

If you are committed to justice, why aren't you an activist?
Comments on Allen Buchanan

Sally Haslanger
MIT

Allen Buchanan's paper takes up the important question: How do ideologies function as "doxastic immune systems," and in doing so, obstruct efforts to promote social justice. His discussion is engaging and insightful, and he raises many important issues worth taking very seriously. I will focus on what I take to be three of his main points:

- 1) Individuals with a "perfect grasp of the principles of justice" (4) and a commitment to justice may nevertheless fail to act in ways to combat injustice because they have false empirical beliefs either about how far our actual conditions are from achieving justice, or because they have pessimistic ideas about whether justice is possible.
- 2) In some cases, we may be fully epistemically responsible while holding false empirical beliefs about the injustice of our actual circumstances, because (a) humans are predisposed to believe what others around them believe, (b) it is costly to be critical of the status quo, and (c) effective coordination with others requires shared belief, even if the belief is false. (pp. 6-7)
- 3) Ideologies are sets of "beliefs, patterns of thinking, and accompanying attitudes" that "serve as evaluative maps" (14); they may include both empirical and evaluative propositions and, importantly, are resistant to correction or modification. They "can function as doxastic immune systems" (14). Ideologies need not always "mask" injustice, as Marxians suggest; they may include true normative beliefs and allow for an acknowledgement of injustice, but also suggest that achieving justice is impossible or impracticable. Conservative ideologies are more likely to do this than liberal or progressive ideologies.

I am broadly in agreement with these points, so I will mainly be discussing ways to develop these points rather than resist them. Let's take the claims in turn.

Consider (1): Can we have a "perfect grasp" of the principles of justice, be committed to justice, live in a society that is clearly unjust, and do nothing to combat the injustice? It is tempting to say that of course we can. The application of any moral principle involves making judgments about the facts at hand, so it is not surprising that ignorance, self-deception, limitations of time, energy, inquiry, and also ideology, prevent *everyone* from living up to their own moral standards. The failure of individuals to recognize the wrongs occurring around them, to know what actions might address them, and to have hope that action matters, are major obstacles to social justice. So yes, one can have a grasp of what justice requires and be committed to it, but do nothing to correct injustice.

But the question itself seems to presuppose that people who know the principles and want to act on them *will be in a position* to promote justice. They may not be able to do the work, but contingent barriers aside, they are ready to go. This suggests a conception of moral principles that I find implausible. Is a

commitment to justice and knowledge of the relevant principles *ever* sufficient as a basis for action? What do the principles of justice look like – what form do they take? Are they sufficiently action-guiding?

Notice that even an explicit set of normative propositions like the Ten Commandments does not entail a determinate list of what ought and ought not to be done. More generally, moral principles are very abstract and are not scripts or recipes for right action. They require interpretation and specification; and there is usually room for reasonable disagreement about application to cases. Interpretation is a matter of *both* normative and non-normative inquiry. There are two kinds of case: thick principles and thin principles. Some principles include thick moral terms that are not obviously decomposable into normative and empirical elements. For example, what exactly is involved in honoring one's parents? What specific actions are required? One may be committed to honoring one's parents, but not know what relevant social practices count as honoring, or who counts as one's parents (adoptive, biological, both?); this looks like a non-normative uncertainty. Or one may be unclear how to distinguish honoring from respecting, so think that your respect is sufficient for honoring; this is plausibly a normative uncertainty.

Other principles are more purely normative, e.g., the act utilitarian principle. Suppose I grasp the idea that one ought always act so as to maximize utility. This is surely not enough to guide action because there are different interpretations of utility, and questions about whether I should maximize average utility or total utility, etc. But let's suppose I drill down and come up with a principle that is normatively specific. Is this alone sufficient to be action-guiding? Once I know the principle and want to act on it, am I ready to go? Clearly not. In order to act rightly, I need to apply the principle; and in order to apply it, I have to have knowledge of the facts. But then we shouldn't be surprised if moral knowledge and concern doesn't lead to action (or activism). Asking a moral philosopher with a perfect grasp of the principles of justice how to act is something like asking a banker for advice about how to invest: Buy low, sell high. Got it. But the question remains, what should I actually do here and now?

Another question is what counts as a "perfect grasp" of a moral principle? Is it like being able to recite the Ten Commandments and know their lexical meaning, or like being able to write a *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, or else? I know the Ten Commandments and can recite them. Plausibly, I grasp them. Do I have a perfect grasp of them? One might argue that a perfect grasp involves an ability to apply them correctly. So we should ask: Could one really have a perfect grasp of the wrongs of racism and go blithely about one's business thinking that we have achieved a non-racist society? Consider Eric, an ordinary White, able-bodied, middle-class, straight, cis-man. He knows we ought to be anti-racist, and also believes that racism is no longer an issue. But I think Eric has no clue what racism is. And the fact that he thinks that racism isn't an issue is evidence that he doesn't grasp the relevant principle of justice. So I'm not wholly convinced that empirical ignorance is easily separated from moral ignorance, or how abstract principles of justice, alone, are supposed to guide action.

Let's move on to consider (2): Recall, Buchanan argues that we may be *fully epistemically responsible* while holding false empirical beliefs about the injustice of our actual circumstances, because (a) humans are predisposed to believe what others around them believe, (b) it is costly to be critical of the status quo, and (c) effective coordination with others requires shared belief, even if the belief is false. I'm interested in exploring the conception of epistemic responsibility in play. At first glance, it appears that there is a background assumption that *ought* implies *can*, and a claim that we cannot help but believe what others

around us believe. But even if we are social beings, we aren't *determined* to accept the dominant beliefs. A critical perspective is always possible. The other two considerations – about the cost and benefits of accepting the dominant beliefs – seem to me *prudential* considerations rather than epistemic considerations. Epistemic and prudential responsibility are importantly different (though they may be related).¹ It may be costly for Eric to believe that racism is an ongoing problem, given the community he lives in; but he has a vast amount of reliable information about structural racism available to him (I am assuming the contemporary United States context), and either he is being epistemically negligent in avoiding it, or is not updating his beliefs in response to the evidence. In either case, he is epistemically irresponsible. There are some cases where we might allow for excuses, e.g., Eric's young son, Cameron, might be excused because he has not gained sufficient epistemic autonomy; others, perhaps those in the grip of a cult, may have compromised epistemic autonomy. But most of us are sufficiently epistemically autonomous to hold epistemically responsible when we fail to update our beliefs in light of available evidence.

As Buchanan notes, however, there is a broader question about how to understand the epistemic responsibility of individuals who are embedded in a social world structured by a hegemonic ideology.² (Note that my concern above about Eric is based on the idea that the current cultures in the United States are not hegemonically racist; there is significant public dissensus and critique.) So we should consider the general thought experiment: is it *possible* for an individual to be fully epistemically responsible and also fail to see gross violations of injustice due to the force of ideology?

To begin, let's get clear on the question. Are we to suppose that the ideology in question is so all-encompassing, so hegemonic, that individuals cannot but conform their attitudes to it? I'm not convinced that this is an apt question, for such a scenario is not plausible. First, no cultures are fully hegemonic; they are always fragmented, contradictory, dynamic. Second, human beings are not robots, we are epistemic agents. Epistemic agency involves reflective and critical capacities, an open-ended responsiveness to information from multiple sources, and the exercise of deliberative judgment. Epistemic agency entails epistemic responsibility; this comes in degrees. If one is so far in the grip of ideology that one's epistemic agency is compromised, then one's responsibility is lessened. This is part of what ideology does: it damages us not only materially and psychologically, but epistemically as well. At times it seems that this is what Buchanan is getting at: if we are in the grip of ideology, we may lack the epistemic autonomy to notice the injustice; expecting us to do so is to hold us to too high a standard. So we can be epistemically responsible – to the extent compatible with our agency – and not notice the injustice. But this falls short of being “fully epistemically responsible” in the sense required of full epistemic agents.

But this adjustment of responsibility lets most of us off the hook too easily. As mentioned before, societies are complex and ideology is never hegemonic. There are always pockets of doubt, resistance, conflict. Full epistemic agency is possible within unjust systems maintained by ideology, even if it is hard to maintain. And full epistemic agency comes with significant demands, including attention to facts that don't conform to the ideology. So, I would argue, it isn't possible to be “fully epistemically responsible” as an epistemic agent and be ignorant of the morally relevant facts. Either you are a full agent and irresponsible, or your agency is compromised: you are not *fully* responsible because you lack core epistemic capacities.

¹ The literature on pragmatic encroachment is relevant here. See Kim and McGrath (2019).

² Another important question is how to judge the responsibility of groups who benefit from the ideology (Mills 2007).

This leads us to consider the third claim I've highlighted in Buchanan's paper. Buchanan suggest that according to the dominant Marxian/Critical Theory accounts of ideology, "all ideologies function to *mask* relations of domination and thereby lead people to support or at least tolerate unjust social orders" (14). As I understand the argument, there are two concerns. First, not all ideologies "mask" injustice because they may allow us to simply to downplay it. Second, ideologies are not simply false or unwarranted beliefs but are self-sustaining doxastic systems that prevent the proper uptake of new evidence. There is much to be said about the topic of ideology, but let me start by offering two responses on behalf of the Critical Theorist.³

Buchanan is right that critical theorists include a functionalist condition in what it takes for a system of attitudes to be ideological: for something to be an ideology, it must function to sustain injustice. But it might do so in a variety of ways: sometimes by "masking" and sometimes by distorting, or deflecting. I don't see "masking" as the single way to sustain domination, so I would assume that the Critical Theorist could easily agree that ideologies can function in ways other than masking. On my own view, ideologies sometimes "make themselves true" and so ideologies need not be false; in such cases, the problem lies in their partiality, ambiguity, and the implicatures they seem to license. (Haslanger 2017)

Yet, Buchanan asks, can the Critical Theorist account for how ideologies function as "self-sustaining doxastic systems"? Does the traditional account explain why an individual in the grip of an ideology is resistant to new evidence? (14-15) It is hard to know what account of ideology is at issue because no specific Critical Theorist is discussed. But as I read the tradition, it would be wrong to characterize ideology as just a "set of beliefs and other attitudes." Consider, e.g., Rahel Jaeggi (2009):

... ideologies are ideas, but they are not just some disconnected ideas one might have or not have; rather, they are ideas that (necessarily or at any rate systematically) exist and evolve under particular conditions...ideologies constitute our relation to the world and thus determine the horizons of our interpretation of the world, or the framework in which we understand both ourselves and the social conditions, and also the way we operate within these conditions. (64)

She continues:

The critique of ideology, strictly speaking, does not directly criticize an ideology, but rather a practice that is maintained via this ideology or constituted by it. Thus, it attempts not just the rectification of the epistemic mistakes, but the - "emancipatory" - alteration of the situation. And it holds that one is important for the other. (69)

Robin Celikates is even more explicit in characterizing the ways in which ideology is self-sustaining:

When social conditions occur that obstruct the development and the exercise of reflective capacities and the corresponding practices of justification and critique, I propose we might speak of *second-order 'pathologies'*, which manifest themselves in *structural reflexivity deficits* on the part of the agents...the unquestioned guise of legitimacy or naturalness of [problematic] social practices and institutions – which could, of course, be called 'ideology' – can therefore be situated at a second

³ I use the term 'Critical Theorist' in upper case for the Frankfurt School tradition in critical theory, and in lower case for the broader tradition of critical race theory, feminist theory, queer theory, disability studies, etc.

level, for it prevents or complicates reflection on and critique of opinions, preferences, ways of acting and social contexts at the first level. (Celikates 2018, 124)

On my view of ideology, we should distinguish ideology (which consists in a set of social meanings) from ideologically shaped attitudes. The social meanings and material conditions reinforce each other through our practices, and so the self-sustaining system is not just in the head: it includes both culture and material conditions (Haslanger 2019). Because the material world is shaped by ideology, our ideological beliefs can be warranted; however, because ideology also licenses problematic communicative practices and inferential patterns, e.g., via implicature, presupposition accommodation, we end up making both empirical and normative errors.

Overall, I find the main ideas of the paper compelling in many ways. In particular, I agree with Buchanan that empirical matters are of utmost importance in understanding our normative commitments and normative failings. (In this I go back to Brandt (1959) on the difference between fundamental and non-fundamental moral disagreement). However, I find myself wanting more engagement with the critical theory tradition, the social epistemology literature, and literature on the epistemology of ignorance (Sullivan and Tuana 2009). Such engagement will, I hope, provide enjoyable and enlightening opportunities for further discussion.

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