

Open Peer Commentaries

on Raivo Palmaru's "Making Sense and Meaning"

Comparing Incomparability – The Functional Distinction between Operation and Identity

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> Upshot • The author addresses implications arising from socializing observer-dependent heuristics. Above all, Palmaru's terminology is called into question since its conceptual deficiencies with regard to the relation between an observing system and its environments cause naturalistic fallacy. The author's reply espouses a concise reanalysis of the complementary relations of fundamentally incomparable domains, namely the observer and the social system.

« 1 » Incessant debates tend to rear up on regular basis, and there seems to be a pressing need to revise yet another delineation of the colloquially phrased question: *How much "we" is in autopoiesis?* Referring to Raivo Palmaru's blueprint, this admittedly trivial phrasing expresses a renewed attempt to bridge Niklas Luhmann's concept of communication and what at best might be named as *humans' participation within the social realm*.

« 2 » Palmaru sets out to redefine the relation between communication and culture, and along with his aim, gives an outright preference for Luhmann's concept of communication. This preference is expressed with the proviso that Luhmann's

theory of social systems lacks explanatory power with regard to the autopoiesis (concept) of communication's ability to explain "meaning." Palmaru suggests overcoming this "weakness" by distinguishing dimensions of meaning, an allegedly elegant solution, which admittedly raises implications. The following remarks attempt to illustrate essential objections to this approach.

« 3 » The point of departure for this commentary is that the communication complexities of the relations between self and society require a theoretical and epistemological framework with a high sensitivity to uncertainty. Communication theory in the tradition of systems theory and radical constructivism, with its emphasis on epistemological reflection, is particularly well-suited to this purpose for it considers agents of communication as agents in communication systems that are complex. It further considers that communication itself is an irreducibly uncertain operation. Communication theory is thus positioned at a level beyond the *agent*, *medium* or *semantics*, although it remains attentive to all three factors.

« 4 » Palmaru plainly bypasses these *au fond* commonplaces of pertinent theory construction by establishing a range of conceptual antonyms opposing communication, and his starting point is the juxtaposition of communication and culture. The choice of means of such an alignment of abstraction levels remains questionable. The author's dimensioning of culture as such is quite narrowly considered. Even the function of culture, which one could expect to be a prerequisite of any further theoretical consideration, seems to amount to nothing more than to contrast with communication. Palmaru introduces culture as communica-

tion's counterpart: partly normatively positing culture, partly as conjuncture of history of science if nothing else when he refers to culture's significance in preceding "books and articles" (§2). Thus, culture appears as an auxiliary construction to surmount implications of Luhmann's work. At no point is a functional assignment for culture given. The notion itself remains on the one hand (quasi-)ontological and on the other hand vague with regard to the author's "arguendo" of culture as a more or less epiphenomenal visitant. Here, "culture" is mentioned in the same breath as "shared knowledge" (§1), "common knowledge" (§1), and "shared meaning" (§28), which eventually marks the main focus of the author.

« 5 » Considering the author's attempt to redefine *sharing* as a form of socially *binding* participation, Palmaru's point of departure – within the realm of social systems defined by Luhmann – is not capable of explaining a claimed overwhelming need to define communication *as* autopoietic. Nor does he apparently reflect on the consequences of such a claim that would allow for such a conceptualization. As Luhmann (2000) unequivocally stated when opting for an "operational constructivism,"

“observers of other observers cannot distinguish the conditions of existence of these latter observers from the conditions of knowing that what they are dealing with are particular, self-conditioning observers.” (ibid: 6)

« 6 » However, Luhmann, evidently aware of social theorists' basal ambition to bridge the individual (observer) and (observed) environments, does not hide the fact that every sociological theory has an obligation to "resolve" the *incomparability*

of an observer's perception of *self* and *otherness*. Along these lines, Luhmann's sole framework, modelling these incomparable arrays, is based on relation as *progression* (Luhmann 1992: 31). I would like to stress emphatically that this progression is mainly driven by *desistance*.

« 7 » In my opinion, such a theoretical decision prevents any intermediating instance, if such an instance can be considered as where meaning is processed for more than one observing entity. Desistance as an impetus for progression is above all not geared to any "third party" that comes into play to evoke extra-systemic grounds for "common meanings" (§30). Palmaru's division of meaning into a human domain, which is defined as personal sense structures, and social-cultural meanings, defining a social domain that itself is not identical with communication, caters for a phenomenological substitute by implication. When Palmaru conceptualizes meaning "as a phenomenon that evolves in communication" and defines "culture" as "a pattern of structurally related meanings" (§81), this endeavor seems to be "outsourcing the function" of systemic orders in preference for a "socially compatible" construction of *identity*. At this juncture, the author effects just that controversial relation in the context of philosophies of mind that has been extensively covered by Luhmann's remarks on "either subject or object" (Luhmann 1997: 886–879). In lieu of considering the consequences of Luhmann's rendering of the subject as identical with *self-reference*, as the foundation of recognition and action (ibid: 868), Palmaru seems to miss the progressive aspect of this irreconcilable contradiction. This aspect, in my view, remains an essential discernment in every observer-based theoretical assumption. In his attempt to make "sharing meaning" "presentable," he simply ignores autology within communication as well as autology's consequences for a societal model:

“Contrary to what is often assumed, the functioning of social relations – from our point of view, the autopoiesis of society – does not depend on ‘intersubjectivity,’ even less on ‘consensus.’ Neither is intersubjectivity always given nor can intersubjectivity be produced (which would require the ability to assess whether intersubjectiv-

ity is or is not achieved). Instead, it is crucial that communication proceeds – however the consciousness necessary for this is induced to participate.” (Luhmann 1997: 874, my translation)

« 8 » We finally face a binding decision: as soon as we encounter situations, we are exposed to the insuperability of a modal antagonism between the referential arrays of action and communication, which is an iteratively emergent phenomenon. Notwithstanding, this insuperability obviously allows for an essential degree of freedom in encounters. "As in the heliocentric system, there must be a third that is the central reference. It is the relation between Thou and I, and this relation is *identity* [...]" (Foerster 1984) Identity makes a difference: identity "draws a distinction" (Spencer-Brown 1969) between an observer's array of mind – his or her consciousness, affects, and cognitions – and his or her observable appearance as a form of being, which is perceived as *mind-driven*. In order to take stock of this boundary, I would like to raise awareness of its definitional "conditio sine qua non":

“The only relationship between elements is contiguity: a given element either is or is not contained in another given element. [...] A definition of an element may be regarded as an interpretation, and an interpretation of an element may be taken as its value.” (Spencer-Brown 1969: 132f)

« 9 » I would like to draw attention to the indissoluble paradox of interaction in general, as it tends to generate referential transfers continuously that can no longer be taken as an exclusive responsibility of their generators. In particular, interaction faces the unfolding of its paradoxical outcome when it divests itself from its agent, when interaction as a process is transferred into an "intermediate world" beyond the operationally closed (subject), where it reclaims intersubjective validity. That is clearly Palmaru's misunderstanding in my view: by installing culture as a "gateway" between a conscious observer (self) and society, the author "naturalizes" systems indirectly by constructing an *extra-systemic* exchange layer for the communitarization of meaning. On this note, Luhmann's strict distinction between action and communication

becomes analytically quite reasonable, shifting accountability to a domain beyond the "subject's" accessibility by drawing the distinction that communication is inherently social.

“Action is not. Moreover, social action already implies communication; it implies at least the communication of the meaning of the action or the intent of the actor [...]. As we have seen, the perfection of communication implies understanding, and understanding is not part of the activity of the communicator and cannot be attributed to him.” (Luhmann 1986: 178)

« 10 » What does that mean for the meaning-heavy term "understanding"? Palmaru at this point equates understanding, knowledge, and cognition, which culminates in his interpretation of *adaptation* (§§60f). Yet again his remarks remain vague as he states, "what is meant is the relationship between an autopoietic system and its environment [...] is literally a matter of survival" (§61). Although one could agree with this circumscription of *viability*, Palmaru leaves the reader in the dark as to what exactly is meant by his reference to "an autopoietic system." According to whether the author refers to "organism," "consciousness," "cognition," "the cognizing subject" or "social systems" this varies randomly (§60). Even his compliance with second-order cybernetics' observer-centrism (§60) interferes with the "heuristic" (Baecker 2002: 131) notion of *the observer* with cognitive systems.

« 11 » I would like to make some necessary remarks on the biology of cognition in order to illustrate Palmaru's "oversimplification" of the conception of cognition. Indeed, in keeping with the theoretical framework of second-order cybernetics (Foerster 1985), the core reference of an observer-conception will be an organism, whose basic referential scope could be described as "consciousness." The preference for this starting operation can be easily explained when examined under the terms of a difference-logical calculus. Consciousness knows no distinction, no differentiation in the sense of a predictive presupposition in the experience of an observer – we cannot step beyond. Similarly, the choice of which concept of consciousness might fit from an

analytical perspective could be easily disputed. This is true in the sense that it seems obvious that the notion of the concept is mentioned as a function of expressing the responsibility of a mind-driven organism as an agent, in accordance with the perceivable consequences of behaviors, actions, and communications. Thereby, the “elegant” character of consciousness could be modeled as an epiphenomenal outcome of the usage of language (Maturana 1978) in a narrow sense, as well as the usage of any kind of proto-semiotic material in a broad sense (Schmidt 1996). As a biological organ, the brain is clearly closed in a relative sense. Allan Schore (1994) argues that the brain is a complex self-organizing system. In the field of neuro-semantics, Olaf Breidbach (Florey & Breidbach 1993) argues that the brain is not only self-organizing, it is self-referential. As a complex system, the brain is not entirely closed, however. If it were, it would remain impervious to neural information. One way to conceptualize self-organization (auto-organization and organization of the self) is as a porous system, where porosity is defined as a complex interplay of structure and open space or solid and fluid phases. This interplay renders a self-referential system both open and closed. Accepting the biological description of operative closure and self-referentiality allows for the assumption that the description of a human observer as unity cannot be characterized by the states of the brain only, but has to consider a holistic approach that is in accordance with a model of the organization of living systems. To describe an observer as a unity, we have to consider more than one sort of those processes that are mainly labeled as “cognitions.” As Frank Pasemann mentions, there is an urgent need to consider that the coordination of a living system intertwines the interaction of several operatively closed processual systems:

“A cognitive system should be in a state in which it can perceive essential aspects of its environment through its sensual organs, it should be in a state to generalize, to categorize, and to draw abstractions from the perceived aspects, and it should be able to build recognizable relations between the distinctive aspects of its observations.” (Pasemann 1996: 48, my translation)

« 12 » To close the loop, we have to consider that we posit an analytical setting, which forces the confirmation of a referential agency. And an agency for the reference of an observer’s observations and perceptions has to take into account a certain state of closure towards its environment. In this regard we return to the categorization of consciousness as an epiphenomenon of the usage of proto-semiotic materials. Any reference that a living system as a unity uses to refer to itself (i.e., auto-logical) is guided by an agency, which can usually be called “consciousness.” This is because the semantic structure of the substantive becomes more transparent when extended by a prefix, and we can also use the expression of self-consciousness as a synonym.

“Self-consciousness then is not a neurophysiological phenomenon, it is a consensual phenomenon emerging in an independent domain of interactions from self-orienting behavior and lies entirely in the linguistic domain.” (Maturana 1980: 42)

« 13 » To use another characterization: the core aspect of the evolution of self-consciousness implies a semantic mode of processing self-reference (Meitz 2009). And processing self-reference while being aware of one’s self in the presence of others urges reflection:

“When we human beings reflect on our living, we find ourselves living together as a matter of course in the flow of consensual coordinations of doings of languaging. [...] Yet, in any case, as we reflect we find ourselves being part of a field of operational coherences of our living. And we also find that we can explain all the worlds that we live with the operational coherences of our living as we become aware of our existence and operation as structure-determined systems that can operate as self-consciousness beings.” (Maturana 2006: 100)

« 14 » Operation and identity – and evidently Palmaru passes over these varying layers of observation – cannot be compared in terms of accessibility, notwithstanding that they allow what Luhmann would have defined as progression and what could be defined by Nils Bohr’s (1931) understanding of *complementarity*. In addition, the more

or less implicit equivalence of cognition, consciousness, and self– as Palmaru apparently accepts in order to define a “sphere,” as opposed to social systems – disguises that encountering others or *the world(s)* is not a cognitive experience within a concrete environment but rather an encounter that allows semantics to be “met” that are derived from reflection, since the “other side” remains unattainable.

« 15 » In conclusion, I would rather agree that a debate about autopoiesis being supportive in explaining societal binding from an observer-based perspective remains a loose end in the connection between radical constructivism and social systems theory. But neither the dislocation of meaning beyond observers or communication – as Palmaru au fond proposes with his definition of culture as an intermediate – nor the revaluation of meaning as a shared sphere exterior to a heuristically deduced observer, appears useful for increasing his theories’ explanatory power. Finally, the overemphasis on an admittedly controversial concept such as autopoiesis, as applied by Luhmann (e.g., Schmidt 1996: 28f), can blur the vision of an application of theory that accords with social phenomena. This blurring occurs when we delineate almost every observer-related category as autopoietic and yet supersede one of the most trivial reasons for holding to observer-related theories at all, namely, not to objectify our own heuristics.

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