

# From the motives and methods of biosemiotics to experiential existential naturalism

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## 1. General picture of biosemiotics today:

**Purpose:** General purpose of biosemiotics:

Better understanding of living phenomena.

Better than what?

- mainstream **neo-darwinism**
- **mechanicism/physicalism**
- atomic/genetic **reductionism**
- **computational determinism?**
- **vitalism(?)** and **theism** at least in their substantial sense

All these are representants of '**Cartesian heritage**',

i.e. the **experiential** division of

rational, moral, intentional,  
and immaterial soul/subject

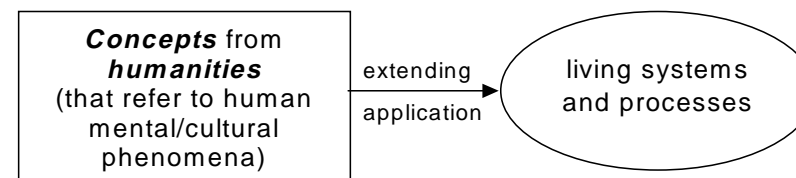
from

mechanical material world.

## Working hypothesis:

The insufficiency of neo-darwinism, physicalistic mechanicism, and reductionism is an unfortunate result of Cartesian dualism that separates soul from body, mind from matter, normativity from material world, and human sciences from natural sciences. Therefore, in order to understand life better, Cartesian dualisms should be reunited.

**Method.** Special method of biosemiotics in getting its purpose:



Some concepts from humanities are extended to refer to the whole sphere of life.

Living phenomena in general is seen as **analogous** with mental, significant, or meaningful phenomena in cultural or human sphere.

Humanities? — Semiotics, hermeneutics, linguistics, metaphysics of mind, phenomenological philosophy, 'folk psychology', etc.

Concepts? — Sign, representation, meaning, reference, communication, intention, interpretation, purpose, interest, consciousness, etc. (with or without prefix 'self-').

## Result:

Biosemiotics = a loosely bounded non-standard discourse somewhere between humanities and the natural science of biology.

## The object of study:

**Life** including human mental and cultural life without reducing them merely to the products of natural selection or computational brain processes.

## 2. Have we gained any progress in biosemiotics?

Hard **criteria** for progress:

1. Explain all what neo-Darwinists can correctly explain and
2. predict more than neo-darwinists can ever predict in principle — i.e. we should be able to find some *new* empirical regularities that mechanical etc. principles cannot explain plausibly.

Quite remote prospects? **Why?**

Do we even have biosemiotic **theories**?

We have views, metaphors, analogies, and metaphysical opinions, but do we have one **theory that can be put into test**? Imagine conditions that would falsify it. Do we have anything more than points of departures?

**Why there are no empirically testable biosemiotic theories?**

“It is easy to speak with precision upon a general theme. Only, one must commonly surrender all ambition to be certain. It is equally easy to be certain. One has only to be sufficiently vague. It is not so difficult to be pretty precise and fairly certain at once about a very narrow subject.” (Peirce CP 4.237, 1902.)

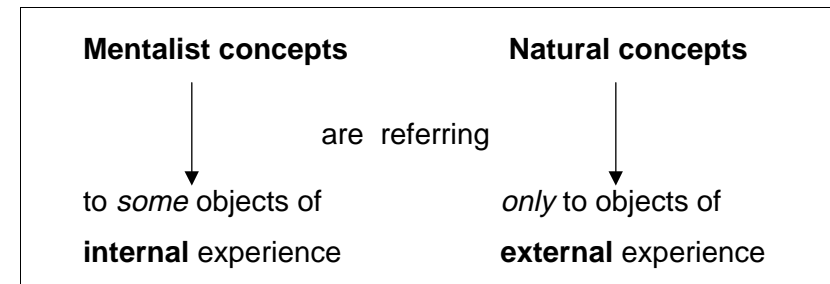
So far biosemiotics has mostly fallen to proclaim 2<sup>nd</sup> of these, **general** and **true** but **extremely vague** statements.

**Diagnosis:** The problem is in our **basic method**, in using semiotic (etc.) *concepts* of humanities referring to biological systems.

At the beginning, we are forced to use them vaguely and metaphorically.

**Threat:** Biosemiotic ‘theories’ and basic concepts will not exceed their metaphorical and vague origins.

## 3. Concepts and objects of experience:



An **experience** is

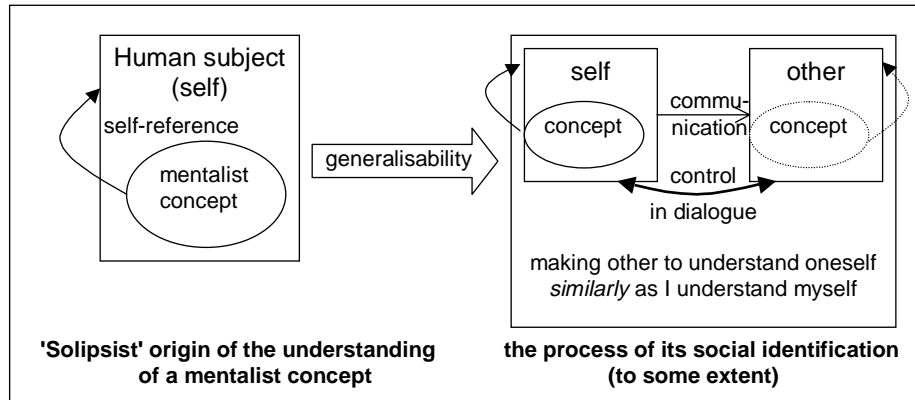
- 1) **external** if it refers to an individual object that is analogously sensible by others, and
- 2) **internal** if it refers to a *subjective object* (or event) that is not *directly* sensible by others but only *mediately* through this internal experience.

*Mentalist concepts* are partly based or dependent on **subjective self-observation**

— either they are (at least partly) derived by **transcendental method** or they get their meaning through it.

It is possible to make somewhat significant **human science** by using mentalist concepts (e.g. self-awareness, free will, intention, angst, meaning as feeling, etc.) in their intuitive senses:

## 4. The legitimate use of mentalistic concepts in *human sciences*



**Basic assumption:** sufficient *similarity* between self and other.

⇒ Other is capable and 'manipulatable' to attain the same *kind* of self-observation as self.

**Preconditions** of this potential generalizability:

- common media of communication (i.e. symbolic language etc.)
- close enough cultural backgrounds (the base of understanding)
- ⇒ other has to be **HUMAN** (or nearly human)

In **biosemiotic extension**, with *non-human other*, there is **no common language or culture** (except in very restricted sense).

⇒ **Lack of control** in identification of the mentalist concept with *non-human other*. Control is only *unilateral, manipulative* or *observational* — not based on *mutual* dialogue aiming to better **equilateral** understanding.

## 5. Solution — the *methodology* of **biosemiotic naturalism**:

Biosemiotic **science** should

1. avoid using mentalist concepts, and when not possible,
2. **naturalize** the used ones

This naturalization means a certain kind of **extended** and **abstractive re-definition** of mentalistic concepts *as natural concepts*, i.e. their transformation to concepts that does not refer to and whose comprehension is not dependent on the *objects* of internal experience.

In the naturalization of a mentalist concept, from the set of its defining characters the internal ones are dropped off so that the external ones are all that remain.

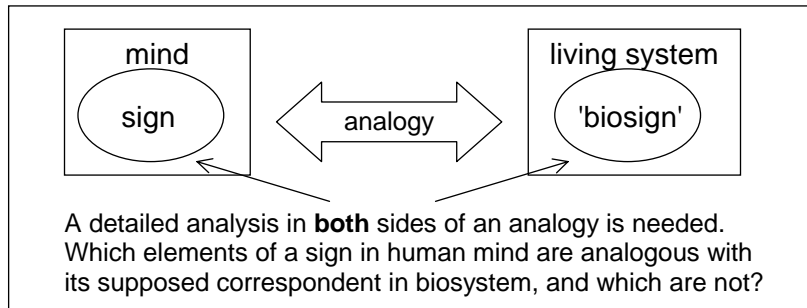
- ⇒ The extension (i.e. the set of all real referents) of a mentalist concept is a *subset* of the extension of its naturalized version.
- ⇒ Naturalized concept is more abstract.

However, in each case we should be careful: How not to go too far — whether something too essential is lost in a naturalization?

## 6. Execution of the solution:

**Start** with analogy or metaphor, but *not* to stay on that — that is only a point of *departure* for further analysis.

**Next stage:** a *detailed analysis* of **both** sides of analogy.



**Last stage** — *after* the dual analysis: **evaluation**

- whether the initial analogy really was correct, fruitful, etc.
- whether we really have achieved a definite and general biosemiotic concept.

These stages seem to be necessary for the

**Final stage:** compose a **theory** and put it under **test**.

## 7. Why this is not easily acceptable in biosemiotics?

Perhaps because of biosemiotician's personal **motives** for biosemiotics, whether ideological, political, moral, or even existential?

The common biosemiotic solution in order to reunite Cartesian dualisms is to emphasize '**experiential biology**' or '**qualitative organicism**':

“experiential biology includes a kind of subjective and qualitative knowledge of the feeling of life, of sentience, of the moods of passive laziness or active engagement, and SO ON.” (Emmeche 2000.)

Is it **incompatible** with biosemiotic naturalism? (Yes and no!)

1. Experiential biology should be used as a **control** for what we do in biology and biosemiotics.
2. Without biosemiotic naturalization, the 'qualitative feelings' of experiential biology can set forth only **extremely vague concepts**.  
⇒ No hope for biosemiotic **theory**.
3. Therefore, it does not reunite Cartesian dualisms. Real biological **science** remains untouched.

## 8. How to *really* avoid dualism?

The dualism of soul and body (or subject and object) is supported and is supported and reproduced through possibly *universal* human experience, the possible experience of **success** or **unsuccess** in purposed or **intentional action**.

### Hypothesis:

It is enough to show how matter —or living system— can have intentionality, purposes, or ***natural self-interest***. Feelings are not necessarily needed, if just the concept of natural self-interest could be defined according to biosemiotic naturalism.

### Need of mentalist concepts and internal experience:

While biosemiotic concepts should be naturalized for biosemiotic **science**, mentalist concepts and internal experience are still the most essential for **life, our life**.

- ⇐ Our everyday life is deeply dependent on the validity of mentalist concepts and on reality of their objects.
- ⇐ Most of our necessary self-knowledge or data for our actual life is mediated by our inner feelings, emotions, etc. These cannot be totally replaced by the objects of external experience.

## 9. Experiential existential naturalism?

Who am I? Where are my boundaries?

Typical western (i.e. greco-judeo-christian) answer to such *existential* questions: privilege given to *inner sense*, i.e. to the objects of my internal experience, my feelings, thoughts, memories, etc.

- ⇒ **Cartesian cogito lurking inside experiential biology.**
- ⇒ If Cartesianism is *really* tried to overcome no special status should be given to the objects of our internal experience in relation to the objects of external experience.

We should find **methods of life** to overcome the initial dualism in experience, 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.

This is no more scientific or even merely intellectual experiment – new *bodily* habits have to be acquired. Biosemiotic naturalism can give only a theoretical framework for that kind of existential project.

But if that existential project is feasible, it might make us able to free ourselves the pathological consequences of quasi-Cartesian thinking by producing a new *concrete* awareness about self as a living body (or as a lineage of living bodies?).

**Perhaps even naturalism can be existentialism.**