

Critical Standpoints and the Epistemology of (In)Justice

1. Recap

In my first lecture offered a practice-based account of ideology. Social practices and social structures depend on a collection of social meanings that provide a “stage-setting” for action and are a constituent part of the local social-regulation system. These *cultural technēs* enable us to coordinate by providing the paths and signals that structure our practices. An ideology is a cultural technē “gone wrong.” It prevents us from recognizing or creating forms of value, and/or, organizes us in unjust ways.

In my second lecture I sketched a way of thinking about concepts, which are one kind of tool in a cultural technē. Working within an externalist model, I argued that concepts should be understood as a collection of skills for responding to informational content. Individuals form different conceptions as they develop different skills and employ the concept in different contexts. But a shared understanding of content – and apt responses to it – is important for coordination. Relative to a context (of inquiry or action), there will be a socially “approved” *orientation* toward the content. I argued that there are multiple ways to critique and ameliorate our concepts without simply replacing them.

Throughout the discussion I have relied on the idea that some cultural technēs are ideological because they are morally problematic. My task today is to say more about the basis for such normative evaluation. Ideology critique is an important part of efforts to promote social justice, but how is critique warranted?

2. Challenges

If we know what is just and unjust, then the proper target of ideology critique simply follows: we should disrupt the cultural technē that prevents us from valuing things aptly and disrupt those social structures that produce injustice.

Note, however, that we are theorizing from *within* a cultural technē, and that technē may itself be ideological. Ideology works by recruiting both the dominant and the subordinate to enact unjust practices without being coerced to do so. This is one thing that ideology, by its very nature, accomplishes; it does so by masking and distorting features of the world that matter. Recognizing this predicament, Robin Celikates (2016) points to three challenges an account of ideology critique must address. Here are two that are relevant today:

i) Normative challenge: what makes an ideology problematic? Are there objective moral values or moral truths by reference to which we can judge a social arrangement defective or unjust? If not, then on what basis do we undertake critique?

ii) Methodological or epistemological challenge: from what standpoint does the critic speak? Traditionally critical theory is embedded in a social movement and

aims to articulate the interests and demands of the oppressed. But then the question is “which insights of which agents – given that they usually do not constitute a homogeneous category – the critical theorist articulates.” (4)

It would be foolhardy to try in a single lecture to provide a full moral metaphysics and a moral epistemology. Let’s start by narrowing the task.

3. Methodological preliminaries

- We should distinguish the *justification problem* from the *illumination problem* (how do we get others to recognize their oppression so they too can be free and join our movement?) In critical theory they are often joined because critical theory should be emancipatory. But they need not be.
- What counts as ideology is a matter of the injustice of its effects and the (bad) values it promotes. I assume that there are truths about what is just, good, and valuable.¹ The claim that there are *some* moral truths cannot be avoided by those engaged in justified political resistance.
- The site of ideology critique is *the social domain*. This includes both individuals and the state, of course. But the primary issues concern what practices we should engage in, what social norms we should embrace, how we should go on, from here, together. Our inquiry is *practice-directed and embedded*.
- An individual can be treated unjustly *qua* individual. But within the social domain individuals are vulnerable to perpetrating or suffering injustice *by virtue of their social positions*. The aim is to improve our social practices and social structures to eliminate this positional vulnerability.
- There are many ways to organize social life, so the goal is not to ask what is the *best* way to do this – the project is *anti-utopian* – but to identify ways in which our way is inadequate so we can do better. In our societies, injustice is already rampant. Rectification is a priority.
- We do not need to *know what justice is* or have a complete moral theory to engage in social critique. We can begin with knowledge of (an) injustice. Knowing what makes this or that an injustice that can be generalized across all cases doesn’t necessarily help. Injustice may not be a proper kind. And knowledge what makes something an injustice – the modal knowledge – is not essential to remedy instances of it.
- Objective values need not be ahistorical or acontextual. They may be path-dependent. What’s valuable depends, *inter alia*, on what is available to value.

Human beings possess an inexhaustible drive to evaluate, to pronounce what is good and bad, beautiful and ugly, advantageous and disadvantageous. Without culture, human values are inchoate and indeterminate; through

¹ I am not committing myself here to a particular meta-ethical view about the nature of moral facts. What I say here is compatible with a robust moral realism, a quietist or deflationary moral realism, moral constructivism, and some forms of moral anti-realism.

culture they become differentiated, articulated, and refined [and he goes on to argue, constructed...]. Balkin (1998, 27-8)

4. Methodological/Epistemic challenge

Celikates methodological challenge situates us at a skeptical moment: If we, ourselves, may be in the grip of an ideology, how can we judge what is emancipatory? He addresses these challenges by treating ideology critique as a “second-order project.” On his view, ideologies are those practices that “block the development and/or exercise of the reflexive and critical capacities” of the agents in question. He says:

...ideology critique can be understood as second-order critique: If ideologies hide the possibility of criticizing (and transforming) these very ideologies and the problematic first-order phenomena they mask, then the first aim of the critique of ideology has to be to identify these blockades of critique and to work towards their dissolution. In this respect, ideology critique can be seen as taking a procedural turn: Its task is not so much to replace a mistaken or distorted view of social reality with one that is correct (as Althusser implies), or to develop a substantial vision of how society should be organized (as mainstream political philosophy does); rather, its task is to make it possible for agents to ask these questions and collectively look for answers to them themselves. (17)

Because critical theory, on his view, is not relying on or importing values other than the epistemic value of developing “reflexive and critical capacities” in a community, it needn’t take a stand on the substantive values at issue in the context. The critic’s primary goal should be to open space for resistant voices to be heard and allow the community to determine its own collective values and the social practices to further them.

I am sympathetic with Celikates’ proceduralism, and with the fallibility of any such process. Note, however:

- Ideology prevents us from engaging in just and worthy practices by shaping our agency (and the social world). In other words, every practice has an epistemic element: it depends on an *orientation* that selects the information that is apt and cultivates a set of cognitive, affective, and agential responses. How do we distinguish changing practices – shifting orientations – from a “second-order” epistemic interventions?
- Are critical capacities sufficient? How should we adjudicate which critique, or which form of critique, is warranted? Can critical practices be ideological?
- As Celikates suggests, a crucial commitment of critical theory is to listen to first person (and first-person plural) knowledge claims of the oppressed. This commitment is grounded, at least in part, in epistemic humility: we should

listen to those directly affected by the practices in question because they are likely to have better access to morally relevant facts. However, sometimes it is a claim of epistemic entitlement by *those who are members* of such oppositional groups. Why does he separate the critical theorist from those directly affected? Why aren’t the critical theorists included among those articulating the critique and demanding first-order solutions?

5. Case Studies

a) “The Girls Fought Back.”

On March 26, the *Washington Post* published an article about a group of girls at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School who learned that their male peers had created a “list” that “ranked and rated [them] based on their looks from 5.5-9.4, with decimal points to the hundredth place.” This kind of activity is not new at the particular high school and occurs virtually everywhere in some form or another. But a subset of the girls on the list, inspired by what they had learned through the #MeToo, movement were upset and complained to the principal. One male student was given detention and that was supposed to be the end of it.

But one of the girls, Nicky Schmidt, called on others in the IB program to meet at the main office the next day to protest the inadequacy of the disciplinary action. Forty girls showed up and as a result, the school hosted a 2.5-hour meeting to have a discussion with all students, including those who produced the list. At this meeting, “Several girls delivered personal and impassioned speeches describing not only their presence on the list but also their previous experiences with sexual abuse, harassment and objectification, both inside the school and outside of it.” After this meeting, the boy responsible for the list said, “When you have a culture where it’s just normal to talk about that, I guess making a list about it doesn’t seem like such a terrible thing to do...It’s easy for me to lose sight of the consequences of my actions and kind of feel like I’m above something...[But] It’s just a different time and things really do need to change.” Collective action was then planned to implement policies and practices aimed to reduce similar behavior in the future.

b) Combahee River Collective (“A Black Feminist Statement” 1977)

In 1974 a group of Black women started meeting in response to their experiences both in everyday life and in the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) and the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM). Their frustration had roots in their situation: “the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women’s lives,” and also the failures of both the CRM and the WLM to give them the tools to develop an adequate response: “there was no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we *knew* was really happening.” (33) Through a process of consciousness raising, they explored the experiential, cultural, and political dimensions of their experience, and developed new terms and concepts:

We discovered that all of us, because we were “smart,” had also been considered “ugly,” i.e., “smart-ugly.” “Smart-ugly” crystalized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our “social” lives.” (34)

Through CR, they reached the “shared belief that Black Women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy...” (33) and “to be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.” (34)

The group that persisted through 1977 – when the statement was written – decided that CR was not enough. They developed a study group, and decided to promote their cause through writing, publishing, lecturing, and other activist organizing. They conclude,

We believe in collective process and a non-hierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice. (37)

6. **Oppositional Consciousness**

Jane Mansbridge uses the term ‘oppositional consciousness’ to capture a particular kind of response to oppression. She suggests (drawing on Foucault) that oppositional consciousness in liberation movements requires:

...a gut refusal to be subordinated rooted somewhere in every human being...To form an effective basis for collective action, gut refusals need cognitive and emotional organizing. They need an injustice frame...They need an apparatus involving both reason and emotion that can trigger the switch from shame to anger. (2001, 4)

Iris Young calls this a “desiring negation.”

Desire, the desire to be happy [?!], creates the distance, the negation, that opens the space for criticism of what is. This critical distance does not occur on the basis of some previously discovered rational ideas of the good and the just. On the contrary, the ideas of the good and the just arise from the desiring negation that action brings to what is given. (1990, 6-7)

Each social reality presents its own unrealized possibilities, experienced as lacks and desires. Norms and ideals arise from the yearning that is an expression of freedom: it does not have to be this way, it could be otherwise. (1990, 7; see also hooks)

Drawing on empirical case studies, Mansbridge, et al (2001, 5) argue that moving from a gut refusal to an “injustice frame” requires the following steps:

- i. Identifying with members of a subordinate group (claiming the identity as a positive thing);
- ii. Identifying, articulating, and opposing injustices done to that group;
- iii. Identifying a specific dominant group as causing and in some way benefiting from those injustices;
- iv. Seeing certain actions of the dominant group as forming a “system’ of some kind that advances the interests of the dominant group.

In this effort, the following tools matter:

...An existing *oppositional culture* provides ideas, rituals, and long-standing patterns of interaction that overt political struggle can refine and develop to create a more mature oppositional consciousness... a history of *segregation* with some autonomy, providing “free spaces” for the elaboration and testing of ideas; *borrowing* from previous successful movements; the *synthesis* of more than one oppositional strand, creating more than the sum of its parts; mutually supportive *interaction*, bridging divides in emotional commitments; and *consensus creativity* by activists, drawing on the traditions and practices of everyday life. (2001, 7-8)

Oppositional consciousness transforms into a movement when those in the group “demand changes in the polity, economy or society to rectify those injustices.” (1)

7. **Oppositional Moral Epistemology** (aka the epistemology of CR)

In the context of oppositional politics, a primary task is to articulate a (warranted) moral claim *in the name of the subordinate group*. The claim is made against those with whom one coordinates and makes a demand that the terms of coordination be changed. This may be in a classroom, a family, an institution (workplace, civic organization), a nation.

The particular question we are facing is how, under conditions of ideology, should we proceed? Where do we stand to formulate a warranted claim? The process I am exploring begins with a reaction, moves to a complaint, and results in a claim. I draw here on Anderson’s pragmatist moral epistemology (2018), but, like Celikates, she situates the question of moral knowledge in theory. Instead, I will focus on practice.

- Begin with a moral “gut refusal” to one’s circumstances. Distinguish *whining* from *justified complaints*. Whining does not constitute a valid moral claim. Whining is an unjustified complaint. How do we transform whining into complaining?
- Begin by *testing* against the experience of others: Articulate our complaint to others within the same (affected) social group. Is the problem individual or social? Is it a *positional vulnerability*? It is important to create counter-publics

where the subordinated can complain to each other without being “corrected” by members of the dominant group.

- This process involves shifting *orientations* to notice facts that have been occluded – empirical facts, morally relevant facts, facts about possibilities. Shifts in orientations can be prompted by the idiosyncratic conceptions of individuals, by existing oppositional cultures (#MeToo), or by the alternative orientations gained by participation in different practices.
- Individuals within the group can rely to some extent on existing identities, but they “must [?] craft new [or redefined] identities.” (Mansbridge, 9) The shared identities allow for a cultivation of trust, new language, shared interests, etc. The patterns of injustice can then become more visible, new hermeneutic resources developed. (“smart-ugly,” “queer”)
- The “testing” process – at this stage and later stages – should involve forms of *bias reduction* and serious consideration of epistemic injustice of all sorts, including testimonial and hermeneutic. There is compelling empirical evidence that: “Standing in a position of superior power over others tends to bias the moral sentiments of the powerful, in at least three ways: it reduces their compassion, activates their arrogance, and leads them to objectify subordinates. (Anderson 2018, 7; also Fiske 1993, Goodwin et al 2010)
- Develop a hypothesis about the source of the problem. Who/What is responsible for the problem? Is the coordination system faulty or are there other problems, e.g., bad actors? (This is Mansbridge’s (v)-(vi).)
- Test the hypothesis. Is there *empirical evidence* that the hypothesis is the best explanation of the phenomenon? (Cf. Neo-Nazis) Revise the hypothesis, as needed.
- Articulate *a claim* challenging the practice, e.g., this (part of the) practice is unjust, oppressive, harmful, or wrongful.
- Suggest proposals for corrective procedures and practices. Where possible, corrective practices should be tested in counter-publics. They should then be taken to public sphere for further deliberation.
- If deliberation is unsuccessful, resort to non-deliberative interventions, “from petitioning, publicity campaigns, theatrical performances, candlelight vigils, litigation, and political campaigns to street demonstrations, boycotts, teach-ins, sit-ins, picketing, strikes, and building occupations.” (Anderson 2014, 9)

Even if a proposal be met with agreement in the public sphere, this is not the end of the story. As Anderson suggests, practical judgments must be tested by acting in accordance with them. She suggests we must ask: “[i] Does acting on the new judgments solve the problem as originally diagnosed? ... [ii] Does it do so with

acceptable side effects? An affirmative answer to both questions amounts to a successful test of the new judgment in an experiment in living.” (5-6)

Repeat as needed.

8. Warrant?

On this view, an oppositional consciousness is warranted insofar as it moves from a “gut refusal” to a moral claim through a collective examination of shared experience that is guided by sound epistemic norms. What norms are “sound” is not simply a matter of what the dominant culture recommends, but should be guided by best practices of social psychology, empirical investigation, and the lived experience of those in the subordinate group.

An oppositional moral claim is not, simply by virtue of being the result of such a process, dispositive. Rather, it is a move in a process of contentious politics that deserves consideration in collective deliberation. Contra Celikates, such progress is not merely epistemic. The critic makes a moral demand, and the social change it produces, is justified.

9. Normative Basis for Contentious Politics

So how do we gain normative standing to critique culture? Recall that under conditions of ideology there is, by hypothesis, a range of unjust social practices that oppress a group; however, the oppression is not experienced as such. As a result, in social movements that seek to undermine oppression, there is a risk that those engaged in the critique are illegitimately imposing their values on others. This is especially true when the targeted practices are ones that constitute value for the practitioners. Thus, Celikates’ questions are pressing.

I’ve argued, however, that an important form of social critique begins amongst those affected as a resistance to the practice that they are being asked to perform. Resistance arises from their knowledge that even if the practice constitutes some sort of value, it is harming *them* in ways that are morally problematic. They reject the ideology that makes the injustice appear harmless and articulate a moral claim against those who maintain the practice.

It may be that the values the resistant rely on when making claims of being harmed are at odds with what others engaged in the practice value. But that does not delegitimize their claims. Social practices are cooperative enterprises, and if parties to the cooperation have reason to think that they are being treated unjustly, or their values being undermined, there is a *pro tanto* reason for all parties involved to reconsider the practice. Insisting on terms of cooperation in the face of the non-consent of the opposition is coercive, and is a *pro tanto* wrong. This is the normative basis for contentious politics.

THANK YOU!!!