Meaning (*Sinn*)

Meaning is the universal medium of all psychic and social systems, i.e., the medium for all forms [→*Medium/Form*] that are generated in these systems. In the medium of meaning, any operation of the system refers to other possibilities of operation production, which remain in the background of what is produced.

Meaning is a medium as it generates loose connections between actual and possible selections, thus allowing any type of tight connection between selections in the system. Therefore, meaning is the basic medium of all forms produced in the system. This is because meaning has a form, too: the form of meaning is the distinction real/possible—or actual/potential. Meaning is the form of selection of social and psychic systems. It is an evolutionary achievement of social and psychic systems that gives form to their →*self-reference* and their structured →*complexity*. Systems selections, which are based on meaning, actualize something and leave the non-actualized possibilities in the background. Selection is the actualization of something through the →*negation* of everything else. Negation is not destruction but the fundamental way through which meaning operates.

The observation of the form of meaning as real/possible or actual/potential distinction comes from Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. Meaning is the premise for processing each experience: meaning reveals itself in the surplus of references to further possibilities of experience contained in each actual experience. Thus, meaning is the simultaneous presentation of the actual and the possible (the potential): every real datum is projected onto the horizon of further possibilities and each actualization potentializes further possibilities. Possibility and reality, the potential and the actual only ever appear together. Meaning is reproduced through an experience that actualizes the meaning and refers to further experiences that are not actualized.

This phenomenological definition of meaning is integrated in systems theory. Meaning is constituted in →*social systems* and in →*psychic systems*: The system operations of communication and thought are realized in the medium of meaning. These meaning-constituting systems are selectively open to other possibilities. In social and psychic systems, any operation is a selection of actual content among possible alternatives, and further operations can always select (actualise) other possibilities. Any operation is a specific decision of making something actual, while leaving any other option possible: meaning is made evident through the possibility to decide elsewhere. Paradoxically, meaning is the product of the operations that presuppose it, in that it can exist only in its reproduction through these operations. Psychic and social systems both presuppose and generate meaning in their operations. On the one hand, a communication (a thought) is constituted only in the reference to further communication (thought) possibilities. On the other hand, the actualization of a certain communication (thought) lays the foundation for opening further communication (thought) possibilities. Meaning facilitates the basic →*self-reference* of social and psychic systems: a communication can be connected to further communications (a thought to further thoughts) when it opens a surplus of communication (thought) possibilities. Meaning determines the connectivity of the elements, which secures the possibility for these systems to continue to operate.

For meaning-constituting systems, everything has meaning, because only on the basis of meaning can everything be communicated (or thought). The world can only be observed through the medium of meaning, which is only realized in systems. Meaning and system are therefore mutual requirements: they are only possible together. In social and psychic systems, meaning ensures present determinations, on the basis of the past history of selections, while opening future alternative possibilities.

Since meaning is the unity of the difference between the actual and the possible, everything (the totality of the real and the possible) has meaning. Meaning even includes its own negation: even the negation of meaning has meaning. The existence of non-meaning can be observed only through meaning. Any reference to non-meaning reproduces meaning; therefore, in system operations non-meaning must necessarily have a meaning. Every meaning content gains actual reality only in the reference to further meaning and the reference also includes the possibility of re-actualizing the same content. Meaning continuously refers to meaning; it is self-referential. On the one hand, meaning requires that only some of the possibilities produced are actu-

alized, while everything else remains in the background. On the other hand, meaning refers to everything that is not actual—it allows the possible to be taken into account. Meaning makes the world accessible because it has not been actualized, and prevents the disappearance of the possible in the actualization of a datum. The →*world* emerges as the totality of meaning references: meaning determines the surplus of references for the social and psychic systems. This surplus constitutes the complexity of the world, and the world is the condition for the actualization of particular contents. By employing the concept of meaning, we shift from the postulate of unalterable ultimate principles to the possibility of observing everything as contingent.

The boundaries separating the system from the environment are also drawn in the medium of meaning [→*System/Environment*]. In the case of social and psychic systems, we therefore talk about meaning boundaries. These are not spatial or concrete boundaries. Meaning boundaries encompass the domain of possibilities within a system; thus, they make this system observable as a context of selection that produces its own operations. The boundaries show that, in the system, particular conditions of reduced complexity apply. Meaning allows the simultaneous reduction and maintenance of the world complexity within the system.

The concept of meaning allows the understanding of the specificity of social and psychic systems in contrast to living systems (organisms, brains). Meaning is an evolutionary achievement of social and psychic systems that does not permit analogy with living systems: meaning and biological life must be differentiated as different types of autopoietic organization. In order to refer to the evolutionary particularity of meaning systems, systemic concepts (e.g., autopoiesis, self-reference, observation) must be abstracted from their original bio-cybernetic contexts. A non-reductionist theory of social and psychic systems is thereby constructed on the assumption that these, like living systems, are autopoietic, but this assumption is specified by means of the concept of meaning. *[C.B.]*

Social Systems (1995: Ch. 2); Theory of Society (2012: Ch. 1.3); Meaning as Sociology's Basic Concept (1990).