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## MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY REDEFINED IN A NUTSHELL

*Robert Junqueira*

### 1. A Catholic Why and an Iberian Wherefore

Medieval Philosophy is a fairly recent field of study. In Portugal, this is an utterly recent field, bearing in mind that the first person to have qualified as a Medieval Philosophy MA in the country, Mário Santiago de Carvalho, is still living.

This is not intended to mean that Medieval Philosophy was previously a non-issue, but rather that the Portuguese scholarly world was short of experts in this field.

It may be true that a benchmarking analysis of the international situation with regard to professionals in Medieval Philosophy would be of considerable practical use.

Here, however, we wish to emphasize that, although the body of medieval literature may appear to have something of a timeworn quality, what we are actually dealing with in the field of Medieval Philosophy is remarkably vibrant and of great significance today.

The first authoritative chronological delimitation of Medieval Philosophy given in Portugal and accepted in Coimbra to the present moment, was provided in the first edition (out of two editions) of Carvalho's *Síntese Frágil*, published in 2002 in Lisbon by Edições Colibri.

Since the first edition of his *Síntese*, the author explores a historical caesura that runs from the end of the first century to the early seventeenth, from the Greek writings of the late Clement of Rome (†99) to the Coimbra Jesuit Course (1592–1606), authored by Manuel de Góis (†1597), Cosme de Magalhães (†1624), Baltasar Álvares (†1630), and Sebastião do Couto (†1639).

In the United States of America and at odds with the angle of Carvalho, John Deely (†2017) has recently proposed a redefinition of the field as the study of the "Latin Age."

Deely's angle on Medieval Philosophy differs from Carvalho's, and among the reasons behind such a difference is the fact that the former moves the inaugural moment of medieval philosophy to roughly the mid-fourth century, while setting its culmination in the mid-seventeenth century.

In Coimbra, because of the rising interest in Medieval Philosophy nurtured by the author of the *Síntese*, Deely's novel proposal seems like a profitable matter for study.

Moreover, we now seem to have a catholic, open-minded enthusiasm regarding Deely's works, not least as a result of a recent international eulogy lasting more than 12 months and directly involving, apart from the audience and more or less occasional benefactors, more than a hundred scholars from almost forty different countries coming from all the continents of the world.

Let us, then, pay special attention to the "Latin Age," to which particular care was given in Deely's *Medieval Philosophy Redefined* (University of Scranton Press, 2010).

Published by St. Augustine's Press in 2016 and 2020, this work has seen two editions with a slightly revised title. In this article we will use the second edition.

## 2. More About the Angle

*Medieval Philosophy Redefined as the Latin Age* is a remarkable development of the part dealing with the field of Medieval Philosophy in Deely's *Four Ages of Understanding*.

Deely expects *Medieval Philosophy Redefined* to provide a historiographical laboratory for the sake of future research. The author gives his opening words a certain ring of importance, for his remarks convey the promise of an unprecedented retelling of the history of science.

Strictly put, Deely assures us that the history of science has lacked a vast and meaningful share of the historical human understanding and experience of the evolution of science, and this book is designed to overcome such an imbalance.

Deely uses the term "science" to signify "critically controlled objectification," and notes that over time the evolution of science has actually turned out to be far more invigorating and profound than suggested by its mainstream renditions.

Revealing the blind spot in the history of critically controlled objectification, dubbed by Deely as the Latin Age, is bound to propitiate, in the author's opinion, a shift towards a new equilibrium at the heart of the community of inquiry, hitherto undermined by the disregard paid by the dominant modern mindset to nearly 1290 years of scholarship

symbolically dating from the birth of Augustine of Hippo (†430) to the burial of João Poinot (†1644).

In the *Four Ages*—comprising a prehistory of the *signum* in the first part, devoted to the “Greek Age,” and the remaining three parts giving a history of the sign in an equal number of ages: the “Latin,” the “Modern,” and the “Postmodern”—, the author presents a grand narrative of the history of philosophy as revolving around the general object of Semiotics: *signa*.

A grand narrative is one that purports to provide insight into a wide range of events in history and render them meaningful by bringing them together with a variety of widespread phenomena that appeal to some common ground.

Deely christens Medieval Philosophy as the Latin Age; the temporal jurisdiction of said age is defined in terms of the whole period of the Western philosophical gestation of semiotic awareness—i.e., the result of accessing what the philosophical historiographer deems to be the right way for understanding what, in general, each and every sign is.

In Deely’s grand narrative about the diachronic breadth of semiotic awareness in the animal kingdom—an awareness the author deems to be exclusively human so far—, the common ground (the general definition of the sign) can be found originating only as late as and up to a certain extent in the achievements of St. Augustine and culminating in those of Poinot.

Poinot is believed to have been the first person to seamlessly communicate a semiotic awareness—one of signs as irreducibly triadic as well as ontological (not transcendental) relations, i.e. the *signum* understood as a relation that is real under any circumstances and whose activity occurs synchronically, in one single stroke of active correspondence between what signifies, whatever else is signified, and an element of awareness.

Even so, the writings of the friar remained understudied until the recent and still nascent spring of Poinotian studies, and this is why Deely’s sign-centric narrative of the Latin Age is not fully traversed until the arrival of the Semiotics of Charles S. Peirce (†1914), arguably the most successful source of semiotic awareness within the broader scientific community up until today.

The merits given to Peirce are far from insignificant. The semiotician, who many consider having founded philosophical pragmatism, is often

referred to as the pioneer behind Semiotics as it is understood and practiced nowadays.

While dealing with Couto's *doctrina signorum*, contained in the latter's 1606 *Dialectica*, Peirce superseded the author's understanding of the sign—superseded Couto's doctrine in a manner identical to that of Poinot, but stumbling upon a brighter short-term future than Poinot for the scholarly acknowledgment of his works among the scientific community.

Saying this in a nutshell—so as to raise awareness of the fact that Deely espouses a very specific thematic concern that entails a historical caesura alternative to Carvalho's, who focuses on time, being, and thinking (*tempo, ser e pensar*)—Deely's angle seems more elaborate now than perhaps it seemed a while ago; so we will now proceed to find out more about that concern.

### 3. The Gestation of Semiotic Awareness

According to Deely, there is no trace of any predecessor of Augustine having suspected that there is no alternative but to follow the general track of signs so as to arrive at an understanding of reality, that is to say, all of what is the way it is irrespective of what one might think or feel about it.

While mostly found on the margins of medieval literature, the *Way of Signs* was pursued by numerous Latin-writing authors without interruption since Augustine until the moment it led to the emergence of a theoretical framework that enabled the rise of modern science.

Unlike the majority of the scientific community since the Modern Age, the greater part of the philosophical community was unwilling or unable to develop their fields of inquiry along the lines bequeathed to the community by the Latin Age—philosophers headed in the direction of a “solipsistic disaster,” for the description of which Deely calls to mind the figure of “Mr. Hyde.”

The thematic concern that we would like to understand better is the one that Deely brings with him as he tackles the exercise of providing us with a guided tour through the field of Medieval Philosophy as critically objectifying a period during which the theoretical prospects of *scientia* were opened up sufficiently for scientific modernity to unfold.

One great and remarkable turning point is attributed to Thomas Aquinas (†1274) in having crossed the echoes of the Augustinian teachings regarding a matter as decisive as the premise that Christian faith is “the absolute presupposition for understanding anything worth understanding.”

The authority of St. Thomas would have allowed multiple generations, from the fourteenth century onwards, to insist on a categorical differentiation between philosophy and theology, whereby neither is the former barred from all revelations of experience, nor the latter sealed off from philosophy—whilst both are firmly committed to managing the interplay between faith and reason.

The gestation of semiotic awareness in both theological and philosophical frameworks began in a puzzled series of steps, over time since Augustine, and experienced some evolutionary shifts as a consequence of the work of proto-semioticians such as the “Splendor of the Latins” (Aquinas), Domingo de Soto (†1560), and Couto, before culminating in the Poinsonian revelation of the discoverability of a descriptive process to legitimately objectify the *signum* in general terms.

Deely reminds us that, roughly in the mid-1700s, the pot was already boiling for the coming of Latinity into collision with the *Way of Ideas*, as he notes that Poinson was in a sense already past the nick of time when he succeeded in bringing to the Latin scientific community enough theoretical prospects for the unfolding of what eventually happened to take the name of the Postmodern Age, inaugurated by Peirce’s *doctrina signorum* as the general study of a particular type of triadic relations.

There were few who paid close enough attention to Poinson’s theoretical triumph, given that very fruitful propaganda efforts were brewing to distance the philosophical community from the wider scientific one, as well as from its Latin and Greek roots.

A semiotic depression has thus been triggered at the heart of the scholarly world, a blackout of sorts that prompted the burning fire that devoured the flesh of Giordano Bruno (†1548) to radiate like a star for a stellar number of years to come.

Such a depression kept animating the burden of liability faced by the reputation of much of the Latin philosophical community, including the members of the resistance in Europe and elsewhere that, albeit unable to follow Poinson into philosophical postmodernity, struggled since the 1700s

to restrain the nevertheless unbridled ambitions of modern philosophical trends.

Before the impact of Peirce, North America, and the English-speaking scientific community began to affect the whole of our planet—not least regarding the inherent semiotic interdependence of all fields of scientific inquiry—how could it have been possible for the Latin Age to effectively unfurl, against the globalizing scholarly world, the results of having found the postmodern *Way of Relations* out the labyrinthic *Way of Signs*, as well as for semiotic studies to flourish beyond modernity to the point where departments of Semiotics can be found in prestigious universities such as that of Tartu?

The Tartu school, alongside proving the extent to which Semiotics now enjoys full institutional accreditation, is paradigmatic in showcasing its benefits, diversity, and fertility, as well as the relevance of the doctrine of signs for all parties willing to respond to a need highlighted in Porto, among us Portuguese, by Miguel Baptista Pereira (†2007) in 1997.

The urgency highlighted by Pereira lies in transcending a temporal state of affairs characterized, at least in the universities, by the unfortunate circumstance whereby, in Pereira's words, "*filosofia e ciências se movem esterilmente sem jamais se encontrarem.*"

The Tartu school has, in fact, successfully transitioned to the Age of Relation or philosophical postmodernity without a shadow of hesitation and in full title of a systematically socialized semiotic awareness, whose period of gestation Deely objectifies. Therefore, it is to be expected that, as part of the quest to find out where Semiotics is coming from and heading towards, we will witness an intense interest with regard to Medieval Philosophy in Tartu.

An example of the relevance of Semiotics for responding to Pereira's call for the scientific community at large to sit around the same table and talk, can be found in the works of Kalevi Kull, who recently conducted a cross-disciplinary study whereby one of the foremost voices not just of the Tartu school, but also of the international circle surrounding the life sciences, addressed freedom and evolution at the intersection of modern science and postmodern philosophy.

Working in the field of Medieval Philosophy with a concern such as Deely's means doing so in search of a renewed insight into the Latin Age, understood as the period of gestation of semiotic awareness, an awareness without which there would not only be no Semiotics, but no common



ground for philosophical fields such as Ethics, Logic, or Metaphysics to maintain a productive dialogue with other scientific fields such as Chemistry, Mathematics, or Physics.

To engage in Medieval Philosophy is also admittedly a matter of grasping the circumstances in which the gestation of semiotic awareness occurred—the gestation of an awareness that can only be accessed once it is realized that all signs consist of a triadic ontological relation.

Considering that the period the *signum* spent inside the Latin philosophical community's womb lasted roughly 100 dozen years, there are a lot of possible angles and concerns to be dealt with regarding the corresponding Age.

Meanwhile, there is something entirely related to the Catholic scholarly world, notably the Coimbra Jesuit school, that Deely thought was key to the birth of semiotic awareness.

The thing is that the Latin experience that led to the Coimbra Jesuit school, where the first person who is known to have made it past the entrance of the Way of Relations (Peirce) earned his degree in Arts, proceeded very carefully towards success in taking advantage of a common terminology handed down by Severinus Boethius (†524) when interpreting pagan philosophy.

The *signum*, though, springs from Augustine—and, despite the imperfect sense of sign in general originally brought forth by the Saint, such a Latin conceptual breakthrough is meaningful to each of the four ages of understanding.

The *signum* is of value to the Greek Age because it signals its end and makes it possible to transcend the limits of Ancient Greek Physics.

It is also of value to the Latin Age, because it spells the launch and is the object of a single, collective, and interdisciplinary inquiry taking place mostly on the margins of the massive scholarly corpus generated over such a lengthy period.

Signs are also of strategic import regarding the Modern Age, as the *signum* stands out but as a missing link within the mainstream philosophical community.

The same is true as far as the Postmodern Age goes, given the ongoing democratization of access to semiotic awareness and the growing interest regarding the details of the logical and genealogical ties between the past and Semiotics.

It was only thanks to the impact of Peirce that the Latin Age was allowed to rest in peace as an outgrown time—outgrown not for its Way of

Signs having led the scholarly world to a dead end, but to semiotic awareness, the felicitous final destination of a multi-secular research project.

The Latin Age, after being marooned in oblivion could not seem to have fulfilled its mission until after the philosophical community started to be aware of the significance of the Medieval thematization of the general definition of the sign.

The results of such a thematization, in the end, proved to have been adequate for the purpose of accessing and communicating effectively a semiotic awareness capable of accounting for the “interdependencies” of all matters involved in the wholeness of human experience.

#### **4. In Time for Medieval Philosophy**

We are given here only a rough, isagogical picture of Deely’s major concern during his field days and the corresponding angle he proposed for the field of Medieval Philosophy.

An interesting short route to put into words what Medieval Philosophy is all about according to Deely would be to start by explaining that this is a field of study that critically objectifies a bygone period in the evolution of the scientific community that spans more than 678 million minutes.

For over 11 million hours in succession, members of the scientific community devoted their time to understanding, among other things, what the sign in general is.

Such an understanding is a hard target to reach because the *signum* rests here and there on the portal that renders it possible to cross over between realms such as those of culture and nature, objects and things, or mental and physical realities.

The sign, in general, is necessarily representative of all signs, not only of physical signs, but also all those that do not comprise an element of awareness whereby the signifier stands for an objective element that in parallel is corresponding in a dyadic relation to a subjective element.

There is a triadic historical caesura that Deely is proposing to Medieval Philosophy, one with a start from Augustine, an end in Poinset, and a new beginning with Peirce.

The Iberian Peninsula, the land offering a mouth for the river of the long Way of Signs, was the place where postmodernity first eclosed, with

much thanks to Lusitanian Catholic philosophers such as Pedro da Fonseca (†1599), Couto, and Poinso.

For his part, Peirce is at once medieval and postmodern, for although he was brought up riding the moving train of the Way of Ideas, he soon broke away from the fields of the philosophical Modern Age and embarked on a journey through the Way of Signs.

And so Peirce proceeded until arriving, independently of Poinso and thanks to his study of Couto's *Dialectica*, at the semiotic awareness that enabled him to notice that taking the Way of Signs was but the decisive step in the direction to the Way of Relations and the establishment of Semiotics.

The Latin Age, watered back to life to the best of Peirce's ability, stands as the object of study of a postmodern field in which virtually everything remains open to scrutiny.

The soundest echo of the results of John Deely's angle on Medieval Philosophy matches the ethos espoused in Coimbra and other Portuguese-speaking hubs in the wake of the *Síntese Frágil*.

We can feel the pulse of such an alloy of beliefs and aspirations by observing that whoever chooses to enter the field will be arriving at the most auspicious of times.

Today is a promising day for the growth of the field's community, not only on account of the fact that there is a surplus of raw material for everybody to explore, but also because some schools of Medieval Philosophy, such as the one in Coimbra, are already up and running.

The field has already begun to be mapped out and we have no need to build from scratch because we are free to notice the footsteps of those founding postmodern historiographers who first stepped into the field of Medieval Philosophy.

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#### ABSTRACT

Deely's chief orientation, in his Medieval Philosophy field days, was to frame the field's thematic concern in light of the gestation of semiotic awareness. He argued that semiotic awareness was expressed fully for the first time in history by Poinso, although he said that the process of gestation only resulted in a community-binding Way after the arrival of the Semiotics of Peirce. Between Poinso and Peirce, a period of darkness preceded a full dawn. In this paper, we provide an introductory picture of Deely's understanding of Medieval

Philosophy and strive to convey a preview of the angle adopted by the semiotician.