

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Theories of Ideology: Origins, Development, and Prospects

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## Abstract

*This essay provides a comprehensive and critical introduction to ideology. It traces the origins and development of various conceptions of ideology, articulating both what they have in common and their differences. Among the distinctions that we develop are the contrasts between pejorative and nonpejorative conceptions, functionalist and causal conceptions, and conceptions that limit ideologies to supporting existing oppressive orders and those that allow for ideologies that challenge such orders. We also explain the role that ideologies can play in either preventing or facilitating social movements to overturn or improve existing institutions. The concluding section of this essay provides a list of important topics for future research on ideology and emphasizes that, in each case, an interdisciplinary approach is needed to understand them fully.*

**Keywords:** collective action; assurance problem; free-rider problem; false consciousness; ideology

## Introduction

The concept of ideology was first introduced by Comte Destutt de Tracy, who conceived of it as the “science of ideas” that aimed to determine the material conditions that give rise to ideas.<sup>1</sup> The concept has undergone significant development since its introduction.<sup>2</sup> Critical theorists employ the concept to explain acquiescence in unjust social orders. Contemporary social scientists invoke it to explain the psychology undergirding political behavior and the stability of social orders more generally. Contemporary philosophers employ the concept of ideology in their work on social injustice, including racism, sexism,

<sup>1</sup> Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy, *A Treatise on Political Economy*, ed. Jeremy Jennings, trans. Thomas Jefferson (1817; repr., Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> For brief surveys, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 107–11; George Lichtheim, “The Concept of Ideology,” *History and Theory* 4, no. 2 (1965): 164–95.

and classism. This essay offers a critical survey of contemporary philosophical work on ideology as well as social-science work from which philosophical theorists could benefit.

We begin by distinguishing two uses of the term: a descriptive-explanatory use and an evaluative use. Among philosophers, 'ideology' is most often used as a pejorative term. A common theme of those who employ the term in an evaluative fashion is that ideologies support unjust social orders. The descriptive-explanatory use of the term, in contrast, is concerned only with how the existence of ideologies helps explain certain social phenomena, including individual political preferences and behavior.

Those who use the term in the evaluative, pejorative sense tend to assume that ideologies are not necessary in a well-functioning, reasonably just society and, moreover, that it would be better if they did not exist. Descriptive-explanatory uses of the term leave open the possibility that ideologies are necessary for the functioning of complex, ethnically and religiously diverse societies and that, therefore, the goal should not be to eliminate ideologies, but rather to curb their negative tendencies. We will argue that both approaches to theorizing ideology are at present incomplete.

The "Change theories of ideology" section begins with a review of the most familiar pejorative use of the concept of ideology—namely, critical theory—focusing on critiques of capitalist, sexist, and racist ideologies. In the section "The self-reflexive epistemic problems of ideology critique," we address the worry that if ideologies are all-encompassing and pervasive, then an objective evaluation of them is impossible because any attempt at evaluation will itself be infected by ideological bias. "Descriptive-explanatory accounts of ideology" explains how various theories offer different answers to questions about (i) what constitutes an ideology, (ii) the effects ideologies have on individual and collective behavior, (iii) the conditions under which ideologies exist, and (iv) the psychological mechanisms that lead individuals to adopt ideologies. We return to the question "what makes an ideology defective or harmful?" with a continued discussion of evaluative approaches in "Evaluative accounts of ideology." We then review different ways in which theorists have suggested we might remedy or rid ourselves of these defective ideologies in the section on "Reforming or eliminating ideology." Our concluding section identifies gaps in both the evaluative and descriptive-explanatory approaches to ideology, and sketches an agenda for future research.

### Critical theories of ideology

According to critical theorists, who use the term in a pejorative sense, ideologies facilitate injustice; the goal of these theorists is to achieve liberation from ideologies. Most critical theorists hold that ideologies help perpetuate injustice through false consciousness. Consciousness is said to be false when it includes

beliefs that are misleading, distorting, or otherwise not accurately reflective of the social facts it purports to characterize.<sup>3</sup>

Raymond Geuss identifies three ways to criticize an ideology: (1) epistemic critiques, (2) functional critiques, and (3) genetic critiques.<sup>4</sup> Epistemic critiques argue that the processes by which the beliefs and attitudes constituting the ideology are formed, disseminated, and accepted are epistemically defective. Functional accounts criticize ideologies on the basis of the negative effects of their acceptance; according to the dominant view, their chief if not exclusive negative effect is that they support unjust social orders. Furthermore, according to functionalist views, ideologies exist because they support unjust social orders. Finally, genetic critiques argue that once we understand how ideologies come to be and spread, we will have conclusive reasons to reject them. Some critical theorists employ one or two of these approaches, while others employ all three. Common to all of these approaches is the view that ideologies perpetuate injustices by misrepresenting social realities in ways that arbitrarily privilege some groups or identities over others.

Marxist, feminist, and anti-racist criticisms of society view ideological beliefs as foundational to social inequality. Classist, sexist, and racist ideologies construct representations of social reality that engender false beliefs about groups of people and the individuals within them. These beliefs bolster social hierarchies by supporting those attitudes and actions that perpetuate them.<sup>5</sup> For example, sexist ideology fosters false beliefs about natural differences between men and women. These beliefs, when widely held, affect social practices, norms, and traditions in ways that perpetuate gender hierarchy.<sup>6</sup>

By motivating actions that contribute to a social experience that seems to confirm the beliefs they foster, ideologies can create positive feedback that supports false representations of reality. Members of groups marked as subordinate or inferior by the ideology internalize and act in accordance with the stereotypes and roles the ideology assigns to them. Taking the Marxist account as an example, the existence of a capitalist ideology explains why the proletariat complies with a social system that exploits it.

<sup>3</sup> See Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 445; Tommie Shelby, "Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory," *Philosophical Forum* 34, no. 2 (2003): 153–88; Jon Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (1947; repr., Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Friedrich Engels, "Letter to F. Mehring," in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Selected Works in Two Volumes*, Volume II (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), 451; György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (1920; repr., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 13.

<sup>5</sup> On the role of ideologies in legitimizing social orders, see the subsection below on "Ideology and the legitimization of social order."

<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (1949; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 12–13.

We next turn to a review of several prominent critical theory accounts of ideology. In doing so, our chief concern will be to ascertain the role ideology plays in such theories rather than assessing the theories themselves.

### **Marxist critiques of capitalist ideology**

Marxist theory identifies three central features of every society: the productive forces, the relations of production, and the superstructure. The forces and relations of production comprise, respectively, the resources used to produce goods and the way production is socially organized. The superstructure is the totality of social, cultural, and legal institutions that are both grounded in the mode and relations of production and supportive of them. For Marxists, ideology is a core part of the superstructure. On the Marxist view, ideology obscures the reality of capitalist production relations so that members of the proletariat continue to engage in them to the benefit of the capitalist class, even when compliance comes at their own expense. The existence of ideology thus explains why the proletariat persists in a condition of “voluntary servitude.”

The precise mechanisms by which ideologies render the proletariat compliant were never clearly explained by Karl Marx and are a subject of disagreement among Marxist theorists. Marx’s critique of ideology is often characterized as functionalist, with ideologies explained by their role in supporting unjust social orders. Jon Elster, however, ascribes to Marx a strictly causal view of ideology, avoiding the notion of function and instead opting for a reductive understanding of ideology as emerging from individual behavior.<sup>7</sup>

While disagreeing on other matters, Marxist theorists agree that, according to Marx, the dominant ideology of capitalist society underwrites exploitative relations of production by obscuring the actual causal relations in capitalist production, thereby causing proletarians to minimize their contribution to the social product<sup>8</sup> and preventing them from considering the possibility that they could come to have collective control over the means of production.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, ideology creates and sustains a false consciousness that gives capitalist domination the appearance of being natural or otherwise inevitable.

Marxists see domination by the capitalist class as a form of exploitation. For Marx, exploitation consists of capitalists’ extraction of surplus value from the labor of the proletariat. Ideology plays a role in capitalist exploitation by fostering the alienation of individuals from what they produce. According to Marx, the alienation of the proletariat from the product of their labor involves, *inter alia*, their failure to understand that labor is the source of value.<sup>10</sup> Although proletarians have formal freedom, including the legal freedom to accept or reject offers of employment, capitalists’ exclusive control over the means of production

<sup>7</sup> Jon Elster, “Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory,” *Theory and Society* 11 (1982): 453–82. More on this in the subsection below on “Explaining why there are ideologies.”

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (1867; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1976), Book 1.

<sup>9</sup> Jon Elster, *Karl Marx: A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chaps. 4–7.

<sup>10</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, Book 1, sec. 4.

forces proletarians to sell their labor power to capitalists for less than its actual value. This pattern of exchange fosters “commodity fetishism,” the attribution of powers and value to mere things that do not possess them. Capitalist ideology leads individuals to mistakenly believe that the value of an object attaches to the object itself rather than to the labor that created it. The alienation of the proletariat from their products along with commodity fetishism thus help to perpetuate capitalists’ monopoly of the means of production.<sup>11</sup>

Causal and functional accounts both hold that, by virtue of misrepresenting social reality, capitalist ideology can make a class-divided society appear inevitable or natural. Because capitalist ideology presents class divisions as natural, individuals may take for granted the social status quo and so fail to consider the possibility of altering it. On this point, functionalist and causal views agree that ideologies are an obstacle to progressive social change.

Starting with the Marxist assumption that ideologies distort power relations, French Structuralists attempt to explain the role of culture in this phenomenon. Louis Althusser, for example, examines various social institutions that spread ideologies, such as the family, the church, schools, and other parts of the educational system.<sup>12</sup> Studies of nationalism often emphasize the role of public education in fostering nationalist ideologies, which tend to include highly inaccurate, sanitized historical narratives that exaggerate the distinctiveness and virtues of “our” nation and discount the character and contribution of other peoples. As forerunners of more contemporary Cultural Studies, French Structuralists have relied on the concept of ideology in their critique of media more generally.<sup>13</sup>

### **Feminist critiques of ideology**

Feminists criticize ideology as a mechanism by which social structures perpetuate the dominance of women by men. On feminist views, sexist ideology consists of implicit beliefs and attitudes that define women as naturally inferior to men and therefore properly subordinate to them.<sup>14</sup> Crucial to feminist critiques of ideology is the distinction between sex (understood as a biological trait) and gender (a socially constructed category that often masquerades as a biological trait). Predominant feminist critiques focus on the social definition of women as objects or means to male ends,<sup>15</sup> the emphasis on “natural” distinctions between

<sup>11</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 175.

<sup>12</sup> Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Sally Haslanger, “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?” *Nous* 34, no. 1 (2000): 31–55; Ann Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

the sexes,<sup>16</sup> the supposed epistemic deficits of women,<sup>17</sup> male domination through the sexualization of gender hierarchy,<sup>18</sup> the subjection of women to material injustices,<sup>19</sup> and the internalization of gendered ideological norms such that women's preferences are adapted to align with patriarchal expectations.<sup>20</sup>

Gender itself may thus be understood as an ideology.<sup>21</sup> Susan Moller Okin defines gender as institutionalized differences between the sexes, where these differences result in distributive injustices.<sup>22</sup> On this view, beliefs and attitudes regarding gender play a central role in the subordination of women. To be a woman is to possess characteristics believed to make one inferior to those possessing the characteristics that make one a man.<sup>23</sup> Catharine MacKinnon takes gender hierarchy to be necessarily *sexualized*; on her view, sexual objectification by men and male-dominant social norms are inherent to the experience of womanhood.<sup>24</sup> This supposed sexualization of the social hierarchy occurs by the imposition of roles that designate women as means to male sexual ends. This account is in harmony with the notion of ideology as a distorted social consciousness that causes individual actions that reinforce the beliefs that inspired them in the first place. Women are believed to be inferior or mere objects of sexual satisfaction and are treated accordingly, which in turn seems to confirm these beliefs, and so the cycle repeats. Women's sexist ideological beliefs affect their actions and self-perception, which, in turn, is taken to provide further support for the naturalization of gender difference and hierarchy upon which sexist ideology (in part) depends.<sup>25</sup>

Ideologies do not work merely through the dissemination of false consciousness. They also constrain and direct the actions of individuals by including norms that require or prohibit certain behaviors and by defining reasonable expectations for members of various groups. In these ways, ideologies distort the exercise of practical reason.

Sexist ideology undermines the status of women as rational agents in other ways as well. Miranda Fricker notes that there is a distinctly epistemic kind of injustice that occurs when prejudicial beliefs affect one's standing as a knower

<sup>16</sup> Sally Haslanger, "Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements," *Res Philosophica* 94, no. 1 (2017): 1–22; Haslanger, "Gender and Race"; Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 34.

<sup>17</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Catharine MacKinnon, "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: 'Pleasure under Patriarchy,'" *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989): 314–46; MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*.

<sup>19</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Ann Levey, "Liberalism, Adaptive Preferences, and Gender Equality," *Hypatia* 20, no. 4 (2005): 127–43; Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*; MacKinnon, "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method."

<sup>21</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Haslanger, "Gender and Race."

<sup>22</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 6–7.

<sup>23</sup> Haslanger, "Gender and Race," 38–39, 42–43.

<sup>24</sup> MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*; MacKinnon, "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method."

<sup>25</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 12–13.

and giver of knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Ideological beliefs about women being less intelligent and less capable than men lead to a “credibility deficit” with regard to women’s standing as possessors and givers of knowledge. Given how critical communication is to social cooperation, the denial of women’s standing as equal epistemic agents perpetuates asymmetric gendered alignment of social power by stifling women’s contribution to the development of collective social meaning.<sup>27</sup>

### Critiques of racist ideology

According to critical race theorists, race, as a social kind, is used to differentiate between groups of people for social purposes,<sup>28</sup> and racist ideologies build upon this differentiation to create or perpetuate unjust social relations. Racist ideology portrays nonwhites as inferior to their white counterparts, justifying their subordinate status in the social hierarchy by grounding this inferiority in “natural” biological distinctions among races.<sup>29</sup> Predominant critiques of racist ideology address the “racialization” of certain traits perceived to belong to particular racial groups,<sup>30</sup> the move from racist ideologies that portray nonwhites as biogenetically inferior to those that emphasize cultural pathology,<sup>31</sup> the obscuring of structural injustices by placing blame on subordinated individuals,<sup>32</sup> and the ways in which long-standing racial stereotypes have worked their way into the “background knowledge” of everyday life.<sup>33</sup>

Some theorists argue that race is real insofar as it is socially constructed.<sup>34</sup> On such a view, the concept of race is not reducible to biology or physical features; rather, it is a set of associated characteristics that assigns group membership according to (typically) informal social norms. This distinction between biology and social categorization parallels the feminist distinction between sex and gender, where the biological categorization of individuals as belonging to one sex or the other entails some social categorization of them as belonging to a particular social group in an oppressive hierarchy built upon gender.<sup>35</sup> Thus, races are groups that are associated with certain physical attributes “when those associations take on evaluative significance concerning how members of the group should be viewed and treated.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*. For a related discussion, see the subsection below on “Epistemic injustice,” which discusses how epistemic injustice might explain the wrong of ideology.

<sup>27</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 9–20.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Haslanger, “Gender and Race”; Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory.”

<sup>29</sup> Haslanger, “Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements”; Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory,” 168.

<sup>30</sup> Haslanger, “Gender and Race,” 144–45; Haslanger, “Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements”; Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory,” 176–77.

<sup>31</sup> Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory,” 169.

<sup>32</sup> Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory,” 164–65.

<sup>33</sup> Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory,” 176.

<sup>34</sup> Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 308; Mills, *Blackness Visible*, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Haslanger, “Gender and Race.”

<sup>36</sup> Haslanger, “Gender and Race,” 44.



One of the ways in which ideology works to justify the subordinating treatment of nonwhites in Western societies is through appeal to the notion that particular qualities and characteristics are part of the nature of nonwhites. Inequalities are then represented as fitting and proper reflections of a natural order. The supposed natural differences often take the form of negative stereotypes that, when they are represented as grounded in biological differences, are given the appearance of being “thoroughly entrenched and (practically) unchangeable.”<sup>37</sup>

This process of appealing to nature to explain the social inferiority of nonwhites is also referred to as “essentialism” or “racialization” and it serves two primary purposes: it (1) justifies the racial hierarchy by (2) essentializing racial stereotypes in such a way that gives them the illusion of being permanent features of the natural order. In the United States, for example, Black people experience disproportionate rates of police violence and brutality, an inequality that is defended by the ideological essentialization of Black people as being dangerous, criminal, or aggressive. This essentialization works to legitimize the brutal policing of Black people and further bolsters the racial hierarchy by criminalizing Black Americans, presenting them as morally inferior to white citizens, and perpetuating the subordination of Blacks socially and politically.<sup>38</sup>

### The self-reflexive epistemic problems of ideology critique

The critical theorist’s aim is to expose the ways in which ideologies help sustain unjust social orders. The prevalent view is that in order to do this, the theorist must be situated in the society whose ideological underpinnings she critiques.<sup>39</sup>

The assumption that the theorist is situated within the society whose ideology she seeks to criticize creates three epistemic challenges for ideology critique. (1) If the critical theorist can effectively identify and expose the damaging effects of ideologies, why can’t the masses do so without guidance from the critical theorist? In other words, given the assumption that the ideology critique must be socially situated and hence subject to ideological distortions, how is she—and not the average person—able to see that they are distortions? (2) How can the critical theorist be assured that her claims about the ideology she believes to be dominant in her society are not themselves subject to ideological distortions?<sup>40</sup> Relatedly, (3) how can the critical theorist identify what is objectively true about her society (for example, that it is unjust), if the mechanisms by which we arrive

<sup>37</sup> Tommie Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” *DuBois Review* 11, no. 1 (2014): 67.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Gooding-Williams, “Revisiting the Ferguson Report: Antiracist Concepts and the Practice of Policing,” *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. 2 (2021): S132–37.

<sup>39</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5–8; Robin Celikates, “From Critical Social Theory to a Social Theory of Critique: On the Critique of Ideology after the Pragmatic Turn,” *Constellations* 13, no. 1 (2006): 21–40; Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 22–30; MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 98–101.

<sup>40</sup> The reader may notice similarity between this challenge and familiar puzzles about skepticism within epistemology. See Amia Srinivasan, “Radical Externalism,” *Philosophical Review* 129, no. 3 (2020): 395–431.



at judgments about objectivity are themselves influenced by ideologies, and are thus defective or constrained?

An implicit assumption of many critical theories is that the theorists themselves are somehow immune to the distorting impact of the ideologies they criticize, even though they operate within the societies they critique. The question, then, is this: How could an individual come to occupy such a privileged epistemic position? If one assumes that such an epistemic standing is possible to attain, what are the normative implications? Does such an epistemic hierarchy confer special authority on the epistemic elite or even justify paternalistic behavior on their part? Could the assumption that some individuals can escape ideological distortions itself be an ideological belief?

One response to this challenge is to deny that ideology critique requires some sort of special epistemic standing. As this argument goes, ideology critique must be “located on the same level as the ordinary situations it aims at and from which it seemed to break away so radically.”<sup>41</sup> On this view, the critical theorist need not “break with ordinary practices of justification” available to all in her society.<sup>42</sup> Instead, she can simply engage in those practices in a more consistent and rigorous way, utilizing good factual information.

This reply is less than satisfactory for two reasons. First, it ignores the possibility that the ordinary practices of justification are themselves distorted by ideology. This would be the case, for example, if those practices featured ideologically grounded testimonial injustice, such as the exclusion of women or people of color from meaningful participation. In such a case, the very “form of reason/rationality that purports to yield objective truths about our social condition is itself defective or limited in some way.”<sup>43</sup> Second, even if the critical theorist’s reasoning process is not impaired by ideology, its results will not be reliable if ideology distorts the factual premises upon which it relies.

One promising way forward is to identify and analyze historical cases where individuals have had progressive moral insights in spite of living in societies in which ideologies were pervasive. Consider, for example, the first participants in the British abolitionist movement.<sup>44</sup> Those individuals were able to achieve moral insights that the population at large would have wrongly regarded as false due to the prevalence of racist ideologies. Allen Buchanan notes that “moral pioneers”—the first individuals to challenge social arrangements that most in their society regard as unproblematic—tend to occupy privileged socioeconomic positions from which they are capable of criticizing the dominant ideology without being subject to excessive costs. Three features seem to recur in such situations. There are some individuals who (i) can enter new cooperative schemes without incurring high costs, so that if their unorthodox moral stance results in their being excluded from their current cooperative groups, they will not suffer unacceptable losses; (ii) are relatively socially influential, such that

<sup>41</sup> Celikates, “From Critical Social Theory to a Social Theory of Critique,” 34.

<sup>42</sup> Celikates, “From Critical Social Theory to a Social Theory of Critique,” 35.

<sup>43</sup> Haslanger, “Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements,” 6.

<sup>44</sup> Allen Buchanan, *Our Moral Fate: Evolution and the Escape from Tribalism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), chap. 6, discusses these cases at length, offering a theory of “moral pioneers.”

others are responsive to their criticisms and judgments; and (iii) have strong moral identities that, when reoriented by their new insights about what being moral requires, supply potent motivation for moral change. Based on historical cases, one can hypothesize that when these three social-epistemic conditions are satisfied, there is some prospect of successful ideology critique. At the very least, analysis of historical cases shows that there are some conditions under which the epistemic problem of ideology critique has not proved insurmountable; further analysis of such cases may prove useful in identifying additional conditions of successful ideology critique. Our surmise is that current ideology theories lack a convincing solution to the epistemic problems we have noted, but that they could develop one if they took a more empirical, historically informed approach.

### **Descriptive-explanatory accounts of ideology**

Critical theory has been the most prominent home for reflections on ideology. The concept of ideology understood in a nonevaluative, descriptive-explanatory sense has been fruitfully applied in a wide range of social-scientific studies and has proved useful in the explanation of widely shared conceptual resources or forms of “common knowledge,” the legitimation of social orders, and individual adherence to belief systems that shape our social world and experiences. Some of these accounts will naturally raise normative concerns, but this can be left aside until the following section, as the focus at present is on descriptive-explanatory uses of ideology.

One might ask: Why should philosophers attend to descriptive-explanatory accounts of ideology? The concept has most frequently been used for the normative end of criticizing social practices. Nonevaluative, descriptive-explanatory considerations in such a critical context might seem superfluous because it may appear that all we need are the resources of moral philosophy in order to criticize normatively problematic social practices, attitudes, and beliefs.

Nevertheless, descriptive-explanatory accounts of ideology have an important role to play in the philosopher’s evaluative enterprise. First, insofar as philosophers aspire to evaluate social phenomena, they must characterize them and that requires a descriptive-explanatory account. Second, an adequate descriptive-explanatory account would seem to be necessary for developing a strategy for overcoming ideologies in order to combat oppression. Interventions to reform or dismantle ideologies must be grounded in an understanding of how they operate.

### **What constitutes an ideology?**

Before one can consider how social science can help us understand ideologies, a prior question must be answered: What constitutes an ideology? On an individualist-cognitivist account: “An ideology is a widely held set of loosely associated beliefs and implicit judgments that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate

unjust social relations.”<sup>45</sup> According to this view, the beliefs that constitute an ideology have certain epistemic properties; for example, they are especially resistant to revision.<sup>46</sup>

Cognitivist (that is, belief-constitutive) conceptions have been challenged on the ground that they fail to recognize that there are noncognitive constituents of ideology. Sally Haslanger objects to the cognitivist conception of ideology because, as she argues, a cognitivist conception of ideology implies an unduly narrow account of ideology critique.<sup>47</sup> It cannot, for instance, offer a critique of features of our social world that are intimately related to ideological beliefs but which themselves lack propositional content:

[O]n the cognitivist account it remains the individual’s thinking or reasoning that is in error, not the very tools that our language and culture provide us in order to think. But what we absorb through socialization is not just a set of beliefs, but a language, a set of concepts, a responsiveness to particular features of things (and not others), a set of social meanings.<sup>48</sup>

On this view, language and concepts constitute an ideology, and so are the appropriate subject of ideology critique, yet they are not constituted solely by beliefs.

Haslanger thinks that if one allows noncognitive features to be constitutive of ideology, this can make a difference as to one’s choice of methods for resisting or reforming ideologies. Strategies of disruption become more appealing because they can challenge the ideology “not by offering reasons, nor by rational discussion, but by queering our language, playing with meanings, and monkey-wrenching or otherwise shifting the material conditions that support our tutored dispositions.”<sup>49</sup>

In reply to this line of argument, one could grant that ideologies have elements that lack propositional content but hold that those elements depend on other elements that do have propositional content. For example, revising a racist individual’s beliefs about Black people might result in a change of attitude toward Black people. Furthermore, disruptive practices can change beliefs. So, proponents of cognitivist theories of ideologies need not neglect the importance of disruptive practices in combating ideologies.

### **Explaining why there are ideologies**

In addition to disputes about the appropriate way to characterize ideologies, philosophers have also disagreed about how to explain their existence. One account, central to classical Marxist theorists, explains ideology in functional

<sup>45</sup> Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 66; Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory.”

<sup>46</sup> Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 185.

<sup>47</sup> Haslanger, “Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements.”

<sup>48</sup> Haslanger, “Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements,” 9.

<sup>49</sup> Haslanger, “Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements,” 10.

terms. To explain some phenomenon in functional terms is to explain it in terms of the needs or purposes it serves or the goals it attains rather than in terms of what caused it.<sup>50</sup> As an illustration, consider explanations of rain in a forest. On a functionalist explanation, we would explain the fact that it rained in terms of what the rain did; for example, it rained because the trees needed water. On traditional causal explanations, the rain would be understood in terms of events that caused it rather than by mention of any kind of purpose, goal, or need, citing facts regarding the properties of water under certain atmospheric conditions.

On some Frankfurt School accounts of ideology, ideologies are functionally explained in terms of their role in supporting, stabilizing, or legitimizing certain kinds of institutions or social practices.<sup>51</sup> On a functionalist view, sexist ideology exists *because* it supports social practices that subordinate and exploit women.

Jon Elster holds that the causal alternative to functionalism must accept methodological individualism, according to which social phenomena can be explained only in terms of aggregate individual behavior and, ultimately, properties of individuals.<sup>52</sup> While methodological individualism is committed to explaining social phenomena in terms of individuals, this does not preclude (a) individuals having goals or interests regarding others, (b) individuals having beliefs about collective social entities and acting on those beliefs, or (c) individuals having essentially relational properties that require reference to other individuals.<sup>53</sup> On this account, an ideology is a group-level phenomenon that emerges from individual behaviors and beliefs. We might explain ideologies in terms of social learning and the consequent beliefs individuals form about one another or in terms of the way in which individuals internalize certain evaluative frameworks that then shape the way they behave. The emergent result of such social learning would be a shared understanding of social life that then leads to behavior that systematically disadvantages certain groups.

Note that an explanation of ideology in terms of methodological individualism does not preclude the ideology leading to the kinds of social outcomes that functionalists believe explain the existence of the ideology. Just as rain might occur because of factors other than a tree's need for water, it remains the case that if it rains, then trees receive the water they need. The satisfaction of this need on the nonfunctionalist explanation is incidental to the causal explanation.

What can be said in favor of the different sorts of explanations? G. A. Cohen argues that the theses central to Marx's social theory commit one to offering functionalist explanations of certain social phenomena.<sup>54</sup> If one wishes to endorse Marx's broader social theory, one must also endorse functionalist explanations of certain social phenomena, including ideology. Elster replies by arguing that functionalist explanations often prove to be scientifically dubious.

<sup>50</sup> G. A. Cohen, "Reply to Elster on 'Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory,'" *Theory and Society* 11, no. 4 (1982): 485–86.

<sup>51</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 15–19.

<sup>52</sup> Elster, "Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory," 453.

<sup>53</sup> Elster, "Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory," 453.

<sup>54</sup> G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

The problem is that it is always possible to posit a novel function that explains a certain phenomenon, and functions can be left ambiguous such that they explain a wide range of seemingly inconsistent phenomena, making such explanations unfalsifiable.<sup>55</sup> That said, the fact that functionalist explanations are often scientifically dubious does not imply that *all* functionalist explanations are dubious, just as the existence of bad causal explanations does not imply that all causal explanations are bad.

A second objection to functionalist understandings of ideology, offered by Joseph Heath, holds that they are superfluous when they are invoked in order to explain collectively self-defeating behavior.<sup>56</sup> Consider, for instance, Marxists' appeal to ideology in order to explain the phenomenon of "voluntary servitude"—that is, the acquiescence of the masses in oppressive social orders. Heath argues that a better explanation is that revolution against the oppressors does not occur due to a failure of collective action. Individuals engage in collectively self-defeating behavior because it is individually less costly to comply with extant expectations and institutions: "Revolutions are risky business. Setting up picket lines, not to mention barricades, is tiresome, difficult, often cold, and sometimes dangerous. Even if it were in the interests of the working class to bring about a socialist revolution, this does not make it in the interest of each individual worker to help out."<sup>57</sup> If, as Marxists and critical theorists tend to assume, the sole value of the concept of ideology is that it explains acquiescence in oppressive social orders, then the concept is otiose if acquiescence can be explained without recourse to it.

It can be argued, however, that the concept of ideology can in some instances explain the acquiescence of the oppressed by showing why they never get to the point of encountering a collective action problem. A collective action problem occurs when individuals recognize that an option requires collective action, but they decide not to participate in the needed collective action because (as Heath describes) they calculate that success will occur or not regardless of whether they participate and regard participation as a cost to themselves (the free-rider problem). Ideologies can prevent individuals from considering collective action even to be an option; hence, they can prevent individuals from confronting a collective action problem. This would be the case if the ideology presents the status quo as natural and hence inevitable, proper, or just. For individuals in the grip of such an ideology, resisting or overthrowing the existing order is not an option. They do not consider the option of participating in revolution and reject it due to calculating in the way Heath describes. Their ideological beliefs prevent them from considering revolution as an option. The fact that they would have decided not to act if they had considered the option of revolution is irrelevant to

<sup>55</sup> Elster, "Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory," 459.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Heath, "Ideology, Irrationality, and Collectively Self-Defeating Behavior," *Constellations* 7, no. 3 (2000): 363–71.

<sup>57</sup> Heath, "Ideology, Irrationality, and Collectively Self-Defeating Behavior," 368; cf. Kirun Sankaran, "What's New in the New Ideology Critique?" *Philosophical Studies* 177, no. 5 (2019): 1441–62.

explaining why in fact they did not revolt. That is explained, instead, by their ideological beliefs.<sup>58</sup>

The concept of ideology can also be invoked to explain why collective action to reduce or eliminate oppression sometimes succeeds. For example, if an ideology presents the existing social order as severely unjust, then, if individuals are sufficiently committed to justice, they may refrain from the kind of calculation that results in their not participating. They might, that is, regard participation as morally mandatory, period. In other words, if ideologies include strong moral commitments, then they can block the kind of calculation that results in failure of collective action, due to the fact that moral commitments can function as “exclusionary reasons”—in this case, excluding considerations of self-interest. Alternatively, individuals can engage in the calculation Heath describes, but regard their moral reasons for acting as overriding.<sup>59</sup> In such cases, appeal to ideology will not be superfluous.

### ***Ideologies as shared mental models***

An account of ideology that is prominent in the social sciences views ideologies as shared mental models constituted by interrelated sets of beliefs, categories, and ways of understanding the world.<sup>60</sup> Two features are worth noting about this account. First, it employs the concept of ideology in evaluatively neutral terms, whereas many of the accounts reviewed thus far conceive of ideology in evaluatively negative terms. Second, the shared mental model account of ideology is generally cast in functionalist terms. Arthur T. Denzau and Douglass C. North emphasize the importance of ideologies in framing and simplifying individual decision-making in complex, radically uncertain social contexts, while Michael Freeden emphasizes that political ideologies of the twentieth century developed to offer solutions to important social and political problems facing society.<sup>61</sup> These functionalist appeals are not of the Marxist variety advocated by Cohen, but they are still distinctly functionalist explanations in that they hold that ideologies exist because of what they do for individuals.

<sup>58</sup> Allen Buchanan, “The Explanatory Power of Ideology,” elsewhere in this volume.

<sup>59</sup> Heath holds that it is a defect of ideological explanations of voluntary servitude that they are patronizing or disrespectful in that they attribute irrationality to the individuals in question. We find this allegation implausible for two reasons. First, there is much recent work in psychology and behavioral economics indicating that irrationality is pervasive among human beings, but we surely should not reject such research on the grounds that it is patronizing or disrespectful. Second, ideology theories, including those in the Marxist tradition, need not single out the oppressed as the only individuals subject to irrationality. They may, for example, attribute irrational ideological beliefs to both men and women (in the case of sexist ideologies), to whites and nonwhites (in the case of racist ideologies), and to capitalists as well as proletarians (in the case of capitalist ideologies).

<sup>60</sup> Arthur T. Denzau and Douglass C. North, “Shared Mental Models: Ideologies and Institutions,” *Kyklos* 47, no. 1 (1994): 3–31; Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); see also Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> Denzau and North, “Shared Mental Models,” 16–20; Freeden, *Ideology*, chap. 6.

Buchanan emphasizes other important functions of ideologies.<sup>62</sup> In particular, he builds on the idea of mental models by emphasizing how these models also have evaluative, not just descriptive, content. He also emphasizes the centrality of models in the coordination of task-fulfillment among large groups. In containing evaluative content, they set goals and ends for individuals and groups and provide them with ways of evaluating existing social arrangements. Furthermore, groups—typically characterized in essentialized, stereotyped fashion—are salient landmarks in the evaluative map. This conception fits racist, sexist, and classist ideologies.

Ideologies in the most general sense, then, can be characterized as shared sets of beliefs, evaluations, attitudes, expectations, and interpretative frames that play a role in coordinating the behavior of large numbers of individuals and guiding individual lives. Ideologies are descriptive-evaluative maps of the social world, necessarily simplified representations with directions for where one should go and with whom. While this description can apply to harmful ideologies, such as sexism, it can also apply to socially beneficial ideologies, such as those that encourage resistance to oppression.<sup>63</sup> If one adds the assumption that ideologies typically include assumptions about when the exercise of political power is legitimate, the result is a concept that is useful for critical theory approaches and for approaches that hold that ideologies can be liberating as well as oppressive.

### ***Ideology and the legitimization of social order***

The idea that ideologies include assumptions about when the exercise of power is legitimate is prominent in contemporary social psychology approaches to ideology that probe the role of ideology in legitimizing social orders. “Legitimizing” here is used in a nonevaluative way to mean “causing individuals to *believe* that the social order is legitimate.” Social dominance theory advances an account of how humans achieve social order where group-based discrimination and oppression is a central method of organization.<sup>64</sup> Such theories aim to explain why individuals believe that social hierarchies are legitimate.

According to the social dominance explanatory framework, groups organize in hierarchies in order to coordinate social cooperation. The distribution of goods within this cooperative scheme is often dictated by a dominant group in such a way that it receives a greater relative share of desirable goods. Ideologies are “legitimizing myths,” or shared sets of beliefs that lead individuals to support extant institutions and the hierarchy they produce. Some empirical evidence supporting this account shows that individuals express greater support for

<sup>62</sup> Buchanan, *Our Moral Fate*.

<sup>63</sup> On this point, see the subsection below on “The virtues of ideologies.”

<sup>64</sup> For reviews of this approach, see Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, “Social Dominance Theory: A New Synthesis,” in *Political Psychology: Key Readings in Social Psychology*, ed. John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), 315–32; Jim Sidanius et al., “Social Dominance Theory, Its Agenda and Method,” *Political Psychology* 25, no. 6 (2004): 845–80.



institutions that allocate resources in accordance with their ideology.<sup>65</sup> In this social-science work, “hierarchy” is best understood as an evaluatively neutral term. Use of the term ‘dominance’ in this context is unfortunate because it suggests a negative evaluation, which should be avoided in a descriptive-explanatory account of ideology. A descriptive-explanatory theory should leave open the possibility that some hierarchies do not feature domination. According to social dominance theories, the legitimizing and stabilizing functions of ideology make it essential for maintaining order.<sup>66</sup>

Although social dominance theory focuses on how ideology helps to stabilize hierarchy, some versions of the theory also maintain that ideologies can contribute to reducing hierarchy.<sup>67</sup> An ideology is hierarchy-enhancing insofar as it leads individuals to hold beliefs and to behave in such a way that group-based inequalities, such as racism or sexism, are exacerbated. An ideology is hierarchy-reducing insofar as it leads individuals to hold beliefs and to behave in such a way that group-based inequalities are reduced or removed. Examples include certain kinds of egalitarianism.

There are several gaps, though, in social dominance theory. Advocates of this theory acknowledge that they have offered little by way of explaining some important features of ideologies. They have not explained how an ideology comes to have some particular content nor how ideologies emerge and spread within a given social group.<sup>68</sup> Some critics have challenged social dominance theory’s “behavioral asymmetry assumption,” which holds that high-status individuals show in-group favoritism while low-status individuals show out-group favoritism. They argue that this assumption is inconsistent with well-confirmed results in social science, especially research concerning individual motives to dominate.<sup>69</sup>

### ***Ideology and individual psychology***

Two theories have fairly well-developed accounts of ideology from the perspective of the individual: social dominance theory and system justification theory. Let us begin by returning to social dominance theory, viewed from the standpoint of individual psychology. Social dominance theory posits an individual psychological property called “social dominance orientation.”<sup>70</sup> The basic idea is that there is variation in how strongly individuals prefer more versus less

<sup>65</sup> Felicia Pratto et al., “The Gender Gap: Difference in Political Attitudes and Social Dominance Orientation,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 36, no. 1 (1997): 49–68; Felicia Pratto et al., “Social Dominance Orientation and the Legitimization of Social Policy,” *Journal of Applied Social Philosophy* 28, no. 20 (1998): 1853–75.

<sup>66</sup> Sidanius et al., “Social Dominance Theory,” 847.

<sup>67</sup> Pratto et al., “Social Dominance Theory and the Dynamics of Intergroup Relations: Taking Stock and Looking Forward,” *European Review of Social Psychology* 17, no. 1 (2006): 271–320.

<sup>68</sup> Pratto et al., “Social Dominance Theory,” 310.

<sup>69</sup> John C. Turner and Katherine J. Reynolds, “Why Social Dominance Theory Has Been Falsified,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 42 (2003): 199–206.

<sup>70</sup> Felicia Pratto et al., “Social Dominance Orientation: A Personality Variable Predicting Social and Political Attitudes,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, no. 4 (1994): 741–63.

hierarchical relations among social groups. Individuals with a high social dominance orientation tend to disregard others, work to maintain hierarchies, regard hierarchies as a fact, and tend to prioritize gaining status. Most important for our purposes, social dominance orientation is positively correlated with support for institutions that distribute goods in accordance with hierarchy-enhancing ideologies. That is, social dominance orientation seems to be an individual psychological property that tracks a disposition for certain kinds of ideologies, namely, those that support hierarchies. That being said, social dominance orientation does not alone determine individual social behavior. Empirical research indicates both that social dominance orientation is only moderately correlated with conservatism, which is often associated with maintenance of the existing hierarchy, and that individuals endorsing more left-leaning or liberal political views can have high social dominance orientations, despite those political views often being associated with reduction of hierarchy.<sup>71</sup>

The second account that connects individual psychology to ideology is system justification theory, according to which individuals have a basic psychological motive to justify the existing social order.<sup>72</sup> More precisely, the system justification motive is a psychological motive that leads individuals to interpret the social status quo in such a way as to allow them to perceive it to be fair and justified. This leads individuals to endorse systems of beliefs and mental frameworks that support the status quo and justify distinctions among groups. Ideologies that present existing social orders as just are apt to emerge and spread because they satisfy individuals' need to perceive their social order as just.

Research by John Jost and colleagues characterizes some mechanisms by which the content of ideologies is determined and how ideologies spread.<sup>73</sup> On their account, individuals with an incentive to gain social support, such as political elites, develop and disseminate ideologies. Non-elite individuals then adopt—generally through an unconscious socialization process—those ideologies that best satisfy certain psychological needs, among them being the system justification motive. Those motives may vary among individuals and such variance influences which ideologies an individual is disposed to adopt. For example, psychological variables pertaining to individual management of risk, uncertainty, and mortality predict the sort of ideology they are likely to adopt.<sup>74</sup> System justification is only one of the motives involved in the adoption of ideologies; it remains open that other motives override the motive from system justification and lead to the adoption of ideologies that are more critical of the status quo.

<sup>71</sup> Susan Fiske, *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Status Divides Us* (New York: Russell Sage, 2011), 68.

<sup>72</sup> John Jost and Orsolya Hunyady, "The Psychology of System Justification and the Palliative Function of Ideology," *European Review of Social Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2003): 111–53; John Jost et al., "A Decade of System Justification Theory: Accumulated Evidence of Conscious and Unconscious Bolstering of the Status Quo," *Political Psychology* 25, no. 6 (2004): 881–919.

<sup>73</sup> John Jost et al., "Political Ideology: Its Structure, Functions, and Elective Affinities," *Annual Review of Psychology* 60, no. 1 (2009): 307–37.

<sup>74</sup> Jost et al., "Political Ideology," 317–23.

One obvious challenge to system justification theory is that its proponents have yet to provide a satisfactory justification for the key assumption that the desire to see the system one lives under as justified is a basic and universal psychological trait. Why should a desire to *perceive* oneself as living in a just social order be more basic and more powerful than, say, a desire to live in an *actually* just social order? Jost and his coauthors do not provide an account that would show why this trait exists in human beings. They suggest, but do not adequately develop or provide empirical support for, the hypothesis that individuals experience intolerable anxiety or other unfavorable mental states when they are unable to regard their social order as just. Even if this empirical deficit were remedied, the question would still remain: Why is the typical response to being disturbed by the thought that one's social order is unjust to believe that it is just rather than to try to make it more just?

### Evaluative accounts of ideology

Critical theory generally proceeds on the assumption that the world would be better if no ideologies existed. In this section, we address in greater detail the question "What makes an ideology bad?" At least four accounts of the badness of ideology are currently on offer: (i) Ideologies are bad by virtue of containing false beliefs. (ii) Ideologies are bad because they perpetuate epistemic injustice. (iii) Ideologies are bad by virtue of frustrating individual interests. (iv) Ideologies are bad by virtue of putting groups in a position where they are subject to domination in the negative, evaluative sense.

#### Pure epistemic accounts

Let us refer to the various social-epistemic features that, taken together, might constitute an ideology as  $\beta$ . According to the

*Pure epistemic account of the badness of ideology:*  $\beta$  is bad if, and because, (1) it contains false claims about the world and (2) individuals who hold  $\beta$  believe those claims to be true.

Geuss attributes this epistemic account to some members of the Frankfurt school, namely, Theodor Adorno and Jurgen Habermas.<sup>75</sup>

The appeal of the pure epistemic view is its simplicity. Ideologies are bad because they are systemic instances of lying, deceit, misperception, or delusion, all of which are generally regarded as undesirable. Nevertheless, the pure epistemic account faces some severe limitations. This view fails to distinguish adequately between ideologies in the general sense and ideologies in the pejorative sense. If merely containing false beliefs is sufficient for a negative evaluation of an ideology, then all ideologies are bad because they all provide simplified evaluative models of the social world and thereby necessarily either

<sup>75</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 13–15, 64.

mischaracterize it or omit important features of it. In other words, the pure epistemic view is unable to distinguish between ideologies that misrepresent social reality merely by virtue of being simplified maps of it from those that contribute to serious injustices.

The natural reply by an advocate of the pure epistemic view is to introduce further conditions that the beliefs—and perhaps noncognitive constituents of ideology—must satisfy in order to be bad or wrong. Such a reply seems eminently plausible, but note that it marks a significant departure from the pure epistemic account. On the pure epistemic account, ideologies are wrong just because they contain false beliefs. If the beliefs must meet further conditions, say, that they contribute to injustice in some way, then the view is no longer purely epistemic, because it must make reference to some moral standard. Indeed, the remaining accounts of the badness of ideology that we now turn to do exactly that, offering further conditions beyond being false that the constituents of ideologies must satisfy in order to qualify as morally bad.

### **Epistemic injustice**

Miranda Fricker's account of epistemic injustice can be marshaled to explain what makes an ideology bad; it is bad if, and because, it promotes epistemic injustice.<sup>76</sup> On Fricker's account, there are two kinds of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutic. An individual is the subject of testimonial injustice when, due to prejudices regarding the group of which she is held to be a member, her testimony is given lower credibility than is warranted.<sup>77</sup> If people treat an individual's claim as less reliable merely because that individual is seen as a member of some social group, then that individual has been subject to testimonial injustice. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when the lack of some concept results in an individual or group being at a disadvantage in understanding and making sense of their social experiences.<sup>78</sup> Fricker offers the absence of the concept of sexual harassment in the workplace as a case of hermeneutic injustice. Prior to the advent of that concept, women who were subject to sexual harassment in the workplace had no conceptual resources to understand what was happening to them, nor did they have the resources to express how they felt they had been wronged.<sup>79</sup> While Fricker does not draw an explicit connection between epistemic injustice and ideology, she often discusses epistemic injustice in terms of its dependence on social structures, which makes it fitting to apply the concept to ideology.<sup>80</sup>

Note that one needs a moral theory in order to explain fully the wrong of epistemic injustice. Testimonial and hermeneutic injustices are injustices proper because they wrong individuals in some way, and so a complete account must

<sup>76</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

<sup>77</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 20–22, 27–29.

<sup>78</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 147–52.

<sup>79</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 149–50.

<sup>80</sup> Indeed, Fricker begins her book by noting how the injustices are products of structural features of the epistemic context.

explain why exactly a wrong obtains. Fricker's preferred account focuses on virtue theory, though she offers a wide range of deontic and consequentialist reasons that can also serve to ground epistemic injustices.<sup>81</sup> Alternatively, one could argue, without invoking virtue theory, that testimonial injustice wrongs people by failing to show them equal basic respect, on the assumption that respect requires allowing all individuals to participate effectively in the social production of knowledge. We will take for granted that what Fricker calls epistemic injustice is an injustice, without attempting to fill in an account of exactly why that is so. We thus have the

*Epistemic injustice conception of the badness of ideology:*  $\beta$  is bad if, and because, individuals holding  $\beta$  regularly commit epistemic injustices.

Let us begin with the relationship between ideology and testimonial injustice. The most direct way to draw a connection between the two is to show that ideologies furnish mental frameworks that lead to the sorts of credibility deficits that constitute testimonial injustice. For example, a sexist ideology may provide individuals with the framing that men are best suited for cognitively demanding tasks, such as critical thinking or scientific reasoning, so that men's testimony in certain contexts is accorded more weight than women's just by virtue of their being men. The idea, then, is that ideology is related to testimonial injustice in that it provides the epistemic background that leads individuals systematically to undervalue the credibility of certain members of certain groups.<sup>82</sup>

Regarding the relationship between hermeneutic injustice and ideology, the question is this: How might ideology result in some group of individuals lacking the concepts needed to understand some aspects of their social life? When sexist ideology objectifies women in such a way that unwanted sexual advances by men in the workplace are considered natural or normal, such behavior is not regarded as problematic. Therefore, there will be no pressure to develop concepts that characterize what makes it problematic. The concept of sexual harassment in the workplace is not available because of the pervasiveness of sexist ideology.

A second way in which ideologies might foster hermeneutic injustice is via omission. Grant for now the general conception of ideology as a shared, *simplified* evaluative model or map of the social world. If simplification involves omitting concepts and interpretative frames that are needed by members of certain groups to make sense of their social experience, then the ideology will produce hermeneutic injustice. Using the example of sexist ideology once again, one can say that the idea of a husband's being entitled to sex from their wife precludes the concept of spousal rape, depriving women of a concept important for understanding their social experience.

<sup>81</sup> For testimonial injustice, see Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 43–59; for hermeneutic injustice, see Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 161–69.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Haslanger, "Gender and Race," 40.

### Interest frustration

A prominent explanation of the badness of ideologies is that they contribute to the frustration of individual interests.<sup>83</sup> Frustration is distinct from a setback of interests. An individual's interests are set back when she is precluded from realizing her interests. Setbacks can be legitimate, as is the case when moral norms require individuals to set aside their own interest satisfaction in order to observe duties toward others. Frustration, on the other hand, is a negatively evaluative concept and, in the context of a theory of ideology, is understood to be caused by features of the social order. One's interests are frustrated when they are set back through unjustified means or processes. For example, a serf's interests are frustrated in a feudal system because the political institutions set unjustifiable constraints on their satisfaction. Ideologies are bad when they inculcate beliefs and attitudes that encourage individuals to act in ways that enable social structures to frustrate their interests.

*Contextualist accounts of interest frustration.* One prominent approach to filling out the notion of interest frustration in theories of ideology is *contextualist*—or perhaps, more accurately, *subjectivist*. Contextualist accounts identify the bad of ideology in terms of wrongly setting back the interests that subjects of the ideology *believe* they have. There are two distinct ways of characterizing individual interests in a contextualist way: strong and weak. For now, we focus on the strong contextualist account.

On the strong contextualist view of individual interests, ideologies are wrong because they frustrate the very interests that they cultivate and give rise to in the population that holds the ideology.<sup>84</sup> A strong contextualist critique of capitalism, for example, would hold that capitalist ideology frustrates the very interests in freedom that it inculcates in subjects of the ideology. Put more precisely, we have the

*Strong contextualist account of individual interest frustration:*  $\beta$  frustrates interests if, and because, when it is internalized by some population  $P$ , (1) it leads members of  $P$  to believe that some set of values  $V$  internal to  $\beta$  are their interests, (2) the pattern of behavior that arises when  $\beta$  is internalized systemically leads to some other social state  $y$ , and (3) there is some other social state  $x$  that  $V$  deems better than  $y$ .

The strong contextualist account is rather demanding, as it holds that the only interests that count are those inculcated by the ideology. This restrictive scope is motivated by caution in response to the risk of being paternalistic.<sup>85</sup> The worry is that, in explaining the badness of ideology, one is simply imposing a moral view on a population that rejects or does not recognize the view. To avoid being

<sup>83</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, chap. 2, discusses the central role of interests in the theory of ideology.

<sup>84</sup> Rahel Jaeggi, "Rethinking Ideology," in *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, ed. Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher F. Zurn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 67–68, can be read as offering this sort of account. Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 63f., attributes the strong contextualist view to Adorno.

<sup>85</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 66.

paternalistic, the critique of ideology must depend on values that individuals subject to the ideology can recognize, among which are the values that the ideology inculcates.

The demandingness of the strong contextualist view might lead one to weaken the account by allowing appeal to *any* interests that the relevant individual believes she has in determining whether her interests are frustrated rather than permitting *only* ideologically inculcated interests. After making the appropriate modifications, we get the

*Weak contextualist account of individual interest frustration:*  $\beta$  frustrates interests if, and because, when it is internalized by some population  $P$ , (1) there is some set of values  $V$  shared by some members of the population, (2) the pattern of behavior that arises when  $\beta$  is internalized leads to some social state  $y$ , and (3)  $V$  deems that an alternative social state  $x$  is better than  $y$ .

The crucial difference with respect to the strong contextualist account is that condition (1) no longer requires that  $V$  be a product of the ideology; it need only be shared by some members of the population. The weak contextualist account still requires that we appeal only to interests that individuals believe they have, but we are no longer restricted to appealing only to interests internal to the ideology that frustrates them. Recall the capitalist ideology example discussed above. Suppose now that the ideology promises only a kind of formal equality and liberty that is realized under the appropriate legal and political institutions and that is also compatible with inequalities of income, wealth, and opportunities. Suppose also that the internalization of the capitalist ideology leads to support for those institutions. Under such conditions, the ideology does no wrong on the strong contextualist account of frustration, because it leads to social states that realize the interests it inculcates in them. Suppose, however, that there are widespread religious beliefs that advocate substantive equality among persons, something that is not possible where capitalist ideology is pervasive. Under such conditions, the weak contextualist account of frustration will classify the ideology as bad because it frustrates interests that are widely believed to be important.

*Real-interest accounts of interest frustration.* Both the strong and the weak contextualist accounts operate with a subjective notion of interests. An alternative account of interest frustration appeals to objective, or “real,” interests. On this account, an ideology is bad if it systemically and unjustifiably sets back the interests of some individuals or groups of individuals, regardless of whether those individuals believe those interests are theirs. Real-interest accounts have an advantage over contextualist accounts when it comes to cases where individuals are socialized to have no basis for criticizing an ideology. Taking sexist ideology as an example once again, if women are socialized such that they believe they have no interests that conflict with the ideology, then a contextualist account would have no grounds to judge the ideology as bad, whereas a real-interest account would. If such cases are not uncommon, then there is reason to opt for a real-interest account.



Just as with contextualist accounts, real-interest accounts of frustration can have varying levels of strength. On the weakest account, “real” interests might be defined in terms of what individuals would believe were their interests formed under appropriate epistemic conditions. This account is so weak as to almost be a variant of the contextualist account, but it departs from such accounts in that it introduces some idealization in the determination of individual interests; frustration is not understood in terms of setting back something that individuals currently believe is in their interests, but in terms of setting back something that they *would* believe is in their interests (under appropriate conditions).

Habermas’s characterization of an “ideal speech situation” is a prominent model of a real-interest account grounded in epistemic idealization. Some ideology wrongly sets back interests, on this account, when individuals would find the ideology and resulting social order unacceptable in the context of an ideal speech situation.<sup>86</sup> The ideal speech situation is an epistemic model wherein agents engage in argumentation unobstructed by any failings that might lead the agents to be in error. Ideologies are bad, on this proceduralist account, when they cannot be the object of the right kind of counterfactual endorsement.<sup>87</sup>

Procedural accounts are a weaker sort of real-interest accounts, as they continue to avoid commitment to comprehensive accounts of interests and, instead, understand individual interests as those that would arise if agents were to go through some reflective process. The demandingness of the reflective process can be increased, though, in order to make the account stronger. As Rosa Terlazzo shows, one can maintain a commitment to a distinctly procedural account while making it more demanding by requiring that within the procedure of reflection agents had valuable alternatives, where the value of the alternatives is given by a comprehensive philosophical account of value.<sup>88</sup> Put generally, procedural accounts of real interests yield the

*Procedural real-interest account of frustration:*  $\beta$  frustrates interests if, and because, when it is internalized by some population  $P$ , (1) it gives rise to a pattern of behavior that leads to social state  $x$  and (2) members of  $P$  could not endorse  $\beta$  or  $x$  under appropriate deliberative conditions.

As we have already noted, procedural accounts will differ in regard to what constitutes “appropriate deliberative conditions.” This may involve epistemic idealization, the presence of valuable alternatives, the emergence of agreement, and so on. More demanding conditions will result in a stronger conception of real interests, while more relaxed conditions will result in a weaker conception.

<sup>86</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 64–72, addresses Habermas’s account of acceptability in the context of ideology.

<sup>87</sup> See also Donald Bruckner, “In Defense of Adaptive Preferences,” *Philosophical Studies* 143, no. 3 (2009): 307–24.

<sup>88</sup> Rosa Terlazzo, “Conceptualizing Adaptive Preferences Respectfully: An Indirectly Substantive Account,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2016): 206–26.

The strongest conception of real interests identifies comprehensive, universal interests that are set back by ideologies. For such a view to be plausible, one would have to supply a theory of objective interests as well as an account of the values or principles that make those interests especially important. An ideology would then be judged as bad insofar as it sets back those interests. Thus, we have the

*Comprehensive real-interest account of frustration:*  $\beta$  frustrates interests if, and because, when it is internalized by some population P, (1) it gives rise to a pattern of behavior that leads to social state x and (2) according to the appropriate comprehensive normative account, x is normatively undesirable.

Tommie Shelby might be read as offering such an account when he criticizes racist ideologies in terms of John Rawls's theory of justice.<sup>89</sup> The comprehensive normative bases, on Shelby's account, are the two principles of justice developed by Rawls, with ideologies being bad insofar as they lead to states of affairs that fail to satisfy the two principles. This leaves open the possibility that ideologies are also bad because they support violations of other principles of justice.

Contemporary theorists who hold that ideologies support unjust social orders have not yet made it clear what comprehensive theories of justice their critiques presuppose. For example, if one assumes a relational egalitarian view of justice, one may characterize as ideological certain beliefs that one would not regard as ideological from the standpoint of a less demanding, distribution-focused theory of justice. To the extent that current theories of ideology do not take a clear stand on what justice requires, their evaluative deployment of the concept of ideology is incomplete.

### **Domination**

In addition to the frustration of interests, the badness of an ideology has also been prominently theorized in terms of domination. Ideologies are bad if, and because, once internalized, they help produce or reinforce social domination.<sup>90</sup> The account is then filled out with a theory of domination.

On some accounts, domination can only occur between discrete agents.<sup>91</sup> Ideology, on this agent-centric conception of domination, is bad because it assigns unjustified power to some individuals. The bad of ideology can be assessed in terms of an

<sup>89</sup> Tommie Shelby, "Race and Ethnicity, Race and Social Justice: Rawlsian Considerations," *Fordham Law Review* 72, no. 5 (2004): 1697–1714.

<sup>90</sup> Jaeggi, "Rethinking Ideology," 63–65; John Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 7.

<sup>91</sup> Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1999), 52.

*Agent-centric domination account of the badness of ideology:* Given some two agents A and B,<sup>92</sup> ideology  $\beta$  is bad if, and because, (1) A has some kind of perceived social authority over B in some contexts and (2) A has this perceived authority only if both agents internalize  $\beta$ .

Additional issues in the theory of domination arise here. On some accounts, it is a further necessary condition that A exercises her (or their) authority in some morally wrong way.<sup>93</sup>

In contrast to agent-centric views, on some accounts, domination can occur without any dominating agent.<sup>94</sup> The social system itself can be said to inflict domination. According to the

*Structural-domination account of the badness of ideology:*  $\beta$  is bad if, and because, it leads to some agents being dominated, where it is not a necessary condition of domination that it be a binary relation between different agents or groups.

If, due to structural injustices, there are cases of domination without particular dominating agents, then that is one reason to prefer the structural conception over the agent-centric conception.

### **The virtues of ideologies**

Thus far, we have identified different accounts of the characteristics of ideologies that warrant a negative evaluation. We have focused on what makes an ideology bad because that is essential to critical theorists' views, which comprise most of the philosophical literature on ideology. However, given a suitably general characterization of ideologies as simplified evaluative maps of the social world or, more determinately, as simplified evaluative maps in which groups are salient landmarks that contain beliefs about the legitimate exercise of power, it may be that some ideologies facilitate desirable outcomes and embody sound values. As we have already seen, ideologies can coordinate behavior and solve collective action problems, both of which are needed for achieving large-scale moral progress.

Ideologies can facilitate moral progress if they encourage action that reduces or eliminates unjust or otherwise undesirable features of the social world. An ideology of egalitarianism, for instance, might lead to normatively desirable outcomes if it undermines domination. Althusser notably argues that the appropriate social goal is not to displace ideology in its entirety, but rather, to supplant

<sup>92</sup> These agents may be group agents.

<sup>93</sup> For a comprehensive view of moral and normative conditions on domination, see Christopher McCammon, "Domination," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/domination/>.

<sup>94</sup> Gwilym David Blunt, "On the Source, Site, and Modes of Domination," *Journal of Political Power* 8, no. 1 (2015): 5–20; Sharon R. Krause, "Beyond Non-Domination: Agency, Inequality, and the Meaning of Freedom," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 39, no. 2 (2013): 187–208.

capitalist ideology by instituting a dictatorship of the proletariat and a corresponding proletarian ideology.<sup>95</sup>

It is striking that some, perhaps most, contemporary philosophers and critical theorists stipulate that ideologies only serve to support unjust social orders, thereby ruling out the possibility of genuinely liberating, revolutionary ideologies. Doing so ignores the fact that the social-science literature on the French and Russian Revolutions is replete with explanations that give a central role to revolutionary ideologies.<sup>96</sup> In our judgment, a viable characterization of ideologies must encompass both ideologies that support the status quo and those that challenge it.

### Reforming or eliminating ideology

The theories of ideology we have canvassed suggest various mechanisms for intervening to combat or reform undesirable ideologies and make progressive ideologies more effective. By “intervention” we mean actions that change the content of the ideology, promote or impede its diffusion, or reduce or enhance its effect on behavior. Critical theorists sometimes appear to take a suspiciously rationalistic approach to liberation from ideologies, suggesting that it suffices simply to expose the distorting effects of ideologies and their role in supporting injustice. Given the growing empirical evidence that false beliefs are often resilient in the face of information that contradicts them, we think it appropriate to consider additional interventions: (i) challenging the ideology by socially disruptive actions; (ii) changing the social learning environment in such a way that the ideology does not spread and persist; (iii) modifying, redirecting, or reducing the psychological motivations that lead individuals to adopt ideologies; and (iv) introducing competing ideologies that are less damaging.

The first intervention’s strategy to alter the effects of ideologies—what we will call “disruptive strategies”—aims to convince people that the ideology is not a reliable evaluative map of the social world, by challenging its descriptive content, its evaluative perspective, or both: “Effective social movements force our everyday concepts to break down and demonstrate how they fail to serve as adequate tools to get along in the world.”<sup>97</sup> On Haslanger’s account, disruption is paradigmatically achieved by marginalized individuals introducing “experiential breaks,” forcing the development of new non-ideological concepts, attitudes, and beliefs.<sup>98</sup> Historically, feminists have criticized ideology in similar ways by challenging and disrupting stereotypes of women as naturally suited for

<sup>95</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*.

<sup>96</sup> See R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>97</sup> Haslanger, “Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements,” 10.

<sup>98</sup> Haslanger, “Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements,” 11.

domestic work.<sup>99</sup> In general, we can think of social movements as mechanisms for the disruptive strategy. When large groups of individuals visibly act in ways that the prevailing ideology cannot effectively categorize or explain, then the ideology will no longer successfully function to orient individuals in their social world. On the expansive account of ideology, when the content of an ideology no longer reliably orients individuals in their social world, then individuals are likely to abandon or revise the ideology.

A second intervention strategy targets the process by which undesirable ideologies are learned by individuals. This approach conceives of the acquisition of ideology in terms of social learning. Successful learning depends heavily on the character of the learning environment. Some theories distinguish between “kind” learning environments, in which there is frequent, reliable feedback on one’s recognition and interpretation of signals, and “vicious” learning environments, in which such feedback is lacking.<sup>100</sup> Kind environments lead to quick and successful learning, while vicious environments lead to the converse. Interventions targeting the acquisition of an ideology thought to be bad or destructive would thus aim to change the learning environment to be relatively more “vicious” with respect to the acquisition of ideology, by introducing conflicting signals that impede the acquisition of ideologies. Increasing the diversity of social experiences will have a similar effect because the experience of diverse social signals will lead to less reliable retention of ideologies. Norm-reform strategies can be used to target the acquisition of normative components of ideology. Targeting high-status agents to change their beliefs to be non-ideological, for example, can lead to a social dispersion of normative beliefs that deviate from the extant ideology.<sup>101</sup> Thus, intervening in the learning environment by making it more hostile to the acquisition of ideology can be an effective mechanism of social reform.

The third method of intervention to combat undesirable ideologies addresses the needs or interests that make ideologies attractive. Above, we identified two psychological theories that explain individual motives for accepting ideologies. According to social dominance theory, individual dispositions for domination (or a preference for hierarchy) play a central role in individuals’ acceptance of ideology, whereas according to system justification theory, individuals accept ideologies as a means for coping with anxiety that they claim to experience in response to injustice. Suppose that these psychological theories are correct. If we could satisfy these motives by other means, that is, if individual anxiety at the perception of injustice could be stymied or if individual dispositions for

<sup>99</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 155.

<sup>100</sup> Robin Hogarth, *Educating Intuition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Daniel Kahneman and Gary Klein, “Conditions for Intuitive Expertise: A Failure to Disagree,” *American Psychologist* 64, no. 6 (2009): 515–26.

<sup>101</sup> For this and other norm-reform strategies, see Cristina Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

domination could be preempted, then the psychological factors that lead to the acceptance of ideology would be undercut.

In the best-case scenario, we might rely on these psychological features of individuals in order to encourage them to accept a more morally appealing (or at least less damaging) ideology. This last type of intervention aims to replace undesirable ideologies with more desirable ones. If we assume that ideologies are mental models (or evaluative maps) of the social world, the idea would be to devise and promulgate alternative models that are not as harmful in their behavioral effects. Democratic or abolitionist ideologies can be understood as doing so vis-à-vis ideologies supporting, respectively, despotism or slavery.

### Some further questions for the theory of ideology

This concluding section evaluates the state of ideology theory, with special emphasis on philosophical theories of ideology; identifies gaps or deficiencies in current work; and indicates an agenda for further research. Our survey shows that there are many theories of ideology, with no single theory at present being clearly superior. Philosophers, social theorists, and psychologists have approached ideology from their own unique perspectives and each discipline has contributed valuable insights. However, there is yet to be a comprehensive, unified account of ideology that integrates these contributions. Progress in theorizing ideology will require interdisciplinary synthesis. We recommend that such theorizing:

- (1) *Provide more solid empirical backing.* An integrated theory could help remedy a major deficiency of contemporary theories of ideology. Both evaluative and descriptive-explanatory theories of ideology presently rely on large causal generalizations that are not adequately supported by sound empirical studies. This is especially true of philosophical theories of ideology.
- (2) *Articulate the normative grounds of ideology critique.* Negatively evaluative theories are predominant in philosophical theorizing of ideology, but they are incomplete in their normative dimension. Theories that identify the main defect of ideologies as their support of unjust social orders are not grounded in a theory of justice. Instead, they assume that certain social practices are unjust, without taking a stand on major disagreements among theories of justice. Whether a particular ideology supports an unjust social order or is a progressive challenge to it depends on what justice requires, but what justice requires is hotly disputed among moral and political philosophers.
- (3) *Provide an account of responsibility for ideological beliefs and behavior.* Negatively evaluative theories of ideology raise but fail to answer another normative question: To what extent, if any, are individuals to blame for their ideological beliefs or behaviors based on them? Under what conditions is it appropriate to expect individuals to escape from ideological distortions that promote unjust social practices?

- (4) *Develop principled and compelling solutions to the reflexive epistemic problems of ideology critique.* To our knowledge, though some contemporary philosophical work offers hypotheses as to how enlightened activists might help rid others of their ideological prejudices (for example, through disruptive political acts), none has developed a systematic, empirically backed account of how such first movers themselves are able to cast aside the veil of ideology.
- (5) *Answer difficult questions about paternalism and the legitimacy of interventions to combat pernicious ideologies.* Closely related to the fourth deficiency is the fact that contemporary philosophical theories of ideology leave unanswered important normative issues concerning the justifiability of paternalism and the legitimacy of elite-initiated policies aimed at reducing the influence of ideologies. This point is worth elaborating because it illustrates the need to integrate theories of ideology with philosophical theorizing in other domains—in this case, theories of legitimacy.

According to justificatory liberalism, a social order is legitimate only if it is justifiable to all those subject to it. But what if ideological thinking precludes individuals from having reasons to accept the social order? Is the right response on the part of justificatory liberals to say that a social order is legitimate if all those subject to it would find it acceptable if their thinking was not distorted by ideological biases? That seems problematic because normal humans are subject to various biases, some rooted in ideology, some in our evolved psychology. In brief, theories of ideology that aim at liberation lack a theory of the ethics of liberation.

- (6) *Face the challenges ideology poses for democracy.* In addition to theories of legitimacy, another area of philosophical inquiry—namely, democracy—ought to be connected to theorizing about ideology. Contemporary philosophical theorists of democracy tend to concentrate on identifying the basic moral principles that undergird the case for democracy and the sorts of institutions needed to implement them. They have not paid systematic attention or, in most cases, any attention to the possibility that even the best designed democratic institutions may not deliver the benefits that are supposed to make democracy desirable if the public is in the grip of pernicious ideologies. Democracy could be undermined if the wrong sort of ideology became dominant or if ideological divisions undermined the normative and epistemic coordination needed for a functioning democracy.
- (7) *Develop connections between ideology theory and theories of large-scale social change.* In the past decade increasing attention has been paid to the previously neglected topic of large-scale moral change in general and progressive change in particular.<sup>102</sup> The role of ideologies in large-scale moral change—including both morally progressive and regressive

<sup>102</sup> Some exceptions include Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell, *The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution,*



change—is an important domain for theorizing ideology, but most philosophical work on ideologies has focused on how they help sustain existing institutions and social practices, not on their role in changing them. Theories of moral change need to accommodate a role for ideologies and theories of ideology need to make clear the role of ideologies in both social stability and change.

- (8) *Engage with the debate over whether ideologies are necessary.* As noted above, many theorists regard ideologies as heuristics or social maps broadly conceived, as connected sets of beliefs and attitudes that provide individuals with an evaluative orientation in the social world, reducing great complexity to more manageable form and supplying a sense of meaning, coherence, and often a group-based identity. On some accounts, ideologies also include beliefs about when social or political power is being exercised legitimately. From this perspective, an important question for further research is whether human beings—at least those who inhabit complex, large-scale societies—can do without ideologies. Theorists in the Marxist tradition assume that ideologies exist only where there are oppressive social orders. Accordingly, they think the goal is to dismantle ideologies so as to facilitate liberation. This means that in a just or free social order, there would be no function for ideologies to perform. But if ideologies are *necessary*, then that is not the case. Instead, the goal would be to limit the damaging effects of ideologies or prevent their misuses, not to eliminate them. We suggest that future research should explore the question of whether ideologies are necessary for human beings—more specifically, whether ideologies are an adaptation to the complexity of large-scale societies, functioning to supply psychological goods for the individual and coordination for groups. Pursuing this line of inquiry would require enriching ideology theory with the resources of cultural-evolutionary theory.<sup>103</sup>
- (9) *Abandon the stipulation that ideologies only serve to support unjust orders.* We noted above that, for the most part, current philosophical work on ideology has proceeded according to a constraining and unjustified assumption, namely, that ideologies only function to support unjust social orders. Social-science explanations of large-scale social change, including revolutions, that employ the notion of revolutionary or counter-dominance ideologies have largely been ignored. Our suggestion is that philosophical theorists of ideology should develop a broader yet substantive conception of ideology that avoids this constraint.
- (10) *Forge connections between ideology theory and fields of philosophy beyond moral and political philosophy.* Lastly, it may prove worthwhile for two reasons to reflect on the place of the topic of ideology in philosophy more generally and not only in moral and political philosophy. First, various fields, including most obviously epistemology and the philosophy of mind,

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and *Moral Progress* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Dale Jamieson, “Slavery, Carbon, and Moral Progress,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20, no. 1 (2017): 169–83.

<sup>103</sup> See, e.g., Allen Buchanan, *Our Moral Fate*.

may provide valuable contributions to the development of a more comprehensive understanding of ideology. Second, theorists in all branches of philosophy should proceed in a way that acknowledges that their own thinking may be distorted by ideological bias. After all, there is ample evidence that scientific reasoning has suffered from ideological biases, so there is no reason to think that any area of philosophy is immune from them.

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