Knowledge in a Raft: Comments to Denise Jodelet

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Once again and as expected, Jodelet's presentation was a significant contribution that furthers our understanding of the plurality of new perspectives introduced by Serge Moscovici, not only in social psychology but also in social sciences in general, and of how they are interlinked and mutually supported.

Such a view does not mean, as Jodelet clearly also emphasises, that the theory of social representations around which we are here assembled, has 'come of age', but continues to offer a systematic as well as a comprehensive corpus of true propositions. As claimed by Moscovici, the theory of social representations must be seen as a theory in progress, a predicament that became, I would happily add, constitutive and not only a feature of its still hesitant first steps.

In her dense paper, if I have correctly grasped her argument, Denise Jodelet gives a special emphasis to the contribution of Moscovici to a psychosociology of knowledge, which not only advances social psychology as a local discipline, but also establishes new bridges with the general epistemology.

The argument is complex and labyrinthic and this is not the occasion for describing it in detail. The metaphor of the pyramid and the raft, invoked by Denise Jodelet in the conclusion of her enlightening presentation, offers a good pretext for a footnote to her argument.

Denise Jodelet borrows the metaphor from a paper presented by Ernest Sosa in the late seventies, where the pyramid is a metaphor for the epistemological theory of foundationalism and the raft is a metaphor for the alternative view of coherentism. According to Jodelet, Moscovici's thinking would be much closer to the raft than to the pyramid.

Metaphors, as we know, help to simplify but very often things are a little bit more complex.

In the case of foundationalism as opposed to coherentism, the argument developed by Sosa as well as many others leads to the conclusion that such an opposition is more apparent than real. Rightly or wrongly, philosophers seem to feel particularly content with introducing subtle differentiations, for example between formal and substantive foundationalism, sometimes supported by clever thought experiments which very much irritate the more empirically oriented social researchers.

But we cannot afford to cut the bridges with metatheoretical reflection, indispensable as it is for giving sense to our empirical research. Returning to the debate between foundationalism and coherentism, and according to what I was able to conclude, there is no radical epistemological difference between these two theoretical perspectives.

In epistemological terms, they are both founded on the criterion of true knowledge and both seem to equate true knowledge with justified true beliefs, a claim already made by Plato.

The only difference would be however that whereas for coherentism the ultimate sources of justification lie in the relations among beliefs, for substantive foundationalism there would be ultimate sources of justification, other than the relations among beliefs.

Traditionally, these additional sources have pertained to the special content of the beliefs or their special relations with the subjective experience of the believer.

Of course, I could not be more in agreement with Denise Jodelet in that however epistemologically minor might the difference be, the thinking of Serge Moscovici is, prima facie, much closer to the pole of the raft than to the pole of the pyramid, much more aimed at the internal coherence of clustered social

representations emerging from common sense than to the hierarchical structure of the reified world of nomothetic sciences.

But this emphasis on internal coherence could eventually lead to a sort of structuralist perspective of closed language games that I do not think corresponds to the much more open views brought by the concept of social representations.

On the other hand, and for the sake of the argument, it could be argued that the meta-theory proposed by Moscovici is not incompatible with a foundationalist perspective, provided that we come to conclude that every human knowledge is grounded in what Wilfrid Sellars(1962) names "sophisticated common sense".

A way of overcoming this apparent conundrum would be to search for an alternative view that does not limit knowledge, or at least all modalities of knowledge, to objective criteria for justifying beliefs as a condition for making them true.

This traditional view shared both by foundationalism and by coherentism eventually led to a number of epistemological traps. One such example is Popper who continues to feed the debate around the validity of science. Eppure, si muove.

What seems to be actually innovative in the theory of social representations, as clearly shown by Denise, is that beliefs produced and justified by common sense do not and would not aim at claiming a status of truthfulness or veracity, but aim rather at claiming the status of truth.

It logically follows that another type of epistemology is required if the aim is actually to understand how human knowledge is not only processed, a task that cognitive psychology endeavours to describe, but rather how it is socially validated in terms of content, without falling in the naïve approach of the sociology of science.

The task of navigating between the psychological Scylla and the sociological Charybdis, another metaphor, is not easy but this has been and still continues to be the ambitious project launched by the theory of social representations. It thus comes as no surprise that in many of the attempts under the protective umbrella of the theory, the findings do not match up to the expectations.

But currently from the field of academic philosophy there seems to emerge a promising epistemological approach which parallels with the psychosociological theory of knowledge designed by Moscovici.

Such seems to be the alternative epistemological perspective known as reliabilism, which Sosa already mentions in the paper about the pyramid and the raft, strategically quoted in Denise Jodelet's presentation.

Reliabilism has known a considerable momentum in the philosophical debate, a debate which, allow me to insist, has close links with the psychosociology of common sense knowledge introduced by Serge Moscovici.

For this new epistemological perspective, the concern with truth becomes second to the concern with justified beliefs. Justification comes to the foreground but, and this is the radical difference, the criterion for validating the justification of a belief lies in that this belief is formed by a reliable process. The idea roughly is that to be justified, a belief must be formed as the result of reliable processes, where reliability does not entail truth.

But the parallels do not end here. Rather curiously, reliabilism has given rise to the rapprochement of epistemic concerns with ethical and normative concerns, which would be unconceivable not so many years ago.

We now have a virtue epistemology – a recent title by Ernest Sosa, ruled by the same logic underlying the ethics of moral virtues. It seems to me that the notion of normative meta-system introduced by Moscovici in Psychoanalysis (1976), elusive and sketchy as it is, could be linked to the logic of reliabilism.

The times are probably ripe for the return of the so despised metaphysics of the subject, but now such a human subject, such a human social subject seems by far more complex than its transcendental forebears.

Reliabilism, as far as I understand it, in giving a decisive voice to subjectivity but also to inter- subjectivity, wherein justifying is understood as accounting to someone else, contributes to reducing the gap between social sciences and in particular, social psychology and epistemology.

Since 1961, Moscovici has stressed that the functions of SR are first of all to help to take a position and to communicate. It seems that the underlying processes are grounded in that new epistemological perspective that emphasizes the rhetoric of social communication in a type of processual reliability.

To a certain extent, ethno-methodology seems to share the same concern of giving reliable accounts. What seems however to constitute the difference that makes

a difference in the démarche of Serge Moscovici is the focus, the irreducible focus on the central psycho-epistemic process of the judgment relating an image to a concept.

Beliefs become true, in the sense of being reliable as an epistemic subject whenever such a process, such a psychological process, is objectified in a representation, but such a representation could never be finalised without becoming social. As stated by Moscovici in 1961 – "every logic or thinking is social, in a sense, but not in the same way, nor in view of the same objectives" (p. 359).

To the frequently asked question, what is social in social representations, one could add what is psychological in social representations. The answer would be, representations themselves, but with all the complexity involving dialogical mediations relating processes with contents.

One final word to express my appreciation for the paper of Denise Jodelet: every time I read her work, I always learn and always feel invited to open new avenues of thinking.

I read her text at least three times, both in its original French and in its accurate and elegant English version, and in every reading there were always some new details that emerged to the foreground.

I can say the same about reading Serge Moscovici whose texts, like Psychoanalysis, require an interminable analysis.

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