

Science and Ideology

Francis Barker

To echo Denys Turner, the debate in *New Blackfriars*¹ has by now ranged over so many different issues and mobilised so many separate arguments that it is impossible to answer every objection that has been raised against my position, nor shall I be able to take all the incidental points not raised directly in relation to my own views but which nonetheless warrant answers from a revolutionary Marxist standpoint. Equally it would be tedious (for anyone can read the debate for themselves) if I were to spend much time simply restating my earlier remarks and taking issue with every instance of their misinterpretation by my opponents.

Therefore, I shall rehearse my argument only in very general form, and then attend to the issue which is central to the debate—the differential characteristics of science and ideology.

My initial strategy was not to offer a substantive contribution to this debate but to carry out a reading of it, as it exists in certain texts, in order to expose the silences, incoherences and contradictions enforced on a writing that engages in what is, for the whole thrust of my argument, a project which has already failed even before its inception. Because, as I contend, Christianity is an ideology (as well, of course, as an ensemble of rituals, practices and institutions) and Marxism a science, and because they suffer a high level of mutual unintelligibility deriving from their very different epistemological statuses (the one, potentially at least, an object of the other), Marxism has *no* 'contribution' to make to this 'debate' *except* to define its character as an irresolvable *ideological* encounter. An encounter, moreover, in which even Marxism must become ideologically deformed (as I have argued of Turner's politics i.e. his fatalism) if it should be so misguided as to enter *into* the exchange rather than correctly standing on a different ground in order to criticise it and the assumptions which must silently be made if it is to take place at all. This strategy, this 'argument', has already led to much confusion. Turner, to cite but one example,

¹ For present purposes the debate consists of the papers delivered at the December Group meeting at Spode House, December 1976, as published in *New Blackfriars*; Terry Eagleton, *Marx, Freud and Morality*, (January 1977); Brian Wicker, *Marxist Science and Christian Theology*, (February 1977); Denys Turner, *Marxism, Christianity and Morality*, (April 1977); and a few backward glances at my own *The Morality of Knowledge and the Disappearance of God*, (September 1976). Page references are to these articles.

reconstructs from my necessarily fragmentary and critical remarks about Christian ideology a 'theory' of ideology (as if I had advanced one rather than merely referring to some of the characteristics of ideology) and then proceeds to attack a position which I did not put forward and do not hold.

Some response is necessary (and was given, to an extent, in my talk at the 1976 December Group). But as the strategy of giving a reading from an external standpoint was realised (doubtless in a more or less formal, abstract and incomplete manner) in my 'The Morality of Knowledge and the Disappearance of God', the following argument should be taken within the general context of that article.

In my present account of the relations between science and ideology I shall say little new about Christianity as such, but will nonetheless hope that what I do say will clarify further the Marxist position on these questions as I understand and would fight for it.

That the science-ideology issue *is* the centre of the debate is agreed by my most serious opponent Denys Turner:

The substance of my disagreement with Barker, lies in our different accounts of Marxist science and in particular of its relationship to ideologies. (p. 187)

Turner then says that while I gave no formal account of what it means to say of a discourse such as Christianity that it is 'ideological', my paper nonetheless contained various remarks about ideology, which Turner extracts from their context and refers to as my 'theory' of ideology. These four descriptive statements are (i) that there is a radical epistemological break between science and ideology; (ii) that science and ideology are epistemologically unequal; (iii) "that as an ideology, Christianity is distinct from some other forms in that while it appears to make substantive truth-claims about something or other, these claims are spurious, since Christian discourse is tautological, truistically spun out of a basic, non-cognitive paradigm" and (iv) that science explains not only the origin of ideological belief but also criticises its contents.

Now, of these four remarks only (iii), which I have quoted in full, is contentious between us. Either explicitly (as in the case of (iv) on which Turner has revised his position since 'Can a Christian be a Marxist')² or in so many words, the other three are accepted by Turner and are even, in one form or another, central to his own argument.

Let us therefore examine (iii). What are Turner's objections to this account of ideology? He attacks what he sees as the impossibility of me holding that ideology is *both* false *and* tautological. Turner argues that if ideology is tautological then its propositions,

² *New Blackfriars*, June 1975.

such as my (tentative) example “God exists”, cannot be genuine ones. As tautologies they can be neither true nor false but simply ‘ideological’. More than this, an argument which tried to prove the falsity of such a proposition (e.g. an argument against the existence of God on the grounds of ontological materialism) would be as fatally implicated within the empty tautological paradigm within which the proposition resides, as the proposition itself. Turner substantiates his argument by showing that Marx never thought that *all* ideological statements were simply vacuous or devoid of truth-function, but simply that their truth or falsity could not be established while they remained in ideological form. Turner gives an example of an ideological proposition from bourgeois political economy: the assertion that “the value of labour is exactly represented by its price in the form of wages” (p. 189). Marx came to see that this proposition was ideological but not that it was necessarily true or false. On the contrary it is a mystified (“fetishised”) proposition in connection with which no decision can be made as to its truth or falsity until it has been “decoded” i.e. until the category mistake it makes has been exposed by Marxist science. When this is done and the defetishised category ‘labour power’ is substituted for the fetishised ‘labour’ it becomes clear that the statement is false. Also, according to Turner:

what holds for opaquely false ideological utterances holds also for opaquely true ones. In general, therefore, what true assertions and what false assertions are made within ideological discourse cannot be known from within it, but within the science—Marxism—which has the key to their ideological character. (p. 190)

Knowledge (of truth or falsity i.e. of precisely that distinction) does lie—it should be noted—*within the science*. Science, for Marx and Turner (and me, for that matter) works upon ideology (its ‘raw material’) in order to produce knowledge (a determinate new *product*). And for Turner at least this knowledge is in part knowledge of the truth or falsity of ideological statements which was undecidable before such theoretical labour had been carried out. He designates such knowledge (and I have parted company with him now) “rescuable truth”, (or presumably “rescuable falsity”, although we hear nothing of this from him).

It should be clear from this account of Turner’s argument that there are areas of agreement between us. Where, then, lies the contradiction between our positions? I shall restate Turner’s argument: I cannot hold that ideology is both tautological and false; the proposition “God exists” must be either tautological and therefore neither true nor false, or false (according to my case) and therefore not tautological. Turner remarks that I say both kinds of thing about theism and that this is a central confusion in my argument which opens up a gap for Turner’s own account of the

science-ideology relationship and for his substantive argument for the rescuability of the truth of Christian ideology. The issue obviously *is* central; we must try to explicate it. And such explication lies (where else would a polemicist find it?) not in the unravelling of a confusion of mine but of Turner's. I shall have to quote what I actually said about tautology in the ideological:

Religious language is paradigmatic, constructed of a 'vertical' paradigm of which the prototype would be something like "I believe in God". In it words like 'because' and 'therefore' do not structure a diachronic development as in scientific discourse, but merely serve to conjugate, to 'spatialise' the optative paradigm. Religious language, *like all ideological discourse*, is thus strictly speaking tautological; it never utters anything that is not in the paradigm right from the start.

(p. 408 n5 emphasis added)

A short commentary on this is warranted. First two small points. My prototypical statement for the religious paradigm was not, after all, "God exists", but rather "I believe in God": a rather different proposition. And secondly it should be noted that my original statement which I have just quoted *is* broadly harmonious with Turner's characteristic (iii) of ideology cited above. So again, where is the contradiction? It lies, at last, in the confusion which makes Turner think that I said that the *utterances* of ideological discourse are all *necessarily* tautological and devoid of factual content or truth-function. To clarify: I said (and it is quite clear) that "all ideological discourse" is tautological, "it never utters anything that is not in the paradigm right from the start". There is a fundamental distinction between the utterances of a discourse (in structuralist parlance, *paroles*) and the system of the discourse as a whole (*langue*.) The paradigm is not, moreover, an empirical collection or sum of actual utterances but a controlling structure of possible utterances within a certain discourse. My contention is that while ideological discourse is tautological (which is, in a sense, to say no more than that it is paradigmatic) it does not necessarily follow that every utterance within the tautological paradigm is itself a tautology. I do not even need to accept Turner's account of Marx's ("elastic") attitude to the epistemic value of ideological utterances (which is in any case irrefutable): I am content to point out that neither of the proposed prototypical statements for the religious ideological discourse—"God exists" and "I believe in God"—are in fact tautological. They can both be used in perfectly meaningful sentences (as Brian Wicker points out) even by Marxists. But what does follow from this clarification is that *I am* able (should I wish) to say both that ideological discourse is tautological and that some of its discrete utterances may be tautological or they may be false. ("God exists" is always false, "I believe in God" may or may not be according to who says it, both are ideo-

logical, neither are tautological, as I have said.) Turner's challenge to my designation of Christianity as both false and ideological thus falls.

To round out the case by considering another permutation of the true/false/tautological set, and to introduce another concept, let us consider an ideological statement which *is* tautological: "God made the world". This is a tautology because if you assume as this utterance does that *someone* made the world, i.e. if you believe in a *Creation*, then who else but God could have been responsible for it? Only God could have made the world because a 'making' of the world, i.e. a creation, is only thinkable in God, a Creator. It should be noted that my designation of this utterance as tautological does not rest simply on logical argument, but upon, as Turner puts it, "non-logical properties" of the utterance. Modern linguistic analysis (stemming ultimately from the work of de Saussure) is now paying attention not only to the 'message' of utterances, but also to their contextual (semantic) 'field' which they carry with them. This utterance thus illustrates a form of tautologicality (if such a word exists) which *may* be partaken in by the apparently non-tautological utterance, i.e. it can only be uttered meaningfully within a paradigm that is tautological.

What is the materialist's response to such an utterance? Certainly not to reply "No, God didn't make the world." This would be incorrect because it implies that somebody (else) did (or didn't) 'make the world', and that would be to become complicit in the ideological paradigm which is to be criticised. As Turner says, the refutation of a statement which is neither true nor false shares absurdity with the statement itself. The correct response is (to introduce the new concept) that of identifying the *problematic* within which the utterance is placed and of criticising that. The problematic is something like the 'field' or 'paradigm' in which utterances are articulated, *but* (and this is crucial) it goes beyond the purely linguistic into the socio-historical. It is not merely a concept belonging to the synchronic analysis of utterance and discourse, but is the contour of the historical conjuncture that brings into being and determines not only its 'answers' (both positive and silent) but its very questions. Thus a Marxist does not claim to be an atheist because atheism is nothing but the mirror image of theism, implicated within the same discursive paradigm (i.e. within the same tautology) and also within the same problematic (i.e. within the same historical generation of the entire question of belief in God or his denial). The concept of the problematic, incidentally, sophisticates Turner's characteristic of ideology (iv). The analysis of the historical genesis of ideology and its substantive criticism is not conducted 'direct' (e.g. "No, God didn't make the world") but indirectly by criticism of the problematic and the discourses it includes.

I have discussed Denys Turner's rejection of what I didn't say. I shall now consider what positively leads on from this erroneous rejection, that is, Turner's own theory of the relationship between science and ideology. He dispenses with the word 'hermeneutic', which I challenged in my previous paper, but retains an *essentially hermeneutical* theory of science.

The weakest point of Turner's case is to base his account of ideology on appearance/reality grounds. This is deficient for two main reasons. First, as Turner himself argues, the appearances of capitalist society as they are seemingly spontaneously offered to view, are not in fact false. When Marx, to use Turner's example again, says that commodity fetishism means that "a relation between persons [is] expressed as a relation between things", the crucial "expressed as" does not mean that this relation is expressed *as if* it were a relation between things, but on the contrary it is expressed as (i.e. in the form of) what it really is, a relation between things. Thus the phenomenal appearances of capitalist society are not false but *real*, and therefore appearance/reality theories of ideology are radically misdirected. Secondly, appearance/reality implies a subject *for whom* the appearance is a mystified expression of the real. But the point is (and Eagleton makes it succinctly) that even to be a subject is in any case ideological. It is not the case that a pre-equipped fully cognitive spectatorial subject is set over against the deceiving appearances of capitalist society which are simply 'given' to that subject (as Turner says that science is 'given' its object "in the structures of capitalist ideology-production", p. 192). To believe this is precisely to be prey to the very mystification that ideology is. To quote Eagleton:

The ideological is precisely this process of *misrecognition*, whereby individual historical agents ... are mystified into that belief in their own 'centredness', into that imaginary relation with the world where the world *is seen* to exist for them and they for the world ... The subject can't *know* the discourses which produce him, the deep structure and laws of the social formation, because the very process of being *constituted* as a subject involves the *repression* of that discourse, the misrecognition of those laws of the mode of production.

(p. 24, emphasis 'is seen' added.)

Similarly Louis Althusser argues that ideology exists merely, wholly, in order to ensure the reproduction of the conditions of production through the interpellation of subjects: that is, the constitution of individuals as subjects, and their insertion as such into the categories of the social formation.³ Turner says nothing of the subject in his account of the ideological, but certainly implies an unproblematical role for it in his theory of ideology.

³ See L. Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, (London 1971).

What then is the relationship between science and ideology, if it is not the discovery (or rescuing) of the real from 'within' ideology? I cannot explore this problem completely in a brief but fully theoretical form, but I will attempt to draw out some aspects of the problem through an example from my own discipline, literary criticism. Consider the ideology of Genius, expressed, say, in an utterance like "*The Prelude* is the work of a Genius". Now, according to Turner this ideological statement could, in principle, be 'decoded' by science and its 'truth' (or falsity) 'rescued'. I argue that this is still an hermeneutic, for all his abandoning of the word, and will try to show this by offering a different kind of analysis:

1) We can say immediately that the ideological utterance is quite simply untrue. Modern literary study is discovering more and more than literary texts are not 'the work' of anybody, whatever their intellectual or spiritual status. On the contrary, the play of codes and discourses within a text, the determinate work of literary forms and devices on ideological materials, the eloquence of the text's silences as much as its positive presences, all enforce a new view of literary production within which the text can no longer be regarded as simply the result of the subjectivity of its 'author'.

2) But on the other hand there is some 'truth' somewhere about this statement. While Genius leaves us with a mystified account of literary production, and moreover involves an elitist hierarchy of individuals, some of whom are and some of whom aren't Geniuses, it is the case that bourgeois society *really* promotes certain individuals to prominence.

3) Also we may point out that the utterance is 'tautological' in the special sense in which I spoke of "God made the world" as tautological; it is implicated in (essentially the same) ideological paradigm of Creation and Subjectivity (God is the great Subject and Creator, in fact a Genius). The problematic is to be criticised. This description of the 'true', 'false', and 'tautological' character of the utterance (which is only schematic and meant to illustrate an argument), cannot be regarded as rescuing its truth. Nor indeed could a full (scientific) 'decoding' of the utterance, which might run something like this:

4) The socio-technical division of labour in capitalist society distributes certain individuals within the category of writer: the ideology given rise to in that society mystifies the processes of literary production so that texts appear to be simple expressions of privileged subjectivity: such ideology in general, and particularly in the literary region achieves special status in relation to the Romantic poets who 'lived' the breakdown of an established social role for writers under the system of patronage, from which writers were estranged by their social marginalisation resultant on the intervention of market relations between them and their audience:

the real social marginalisation of writers as isolated producers gives rise to their marginalisation (i.e. centring) in ideology, as Geniuses. A real analysis would demand many more social and ideological theses than these, but this provisional 'decoding' will suffice for present purposes.

Now, it is immediately clear that the scientific explanation of the genesis of the ideological utterance ("*The Prelude* is the work of a Genius") and its account of what such an utterance tells about the real ('true') nature of bourgeois society, differ radically from the utterance itself. It conforms to Turner's central criterion of (Marxist) scientificity—greater fundamentality—but is quite distinct in form, discursive location and social function from the original statement, *nothing of which—neither form nor content—survives* in the 'explanation'. The ideological utterance has been supplanted by something radically new (a new *product*) and not hermeneutically interpreted or 'rescued' (it has been demolished). 'Rescued truth', to cite aphoristically. Turner's account of the science-ideology relation, implies an unchanged form extracted from its ideological predicament (as a damsel from the dragon's lair); but Marxist science, like all production, consumes its raw materials.

I want to say two more things.

Firstly, it is not the case that Marxism necessarily generates all its knowledge by the transformation of every ideology. This would be to suggest that every ideology has its rescuable truth, and Marxism consists in the totality of the products of this one to one engagement with every available ideology. Brian Wicker seems to think that each ideology should have its 'own' science that together they will stroll through history in amorous complicity or familiar antagonism: he thus justifies theology by its hypothetical role as the science of religious ideology, rather than as another of its forms. But the history of the foundation of Marxism tells a different story.

From an ideological pre-history (Hegelian, Feuerbachian) Marxism moves to the attention to a different object, not 'the Spirit' or 'Man' but 'economics', and develops its own procedures. While this was indeed an engagement with an ideology (that of bourgeois political economy) it was a *route* through which Marxism was able to construct its own distinctive concept of the social formation (including an account of the place and function of ideologies). This was not only the rearrangement of the relations between categories (standing Hegel on his feet again) but also the substitution of new terms within the relations (means of production, forces of production, and so on). Thus the main knowledge achieved by Marxism through an engagement with an ideology was 'derived' from bourgeois political economy but not because it was simply one ideology among others, but because the economic is

in fact fundamental and was so before ever Marxism ‘discovered’ it. Having constructed its concept of the social formation Marxism then is able to read back from *this* its knowledge of other ideologies. And it attends to them not because they all have a truth to be rescued, but because they all have a similar social function: the maintenance of the hegemony of the ruling class through the interpellation of subjects. But this does not commit Marxism to believing that all ideologies are the same in substance or epistemic status.

Secondly, the category of the subject is crucial to ideology and above all to religious ideology. Althusser’s argument (to which I have already referred and which I support) is there to be read,⁴ so I shall not follow it in full, but will summarise its main conclusions. Althusser argues that ideology does not represent, in mystified form men’s real conditions of existence in class society. What it represents is the imaginary *relation* of men to the real conditions, i.e. ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of men to the relations of production and the relations that derive from the relations of production. This is why an hermeneutic science is erroneous. The point is not to free from distortion the representation of the real given by ideology, but to discover (as I tried to suggest in my account of Genius) the principle of the relationship of ideology to the real (a relationship which is not one of direct, although distorted, representation). In order to discover this principle Althusser focusses on the category of the subject. There is, he writes, “no ideology except by and for subjects”, and its function is to constitute individuals as subjects in order that they recognise ‘their’ place in the social formation. ‘Hailed’, in Althusser’s word, by ideology the always-ready constituted subject responds “Yes, it really is me ... I am here, a worker, a boss, a soldier!” Caught in a multiple system of interpellation, of universal recognition (of one’s place, of one’s subjectivity and of others as subjects), and of absolute guarantee (of one’s unique, irreplaceable subjecthood) the individuals within a social formation then ‘work’, “they ‘work by themselves’ in the vast majority of cases, with the exception of the ‘bad subjects’ who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus”.

But where does the ‘absolute guarantee’ come from? The interpellation of individuals as subjects presupposes “the ‘existence’ of a Unique and central Other Subject”, i.e. God, the Father who, as in Eagleton, “will not abandon his children”, his subjects. Althusser thus gives the Christian religious ideology a key place (no longer in history or politics but) in “ideology *in general*”; for in religious ideology, the ideological role of the category of subject appears in its most clear (most mystified) form. And in it lies the unravelling

⁴ *Op. cit.* pp. 165-70.

of the “mystery” by which subjects ‘work by themselves’ within their designated places in the social formation. I quote in full:

The whole mystery of this effect lies ... in the ambiguity of the term *subject*. In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means: (1) a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission. This last note gives us the meaning of this ambiguity, which is merely a reflection of the effect that produces it: the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself’. There are no subjects except by and for their subjection.* That is why they ‘work all by themselves’.

It is this ‘truth’, which ideology articulates quite plainly for itself, without equivocation—“it is not you who will be speaking, the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you”—that has to be *known*, in theory, and *overcome*, in practice.

Religion, Truth and Language Games

Brian Davies O.P.

When people become religious believers, when they talk about their religion or engage in verbal activity in practising it, what are they doing? Although he does not believe that a simple, unqualified answer can be given to this question, Patrick Sherry¹ thinks that it is important, that certain ideas of Wittgenstein are a help in trying to answer it and that a proper answer raises problems of truth and justification which are often ignored: “Let us then ask ourselves what pictures and concepts are used in religion and theology: we want to know how doctrines are related to the world—what is their subject matter and what kind of description are they trying to provide? Now it is unlikely that we will be able to reach a simple answer to such questions, because so-called ‘religious language’ is of many different kinds ... even putatively ‘descriptive’ or ‘fact-stating’ uses of religious language are of many types (p. 18)...

¹ *Religion, Truth and Language-Games*, by Patrick Sherry, Macmillan, 1977, pp. x + 234 £8.95.