

Social Representations



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Abstract

This entry surveys Social Representations Theory as a foundational framework for understanding how socially shared meanings organize knowledge, identity, and action. It outlines the theory's core assumptions, including the co-constructive relation between individual and social processes, the representational functions of anchoring and objectification, and the distinction between hegemonic, emancipated, and polemical representations. The chapter situates social representations historically within European social psychology and highlights its emergence as a response to positivism, individualism, and theoretical fragmentation. Key debates concerning vagueness, consensus, agency, and epistemology are critically reviewed, with particular attention to dialogical developments that clarify the relational nature of meaning making. Finally, the entry considers contemporary possibilities, including policy engagement and the challenges posed by generative artificial intelligence, to argue that Social Representations remain an adaptable framework for analyzing social knowledge in changing communicative landscapes.

Keywords

Social representations · Meaning making · Anchoring and objectification · Dialogicality · Social knowledge · Public understanding · Collective meaning

Introduction

Social representations theory (Moscovici, 2000) is grounded in the conviction that we make sense of the world around us through drawing on networks of socially developed, socially shared, and socially maintained ideas, beliefs, and meanings (Moscovici, 1973). The theory deliberately situates itself and the idea of social representations “between” the individual and the social (Marková, 2017), aiming to operationalize the individual processes involved in meaning making, but to situate these within the context of the social processes, forces, and structures in which we live. Rather than being seen as sequential or additive, individual and social are mutually co-constructive, and as such the theory aims to give weight to both the social influences (and even forces) that shape our understandings of the world around us while still allowing the scope for individuals to challenge and change these (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005).

Moscovici (2000) argues that the purpose of representation is to make the unfamiliar familiar. Representations provide us with a “code” that allows us to situate ourselves in relation to social

objects, or “orientate” ourselves, and then to communicate about them with others (Moscovici, 1973). The twin processes of anchoring and objectification are seen as critical to this process of meaning making. These processes describe how social representations develop to make unfamiliar ideas intelligible in everyday life. Anchoring refers to classifying and naming what is new by relating it to established categories, values, and shared knowledge. Through anchoring, people reduce uncertainty by placing an emerging phenomenon within a familiar moral and interpretive framework, making it discussable and judgeable (Toepfer et al., 2013). Objectification refers to transforming abstract or technical notions into concrete images, metaphors, and exemplars that can be “seen” in common sense. This may involve personification, use of iconic figures, or the concrete materialization of an idea in everyday practices (Hoijer, 2010). Together, these processes stabilize meaning, enable communication, and organize social action by guiding what feels legitimate, and they structure how groups position themselves and others in relation to the represented object. For the theory, neither of these processes are not primarily cognitive but are socially situated, contested, and linked to social power; dominant groups can impose anchors that marginalize alternative understandings.

Moscovici (1988) identified three broad types of social representations based on how widely they are shared and the nature of relationships between groups that hold them. Hegemonic representations are relatively uniform systems of meaning that are widely shared by large groups such as practicing members of a religion. These representations appear as taken-for-granted, and often coercive, knowledge that prevails widely in everyday life and symbolic practices. For example, conventions of praying in different religions involve specific practices, bodily movements, and gestures that are considered to be the “correct” way of praying. In contrast, emancipated representations are more localized and diverse and emerge when subgroups develop their own version of a particular idea, making adaptations to the wider idea. Beliefs around health and some

illnesses are good examples of knowledge where people may draw upon both biomedical and traditional beliefs and mix them creatively to develop a localized understanding. The third type, polemical representations, are tied to controversies and social conflicts and emerge in environments of ideological or group struggle. They emerge when groups in conflict hold antagonistic, and often mutually incompatible beliefs about the world. Given how strongly social representations are linked to group identities (Jovchelovitch, 1996), polemical representations are often a group’s response to threats to its identity and defend their worldview against competing beliefs. For example, the task of understanding the threat of coronavirus provided fertile grounds for the emergence of polemical representations where groups formed contrasting representations about the nature of the pandemic and the role of vaccines (Páez & Pérez, 2020).

These distinctions enable the theory to take a valuable perspective on the nature of social knowledge and beliefs in groups: while some ideas enjoy a hegemonic consensus, others remain plural and heavily contested. This means that knowledge circulating in the public sphere, and held between and within groups, is simultaneously structured and dynamic; it is a bubbling pool of tensions and oppositions where the processes and outcomes of meaning making are shaped by identities and group’s motives (e.g., competing representations in identity negotiations in Howarth, 2002). Social representations, thus, are values, beliefs, and practices that compete and can unite or divide. Distinguishing between the three forms helps recognize the variety of functions of representations: hegemonic representations can marginalize alternative views and exercise coercive control on what is imaginable; emancipated representations allow for diversity and synthesis of newer synthetic ideas; and polemical representations can fuel polarization and social fracture but also become bases of change.

The emergence, circulation, and transformation of social representations are fundamentally tied to social interaction and communication—this is a particularly important area of strength

for the theory and makes it widely used within the field of media and communications research (Höijer, 2011). Drawing upon the genetic approach to social psychology (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990), three interrelated processes are at the heart of how representations develop and propagate and become co-constitutive of the individual and the social. It is worth noting that the three terms are not unique to the theory but are used widely across social sciences. Here we shall focus on their conceptualization within the theoretical framework.

The first process is of *sociogenesis* which encompasses the broad, collective construction of a new representation and its diffusion through a community or culture. As in the case of the representations of psychoanalysis in Moscovici's (1976) seminal study, sociogenesis begins when a new idea is introduced in the public sphere and begins its journey to becoming a common-sense notion. Sociogenesis, thus, refers to the social transformation of ideas at a societal level, relying on collective processes and wider discussions (e.g., in the media), all the while drawing on the existing and historical knowledge, and social and cultural dynamics. The second and the third processes, in contrast, reflect Vygotskian ideas of the social development of the mind and the individual (Wertsch, 1989).

Ontogenesis is concerned with how representations develop within the individual mind over the lifespan of the person, including how people understand and modify the circulating representations as they develop and traverse through varied social contexts. Gerard Duveen and Barbara Lloyd's work (1990) on the ontogenesis of social representations of gender is an excellent demonstration of how children are born into a world that is already structured by cultural meanings of what it means to be a male and female. Through interactions with family, teachers and educational structures, and their peers, children become aware of them. However, in the ontogenesis of any representation, children are not passive. They have the agency to negotiate with the representations and in becoming competent social actors, can both reproduce or challenge the normative understandings of gender. Ontogenesis, thus,

emphasizes that the acquisition of everyday knowledge is inherently social and dialectical.

The third process involves the generation and transformation of a representation during social interactions and is termed *microgenesis*. During social exchanges, the actors discussing an object or an event make sense of them by drawing upon existing representations—it is in these instances that the agentic subject has the opportunity to either reinforce or alter them (Zittoun et al., 2003).

These three processes are interdependent and are best conceptualized alongside each other. Sociogenetic representations provide the context for interaction, communication, and for people to understand each other in everyday exchanges. They are the architecture on which everyday social world and its practices take shape. Microgenetic representations that emerge in interactions, on the other hand, through accumulation and over time shape both sociogenetic and ontogenetic processes (Psaltis, 2015). Ontogenesis links the two: each person's development as a social actor is shaped by the sociogenetic pool of knowledge and the innumerable microgenetic interactions through which they refine their social knowledge. These three processes of social representations help understand why a person, or indeed, a community, thinks about something the way it does. They allow the theory to consider the societal context in all its historicity (sociogenesis), an individual's embeddedness in the social (ontogenesis), and interactive meaning making where the individual exercises their agency (microgenesis) as intersecting influences on the dynamic nature of personal and public meanings in the social world.

Background and Context

Social representations theory has its roots firmly in one of the so-called crises of social psychology. The origins of social psychology as a named and distinct discipline can be traced back to a number of European figures, including Wilhem Wundt, whose work in this area built on and developed a number of other theorists (Farr, 1996): in these early stages, the nascent discipline had a distinctly

interdisciplinary feel, focusing on questions of the relationship between individual and society that can be traced back to ancient philosophy, and taking in broad methodology that recognized the importance of studies situated within the society in which phenomena took place (see, for example, discussion of Wundt's *Volkerpsychologie*, Danziger, 1983).

However, a number of circumstances, including two World Wars, led to social psychology's development in the early to middle part of the twentieth century being predominantly focused on the United States (Farr, 1993). The focus and flavor of the discipline shifted significantly, as exemplified by the approach taken by the Allport brothers, Floyd and Gordon (Jaspers & Fraser, 1984). Theoretically, social psychology became tied to behaviorism (Graumann, 1986) and then later to cognitivism (Farr, 1993); methodologically, it became tied to experimentation (Danziger, 1990). The individual became seen as the appropriate unit of analysis for social psychology (Allport, 1924): indeed, there was significant mistrust of anything approaching a conception of the "group mind," likely rooted as much in the political and social climate of the United States at the time as in an academic philosophy. This has variously been referred to as the "individualization" (Farr, 1996) or the "disappearance" (Greenwood, 2003) of the social in social psychology.

Whatever we call it, this meant that by the late 1960s there were concerns being openly discussed among European social psychologists that the discipline had lost its way, could no longer be differentiated from general psychology, and had taken on the preoccupations of the United States without adequately demonstrating that these were also relevant to other contexts and cultures. This is exemplified by the foundation of the European Association of Social Psychology, which aimed to develop a professional identity for social psychology in Europe that was not a replication of that found in the United States (although also did not exist in opposition to it). One of the early participants in these discussions was Serge Moscovici; notable others included Henri Tajfel and Gustav Jahoda. All three of these leading

figures of European social psychology were born into Jewish families and as such experienced discrimination and displacement as refugees during the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed it has been suggested that these experiences were quintessential to defining the projects to understand the mutually co-constructed relationship between individual and social, and the complexities of this, which formed the lifelong careers of all of these men (Duveen, 2001; Jovchelovitch, 2007).

Perhaps there is no better explanation of the context of social representations than Moscovici's (1972) chapter "Theory and Society in Social Psychology," published in J. Israel and H. Tajfel's *The Context of Social Psychology: A Critical Assessment*. This is an important development for the theory of social representations. By this point Moscovici had published the first edition of his study *La Psychoanalyse: son image et son public* in French in 1961. The second edition was published, also in French, in 1976, and it was not translated into English until 2008. Other than a very brief mention of social representations theory in a chapter on attitudes in the *Annual Review of Psychology* in 1963, very little of Moscovici's work was written in or translated into English until the 1980s (his Introduction to Herzlich's 1973 *Health and Illness* is an exception). This 1972 paper is therefore important for a range of reasons.

It remains an extraordinary contribution: part detailed critique of the state of social psychology, part manifesto laying out what social psychology could, and indeed according to Moscovici, should be, part call to arms. In equal measures angry and inspiring, it is essential to understand the purpose, project, and foundations of social representations theory even if it does not, in fact, reference the theory at all (Foster, 2016). Instead, Moscovici unpacks what he sees as the major problems with social psychology as it is currently conceptualized. He sees it, first and foremost, as not social at all and identifies three major problems as stunting its development and the opportunities it presents for truly addressing the issues facing society and coming out of what Moscovici refers to in this chapter as the "academic ghetto." First, Moscovici argues that social psychology, as

things stand, is overly positivist, both in its philosophical assumptions and also its methodological approaches. Second, he maintains that theory has been neglected: as such, social psychologists move from one study to the next, replicating or failing to replicate results and reporting accordingly, but without fully embracing a wider theory of the nature of humans and society. Third, Moscovici contends that at that moment social psychology is seen purely as a branch of general psychology, with its aim being to examine phenomena which remain unchanged in operation and production, e.g., perception. These criticisms are important for understanding aspects of social representations theory, and its aims.

First, it is a theory that moves beyond a positivist perspective, and instead focuses on the variety of forms of understanding in any society, and the importance of considering these in context, and in light of the purpose that they serve groups that subscribe to them. The precise epistemology of social representations theory has been a matter of some debate. Moscovici did not actually refer to the theory as social constructionist (Wagner, 2020), but given its focus on meaning making, it has inevitably been considered to have close links with social constructionism (Romaioli & Contarello, 2021). Bauer and Gaskell (1999) suggest that some of this debate around social constructionism is something of a distraction, as the object of study in social representations work is not actually the “object” as such, but rather the understandings of it and what that tells us about the social setting and context. They use the analogy of a stone being thrown into a pond: social representations theorists are less interested in the stone itself (e.g., “mentalhealth problems”), but rather in the ripples that it creates (the representations of mental health problems) and what those ripples tell us about the wider context and geography of the pond (that is the wider societal and communicative context) (Foster, 2011). More recently, in an attempt to address some of the more problematic aspects of relativism that can arise as part of these discussions, other theorists have suggested that social representations theory is equally compatible with critical realism (Sarrica, Mazzarra, & Brondi, 2016), and indeed

that this might be more appropriate when considering certain objects of representation where suggesting that all representations are equally viable may be problematic, or stigmatizing.

Moscovici’s second criticism of social psychology is that it is lacking in any overarching theoretical approach. It should not be surprising, then, that the theory of social representations aims to provide just this—an overarching, comprehensive theory under which other concepts within social psychology—such as attitudes, ideologies, and so on—can sit (Moscovici & Marková, 1998). For some readers, the place of social representations theory within social psychology, especially in relation to existing concepts, can seem unclear. Indeed Jahoda made this criticism of the theory as far back as 1988, and it has without a doubt contributed to accusations that the theory is vague. However, as Wagner (2020) points out social representations were never conceived “as a micro-theory but a large-scale framework uniting societal and psychological aspects.” It is much easier to understand these ambitions, and the implications of them, against the background of Moscovici’s 1972 discussion.

The final criticism Moscovici makes is that social psychology, as it stands, is no different from wider general psychology and focuses too much on the hunt for universalities. This again relates very significantly to the focus of social representations theory: Moscovici made it very clear that in his view social psychology, and social representations theory, had much to gain from and contribute to disciplines beyond psychology, considering as well sociology, anthropology, and other social sciences (Marková, 2017). What is also clear in this concern, and is fundamental to the theory of social representations, is the relevance of cultural context to understandings. Central to social representations studies is the idea that we should expect differences in beliefs and the influence they have on our action and interaction across different social and cultural contexts: indeed, in increasingly diverse yet globalized societies, this is why we expect to encounter social representations rather than collective representations, as envisaged by Durkheim, which are more static and hegemonic in nature (Farr, 1998).

A further point made by Moscovici in the 1972 chapter is that there are three different forms of social psychology coexisting at this point without any overt recognition or acknowledgment of this. The differences relate to the conceptualization of Self and Object in each type. This is particularly important as well in understanding the position of social representations theory with regard to dialogicality (Marková, 2023). For Moscovici, there are three types of social psychology operating at this point: taxonomic, differential, and systematic. In taxonomic social psychology, the Subject remains undifferentiated and largely undefined, while the Object is differentiated into either social or non-social. As such assumptions are made about the universality of responses across Subjects; social and cultural differences are not considered, and as Marková (2017) points out, Subjects only become important in terms of taxonomic categorizations such as young and old. Conversely, in differential social psychology, the Subject is differentiated, while the Object is not. Here, however, differences between Subjects are largely based on individual differences, such as personality characteristics. There is no effort to engage more broadly with social or cultural categories or histories. Finally, systematic social psychology aims to consider the relationship between Subject and Object in relation to other Subjects. Moscovici makes it very clear that very little social psychology can be categorized in this way, but it is here that we start to recognize the fundamental “triangle” that forms the basis of social representations theory (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Marková, 2023). In systemic social psychology the Self (or Subject) exists in relation to the Object, but also in relation to the Other. That is, I (Self) may have a representation of mental ill health (Object), but this exists in the context of my relationship to Other people: these could be members of my own social groups who may share those representations (indeed, my membership of those groups will have in the first place have led me to take on board and develop those shared understandings), or they might be members of other social groups who hold different representations of mental ill health than my own. Depending on a variety of factors, I may resist or

challenge those other representations (Gillespie, 2008) or in certain circumstances, my representations may be influenced by those other representations, thereby changing and developing (Lloyd & Duveen, 1990). The point, however, is that systematic social psychology, which is undoubtedly closest to social representations theory in Moscovici’s conception, relies not only on the Subject-Object relationship and encounter but on the essential social contextualization of that relationship and encounter.

Moscovici ends the 1972 chapter with an impassioned plea for social psychology to move out of the academic ghetto and consider questions of genuine social importance, addressing social problems and concerns more directly. This is of particular interest as we move to consider the development of the theory within social psychology and its contributions more broadly.

Debates and Challenges

Given the seeds of social representations lay in dissatisfaction with the state of social psychology, it is hardly surprising that its diffusion spurred significant academic discussion. In the process, important debates about the nature, form, and purpose of social representations took place in the 1980s and 1990s. Debates around the very nature and place of social representations in the discipline emerged. Critics charged them to be a “catch all term,” or even a “background concept” (Billig, 1988; Potter & Litton, 1985). Similarly, Gustav Jahoda (1988) expressed reservation about the degree to which something needs to be shared to be called a representation. Some criticized the theory for being excessively socially deterministic, whereas others found it cognitively reductionist (McGuire, 1986; Parker, 1987; Potter & Litton, 1985; Semin, 1987). Such was the diversity in opinions that it will not be unfair to say that representations of “social representations” emerged, depending on the paradigmatic orientation of the people engaging with it, the theory was viewed in radically different ways. We recommend Voelkin and Howarth (2005) for an excellent review of these debates and shift our focus on

why the theory, at times, appeared challenging and indeed, to some, vague.

The Theory of Social Representations, as noted previously, is not a micro theory that will provide a basis for testable hypotheses; instead, it provides perspective on the organization and perpetuation of meaning and order in the social world. By their very nature, social representations simultaneously encompass both the *process* of making the unfamiliar, familiar (e.g., anchoring and objectification), and the *contents* of representing (e.g., values, beliefs, practices, and ideologies that emerge). There is no ontological boundary between the process and content of social representations as the two are not sequentially ordered and must be understood as fused together. Take the example of how people make sense of synthetic meat (Marcu et al., 2015). A value position (eating this “thing” is morally defensible as no animal was slaughtered) is the outcome of representing, but it is not separate from the process that anchors the novelty of synthetic meat within moral debates around rearing animals for the sole purpose of consumption. This is where the intertwining of process and content becomes evident. Thinking about the social representations of synthetic meat as the outcome of what it gets anchored in has no basis as the choice of the anchor may entirely be reflective of the goal of the group to develop certain representations. In this instance, the anchoring of synthetic meat in the idea of absent animal slaughter could be driven by a group’s intention of making its consumption permissible. Implying a pathway in the opposite direction is equally unsustainable. Strictly speaking, there are no social representations that can become the isolated objects of inquiry: “social representation of X,” by necessity, is a fuzzy object of inquiry that must lack a strict boundary, for it is rendered meaningful only when illuminated by the web of relationships it shares with the representations of numerous other social objects (Zadeh & Foster, 2016). Thus, the so-called vagueness attributed to social representations is nothing but a recognition that sharp differentiations between social objects are often an artifact of the researcher’s definitions and

motivations, not an ontological property of the objects or world.

The questions of consensus and individual agency, similarly, require a nuanced consideration. Social representations are indeed prescriptive, but they do not eliminate the agency of individuals. Being fundamentally relational, they play an organizational role in the social world where they act as the basis of a group’s identity and worldview (Jovchelovitch, 2007). As a result, the agentic ability of individuals is more limited with regard to beliefs and practices that are the foundations of the identity of the group—along with its point of differentiation from other identities—and the basis of the persons belonging to it. Think of religions as body of knowledge that provides order and meaning to values, beliefs, and practices of people who identify as belonging to a religion (Marková, 2007). In all religions individuals enjoy some degree of flexibility in their beliefs and practices, but in most, there remain domains where a hard boundary protects shared beliefs that are held in strong consensus—the case of consuming certain meats seems to be an easily recalled illustration. This point has been made more explicitly using the metaphors of core and periphery in the structural approach to the study of social representations. Developed in the works of Jean Claude Abric (Abric, 1993, 1996), the theory of central nucleus proposes that the central core of a representation contains ideas that enjoy high levels of consensus and are central to defining the worldview and identities of a group—such is the coercive power of these elements that exercising individual agency in this domain mounts a challenge to one’s belonging to the group. On the other hand, the peripheral elements provide opportunities for individual agency and are more open to change and reinterpretation.

The inseparability of different aspects of social representations is a fundamental strength of the theory: their content (meanings of X), organization (degree of consensus on different elements), functions (what a representation achieves), along with the history and possible future trajectories of ideas all come together to define a social representation at a particular moment in time. The defining element of social representations is their

relational priority—representations of X are developed, sustained, and deployed *in relation* to other groups and *within* a web of other relevant social representations. Core representational processes such as anchoring and objectification can be explicated fully only in terms of how they place the Self in relation to the Object and the Other, and therefore *thinking with social representations* is a cognitive activity that is steadfastly social.

The dialogical turn in the theory has helped clarify the position of social representations as neither primarily consensual or deterministic nor predominantly cognitive or social. Driven by Ivana Markova's scholarship (Marková, 2003, 2006, 2016, 2023), a dialogical perspective recognizes the Self's thinking and meaning making as a relational exercise that is realized only in relation to Other(s). The Self has real agency in creation of meaning, but it remains socially bound by the dialogical field. Knowledge that can be claimed as legitimate, justified, and in practice, declarable depends on the Other in the representational field. The Self can hold conflicting and pluralistic views in ideational tension because knowledge is always oriented toward and rendered meaningful against the backdrop of the other (Chauhan, 2016). The Other in the context of social representations is neither homogenous nor unitary. As social psychologists from all camps would recognize, others can be "real, imagined, or implied" (G. W. Allport, 1954) which allows for the plurality of a group's representation of the same object—changes to who the group is thinking against, changes the content of representations. As Chauhan's (2016) work shows, what poor people in Bihar, India, thought about the cause and consequences of their poverty depended on whether they imagined the rich or the government as the Other. The dialogical perspective on social representations has also been critical in clarifying the role of interaction and exchange, which in turn, have made social representations more explicit about their theory of change (Obradović & Draper, 2022). Antinomies, tensions, and dialogue make social representations fluid—social representations become highly plural as antinomies shift, the Other becomes less

mysterious through dialogue, or when a new Other is invoked.

Possibilities

As previously outlined, Moscovici (1973) clearly saw social psychology as having a greater role to play in addressing social issues, and so one might expect that social representations theory had been at the vanguard in this respect. We will discuss some of the ways that social representations theory has been used proactively to consider a variety of social problems and concerns. However, it is important to note that many studies take a more reactive approach, describing the representations that are held by particular groups without seeking to apply this. This is perhaps not surprising given the theory's position on considering the context and purpose of knowledge and not seeking to "judge" it or see it as part of a hierarchy (Howarth, Foster, & Dorrer, 2004). Trying to influence or change representations might be seen as at odds with some of Moscovici's original project to rehabilitate common sense. However, projects that have aimed to use social representations studies to develop and inform policy have had some success. Here, the key is to recognize that knowledge is historically and politically structured and socially shared, and so addressing aspects that may be stigmatizing or problematic in other ways cannot be done by relying on attitude and behavior change models that focus purely on the individual (see Walsh & Foster, 2021, for further discussion on how this relates to health education campaigns, especially those around mental ill health). An excellent example of social representations work that has had a major influence on policy and practice is that of Gail Moloney, who has pioneered work on social representations of organ donation and has influenced a range of policies in Australia, as well as contributing to organ donation campaigns that are sensitive to the social and cultural differences across different groups (Moloney et al., 2012, 2020, 2022; Moloney & Walker, 2000, 2002). However, it still feels as if further steps are needed to see social representations studies become more

embedded within policy work, and this would need something of a shift away from a focus on individual behavior and an appreciation of the interlinked complexity of social life.

A second issue that is particularly pertinent at the time of writing this entry is that of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Large Language Models (LLMs) being explored. LLMs generate text probabilistically and have been called “stochastic parrots” (Bender et al., 2021), and it is inescapable that they lack subjectivity in a human sense (see, for e.g., Nagel, 1974). However, we must not be quick to dismiss the problematic at hand: LLMs produce text which can—and does—influence thinking and sense-making of subjective human beings. Outputs generated computationally by AI systems may not be socially produced in the same way social representations are, but they can become socially shared forms of knowledge. For these reasons, social representations will need to grapple with the knotty issue and clarify the position and place within the theory for social representations that are, at least in part, produced by such computational mechanisms.

There are several key questions that need to be resolved. Who is the subject in a text generated by an LLM? From a dialogical perspective, we must also ask who the Other is in such a text. If an LLM were trained on all existing text ever produced by humans, have the full spectrum of representations and alternative representations available—can it be said that the meaning produced by this LLM can be located *solely* within the Self-Other-Object relationships evident or implied within the text? The text can be “meaningful” and context appropriate, but when statistical probabilities dictate the textual output, whose representations does it mimic? Similarly, the text may circulate in the social world *as if* it were a representation, but whose representation does it embody? One can dismiss these issues and treat the text above as a representational artifact without a representational subject. In doing so, we are still left with new kinds of ghosts in the machine (Ryle, 1949) as the people providing the LLM with prompts are socially positioned subjective agents, and their language of input itself is not neutral. The text

can also become meaningful through social uptake and uptake, despite its origins lacking any clear and meaningful social positions—Floridi (2023) notes this as AI “agency without intelligence.” Indeed, as producers of “meaningful” text, AI systems are unique insofar as they do so without clear epistemic or dialogic participation. Of course, social representations are not reducible to text, which is the primary example driving this section. Yet, the landscape has been fundamentally altered—declarative knowledge that can become the basis of representations is getting produced without dialogical mediation and social positioning. Even if we do not labor the philosophical issues and afford some kind of “understanding” to AI systems (see Gubelmann, 2023), social representations must deal with the question of the subject and the nature of social embeddedness of the knowledge that these systems produce. In some ways, subjectivity in an AI-generated text is distributed in ways similar to social representations; only, it is far more slippery and elusive.

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