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SOME PROBLEMATIC PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE THOMAS THEOREM

Abstract

Despite of its wide recognition in the social sciences, the Thomas theorem lacks clarity and finds its expression in diverging statements. A sound core of the theorem is blurred by notions these statements consist of. They include untenable ontology and epistemology along with a flawed claim concerning the peculiarity of the human world.

Keywords:

Thomas theorem, situation, environment, behavior, interactions

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INTRODUCTION

Apart from several more ancient statements, the claim of a peculiar characteristic of the human-related world, and especially of the human society, was famously made by the neo-Kantian thinkers at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. Being interested chiefly in theory of knowledge and methodology, these thinkers postulated different modes of cognition to be applicable for investigating issues concerning the human society on the one hand and issues concerning (the remaining) nature on the other hand. Cognate views can be found in the metatheoretical reflection on social sciences and humanities up to the present day. They stem from diverse traditions, and thus are not necessarily inspired by the neo-Kantian classics.

Characterizing scientific thinking, Abner Shimony (1993: 40, 183 f.) refers to the “Copernican position” as a core aspect thereof. With that notion, he indicates not only that particular scholar and his theory but some more general features exemplified by it. They consist in considering any aspect of the world under investigation without distinguished reference

to the investigating subject, to the humanity, or to the perspective emanating therefrom. In the Copernican position, cognitive efforts are selected not with respect to some particular agency in its functional relationship to a specific environment, where knowledge promotes survival in that environment. They rely on fit with data representing the world which may transcend any such environment the knowing subjects are immersed in. This paved the way for bootstrapping ourselves in our cognitive efforts out of the Platonic cave.

Having originated in the natural science, the Copernican position not easily found its way into the social sciences. It is only partly due to the fact that these sciences are, in general, of a relatively recent origin as compared with their natural counterpart. More important reasons stem from their status as *social* sciences, thus being concerned with the human-related world itself. Even though it is flawed to deny some peculiarity of social sciences *vis-à-vis* natural science across the board, it is on the other hand important to identify it at the proper point. The real problem has little to do with any essential (ontological) differences between human society and the remaining nature. Instead, it concerns different ways of our connection with the respective aspects of the world. This motivates different expectations associated, at least implicitly, with the both involved branches of knowledge. Any of those branches is limited in providing information concerning the occurrence of particular facts within the realm of reality investigated by it. Even if the appropriate understanding is nowadays pretty reliable in that respect, we can predict only with some probability whether it will rain tomorrow and how long and heavy the possible rain will be. Nature and natural science do not differ at this point very much from society and social sciences. According to Hayek (1967), the existing differences are due to the relative complexity of human society. Yet, the interrelations of factors the actual weather situation arises from are also very complex, and it seems difficult to find any measure for comparative rating of these both complexities. Another aspect is more crucial in this regard. It pertains to the somewhat diverging coupling between humans and the facts of the *social environment* on the one hand and of the remaining natural environment on the other hand. The former kind of coupling is, as it were, more 'closely woven' and proceeds with 'higher frequency' than the latter. This implies continuous concern for a great amount of particular circumstances occurring in the social realm and involves, in addition, the normative account of them. Since scientific knowledge cannot offer much support in that matter, humans find it elsewhere – in elements of tradition established independently of the scientific revolution. This results, among others, in a combination of respective patterns of thought and expectations related

to them with social sciences involved in social practice and human action. Such combination contributes to the uniqueness of some aspects of social sciences compared with natural science.

Examining these issues, we shall discern between the explicit anti-scientific reaction within the corresponding branches of knowledge and standpoints in principle sympathetic to the science-conforming investigation of the social world. The latter are roughly tantamount to what Sperber (2007) and others dub “standard social science practice.” Admittedly, it is hardly feasible to neatly mark off these aspects in each particular case. But matters of classification are of minor relevance here. More clear-cut examples of ‘reactionary’ endeavors, inviting not only social sciences but also the natural science back into the cave, refer to currents of thinking known as “poststructuralism,” “postmodernism,” or “deconstructivism.” Questions concerning the Thomas theorem pertain certainly to the other category.

THOMAS THEOREM AND ITS WIDE RECOGNITION

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The so-called Thomas theorem enjoyed wide recognition in the social sciences and the philosophy thereof. Numerous authors, among them such of great significance for their fields of inquiry, regarded it as a valid statement of the peculiar character of social reality, which marks crucial distinctions between that reality and the remaining world.

The most well-known proponent of the theorem was Robert Merton, the respected sociologist, who also dealt with metatheoretical questions of his discipline. His writings decisively initiated the subsequent popularity of both the theorem and its original inventor. It was also Merton who first used the term “Thomas theorem” to refer to the corresponding pronouncement. According to him (1948: 193), the theorem is “basic to the social sciences” and

[t]hough it lacks the sweep and precision of a Newtonian theorem, it possesses the same gift of relevance, being instructively applicable to many [...] social processes.

Noteworthy in this context is also the respective, and more actual, appraisal by Mario Bunge, who, in addition to being a profound philosopher, outstripped many other authors in denouncing and opposing tendencies tantamount to luring social sciences back into the cave. Such nearly

univocal recognition of the theorem is astonishing and, therefore, worth consideration. According to Bunge (2001: 136),

[t]he main difference between the social and the natural sciences is ... one of subject matter; i]n particular, humans satisfy what Merton [...] has called the Thomas theorem.

He, however, promptly adds, that

social reality [...] is out there, embedded in nature, just like rocks and rivers [, and thus] social science is just as materialist and realist as natural science.

Are these both statements indeed compatible, or are we facing some problems involved in making them appear that way?

WHAT DOES THE THEOREM SUPPOSEDLY MAINTAIN?

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Although it was lucidly stated, there is some trouble with clearly expounding what the theorem is about. A good indicator of such ambiguity offers comparing the original formulation with its translations. With a statement making explicit sense, translation is a quite simple task. It presupposes some linguistic competence and consists, merely, in finding another expression for the given sense. Otherwise translators may easily go astray.

The famous sentence in Thomas/Thomas (1928: 572) reads: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Two German translations (Thomas, 1965: 114; Merton, 1995: 399) and one Polish (Merton, 1982: 462) translation of it are most directly at hand for me. Translated back into English, they read, respectively: (1) "If men define situations as real, then their consequences are also real." (2) "If men define situations as real, then they have real consequences." (3) "If men define situations as real, then they turn into real situations."¹ We are thus confronted with four more or less different statements of allegedly one and the same theorem. The differences between them concern not only words, but pertain to the content. What do they, literally, claim? How can these claims be appreciated? I will review them in the inverse order.

¹ (1) "Wenn Menschen Situationen als real definieren, so sind auch ihre Folgen real." (2) "Wenn Menschen Situationen als real definieren, so haben sie reale Konsequenzen." (3) "Jeśli ludzie definiują sytuację jako rzeczywiste, to stają się one sytuacjami rzeczywistymi."

The last statement, "If men define situations as real, then they turn into real situations," is fallacious. The proficiency attributed there to "men" pertains only to God, as pictured in the Hebrew Bible. Things turn out as He pronounced ('defined') them to be.

The following variant, "If men define situations as real, then they have real consequences," is a combination of triviality and fallacy. Trivial is the claim that situations have real consequences. If there *are* situations which *have* consequences, then it necessarily follows that those consequences likewise *are* there, ergo *are real*. Fallacious is the conditional clause, "if..., then...", used in the statement making that trivial relationship dependent on "men" who "define" situations. The relationship simply holds irrespectively of whether there are any men (i.e. humans) involved and whether they provide any definitions or not.

Adding the word "also," renders the third statement, "If men define situations as real, then their consequences are also real," a bit less trivial but instead more problematic, and therefore still more fallacious than the former one. Fallacy precedes here the use of the conditional clause and concerns the assumed relationship between situations and their consequences. Consequences of real situations may *also* be real (or not). The statement implies that once there *are* (real) situations which *have* consequences, it is possible for those consequences not to be real, that is, as it were, not to exist. The conditional clause includes, again, the claim that for the consequences of situations to be real, we need men engaged in defining them.

The message conveyed by the original statement, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences," is quite different from the two foregoing formulations. Unlike them, being real or not concerns here not the consequences of situations, but the *situations* themselves. The latter are claimed to be real (or not) *in* their consequences. It depends on whether the conditions referred to in the relative clause are fulfilled or not. In case men define the situations accordingly they are real in their consequences, otherwise they are not. Is this statement, except of making different claims, more tenable than the foregoing ones? Although there is no clear measure for comparing the amount of fallacy, all four statements are, alas, roughly similar in that respect (perhaps only with the first formulation outmatching the other three). As to the original version: if there *are* situations, they are ipso facto *real*. Neither their consequences, nor men, nor what their definitions amount to have any bearing on it. Except of, admittedly, being themselves just parts of those situations.

We can then conclude that there are diverging formulations for the theorem and all of them lack merit. Yet, none of them (including the original wording) correctly voices what the respective idea is all about.

WHAT DOES THE THEOREM ACTUALLY INTEND TO PRONOUNCE?

The idea thus vaguely stated is in fact rather simple: when confronted with *a* but (falsely) believing it to be *b* we behave accordingly (that is, as if it were *b*). For instance, if seeing dew under our feet we (falsely) believe it rains, we (may) take an umbrella for the walk. Thomas' example was more dramatic. A (surely very sensitive) man encountered another man who talked to himself. He (falsely) believed that the other man talks to him insulting him, and he killed that man.² However, with respect to the problems discussed, there is no considerable difference between the umbrella-example and the murder-example.

Where does all the bewilderment in the statements of such plain insights result from? It is due to mixing up the issues referred to with problems disconnected from them. These issues concern behavior of agents in relation to beliefs they have. Problems of ontology, pertaining to whether something is real or not, are not part of the package. In particular, these problems are in no way affected by whatever our insights regarding the former issues may be. An umbrella being *really* taken for the walk does not cause dew turning out into *real* rain. Being *really* killed does not turn the self-talking man into *real* insulter in the situation in which he was still alive.

When, as the title suggests, there is something problematic in the Thomas theorem, it must have been ambiguous from the beginning. Where then did its initial success as well as subsequent acceptance come from? How do the respected proponents of the Thomas theorem conceive the related questions? Where do they see the strength of his idea? In that regard, we shall consult primarily Merton.

MERTON'S APPRECIATION OF THE THEOREM

Three essential aspects are concerned in Merton's considerations: the ontological, the epistemological, and the practical aspect.

The first aspect is crucial in this context. It pertains to the assumed difference between the social realm and the remaining world. According to Merton (1948: 195),

² Actually, Thomas writes of several persons being killed by the same offender that way. But this is irrelevant for the issue, since each one of the corresponding situations is supposed to illustrate the Thomas theorem.

definitions of a situation (prophecies, predictions) become an integral part of the situation and thus affect subsequent developments. This is peculiar to human affairs. It is not found in the world of nature, untouched by human hands.

The second aspect affects the central problem of epistemology – the problem of truth. Merton maintains (195), that the respective definition

is, in the beginning, a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come *true*.

The third aspect is related to how to cope with problems possibly engendered by the specific features of social world. In Merton's view (197),

[t]he application of the Thomas theorem also suggests how the tragic, often vicious, circle [...] can be broken. The initial definition of the situation which has set the circle in motion must be abandoned. Only when the original assumption is questioned and a new definition of the situation is introduced, does the consequent flow of events give the lie to the assumption. Only then does the belief no longer father the reality.

Merton was a great scholar, whose multifaceted contributions to sociology and social sciences in general are beyond doubt. Yet, there is not much substance in his treatment of the Thomas theorem. Let me shortly comment on his statements replicating the suggested classification.

(1) Ontological aspect. The word "definition" used in that context is, of course, a metaphor. What Merton or other authors mean with it is in fact a spectrum of attitudes of an agent (or, more general, an interactor) towards something. This conforms to the example with dew (*d*) being regarded as rain (*r*). It is not only not necessary but also misleading to speak of *d* being "defined" as *r*, because in such a situation no one is engaged in defining. He or she simply assumes that *r* is the case and, possibly, takes an umbrella for the walk.

The respective quotation consists of two parts: the longer sentence at the beginning and the two following sentences. The first part is unproblematic. Yet, despite of using cognate words, it is in fact disconnected from the claims originally made by the Thomas theorem. Merton merely states that our "definitions" of a situation are *parts* of it, and thus (in combination with other components of the situation) contribute to how the resulting occurrences will be. He does not postulate any feed-back between the "definitions" and the ontological status (the 'reality') of situations to which those "definitions" refer. The difference between being *part of* and *referring to*, with respect to "definitions," is decisive for what the Thomasian formula – despite its vagueness – is all about. In the first case, the "definition" simply adds to the assembly of aspects constituting the situation. In the

second case, it is located on a meta-level from where it is related to the situation in a way bearing far-reaching effects on it.

The corollary of Merton's view is, nevertheless, included in the two final statements. However, both of them do not hold: the described relationship between a living thing, a situation and how the situation is regarded by that thing is *not* peculiar to human affairs, and it *is* widely found in the remaining world of nature. Consider, for instance, how such devices as scarecrows work: birds regard scarecrows (*s*) as humans (*h*) and, possibly, keep distance from them. Looking for examples, we do not have to concern with so much sophisticated creatures as birds, because the entire living nature behaves roughly that way. On the other hand, a multitude of organisms are informed that such mechanisms operate in the world they live in. They can thus correctly expect that some other organisms in their environment behave in a manner satisfying something similar to the Thomas theorem. In a sense, such expectations pertain even to plants in their strategies to deceive animals. Admittedly, all those creatures do not construct definitions, do not have language, and they thus interact with their environment differently than we do. Yet, the point is exactly that the same scheme – falsely assuming that *a* is *b* and behaving as if this really were the case – works when nothing specifically human is involved in it. It does not matter whether the corresponding expectations are consciously reflected and inferentially arrived at or, simply, built into the organism's morphology. In both cases they appropriately exploit the 'Thomas theorem' – conforming features of some other organisms they interact with. For instance, the bee orchid's pollination strategy rests upon the inbuilt expectation that when its flowers (*f*) are made to appear to male bees as conspecifics of the other sex (*c*), the insects will behave toward them as if they were *c*, even if de facto they are not.

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(2) Epistemological aspect. Merton's epistemological considerations are both untenable and unnecessary. A false conception cannot "come true." It is and remains false, irrespectively of the behavior of a person who (falsely) believes it to be true. False beliefs may, *in fact*, affect behavior and accordingly the *factual* consequences thereof. All that does not, yet, bear any influence on those *facts* to which such beliefs (falsely) refer. A similar relationship concerns the non-reflexive behavior of a non-human agent *vis-à-vis* something being regarded as another thing. *F* does not come to be *c*, even if the male bee ejaculates on it (which it, in fact, does). We are confronted here with a different mechanism and a different problem than those concerning the *truth* or *falsity* of statements.

A false assessment cannot be made true by assuming that the world is otherwise than it really is, nor by behaving in accordance with such assessment. It can only result in a collision with the facts of the environment in which the actor (the organism) in question is situated.

(3) Practical aspect. The respective considerations are commonplace: when we abandon something (a belief), it ceases to bear any effects. Ex definitione, there cannot be effects of something that does not exist. Assumed, of course, that we were quick enough to abandon it before the effects already occurred. On the other hand, and in contrast to conscious beliefs, unconscious behavioral patterns of the kind mentioned above cannot be simply abandoned. For a wide spectrum of interactions occurring in the living world³ it will still hold that agents behave towards something as if it were another thing due to (mistakenly) taking it for that thing. When reduced to their essential content, the related insights of the Thomas theorem appear thus even more substantial than Thomas or Merton claimed them to be. Nevertheless, they *contradict* rather than support the intention of these authors to employ the theorem for expounding the peculiarity of human society as compared with the natural world.

There were, however, other prominent scholars who declared to follow the idea of Thomas. One of them was Schütz. Will we come to decisively different conclusions when we examine how that idea was adapted or developed further by him?

SCHÜTZ' MULTIPLE WORLDS

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Schütz and Merton do not have much in common. Schütz was inspired by the tradition of Husserl, and he worked towards transforming phenomenology into social science. That tradition and such attempt were alien to Merton. The main aspect these authors shared was perhaps their unspecified allegiance to the Thomas theorem.

One of Schütz' central concepts is the notion of "life-world." Seemingly, it appears complementary with the concepts of either "biosphere" or "environment" used in the natural science (the more so as Schütz himself declares the notion to be tantamount to "the whole universe of life," Schütz, 1962: 246 f.). Yet, in fact, it challenges rather than complements them. Schütz borrowed the term from Husserl, and thereby he took over the idea of the world as a secondary category, subordinate to the way human subjectivity is related to it. This idea underlies Schütz' notion of "multiple realities" (cf., 207 ff.), which is at the heart of his reception of the Thomas theorem.

³ However, it is possible to extend this analysis beyond the limits of the living world by considering some technical tools designed so as to interact with their surroundings.

The move from Thomas' original notion to the notion of multiple realities appears moderate, but it involves aspects that were lacking in Thomas or Merton. These authors plainly maintain that if someone regards *a* as *b* and behaves due to what he or she believes to be the case, then the resulting consequences are conditioned by the corresponding belief. They also, even if unnecessarily, add that these consequences are *real*. In Schütz, the adjective, *real*, turns into the substantive, *reality*. The Thomasian formula of the type '*b* is *real*, because it is so defined by some agent,' changes in Schütz' (cf. 54) reading⁴ into the idea that can be generalized like this: 'to *g* [where *g* refers to a group sharing an attitude or a belief], *b* is an element of their social *reality*.' Since besides *g* there may be another groups of agents, *h* or *i*, whose 'definitions' may amount to regarding a thing or a situation not as *b*, but as *c* or *d*, there are some more (here, three) *realities* possibly emerging from the underlying relationships. Schütz thus distinguishes "realities" by relativizing them to the respective groups of agents who approach them this, that or still some other way. Another aspect of the same idea consists in multiplying realities with respect to the type of practice pursued by the agents at issue. People are doing different things; in doing them, they behave (either overtly or not) accordingly. These are simple facts, known to everyone. In particular, people are *working*, *dreaming*, *imagining*, *phantasying*, *contemplating*. They do it where they are. The most general name for where they are is the *world*. Therefore, people do what they do in the world, since it is the world where they always are situated. This is also plain and plausible for everyone, if only one bothers to think about it. Schütz, however, transforms such plain facts into more sophisticated ones. Instead of speaking about *working*, *dreaming* etc. *in the world* (where else?), Schütz multiplies the 'worlds' and refers to the "world of work," "– of dream," "– of imagination," "– of phantasy," "– of contemplation." Scientific theorizing (in the world) turns into "the world of scientific theory," and various related derivations generate some more 'worlds,' as expounded in the respective book (cf. esp. part III, 207–356). Generally, '*x*-ing (in the world)' becomes 'the world of *x*,' which is accompanied by the similarly introduced 'worlds' of *y* or *z*.

Unlike Thomas or Merton, Schütz' theory is thus closer to 'reactionary' implications of the position espousing the peculiar character of the

⁴ Considering Schütz' reading, we get, however, one more interpretation of the Thomas theorem extending its ambiguity mentioned so far. According to Schütz (1962: 54), "as W. I. Thomas has shown, social reality contains elements of beliefs and convictions which are real because they are so defined by the participants [...]." Thus, what is "real" are *beliefs* and *convictions*, and at the same time they are "real," because they are *defined* as such. Just as was the case with other readings referred to above, this formula amounts to fallacy or, at the best, to a tautology.

human world and its cognitive penetration *vis-à-vis* nature and natural science. Such attribution holds even more with regard to those currents of thought which followed Schütz by further radicalizing the relativist, subjectivist and, generally, anti-naturalist facets of his approach. Still, there is some logic linking the more modest reading of the Thomas theorem with the extravagant ontology of Schütz. Consider how the theorem can be reasonably applied to a situation consisting of interactions of two or more agents each of whom 'defines' that situation differently. Which of these 'definitions' will then outmatch its competitors thus coming to be 'real' due to the consequences thereof? We can bypass the problem by claiming that what we face now is not one single situation but multiple situations, relative to the divergent 'definitions' held by the agents involved. Since each of them is as 'real' as the remaining ones, the single reality branches into a co-existing variety of them.

MEANINGS, ROLES, AND THE LEGACY OF SCHÜTZ

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The term "definition of the situation," originally used by Thomas and Merton was a metaphor. Thus, Schütz (1967) occasionally substitutes "meaning" for it, establishing a contrast between "meaningful" and "natural world" (218). In his attempts "to determine the precise nature of the *phenomenon of meaning*" (13), Schütz claims that

meaning is merely the special way in which the subject attends to its lived experience; [...] which elevates the experience into an action (215).

Accordingly,

that theory is completely wrong which maintains that one's behavior is distinct from one's conscious experience of that behavior and that meaning belongs only to the latter (42).

The introduction of the term "meaning" proves thereby superfluous since it ends up in a tautology: the course of behavior is assumed to result from "meaning" attributed to *x*; but it turns out that "meaning" is nothing else than any (namely: this or that) behavior *vis-à-vis x*.

Referring to "meaning" in cognate contexts is firmly established in social sciences, and even characterizes the mainstream thereof. It commonly signposts the path to the slippery slope bringing social sciences away

from the account of the world established in natural science. Meaning, it is claimed, is exclusively human. Nonhuman animals may be ingenious in what they do, yet they never ‘mean’ anything. Alas, the respective use of the term relies on a conceptual confusion. It, therefore, obscures things rather than contributes to understand them.

Inspired by the ideas of Schütz, McHugh (1968) replaced the Thomasian (and Mertonian) “definition of the situation” with “meaning,” conceiving the latter term as “the more general one” (50). Its application amounts to the statement that “the same events or objects can have different meanings for different people, and the degree of difference will produce comparable differences in behavior” which are to be conceived in terms of varying “role-taking” (7 f.). All that is quite plain and can be said without using the respective word. It simply concerns any case in which we face something that can be named “behavior,” be it human or non-human behavior. Behaving always includes an x to which behavior is related, in the sense of behaving *towards* an x . Furthermore, to be related to something (that is, to behave towards something) necessarily implies to be related *this, that* or *some other way*, and, therefore, to play a corresponding “role.” It, thus, proves again that the alleged “meaning” is included in behavior and does not add as a kind of metaphysical grounding to it.

572 Just as those two authors, also Bruner (1996) makes a great case of the term “meaning” attributed to human behavior. According to him, “[a]s a species we adapt to our environment in terms of what things [...] are taken to *mean*” and this “is not to be found elsewhere in the animal kingdom” (164). Yet, when we look for what “meaning” is supposed to mean here, it turns out that it is simply a substitute for *function, place in a system or in chain of events*. In such a sense, the “alternative meanings” of the Panama Canal are “an episode in the history of North American Imperialism”, “a [...] step in the history of [...] transportation,” and “a landmark in man’s effort to shape nature” (13). The term is therefore confusing and superfluous, whereas what it vaguely refers to is not at all distinctive for humans. For beavers, a branch gnawed off of a tree can be the source of food and/or the material for improving the dam; they behave towards it due to whichever of the “alternative meanings” it momentarily has for them. Such abundant dealing with the word “meaning” is usual when it is dissociated from its strict semantic sense and used with reference to a variety of behavioral phenomena and social relationships. In the so-called interpretative social science, especially in Geertz, the self-proclaimed “meanings-and-symbols ethnographer” (Geertz, 2000: 69), the term “meaning” is used as a substitute for 10 different, partly overlapping notions, any of which is served better by some other, more specific word (cf. Aleksandrowicz, 2015: ch. 2.4).

The upshot of Schütz's legacy is, however, that the basic concepts used (as "life-world" or "meaning") or invented (as "multiple realities") by him boil down to social constructivism (cf., for instance, Berger/Luckmann, 1966/1991). Social constructivism is just relativism converted into ontology. Traditional relativism deals with differing behavior of social groups and agrees that they differ because of being located in different settings and being thus conditioned by them. Constructivism quasi turns this relationship upside down. Now, it is a particular kind of agentic behavior, particular stance towards the surrounding, especially stance consisting in comprehending it this or that way, that forms a 'world.' Another 'world' (reality) is again due to a different stance adopted by the involved subjects.

Due to its ambiguity, the Thomas theorem allows for interpretations cognate with these views. Something is real *because* of being "defined" that way.⁵ Nevertheless, such notion rather deviates from what Thomas and, the more so, Merton regarded as the essential implications of the theorem. As to Merton, the divergence seems to reach even further. Was Merton really consequent in maintaining what he declared with respect to his appreciation of the Thomas theorem?

MERTON'S APPLICATION OF THE THEOREM

In his renowned paper, Merton starts as a philosopher of social sciences and ends up as a sociologist. He thus proceeds from a general appreciation of the importance of the Thomas theorem to its concrete application concerning some particular aspects of the society. Do his sociological endeavors really confirm his initial philosophical claims?

The special issue elaborated by Merton are ethnic and racial prejudices in the American society of the mid-20th century. Having diagnosed the emerging problems, the author outlines a scenario for their effective solution. With the Thomas theorem as a seriously taken conceptual background for considering social problems, the proposed solution would be supposed to focus on respective 'definitions' of the situation, that is, on

⁵ Is such a view also championed by Peirce (1965: 268) when he writes "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real"? This is only seemingly so, since the crucial notion in the statement is "[to be] fated", which connects "opinion" with (universal) "agreement." "Fated" by what? By how the world ("the object") really is – what else could such a "fate" (determination) rely on? (Thus, "the conception of truth and reality" attempted that way is reducible to a tautology).

what happens in the minds of the involved agents. These agents, members of an in-group, wrongly regard *a* (members of an out-group) as *b* (inferior or hostile to them) and thus behave accordingly. The task consists then in changing their minds in order to eliminate the corresponding behavior and the social tensions generated by it. Does Merton proceed in a similar manner?

He does not. Dealing with these questions, he rather successively steers away from the Thomas theorem rendering it utterly dispensable in that context. At the end of his paper (209 f.), it turns out that it is not due to attempts to influence *thought*, but owing to appropriate *institutional arrangements* that solutions of emerging problems can be effectively approached. They depend, therefore, on creating *facts* that constrain the respective behavior. The core theme is now the generation of *real situations*, and not merely of other – more realistic – ‘definitions’ of them.

Having said all that, it still cannot be denied that people sometimes do *d* just *because* they (wrongly) consider *a* to be *b*, and, in addition, elicit significant consequences that way. This might well be the case with the oversensitive murderer referred to by Thomas. There are also many more, quite diverse examples illustrating relationships of the kind indicated by the Thomas theorem. They cover a large array of issues concerning sociology or economics as well as individual psychology but also transcending the human world. At the same time, however, they display different mechanisms underlying the connection between causes and effects.

Let us take a brief look at some examples picked out from a potentially infinite number of suitable cases. Is the Thomas theorem useful for dealing with them? Can it at least assist to conceptually reduce the existing diversity by bringing various constellations of factors to some common point?

VARIETY OF EXAMPLES

In the context known as the “placebo-effect” or “placebo-response,” the health condition of a person (sometimes) improves when he or she takes a neutral substance (*a*) and believes it to be medicine (*b*). The relevant effect does not, yet, concern here the behavior of the involved person, since that behavior is restricted to the plain fact of taking *a*. The effect emerges out of a psychosomatic process not controlled by the person. In so far the mechanism in question has little to do with issues emphasized by Thomas. On the other hand, however, it is important what happens in the mind of the person for the process of “placebo-response” to occur.

Somehow cognate to it are beliefs of the Chinese in therapeutic effects of consuming certain body parts of some animals such as tigers, elephants, pangolins or rhinos. There is a noteworthy relationship between, say, Chinese beliefs concerning ivory and elephant poaching in Africa. To account for it, we must go beyond the causal scheme vaguely indicated by the Thomas theorem. Respective beliefs create market for ivory in China. Poaching elephants answers the demand existing on that market. For hunters as well as for sellers who serve the market it is irrelevant what kind of subjective motives the demand emerges from. Nonetheless, for the sake of their businesses they are objectively interested in perpetuating people's inherited beliefs.

This in turn points at the problem of molding or creating the consumer market by influencing the behavior of potential buyers by appropriately reshaping the seemingly tradition-bound Chinese folk-medicine. With such goal in mind, interested traders newly evoked respective convictions concerning manta rays, which were absent in the traditional view. On a more sophisticated level, some mechanisms of advertisement and of fashion operate that way. They consist in endowing things (commodities) with a kind of "semantic value," beneath their ordinary utility value and making consumers believe that by getting (buying) these things they also acquire that very value (cf. the concepts of "semantic value" and "symbolic consumption" in Aleksandrowicz (1979), and of "conceptual consumption" in Ariely/Norton (2009)). For instance, buying Marlboro cigarettes you get the image of the tough guy riding a horse in the Wild West, whereas buying Camel cigarettes you get the image of the tough guy driving his Land Rover in the rainforest. Both of them add to the common use value of these things (as means of damaging one's own lungs or whatever) which they share. As far as it works, consumers behave respectively because of sticking to what has been suggested to them. However, with the Thomas theorem, we are here also too poorly equipped to understand the corresponding phenomena. It does not capture the interdependencies generated by highly competitive markets where the demand for use values is approximately covered by alternative supply.

We can regard similar phenomena as instances of manipulation via deception, even if not as an especially harmful category thereof. A different kind of deception concerning consumer behavior was due to the classification of beaver as fish proclaimed by the Catholic Church some centuries ago. In this case, the intention was rather to deceive God with his prohibition to eat (mammalian) flesh on special days and at the same time to please devout meat-eaters by reconciling their dietary preferences with their sin-avoiding behavior. To dwell on the respective mechanisms of 'defining' *a* as *b* and its real-world consequences, we have to include,

among others, some aspects of theology and sociology of religion. Instead of considering the Thomas theorem, more useful would prove here consulting Thomas Aquinas whose proto-biology offered some doctrinal legitimacy for the remedy invented by the Church.

With these issues we approach a more general problem of deception which consists in influencing the stance of an interactor towards something so as to make it advantageous for the deceptor. Such strategies are, however, not specific for humans but are widely disseminated in the living world. The abovementioned pollination strategy of the bee orchid is one of numerous instances of it. Behavioral ecology or cognate contexts offer therefore a much more appropriate theoretical background for understanding the involved mechanisms than the Thomas theorem.

Behavior manipulation via deception in plant as well as in animal world depends on signaling (cf. Krebs, Dawkins, 1979). Unique to humans is the use of *language* in this function. Dealing with it, necessarily includes aspects absent in the more generally oriented behavioral ecology. Authors studying them (as, for instance, Tomasello, 2003) cannot either benefit much from considering the Thomas theorem, since it is conceptually too rough for that task. The theorem includes nothing but the already taken-for-granted assumption that the way we conceive our environment affects the way we behave in it. Such quite uncontroversial but rather vague assumption does not even address the more specific question how linguistic communication works in that context.

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The very same assumption holds with respect to a wholly different agent-environment constellation which is bereft not only of any communication or purposeful signaling but often also of awareness on the side of the agent. When someone refrains from going into the dark forest because he or she regards it intimidating, then to understand the underlying mechanism we have to focus chiefly on the nature of inborn instincts. They operate even if the environmental conditions (dangerous beasts lurking in the respective surrounding), which once evoked them, already disappeared. Akin to it are several other biologically based patterns of behavior-guiding orientation in the world. Their colligated instances are the "agency detection system" (cf. Barret/Johnson, 2003) or the "law of similarity" according to which "things are what they appear to be" (Rozin, 2006). Since such patterns are common to different animals beyond humans, investigating them involves facets escaping the conceptual capacity of the Thomas theorem. In general, the patterns are due to anticipatory attributes (and to building of a related internal model of the environment) common to all organic complex adaptive systems (cf. Holland, 1992).

In the special case considered by Thomas (oversensitive and aggressive person *vis-à-vis* soliloquizing person), a possible explanation could consist

in qualifying the relevant agent as a mentally disordered individual (at the same time taking for granted the uncontroversial insights expressed by the Thomas theorem). There is large anecdotal as well as scientific evidence for mentally disturbed people who think themselves or others to be what they in fact are not (for instance, Napoleon or Elvis Presley, friend or foe) and behave accordingly. To tackle the related problems presupposes first of all drawing on findings offered by psychiatry and psychology rather than on anything that can be read out of the Thomas theorem.

In contrast to such individual-oriented perspective, the social dimension comes to the fore when we regard the aggregate behavior of groups and its consequences in terms of (unjustified) beliefs shared by members of these groups. For instance, the popular support for Hitler and his party in Germany in the 1930's and early 40's had a considerable bearing on what subsequently happened in that country and in the world. The underlying beliefs consisted in regarding Hitler and the Nazis as forces that will solve the problems emerging from the economic crisis and the defeat of Germany in the 1st World War. Understanding the social aspect of the involved beliefs, the resulting behavior and its consequences does not, yet, benefit much from sticking to the Thomas theorem. The notion of "belief" which is to be consulted here is much more complex than the "definition of the situation" alluded to by Thomas. On the side of the affected actors, beliefs concerning Hitler and the Nazis did not consist simply in viewing some *a* as *b*, that is in attributing the respective "meaning" to it. Unlike the example referred to by Thomas, the beliefs at issue principally exceed any situation in which the actor immediately finds him- or herself, and at the same time go beyond simple interactions with momentarily given aspects of the environment. They include a kind of theory (or quasi-theory) operating with abstract concepts and covering a greater range of facts detached from the immediate surroundings (cf. Millikan, 2004: ch. 14). The Thomas theorem will, thus, bring us not far enough in dealing with these questions. (For more on this see further below in this paper.)

The individual and the social aspect merge in the example demonstrated few years ago by E. M. Welch. He traveled to a restaurant and threatened some of its staff with a gun because he believed *a* (the restaurant) to be *b* (the place where pedophile politicians keep kidnaped children). However, there is no more than only a superficial and therefore not very instructive analogy with the example the Thomas theorem makes use of. In the latter, the misguided behavior emerged from self-deception. Welch's action was inspired by messages he found in the electronic media. The aim of conveying those messages was not to make some particular individual do something in a particular moment at a particular place. Likewise, the situation in which the messages were supposed to exert their influence by far surpassed such

narrow dimensions of time and space. Instead, it potentially covered the whole USA and included possibly some other places of the world, where the messages were propagated, targeting to affect the decisions of voters in the approaching presidential elections. It cannot be the task here to get involved in an analysis of all those entangled issues. The upshot is, yet, that attempting to understand the Welch-case with the aid of the conceptual equipment offered by the Thomas theorem leaves us with trivialities, while distracting from more constitutive aspects just mentioned.

The more examples we view the more diffused picture we get. The internet pages referring to the Thomas theorem offer a rich choice of them. Yet, finding such examples is a rather idle enterprise, just because they are so different in character, so numerous and thus abound wherever you look: "Poor cook! He wrongly assumed the soup is unsalted, salted it twice and his boss chided him." "Poor boy! He wrongly assumed that the water in the pond is deep enough, jumped into it, broke his backbone and will spend the rest of his life on a wheelchair." With ourselves as well as with all other organisms being imperfectly designed, lacking full information, and being confronted with deceptive measures, this is the way how organisms and their environments often interact in this world: "Poor fish! It wrongly assumed the moving and shining thing to be prey, swallowed the wobbler and ended up on the hook."

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The diffusion as well as the possible confusion result from thinking of the diverse relationships in terms dictated by the Thomas theorem and the subsequent trouble to make further progress that way. What will then be left as the grain of the problem when we free it from its cumbersome formulation in the Thomas theorem? Let us first consider which aspects of the statement might be thus abandoned.

DISTINGUISHING BABY FROM THE BATHWATER

In the previous sections I already more or less explicitly pointed at some aspects of the bathwater included in the Thomas theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."

Firstly, the reference to "men" (or, for that matter, to women) is unnecessary. It wrongly suggests the underlying problem to be less overarching than it in fact is. At the same time, it assumes too much just at the beginning. Therefore, I substituted that notion with "agents," "actors" or "interactors." The very last term is the best because it is more general and presupposes less than the other two. While this does not imply the claim

that humans and non-human organisms are the same kind of systems, there is still some elementary level at which their respective interactions with the environment can be modelled in similar terms. It implies starting at this elementary level of similarity between humans and other organisms and successively importing into the model relevant differences for concrete cases. It is opposite to the proceeding which starts from the differences between humans and other organisms and ends up with maintaining a gap between them.

Secondly, even more misleading is including the word “real” which appears twice in the short dictum. It paves the way for rather idle speculations concerning issues of ontology. They result in bad philosophy which misses the more relevant point. Contrary to them, the core question vaguely implicated by the Thomas theorem is not about what is *real* but about what is *causative* and in how far we can speak of *proper causation* in that respect. Questions of epistemology concerning what is “true” are neither at the right place in this context. Although this aspect was not directly referred to by Thomas, it was introduced by Merton who counts as the proper spokesman of the theorem. Those interconnected interpretations, namely the one pertaining to ontology and the one pertaining to epistemology, pose pseudoproblems. They arise from assuming a non-existent feed-back between conceiving *a* as *b* (due to illusion or successful deception) in combination with behavioral consequences effected by it on the one hand and the ontological status of *a* as well as the truth of the sentence “*a* is *b*” on the other hand. Such magic does not work in this world. Religious belief that there is an all-powerful God who can support us owing to our ritualized requests, results in prayer. The latter behavior is, admittedly, real. However, it does not produce anything (real) in the sense intended by it but further illusions. In general, belief in God as a widespread attitude *towards the world* has substantial consequences *in the world*. It thus renders people subordinate to the Church as well as makes the very origination of respective organization possible. All that, however, does not effect in making things to which this belief refers “real” and making the corresponding claims about the world “true.” These both sets of issues are completely independent from each other. Having referred to God, it will be not out of place to point at some parallel between how ontological problems are addressed in the Thomas theorem and in the so-called ontological proof of the existence of God invented by Anselm of Canterbury (1077–1078/1986, chs. II and III). It postulates an argumentative feed-back connecting the alleged necessity to conceive God as existing and His real existence. Already the medieval opponent of Anselm, Gaunilo (1078/1986), contended the supposition of this kind of feed-back to be logically fallacious because conceiving things *someway* does not bear upon how they in reality are.

The still remaining bathwater is due, thirdly, to the notion of the “definition of the situation.” The notion is essential for the Thomas theorem but it notably contributes to some confusion. The unwarranted use of the word “definition” was already mentioned above. Yet, the problem goes beyond that simple detail. The notion implies theorizing about the respective processes in the world in terms of (1) agentic systems, (2) situations confronted by them, (3) the way they view (“define”) these situations, and (4) the resulting behavior. Such theory establishes thus (3) as a kind of intermediary factor between (1) related to (2) on the one hand and (4) on the other hand. What is problematic in it? Where then is the baby?

ENTANGLEMENT OF SITUATION, INTERPRETATIONS, AND CONSEQUENCES

Can (3) always be neatly separated from the other aspects? Even the example selected by Thomas casts some doubt in that respect. Someone encounters another person and this is the situation someone is confronted with. He thinks the other person is insulting him and this is how he views (‘defines’) the situation. He kills that person and this is the resulting behavior. It is not clear where ‘viewing’ is supposed to end for ‘behaving’ to begin. Is it not rather one and the same process engaging, as the case may be, brain, tongue, arms, and what have you? Making the difference between ‘overt behavior’ and ‘internal, mental processes’ would not be of much help either. (By analogy, cf. here the distinction between “biological” and “representational function” in Burge, 2010.) When someone views *a* as *b* his or her eyes may shine and his or her knees may tremble accordingly. When the person makes the pronunciation “*a* is *b*,” then what happens that way is overt, yet it is still nothing but an expression of the person’s views.

Such entanglement is even more evident in the famous example introduced by Merton (1948): clients of a well-functioning bank hear rumors about its possible insolvency. They believe these rumors, run on the bank to withdraw their deposits and hence contribute in fact to its bankruptcy. Here, (3) merges not only with ‘behavior’ but in some measure also with ‘situation.’ Rumors (claiming *a* to be *b*) have the same content as views (claiming *a* to be *b*) of the involved agents. At the same time, they are part of the situation these agents are confronted with. Their views in turn need not at all have the shape of an explicit contention or even thought that *a* is *b* but can simply consist in behaving as if *a* were *b*. It is

tantamount to running on the bank which means nothing else than to follow the overall run exercised by others (in order to secure one's own savings in face of the bank run having erupted). Seen from this angle, run on the bank proves to be another aspect of the situation the agents at issue are faced with. Here we have to consider the difference between *learning from* (by paying attention to rumors) and *conforming to* other members of a social group. In the latter case the respective behavior of others functions as an environmental factor to which the actor in question adapts. Thus, the alleged "consequences of a situation," as considered from the point of view of the Thomas theorem, at the same time constitute the situation, while likewise contributing to the emergence and persistence of related 'interpretations.'

All pertinent aspects, namely situation, its interpretation and behavioral consequences, overlap and penetrate into each other. However, they do not overlap according to some common pattern, which might still leave room for approaching the interactions in question with a theoretical model of the kind implicated by the Thomas theorem. When their theoretical treatment is at issue, the diverse variants addressed in sec. 8 and in the current section, always call for conceptual aid outside of the Thomas theorem. Furthermore, neither of those cases proves supportive for the central philosophical conclusions of the theorem concerning reality and truth.

INTERACTIONS, INFORMATION, AND CONSTRAINTS

In the Mertonian example, both rumors and running on the bank exercised by others are information or, as the case may be, misinformation. Neglecting the question of 'reality' as well as the question of 'truth' and of the 'definition of the situation,' we are thus confronted with the problem of *information* and its role in the interactions between an agentive system and its environment. Information resp. misinformation *constrains* and *canalizes* rather than causes the behavior of the involved agent. The Thomas theorem, slimed down to its sound core, maintains that behavior is affected by what agents recognize in their environment and how they recognize it. There are two aspects that can be now added to the simple statement. (1) The way the environment is recognized is not freely decidable by the agent but constrained. (2) It does not occur exclusively on the side (and the less so – inside) of the agent but due to the relationship between the agent and the environment; in the interactive coupling between the two.

There are twofold implications of considering the respective processes in terms of dynamical, interactive couplings between agents and environments. Firstly, the way the environment is recognized ('viewed') by the agent depends on the encounter of relevant characteristics of both of them. Secondly, the agent behaves *vis-à-vis* the environment according to how the environment has been recognized; the environment 'answers' with subsequent occurrences happening in it. In the Thomasian example, the passer-by as part of the environment emerges with his odd manner to talk to himself. The respective agent emerges with his oversensitivity as a kind of mental disorder. The interplay of the two results in the (mis)information of being insulted by the passer-by. That (mis)information, most probably in connection with some other informational constraints of the type that it is dishonoring to endure insults, results in aggressive behavior. The environment 'answers' chiefly due to the function of the legal system, involvement of the police, the court etc. Owing to the inbuilt detection mechanism, a frog recognizes any small thing moving within its field of view as prey (a fly or a bug) and catches it with its tongue. Now and again the environment 'answers' by proving the thing to be inedible. The frog pits the thing out and in so doing it correctively improves its fit with the environment. A special, and accessible only to humans, kind of behavior *vis-à-vis* the environment resides in a public statement that a is b . Does then the environment engender any 'answer' when the behavior in question does not entail anything more except of predicating " a is b "? It does, by allowing for either corroboration or falsification of the statement. What remains is only the (public) articulation of either of the two. Admittedly, such interaction concerns rather some more sophisticated types of communication, whereas communicative acts such as, for instance, rumoring are not affected by it.

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The primary manifestation of (falsely) conceiving a to be b consists in the behavior of an interactor i ; the further outcomes are due to answering on the part of the environment. The puzzling construction which claims that to define some a as b makes the resulting consequences real can thus be released of its alleged metaphysical depth and reduced to a rather plain observation. It proclaims merely that sometimes interactors behave towards something as if it were another thing and in doing so they generate or provoke some additional events.

However, exactly due to the 'answer' on the side of the environment, consequences of actions often disprove the view of the situation on which these actions initially relied. This contradicts a possible implication of the Thomas theorem to conceive the social world in terms of conscious projections becoming real owing to the consequences emanating from them. Not only actions based on apparently illusionary views but also those backed

by more realistic accounts of the world are confronted with the fact that what decisively constitutes the aggregate outcome of them are unintended consequences of intended acts. People may think this or that, and may view their surrounding this or that way. Yet, these attitudes or thoughts cannot control the further effects of their respective undertakings.

It was nevertheless exactly Merton who already in the mid-1930s approached the problem of unintended consequences of intended actions (1936). This illuminates an important aspect where Merton and Thomas tend to go their own way in their understanding of the seemingly one and the same theorem. The Thomasian murder falsely appreciates the behavior of a person and kills that person. The 'real' consequences of his initially unrealistic view of the situation consist in the latter act. Here, the agent did what he intended to, and his intentional action causally underlies the respective course of events. In the Mertonian illustration of the theorem, people hear false rumors suggesting the bad condition of a bank they keep their deposits in. They run on the bank in order to protect their savings. In effect, the condition of the bank really gets bad, causing its insolvency. Unlike the former example, the relevant consequences of actions undertaken by the involved agents occur at the aggregate (social) level. The agents perform some actions concerning the bank, but do not 'make' the bank insolvent. The insolvency just *happens* as an unintended outcome thereof.

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The more complex the related issues and the more distal the possible consequences the less productive appears considering them in terms of situations and individuals undertaking actions due how they appreciate those situations. Consider, for instance, questions connected with climate warming. For the vast majority of us it is hardly possible to reasonably 'appreciate' anything in that regard, just because we do not encounter the relevant aspects of the situation the way the murder encountered the passer-by in the example outlined by Thomas. What we face here are only some cues, but not how those cues come together adding up to a complex system and contributing to the further dynamics emanating therefrom. In such context, wisdom would consist rather in sacrificing our subjective appreciations in favor of insights offered to us by experts. (For associated problems cf. Boyd/Richerson, 2005, ch. 4, who relate the rise of intersubjectively transmitted cognition to the increased complexity of the environment due to the instability of climate in the Pleistocene).

Applying the term "information" presupposes some clarification of this quite polysemous concept. The way I use it draws on the so-called "ecological" (causal) theory of information developed in the "situation semantics" (cf. Barwise & Perry, 1983; Barwise, 1993 or Devlin & Rosenberg, 1993). The concept is cognate to the respective notion in the "ecological mechanics" proposed by Shaw and Kinsella-Shaw (1988). Situation

semantics conceives information in terms of either causal or conventional constraints put on how situations are connected with each other. They constitute “channels” or “tunnels” through which such connecting occurs. Modifying somewhat the concept and taking the aspect of behavior into account, we can understand information in terms of constraints put on behavioral alternatives available to the informed agent. Informationally constrained behavior confronting a given connection of situations consists in generating some specific instead of an arbitrary spectrum of new situations. One connection of situations is followed by the other one in as far they are based on the same constellation of constraints. Situation₁ (water drops under the feet) is connected with situation₂ (possible rain); this in turn channels the connection with situation₃ (someone, namely the informed agent, takes an umbrella for the walk).

The last example (wet ground → rain → umbrella) with respect to how it was used in secs. 3 and 4 touches the notion of “misinformation” mentioned before. The notion poses some problems, since *misinformation* is not a special kind of information but rather lack thereof (cf. Aleksandrowicz, 2015: sec. 3.9). We shall then use the word with some caution. It might also be useful to consider what the notion of “misinformation” alludes to in negative terms, namely in the sense of covering information and obstructing the assimilation thereof. Referring to an example cognate to the frog-example indicated above, Haugeland (1998: 309 ff.) maintains that “there’s no such thing as misinformation.” Catching any small thing moving in the visual field is then rather due to genuine information emerging from the interactions of the respective agent and its environment; that is, assuming the (alas, always imperfect) general design of the species in question. Seen from this perspective, the Thomasian murderer is likewise *informed* in the light of the aspects of his particular ‘design’ previously indicated.

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ESSER’S ASSIMILATIVE RECEPTION OF THE THOMAS THEOREM

The reception of the Thomas theorem since Merton and Schütz consisted often in repeating the formula and referring to further examples supposed to confirm it. The latter was a rather easy task since our world as well as records concerning the past offer a vast and many-faceted amount of them. This was not intended by Esser (1996) whose reading of the theorem consists in an attempt to integrate the idea into his own theoretical

approach and make further progress that way. According to the author, “[h]ardly any other statement meets with greater approval among sociologists than the so-called Tomas theorem” (3). Nevertheless, his assimilative reception amounts at the same time to a kind of ‘updating’ of that nearly a century old statement. With its title, “Definition of the situation”, the paper points to the two crucial notions of the theorem. The unhappy connection of these two words originated from Thomas and was then adopted by his followers, such as those referred to above. The respective authors seem, however, to have used the notion as a metaphorical manner of speaking rather, without combining any special theoretical claims with it. In Esser, however, “definition of the situation” is a bit more than mere wording. He not only adopts the notion, but attempts to make a proper theoretical concept out of it.

“Situation” refers to those aspects of the environment where the agent in question is momentarily situated. It consists of things, included living things, institutions etc. faced by and interacting with the agent. The agent may approach the situation and its components in diverse ways, but ‘defining’ them is not among the available options. It can apply to words. Defining words, we explicate (or establish) their sense and/or reference and engage in it whenever there is some unclarity in that regard which would impede communication: “What is a ‘mobile’?”. “It is a telephone which you can take with you going out or traveling somewhere and can still be phoned or phone with it, great-grandma.” However important it is, we should beware from defining too much, in order to progress from “mentioning” to “using” words (cf. Quine [1951], § 4, on “mention/use confusion”) and thus make communication possible, because this is what language has evolved for. “Defining” with respect to situations, things and the like is then an improper name for viewing or some related overt behavior towards them.

“Situation” is a convenient concept, and it was used above except with regard to the Thomas theorem also in connection with the “situation semantics”. Nevertheless, we may get confused by that concept when we refrain from using it carefully. On the one hand components of situations are out there, in the world, but on the other hand there is some artificiality in the way how we view the world applying the respective notion to it. Objectively, one is continuously not in *a* situation but in a still changing sequence of them. When one moves from *A* to *B* then every step of one’s feet or every turn of the wheels of one’s bicycle transfers that person into a new situation. However, it is not the way we consider situations we or others are embedded in. We would rather tend either to regard the entire moving from *A* to *B*, at least some sections of it significantly longer than a step or a turn of the wheels, as one situation or (more probably) to refrain

from making any reference to the respective concept. Identifying of separate situations within such continuum and viewing ourselves in terms of them, is only due to the occurrence of unexpected and sufficiently relevant events, like broken leg or flat tire (to mention only such unfortunate incidents). Thus, in spite of being always in some situation, we use the respective word rather sparsely in everyday communication. This is usually the case in contexts such as "What a good/bad situation I am in!", "I would/would not like to be in his/her situation!", "I wish to escape/get into that situation!" and so on. It would then seem as if sometimes one were in a situation, and sometimes (in fact, for most of the time) not. But this is not the way how that manner of speaking as well as of thinking is to be interpreted. We resort to the notion when there is some effort, be it some change in our behavioral routines, necessary to deal (either in a positive or negative sense) with occurrences in our environment. Scholars studying human behavior apply the corresponding concept not very differently in that regard. This is also how Esser seems to understand the issue when he connects "conscious consideration of a situation" with "important and unfamiliar" aspects appearing in it (31).

586 In his assimilative rationalization of the Thomasian formula, Esser interprets "definition of the situation" in terms of "complexity reduction". To "define" the situation means therefore to reduce complexity previously inherent to it. The specific Esserian notion for the concept is "framing". "Framing" refers to "frame," and the function of frame is to limit something that happened to be enframed by it. In this sense, "[t]he main idea of the Thomas theorem is [...] [that] people simplify the over-complexity of information in a situation due to a framing 'definition' of a leading point of view" (6).

"Complexity reduction" is a crucial purpose in the theory-backed inquiry of the world. In following it, theoreticians do not interact directly with the world but with "decoupled representations" thereof (for the latter term cf. Sterelny, 2003: chs. 2, 3). Admittedly, theoreticians interact directly with the environment as walkers, bikers, consumers or lovers, but in constructing theories they do not approach it that way. Theories include models of the respective aspects of the world, which reduce their really given complexity by hypothesizing about essential mechanisms operating there. Interaction with the world happens only thereafter, when the theories are tested with respect to how good they 'fit' the world. To be sure, interactions taking place here are not just the same as when one interacts with it as walker and the like. In testing hypotheses, the world is often substituted by diverse types of simulations, such as, for instance, experimentally designed environments (including thought experiments). But this fine difference can be ignored in this context. Either way, in testing we do not have

to bother about complexity reduction, because it has already been done in the previous step. Engaging in testing, we know in advance where to look in the world, which experiments to design, what to 'ask' the world for. The same, turning again a blind eye for the fine differences, concerns such mundane interactions as those mentioned above. Despite of considering oneself only occasionally to be in a "situation," one does not appear there as Martians landing on the Earth, where everything is alien to them. In fact, one steps into the "situation" following an interconnected chain of previous situations, even if he or she does not view them that way. The biker with the flat tire (to forget the somewhat sadistic example with the broken leg) knows without any additional 'reductive' effort what is now relevant for him or her and how to tackle with the emerging problems: fitting the tire, pushing the bike, or seek for alternative transportation, just in order to get from *A* to *B*. Such achievements do not, yet, distinguish only humans (and the less so humans endowed with bicycles) but can be traced far down the ladder of the living world. Moving towards moisture, avoiding aridity and the predating mole, the humble earthworm likewise selects only some aspects of its surrounding, thus reducing the complexity it consists of.

Situations of the kind referred to by the Thomas theorem are of a similar character. The madman encounters another man on the street and viewing him necessarily classifies the person somehow. He may classify him as an insulter and kill him or (this time rather implicitly) simply as a neutral passer-by and ignore him. Neither of the two classifications contributes more than the other one to complexity reduction, while both of them are just alternative applications of the selective sieve established far back in the sequence of interactions between the respective agent and his environment.

The Thomas theorem, as it was stated in the famous sentence (1928: 572), made popular by Merton, and then quoted by numerous authors, concerns some special type of classifying things in one's environment, namely classifying them the way which deviates from what they in fact are. The theorem consists in the claim that, in spite of being counterfactual, respective views result in facts of behavior of the involved agents and in facts concerning the consequences evoked by that behavior. The uncontroversial statement is, however, combined with dubious ontology and epistemology as well as with the untenable contention that it applies exclusively to the human world.

"Complexity reduction" *applied to the situation and not emanating from the interconnected sequence of them is part of the issue rather in situations structured differently from those originally referred to by Thomas. In such situations, as was already indicated above, relevant consequences are distal, occur at the aggregate level and escape the chain of events causally*

connected with actions undertaken by the involved agents. The difference refers thus to diverging constellations of causal relationship the behaviour in question is involved in. This is due to whether (a) the course of action and its supposed target are directly causally connected and entailed within a horizon readily comprehensible by an agent or (b) their connection straddles to a realm extended beyond the horizon of the action directly performed. In the first case, the agent's behavior refers to information generated in the given situation or in analogous situations faced with in the past. In the other case, it refers to theoretical or quasi-theoretical knowledge anticipating the outcomes of causal connections transcending the proximal context the action is directly involved in (cf. Rieser, 1999, for a simple model referring to related problems concerning wayfinding behavior).

Just as with the case of theory-backed inquiry, complexity reduction occurs here owing to a kind of theoretical account of the world. In contrast to theories proper, it is not subject to critical discussion and tests working towards improvement of knowledge but consists in folk-theories or pseudo-theories which stem from tradition, ideology and the like. Looking for examples of such theories well apt to concern issues addressed by the Thomas theorem, we shall point first of all to conspiracy theories. At the same time, conspiracy theories in their diverse forms are among the most common folk-theories offering easily comprehensible simplifications of the complexities of the social world. This owes to the fact that the respective stance towards the world relies on primordial intuitions (cf. Barrett/Johnson, 2003; Kelemen, 2004) and is therefore more lightly accepted than the usually less intuitive and more demanding accounts stemming from expert knowledge.

Animated by the corresponding theory and the related intention to make Britain great again, the voter voted for "leave" in the Brexit referendum. The situation, let's call it situation_p (for "proximate"), in which his or her action was causally connected with the consequences thereof, ended with his or her voting card falling down on the bottom of the voting box. The further consequences pertain to situation_a spreading over the aggregate and the distal dimension. They consist in the final outcome of the voting and in numerous problems generated for Great Britain (as well as for the EU) that way. With the Thomas theorem we are rather ill-equipped for dealing with the respective agent-environment interactions. Its concept of situation is too coarse-grained to account for the two dimensions the agent is situated in. Deciding in situation_p ("how to vote?"), the agent, instructed by the folk-theory, strives for effects concerning situation_a ("to make Britain great again"). Attempting to apply the theorem to this kind of interactions, we may get still more confused than with respect to simpler cases similar to the one outlined by Thomas. They are also still less

appropriate for confirming the philosophical upshot of the respective formula, namely that viewing situations “as real,” makes them “real in their consequences.” Falling down of the voting card in the voting box was real, and equally real are the precarious troubles faced now by the country. Yet, none of those dissimilar states of things is apt to materialize the expectations suggested by the underlying, complexity-reducing conspiracy theory: that freeing Great Britain from the European oppressors will allow to make the country and the British people better off than they were hitherto.

Another aspect of the Esserian assimilative interpretation of the Thomas theorem consists in regarding it in terms of the subjective-expected-utility (*SEU*) theory. According to the author, “it can be easily read even as an early formulation” of that theory (4) (In another paper, 1991/1993, the author offers a cognate treatment of Schütz). The Thomasian madman calculating the available behavioral alternatives, that is, killing or not killing, by comparatively weighting “subjective utilities” related to them would, yet, face an impossible task. Those “utilities,” such as avoiding to sacrifice one’s own honor vs. avoiding to be sentenced to prison (or to death), cannot be reasonably quantified and thus expressed in numbers making the respective weighting feasible (cf. Bunge, 1999: 78 ff., on “pseudo-quantification”). This suggests therefore to consider the corresponding notions as metaphors than as proper concepts rather, just as it was the case with “definition” in the above context. It is, however, not the proper place here to seriously deal with the *SEU* theory (as well as with the rational-choice approach that theory emerges from), because this would mean to address too many additional problems, which at the same time would bring us too far away from issues raised in this paper.

PERSPECTIVES, RELATIONS, AND FACTS

The critical discussion of the legacy of the Thomas theorem amounts, among others, to theorize about the human-related world from a conceptual stance located outside of it. Respective attempts share, more or less explicitly, such approaches as ecological psychology, the theory of complex adaptive systems, the ecological (in contrast to “constructivist”) conception of rationality, the so-called “Universal Darwinism” (dating over a decade earlier than that wording coined 1983), or the dynamic systems theory as the most general and formal of them. They, to some extent at least and indirectly, bear on issues addressed by Thomas and then developed further by his followers. All these approaches do not

start with assuming peculiarities of that corner of the world we are embedded in and are thus intimately tied to. Instead, they aim at inventing more overarching and integrative models to be applied to a variety of agentive resp., more generally, interactive systems. Relevant peculiarities of the human niche in that world are, admittedly, existent. Just as it is in the case of, say, spiders or chimpanzees. These peculiarities are, however, to be considered *within* such models and not *in contrast* to them. They establish a conceptual framework for an *explanative* account of those aspects of the world which are simply *assumed* by the standard practice of social sciences. Such aspects include several traits attributed to humans, like intentional and rational behavior, or deceptive manipulation thereof. Understanding social events and processes appears then as a cognitive task not principally different from understanding occurrences in galaxies, ecosystems and other complex systems, which, in a wide sense, have the character of complex *adaptive* systems. Those who maintain the unusual, specific character of society and therefore of attempts to cognitively grasp it, point at the role of consciousness appearing there. However, each of the diverse systems includes some relevant factors which are characteristic to it and thus are to be accordingly dealt with in attempts to gain knowledge concerning respective issues. Consciousness is nothing but another factor of such kind.

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In his "Principles of Social Evolution" Hallpike (1986) contrasts biological adaptation with adaptation occurring in human society. He claims that unlike biological adaptation, where the design of the organism accommodates to the environment which remains *unchanged*, in the case of social systems, we are confronted with *mutual adjustment* (cf. 36). Such argument for the uniqueness of human society *vis-à-vis* the world of nature loses its force when we consider *niche construction* (cf. Laland et al., 2000) as an aspect of biological adaptation. In Hallpike, however, this point is further connected with notions cognate to the Thomas theorem. Accordingly,

we can only interact with our environment as we understand it, not as it 'really' is (127); [t]he human mind [...] grasps reality by a highly selective and structured attention which is essentially active rather than a mere passive reception of sensations (129);

therefore,

[f]or man, above all other organisms, thought defines the nature of reality [...] [s]o [...] that men inhabit a world whose very nature depends on their definition (136 f.).

Letting "thought" aside, all what the argument asserts pertains not only to humans but to any organisms, including worms and lichens. Yet,

exactly because of being in that sense “selective,” they interact with the environment as it *really* is, hence, as it *in fact* is.⁶

To identify facts in the cluster of things and events encountered in the environment means to relate them to other aspects of the environment, be it relationships in which an organism itself is involved or not. When an organism, *a*, approaches *x* as *y* (edible), then, in addition to the thing *x*, it faces now the fact which, in case language would come into play, could be phrased as “*x* is *y* (edible).” In case the organism itself is directly involved and, in addition, “*a*” refers to human organism, the issue still pertains to a relationship between things of the world: *a* eats *x*, *a* buys *x*, *a* cultivates *x*. According to such relations *things* become *facts*. Clinging to the Kantian vocabulary, one can say that owing to pertinent relational constellations “things-in-themselves” turn into “things-out-of-themselves,” since they now (simply) relate to something that is *outside* of them: “*x* is noisy,” “*x* revolves around a star,” “*x* affords⁷ sitting.”

Contrary to the view referred to above, the concept of relation, except of being simpler and more universal, is more basic than the concept of perspective (or perspectival experience). This suggests denying the ontological peculiarity of such category of facts which involve human beings as elements of relationships underlying them.

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⁶ Superficial conceptual burden akin to the Thomas theorem contributes to confusion also in the following line of thought: (1) “not only can men accommodate to a particular environment in a number of possible ways but, much more fundamentally, this process of accommodation also involves the assimilation of the environment” (2) “because what the environment *is* depends on how we define it,” and (3) “once adopted, certain uses of the environment open up remarkable possibilities [...] that are often irreversible [...] [and] produce further consequences” (286 f.). The construction is fallacious, since (1) does not imply (2), whereas (3) makes it clear, and can be even understood so as to contradict (2). The contradiction is complemented by the statement that societies inherit certain principles from their past, and “these principles are [...] of vital significance both in the definitions of [...] challenges [...], and in their response to these challenges” (cf. 370). This, correctly, implies that the way people “define” their surrounding is not a primary factor but a consequence of other constraints relevant for them.

⁷ For the term, cf. Gibson (1982).

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