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Meaning and meaning fields: A non-dualist approach by Martin Staude

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Review of *Meaning in Communication, Cognition, and Reality: Outline of a Theory from Semiotics, Philosophy, and Sociology*, by Martin Staude. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2012.

The recent book by Martin Staude (2012), *Meaning in Communication, Cognition, and Reality*, which he also defended as a doctoral dissertation in November 2009 at the Free University of Berlin,[2] proposes a theoretical framework by which meaning-related phenomena could be described and investigated in psychic and communicative systems. Staude takes an approach to theory-building by which initially the most fundamental, abstract and general elements and properties of the theory are chosen and discussed. Only after the solid frame is set, are additional layers of complexity included by more concrete methodological decisions which remain faithful to the foundations. The theory-building is accompanied by a very clear presentation of both the contents of the theory thus established and the principles that have guided its construction. A substantial portion of the work is dedicated to the development of a formal representation that enhances the theory's transparency even further.

Staude's ultimate aim for establishing a clear foundation on the most abstract level is to create broad connectivity with neighbouring approaches in semiotics, philosophy and social sciences. Throughout the work Staude mentions concepts in other fields which would allow a good point of contact. In seeking a deliberately abstract conceptual basis, Staude starts with the main term 'meaning', formulating a concept that may equally be termed *signification, sense, denotation, signified, concept, sign, word, code, symbol, description, indication, label, distinction, idea* or

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interpretation (p. 1).[3] Thus Staude adopts a stipulative definition (that is, a novel and idiosyncratic definition with particular purposes in mind) for the term 'meaning' that would allow many related processes in psychic and communicative systems to be approached in a unified abstract frame.

Staude's conception of meaning is built around the operation of distinction. Namely, Staude argues that in operationalizing a common notion of meaning that is based on indication or action, there is a requirement for an operation of distinction to be taken into account as a prerequisite for any indication or action to be possible. This argument is based on the works of Spencer Brown (1971) and Jokisch's reconstruction thereof (1996), and provides the ground for Staude's conception of *meaning as a distinction-based category*. A brief definition is given: "A meaning denotes 'something particular', which is marked or indicated, so that it is automatically distinguished from 'something different' or from 'all the rest', which remains unmarked or ignored" (p. 8). This definition allows some agency for a system or an observer who is performing the indications and distinctions; however, centrally for Staude, these meanings are also subject to heavy standardization in both cognition and communication and thus an object of investigation is found in intersubjective commonalities (p. 10).

Starting from this general definition, Staude places the threshold for the capacity for meanings at a rather rudimentary level – thus describing a very broad variety of events or actions in the same terms, which to some readers may seem rather radical. Staude's own examples include the salivation of Pavlov's dog, the discomfort felt by a bacterium in a wrong environment, the figure-ground perception of a human infant, a common conceptualization of a table, the Western notion of love, and an Anglo-American understanding of a legal contract (p. 15). In another step of abstraction, Staude also finds all these instances of meaning to be of a linguistic kind by designating a language to be "a set of signs or tokens (e.g., words, concepts, images, symbols, etc.) and a set of rules for combining these signs or tokens (e.g., syntax, syntagmatic conventions, grammar, etc.), which are used in psychic or communicative operations" (p. 15). Staude makes these formulations quite explicit and openly declares them to be uncommon reconceptualizations at times. The book is structured well enough for these instances to be followed and in most cases Staude makes his reasoning rather clear.

The question of the threshold itself could perhaps have been developed further as it has been central to many of the endeavours in semiotics and philosophy that Staude wants to relate to. For example, he does state that in practical terms among human meanings, it provides little information in this context if any category can

[3] Throughout the review, the page numbers (p. and pp.) refer to the book under review (Staude 2012).

be designated to the sphere of biology or culture (e.g., p. 14); however, the inclusion of Pavlov's dog, for example, does raise suspicions as to whether different types of meaning ought eventually to be distinguished or what kind of an observer or system is necessary for all of the properties of the meanings that are described to become relevant. Staude's practical examples almost all remain in the sphere of human meanings and thus the exact demarcation of these boundaries may not have much of an impact on its main object of study, although there is space for additional elaboration. Staude naturally also declares that his framework does not claim to be exhaustive in any way, and many equally interesting objects of study may be found within the realm of cognition and communication (p. 3).

Non-dualist philosophy

A significant portion of the work (pp. 21–84) is dedicated to ontology – that is, the question of what exists at all, according to this theory. Staude works on it from two angles, giving it a rationalization that ought to be valid from a theory-independent view and analysing the particular mechanics and arguments as they pertain directly to the theory in question. Staude's theory of meaning is placed within the frame of non-dualism, as it has been formulated by Mitterer (1992; 2001). The main theoretical position is taken up by arguing against two epistemological positions: realism and constructivism. Staude argues that they should both be seen as dualist frameworks since both presuppose an underlying reality to which their statements ought to be related (with realism maintaining a hopeful stance, and constructivism a sceptical one). According to non-dualism, a coherent view instead would presuppose no ontological distinction between the 'reality' and statements about it, thus arguing that they should be interpreted in the same terms. Thus, instead of the truthfulness or validity of any claim, the measurements of acceptability should be wholly based on the mechanisms of description, such as *connectibility* and *robustness* that are described in greater length below (p. 75).

Staude supports these claims in dialogues between a dualist and a non-dualist, each making a case for their position. This presentation makes Staude's arguments particularly visible, as part of the reasoning requires that the 'reality that is independent of description' needs to be thought or communicated somehow to make this notion in any sense meaningful. However, when any reference is made to an object of this type, according to Staude the conversation leads to a logical-vs-performative contradiction, that is, the utterance will actually performatively accomplish something that it simultaneously denies itself doing (i.e. bringing this 'reality' into the sphere of descriptions) (p. 31). There are a few possible positions which Staude

mentions that a dualist could coherently hold to various extents, such as taking the attitude of a sceptic about the non-existence of reality, and that of an agnostic towards the unknown reality or psycho-communicative silence, each of which has some problems that make them less suitable for a research paradigm, although Staude does suggest that these could be explored in further studies (pp. 54–57).

Describing the argument from within the theory, it is useful to incorporate the novel formalism that was used in the book. This takes as a basic element an ontological marker M for meaning, which can be schematically placed in the sphere of meanings as M vs M_{ELSE} or M vs $M_{ANOTHER}$ representing a distinction between this meaning and others. Thus a distinction between reality/world and descriptions/meanings could be represented as W vs M, which in a non-dualist framework would be represented as M_W vs M_M or $M_{(W\ VS\ M)}$. The latter two representations take an ontological W to be nonsensical and make it transparent that the distinction between 'real things' and 'mere descriptions' belongs fully to the sphere of meanings. M_W and M_M can thus be taken as types or modes of being within that sphere of meanings that describe particular meanings, or as it is difficult to differentiate the modes from the elements, it can be said that M_W is a meaning that auto-describes itself as a meaning and M_w is a meaning that auto-describes itself as pertaining to reality. The formalism has been extended to refer to particular contents by "= ⌈...⌉", such as M_W = ⌈TABLE⌉ or M_W = ⌈BLACK THING⌉ that are "descriptions M that auto-describe them(selves) as objects W but not as descriptions M, because in everyday semantics tables and black things are considered to be material, permanent, external, resistant, or observable entities, so they are seen to belong to the ontological level of objects W but not to the ontological level of descriptions M" (p. 64).

Relations between the meanings

Staude's basic framework of distinction-based meanings as they appear to a system or an observer is extended and made more concrete in various dimensions. In elaboration of the M_W vs M_M, Staude introduces a temporal distinction to the framework, distinguishing between meanings *up to now* and meanings *from now on*. Meanings up to now refer to the prevailing descriptions that are supposed to be in place at the moment of use or utterance, while meanings from now on refer to descriptions that work by modifying or adding something to the description as it has been accepted. A natural dialogue can be seen as a constant flow between the two types of meanings as certain meanings are accepted and other meanings are introduced modifying or elaborating them. Thus, for example, the reference from M_M to M_W can be seen as a meaning from now on referring to a meaning up to now. The temporal characterization

is more general than the one relating 'meanings' and 'world' and is dependent on specific circumstances.

Abstracting even further, Staude introduces the notions of connectivity and robustness to characterize the relations that guide the use of meanings. A high measure of connectivity characterizes the ability of a meaning up to now to generate a high number of meanings from now on that semantically refer to or connect to the meaning up to now. For example in a conversation this refers to possible continuations to a particular utterance, thus "accepting or rejecting a meaning-description corresponds to a high connectivity, whereas ignoring a meaning-description corresponds to a high discontinuity" (p. 74). A high measure of robustness characterizes the ability of a meaning up to now to generate a high number of meanings from now on that semantically accept or presuppose the meaning up to now, in other words allowing it to remain valid, accepted and unchanged. In natural discourse a scale in robustness can be seen proceeding from low to high, for example in lies, opinions, facts, reality (p. 74).

Refining the distinction between the reality and descriptions, Staude also incorporates the semiotic triangle to his framework by introducing a non-dualist version of it (adapting particularly the model of Ogden and Richards 1994: 16). In a non-dualist semiotic triangle its main elements the signifier, the meaning, and the referent are seen as M_S, $M_{M,}$ and M_R, that is, elements that auto-describe themselves as either signifiers, meanings or referents. For example, "the referent is an M that auto-describes it(self) as a referent $_R$, i.e., as a concrete and empirical entity, object, exemplar, event, behaviour, fact, actor, or phenomenon in the real world. According to this auto-description, the referent is material, permanent, external, resistant, constraining, observable, difficult to modify or avoid, objective, ontologically distinct from meaning and description, non-symbolic and non-referential because it simply is or happens without referring to something other than itself" (p. 85). This is also naturally accompanied with a relativist position in the reading of signs – that is, based on the arguments by Peirce and Chandler (CP 2.308; Chandler 2002: 17), a sign is only a sign if it is seen as such, but also anything can be a sign if it is seen as such. Thus in an analysis of meaning "a M = $\left|\text{SCALE}\right|$ is for one observer simply the non-symbolic object $M_R = \left|\text{SCALE}\right|$, whereas for another observer it is the symbolic object or signifier $M_S = \left|\text{SCALE}\right|$ that symbolizes the meaning $M_M = \left|\text{LAW AND JUSTICE}\right|$" (p. 90).

Staude accommodates the non-dualist semiotic triangle to demonstrate various formulations of other processes and relations that traditionally belong to the research area of semantics (pp. 85–123). Particular representations are created for extension and intension, classification, onomasiology and semiology, meaning interpretation, and meaning convergence, providing a rather succinct formulation

for each of them. Additionally, Staude brings in the notion of prototypicality, arguing that in social and cognitive systems the boundaries between meanings are often fuzzy, and also within the auto-descriptions of particular meanings the idea of prototypicality is often included. Thus, for example, an apple is a typical fruit, while an olive is a very unusual fruit. It is quite natural to encounter sentences like "Strictly speaking, a penguin is a bird" (p. 135) or "Ackees are fruits, but they are not edible" (p. 135). Staude considers a variety of models of prototypicality (p. 147) and chooses one with a gradient structure of prototypicality with a categorical centre as the most suitable one for particular analyses of meaning in analysing social systems as it theoretically allows both gradience and discreteness for any particular meaning under study (p. 156).

Medium, form, and meaning fields

A central term by which the relations between meanings could be investigated and described is in Staude's framework a *meaning field* – that is, a cluster of meanings that describes a level of organization beyond the atomicity of a single meaning, but at the same time allows a certain focus by considering only a part from the universe of all meanings (pp. 160–165). Crucially, while meanings in their atomicity and meanings as they pertain to the entire sphere of meanings are made of the same stuff, and also meanings that are currently indicated or negated are of the same stuff as the ones that are not, there is an additional aspect that is needed to describe the use of particular meanings in particular circumstances. Staude introduces a distinction between the meaning medium and the meaning form that is inspired by Niklas Luhmann's (1984) very similar distinction (p. 72). The two are thus connected via a process of transformation, whereby the latent, inactivated, uncoupled mass of meanings that is the medium allows a smaller selection of manifest, activated uncoupled meanings that is the form to temporarily emerge (pp. 211–229). This process is termed activation and roughly corresponds to "the concrete use, selection, or appearance of meanings or meaning fields by a particular actor, system, or discourse" (p. 269).

While in one sense the entire universe of meanings works as a medium for these activations, it is possible to find more particular areas that function as medium for particular (inter)actions or that fulfil a relatively stronger role in the minds of a particular actor (p. 213). This is where meaning fields come into play as meaning mediums that bring out certain meaning forms (p. 269). In this sense for example an M = ⎪NO-PARKING SIGN⎪ might activate the meaning field MF^{LAW} within which the sign could be connected with particular sanctions such as fines (p. 218). Meaning fields are often manipulated via particular meanings; however, Staude emphasizes a

dynamic relationship between them as activations and subsequent deactivations of particular meanings work to reproduce and rejuvenate particular meanings (p. 212), while meaning fields as media also change over time through particular uses (p. 169). Without activation, a medium may atrophy and lose its connections within the general sphere of meanings akin to any processes of habit formation (p. 212).

The concept of a meaning field thus proposes a conceptual paradigm by which patterns and organizations in the sphere of meanings may be studied (such as the meaning fields of law and power). The empirical procedures involved are inspired by Geertz's (1973) thick description with the aim of addressing a multitude of different first-order perspectives of emic and etic varieties in order to compose a stipulative second-order analysis that conceptualizes the data in terms of meanings and meaning fields along with their activation and non-activation (pp. 197–207). This allows for observations to be gathered from various extrospective sources and also introspection as a variety of emic auto-description that may be eventually combined (pp. 207–210). As a combination of different types of data, meaning fields emerge as highly condensed and confirmed groupings of meanings, which are situationally independent, highly generalized, and thus easily repeated. At the same time their particular manifestations are to be observed as related to particular actors, and meaning fields may also relate interindividually to each other in complex patterns, such as contradiction, subversion, counter-meaning fields, inclusion, overlap, marginal vs dominant meaning fields, etc. (p. 170).

Prospects

Staude sets forth a novel framework which gathers much of the intuitions within social sciences, philosophy and semiotics to designate an object for research on a very abstract level. This provides both a capable toolbox by which practical research may be performed, and a vantage point for comparisons between different theoretical frameworks to be grounded. The basis is solid and well developed and the book even provides rather concrete and practical instructions as to how future research should be conducted. The eventual reception of Staude's framework may, however, depend particularly on whether the researchers will find the questions proposed in the book interesting enough and a productive angle to investigate from. That is, for example, whether questions like "what is the structure of the meaning field of health among the New Guinea Mountain People?" (p. 272) and "when is the meaning of unlawfulness activated in doctor-patient-interactions?" (p. 272) will be received as interesting problems for the researchers to pursue. Staude also provides his own assessment that his basic framework particularly has room for specification by building stronger claims

as to interconnectedness of different observable elements that can be both tested and applied in case studies on particular circumstances (p. 270–272).

Among the opportunities for theoretical comparison, there is an aspect that seems particularly promising for further evaluations in the eyes of the reviewer. Staude claims that constructivism and realism as defined are effectively quasi-monopolistic in the social sciences, which is why non-dualism is a fresh wind (p. 26). This could be substantiated further by indicating the exact disciplinary boundaries in mind, but as Staude himself indicates, his proposal has numerous predecessors in for example the Linguistic Turn, the Semantic Turn, the Cognitive Turn, the Interpretive Turn and others (p. 62). Based on the very clear and abstract theoretical foundations given, there is room for more precise formulations of how exactly dualisms in various studies emerge and how they impact the research results that they are thus able to provide.

Granted, Staude makes a clear case for Luhmann's systems theory to be dualist due to its distinction between societal semantics and social structures despite the bidirectional and flexible influence between them, on which the reviewer will also have to rely. However as demonstrated with Staude's own M_W vs M_M distinction, the ontological questions pertain to the outermost frame of any theory, and thus in other cases a distinction present in the terminology might not extend to the basic ontology. For example, a plausible non-dualist theorist can be found in a predecessor of and a strong influence on Luhmann – Vilfredo Pareto. Even though in numerous places he implements categories which have a dualist background, he also provides a larger frame: for example as in "We must not be misled by the names [objective and subjective] we give to the two classes. In reality both are subjective, for all human knowledge is subjective" (Pareto 1935: 76).

It is possible that there is some injustice in Staude's description of Peirce's semiotic triangle as dualist (p. 83). Granted, he does emphasize the role of practical results and behaviour in an assessment of an interpretant; however, Staude himself describes Peirce's pansemiotism as very close to non-dualism (p. 62). There is an extra difficulty in that Peirce's ideas exhibited significant change over time, and thus perhaps earlier ideas may not be compatible with later ones. If one views the notions of behaviour or event from a pansemiotic angle, one would have to conclude that Peirce's semiotic triangle is non-dualist as well (although very different in its make-up). There are indeed numerous approaches that have tried to tackle the problem of meaning only deriving from meaning or signs from signs and, with the help of Staude's formal description of the philosophical background (put forward by Mitterer), there is now an opportunity to make the basics explicit in a concise manner. Another candidate that may be of particular interest is the model of the semiosphere as composed within the Tartu–Moscow School (Lotman 2005). While at one

end of investigations there is particularly the non-compatibility and the possibilities for dialogue between different semiospheres, also a global semiosphere can be seen there that may bear a strong resemblance to Staude's sphere of meanings. There may be quite a few other frameworks and research programmes that start from the same foundations without declaring the philosophical background so explicitly as Staude. The commonalities and the conceptual differences between such different formulations on possibly very similar foundations may well prove to be a fruitful area for theoretical investigation.

Staude proposes an interesting framework that opens up new areas of study within the social sciences in a very clear and deliberate manner. The explicitness by which the core is built up may indeed be presented as a textbook example for future students attempting to tread the path of theory-building. While the particular concepts proposed (such as the meaning field) will have to compete with other theoretical proposals for a conceptualization of the domain of meanings (for example, the ones based on conflict, dialogue, translation, etc.), the abstract characterization provided by the author allows these theoretical points of contrast to be placed on an especially clear and lucid background. The author also makes a sufficient case for the details that may be a capable contender, among other things providing an immersive vocabulary that gives theory-specific interpretations to the common notions that he initially presents the theory with (e.g., meaning, semantic, robustness, connectivity, etc.). The effort Staude makes is strong, both in the book's theoretical content as well as in establishing accessibility for a potential audience, and deserves a closer look from anyone interested in the variety of ways to study processes of meaning, possibly to even provide a vantage point from which these dangerous waters could be charted in other contexts.

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