

# A COMMENT ON THE PAPER BY J.T. JOST

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In his paper on *Social Representations and the Philosophy of Science: Belief in Ontological Realism as Objectification* Jost raises several interesting issues. First, he argues that Moscovici's concept of objectification is strikingly similar to the philosophical notion of ontological realism. Second, Jost claims that the theory of social representations leads to the counter-intuitive prediction that laypersons are more likely to hold positions of ontological realism than scientific experts. Finally, Jost postulates six hypotheses based on the previous claim. In my comment on Jost's paper I shall, first, present briefly the positions of ontological realism and of social representations with respect to ontology and epistemology. I shall then take up the above three issues in turn.

## 1. Objects in the world and cognition.

The subject matter that is essential for the discussion below is that of the relationship between *objects in the world* and *human cognition*. It is on this issue that ontological realism contrasts itself radically both from *empiricism* and from *transcendental idealism* (Bhaskar, 1978, p 25).

According to empiricism, for example, in its Humean variation, the world consists of atomistic facts and these are the ultimate objects of experience. More generally, empiricism postulates an ontology of discrete and atomistic facts and it conceives of complex phenomena as consisting of conjunctions of such atomistic and discrete events. These atomistic facts are the objects of an individual's sensations and thus of knowledge. Such a position, however, that attempts to transpose ontological questions, i.e. questions about the being of objects, into epistemological ones, i.e. questions about the knowledge of such objects, Bhaskar argues, is an *epistemic fallacy*. It is wrong to reduce ontological issues into epistemological ones.

According to *transcendental idealism*, in particular in its Kantian and neo-Kantian forms, although ontologically speaking, there is a *real world of objects*, this world is available to human beings only as phenomenon, i.e. only through their cognitive systems. Depending on the kind of cognition human beings possess, the real world may appear to them in either this or that form. Since the real world of objects is available to knowers only through the filter of their cognition, it is impossible to find out whether the real world of objects corresponds to the phenomenal world available to people via their cognitive systems. In other words, the real world is unknowable and thus, once again, questions of an ontological nature are reduced to questions of an epistemological nature.

Ontological realism rejects a position that reduces ontology into epistemology and which thus makes real science impossible. Instead, it claims that objects in the world are 'real structures which endure and operate independently of our knowledge, our experience and the conditions which allow us access to them' (Bhaskar, 1978, p.25). Science is possible only because the objects of knowledge are *ontologically independent* of knowers and must be

treated as such (ibid., p. 190). Yet, they are knowable (ibid., p.22). As already pointed out, Bhaskar emphasises that it is an epistemic fallacy to reduce or analyse statements about being, i.e. ontological statements into epistemological statements (ibid., p.36). He maintains, moreover, that ontological realism 'is not a theory of knowledge or truth, but of being' (Bhaskar, 1986, p.6). He elaborates on this claim as follows:

a realist position in the philosophy of (natural) science will consist, first and foremost, of a theory about the nature of the being, rather than the knowledge, of the objects investigated by the sciences - to the effect that they endure and operate independently of human activity, and hence of both sense- experience and thought (Bhaskar, ibid.,p.6).

Defined in this way, ontological realism is opposed both to rationalism and empiricism, which define *being* in terms of reason or experience, respectively. Ontological realism, of course, has important implications for the theory of knowledge, and, indeed, it is one of the main concern of those social scientists who are ontological realists to explore what these implications are. For example, what are the properties of *social objects* (in contrast to natural objects)? To what extent can they be studied in the same way as natural objects? (e.g. Bhaskar, 1979). Are social entities ontologically independent of people? Can societies be ontologically reduced to people? And so on.

In contrast to the philosophical theory of ontological realism, the main concern of which is *ontology*, the theory of social representations is concerned with epistemological questions: it is a *social theory of knowledge* (Moscovici, 1987; Marková and Wilkie, 1987). As such, it is concerned with the psychological and sociological processes that facilitate and interfere with the formation and maintenance of people's images, concepts and beliefs; with the processes by which people construct natural and social phenomena including scientific entities; with the question of how social representations give rise to new representations; and so on. In Moscovici's (1984) words, social representations form our thinking environment. Their purpose is to conventionalise and simplify phenomena in our environment. In order to do this, people try to fit new, threatening and unfamiliar phenomena into the existing patterns of thought and behaviour. Once created, representations exist independently of their creators: they acquire their own ontological reality. As Moscovici puts it, 'they lead a life of their own, circulate, merge, attract and repel each other...' (Moscovici, 1984, p.13).

The notion of 'objectification' is concerned with a process by which abstract and initially unfamiliar (or non-intelligible) phenomena become part of everyday culture. For example scientific concepts, e.g. the concepts of evolution, a magnetic field, psychoanalysis, etc. are originally only used by professionals in the given field of expertise. Gradually, however, they become part of educational curricula, of daily language, of the images used by the mass media and by laypersons. Once they are so objectified, they are taken for granted, just as are other ideas and images that people use, and just as is the physical environment, e.g. trees, cities, rocks and trains.

So what is the relationship, in the theory of social representations, between objects in the world and cognition? In fact, the theory of social representations says nothing on this subject because it is not its concern. Its concern is only with the objects of knowledge, i.e. with epistemological questions but not with the being of objects as such. It is not concerned with the philosophical question as to whether the real objects that are antecedents of social representations, *really* exist.

## 2. Objectification and ontological realism

What Jost calls a striking similarity between objectification and ontological realism, to my mind, is only a kind of superficial similarity based on nothing more than a statement that can be expressed, both by ontological realism and objectification, as follows: *X has existence independently of human beings*. However, once we attempt to specify *X*, the similarity ends. For ontological realism, *X* or *X*'s are real objects, and some are theoretical entities (cf. Greenwood, 1989, quoted by Jost, p. 8). Theoretical entities may be real objects or they *represent* the real structures of objects in the sense that they are real structures of objects. They are knowable and knowledge is a social process. For objectification, *X* has nothing to do with real objects because *X*'s are social representations, that is, socially constructed and socially shared concepts, images, beliefs and ideas.

Rather than focusing on the presumed similarity between ontological realism and objectification, we should point to the essential differences between them. The objects of analysis of ontological realism are *real objects in the world*. They are independent of knowledge. The objects of analysis of social representations are not real objects in the world but *the objects of knowledge*.

Both for ontological realism and for social representations, *objects of knowledge* are *dependent on knowers*. Both for ontological realism and for the theory of social representations *knowledge is a social process*. For ontological realism, scientific constructs are products of science. Science is a 'social activity whose aim is the production of the knowledge of the kinds and ways of acting of independently existing and active things' (Bhaskar, 1978, p.24). This issue, however, is not mentioned by Jost.

When one talks about the *independence* of social representations from people, this is a different kind of independence than the ontological independence of objects. The independence of social representations is only *secondary*. Social representations are a form of social knowledge and as such they have been created by people and their independence through objectification is only *as if*. It is the result of their becoming a part of social reality, a part of taken-for-grantedness. Their independence is thus only metaphoric. Once they become a subject of focused awareness, their independence is lost. They can be questioned, challenged, and finally changed, just as any kind of knowledge that develops and changes.

In view of what has been said so far, is there a 'striking similarity' between objectification and ontological realism? This question is not answerable because the two concepts are not comparable. They belong to different categories. *Ontological realism* is concerned with *ontology*. *Objectification* is an *epistemological* term.

## 3. Are amateurs more likely to be ontological realists than scientists?

According to Moscovici (1984), there is a fundamental difference between science and social representations. Science belongs to the so called reified universe. Its purpose is to understand the natures of objects and events existing independently of human individuals. In contrast, social representations are concerned with the consensual universe. The methods of scientists and public, according to Moscovici, are different. While the former is characterised by impartiality, the latter is characterised by values, common sense.

Jost (p.8) presents the following quotation from Bhaskar (1978):

The scientist seeks to describe the mechanisms generating the phenomena; but *the results of his (or her) activity belong to the social world of science, not the intransitive world of things*. Does this mean that it is wrong to talk of the scientist explaining events, describing mechanisms, etc.? No: provided we remember that *what is explained in any concrete scientific episode is always the event known under a particular description*. This does not mean that the event is, or that we must think of it as if it were, its description. On the contrary, *the ontological independence of the event is a condition of the intelligibility of its description* (p. 190, emphasis added by Jost).

This quotation that Jost gives on p.8 is not concerned with scientists' ontological beliefs as Jost appears to assume. This would be more obvious to the reader if the quotation started 2-3 sentences earlier. Bhaskar states in the quotation that for a scientist to be able to carry out a scientific exploration, there must be an ontologically independent world of events that can be intelligibly described. He is concerned here with the argument that although objects in the world are independent of knowledge, it is meaningful to carry on with the business of science. The quotation, however, has nothing to do with the question as to whether the scientist actually believes in such an independence of objects. Therefore it is a different kind of question than the one posed by the theory of social representations. It thus cannot be compared to any of Moscovici's hypotheses (cf Jost, p.8).

Forgetting now about the incompatibilities of social representations and ontological realism, let us take up Jost's prediction concerning ontological beliefs of scientists and laypersons. Jost claims it follows from the theory of social representations that 'amateurs should be more likely to be ontological realists about theoretical entities than should professional scientists' and that this prediction is counter-intuitive.

I shall argue, however, that from the point of view of the theory of social representations, such a claim is not counter-intuitive at all. It is for the following reasons. If I am, say, an expert in the behaviour of cars in different road conditions and I drive a car on a really bad road, I shall be much more sensitive to differences in the road handling of different types of car than if I were a layperson who would take the mechanics and functioning of the car for granted. Similarly, if I am a scientist in a particular area, I shall be much more deeply aware of the problematic nature of the subject matter than if I were a layperson who only knows superficially about the existence of the phenomenon in question. This way of thinking corresponds precisely to Moscovici's notion that scientists and laypersons differ in the ways of their thinking, as mentioned at the beginning of this section. Since a scientist is highly aware of the problematic nature of the phenomenon, it is less likely that he or she will treat theoretical constructs as ontologically real. In contrast, the layperson, according to the theory of social representations, does not rely so much upon his or her *own* rational thought but tends to accept, through objectification, ready-made ideas and concepts. This process is often only semi-conscious or even unconscious. According to the theory of social representations, beliefs in the ontological reality of phenomena are associated with lack of awareness rather than with great awareness. Therefore, while I agree with Jost that the prediction that 'amateurs should be more likely to be ontological realists about theoretical entities than should professional scientists' follows from the theory of social representations, I disagree that it is counter-intuitive. Rather, it is my view that it is highly intuitive.

#### **4. Hypotheses based on Moscovici's concept of objectification.**

I find the first, second and third hypotheses very similar to each other and they are all already included in the last sentence of the previous paragraph. They follow from the above

discussion and are not really surprising. Hypotheses four, five and six perhaps could be tested empirically.

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