

Ethics in the Theory of Social Representations¹

IVANA MARKOVÁ

University of Stirling

There are different ways in which the question ‘what makes humans distinct from other species?’ can be answered. One way is to refer to the ability of humans to reason and make rational decisions; another is to point to the capacity of humans to speak and express themselves in symbols; or to imagine future events and be aware of their mortality; and so on. I propose to focus here on the capacity of humans to make ethical choices and to view this as a feature of common sense knowledge and to that extent, as a feature of the theory of social representations.

MAKING ETHICAL CHOICES

From his early years shaped by the Second World War, Nazism and Stalinism, Serge Moscovici has placed the study of ethical choices, values and social norms into the centre of his attention with regard to the meaning of humanity. As he reveals that in his autobiography *Chronique des années égares*, (Moscovici, 1997) in his early youth he found inspiration in Nietzsche’s philosophical thoughts, in Pascal’s *Pensées* and in Spinoza’s *Ethics*. In his autobiography Moscovici scrutinized passions that, throughout the long past of mankind, tore apart communities as well as brought them again together. Within broad historical and cultural contexts he pondered

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about ethical values guiding beliefs in justice, the search for progress, and the desire of humans for immortality. Bearing on this autobiographical portrayal, there are several sources of Moscovici's ideas concerning ethics, both personal and scientific, all of them converging together.

On the personal side, experience of anti-semitism, persecution and humiliation during and after the War became the formative foundations of ideas expressed already in his first publication in the journal that Serge Moscovici co-edited with his friends in Bucharest. Later on, during his social scientific research in France, inspirations from Pascal, that he described in *Chronique des années égarées*, in particular those relating to science, religion, ethics and morality, came to the fore. When Moscovici became acquainted with Durkheim's writings, he focused on the fact that ethics was omnipresent in all social phenomena, and that it was conceptualized in different manners, whether in sacred, or in profane spheres. In contrast to Durkheim, Moscovici's approach in ethics has been dynamic, and permeated ideas about the driving forces of human invention and innovation. He brought into discussion intellectual polemics between different modes of thinking, like scientific, religious and public, that revealed different values and ethical standards. These he has pursued throughout his career in all major areas of his studies, whether in social representations, in studies of innovation of minorities and in ecological writings. These issues, to my mind, form the basis of the epistemology of common sense and consequently, of the theory of social representations.

I do not mean to say that the theory of social representations is a theory of morality or ethics. Instead, I wish to emphasise that the theory places emphasis on *humans as ethical beings*, as beings who pursue passions and make *ethical choices*. Making ethical choices is the fundamental disposition, *the capacity that makes our species human beings*. It is ethics and morality in this sense, which is a fundamental concept in the theory of social representations as it is evidenced in *La Psychanalyse: son image et son public* (Moscovici, 1961/1976; English edition 2008) and in Jodelet's (1989/91) *Madness and Social Representations*. This does not mean that the capacity to make ethical choices places emphasis on goodness of human nature. Rather, ethical choices could be highly ego-centric; they could be based on selfish judgements and on justifications of self-interest.

However, *the focus on the capacity of making ethical choices* – whether based on selfish judgements or on community/society interests - is one of the main features that distinguish the theory of social representations from other current social psychological theories that emphasize the neutrality of facts in social reality. Even if ethics and morality is brought into social psychological theories, it is not conceived as a capacity that makes mankind human, but as a variable to be objectively assessed and measured (e.g. Piaget's and Kohlberg's studies of the development of morality).

SUPERIOR AND INFERIOR KNOWING

In his writings Serge Moscovici (e.g. Moscovici, 2011) points out that throughout the history of mankind, from Plato up to Einstein, we can trace two kinds of knowing, an aristocratic and plebeian, or an elitist and popular knowing. The first adjective in each of these pairs of notions refers to superior, and the second refers to inferior knowing.

Albert Einstein, in his remarks on Bertrand Russell, draws attention to what he refers to as two illusions of thinking. One is what he calls an aristocratic illusion, i.e. the belief in an unlimited power of thought. The other is a plebeian illusion of naive realism, 'according to which things "are" as they are perceived by us through our senses' (Einstein, 1944, p.281). The latter illusion is common in mundane life of people and animals, as well as the starting point of natural sciences. Starting with the aristocratic knowing, in ancient Greece, Plato attributed a higher degree of knowing to non-material and abstract ideas than to knowing the world through sensations and experience. Plato's ideas have retained their traces in modern philosophy. In the 17th century Baruch Spinoza's masterpiece on *Ethics* (Spinoza, 1677/1967) we find that *reasoning* and *intuition* lead to adequate forms of knowing because they conceive the true nature of things. *Imagination*, in contrast, Spinoza named as common sense and he treated it as the lowest kind of intellectual activity that does no more than leads to false and fictitious ideas. Hegel, who admired Spinoza's philosophy, took over Spinoza's three kinds of thinking, naming them common sense, science and philosophy, leaving common sense at the bottom of hierarchy. Hegel's viewpoint on these kinds of thinking enabled Geoffrey Mure (1940, pp. 1-2), in his *Introduction to Hegel*, to state: 'Common sense is a rudimentary thinking'. It is conceived as

something between sense-perception and imagination and that is no more than a thin abstraction from reality; indeed, should it be called thinking at all?

The rise of European science from the 17th century onwards has contributed to the conviction that one day, fantasies, myth and magical thinking will disappear and that they will be fully substituted by rational thought and reason. The general ethos to eradicate mythical thinking has dominated various systems of thought, beliefs and ideology. Scientific Marxism, too, firmly adopted the rationalistic outlook with respect to theories of historical and dialectical materialism, economy and politics; this perspective implied, as Moscovici puts it, that ‘le peuple ne pense pas’, that only intellectuals are capable of rational thinking but ordinary people are not; therefore, they must be guided towards rationality by the Party (Moscovici & Marková, 2000, p. 228).

FACTS AND VALUES

In one of his most recent articles, Serge Moscovici says that he has been always intrigued that ‘most theories or discussions of prejudices, stereotypes and relations between groups are couched in terms of the logic of facts and categories’ (Moscovici, 2011, p. 445; on this issue, see also Moscovici, 2000), totally ignoring ethical choices and values. Opinion and attitude scales, questionnaires about attributions, stereotypes, prejudice or influence – all aim to examine facts and categories, information and citizens’ rational thinking, *as if* participants in such studies were the rationalized machines expressing thoughts without any active engagements with respect to such socially valorized phenomena.

Although the phrase ‘facts versus values’ is a relatively modern one, and came to use during the Enlightenment, we find that throughout history, the distinction between practical wisdom and scientific facts goes back to Aristotle (1998) who brought into focus the pluralities of thinking and the existence of different kinds of knowledge. The distinction between philosophical and scientific thinking on the one hand, and practical wisdom on the other, has been maintained throughout subsequent centuries and it marks the perspective on ethics and sciences until today.

For the early 18th century scholar Giambattista Vico, ethics was the fundamental feature of *sensus communis*. He rejected the approach to ethics as an objectified moral science based on

rules and propositions. Vico developed his own ideas on ethics, as well as the critique of Descartes' method and of his mathematical model of rationality. He described in details what he thought were the differences between science and common sense, the latter being of ethical nature, and interdependent with imagination and language. Vico (1709/1965, pp. 46-47) argued against systematization of rules in ethics and he pointed out that in real life, human conduct depends on sound judgment and therefore, nothing is less useless than the treatment of ethics as a general and objective science. Vico saw the ethical nature of common sense in history and community. Common sense is shared by everybody: it is 'judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the entire human race' (Vico, 1744/1948, Axiom 142). It is a socially shared but not reflected upon, habitual way of thinking, communicating and acting.

Three hundred years later, scientific psychology and some approaches in social sciences, in their effort to achieve the ideal of 'objective science', have objectified ethics in the manner that Vico had rejected. In addition to scientific and ideological reasons for establishing a neutral language and viewing communication as a transmission of neutral information, there have been also moral and ethical reasons for 'neutrality'. Such views have been applied above all in ethics in relation to health communication or education. For example, giving the patient unbiased information with respect to various medical conditions is thought to be highly ethical because that this enables patients and their families to make well informed decisions. It is argued on perfectly acceptable grounds that patients and their families have to be left free to decide which of the offered actions to choose. Yet our own research (Marková et al., 1984) in the field of genetic counselling showed that clients were often unsure as to what choice they should make and they relied on advice of the professional or they 'read' an advice into what the expert said to them. These attempts to mix up scientific knowledge and common sense thinking have led to difficulties of interpretation and, arguably, became unethical in the name of ethics.

Moscovici (2011) has re-iterated the problem of the separation of values and facts in his recent article on persecution of ethnic minorities. Specifically, he takes up human capacities for representations of goodness and evil and traces them back to Nazism and then to the Milgram experiment. The tendency to rationalize and mechanize interpersonal relations and to draw the objectified rules into ethics serves as a permanent reminder of the susceptibility of researchers

and professionals to separate facts and values. Moscovici (2011, p. 449) comments: ‘The condition of this rationalization is the well-known separation of facts and values ... our science is based on the specialization facilitated by the awareness and knowledge of objective reports ... When we no longer have a living moral consciousness, we can no longer refuse to obey the order we are given by our superiors or by the “offices” ’.

Rationalization leading to the separation of facts and values to which Moscovici refers here, reminds what Vico called ‘the barbarism of reflection’ (1744/1948, paragraph 1106). Vico’s powerful analysis of reflection deserves more than a passing reference. In his historical approach to the study of ethics he maintains that original communities lived in the ‘barbarism of senses’, i.e. they apprehended the reality unreflectively through senses. However, during the long past, they developed the ‘barbarism of reflection’ and ‘premeditated malice’. This is a historical stage when a human being, in and through reflection, starts to think only of his/her own private interests rather than about interests of the community. Despite superficial socializing with others such an individual lives in a deep loneliness of spirit and ‘under soft words and embraces, plots against the life and fortune of friends and intimates’ (ibid.). The barbarism of reflection, we may say, refers today to the attempts to rationally justify irrational scientific theories like racism and Nazism. These theories, Moscovici observes, ‘took place in colleges and universities, not in the streets’ and so were legitimated by intellectuals of a significant power of the mind (Moscovici & Marková, 2000, p.228).

The focus on ethics in the theory of social representations leads to the following conclusion. The European and North American education systems at all levels, from nurseries to universities, from professional to academic education – promote the idea that learning and knowledge is geared towards rationality of the individual, the search after truth, neutrality of observation and disengagement with the object of study. This kind of approach has been historically ingrained into thinking as an ideal towards which the mankind strives. This ideal has become known as a passage from inferior to superior form of thinking, or ‘from common sense to science’.

In contrast, the theory of social representations views the human mind as dialogical which means that it is engaged in multiple ways with the reality that it creates and imagines. It is the

capacity of making ethical choices that makes, for better or worse, our species human beings, and therefore, the proper focus of interest and study of human and social sciences.

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IVANA MARKOVA is Professor Emeritus in Psychology, University of Stirling, and Visiting Professor in the Institute of Social Psychology at the London School of Economics. Current research includes the theory of social representations, dialogicality, trust, responsibility, and the relation between common sense and other forms of knowledge. The latest books include: *Dialogue in Focus Groups: Exploring Socially Shared knowledge* (2007, with P. Linell, M. Grossen, A. Salazar-Orvig); *Trust and Distrust: Sociocultural Perspectives* (2008, co-edited with A. Gillespie); *Trust and conflict: Representation, culture, dialogue* (2012, co-edited with A. Gillespie); *Dialogical Approaches to Trust in Communication* (2013, co-edited with P. Linell).