
ON THE THREE TYPES OF REALITY

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Abstract

The complexity of the semiotic processes requires an analysis of the realities related to the semiotics, based on the transmutation of the existential events. Semiotic activity is a significant part in all kinds of research. We formulate our conclusions with the help of signs and sign-systems; we transmit our formulations to others by way of signs known to the people we are communicating with; we project these conclusions into future also with signs. But our choice of signs in all these cases depends on our mental convictions. Thus, the whole process relies on the three realities – ontological, semiotic and our world-anschauung (mental reality).

Keywords: semiotics, types of reality, transmutation of existential events

1. Introduction

At the beginning of this century, I proposed the notion of *semiotic reality*, a type of reality that exists side-by-side with the *ontological reality*, which is usually discussed in philosophical discourse [1]. Semiotic reality consists of the signs and sign-systems that were invented by humanity throughout the course of civilization. It is used to transmit knowledge that people have acquired to others. Coupled with the knowledge that we glean independently from our encounters with ontological reality, the knowledge we acquire by means of semiotic reality greatly assists us in learning about the world around us. It is just as mighty a source of knowledge as direct ontological experience is. In fact, in the early stages of our lives, semiotic reality even surpasses ontological experience in helping us acquire the knowledge we need and want. But semiotic reality differs from ontological reality in its origin: whereas ontology is given to us ready-made, semiotic reality is entirely the product of the human mind. That is why it has different laws of development and is completely subject to our wills. We can decisively influence it, twist it, change it, and present it in any form and design we wish.

My interest in the idea of semiotic reality developed as part of my more general quest to establish and characterize what I view as a new branch of science, which I call *General semiotics*. I view the notion of semiotic reality as

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one of the core concepts of this science, and have included it in my definition of the Science by saying that general semiotics is the *science of signs, sign-systems, and semiotic reality*. In a number of other articles, I have tried to define the main characteristics of semiotic reality as compared with the reality we observe and deal with in ontology. I am happy to see that this new notion has begun to appear in the scientific writings of other authors [W. Kreimer, *Psychology and Symbols of the Jewish People*, 2010, online at: http://peoples-peace.blogspot.com/2010/07/blog-post_13.html].

2. The transmutation of existential events

The diagram below (Figure 1), which illustrates what I call the *transmutation of existential events*, should help to clarify what I mean by semiotic reality.

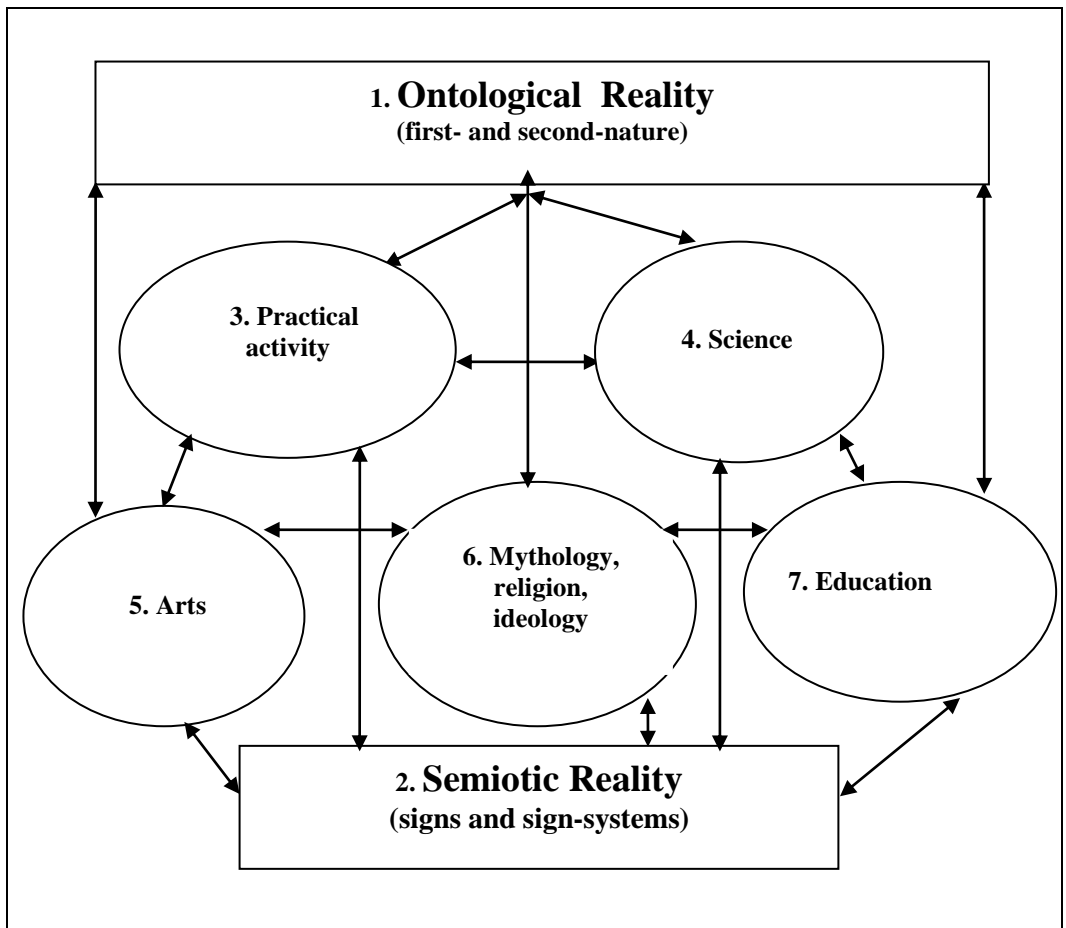


Figure 1. Transmutation of existential events.

When we are born, we find ourselves in the world of *ontological reality*, a world that exists independently of us and to which we have to adapt in order to live comfortably. In order to adapt to our ontological reality, we begin to study it, both at school and by ourselves. This acquisition of knowledge, and the drawing of conclusions from it about ontological reality, proceeds with the help of signs. The crystallizations of our thoughts are formed using signs: our speech consists of signs (words are signs of their referents), and the pictures, maps, diagrams, etc., that we use to explain ourselves, are all signs, as well. All cultural creations – literature, ballet, sculpture, and so forth – are infused with signs. Our scientific investigations are performed using signs and their systems, and the results are also expressed in signs. All of these signs and sign systems are gathered together in a special plane of our lives that I call *semiotic reality*.

Semiotic reality is a collection of semiotic findings about our surroundings, our lives, and our selves that are preserved in special receptacles, such as libraries and computerized databases. From these receptacles, particular items can be retrieved, studied, and worked upon; and thereafter they can be returned to their receptacles for continued storage. Sometimes these receptacles are organized according to the type of knowledge they contain; at other times, they gather all kinds of information together. The most important point is that these receptacles are all used for safeguarding semiotic data.

Humans use semiotic reality to help them cope with ontological reality. With the help of semiotic reality, we can penetrate to the essence of real objects, understand the ways things work or behave, and sometimes even change the course of events for the benefit of the human race. In recent centuries, scientists using semiotic reality succeeded in introducing many changes in our lives, making them more comfortable and pleasant. Using semiotic reality, we have succeeded in creating a vast array of amenities that have completely changed us and improved our surroundings. Some of these changes were of a material ontological nature; these were added to ontological reality. Others were of a semiotic nature, and served to improve our semiotic toolbox for further and more effective use.

3. Changing ontological reality

Once we have procured the necessary knowledge and techniques, we can adapt ontological reality to better suit our needs. Indeed, to some degree, we can completely change it. The ontological reality we face today is, in fact, quite different from what it was when humans first encountered it. We can say that ontological reality has two facets, its original facet, which I call its *first nature*, and that which is added to it, which I call its *second nature*. Every generation of people encounters a different stage of ontological reality, and accepts it as a complete whole. They learn about their particular stage and then introduce

further changes and improvements to it. Thus, over time, the ontology experienced by people undergoes an endless process of modification.

Because humans can only express their thoughts using signs, the process of accumulating new ontological experiences and improving ontological reality for the next generations can only take place with the help of signs. This is where *semiotic reality* comes into play in its most potent way. Although the first and foremost purpose of semiotic reality is to accurately represent different ontological phenomena, this is not its only aim. Semiotic reality has an additional powerful property: it allows us to detach signs from the real things they represent and manipulate them in our minds. That is, we can transform signs in order to acquire new knowledge about the things they represent. If the signs we use were chosen well for the tasks at hand, and the rules we use to transform them are appropriate, we can gain new knowledge about reality itself by transforming signs within semiotic reality.

In principle, this process is quite simple: First, we create a semiotic reality that mirrors the ontological reality we have observed. Then, we develop rules for transforming this reality, and apply them to enhance our knowledge of the ontological reality. Finally, to ensure we have implemented this process impeccably, we design and perform various ontological and semiotic tests to make sure the results of our transformations are accurate. Once we have done this, we can make use of the knowledge we have gained to improve our lifestyles as much as possible.

In practice, this entire process is much more complex and problematic than it sounds. The most difficult problem is that signs differ completely from the things they represent. They are different in form, in their ties among themselves and, consequently, in the rules that must be applied in order to transform them in ways that have meaning in ontological reality. Thus, the main task faced by humans who are studying things using signs, is to make sure that the rules that are applied in the semiotic reality match the rules of the ontological reality in the ways that are necessary.

This is no simple feat. It is complicated, first of all, because of the fact that these two planes of reality are simply *different*. We see real objects in nature as they are, or at least as they appear to us. But we can only paint them using the seven colours that are at our disposal, which cannot perfectly render the full gamut of natural hues. So we must resort to using artificial combinations of colours, some of which capture the experience of the original colours well, while others do not. Similarly, we see our environment in one manner, but depict it in charts and maps with signs that are quite different from what we see. And when we sing, we hear the sounds absolutely differently from the way we represent them in notations on paper. Because of inherent difficulties and discrepancies like these, the skill of using signs to represent a particular aspect of ontology must be learned, often over a long period of time.

But the main obstacle to making full use of semiotic reality is that the thought processes that are employed during the observation of ontological reality are different from those that are appropriate for the semiotic plane. This

divergence derives from the fact that the bonds between things in ontological reality are characterized by a great deal of *continuity*, while *discreteness* is a highly dominant characteristic of the world of signs. When we observe something in ontological reality, we initially encounter it as a solid, already existing, whole. To gain a greater understanding of it, we must *analyze* it – take it apart in order to understand how the parts constitute the whole that we have already observed. By contrast, when we attempt to reproduce the same phenomenon in semiotics, we must begin with discrete signs and use them to *construct* a larger unit. That is, the thought process is one of *synthesis* rather than *analysis*.

The processes of analysis and synthesis are by nature rather open-ended, and often leave us at a loss for how to proceed. Our minds can usually come up with many possible approaches to a single problem, and need some sort of anchor to keep them on the right track. Normally, we use two types of anchors for this purpose: logic and empirical testing. That is, we undertake our analyses with the help of an established system of logic, and, even more importantly, we test all of our conclusions empirically to make sure they work in ontological reality. No innovation is fully accepted until it has passed empirical tests that prove its validity.

Anchors of various sorts were already advocated by the ancient Greek philosophers. For example, one of the most important points of Socrates' teachings was that learning the meaning of something is achieved through the use of 'universal definitions' to describe it. According to Plato, characterizing an object in this way conveys true knowledge – the idea of the thing – to us. This works because our souls have already visited the place where all such ideas are collected, and only needs to be reminded of them by means of their universal definitions. Plato held that the receptacle of ideas is located somewhere in the heavens. Epicurus disagreed with him, declaring that the substance of a thing is expressed by its idea, but the idea cannot be separated from the thing itself. Ideas are located within the very objects that represent them. When we observe an object, its idea flies out of the object and into our minds [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greek_philosophy, retrieved in December 2011].

This disagreement between Plato and Epicurus represents the earliest of an endless series of disputes among scientists on the problem of how knowledge about things in ontology gets into human minds. Innumerable theories have already been put forward. I will now be so bold as to add a new theory of my own to the ever-expanding collection, one that introduces signs and sign-systems into the discussion. In a nutshell, my model is as follows: when we observe things from ontology, we unite two worlds together – the ontological and the mental. When we begin thinking about what we saw, our thoughts tend to be chaotic and unrestricted. To harness them, we use signs.

For example, consider what happens when we want to formalize and make use of an observation of a real-life phenomenon. (These days, such observation is performed in accordance with scientific rules.) After proper observation, we

come to a conclusion about what we saw and understood. Our thoughts belong to our mental sphere; we do not know exactly how they are created in our minds. Many people have tried to explain how this happens, yet it remains implicit and oblique. In any case, once we have reached our conclusions about our observation, we want to communicate our thoughts to others. For this purpose, we have to use signs. As I mentioned above, we use signs to organize our thoughts into a logical structure. In addition, the signs we use are usually *socially approved*, and this is a very important thing: They not only arrange our thoughts in a clearly structured form, but also present them in a way that other people who are familiar with the same semiotic code can understand. In this way, our inner, unstructured impressions can be subjected to critical analysis. After we acquire the necessary social approval for our conclusions, we apply some form of empirical testing to them. If the testing goes smoothly, we can convert our mental construction into something concrete and introduce it for practical use in ontological or semiotic reality.

This theory represents what is essentially an entirely new point of view on the age-old discussion, because it places *signs* at the crossroads of the two realities, the ontological and the mental. The capacity of signs to crystallize human thoughts and make mental constructions available for others to examine makes their role in the process crucial.

4. A third type of reality: imaginary reality

In addition to their function in helping people communicate their ideas to one another, signs also have another potent characteristic: they have *predictive* power. Not only can signs be used to express things we have already observed and thought, they can also be used to project our thinking into the future. Thus, signs enable us to take part in another process: *planning* future innovations by thinking about and working with something that does not exist at all in ontology as we currently know it. Using signs in this way allows us to plan things in advance, to give them substance and verify their functionality before we bring them into actual existence. For example, it is much safer to design a future highway, give the blueprints to experts for analysis, and discuss the plans in detail with all the parties involved in the project *before* we build the highway, than it is to begin building without these preliminary steps. The ability of signs to reflect not only phenomena from the outside world but also ideas from our imaginations is what makes this whole process possible.

These observations have led me to suggest that a third type of reality exists: the *imaginary* world. In essence, semiotic reality can be subdivided into two parts. The first part is the one that complies with scientific methods and demands, while the second one does not require any links or adherence to Science. Most of our occupations belong to the first group. They must obey the constraints of Science or they will cease to function properly. Thus, our everyday activities, our professional ventures and, of course, the bulk of our education, must comply with the strictures of scientific methodology. But there

are also spheres of life which do not require such compliance. Like the spheres of all our activities, these spheres are built on signs, because we must use signs to convey all of our thoughts, including imaginary thinking. But, in these spheres, the signs are used to deal with aspects of life for which scientific justification is not required. Examples of such spheres are religion, superstition, and the arts.

By *religion* I mean an established doctrine with a distinct conception of how the world came into existence, how it functions, and the forces governing these processes. Scientific anthropology maintains that there are three stages, or eras, of human development: superstitious or mythological, religious, and scientific. Indeed, until recently, most people believed that gods and various mystical powers preside over our world. Even today, a lot of people continue to hold the same types of beliefs, although a great number of others now completely rely upon Science.

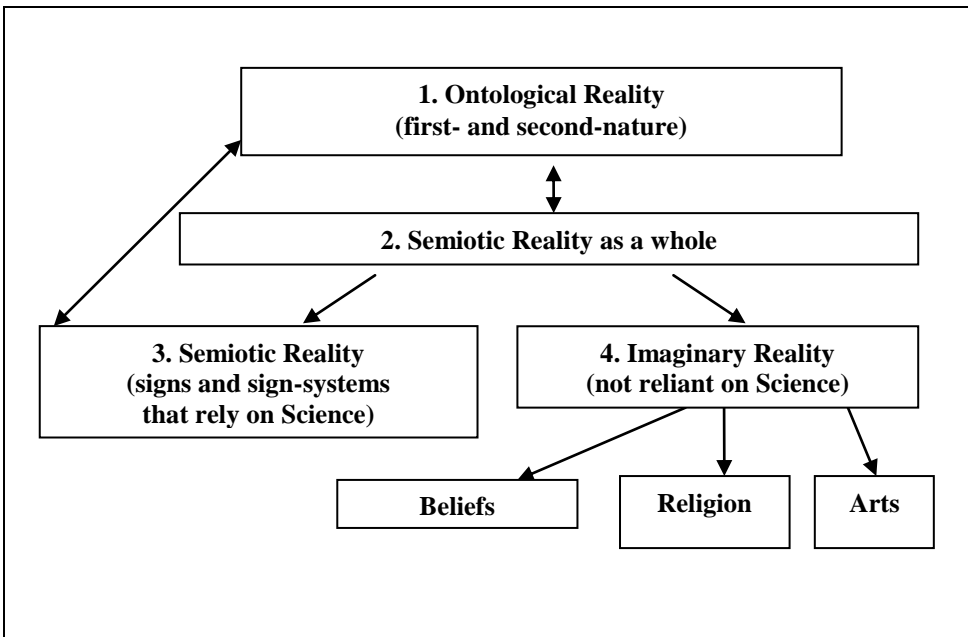


Figure 2. Modified diagram of existential transmutations.

Neither religion nor any of the arts depend on Science, though for different reasons. Religious people rely on faith, which need not be supported by scientific proofs; they do not seek justification in anything but their own convictions. If they encounter something contrary to their beliefs, they reject it out of hand. Some believers try to reconcile their ideas with Science, but I think these two planes are essentially incompatible. The arts also need not lean on Science, because their aim is to satisfy emotional and aesthetic feelings. For this reason, the arts do not typically include anything like the intense competition that is so characteristic of scientific researchers, who all want to be the first to

make a discovery. In the history of the arts, we encounter some masters who demanded that their crafts pay heed to ontological truth (Leonardo da Vinci, for example), and others who propagated the theory of art-for-art's sake. In my view, both camps are right, each in its own way. One treats art as a Science, the other as part of imaginary reality.

My perspective on the three types of reality is presented in Figure 2.

5. Conclusions

I believe that my discussion of the three types of reality is quite important to our understanding of the world in which we find ourselves. Similar discussions have taken place from time immemorial, and I think they will continue to take place until the end of time. My special contribution is to introduce Semiotics into the discussion. Although my ideas are neither complicated, mystical, or out of the ordinary, they do tend to restructure the discussion and frame it in a new way.

I feel it is important at this point to stress that none of my comments were intended to insult anybody or disparage any point of view. Obviously, I am an atheist and a worshipper of Science, but this does not mean that I deride other *world views*. Each of them has its own merits and deserves serious consideration in other venues. For the purposes of this article, I only wanted to show how all these ideas are interrelated and to highlight the part played by Semiotics.

References

- [1] A. Solomonick, *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, 5(1) (2011) 62.