

Biosemiotics as a science and as an existential philosophy

TOMMI VEHKAVAARA

Department of Mathematics, Statistics, and Philosophy,
University of Tampere, Finland

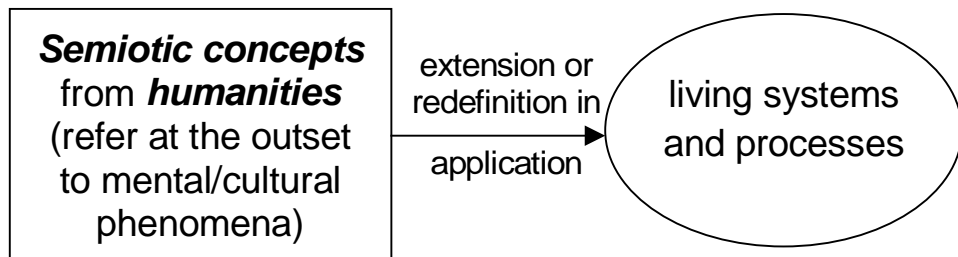
E-mail: [tommi.vehkavaara\[at\]uta.fi](mailto:tommi.vehkavaara@uta.fi)

Homepage: <http://mtl.uta.fi/~attove>

Two theoretical stances or attitudes toward biosemiotics:

'Humanist' biosemiotics

Aim: To describe and understand the 'full' complexity of life and its role in human life.



=> Initial reluctance toward mechanical, reductive, computational, etc. models and explanations —> search for alternatives or supplements to mainstream biology

Motives: Initially or implicitly ETHICAL (humanist, environmentalist, social, etc.)

Ideology: both external and internal experience important —> 'qualitative organicism'

'Mechanicist' biosemiotics

Aim: To produce as simple models of living phenomena as possible.

<= Semiotic (or semantic etc.) concepts defined formally or technically —
sign as signal

=> Mechanical, reductionistic, or computational models favoured —
sympathetic with mainstream biology or even physicalistic reductionism

Motives: COGNITIVE, TECHNICAL, or pragmatic (possible usefulness)

Ideology: everyday experience eliminated or substituted by superior scientific reasoning, measuring, calculations, and experimentations

Applied biosemiotics

– application of either of the above stances in experimental studies

Motives and purposes of biosemiotics

– Different stances are due to differing motives and purposes what we have for biosemiotics.

Motives: *effective causes* of psychical kinds that drives us to make the biosemiotics we make

Purposes: *final causes* of our biosemiotic research that include *normative criteria* for our studies

Motives:

(blind following the institutionalized habits of research without much questioning them)

ETHICAL or POLITICAL motives

- humanist/'culturalist'
- (environ)mentalist
- social(ist)
- existentialist
- religious, etc...

COGNITIVE, TECHNICAL, or PRAGMATIC motives

- pure knowledge
- control (external or internal)
- illusion of control

– Two types of motives are non-exclusive and both classes may include mutually conflicting motives.

– At least *some* ethical or political motive is usually effective in 'humanist' stances.

– In 'mechanicist' approach, cognitive or 'technical' motives are often *emphasized*.

Queries:

For ‘Mechanicist’ biosemiotician(s):

Is ‘mechanicist’ stance capable of producing *independent* biosemiotic theory or does it lapse either to a non-independent analytic (or heuristic) tool, or after all to some form of ‘humanist’ biosemiotics in disguise?

For ‘Humanist’ biosemioticians:

1. Is your ultimate purpose in biosemiotics practical or theoretical?

If you have both, they should be kept separated in your studies.

An argument from Peirce (1898) (worth considering especially for environmentalists):

CP 1.640. (...) I next desire to point out how exceedingly desirable (...) it is for the (...) science generally that practical utilities, whether low or high, should be *put out of sight* by the investigator.

CP 1.642. (...) the two masters, *theory* and *practice*, you cannot serve. That perfect balance of attention which is requisite for observing the system of things is utterly lost if human desires intervene, and all the more so the higher and holier those desires may be.

2. If your purpose is a biosemiotic theory, how you avoid *anthropomorphic fallacies*, to predicate peculiarly human characters to whole living sphere?

3. If you accept the stance of ***qualitative organicism*** (or some equivalent of it), what are your *motives* and what *purpose* does it serve?

Qualitative organicism

Qualitative organicism is a commonly held **stance** on how ‘humanist’ biosemioticians “understand living systems in context of theoretical biology” (Emmeche 2004: 117).

“**Qualitative organicism.** This is (...) differing from main stream organicism in its appraisal of teleology and phenomenal qualities. (...) When sensing light or colors, an organism is not merely performing a detection of external signals (...) something more is to be told if we want the full story, namely about the organism’s own experience of the light. This experience is seen as real.” (Emmeche 2004: 117.)

How could organisms’ “own experience” be reached, if we do not limit biosemiotics to zoösemiotics of apes, dogs, pigs, and other man-like organisms? How about insects, plants, or bacteria?

“Signs have extrinsic publicly observable as well as intrinsic phenomenal aspects. We can only access the meaning of a sign from its observable effects, a good pragmatist principle indeed, but observation of the phenomenal experiences of another organism may either be impossible or highly mediated. However, reality exceeds what exists actually as observable.” (Emmeche 2004: 118.)

Questions to Qualitative organicists:

- What is the pragmatic meaning of the idea of phenomenal experience *in general biosemiotics*?
- If the motive for that stance was to distinguish oneself from ‘mechanicism’ (or ‘standard’ organicism), would not the reintroduction of systemic teleology be enough?

Suggestions:

The emphasis of qualitative organicism upon phenomenal qualities should be wiped off (except in part of the zoösemiotics), *when* our purpose is *true biosemiotic theory*.

That does not mean wiping off the idea of structured local teleology of living systems.

Claim: Such theoretical concepts of general biosemiotics that include some reference to the qualitative experience are doomed to remain too vague to be theoretically fruitful.

They should be naturalized (according to the method of semiotic naturalism).

However, our purpose need not be either purely theoretical or strictly practical, it can be **existential**.

In **biosemiotic existentialism**, the object of study is not “other organism” whose experiences are hidden for us, but the one organism we know from the inside too.

ō The emphasis upon qualitative experiences makes perfectly sense.

While biosemiotic **science** would need concepts derived from external experience, internal qualitative experience are still the most essential for **life, our individual life**.

i Most of our necessary self-knowledge or data for our actual life is mediated by our inner feelings, emotions, etc.

Biosemiotic existentialism

Aim: Better self-understanding especially of my *motives* and *purposes* (and capabilities)

○ could be useful in composing true biosemiotic theory of life.

– Possible usefulness for *biosemiotic science* is not the primary purpose, but to find **truth** about who I am, where my boundaries are, etc.

– The purpose is not purely theoretical either i learning to know myself changes me

○ Biosemiotic existentialism is **self-constructive** ART rather than science.

What could specifically *biosemiotic* existentialism consist of?

Typical *humanist* answer to *existential* questions: **privilege** given to *inner sense*, i.e. to the objects of my internal experience, my feelings, thoughts, memories, purposes, etc.

‘I am what I think rather than what I look like and involuntarily react.’

○ **Cartesian cogito lurking inside qualitative organicism.**

If characteristically biosemiotic existentialism is purposed, we should seek to not give any special status to our internal experience in relation to the external experience.

– That in our experiential conception of our **identity**, our thoughts and feelings would not have any privileged place. That they are admitted equally fallible as our external experience.

We have to find **methods of life** —new *bodily* habits— to truly overcome the initial ‘Cartesian* experiential dualism, i.e. the difference between the thought (or planning) of an act and the act itself. That dualism *might* be removed even from the **experiential** structure of self-consciousness so that the thought about an action and the action itself might be assimilated if desired.

If this existential project is feasible, it might make us able to free ourselves the pathological consequences of quasi-Cartesian culture by producing a new *concrete* awareness about self as a living body — or perhaps as a lineage of living bodies?

Perhaps even naturalism can be existentialism.