

Society, agency, and the good: *Kritische Psychologie* as a moral science

Charles W. Tolman

Abstract

In recent years it has been widely and correctly recognized that science is not value-free, that is, it is not morally neutral. While it is not the aim of the social sciences to produce theories of what is morally good, they stand subject to the judgement of such theories which lie in the province of philosophy. In what follows, a theory of the morally good is sketched. *Kritische Psychologie*, as developed by Klaus Holzkamp, is then accordingly evaluated. It will be shown that this psychology is far superior to traditional behavioural and cognitive psychologies in meeting the requirements of moral theory. Among reasons for this are its emphasis on societal-historical relations and its focus on the agency (*Handlungsfähigkeit*) of human subjects within those relations.

Keywords

critical psychology, moral theory, moral imperative

It will be obvious to most of us, all but the most isolated, that the world we currently live in is a mess. Wherever we are, wherever we look, we see murder, hunger, poverty, despair, etc. In his recent book, *The Wages of Rebellion: The Moral Imperative of Revolt* (2015), Chris Hedges describes the current global situation (optimistically, in my view) as a “revolutionary moment.” In his words:

The disastrous economic and political experiment that attempted to organize human behavior around the dictates of the global marketplace has failed. The promised prosperity that was to have raised the living standards of workers through trickle down economics has been exposed as a lie. A tiny global oligarchy has amassed obscene wealth, while the engine of unfettered corporate capitalism plunders resources; exploits cheap

unorganized labor; and creates pliable, corrupt governments that abandon the common good to serve corporate profit. The relentless drive by the fossil fuel industry for profits is destroying the ecosystem, threatening the viability of the human species. And no mechanisms to institute genuine reform or halt the corporate assault are left within the structures of power, which have surrendered to corporate control. The citizen has become irrelevant. He or she can participate in heavily choreographed elections, but the demands of corporations and banks are paramount. (p. 1)

The symptoms of this global societal dysfunction are no more evident than in the world's wealthiest and most politically powerful country, the United States of America, which has been trumpeting the advantages of capitalism to the rest of the world for at least the last 250 years. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 47 million Americans lived in poverty in 2014; 15.5 million children live in poverty (about 1 in 5); 1.6 million children experienced homelessness at some point during the year. This misery is not evenly distributed: the rates are much higher for people of colour. Moreover, 21 million live in "deep poverty" (at less than half of the official poverty level), while another 105 million live close to poverty at less than twice the official poverty level. (<http://www./povertyusa.org/>)

In part, this poverty is related to the unemployment rate. Official sources and the media proudly point out that this rate dropped from 6.6 percent in January 2014 by a full percentage point to 5.6 in December. But the statisticians at Forbes point out that this is the *official* rate; the *real* rate is estimated to be 15.8 percent,¹ which amounts to approximately 40 million people without jobs. Furthermore, amongst the employed, there are those who are part-time or otherwise insecurely employed.

People get angry and potentially violent when they are forced into poverty and excluded from the job market, or otherwise mistreated. In the first eleven months of 2015, there were 48,331 gun incidents in the United States in which 12,226 people were killed. Of these incidents 353 qualified as "mass shootings" (four or more killed or injured) which took 462 lives, leaving 1,316 injured. These incidents have, in short, become so common that the media pay attention only to the very worst, which means that we only hear of about two or so incidents per month, while in fact they average more than one per day.² (<http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/> and <http://www.shootingtracker.com/>)

Can we imagine a different world; a society that is organized around the preservation of the common good; a world of people fully and gainfully

¹<http://www.forbes.com/sites/dandimicco/2015/02/13/jobs-the-real-unemployment-rate-please-anyone/#2715e4857a0b3e355965423d>

²<http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/> and <http://www.shootingtracker.com/>

employed, with all basic needs met, and living without the threat of poverty and untimely death? It would seem that humans have always been capable of such imagination when things got rough. The Hebrews imagined a better life after escaping from the Egyptians, and the itinerant preacher Jesus responded to the oppression of Roman rule by preaching the coming of the kingdom of God on earth. Thomas More imagined Utopia in the 16th century. In our own era, Marx and Engels saw the source of a troubled society in capitalism and imagined its self-destruction and replacement with something more amenable to human needs. They were joined in the last two centuries by numerous socialists, anarchists, and utopians. We are today not short of visions. The problem will be, as ever, to distinguish the realistic wheat from the impossible chaff, and of course to muster the power to effect change.

In my view, there is no question that radical societal transformation is needed and, just as importantly, that it is possible. But, as we all know, there are many things that stand in the way of transformation. The forces that seek to preserve this dysfunctional world and those who benefit enormously from it are powerful, influential, and often invisible. To use Gramsci's term, they are *hegemonic*. Their ideological aspect literally invades, indeed pervades, our thinking. Even social scientists who are otherwise aware of the problems and support transformation, continue to develop and adhere to theories that implicitly support oppression. But change cannot be brought about without a clear understanding of the problems that plague us and their solution. As Marx and Engels clearly understood, *good theory* may not be a sufficient condition for achieving transformation, but it is an absolutely *necessary* condition.

The psychological theories that were dominant in the 20th century, and still prevail in one form or another, either as such or as mutations, were behaviourism and cognitivism. Behaviorism is usually taken to have had its start in 1913 with the publication of John B. Watson's "Psychology as the behaviorist sees it," often referred to as the Behaviorist Manifesto. But Watson was running rats through mazes well before that (Watson, 1903). And it is not just coincidental that Fredrick W. Taylor published his *Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911. The tenor of the times called for control. Behaviorism took many forms over the following century, but none strayed from the focus on the control of behaviour (cf. Mills, 1998). The most extreme version came from B. F. Skinner who was proud to demonstrate that the shapes of the cumulative curves resulting from lever pressing on his specially designed recorder were the same for rats on fixed interval reinforcement schedules as for pigeons or humans. Indeed, it was impossible to tell the difference between any animal species subjected to his conditions. Yet he and his disciples claimed to be explaining "complex human behavior" (cf. Staats & Staats, 1963). This was a psychology more suited to

enslavement than to liberation, as Skinner surprisingly appeared to recognise in his novel, *Walden Two* (1948).

Cognitive psychology promised to restore that which was uniquely human, but it was inspired not by discoveries in human psychology but by the invention and development of computer technology. Once again, the human was cast in the role of a machine to be programmed by others. And this psychology in fact did not stray far from the behaviourism that it claimed to replace. The best evidence for this lies in the fact that the methodology did not change. It was still framed in terms of independent and dependent variables, which were simply sophisticated variants of the behaviourist's stimulus and response.

And then of course there is the "neuromania" that has been promoted by the development of technology that can measure brain activity, encouraging the belief that once we figure the brain out, we will be able to explain everything, totally ignoring the obvious fact that the brain is a necessary, not a sufficient condition for human activity, whether mental or physical.

More recently, there has been the emergence of "positive" psychologies, purportedly "scientific" approaches to what makes people happy and thrive, and based on the assumption "that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play" (<http://www.positivepsychology.org/>). In his book, Chris Hedges writes about a participant in the Occupy Movement who was arrested and imprisoned for her protest activity, and was then exposed to some of this psychology as part of a rehabilitation programme. In her words:

... it is all about the power of positive thinking, about how they [the inmates] made mistakes and bad choices in life, and now they can correct those mistakes by taking another road, a Christian road, to a new life.... This focus on happy thoughts pervades the prison. There is *little analysis of the structural causes for poverty and oppression*. It is as if it was all about decisions we have made, not that were made for us. And this is how those in power want it. This kind of thinking induces passivity. (Hedges, 2015, pp. 141-2, emphasis added)

There is more to these kinds of psychology that suppresses movement toward social change than just emphasis on control, either of a direct sort or by inducing passivity. They also tend to focus on the isolated individual, treating the social environment as just another set of variables, rather than as constitutive of the individual. In short, despite progressive-sounding claims, they silently support the status quo. And while it is certainly true that good theory cannot bring about social change, that is, that theory alone cannot be sufficient in that respect, there is unlikely to be any social change without theory that supports it. Though not

sufficient, good theory is a necessary condition. What would such a theory need that is lacking in mainstream theories? There may be legitimately differing ways of expressing the answer to this question. My own is to identify four characteristics: the theory must be working with a set of thoroughly examined categories, such that it can be confident about that of which it speaks; it must acknowledge the essential nature of the historical and societal context as constitutive of individual existence; it must embrace the active nature of human subjectivity, which I identify as agency; and it must accommodate and reflect the fundamentally moral nature of the human species.

The first three of these characteristics are plainly evident in German Critical Psychology, and are summarized in Klaus Holzkamp's *Grundlegung der Psychologie* (1983; see also Tolman, 1994), as well as in many subsequent works identified with Critical Psychology. What I propose to do here is to outline the basics of a moral theory and then demonstrate how Critical Psychology meets its demands and thus contributes to the necessary theoretical basis for social change. A good place to start is to look at Kant's moral theory. There are many problems with Kant's theory, and it can be argued that most, if not all, subsequent attempts to develop moral theory have begun by critiquing Kant or seeking solutions to problems in his theory, some of which even he acknowledged. But Kant is still useful for our purpose here, which is to sketch the task of a moral theory and what it is about.

Kant's theory rests upon two "imperatives," which will help us to make an important distinction, as well as to arrive at some central features of moral theory. The two imperatives were designated "hypothetical" and "categorical." The hypothetical category he stated as follows: "Who wills the end, wills (so far as reason has decisive influence on his actions) also the means which are indispensably necessary and in his power" (Kant, 1785/1964, p. 84). In short, you must do what you need to do to achieve your end. What this identifies is *prudence*, not morality as such, as it focuses on the means without consideration of the end, other than that it exists. This is important, but we need a second imperative to assure that the end is worth pursuing. This is the categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (*ibid*, p. 88). Later in the same text, Kant elaborates this in the following way: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as end" (*ibid*, p. 96).

What can be distilled from Kant's imperatives is that what is genuinely good for me is also good for others, and vice versa. The individual good and the common good are ultimately identical. And we can see that this is so from findings of later social science that reveal the essential relationship between the

individual person, society, and the whole of humanity. I am who I am by virtue of my relation to others. Other more recent moral philosophers would express this in terms of the essential human requirement for love (*agape*), as in the “situation ethics” of Joseph Fletcher (1997), or of the need for community, as in the moral theory of John Macmurray (1961). However this is articulated, it implies *agency*: animals and robots do not distinguish between means and ends; that requires conscious *intention*; and love and community in the human sense are intentional acts.

A curious paradox peculiar to moral philosophising arises at this point. If we ask *why* we should treat humanity, both ourselves and others, as ends, the categorical imperative becomes hypothetical. Does this undermine the project? No, it merely shifts the task of explanation to the domain of the social sciences. What is retained by philosophy, however, is important: the categorical can always itself be hypothetical, but the hypothetical cannot always be categorical. Another and more accessible way of putting this is to say that the moral (i.e., the good) will always be prudent (at least in the long term), but the prudent is not always moral. To act in the interest of the other, or for humanity as a whole, may, in the short term and however wrongly, seem contrary to one’s own interests, or even those of particular others, but in the long run it’s the only genuine good. This is a point that is recognized by, and forms a leading theme, in Fletcher’s situation ethics. It is a matter of the greater good prevailing over the lesser.

It will be useful at this point to remind ourselves how this relates to the desire for social change, whether by reform or by revolution. Such desire can only be motivated by a conception of the good. We want change, because we image a better world, one in which the humanity of all people is respected, where love prevails over hate and fear, and where genuine community exists on the largest possible scale. In short, social change is fundamentally a moral issue. A theory that promotes or facilitates it can hardly be morally neutral. Social scientific theories that focus on control or happiness despite exploitation cannot fill that bill. Indeed, they may be morally objectionable.

How does German Critical Psychology fit the task? The short answer has two parts: first, it situates itself within the context of the social-historical development of the individual psyche, and, second, it focuses on the individual’s subjectivity, understood as agency. As might be expected, these two parts are intimately related. In dealing with the first point, it is important for English readers to know that the word “social” has two distinct expressions in German: *sozial* and *gesellschaftlich*. While both words are commonly translated as “social,” this obscures a significant distinction. By far the majority of animal species can be described as social, including humans. But social is a biological characteristic that is determined by its genetics and is therefore subject to

evolution. A species of wasps, for example, is social in a predictable way wherever it is found in the world. Moreover, it is social in probably much the same way now as it was perhaps thousands of years ago. In a broad sense, humans are also social in a way that transcends place and time, but we note as well that this characteristic differs significantly in different time periods and from place to place. We speak of this aspect of sociality as “culture.” The cultures of people living now are very different from those living centuries ago. Indeed, we know that cultures can change radically within a single lifetime. In short, this aspect of the humanly social has history, and it is this historically determined sociality, or culture, that for humans has largely replaced biology (i.e. genes) as the storehouse of the information needed for us to become truly human. All this difference from the wasp is captured in the German term *Gesellschaftlichkeit*. The most adequate translation of its adjectival form, though seemingly awkward, is “societal.” As Klaus Holzkamp spoke of it:

The springboard for all controversy about an adequate understanding of the problem of subjectivity and its ontogenesis is the set of questions concerning the definition of the *relationship between subjectivity and the societal character of individuals*: is individual subjectivity reducible to societal relations, or are these something that stand independent of and in opposition to it? If subjectivity is something independent, then how is its *difference* to be reconciled with the nevertheless existing *connection* between the individual’s societality and subjectivity? Or, more particularly, if the result of ontogenesis is in some sense the ‘societalized’ or ‘socialized’ subject, how then is the *individual societalization* that is achieved to be precisely defined? What is the *initial state of early childhood* from which the societalization process begins and what is the *necessary course governing the ontogenetic transition* from the initial state to the final result of individual societalization?” (1979, p.12., italics in original)

I cannot summarize all the pertinent aspects of German Critical Psychology in the short space allotted here, but three concepts can be mentioned that illustrate its recognition of *Gesellschaftlichkeit*. These are “action possibility” (*Handlungsmöglichkeit*), “agency” (*Handlungsfähigkeit*, sometimes translated as “action potence”), and “subjective situation” (*subjektive Befindlichkeit*). All three are based on the recognition that human individuals do not confront the world directly, but as a structure of meanings which creates for us what may be called an “epistemic distance” between ourselves and objects. Objects do not act directly upon us, but rather present us with *possibilities for action* that can only

be decided by the individual reflecting on a complex amalgam of cognitive, historical, and societal factors. In Holzkamp's words:

The essential determinant of consciousness in its specifically human form is the emerging epistemic relation of the individual to world and self, materially based on the overall societal mediatedness of individual existential security, in which people are able to relate consciously to meaning structures as action possibilities, thus becoming free of the demands of immediate personal survival and able to understand the overarching connection between the existential and developmental problems of the individual and the overall societal process by which the means and conditions of providing for human life are created in a generalized way. (1983, p. 237)

Among the implications of this is that individuals come to relate to themselves as first-persons in societal relations with others, and subjectivity becomes seen as equivalent to intersubjectivity. This is important from the moral theoretical point of view, as it creates the morally necessary choice of relating to others as – to use Macmurray's terms (1961) – *instruments* (means) or as *persons* (ends).

“Agency” (*Handlungsfähigkeit*) refers to the historically and societally determined degree of control that individuals have over their own conditions and possibilities for satisfying their needs. Clearly, there are circumstances under which such agency can be severely limited. This may or may not be obvious to the individuals affected. Those whom Marx called “wage slaves” in a capitalist economy have agency that is restricted, but they may accept such restriction as normal, thus remaining effectively unaware of their enslavement. Ideally, a society should be organized such that every individual has the possibility of realizing the potentials for satisfaction that are offered by the state of the society's historical development. We all need to play a meaningful part in the control of the societal process (Holzkamp, 1983, p. 243), which brings us to the concept of “subjective situation” (*subjektive Befindlichkeit*). This is the individual's personal awareness and assessment of his or her own possibilities and restrictions. As long as the wage slave is unaware of the restrictions that create wage-slavery, little is likely to be done about removing those restrictions. An important role of theory is to create that awareness.

I trust that I have said enough to show that we have here a psychological theory that is equipped with the kinds of concepts that readily mesh with moral theory and its concerns. The world in which we live is currently ruled by fear, destruction, and greed, that is, by anything but concern for the development and exercise of human possibilities and the development of individual awareness and

agency. To realize the latter, radical change is needed. As Chris Hedges (2015) writes, such change (or “revolt” as he puts it) is a moral imperative. No psychological theory will bring this about, but one with the right concepts can be part of the necessary apparatus of change. German Critical Psychology meets that requirement; it is prepared for the “revolutionary moment.”

References

- Fletcher, J. (1997). *Situation ethics: The new morality*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Hedges, C. (2015). *Wages of rebellion: The moral imperative of revolt*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Holzkamp, K. (1979). Zur kritisch-psychologischen Theorie der Subjektivität I: Das Verhältnis von Subjektivität und Gesellschaftlichkeit in der traditionellen Sozialwissenschaft und im Wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus. *Forum Kritische Psychologie*, 4, pp. 10-54.
- Holzkamp, K. (1983). *Grundlegung der Psychologie*. Frankfurt: Campus Verlag.
- Kant, I. (1785/1964). *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals (Grundwerk zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, trans. H. J. Patton). New York: Harper Torchbook.
- Macmurray, J. (1961). *Persons in relation*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Mills, J.A. (1998). *Control: A history of behavioral psychology*. New York: New York University Press.
- Skinner, B. F. (1948). *Walden two*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.
- Staats, A.W., & Staats, C.K. (1963). *Complex human behavior: A systematic extension of learning principles*. New York: Holt, Rinehard, & Winston.
- Taylor, F. W. (1911). *Principles of scientific management*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Tolman, C. W. (1994). *Psychology, society, and subjectivity*. London: Routledge.
- Watson, J. B. (1903). *Animal education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Watson, J. B. (1913). Psychology as the behaviorist views it. *Psychological Review*, 20, pp. 158–177.

Charles Tolman is Professor Emeritus of psychology at the University of Victoria, Canada.