

## What Anchors Semiosis : How Descartes Changed the Subject

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

The goal of this article is twofold. First, it revises the historiographic partition proposed by John Deely in *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001) by arguing that the moment marking the beginning of philosophical Modernity has been vividly recorded in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* with the experiment with the wax. Second, an upshot of this historical study is that it helps make sense of Deely's somewhat iconoclastic use of the words "subject" and "subjectivity" to designate mind-independent worldly things. The hope is that successfully accomplishing these twin tasks will give semiotic inquiry a better appreciation of its own history, as well as resources genial to furthering its ongoing development.

# What Anchors Semiosis : How Descartes Changed the Subject

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John Deely's *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001) is increasingly being regarded as a landmark work in semiotics (Danesi 2010 : 25). Not only does Deely cast semiotic inquiry's rich history in a new light, he does not hesitate (or perhaps is eager) to project that trajectory beyond the present and venture informed conjectures as to what direction future intellectual developments will take (see for example Deely 2000 : 26). The exercise, though risky, emerges as compelling precisely because it conjugates all three tenses : the look ahead is prompted by a dissatisfaction with the present that turns to the past for guidance.

This is in many ways a wise strategy. None of us have entered the intellectual scene *sui generis*, and though some of our teachers may disavow their debts to history, they nevertheless had teachers too, and so on. Thus, if one is dissatisfied with the landscape of intellectual possibilities they present one with, one can always scrutinize the stores of the past in search of alternative conceptions. To be sure, nothing guarantees that one will find what one is looking for — dead thinkers are no more insightful for being dead. But familiarity with one's ancestry can at least loosen the hold which unquestioned premises can have on our thinking, deflating the apparently non-negotiable status of a given menu of options and spurring our confidence that new modes of approaching a recalcitrant issue can be devised.

This is the spirit in which John Deely articulates his retrieval of lost semiotic insights. Modernity, he argues, offers us variations on a common theme, namely that the mind cannot attain genuine knowledge of the world. Yet such a thesis was not always the truism some now take it to be, so we can go back earlier to recapture a more promising way of

viewing the knowledge situation. As a means of aiding such a retrieval, Deely attempts to pin down an emblematic moment or “landmark detail” (Hittinger 2010 : 4) signaling the start of each of his four “ages”. Post-Modernity, for example, is said to have been inaugurated (in germinal form, to be sure) on 14 May 1867 with the presentation of Charles S. Peirce’s talk “On a New List of Categories” (Deely 2001 : 637).

Is there any justification for the assignment of so precise a date? I believe there is independent support of the idea that ages of understanding might succeed each other with particular salience. Thomas Kuhn, for example, suggested that paradigm-shifts in the realm of science are never gradual, but rather occur suddenly, in punctualist fashion (2002 : 28-29). A practitioner has looked in vain for a solution to the cumulative difficulties plaguing her field, goes to bed pondering these issues, and literally awakes with an altogether different way of viewing the situation. Armed with this unprecedented vantage point, the tensions which previously seemed so problematic aren’t so much solved as “dissolved” into irrelevancy. Hence, the world now looks very different. Alluding to the famous duck-rabbit of Gestalt theory, Kuhn writes : “What were ducks in the scientist’s world before the revolution are rabbits afterwards” (1996 : 111). The tale of Newton’s falling apple, though largely confabulated, is a familiar example. In one swift stroke, a mundane occurrence transpiring in the sub-lunar realm is linked to the motion of distant celestial bodies, thereby unifying disparate events and opening up hitherto unnoticed possibilities for inquiry (and foreclosing others).

Applied to the realm of philosophical reflection, this thesis raises an interesting question : when exactly did Modernity begin? Deely has stated that the “second turning point” of his fourfold scheme “has its origin in [John] Poinot’s very lifetime” (2008 : v). Within this bracket, he has further refined the ascription : “If I had to pick one event as the defining event of the outset of modernity, probably the best choice would be the condemnation of Galileo for teachings deemed contrary to the revealed Word of God” (Deely 2001 : 493). The date of 21 June 1633 is thus viewed as

a landmark event in the history of philosophy, and it made the turn toward ideoscopy a revolution rather than what it should have been, a natural extension along ideoscopic lines of the ‘natural philosophy’ cenoscopically outlined by Aristotle and advanced in the Latin universities from the time of their founding to the debacle of Galileo’s trial. (Deely 2008 : 11-12)

Yet the year 1632 also recurs in Deely’s writing as a plausible milestone (see his 1990 : 113; 2001 : 480), in so far as it marks the publication date of Poinot’s *Tractatus de Signis* and the birth of John Locke — whose emblematic portrait adorns the opening page of the *Four Ages*’ section on “The Modern Period” (Deely 2001 : 485; with an erroneous date of birth at bottom).

The place of Locke is by all accounts an ambiguous one, since he is at once a major figure in the maligned “Way of Ideas” and the coiner of what would in time blossom into the (for Deely, rival) “Way of Signs”. As Deely avers :

Locke’s insight can be regarded as a key act in the central tragedy of modern philosophy, inasmuch as the central figures in the mainstream modern development from Descartes to Kant all built on the foundation of semiotic sand constituted by the presupposition that the ideas of the mind are also the direct objects of its apprehension. (2003 : 29; see also Latraverse 1998)

If we take seriously this suggestion of influence, we are faced with an anachronism, in so far as Descartes’ own brand of idealism antedated Locke’s and in fact rested on wholly autonomous (rationalist) foundations. Indeed, the case could be made that Descartes (and not Locke) is the father of philosophical Modernity — which is certainly how standard histories of philosophy view the matter. Descartes is clearly a villain in Deely’s narrative. As such, Deely no doubt felt unease at assigning one of his main philosophical opponents such a prominent place in his historiographical narrative. Locke, by coining the term that would define the program enthusiastically championed by Deely, is by contrast a much more palatable candidate. Still, I would like to call into question that attribution, and propose a reinstatement of René Descartes as the more appropriate founder of the “Third Age of Understanding”.

In the interest of making a better-informed judgement about what went right or wrong in the transition from the Latin age to Modernity, I want to pinpoint a plausible “moment” for when the latter period began, and attempt to recapture the very different Aristotelian/scholastic worldview that was left behind as a result of this shift. To recapture the truly revolutionary scope of Descartes’ influence, we have to consider the curiously bifurcated semantics of the term “subjective”. The *Collins English Dictionary* contains two definitions in its entry. On the one hand, “subjective” is described as “the grammatical case in certain languages that identifies the subject of a verb”. On the other hand, it is said to be “of or based on a person’s emotions or prejudices”. These incommensurate meanings are an archaeological trace, a scar that bears silent witness to a severe paradigmatic tear. At the risk of oversimplifying, the first acceptation owes mainly to Aristotle, and the second to Descartes.

The study of a paradigmatic shift perforce juxtaposes two related contiguously connected in time. In the opening paragraphs of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes announces his aim to break with the dominant ideas of his time and reconstruct his worldview anew “right from the foundations” (Descartes 1984 : 12). Although the authorities of scholastic thought are not singled out by name — the *Meditations* are about as far as one can get from a work of exegetical commentary — this considered refusal to acknowledge the patrimony of Latin thought remains a deeply reactionary move.

Yet unlike, say, Luther's theses, Descartes' work is no mere *manifesto* serially expounding an assemblage of provocative tenets. To be sure, it was highly polemical in its original context — as witnessed by the divisive impact it had on admirers and detractors soon after its publication (see Clarke 2006 : 184-217). But what makes it a celebrated classic is that it lets us follow step by step the careful deliberations that lead Descartes to adopt his challenging views. Hence, while the scholastic tradition is admittedly absent content-wise, its institutionalized *disputatio* format is nevertheless retained; the dialectic cut and parries being recast in the voice of a single narrator sometimes talking at cross-purposes.

This format allows us to playback the deliberations in slow-motion, as it were, and discern particularly salient moments when truly revolutionary transitions take place. Striving to obtain a finer pixellation, I want to show how the development from an Aristotelian worldview to a Modern one has been vividly recorded in the *Meditations* with the experiment on the wax.

In his second round of reflections, Descartes brings his inquisitive intellect to bear on "things which people commonly think they understand most distinctly of all; that is, the bodies which we touch and see" (Descartes 1984 : 20). The conclusions that result from that effort bring about a sharp departure from medieval (Aristotelian) metaphysics. Are phenomenal experiences signs of things beyond them? Or are they intransitive opaque ends in themselves which at best obliquely acknowledge only the reality of the person enjoying them?

[B]oth Aristotle and Aquinas build their ontological theories first, and then their respective philosophies of mind follow upon their ontologies. It is not the other way around, as one finds in many modern epistemological foundationalists. Hence, for both Aristotle and Aquinas, an ontology of primary substances is a necessary condition for the development of a coherent philosophy of mind. (Lisska 2010 : 138)

By retreating strictly to what is phenomenally present before the mind, Descartes deliberately casts aside this long-standing way of viewing the world in favour of an agent-centred viewpoint, one which will become a defining staple of philosophical Modernity.

Descartes' musings on the piece of wax were meant to address an age-old metaphysical puzzle, namely change. The answer given may have been quintessentially Modern, but the problem-situation certainly was not. Consider a piece of burning wood. As it burns, a change occurs. First the wood was brown and cold; then it is replaced by something black and hot. In other words, one thing comes into existence while another exits. This, as it stands, creates a puzzle of sorts : "where" did the first object, which was brown and cold, "go"? Similarly, where did the subsequent object, which is black and hot, "come from"? Instead of preserving the *prima facie* acknowledgement that in some way there are both *two* and *one* states involved in change, early Greek thinkers

had a tendency to be ontologically partisan and champion one side of the opposition between constancy and change. Thus, for Heraclitus, the burning wood was in fact a succession of two things, and all intuitions to the contrary were considered illusory (Burnet 2003 : 144-177). In contrast, Parmenides held that there is only one thing involved in the burning wood, and whatever ran counter to that tenet was deemed by him and his school to be mere appearance (*Ibid.* : 189-201).

Being conversant with these views, Aristotle strove to overcome the limitations of each. Like Parmenides, he duly recognized that some continuity endures amidst discontinuity, since there must be something that connects the different end-states. Yet to leave it at that would be far too strong, and would effectively relegate whatever does change to mere appearance. In Aristotle's estimate, "The first of those who studied philosophy [...] exaggerated the consequence of this, and went so far as to deny even the *existence* of a plurality of things maintaining that only what is itself is" (Aristotle 1984 : 326). Clearly, Heraclitus was in some sense correct to insist on the ontological importance of discontinuity. The task, then, is to find a way to harmoniously integrate the best of these conflicting accounts. To that end, Aristotle introduced a very influential distinction between "matter" and "form". Exploiting an analogy with a sculpture refashioned into various shapes, he adduced matter as the source of whatever "thisness" stays constant throughout the change, concomitantly letting the form imposed on that matter account for the "suchness" that undergoes modifications from one moment to another.

The specifics of Aristotle's explanation can get pretty complicated (the matter/form distinction must be augmented with that between potency/act), and I have no wish to get bogged down in the proliferation of sub-distinctions that so captivated the late-medieval theorists Deely is so fond of (and against whom Descartes was rebelling). All we need retain for the purposes at hand is the idea that, in the Aristotelian conception, what anchors the succession of states is the substantial subject. According to this theory, there is an ontological substrate which carries a given thing's various properties (see Lisska 2010 : 144). To borrow from Locke's famous expression (2008 : 179), it is a "something, we know not what" which, as the material cause of a thing, remains wholly unaffected by the turmoil of efficient causation. Aristotle is explicit on this point : "For my definition of matter is just this — the primary substratum of each thing, from which it comes to be, and which persists in the result, not accidentally" (Aristotle 1984 : 328).

It is this ineffable worldly substrate which collects observed predicates into a cohesive bundle and ensures that the various properties that replace one another in the experience of change are not merely a haphazard collection, but in fact appertain to a same and single thing. Since substances exist apart from their transient properties, they impose

a certain friction that limits change and prevents reality from lapsing into an all-out Heraclitean flux. As Aristotle explains :

it is plain that there must be something underlying, namely, that which becomes. For when a thing comes to be of such a quantity or quality or in such a relation, time, or place, a subject is always presupposed, since substance alone is not predicated of another subject, but everything else of substance. (*Ibid.* : 325)

These background Aristotelian assumptions, which helped scholastic thinkers make sense of change, are violently upturned by Descartes in the second part of the *Meditations*. To be sure, the authority of Aristotelianism had already been challenged by the Spaniard Francisco Suárez in his controversial 1597 *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, which created quite a stir by tackling metaphysical questions without the customary deference to established figures. But Descartes goes much further. In keeping with his promise to provisionally put aside all he had learned from his (Jesuit) teachers, he confronts the question of change as a freethinking sceptic who takes absolutely nothing for granted. He begins his destructive labour by reiterating the commitments made the previous day in the opening meditation :

I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras. So what remains true? (*Ibid.* : 16)

Fortunately, this narrator shortly thereafter discovers a first indubitable truth, concluding that “this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (*Ibid.* : 17; emphasis in original). This formula will be further refined as the Cartesian dialectic unfolds. It nevertheless presents the first indication that the sceptical heuristic adopted will not result in nihilism, and that at least one part of the Archimedean leverage point ardently sought after has been found. Armed with this insight, Descartes proceeds to ask what is this mysterious “I” which emerged unscathed from the sceptical policy. The only certain answer to this question is that he is “[a] thing that thinks” (*Ibid.* : 19).

In a remarkable show of phenomenological honesty, Descartes admits that “corporeal things” still manifest “much more distinctness than this puzzling ‘I’ which cannot be pictured in the imagination” (*Ibid.* : 20). How could it be that something as slippery and abstract as the thinking self be “real” (*i.e.*, resistant to doubt) whereas those mid-sized material things that populate his room have yet to pass muster? Don’t these also attest to their existence by the mere fact of being there, waiting to be grabbed, moved around, and so on? If this is so, he reckons, then they must be able to go through the same gauntlet of adversity which his thinking self successfully negotiated.

Scholastic thinkers would have never dreamed of calling into

question the multiplicity of things that ostensibly make up the world. That trees, rocks, and rivers exist was for them something of an axiom, and their worries centred instead on how we come to group these particular things into empirically adequate classes, carving nature at its joints (Lisska 2010 : 146-150). Descartes goes further still. What we find in the well-known remarks about the melting piece of wax is a drastic revision of the notion of “subject”.

It must be borne in mind that, when we read Descartes today, we are reading him from within the vantage of a paradigm largely genial to his philosophy (unsurprisingly, as he helped to spawn that worldview). Of course, this was not the case with Descartes’ contemporaries, who had yet to experience for themselves the Gestalt-switch which he tried so ardently to communicate. Indeed, the gifted person who first proposes a radically new way of seeing things is burdened with an intellectual double-duty, as sudden innovation must eventually give way to a lengthy phase of persuasion. This task Descartes eventually undertook, aided by the resourceful impresario Marin Mersenne. But to the extent this bid proved successful, the once-eccentric viewpoint of agent-centred “subjectivity” attained an unquestioned normalcy.

What was a radical departure can thus present itself to current readers as a banal truth which seemingly goes without saying. In contrast, the idea of “subjectivity” as pertaining to a grammatical subject — which includes but is not limited to the first-person pronoun — goes back to a bygone ontology of substances. Unlike the construal of the subject as that which *apprehends*, this more archaic sense of the word pertains to that which is *apprehended*. Our grammar still attests to this Aristotelian thesis. When a grade-school teacher explains that only substantives can be grammatical subjects and that verbs and adjectives cannot, she is basically reiterating (in a frozen linguistic state) Aristotle’s metaphysical contention that “[t]here is no such thing as motion over and above the things” (Aristotle 1984 : 342). We can thus say that Aristotle’s “subject” is the “it” lying in the world, whereas Descartes’ “subject” is narrower and is limited solely to the singular and incorporeal “I”. This is a truly momentous shift. Aristotle had insisted on the importance of change, stressing quite rightly that if change were unknown, “nature too would be unknown” (*Ibid.* : 342). Given his search for complete and indubitable intelligibility, Descartes agrees. But his own solution to this venerable problem is drastically different from the one put forth by Aristotle and later espoused by Latin thinkers.

The piece of wax is for Descartes an ideal place to begin another volley of his grand aim. As a body he can readily “touch and see” (Descartes 1984 : 20), it presents a worthy adversary, a perfect target on which to deploy his unwavering policy of scepticism. For if doubt can wedge its way into such a seemingly obvious item, then that should go a long way towards advancing the destructive portion of his philosophic project of



changing the foundations of human knowledge.

Descartes notes that the wax has several properties, all of which can be ascertained by one or more of the senses. It has a certain taste, a specific scent, texture, shape, etc. "In short, it has everything which appears necessary to enable a body to be known as distinctly as possible" (*Ibid.* : 20) — where distinctness is taken to be the telltale sign (bound by God's benevolence) of a non-deceptive alignment with the truth. Thus, if the scent of flowers is considered in itself as some atomic *quale*, that simple quality presents itself so plainly as what it is that it does not seem open to doubt. Problems arise, however, when we consider that what is revealed in one's phenomenal field is not a static display of stable contents, but rather an aggregate of sundry qualities that bleed into each other and undergo constant variation. Change spoils the purity of the lone datum, such that this idle expanse of quality loses whatever clarity and distinctness it had in the flow of semiosis. As Descartes puts the wax by the fire, the once stable roster of properties is gradually undone : "the residual taste is eliminated, the smell goes away, the colour changes, the shape is lost, the size increases; it becomes liquid and hot; you can hardly touch it, and if you strike it, it no longer makes a sound" (*Ibid.* : 20). The stability which had at first shown so much promise is now compromised to such an extent that it is virtually unrecognizable. Hence, what warrants the belief that these disparate collections of properties are in fact attributes of a single common thing? As Descartes queries, "what was it in the wax that I understood with such distinctness?" (*Ibid.* : 20).

His scholastic contemporaries would have confidently answered that it was the matter itself, the incorruptible worldly subject which, as the source of the thing's immanent "thisness," serves as the bearer of its various predicates. These predicates, they would have intoned, can be affected by efficient causation, but this leaves untouched the bare "stuff" underneath it all, the material substratum which receives various forms by way of its involvement with other things but is never itself put in jeopardy. Trying out alternative explanations, Descartes briefly ponders this reply. In fact, he borrows the vocabulary of his philosophical antagonists when he rhetorically suggests that perhaps "the wax was not after all the sweetness of the honey, or the fragrance of the flowers, or the whiteness, or the shape, or the sound, but was rather a body which presented itself to me in these various forms a little while ago, but which now exhibits different ones" (*Ibid.* : 20).

Of course, once a thing's predicates are stripped away, it is not altogether clear what — if anything — remains. The only plausible candidate seems to be that extension through space is the one primitive that cannot be eliminated. In his 1634 *The World* (Descartes 1985 : 90-92), Descartes endorses an arid *quantitative* ontology akin to what one would find in a purely geometrical universe. But at this point in

his investigations, Descartes is more preoccupied with the still more problematic question of how one could come to know this sort of bare extension. Seeing how the senses each latch onto qualitative properties that shift and replace one another, what faculty can possibly allow us to gain insight into the residual presence that is left over?

Understandably, Descartes suspects that he may have arrived at this naked entity solely by means of his imagination. But, he remarks, although his imagination can depart from states of affairs that obtain, it is nevertheless severely limited in the number of possible configurations it can fathom (1984 : 21). To strip away properties solely by means of the imagination is an immense task which he has obviously not undertaken. How then can he still arrive at the idea that wax is an extended body that is not what it seems? His momentous conclusion is that “the nature of this piece of wax” — which here excludes the transient phenomenal properties catalogued earlier — “is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone” (*Ibid.* : 21). The expression “perceived by the mind” is an awkward one, as it connotes a mode of knowledge akin to ordinary sense perception. What Descartes is trying to convey is rather a purely *rational* mode of ingress into the nature of things. Descartes thus expands on his important result : “And yet, and here is the point, the perception I have of it is a case not of vision or touch or imagination — nor has it ever been, despite previous appearances — *but of purely mental scrutiny*; and this can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct as it is now, *depending on how carefully I concentrate* on what the wax consists in” (*Ibid.* : 21 [emphasis added]).

Note that the level of insight into the wax’s true nature depends not on the thing itself, but on the degree of care and rigour with which the “thinking thing” ponders it. Indeed, Descartes spends the next paragraph insisting that the senses play no part whatsoever in this process, and thus do not contribute to our knowledge of things, despite all appearances to the contrary. To be sure, habitual ways of thinking exert a constant centripetal pull and lead us to construe the situation in conformity with our commonsensical intuitions. That is why Descartes confesses that he is “almost tricked by ordinary ways of talking” (*Ibid.* : 21), and is often tempted by such inertia to lapse into folk-theoretical assumptions to the effect that he *sees* the worldly wax itself. But in keeping with his methodological vow to suspend such assumptions, he reminds himself that when he looks out the window, he does not truly see people walking about, but rather (potentially deceptive) images of hats and coats gliding by in his visual field. If ever he considers that they are what they appear to be, it is not in virtue of some non-inferential givenness, but because “*I judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind” (*Ibid.* : 21). On this view, the senses provide us with a qualitative spectacle, but it is the unaided intellect which grasps quantitative aspects like extension. And since

such extended space is in the final analysis all that bodies consist in, Descartes holds that only mental scrutiny gives us insight into the nature of things.

Cartesianism thus ascribes the mind a role far greater than did scholastic doctrine in the constitution of intelligibility. Proceeding from the Aristotelian framework, medieval thinkers (like Abélard and Aquinas) held that the human intellect can “abstract” whatever recurrent features are nested in things, thereby forming “concepts” that let us ascend from knowledge of individuals to a grasp of natural kinds (see Deely 2007 : 52-53, 81-100). Still, it is the immanent substances which are the metaphysical stuff of the world, and these always have primacy over the transcendent conceptions we (fallibly) tease out from the semiotic stream of experience. The direct consequence of this substance-only ontology is that we as viewers are in no way responsible for the constancy which survives change. Rather, it is the worldly subjects themselves — the particular rocks and trees — which are the guarantors of their own continuity.

This is a nice account, but it is very much open to doubt. Accordingly, Descartes rejects it. Knowledge of things does not come by way of perception and abstraction therefrom, he argues. Rather, it comes solely by way of *judgement*. All perception can do is provide an array of phenomenal qualia. True, these are indubitable when considered in themselves as “simple natures,” but there is nothing in such qualia, Descartes held, which guarantees that they are in fact properties of a worldly subject like a particular piece of wax : “[T]he chief and most common mistake which is to be found here consists in my judging that the ideas which are in me resemble, or conform to, things located outside me” (Descartes 1984 : 26).

In the Aristotelian scheme defended and expanded by Latin thinkers like John Poincaré, experiential predicates like hot, soft, and pungent were united by and anchored to a worldly “subject” in the archaic dictionary sense outlined earlier. In the new Cartesian scheme, it is a mental “subjectivity” which gathers these qualities and judges them to appertain to a common spatial region. Predicates are therefore *not* the gateway to a clear and distinct knowledge of things. Much the contrary, since they can morph to the point of unrecognizability, they obscure and distort the true essence of a thing, which is its inert spatial extension. It is the unaided intellect of the thinking subject which attains a true knowledge of the nature of things, and it does so by putting aside the unclear and indistinct qualitative distortions of the phenomenal field and relying solely on the ironclad verdicts of rationality.

Can the stream of first-person experience successfully lasso things in the “external” world, or is that experiential concatenation a potential source of deception which only *a priori* deliberation can see past? Descartes favours the second answer. This signals a dramatic change in

perspective — a Copernican revolution, if you will, far ahead of (and in a sense still more radical than) Kant's. Instead of a plurality of worldly subjects, intelligibility is now beholden to a singular mental subject. Descartes' reflections on the piece of wax can thus (in hindsight) be seen as the precise locus of this paradigmatic rupture (it would be interesting to pinpoint the exact date when Descartes sat in front of his fireplace with wax).

It should be noted that there was a short delay between this philosophical shift in the pages of the *Meditations* and its consummation in the public consciousness. Knowing full well its canonical place in the scholastic ontology he sought to upturn, Descartes was reluctant to employ the term "subject" to describe the mental anchor that endures various changes. It was Thomas Hobbes who, in the third set of *Objections and Replies* that follow immediately after the *Meditations*, first brought up the term. Ostensibly failing to appreciate how radically Descartes wants to break with the Aristotelian tradition, Hobbes remarks that "all philosophers make a distinction between a subject and its faculties and acts, *i.e.* between a subject and its properties and its essences" (in Descartes 1984 : 122). He then goes on to add that "the wax, despite the changes in its colour, hardness, shape and other acts, is still understood to be the same thing, that is, *the same matter that is the subject of all these changes*" (*Ibid.* : 122 [emphasis added]).

Hobbes is here futilely addressing his interlocutor from the vantage of a pre-Modern metaphysic. Indeed, Descartes' whole point was to show that, in the final analysis, what glues together "all these changes" is not at all a material thing but rather an unextended *mental* substance, regarded as the ultimate "subject" without which no other (worldly) "subject" could be constituted (for a similar view, see Husserl 1999; and the comments by Deely 2007 : 6). Hence, while Descartes deems that Hobbes "is quite right in saying that 'we cannot conceive of an act without its subject'" (Descartes 1984 : 123), the two are basically talking past each other, since they are working from radically incompatible understandings of what "subject" should be taken to mean in this case (on a personal level, the two thinkers had a strained dialogue at best, see Clarke 2006 : 203-204).

In a passage that eerily recalls Peirce's "ethics of terminology" (1998 : 263-266), Descartes explains his reluctance to employ the terminology of the Latins by saying that "it is perfectly reasonable, and indeed sanctioned by usage, for us to use different names for substances which we recognize as being the subjects of quite different acts or accidents" (Descartes 1984 : 124). The marked discomfort expressed by Descartes underscores just how self-conscious the break from the Second Age of Understanding really was. Manifesting a keen awareness that the word "subject" originally stood for some mind-independent existent, it is telling that Cartesian dualism originally would have preferred *not* to label the

private experiences of the *res cogitans* “subjectivity”.

As things stand, the deliberate Peircean policy was overtaken by a fortuitous Saussurean dynamic, as collective linguistic usage consummated the paradigmatic reversal : an avant-garde proposal in speculative philosophy eventually became common sense — and this, in spite of Descartes’ initial terminological reservations.

Deely’s refiguring of the history of philosophy returns periodically to a key point : the accidental or sometimes intentional shifting of meanings in the process of either translating works from one cultural system to another, or reinventing parallel constructs working in the service of human understanding. Both of these processes created capricious turns in the thrusts and results of inquiry through time, rendering it necessary in our time to renegotiate some texts we may now regard as prominently foundational. Even more interesting, it appears that at points along the way, especially in the modern period, philosophers inspired by ancient texts, aspiring to work in continuity with them, have sometimes projected quite new appreciations of the world onto them. (Haworth and Prewitt 2010 : 54)

Indeed, by the time we reach the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, Hobbes’ proposed terminology has become the norm, such that Kant no longer feels it necessary to mention any departure from the once-accepted scholastic usage : “I, as a thinking being, am the *absolute subject* of all my possible judgments, and this representation of Myself cannot be used as the predicate of any other thing” (Kant 1998 : 415-416 [emphasis in original]).

There are always gradual changes in how words are used. It is not often, however, that the semantic content of a given linguistic vehicle makes a complete about-face. Ironically, this abrupt transformation does not in this instance ignore previous definitions : the technical term “subject” is still construed as an enduring entity which has transient predicates. The only difference — and it is a huge one — is that for the Modern mindset the only thing that fits the bill is oneself. We can retrace this shift by looking at the meaning of the philosophical term “subject”. As the historian of ideas Richard Tarnas puts it, with Descartes

Rational man knows his own awareness to be certain, and entirely distinct from the external world of material substance, which is epistemologically less certain and perceptible only as object. Thus *res cogitans* — thinking substance, subjective experience, spirit, consciousness, that which man perceives as within — was understood as fundamentally different and separate from *res extensa* [...]. (1993 : 277)

Although the task of pinpointing the precise date when this shift manifested itself in natural linguistic usage is best left to lexicographers, I have proposed that the *philosophical* rupture from the subject-construed-as-a-worldly-thing to the subject-construed-as-a-solipsist-mental-activity can be traced back to Descartes’ introspective reflections on the piece of wax. Henceforth, we are left with two incompatible — indeed *incommensurate* — interpretations of what can be properly regarded as

a subject :

In the scholastic tradition there are 'subjects' considered in themselves — that is, apart from being known (whether people or things). [...] With the modern shift from ontology to epistemology (typified by Descartes), 'subjective' has come to mean the perception of a 'psychological subject' [...]. (Bains 2006 : 50-51)

Whether that momentous turn towards interiority is cause for celebration or chagrin is a question outside the purview of the present inquiry (Deely certainly opts for the latter gloss). Still, it seems fair to say that something was lost in the process. Indeed, how many contemporary theorists truly incorporate the idea that trees and rocks “out there” enjoy a *bona fide* subjectivity — that it is they *and they alone* which guarantee their continuance amidst time and change? It is safe to say that any attempt to remedy this situation would have to reach back farther than Descartes to find genial philosophical resources. In this respect, John Deely's ambitious semiotic project is surely on the right track. But the very desire to go past Descartes effectively pays homage to his epoch-making historical import. The issues I have addressed are arguably more consequential for a discussion of the sign and its action than Galileo's quarrel with religious authority. Accordingly, I submit that the *Meditations on First Philosophy* must assume its rightful place as a founding text that is to Modernity what Peirce's “New List of Categories” is (or, rather, may become) to a nascent Post-Modernity.

Unfortunately, aside from authoring tangible advances in historical scholarship, Deely's salvage attempt in more straightforward argumentative contexts has been somewhat blunt : he has simply committed himself without much comment to consistently deploying the terms “subject” and its cognates in a manner diametrically opposed to current (Cartesian) usage. Consider for example the following passage from *Four Ages of Understanding* : “The point is that the physical environment is one thing, the world as a particular organism is aware of it is something quite — not entirely, yet quite — different. The former is the subjective or physical world, the world where things exist whether or not they are cognized” (Deely 2001 : 5-6). The reader unaware of Deely's commitments could be forgiven for thinking that a gross spelling mistake has been made here.

This raises important questions about proper choice of terminology. If a given term suddenly takes on a meaning opposite to what it originally meant, should someone who wishes to adhere to its former meaning try to single-handedly redress the situation, or should one forgo such a retrieval as futile and pick a different label altogether? Peirce himself thought it best later in life to relinquish the term “pragmatism” (even though it can be argued that Peirce never really disowned the basic tenets at hand; see Houser 2010). Deely, by contrast, is redoubling his efforts where Peirce would have thrown in the towel, attempting a

terminological recovery that would have to overturn several centuries of concerted philosophic and lay usage in order to succeed.

There is definitely something romantic about witnessing such an effort. Still, given that the terminological switch championed by Deely is liable to confuse (and in point of fact has confused) so many readers, it deserves a more ample explanation. Yet to my knowledge, no accessible account has surfaced within the semiotic community to explain (in a non-militant way) the background issues that prompt Deely's radical reversal (it certainly doesn't help that Deely disdainfully regards Modernity in its entirety as "fly-over country," *pace* the unfortunate comment in his 2007 : xvii; see Jeffrey 2010). My hope is that, in addition to proposing a more accurate boundary between the Latin Age and Modernity, this essay will have supplied that much-needed rationale.

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## Abstract

The goal of this article is twofold. First, it revises the historiographic partition proposed by John Deely in *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001) by arguing that the moment marking the beginning of philosophical Modernity has been vividly recorded in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* with the experiment with the wax. Second, an upshot of this historical study is that it helps make sense of Deely's somewhat iconoclastic use of the words "subject" and "subjectivity" to designate mind-independent worldly things. The hope is that successfully accomplishing these twin tasks will give semiotic inquiry a better appreciation of its own history, as well as resources genial to furthering its ongoing development.

## Résumé

Cet article se donne deux buts. Premièrement, il remet en question le découpage historiographique proposé par John Deely dans *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001) en soutenant que la genèse de la Modernité philosophique se trouve dans les pages des *Méditations métaphysiques* de Descartes avec la réflexion sur le morceau de cire. Deuxièmement, un atout de cette étude historique est qu'elle permet de rendre compte de l'usage plutôt iconoclaste des mots "sujet" et "subjectif" par Deely pour désigner les choses du monde indépendantes de la pensée. L'espoir est que le fait de mener à bien ces deux tâches donnera à la recherche sémiotique une meilleure appréciation de son histoire, ainsi que des ressources lui permettant de poursuivre sa croissance actuelle.

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