



McGill
University

Foundations & Philosophy of Science Unit

1984.01.24

Dear Mr De Shaw

Thank you for yours of December 27th, which I read upon my return from Egypt.

I still think that my semantics can be of hardly any use to your social work. I suspect that what may have been useful to you is just that you found in those books of mine some formal tools of universal applicability, and which you could have found in math. books.

My main reason for that belief is that my semantics is usefully after rather sophisticated theories have been formulated. It may then be used as a tool for analysis or even for orderly reconstruction (axiomatization).

You ask me what I think of your formalization of the concept of handling. I would proceed otherwise, namely thus. Social handling, or managing, is ultimately reducible to one person acting on another in view of certain goals and in light of certain rules (e.g. legal prescriptions). In short, the typical proposition involved in handling is of the kind

Person a acts on person b in view of goal g in light of rule r

or Habgr for short, where H is thus a 4th order relation. If the precise nature of the action c can be specified, and if in addition the circumstances d of the action are characterized, we can attempt to transform the relation into a function, namely thus:

$$\langle a, b, d, g, r \rangle \xrightarrow{H} c$$

i.e.

$$H: A \times B \times D \times G \times R \longrightarrow C$$

However, since actually the actions of the agents A's on the patients B's depend not only upon the external circumstances, the goals, and the rules, but also on the internal states of the agents (who are now lenient, now severe, now observant, now negligent, etc.), the items a, b, d, g, and r determine a whole collection of possible actions rather than a single action. In other words, the range of the function H is not a set C of actions but rather the power set P(C).

Such analysis does say something about handling but that something is very little. It would be convenient to specify the function H, if not thoroughly (by means of a set of equations) at least partially, by a table with a few entries.

Cordially

Mario Bunge

Postal address: 3479 Peel Street, Montreal, PQ, Canada H3A 1W7