

Could it be that "theory" (as well as its cognates) is a systematically ambiguous word?

Yes, it very well could be, for at least two reasons, or in two ways:

(1) As I have long since acknowledged, there is the difference between the existential and the (fully) reflective levels of understanding, by which I mean something like Habermas's distinction between the levels of (Lebens-) Praxis and Diskurs. One reason, then, for thinking "theory" systematically ambiguous, or one way in which it might be so thought of, is that it could be taken as a synonym for "understanding," in which case one could distinguish "theory" at the existential level from "theory" at the (fully) reflective level.

(2) The other reason why, or the other way in which, "theory" could be systematically ambiguous is that a distinction is to be made between understanding the meaning of things for us and understanding the structure of things in themselves. Since, again, understanding is involved in both cases, one could say, assuming the synonymy of "theory" and "understanding," that "theory" is involved in both cases.

(3) Perhaps a more appropriate use of language, however, would be to use "theory" (systematically ambiguously!) only in the first of these two ways—so as to distinguish, namely, between the cognitive aspect or dimension of self-understanding and praxis, on the one hand, and critical reflection so as to validate the validity of claims expressed or implied by self-understanding and praxis, on the other. In the case of the other way, then, one could depend on the distinction between "abstract" and "concrete," rather than on that between "theory" and "praxis." Relative to understanding the meaning of things for us, understanding the structure of things in themselves is not so much more theoretical as simply more abstract.

18 October 1986