

Ideology in Practice: What Does Ideology Do?

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1. Introduction

In asking “What does ideology do?” I mean to be asking both, what does ideology do for us theoretically, and what does ideology do *to* us and *with* us as social subjects. These questions arise as the concept of ideology is beginning to play a more significant role in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy, and different scholars are entering the discussion from different traditions. The traditions use the term ‘ideology’ in different ways and, within the different traditions, controversies over whether the idea of ideology is theoretically or politically useful have appeared, disappeared, and reappeared over time (Purvis & Hunt 1993). My goal in this paper is to sketch a particular challenge for those working on social justice – why is it that most of us, most of the time, act in ways that perpetuate injustice? – and an approach to this challenge that relies on a theory of ideology to answer the question. I will consider several objections to the idea that ideology is either necessary or adequate to this task, and will then develop an account of ideology – inspired by Althusser, among others – that embeds it in social practices that helps to avoid such objections.¹

2. Conceptions of Ideology

a. Descriptive and Pejorative

One major divide in conceptions of ideology is between what Raymond Geuss (1981) calls “ideology in the descriptive sense” and “ideology in the pejorative sense.”² Both conceptions use the term ‘ideology’ to describe “the framework of meanings and values within which people exist and conduct their social lives” (Purvis & Hunt 1993, 479).

...human individuals participate in forms of understanding, comprehension or consciousness of the relations and activities in which they are involved... This consciousness is borne through language and other systems of signs, it is transmitted between people and institutions and, perhaps most important of all, it makes a difference; that is, the way in which people comprehend and make sense of the social world has consequences for the direction and character of their action and inaction. (Purvis & Hunt 1993, 474)

¹ Some sections of this paper draw on my first Spinoza Lecture “Ideology and Materiality” (Haslanger 2017a). I have been working on these topics since 2015 and several of my other papers are relevant and spell out further details of the view I develop here (Haslanger 2017b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 202b, 2021).

² The descriptive sense is also characterized as “positive,” “sociological,” or “anthropological” and the pejorative is also characterized as “negative” or “critical” (for example, Purvis and Hunt 1993 479, 477-78; Geuss 1981, 4, 12). Geuss also adds a third category “ideology in the positive sense.” In the United States, this positive sense seems to be employed when people describe (usually explicit) statements of political commitments as ideology, e.g., Liberal ideology. I’m not going to be concerned with this third conception of ideology in this paper.

The difference between the descriptive and pejorative conceptions is as one might expect: according to the descriptive conception, the ideology of a society, group, or organization is just whatever framework predominantly guides their understandings and interactions. This is why it is sometimes called a “sociological” or “anthropological” conception. All social groups have an ideology in this sense because we need such a framework – whether implicit or explicit – in order to live together, communicate, divide labor, and coordinate. According to the pejorative conception, it is agreed that there is a shared framework that structures social interaction, but this framework is ideological (roughly) to the extent that it shapes our interactions so that they perpetuate domination and subordination. Frameworks of this sort are morally and politically bad (there are different theories of what makes them bad and how they perpetuate the badness), and the pejorative use of ‘ideology’ highlights this fact.

So, there are differences – between what I’ll call the *sociological* and *critical* traditions respectively – in how the term ‘ideology’ is used. But are there any disagreements about the facts? Of course, there is plenty of room for disagreement, but there need be no fundamental disagreement on two points: there are frameworks of meaning and value that guide social agency and some of these frameworks are problematic (though particular versions may disagree about what frameworks of meaning are or what social agency consists in).³ The key disagreement is about whether to use the term ‘ideology’ for all such frameworks or only the bad ones. But what difference does it make which of the two conceptions we use?⁴

b. Motivating Questions

A broad question in social philosophy is to understand how members of society develop practical orientations or outlooks that enable them to coordinate their behavior. Those working within the sociological tradition take up this broad question and use the descriptive notion of ideology as a tool to address it. In the project of offering a full answer to the broad question, many more specific questions arise. For example, how do we come to have shared outlooks or “practical consciousness” – what is the causal mechanism by which we coordinate our attitudes? How do our shared attitudes come to have a particular content, for example, why do the wealthy tend to share a political orientation? Why are some groups more likely to be homophobic?

For those in the critical tradition, the core issue is not the broad one about how we develop coordinated practical orientations, but more specifically how and why, without being coerced, we come to enact *oppressive* social structures. Surely, most of us are not knowingly and intentionally dominating others or allowing ourselves to be dominated. Yet this happens, nonetheless. A rather straightforward example is the division of labor in the household, i.e., women’s “second shift” (Hochschild 2003). Even those who are conscientiously egalitarian in their politics live in ways that burden women with housework, childcare, eldercare, care of the sick and disabled, to an extent that far exceeds their fair share. Another example, of course, is the regular enactment and tolerance of racial privilege. We might also ask: why do we

³ By the ‘critical tradition’ I mean to include the Frankfurt School, but also related work in cultural studies, critical race theory, feminism, critical science studies, and such. I will use the term ‘critical work’ in lower case to refer to work in this broad tradition and ‘Critical Theory’ in upper case for the Frankfurt School.

⁴ Special thanks to Robin Celikates for his patience in guiding me as I think through this question and learn about the Critical Theory approach, for teaching me why ideological oppression is a distinctive phenomenon worthy of its own theory and for his (2018) book on the topic. I also draw insight and inspiration from Jaeggi (2009; 2018), Stahl (2017), Shelby (2003), Gooding-Williams (2011; 2017); Ng (2015); Lepold (2018; 2021).

consistently act in ways that frustrate our own self-interest? Why do we become agents of the injustices we abhor? And not just a few of us, and not just now and then, but pretty much all of us all the time?

The sociological and critical traditions differ in the focus of inquiry. There are multiple terms that can be used to pick out frameworks of meaning and values in the descriptive sense ('culture' is a common one). There are fewer terms for the distinctive phenomenon of complicit agency within oppressive frameworks, and 'ideology' has a history of serving this role.⁵ My focus is on the questions arising in the critical tradition, so I will use the term 'ideology' in the pejorative sense.

c. Subject Matter and Method

It might appear that the questions just listed, such as how and why we develop certain practical orientations, are properly answered by psychology, specifically social psychology. In fact it is not uncommon to find authors suggesting that an ideology is a set of widespread or dominant beliefs. So shouldn't we be asking psychologists, and not philosophers, such questions as: How are individuals conscripted into being complicit in injustice? How do communities develop a set of ideological beliefs? Although there is no doubt that psychological research is important, issues in social ontology, philosophy of action/agency, philosophy of language, epistemology, and social/political philosophy are crucial. There are many questions beyond psychology's purview.⁶ For example, what is a framework of meanings and values (and should we think of this as *culture*?) and how does it evolve? What is the role of language and other symbolic systems in such a framework? What does it mean to suggest that individuals live "within" such a framework? How does such a framework condition an individual's knowledge and agency? What is the relationship between such a framework and the material conditions in which it emerges? How are such frameworks related to social structures, and what role do agents have in creating, maintaining, and disrupting structures? What is structural oppression and how are we each implicated in it?

To see more clearly how psychology is only one dimension of the issue, let's begin by considering whether or not ideology is plausibly understood as a set of (implicit or explicit) beliefs. Because ideology is often described as a "form of consciousness," and is used to explain individual behavior, one might wonder how it could be anything other than a psychological phenomenon. But there are several ways in which use of the term 'consciousness' in this context can be misleading. Consider again the quotes above. Ideology is described as "a framework of meaning and values within which people exist and conduct their social lives," and as a form of understanding that individuals "participate in." There are three aspects of this idea that are not captured by the ordinary understanding of consciousness in philosophy of mind and that further suggest a non-psychological conception of ideology.

First, individual consciousness is taken to be private to the individual (and the same is true of other psychological attitudes), whereas an ideology must be public given that it structures how we interact with each other. Publicity is not simply a matter of individuals having the same psychological state (experience, belief, desire), because individuals can share a psychological state in this sense without being aware that others are in the same type of state, so each psychological state remains private. At the very least, what's

⁵ Thanks to Robin Celikates for his guidance in thinking through the use of the term 'ideology.'

⁶ Thanks to Michael Brownstein, Alex Madva, and Daniel Kelly for pressing me on these issues.

needed is something like mutual awareness of being in the state. In the case of belief, it would seem that publicity requires *common belief*: You and I not only both believe p , but also believe that the other believes p . In other words, it is recognized by both of us that we share the belief that p . (We might generalize this to say that we have a common desire/experience/emotion if we all desire that p and believe that the other(s) desires/experiences/has the emotion that p).

But this doesn't yet capture the notion of publicity that we presumably want for ideology. For example, an individual may be fully aware of the background ideology of a group and act in ways that conform to the ideology, but not believe or desire what the ideology recommends. I am fully aware, for example, that according to the contemporary ideology in my social milieu, women are (supposed to be) deferential to male peers. I disagree with this, but also sometimes abide by it, sometimes use it to my advantage, sometimes explicitly challenge it, and often flaunt it. My non-conforming actions may contribute to changing the sexist ideology in my immediate context (though backlash occurs!), but the public assumption of gendered deference – and sexist ideology more generally – remains broadly entrenched. In some social contexts, the majority may not believe the ideology, although they act in accordance with it because it is the (dominant? proper? enforced?) framework of meanings and values that is used to guide social interaction.

Ideology, then, does not seem to be aptly characterized as common belief, but as what individuals accept or presuppose for the purposes of interaction. In the context of philosophy of language, the idea of *common ground* is used to capture the background assumptions of individuals in a conversation, against which contributions to the conversation provide new information. Common ground, Stalnaker suggests, is “the field on which a language game is played” (2002, 720). There are at least two ways in which the idea of common ground is useful in thinking about ideology: i) common belief is not required for something to be part of or enter the common ground, and ii) one can implicitly convey elements of the common ground and update the common ground simply by presupposition. So eliciting acceptance of the common ground need not involve explicit discussion. This suggests that the common ground is dynamic and “prior” awareness of the contents of the common ground is not necessary for successful communication.

For example, suppose I run into you in the elevator and say, “I’ll be there on Saturday.” The utterance is comprehensible as a move in a conversation only if we both have a particular place or event in mind. In a case like this, we plausibly have a common belief concerning the place at issue and I give you new information about my plan to be at that place. I might also make adjustments to the common ground by presupposing information in my contributions to the conversation. For example, I might add “And I will bring my sister as my +1.” You may thereby learn that I have a sister and proceed on that assumption, saying, for example, “I look forward to meeting her.” But it is not necessary for this exchange that we have a common *belief* about the place or event. Suppose your daughter was to be married on Saturday but has called off the wedding. You don't want to be the person to break the news to the guests, so you don't challenge the assumption I am making; instead, she is the one who will make the announcement of the cancellation. However, you understand what I am saying by “I’ll be there on Saturday” and also update your assumptions about my sibling; and you truly express a desire to meet my sister. We communicate, but not against a background of common *belief* (we don't both believe that there will be a wedding on Saturday). Stalnaker offers an (idealized) account of common ground for conversation: “It is common

ground that ϕ in a group if all members accept (for the purpose of the conversation) that ϕ , and all believe that all accept that ϕ , and all believe that all believe that all accept that ϕ , etc.” (2002, 716).⁷

Although Stalnaker is concerned specifically with linguistic communication, the account is a useful starting point for understanding a broader range of social interaction that relies on background meanings and values.⁸ As a next step, we should not only include propositions *accepted* for the purposes of interaction, but also propositions that are the content of other psychological attitudes (Yalcin (2007, 1008-9); also Langton (2012; 2015); 2018, Hesni 2021).⁹ This step will help us capture how the framework doesn't just provide tools for *thinking* but also a wide range of tools for responding to others, i.e., it guides our social agency. In further steps, we should include non-propositional content, for example, conceptual content, in the background framework as well. (See Haslanger 2020a, 2020b.)

Note, however, that on Stalnaker's view, although what *makes* a proposition ϕ part of the common ground (introduces it or removes it) is a pattern of acceptance and belief, the *content* of the common ground is not psychological (the content is not a state of mind); instead, the content is the information or proposition(s) that serve as background to the exchange.¹⁰ In the case discussed above, the content of the common ground includes the proposition that your daughter's wedding is at such-and-such a place at such-and-

⁷ As Stalnaker says, “Belief is the most basic acceptance concept: the simplest reason to treat a proposition as true is that one believes that it is true. But there may be various reasons to ignore the possible situations in which some proposition is false even when one realizes that one of those possible situations may be the actual one. One may simplify or idealize in an inquiry, one may presume innocence to ensure fairness, one may make assumptions for the purpose of contingency planning, and one may grant something for the purpose of an argument. In cases where communication is facilitated by accepting propositions that one or the other of the participants don't believe, we need a notion of common ground based on a notion of acceptance that may diverge from belief” (2002, 716).

⁸ Note that the literature on conversational common ground emphasizes that it is extremely dynamic and often fleeting, unlike ideology, which is assumed to be entrenched and stable. (Thanks to Seth Yalcin for reminding me of this.) Accounting for the entrenchment of ideology will be part of the task for those who use common ground to understand ideology. But note that there are some stable elements of common ground in a linguistic context. For example, the default language we are speaking, the lexical meanings of words, the rules of conversation, and what default assumptions guide non-logical inferences. As I hope will become clearer as we move forward, because ideology is used as a tool to sustain social practices, and there are many reasons why certain social practices are relatively stable, this will help account for some degree of entrenchment. (See O'Connor 2019.) But the local dynamics of ideology and the fragmentation of ideology in relation to different practices are also important, and the idea of common ground helps to make sense of this.

⁹ Yalcin moves in this direction by moving to a notion of *conversational tone* that captures the attitude we should take towards the propositions in the common ground. “To be given the common ground is only to be given a set of propositions mutually understood to be presupposed; it is not yet to be given that the agents also regard those presuppositions as knowledge, or as warranted belief, or conjecture, or fiction, or whatever. Using the notion of common ground, we can define a second notion which will let us articulate the status that the agents of a given context attach to the propositions they presuppose. Call this notion conversational tone: An attitude is the conversational tone of a group of interlocutors just in case it is common knowledge in the group that everyone is to strike this attitude towards the propositions which are common ground. (It may be that a conversation is plausibly understood as having more than one conversational tone....) When interlocutors coordinate on a conversational tone, they come into agreement about what counts as the correct non-public attitude to take towards what is common ground. This will be a reflection, *inter alia*, of the purpose of the discourse” (2007, 1008).

¹⁰ Stalnaker models propositions as sets of possible situations or as functions from sets of possible situations to truth values; the informational content is a partition of logical space and is not “in the head” (Stalnaker 1998, 343; Stalnaker 1989). Note that sometimes we do accept for the purposes of interaction some information about psychological states, for example, that many people are afraid of snakes. But this is not to say that the content of the common ground consists in psychological states – the common ground includes the proposition that many people are afraid of snakes, i.e., the informational content.

such a time. Plausibly it also includes information about what a wedding is, what it means to have an invitation that includes a +1, that weddings are generally happy events to be celebrated, and so forth. If ideology is to be modeled on common ground, we may want a social-psychological theory that explains how some information comes to be accepted background (and why it comes to be accepted by some communities and not others), but ideology itself – the content of the ideology – does not consist of psychological states. (This should not be surprising to those who believe that meanings and values are not psychological states, for given the approach we are working with, an ideology is a framework of meanings and values.)

Second, how a framework of meanings and values is structured may not be determined simply by how we think they are related; some values and meanings stand in objective relationships. For example, if ‘dog’ means the species *canis lupus familiaris*, and ‘wolf’ means the species *canis lupus lupus*, then there are relations between the meanings of ‘dog’ and ‘wolf’ that we come to know through empirical investigation. For example, that dogs are related to wolves through evolution. The same is true of values: through normative inquiry we find that the value of honesty and the value of trust are related.¹¹ A group’s thinking or assuming that meanings and values stand in certain relations in a framework doesn’t make it so. This highlights the fact that we may be relying on a framework of meanings, yet not be aware that we are doing so. As a result, we may not be aware of the implications of the framework, and we may also be subject to correction about the framework. Nevertheless, it is characteristic of ideologies – of either sort – that they provide tools for understanding meanings and values that may not get things right. The framework of meanings and values may provide tools for a context of interaction that oversimplifies things, distorts things, suggests connections that aren’t there, or misses some connections that are.¹²

Third, in speaking of ideology, it is common to suggest that individuals live *within* a social world of meanings and values. This notion of living *in* ideology highlights that we come to social and linguistic competence as individuals with a framework of meanings and values already in place. As we become fluent, the meanings and values come to “live in us.” As J.L. Balkin suggests:

People become people only when they enter into culture, which is to say, only when culture enters into them, and becomes them, when they are programmed with and hence constituted by tools of understanding created by a culture at a certain point in history. Through existence in history, which is existence in culture, people obtain and incorporate cultural tools, and these become as much a part of them as their arms and legs. (1998, 18)

Balkin uses the term “cultural software” to describe the framework of meanings and values that we enter into and that enters into us. I prefer the term “*cultural technē*” to emphasize that the framework consists in a set of tools from which we pick and choose in navigating social space; choice and agency are part of the

¹¹ I am relying here on an externalist account of meaning according to which meanings are not psychological entities, i.e., they aren’t in the head (Putnam 1975; Stalnaker 1989). I am not suggesting that such semantic externalism is common amongst those who have offered theories of ideology, but I do believe that many theorists would agree that a purely representationalist account of ideology does not give us what we need. As hinted at here and explored more fully below, I prefer to think of ideologies as a set of tools made available for understanding oneself and others in one’s social milieu. Social interaction is a skill that relies on such tools.

¹² Much of the literature on conceptual engineering makes this clear (for example, Burgess et al 2020), as does the literature on the epistemology of ignorance (for example, Sullivan et al 2007).

picture.¹³ Again, linguistic competence is a helpful example: we grow up in a language and become fluent in using it. We don't make it up from scratch as we go along. Individual speaker intentions matter in determining what we say, but communication depends on a shared background that gives our utterances content, an apparatus (signs and symbols) for expression, and opportunities for uptake. Language does not control what an individual says – we pick and choose our words – but it structures and shapes what is said. And what it is possible to do or say depends in many ways on what has been done and said before us; and what we do and say now, changes what will be possible later.¹⁴ This point captures the dynamic looping effects between the content of ideology and our actions and attitudes. However, we should not conclude that the content of an ideology supervenes on a distribution of individual attitudes. As mentioned before, we (collectively) may be oblivious to how some contents in the framework are related and so be misguided about its structure, and the structure may change due to changes in the world, not only changes in our minds. (See also Epstein 2015, Haslanger 2020d.)

3. Social Subjects and Interpellation

Let us return now to the critical question: how and why, without being coerced, do we come to enact *oppressive* social structures. The answer offered by the critical tradition is, roughly, that we do so because we are in the grip of ideology. How might we spell out the relevant notion of ideology?

My own approach to this question is broadly Althusserian, so let me briefly sketch his view. In his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser distinguishes *repressive state apparatuses* (RSAs) and *ideological state apparatuses* (ISAs). (See Althusser (1971/2014, esp. 243-44.) RSAs include the “government, administration, army, courts, prisons,” that “function by violence” or, “massively and predominantly by repression” Ideological state apparatuses, including religion, education, the family, the legal system, the political system, trade unions, communications/media, and culture (“literature, the arts, sports, etc.”) “function massively and predominantly by ideology.” (No state apparatus is purely one or the other, and each depends crucially on the other (1971/2014, 244); though in modern society, the ISAs are the dominant mode of social management.)

On Althusser's view, the role of ISAs and RSAs, together, is to reproduce the productive forces (for our purposes we can focus on labor power) within specific relations of production. Althusser highlights the

¹³ The term ‘cultural technē’ is the general term for a set of cultural tools; one might think of it as ideology in the descriptive sense. Sometimes it is useful to speak of a broad cultural technē with many tools that are available for different practices and contexts; sometimes it is useful to be more specific and consider the technē available for a particular practice or context. In the latter case, I sometimes talk of the schemas of the practice. As will become clear, I do not assume that all cultural technēs are ideological. Some organize us in good and just ways; those that (roughly) organize us in oppressive ways are ideological.

¹⁴ Stalnaker also recognizes the looping between context and content: “The aim was to represent the interaction of context and content. First, context influences content, since the expressions used to say something are often context-dependent: what they are used to say is a function, not only of the meanings of the expressions, but also of facts about the situations in which they are used. But second, the contents that are expressed influence the context: speech acts affect the situations in which they are performed. If speech and its interpretation both affect and are affected by context in regular ways, then the pattern of interaction may result in regularities in speech-systematic relations between the contents of successive speech acts. In such cases, regularities that appear on the surface to be semantic are explained pragmatically: by the way one speech act alters the context, which in turn constrains the interpretation of a subsequent speech act. To represent and explain this kind of phenomenon, we need a single concept of context that is both what determines the contents of context-dependent expressions, and also what speech acts act upon.” (1999, 4).

educational system (or the “school-family”) as the primary contemporary ISA, for students learn in school the “know-how” required for participation in production.¹⁵ However, learning technical “know-how” is not enough:

...besides these techniques and knowledges, and in learning them, children at school also learn the ‘rules’ of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is ‘destined’ for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination. They also learn to ‘speak proper French’, to ‘handle’ the workers correctly, i.e. actually (for the future capitalists and their servants) to ‘order them about’ properly, i.e. (ideally) to ‘speak to them’ in the right way, etc. (1971/2014, 235-236).

He continues:

The reproduction of labour-power thus reveals as its *sine qua non* not only the reproduction of its ‘skills’ but also the reproduction of its subjection to the ruling ideology or of the ‘practice’ of that ideology...But this is to recognize the effective presence of a new reality: ideology. (1971/2014, 236)

A crucial difference between an ISA and an RSA is that individuals are hailed into a subject position by an ISA, rather than violently forced into it; and it is characteristic of those “good subjects” who respond to the hailing that they take up the norms as binding on themselves. As a result, they don’t need to be coercively managed, they work “all by themselves”! (1971/2014, 269).

This process by which we become socially legible subjects who interact and communicate effectively with others, Althusser calls ‘interpellation.’ One key point is that individuals are “trained” to occupy a particular social position – to be socially legible; but it is not the main point. The main point of the ISA is to create subjects who identify with their role in the oppressive relations of production, and to internalize the relevant expectations and norms, so that coercion to perform the role is not needed. Oppression comes in many forms. Ideological oppression is a *particular form of oppression* that enlists our agency in our own subordination and/or domination of others. There are other forms of oppression that are directly coercive rather than ideological, for example, systematic violence (Young 1990b).

This interpretation of modern power is developed further in Michel Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish: “the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary”* (1979, 201). In this work, Foucault meticulously chronicles the ways in which modern power is exercised less by coercion, and more by discipline – the crafting of subjects who monitor and manage themselves, their bodies, to conform to the demands of social position. As he says, “Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, docile bodies.” (1979, 137-8)

In Foucault, discipline works primarily through surveillance, first the surveillance of others, and then self-surveillance. Surveillance is an epistemic activity: the agent is put at risk of being exposed. Fear of exposure – being found out as noncompliant, incompetent, abnormal, and so abjected – is a mechanism

¹⁵ I discuss further the role of the school as a contemporary ISA in (Haslanger 2014).

for shaping subjects. But despising oneself for one's failings is as powerful as, if not more powerful than, any punishment others can impose. Self-hatred is not easily escaped or deflected.

Foucault allows that disciplinary powers "go right down into the depths of society" (1979, 27). Institutionally "unbounded" discipline occurs through social norms, and so is often masked and difficult to identify as ideological. As Sandra Bartky points out, this is characteristic of gender: "The absence of a formal institutional structure and of authorities invested with the power to carry out institutional directives creates the impression that the production of femininity is either entirely voluntary or natural" (Bartky 1990, 75). Women's bodies are constrained by norms specifying shape, size, motility, and appearance ("A woman's skin must be soft, supple, hairless, and smooth; ideally, it should betray no sign of wear, experience, age, or deep thought." (Bartky 1990, 69)). This process of constraint is not usually achieved directly by coercion. Under surveillance, we do it to ourselves, voluntarily. Over time, femininity becomes us (pun intended).

...insofar as the disciplinary practices of femininity produce a 'subjected and practiced' and inferiorized, body, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination. This system aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men just as surely as the army aims to turn its raw recruits into soldiers. (Bartky 1990, 73)

Althusser is very explicit that ideology is not merely a set of ideas or beliefs. In fact, it is one of his main theses: "Thesis II: Ideology has a material existence." (1917/2014, 258). He elaborates the thesis later: "I now return to this thesis: an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material" (1917/2014, 259). Of course, this is a complicated claim that deserves considerable interpretive care, but for our purposes, there are two ideas to highlight: (i) ideology is not manifested in mere thought, but through action in accordance with practices, and (ii) ideology always has a material apparatus.

...the 'ideas' of a human subject exist in his actions, or ought to exist in his actions, and if that is not the case, it lends him other ideas corresponding to the actions (however perverse) that he does perform. This ideology talks of actions: I shall talk of actions inserted into practices. And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the rituals in which these practices are inscribed, *within the material existence of an ideological apparatus*, be it only a small part of that apparatus: a small mass in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at a sports' club, a school day, a political party meeting, etc.... (1971/2014, 260).

It will be helpful to consider an example. For the moment, let's set aside the issue of ideology's oppressive function and focus on how frameworks of meanings and values are material: how they are embedded in practices, and have a material apparatus. A straightforward example concerns driving a vehicle. When one learns to drive a car, one learns the rules of the road, the meaning of signs and lines on the surface of the street, the values encoded in the rules (show attentive concern for others on the road such as cyclists, pedestrians, and other drivers, given that lives are at stake), and in time, the unstated habits and customs of those using the road in the area (never stop at a yellow light!). But one cannot be said to know how to drive simply by having propositional knowledge of this information. One must be able to "put it into practice" – to develop "know how," skill, bodily competence, until eventually one becomes fluent in

driving and can manage without second thought. Moreover, driving requires a vehicle and other background material conditions such as roads, traffic lights, an energy source (gasoline or electricity or solar power); this is the material apparatus for driving. I understand the material apparatus to include both the material objects that convey relevant information – such as traffic lights and signs – and the parts of the world that the practice manages (vehicles, bicycles, bodies moving from place to place).

According to Althusser's conception of ideology, then, an ideology is a public framework of meanings and values that guides fluent participation in materially engaged practices. What makes the framework *ideological*, however is that it produces and reproduces oppression through subjection, i.e., through the making of the social subject to occupy roles in an oppressive structure.¹⁶ Returning to Bartky, the framework of gender meanings and values is ideological because the practices it structures create human subjects who are “docile and compliant companions of men” (1990, 73, quoted above), by training them to enact the norms of femininity fluently, and to identify with them so that they judge themselves to be defective if they fail. The gender framework would not be ideological in a context where it is held in place entirely by direct coercion. And an individual may accept the framework for the purposes of social interaction (assuming that others are ideologically shaped subjects) but not identify with their proper role in it. In such a case they would act in accordance with the ideology but not be “in its grip.” (This would be parallel to someone accepting an assumption in the common ground for the purposes of communication, but not believing it.)

I embrace Althusser's general approach, but there are concerns that should be addressed, both about the explanatory use of ideology and the possibility of ideology critique. I will turn to them in the next section.

4. The Critique of Ideology (not “Ideology Critique”!)

Since the late 1970s, there has been controversy in the critical tradition about whether the notion of ideology, especially the Althusserian conception of ideology, is suitable for answering the core question: why and how, without being coerced, do we participate in and perpetuate oppressive structures (Purvis and Hunt 1993). There are three main concerns:

First concern: The conception of ideology is committed to an unacceptable form of economic or structural determinism.

Second concern: The conception is committed to the idea that ideology consists in false and/or distorted claims and leads us astray by misrepresenting social reality. One strand in this criticism rejects the idea that we can intelligibly speak of “Truth” outside of ideology; another strand (the one that I agree with) is that ideology is sometimes true.

Third concern: The critical approach to ideology disrespects those it is intended to liberate. The

¹⁶ The idea that the process creates a social subject is sometimes misunderstood as suggesting that the process creates human beings, or creates persons, de novo. This, of course, is rightly rejected. A better way to describe the process is that it forms human beings (or other social animals) into social subjects by situating them in social space and providing them with social identities (Althusser (1971/2014, 264) says as much). If one is Lockean, one might say that here in the space of my body there is a human being, a person, and a social self. But we don't need to multiply entities this way if we say that the human being becomes a person and becomes a social self through processes of development and socialization.

subordinated who are in the grip of an ideology are allegedly acting in ways contrary to their true interests – they are deluded – and the theorist aims to emancipate them from themselves. But who is the theorist to tell us what’s in our interests? A further elaboration of this concern asks: what value system is the theorist invoking? Can we intelligibly speak of “Value” outside of ideology, and if not, then on what basis can we identify human interests?

I will consider each of these objections in turn.

a. Economic Determinism and Materialism

Economic determinism is the view that all social phenomena can be explained (ultimately) in terms of economic forces. Some go so far as to suggest that ideology, then, is epiphenomenal. It does not play a causal role. Nevertheless, economic determinism could, in principle, provide an answer to our question about ideological oppression: we are (somehow) caused by the economic structure of our social milieu to have attitudes that result in unjust and self-defeating behavior. Passages in Marx such as this are suggestive:

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx 1859/1977, Preface)

A passage from Althusser has also been used to commit him to this view:

It is easy to see that this representation of the structure of every society as an edifice containing a base (infrastructure) on which are erected the two ‘floors’ of the superstructure, is a metaphor, to be quite precise, a spatial metaphor: the metaphor of a topography [topique]. Like every metaphor, this metaphor suggests something, makes something visible. What? Precisely this: that the upper floors could not ‘stay up’ (in the air) alone, if they did not rest precisely on their base. Thus the object of the metaphor of the edifice is to represent above all the ‘determination in the last instance’ by the economic base. (1971/2014, 237)

To begin, the attribution of economic determinism to Marx is problematic. First, it is generally agreed that taken at face value, the translation of this famous quote is not a fair representation of Marx’s view; the idea that relations of production *condition* (but don’t determine) consciousness is the more plausible interpretation of Marx’s text. We may be embedded in social structures, but we are not robots that lack autonomy. Moreover, it would be self-defeating for those seeking emancipation to accept a theory of ideology that precludes emancipation through social critique. If our attitudes are determined to support the status quo, then the only hope for social change is in factors that are outside of our agency.

Moreover, although it is common to find scholars characterizing Althusser as an economic or structural determinist, this view is not supported by his discussion of ideology. In fact, he states quite explicitly that speaking of “the metaphor of the edifice” with different floors resting on the base, is misleading because it is “descriptive” (1971/2014, 238). He elaborates what he means by this: we must “envisage this phase [of

theorizing] as a transitional one, necessary to the development of the theory. That it is transitional is inscribed in my expression: ‘descriptive theory’, which reveals in its conjunction of terms the equivalent of a kind of contradiction’.” As a result, he claims, it must be superseded: “the ‘descriptive’ form in which the theory is presented requires, precisely as an effect of this ‘contradiction’, a development of the theory which goes beyond the form of ‘description’.” (1971/2014, 239-240). As I understand his point, theory, properly understood, doesn’t merely *describe* the patterns of life as we know it, but considers counterfactual possibilities; in order to defend the causal priority of the base, such counterfactual reasoning is necessary, and importantly, the metaphor of the edifice that suggests an economic determinism, even “in the last instance,” is inadequate. (See also Smith 1984.)

Perhaps, however, Althusser endorses a structural determinism that isn’t purely economic. Individuals are mere cogs in a bigger structure of forces whose behavior is determined by the system as a whole. But this is also implausible as an interpretation of Althusser’s view of interpellation. To be “hailed” is not to be forced into a role. And the whole point of contrasting ISAs and RSAs is that ISAs do not function by coercion; this suggests that they are taken up (or not) by subjects who are capable of choice. Moreover, he allows that some effectively resist being interpellated in ways that perpetuate oppression. After criticizing schools as a powerful ISA, he says, “I ask the pardon of those teachers who, in dreadful conditions, attempt to turn the few weapons they can find in the history and learning they ‘teach’ against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped. They are a kind of hero” (1971/2014, 253).¹⁷

But even if I am wrong about Marx and Althusser (and I’m certainly not an expert on their oeuvres), the general approach to ideology need not be committed to economic or structural determinism. Consider Foucault: “At the same time, the micro-powers that create docile bodies also “define numerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which as its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations”.”(1979, 27). And contemporary materialists are clear that there is an interdependence between ideology and material conditions. For example,

I understand a materialist account as one that considers phenomena of ‘consciousness’ - e.g., intellectual production, broad social attitudes and beliefs, cultural myths, symbols, images, etc. - as rooted in real social relationships. This should not imply ‘reducing’ such phenomena of consciousness to social structures and social relationships, nor does it even mean that the phenomena of consciousness cannot be treated as having a logic of their own. Nor should it mean that phenomena like attitudes and cultural definitions cannot enter as elements into the explanation of a particular structure of social relationships, though I would claim that they can never be the sole explanation. This requirement mainly calls for a methodological priority to concrete social institutions and practices along with the material conditions in which they take place. (Young 1980/1990a, 33)

¹⁷ Another passage in which Althusser suggests that ideology is contested: “The ideology of the ruling class does not become the ruling ideology by the grace of God, nor even by virtue of the seizure of state power alone. It is by the installation of the ISAs in which this ideology is realized and realizes itself that it becomes the ruling ideology. But this installation is not achieved all by itself; on the contrary, it is the stake in a very bitter and continuous class struggle: first against the former ruling classes and their positions in the old and new ISAs, then against the exploited class” (1971/2014, 271).

So the concern that the Althusserian model of ideology is committed to an implausible economic or structural determinism is unpersuasive.

b. Ideology as Illusion

In the critical tradition, ideology is understood functionally: a framework of meanings and ideas, what I call a cultural technē, is ideological to the extent that it produces or perpetuates oppression. In other words, oppression occurs systemically and reproduces itself; ideology is a component in the system that contributes to the system's reproduction.¹⁸ The specific role of ideology, on this account, is to mask the real workings of the system; those in the grip of an ideology have *false* or *distorted* ideas (Geuss 1981; Shelby 2003, 2014). This suggests an answer to the core question: Individuals perpetuate oppressive systems, contrary to their own interests, because they are ignorant that the systems are oppressive and/or of how the systems work.

The associated concern mentioned above has two forms.

The Problem of Truth: If we are going to speak of false or distorted ideas, we must be assuming that there are truths about social reality, and that we can know such truths. But how is that possible? If our access to social reality is always mediated by a cultural technē, then how can we be certain that any perspective is “True”? We cannot “get outside” of culture to verify our perspective.

This concern is no more convincing than Cartesian skepticism, and there have been centuries of work challenging its background assumptions. For example, knowledge does not require certainty; concepts and meanings are not a veil between us and the world but provide access to it (my eyeglasses mediate my vision of the world and in doing so improve it!); we do not need to “get outside” of culture to discover falsehood because many falsehoods can be empirically refuted, and so forth. However, another version of the criticism is more compelling:

Problem of Accuracy: Because ideology functions to create social reality, it “makes itself true.” As MacKinnon says, “...the more inequality is pervasive, the more it is simply “there.” And the more real it looks, the more it looks like the truth.” (1989, 101) So “successful” ideology isn't necessarily false. This is, in fact, how we often end up forming the “ideological” beliefs in question – we look around us. For example, women, as a group, are actually better caregivers than men; after all, we do most of the caregiving of the young, disabled, and elderly. The poor, as a group, are less able to hold time-intensive jobs that impinge upon other responsibilities; after all, they can't afford childcare, they depend on public transportation, and often hold more than one job.¹⁹

As a response to the idea that ideology always and only functions by creating illusions and perpetuating falsehoods, this concern is legitimate. However, it is an odd critique of Althusser's view. Yes he does claim that ideology traffics in illusion: “THESIS I: Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1971/2014, 256). But recall also that on his account, ideology is

¹⁸ I am assuming a systems approach to function here. (See Cummins 1975; also Haslanger 2020d.)

¹⁹ The observation that ideology makes itself true must be qualified, however, depending on what claim is at issue. If ideological belief essentializes or naturalizes the patterns of social life, then it plausibly is false: women are not better caregivers by nature; those who are poor are not by nature unreliable. (See Haslanger 2012, Ch. 17.) But ideological belief need not be essentializing (though some is) to play a crucial role in an ideological orientation.

material: we enact ideology through the practices it structures. Ideology provides us with an imaginary relationship to our conditions, and we take it up this relationship in action and make it real. Although one might say that the relationship began “in imagination,” it becomes material. He claims that as we “advance in our analysis of the nature of ideology” (1971/2014, 258),

Ideas have disappeared as such (insofar as they are endowed with an ideal or spiritual existence), to the precise extent that it has emerged that their existence is inscribed in the actions of practices governed by rituals defined in the last instance by an ideological apparatus. It therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system... ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief. (1971/2014, 261)

The fact that ideology sometimes “makes itself true,” however, does not mean that it cannot be epistemically or politically criticized. Falsehood is not the only way a framework of meanings and values can go wrong (Anderson 1995). The tools provided by our practices for understanding the world, including our concepts, our background assumptions, the apparatus that shapes our behavior, may shape our attention, perception, cognition, affect, and memory in such a way that our understanding of the world is biased, or that our responses to it are misguided. We may miss important facts; we may lack hermeneutic resources to understand what is happening; the choice architecture we can imagine may be overly limited or even self-defeating. The problem is that ideology uses our (often reasonable and well-intentioned) agency to perpetuate the oppressive system, not always by deceiving us with falsehoods, but taking advantage of our need for fluent coordination and the shortcuts such fluency requires (Haslanger 2019). Any account of ideology must be attentive to the various ways it functions, which is not just by illusion and falsehood.²⁰

c. Epistemic Disrespect

If ideology systematically leads us astray, then we live our lives, maybe not under an illusion, but under a pervasive and systematic bias or distortion. Sometimes the distortion is of what is possible, sometimes of what is natural or decreed by God, sometimes of what is valuable, sometimes of what is reasonable to assume. Overall, even if we have a lot of true beliefs about social reality, we are self-destructively deluded about the choices we make and the reasons for them. The third criticism of the critical approach is that this broad delusion or distortion is implausible, and it doesn't show respect for our basic epistemic capacities. Stuart Hall puts it well:

‘Distortions’ opens immediately the question as to why some people—those living their relation to their conditions of existence through the categories of a distorted ideology—cannot recognize that it is distorted, while we, with our superior wisdom, or armed with properly formed concepts, can...[The alleged epistemic failures] make both the masses and the capitalists look like judgemental dopes. They also entail a peculiar view of the formation of alternative forms of consciousness. Presumably, they arise as scales fall from people's eyes or as they wake up, as if

²⁰ This is common in the Critical Theory and critical theory traditions. See Buchanan (forthcoming) and my comments on him (forthcoming).

from a dream, and, all at once, see the light, glance directly through the transparency of things immediately to their essential truth, their concealed structural processes. (Hall 1996/2006, 29-30)

In some ways this concern piggy-backs on the suggestion that ideology is a matter of falsehood and illusion. I've addressed that concern above. But there is a further point: if we are claiming that "the masses" who are acting in ways that perpetuate oppression are in some ways deluded, then (i) on what basis are we claiming this, and (ii) are we illegitimately assuming that we, the critical theorists, have a better understanding of social reality? Is that epistemically plausible or respectful? (This echoes the criticisms that have been raised about the idea that "the masses" live under "false consciousness".) We can then articulate two forms of the challenge:

Problem of Justification: On what basis can one claim that a particular cultural technē is ideological? For a framework of meaning and values to be an ideology it must facilitate a pattern of epistemic failings (including belief in falsehoods, but not only that) that perpetuates oppression within the broader system. But where does one stand to judge that a perspective is *biased* or *oppressive*? On what basis can one claim that it is "the masses" who are wrong? In doing so, is the critic claiming undue epistemic and moral authority?

Problem of Emancipation: If the power of ideology lies in its falsehood or distortion, then what's needed to make the world more just is access to the truth (the truth shall set us free), or right thinking. Given the problem of accuracy, truth won't be enough. And generally, power can override right thinking. Emancipation is not in the head.

Let's take the problem of emancipation first. Of course more will be required to disrupt oppressive systems than right thinking. Ideology is one part of the system and there are many ways a system can accommodate changes or "perturbations" in its parts. Althusser's approach, however, is less vulnerable to this complaint than many because, as we have already discussed several times, ideology is *material* (or, maybe better, for something to be an ideology it must be materialized in practices). Ideology isn't just taken up in psychological attitudes but is embedded in our actions in accordance with practices. To change an ideology is to change how we act, what practices we engage in, and how we coordinate. And this will do more to disrupt oppressive systems than just changing how we think. Nevertheless, the concern can be embraced: in order to end oppression we must do more than change our minds.

The problem of justification is more difficult and controversial, of course. But some part of the question is already addressed – in passing – in response to the *Problem of Truth*. Behind the problem of justification lurks an implausible epistemic and moral skepticism. The more pressing issue at this point is epistemic justice. What is the relationship between the critical theorist and "the masses"? Do critical theorists fail to show sufficient (moral and epistemic) respect for those who are "in the grip" of ideology?

This question deserves extensive discussion, but let me make three points here. First, "the masses" are not a homogeneous group who all share exactly the same perspective. "Critics" are among "the masses." Many of those who participate in oppressive systems come to have a "double consciousness" that gives them access to both the ideological frame and its harms (for example, Du Bois 1903/1987; Collins 1986; Anzaldúa 1987). (Note that this can be captured, to some extent, by modeling it on how one can accept the common ground for the purposes of interaction but not believe it). So warranted ideology critique is

not undertaken by strangers to the system, but by those within it who resist. In making sense of this, it is useful to draw on two kinds of fragmentation. *Individual fragmentation*: What background assumptions we accept depends on the purposes at hand – so an individual can proceed with one set of assumptions in one context and a different set in another context. As individuals move between contexts, they can gain critical perspective on the different cultural technēs. *Social fragmentation*: Ideology provides us with cognitive and practical skills, and what skills are necessary and developed are specific to communities and divisions of labor. As groups interact, they can achieve critical perspective on the cultural technē of the other. Fragmentation allows critique to arise in ways that do justice to the object of critique.

Second, there are better and worse ways to undertake ideology critique, and some methods do rely on a disrespectful elitism and epistemic silos. How to undertake respectful and meaningful ideology critique is an ongoing subject of discussion, but there is no reason to think that critique is necessarily a performance of epistemic injustice. Disagreement is not disrespect. Moreover, because on the approach we are considering, ideology is sometimes true and “the masses” may be being epistemically responsible in forming beliefs about social reality, we don’t need to say they are stupid or ignorant. Perhaps most important, critique can involve giving voice to concerns that had been inarticulable in the existing ideological framework. It can remedy hermeneutical injustice. But we must always keep in mind the risks and implement methods to guard against them.²¹

Third, critique alone does not impose another set of practices on others. As mentioned in the discussion of the problem of emancipation, changing minds is one small step. In order for critique to be a vehicle of change, it must be embedded in a broader movement to change the oppressive practices and material conditions, and the movement will act within and against a background political system. Epistemic and political injustice can arise at every turn. There are no guarantees. But there are also no promising alternatives (coerced reform? violent revolution?).

In this section, I have considered three sets of concerns that have been raised against a broadly Althusserian approach to ideology: the problem of economic determinism, the problem of illusion, and the problem of disrespect. These are not the only concerns, but they are relatively common. I have argued that either they are misplaced and so no change to the approach is required, or they are reasonable concerns but not ones that undermine the approach. Rather, they are ones we must remain attentive to.

5. Agency, Culture, and the Problem of Materiality

How do we use the Althusserian conception of ideology to explain our ongoing and yet unintended participation in structures of domination and subordination? As just discussed, we aren’t all stupid or self-deluded. A simple suggestion would be that we enact social structures simply out of habit formed through a process of socialization. We don’t “represent” what we are doing at all; we are “programmed” to do it by inculcating the local ideology. On this view, it is even a stretch to describe our participation as action rather than behavior.

Admittedly, socialization into habits and routines is part of the story but treating agents as “programmed” to act on ideology is not a great improvement over economic determinism; we seem to have just replaced

²¹ The literature on this is vast. Beyond those cited above, some key texts include Lugones (1987; 2006), Mills (1988), Mansbridge and Morris (2001), McWeeney (2016), Khader (2019). See also Haslanger (2021).

economic determinism with cultural determinism. A faint glimmer of hope is that we can overcome bad habits. But even this is unsatisfying because not all of our participation in social structures is habitual. We choose to act in ways that perpetuate the structures. Is there a way to understand constraints on agency in such a way that we still have genuine agency?

Judith Butler's notion of performativity helps here. On Butler's view, we enact our social roles and identities, not in a deterministic or unthinking way, but by *constrained choice*:

If one becomes a woman, according to Beauvoir, then one is always in the process of becoming a gender ... In this sense, then, gender is a project, a skill, a pursuit, an enterprise, even an industry, the aim of which is to compel the body to signify one historical idea rather than another. Instead of claiming that one is a man or is a woman, it is necessary to substitute a vocabulary of action and effort for the reified vocabulary of self-identical nouns. Hence, one does one's womanhood, one executes it, institutes, produces and reproduces it, wears it, flaunts it, hides it, but always stylizes it in one way or another. For gender is a corporeal style, a way of acting the body, a way of wearing one's own flesh as a cultural sign. (1989, 256)

One does not become a gender through a free and unconstrained act of choice, for gender identity is governed by a set of stringent taboos, conventions, and laws. There are punishments for not doing gender right. (1989, 256)

And yet, on Butler's view, the agency that is constitutive of gender is also a source of transformative potential:²²

Gender is a mundane drama specifically corporeal, constrained by possibilities specifically cultural. But this constraint is not without some moments of contingency, of possibility, of unprecedented cultural confusion that will invariably work to destroy the illusion that gender constraint is a dictate from nature. (1989, 261)

Ian Hacking provides one way to understand this "grip" of culture on agency. Intentional action plausibly involves an ability to understand what one is doing and to situate it at least within a frame of intelligibility, and often also within a space of reasons. He suggests, "What is curious about human action is that by and large what I am deliberately doing depends on the possibilities of description... Hence if new modes of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence" (1986, 166). In short, the intentional act (or intentional dimension of the act) is linked to one's conceptual repertoire; and one's conceptual repertoire is provided by one's culture. One cannot intentionally become a wife without there being an institution of marriage situated within a broader frame of cultural meaning. Navigation of social life depends on the cultural *technē*, i.e., it depends on a sensitivity to social norms and shared meanings that are part of the "common ground." Because our conceptual repertoire is inevitably limited, some forms of action are unintelligible. How could I then be expected to perform them? Moreover, this is also a site of disruptive potential. Once we gain some critical distance from our conceptual repertoire, we can ask: why can't a woman have a wife? Why should anyone be a wife? A critique of the available concepts opens space for new forms of action and new identities.

²² Note that we considered a passage from Foucault (1979) above that makes a similar point.

So where do we stand? How is performativity related to the questions of ideology that we are trying to address? We started with the question of how “frameworks of meanings and values” stabilize structures of power and domination. We considered the idea that economic or structural factors determine us to think and behave in certain ways. But such determinism is implausible. We also considered the suggestion that we are guided by false representations of the world, for example, by a set of false beliefs, and found it inadequate. My beliefs that there is an institution of marriage, and (at a certain place and time) that marriage “is between a man and a woman” are not false, and my intention to become a wife is not a misrepresentation.

Butler and Hacking have offered a way to locate a kind of agency constrained by shared “concepts and languages of practical thought” – or what we have been calling a framework of meanings and values – that have social origins. The problem is not, first and foremost, that we misrepresent the world; rather, we lack certain conceptual tools to make apt choices. For example, our concept of marriage is too limiting and obscures options that could be available (See Butler 1990; 1993). So we have made progress. But how do we link such ideological constraints with structures of power and domination? As Butler notes, it would be misguided to think culture, in itself, is subordinating. First, there is no agency at all without the conceptual resources that society, through our language, provides. Second, such resources are not only constraining, they are also enabling. (See Butler 1990, 148-149.) I consider this to be the *problem of materiality*.

Subordination may involve culturally interpolated subjectivity and constrained agency, but that cannot be the beginning or the end of the story. Subordination occurs in the economy of social relations. And these social relations are a site of material injustice. As discussed above, the materialist gives “a methodological priority to concrete social institutions and practices along with the material conditions in which they take place” (Young 1980/90, 33) but does not ignore other constraining factors such as law, culture, and language. Limiting marriage to “one man and one woman” is unjust because it deprives individuals of rights and organizes society in ways that stigmatize other loving relationships; it institutionalizes a normalized division of labor between husbands and wives that disproportionately burdens women with drudgery, has them accept submission and subordination as their proper role, and renders them susceptible to abuse. The problem is not, as Butler sometimes suggests, just that our cultural repertoire is taken as “given” and we are denied playful exploration of possibilities in constructing our own identities. Open-ended existentialist opportunities to construct ourselves are still compatible with deep and persistent injustice.²³ Is there a way to retain some of the insights from Butler and Hacking and incorporate them into a materialist account of ideology?

²³ There are actually two different issues packaged together here. First, the problem of materiality; second, the problem of normativity. A materialist feminism links the two: a primary site of injustice is material. Note that I am considering here views Butler published over twenty years ago and do not mean to attribute them to her beyond that timeframe. Her views have evolved and developed over time. For example, in “Merely Cultural,” Butler (1997) is more sensitive to the materialist critique than in her earlier work (1990, 1993) and there situates her view in a broad understanding of the economy. For example, “an expansion of the ‘economic’ sphere itself to include both the reproduction of goods as well as the social reproduction of persons” (1997, 272). However, in this work the normative critique remains insufficiently materialist. For example, Butler says: “The economic, tied to the reproductive, is necessarily linked to the reproduction of heterosexuality... This is not simply a question of certain people suffering a lack of cultural recognition by others, but, rather, is a specific mode of sexual production and exchange that works to maintain the stability of gender, the heterosexuality of desire, and the naturalization of the family” (1997, 274). As she describes it, the problem seems to be that binary gender and heterosexuality are treated

6. Social Practices

Social structures are networks of social relations. These include relations *between people*: being a parent of, being an employee of, being a spouse of; and they also include relations *to things*: cooking, owning, occupying, driving, eating, herding. Social relations, in turn, are constituted through practices.²⁴ Consider cooking:

Cooking rice is an instance of a more general practice of cooking, and regular engagement in the practice is constitutive of a social role: cook. Being a cook relates one in specific ways to other persons (not only the customer or family, but also the farmer, grocer, garbage collector, sources of recipes, including traditions, cookbooks, and so forth), and also relates one in specific ways to things (foodstuffs, sources of heat, water, utensils). Cooking is only possible within a social structure that provides the ingredients, skills, tools; the norms for taste, texture and ingredients; the distribution of labor of cooks and consumers, and so on.

What, then, is a practice? Social *practices* are, in the central cases, collective solutions to coordination, cooperation, or access problems with respect to a *resource*. The solution consists in organized responses to the resource. For example, traffic management and food distribution. Drawing on the work of William Sewell, Jr. (1992, 2002), I suggest (Haslanger 2018) that:²⁵

Practices consist of interdependent **schemas** and **resources** “when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time” (Sewell 1992, 13). Sets of interdependent practices constitute social structures.

I have developed this approach in several ways. First, the cultural *technē* is the “framework of meanings and values” that we have been discussing. *Practice schemas* are parts of the cultural *technē*, what I’ve been modeling as the common ground for social interaction. I use the terms ‘schema’ and ‘technē’ as placeholders. Roughly, a cultural *technē* is a clusters of concepts, background assumptions, norms, heuristics, scripts, metaphors, (and so on) that enable us to interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought, and affect; practice schemas are clusters of these that shape a particular practice.²⁶ In order for social meanings to function, they must be recognized, but they need not be endorsed. For example, I may know that being a mother and being a father carry different social meanings in my milieu, and I may take that into account in my actions, but reject the meanings and look for ways to resist them. And yet, public schemas are typically internalized by individuals and have a role in thought; this enables individuals to act fluently in social contexts. *Psychological schemas* process and store information in individuals that provides the basis for various behavioral and emotional dispositions. Although psychological schemas are variable and evolve across time and context, their elements are sticky

as “stable,” “natural,” and “normal.” But these features are not only what makes gender, heteronormativity, and the family, unjust. Thanks to Robert Gooding-Williams for urging me to clarify this. See also (Fraser 1997; 2000). Butler’s more recent work takes up issues of justice beyond the ones mentioned here. See, for example, (Butler 2013, 2021).

²⁴ I develop this account of social practices more fully in Haslanger 2018.

²⁵ Contemporary practice theory is a broad interdisciplinary project with many strands. In addition to Sewell, some of the work that I draw on in developing my view include: Ortner 1984; Rouse 2006; Jaeggi 2008, and others.

²⁶ Note that I am still using an externalist account of concepts and propositions along the lines of Stalnaker. See also Machery 2009.

and resist epistemic updating. The schemas that partly constitute practices are practice schemas; however, when we enact a token of the practice, corresponding psychological schemas guide us.

I've suggested that schemas organize us around resources. What are *resources*? Resources are things of all sorts – human, nonhuman, animate, or not – that are taken to have some (positive or negative) value (practical, moral, aesthetic, religious, and so forth).²⁷ Valuable resources are a source of power. For example, water, land, time, and knowledge, are all valuable resources; toxic waste is also a resource, but has negative value. In principle, whether something is a resource and what kind of resource it is, depends on the cultural frame. In the context of agriculture, a grasshopper may be a pest; in another context it may be a culinary delicacy. Outside of any interpretive frame, there are grasshoppers, but they don't count as a resource (good or bad); and even things that are in many contexts highly valuable, for example, money, are not valuable in all contexts.²⁸

In social reality, schemas and resources are interdependent and create looping effects. Sewell suggests:

A factory is not an inert pile of bricks, wood, and metal. It incorporates or actualizes schemas.... The factory gate, the punching-in station, the design of the assembly line: all of these features of the factory teach and validate the rules of the capitalist labor contract...In short, if resources are instantiations or embodiments of schemas, they therefore inculcate and justify the schemas as well... (1992, 13)

For example, a practice schema enables us to interpret a kind of nut as food, and so a resource. What it is to be food is not just a matter of what is edible, since not all edible things are known to be or count as food; food is what we (collectively) regard as to be eaten. Our interpretation of it as food also situates it within a framework of reasons: we gather nuts because they are food. Moreover, the interpretation of a kind of nut as food, i.e., as a valuable resource, raises questions about how to gather, maintain, produce, distribute, protect, and store, the nuts. These tasks require us to develop practices to guide us, and our actions, in turn, affect the quality, quantity, and sorts of nuts produced. So there is a causal interdependence over time between schemas and resources as well.

Schemas evolve. Resources change (the Western US is running out of water). This requires new practices, and new schemas. For example, almond production is at risk. We then ask: what nuts require less water to produce? Our thinking and acting evolve along with the object/artifact. Moreover, the practices may become congealed and dissociated from the interests and functions that were their original impetus.

²⁷ Following Giddens and Sewell, I have mostly used the term 'resources' for the material element of social practices. The term 'resource' however has a positive connotation and I've been urged to find another way of speaking of resources that more easily includes things taken to have negative value. (Thanks for this nudge to Jeffrey Stout.) So on occasion, I have used instead 'sources.' But because we are not assuming that what we "take to be" of value or disvalue is correctly valued, we should not assume that 'source' or 'resource' is evaluatively factive. Here I return to use 'resources' because I think it sounds better and because it reflects the tradition I am part of.

²⁸ Note that my account differs from Sewell's in several ways. For example, on his view, resources are defined as a source of power; on my view something is a resource by virtue of being seen as having value (negative or positive). On Sewell's view, schemas and resources constitute structures; on my view they constitute practices that, in turn, make up structures. Some of Sewell's language suggests that the interdependence between schemas and resources is both causal and constitutive, but he doesn't explicate his points in these terms. See also Haslanger 2012, Ch. 17.

So where does ideology fit into this picture of social practices and structures? Do we have a better model for agency within self-defeating and unjust structures? Social structures and the practices that constitute them consist partly in practice schemas – the public meanings and such that enable us to interpret each other and coordinate. An ideology is a cultural technē that organizes us (i) in relations of domination and subordination (either through the production and distribution of goods, or in the constitution of selves), or (ii) in relation to resources whose value is misconceived or not recognized. This gives us two dimensions of ideology critique: we are valuing the wrong things (or in the wrong way), or our ways of organizing our relations to things of value are unjust.

7. Loose Ends

My account of ideology is sympathetic with the criticisms that ideology should not be evaluated primarily in terms of truth and falsehood, and it embraces the suggestion that social agency (or socially intelligible agency) is only possible against a framework of meanings and values – a cultural technē. However, on my account, we can still preserve a notion of ideology as a cultural technē “gone wrong.” It may “go wrong” in various ways: it may not provide us the tools to recognize what is valuable; it may distribute what is valuable unfairly; and it may organize us in unjust or harmful ways. It does this by functioning as a common ground within practices, and guides us in responding to material conditions in ways that produce or perpetuate subordination and domination. Nevertheless, we remain agents navigating the material and cultural conditions, and resistance – both individual and collective – is possible.

Progress can be made on identifying the failures of ideology, first, by considering elements other than the *attitudinal* parts of schemas. If we assume that ideology consists of shared or common beliefs, then we will have to rely on traditional epistemic critique (Shelby 2003). And we end up critiquing individuals (rather than the cultural frame) which, as we have seen, risks epistemic injustice and disrespect. However, if we use the (rough) model of a cultural technē as a common ground for social interaction, we can also undertake a critique of concepts, or cognitive processes of various kinds. How do we evaluate concepts? Concepts, themselves, are neither true nor false. For example, the concept of *being wasteful*, itself, is not true or false. Instead, a key evaluative question for a concept is whether it is *apt* or not. Should we evaluate agricultural practices or factory production using the concept? By what standards should we judge this? Or we might ask of a concept, say, *race*, should we have it in our repertoire at all? If so, how should we construe it?

Given that practices involve not only individual agency and culture, but also material resources (and apparatus), we can follow Althusser in saying that “ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material” (1917/2014, 259). It is not just my attitudes and the attitudes of others that create my choice architecture. For example, what *food* I prepare is constrained by the foodstuffs and tools available, and my movement depends on the terrain and the pathways and forms of transportation that are available. To understand these material constraints, we need to recognize how the physical world, interpreted and shaped by culture, is arranged to produce and reproduce injustice. Correlatively, we need to take note of how changes to the physical environment can make a difference. For example, curb cuts that were designed and justified to assist the disabled have had positive effects in enabling women, and now men, who are pushing strollers to have access to public space.

Although ideology often works by stabilizing assumptions about what's natural or "given," this is not the only way it goes wrong epistemically or practically. To determine whether a cultural technē is ideological, we need a normative account of what's valuable, how we ought to organize, produce, distribute, appreciate things of value/disvalue, and what are acceptable terms of distribution and cooperation. This requires attention to material disparities, distributions of productive and reproductive labor, and insight into the pathologies and potential of collective action. The methods and starting points for such a normative account are controversial, but the issues cannot be side-stepped.

My account of ideology is materialist because the source and structure of a discursive/conceptual frame depends on the complex network of social relations that organizes our relationship to things of (assumed) value. In the broadest sense, this is the economy: "economic" relations should not be understood simply in terms of the market. (In this I am sympathetic to Butler 1997.) The economy is the system that manages a community's resources, and if resources are what has value within that society, then the economy also involves the distribution of power, status, health, leisure, education, and so forth. These are managed through the interplay of schemas and resources that constitute social practices and relations.

8. Conclusion

I've argued that a broadly Althusserian account of ideology combined with a Sewellian account of practices enables us to give an account of how unjust social structures are routinely enacted and reinforced, while maintaining a commitment to genuine agency, respect for the epistemic capabilities of the oppressed, and attention to the materiality of injustice, while also offering insight into possibilities for resistance and social change. Providing a full theory is not possible in a single article, but I hope that I have sketched a path for fulfilling these desiderata that can be fruitfully developed.

Social structures are enacted by individuals within conditions of constrained choice. We are constrained by our basic human needs (for food, shelter, engagement with others, and so on), the material conditions of our situation, and the social meanings that enable us to coordinate with each other. Such constraints are usually organized unjustly, though not intentionally so. Many practices we engage in fluently but not deliberately; and the fallout of interactions between practices is hard to notice, much less predict. To see structural injustice, we need to step back from our self-conscious agency and consider how we are molded (socially, physically, historically) by our environments to participate in practices that present themselves as worthwhile and meaningful, yet result in often broad and deep injustice. Fortunately, we can modify or change unjust constraints on agency, if we think and act together.

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