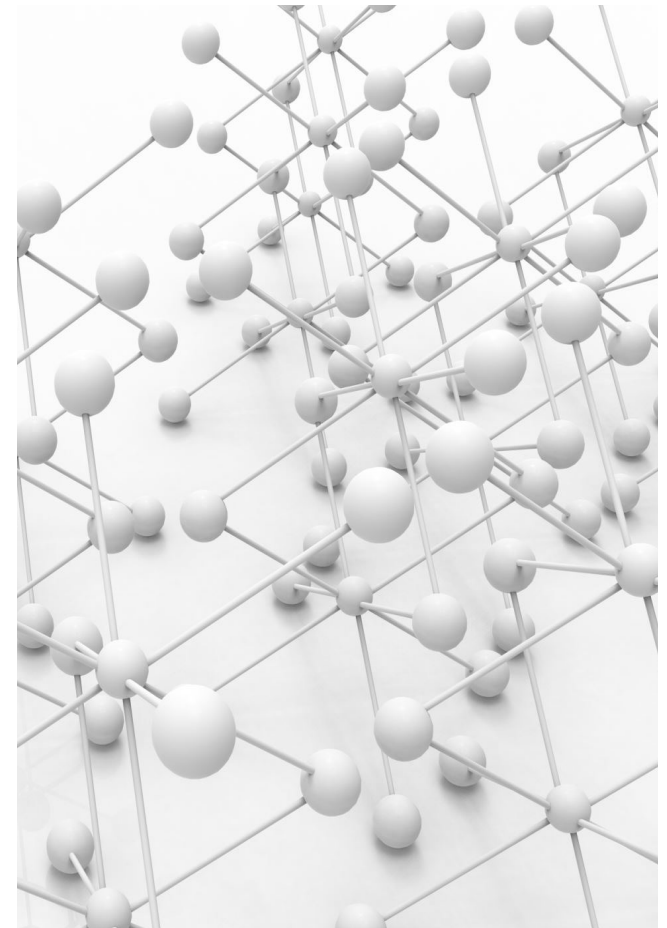# Ideology, Culture, and Social Meaning
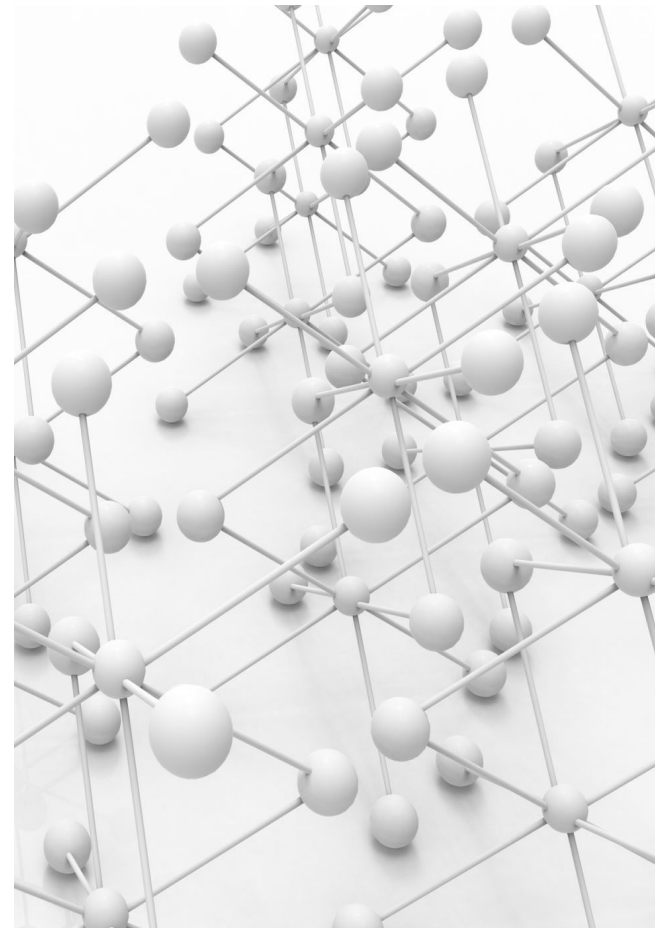
Sally Haslanger

16 February 2023

Outline

1. Introduction: A Critical Approach to Ideology
2. Social Practices and Ideological Cultural Technēs
3. Signaling and Content
4. Materiality of Culture/Ideology
5. Conclusion

Outline

To undertake the study of cultural activity – activity in which symbolism forms the positive content – is thus not to abandon social analysis for a Platonic cave of shadows, to enter into a mentalistic world of introspective psychology or, worse, speculative philosophy, and wander there forever in a haze of "Cognitions," "Affections," "Conations," and other elusive entities. Cultural acts, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms, are social events like any other; they are as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture.

(Geertz "Religion as a Cultural System," 91).
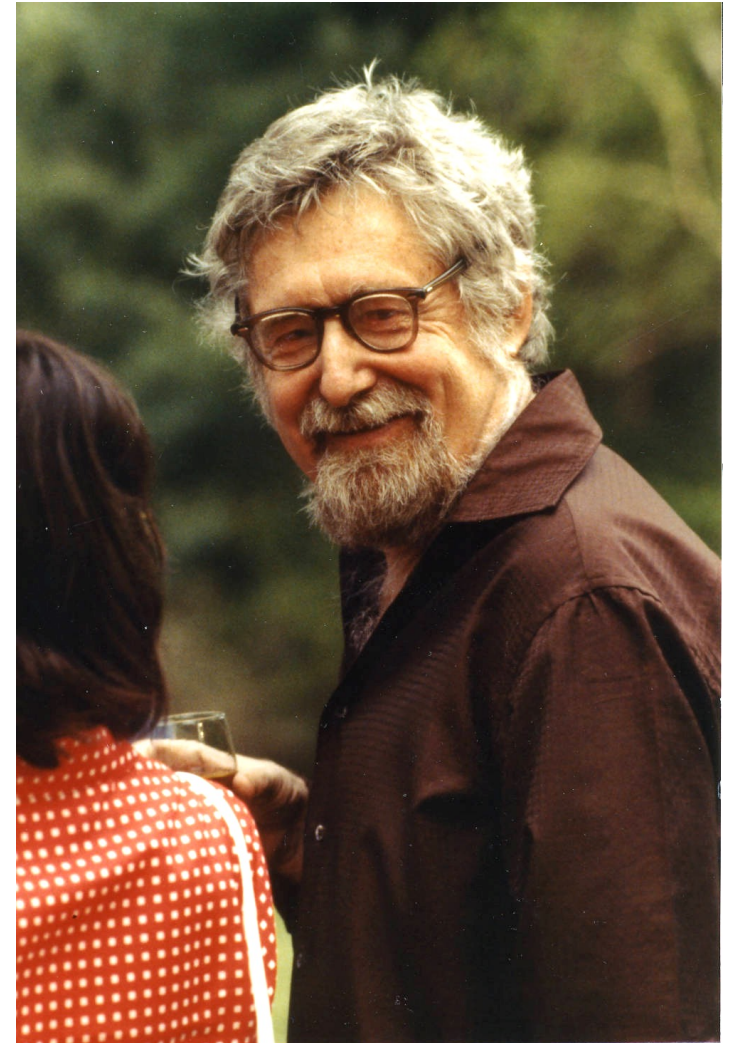
Main claims

1) We become social subjects by participating in practices, and gaining social know-how.

- Some of the practices we rely on, even if they produce some value, are crucial parts of an oppressive system.

2) Social practices rely on a toolbox of social meanings, some quite specific to a practice and others more general.

- This toolbox – **I call a "cultural technē"** – is not a set of psychological attitudes. It is a system of signs that invests an apparatus (signifier) with a meaning (signified).

- An ideology is a cultural technē "gone wrong."

3) Social meanings cannot have their coordinating function unless the system of signs is, to some degree, public.

- The required publicity, however, does not require common knowledge, common belief, or common acceptance; it is not, strictly-speaking, common ground.

- I argue that a capacity for sending and receiving information through signaling is sufficient for publicity, and such signaling is a form of meaning that falls between Grice's distinction between natural and non-natural meaning.

As a result, in our current world order, most of us are recruited into sustaining oppressive systems simply by becoming social subjects. We are not *determined* to do this. We do it voluntarily, on our own, often for good reasons. This is the power of ideology.

Ideology: Sociological and Critical

In his work, *The Possibility of a Critical Theory,* Raymond Geuss distinguishes "ideology in a descriptive sense" and "ideology in a pejorative sense".

The guiding questions of a *critical* approach to ideology are: Why do we 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 point of a theory of ideology is to distinguish agency under oppressive structures that we are coerced to do (repression) and those we do "all by ourselves" because we have taken up our social position in practices as having a normative grip on us.

Social Fluency: Uptake and Interpellation

Althusser distinguishes **Repressive State Apparatuses** (RSAs) and **Ideological State Apparatuses** (ISAs). An RSA is coercive and includes the police, army, courts, etc. An ISA shapes us a social subjects through norms in the family, school, church, workplace (with coercion as a background threat).


Broadly speaking, a social system produces social subjects who fluently engage in practices that we rely on for coordination (though, on my view, not necessarily managed by the state).

- We are "hailed" into practices in a variety of ways, e.g., we are hailed into speaking English by having English spoken to us; we are hailed into adulthood by having to pay the rent (with threat of penalties in the background). We then develop ways of being and thinking so that we are (more or less) fluent English speakers, fluent rent-paying adults....

Cultural technēs are a mixed bag. Some are empowering and valuable; some are efficient and practical; but others function to sustain an unjust (capitalist, racist, sexist...) system.

Shared background to both accounts
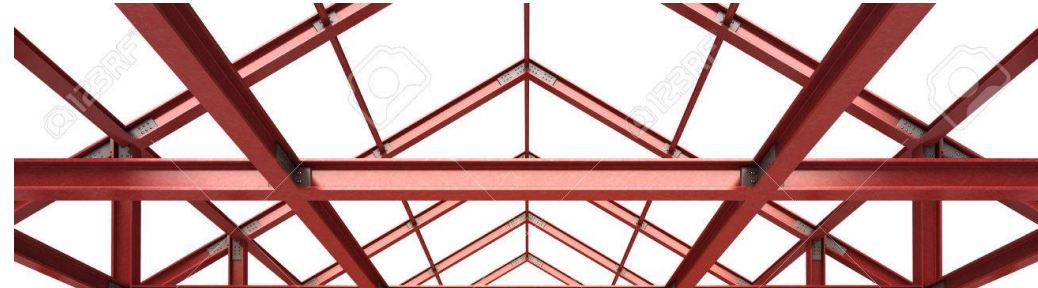
Both descriptive and critical approaches to ideology assume that it is, roughly, "**the framework of meanings and values within which people exist and conduct their social lives**" (Purvis & Hunt 1993, 479).

…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. (1993, 474; my italics)

In exploring the idea of a cultural technē, I'm asking what is this shared framework and how does it organize us and our activities?

When we turn to ideology, there are additional questions about how a cultural technē distorts our understanding and our relations to each other.

Ideology and Its Apparatus

• 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).

• 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…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).
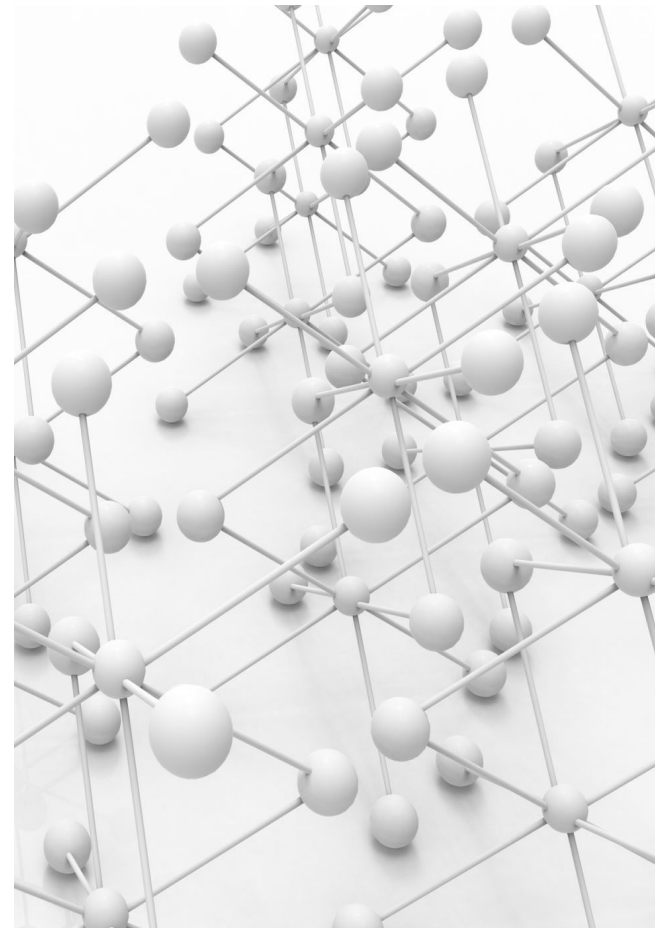
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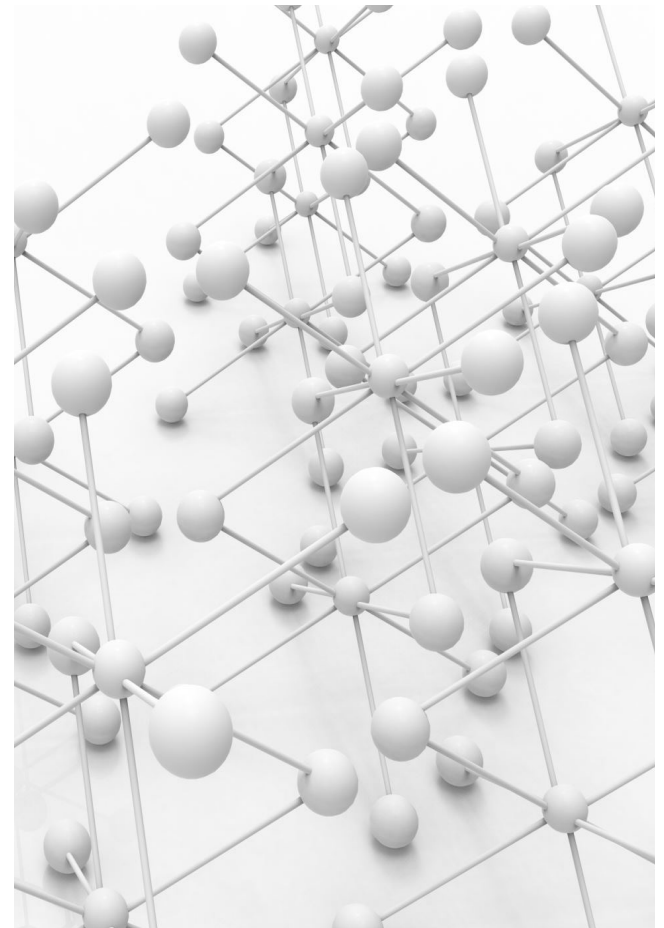
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What is a Social Practice?

Coordination around *resources*, i.e., things of (+/-) value, is a fundamental human task, and our ability to develop flexible forms of coordination *that can be passed down through social learning* is the key to our evolutionary success (Sterelny 2012).

Humans are not the only ones who need to coordinate around resources. And non-human animals from bees to vervet monkeys plausibly rely on some kind of social learning.

Coordination relies on meanings, symbols, default assumptions and associations – to shape our behavior. Humans not only learn what is edible, but develop cuisines, menus, daily and holiday rituals...

Cultural constraints on human agency

Any human behavior is conditioned by multiple factors.

It is constrained by:

- The *physical* **demands** of the human body;
- The *geographical* **context** and the edible things in it;
- The *social/political/legal context* that makes certain edibles salient, available, safe;
- The *economic constraints* on what we can afford; and
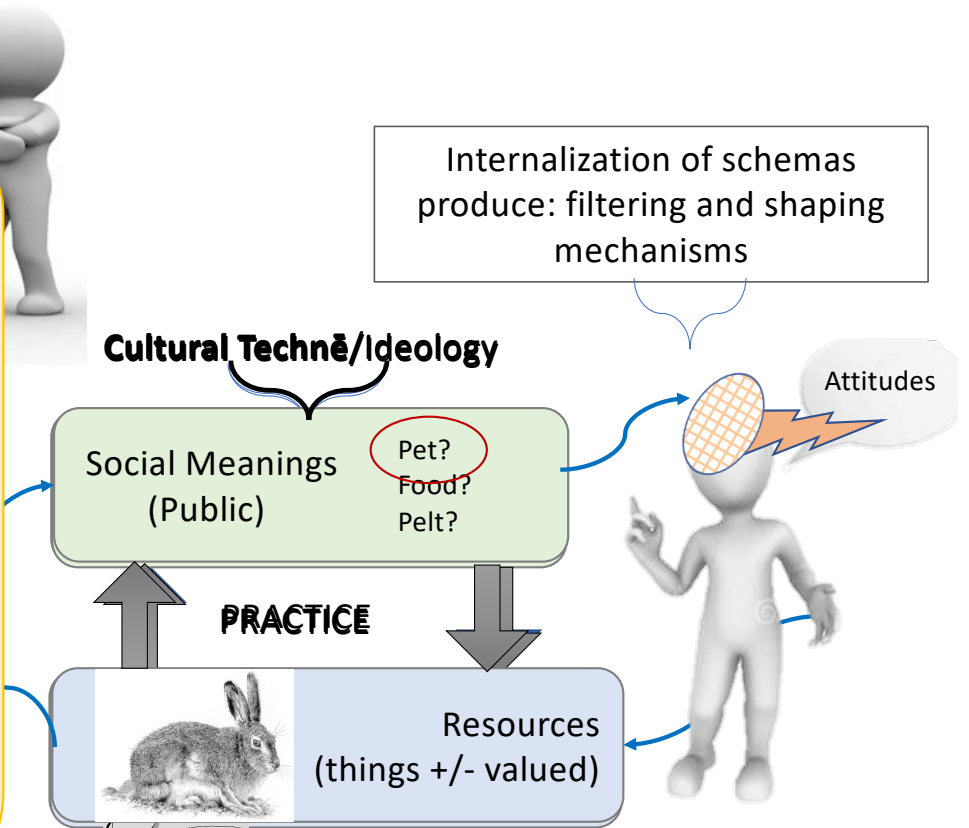- The *social meaning* of the different foodstuffs, i.e., culture.

Consider a meal...

January 2019, "Feast Fit For A Burger King: Trump Serves Fast Food To College Football Champs" (NPR)

Social practices are

- patterns of **learned behavior** that, at least in the primary instances,

- **enable us to coordinate** as members of a group in creating, distributing, managing, maintaining, and eliminating **a resource** (or multiple resources),

- due to **mutual responsiveness** to each other's behavior and the resource(s) in question,

- as **interpreted through shared meanings/cultural schemas** (a cultural technē).

Internalization of schemas produce: filtering and shaping mechanisms

Cultural Technē/Ideology

Social Meanings (Public)

Pet?
Food?
Pelt?

Attitudes

PRACTICE

Resources (things +/- valued)

Cultural technē: What's Included?

i. **Simple meanings** (pink means girl, red means stop) and other forms of signaling (greeting rituals, clothing choices, logos);

ii. **Default assumptions** ("Marriage is between one man and one woman" "The US Constitution protects liberty and justice for all."); Concepts (BACHELOR, MARRIAGE, SEX, GENDER, RACE, WATER, JUSTICE) and alleged analytic truths about them);

iii. **Elements of architectural design** (brick and ivy, toilets designated for men and women only, spaces only accessible by stairs, facade columns);

iv. **Narrative tropes** ("First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage") and material signals and prompts for one's place in them (wedding rings, "gender reveal" events and associated paraphernalia);

v. **Familiar patterns of metaphor and metonymy** ("God is love," "The pen is mightier than the sword");

vi. **Entrenched conceptual homologies** (reason : passion :: man : woman);

vii. **Explicit public declarations** ("Black Lives Matter," "Blue Lives Matter").

"Living in" ideology

- In speaking of ideology, it is common to suggest that individuals **live within a social world of meanings and values.** The idea that we "live in" ideology suggests two things:
  - First, ideology is somehow, or to some extent, "prior" to our (epistemic, social) agency; belief and action takes place against the backdrop of social meaning.
  - Second, we are shaped by the ideology to fit within it.

People become people [social subjects] 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. (Balkin 1998, 18)

What is a Cultural Technē?

- An account of a cultural technē should explain several key features:

    (i) **What exactly are the constituents of a cultural technē?** I characterize it sometimes as a "framework of meanings and values" (following Purvis and Hunt). It is also supposed to contain default assumptions and even material parts of the world, e.g., architecture. Is there a coherent ontology here?

    (ii) **How it is public** (this is necessary for it to serve its coordinating function),

    (iii) **How it can guide us without being fully transparent** (in some cases we should be guided by cultural technē and not realize that we are and potentially be wrong about its content).
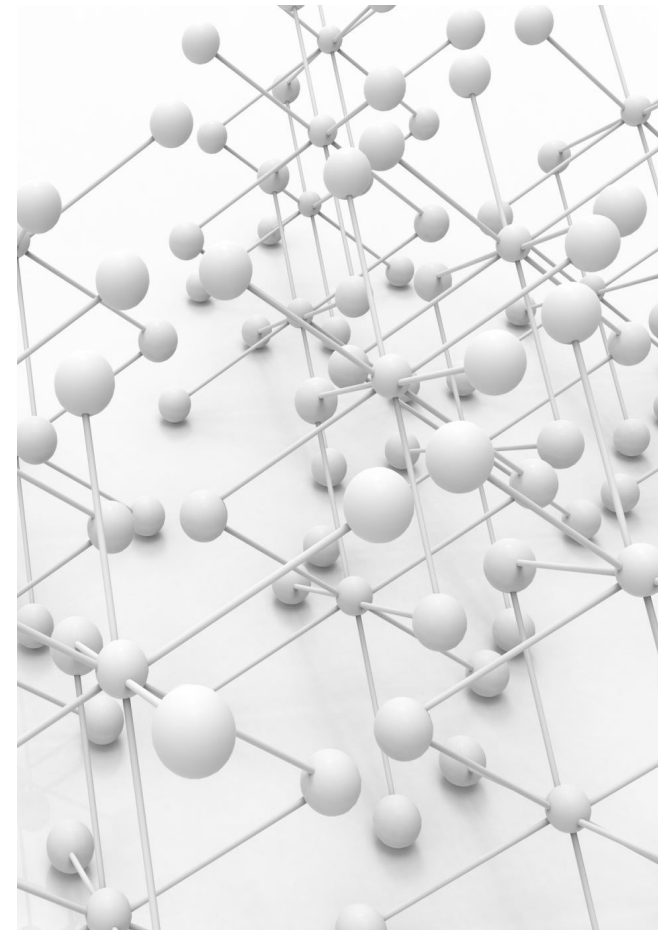
An account of an *ideological* cultural technē should also explain:

    (iv) How it distorts or occludes parts of the world and organizes us in ways that promote or sustain unjust social stratification.
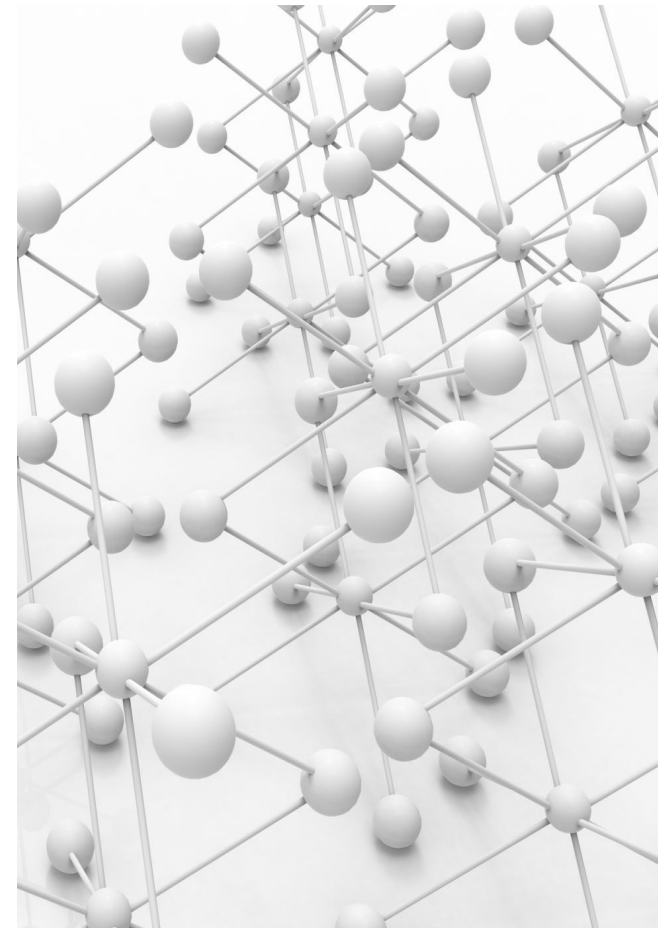
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   - To engage in a social practice is to take up a toolbox of social meanings that enable coordination around a resource.
   - Socially intelligible agency depends on such uptake.

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Strategy

- Semantic truths exist prior to our individual efforts to use language, and they shape our linguistic behavior. So maybe it would be helpful to look more closely at how meaning structures our communicative agency.

- Semantics/semiotics relies on a "material" apparatus of symbols (signifiers) – sounds, inscriptions, meaningful objects.

- Can we draw on resources in communication, more generally, to make sense of ideology?

- I will narrow my focus to examples of simple meanings such as ***pink means girl.*** Clearly, there is much more that needs to be said to account for more complicated cases.
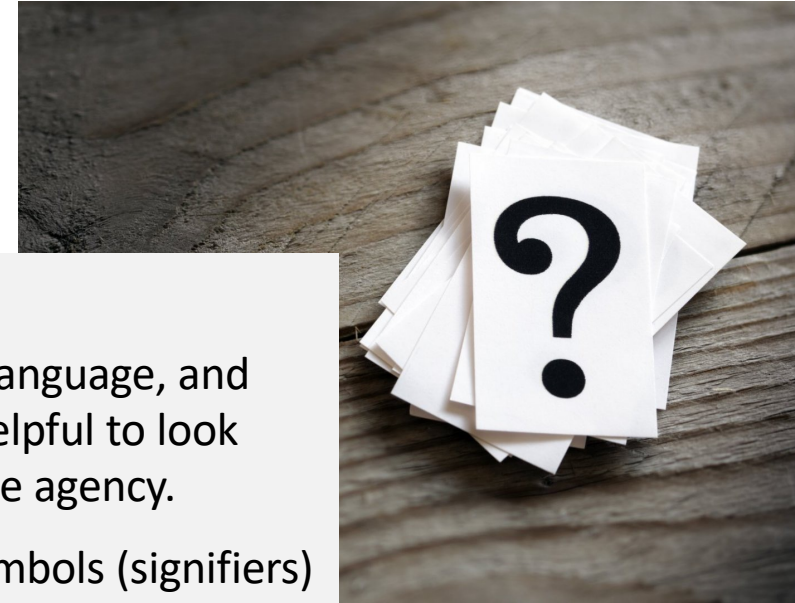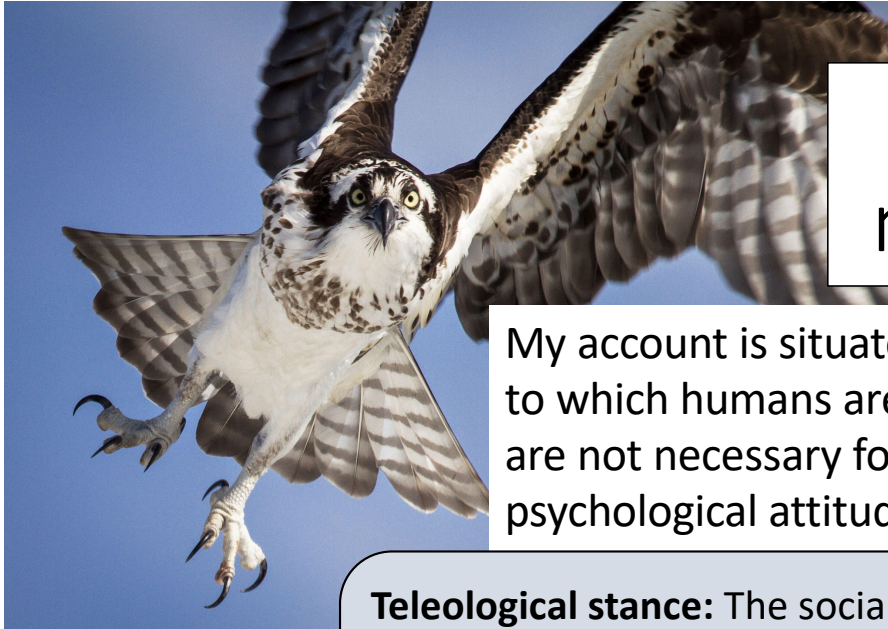
Semiotic Terminology
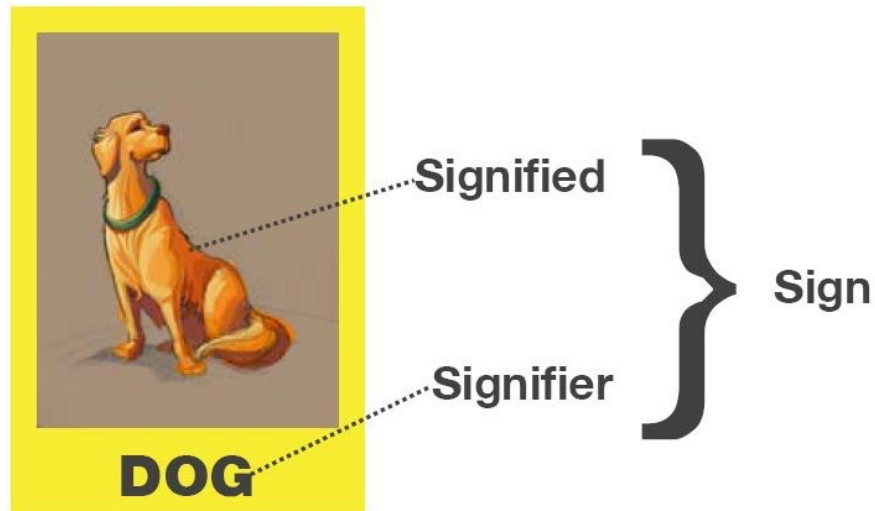
Compare:

'bank' – financial institution
'bank' – edge of a river or lake

1 word or 2 words?

1 signifier, 2 signs

Beliefs:
minimal and "full blown"

My account is situated in a background understanding of sociality according to which humans are not the only social animals, and linguistic capacities are not necessary for sociality. Key to this distinguishing "full blown" psychological attitudes from more minimal ones.

Teleological stance: The social cognition of nonhuman animals, human infants, and human adults engaged in unreflective, quotidian interactions involves a minimal form of practical rationality. To attribute low-level psychological attitudes only requires an interpretation of behavior as "aim[ing] at specific goals and constitut[ing] the most rational means to those goals given environmental constraints. (Zawidzki 2013, 15)

"Full blown" psychological attitudes: Beliefs, e.g., are "unobservable, concrete causes of behavior, that (mis)represent the world as being a certain way under individually variable modes of presentation, with complex connections to other propositional attitudes, perceptions, and behavior" (due to holism) (Zawidzki 2013, 11-12).

Meaning: Grice

In his famous paper, "Meaning," Paul Grice distinguishes natural meaning from non-natural meaning.

Natural meaning:

- "Those spots mean (meant) measles."
- "Those spots didn't mean anything to me, but to the doctor they meant measles."
- "The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year."

Non-natural meaning:

- "A meant$_{NN}$ something by x" is (roughly) equivalent to "A intended the utterance of x to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention"; and we may add that to ask what A meant is to ask for a specification of the intended effect...

Meaning: Stevenson/Skyrms

Stevenson's view (described by Grice, quote is Stevenson):

[F]or x to mean$_{NN}$ something, x must have (roughly) a tendency to produce in an audience some attitude (cognitive or otherwise) and a tendency, in the case of a speaker, to be produced by that attitude, *these tendencies being dependent on "an elaborate process of conditioning attending the use of the sign in communication."*

Brian Skyrms (2010) work on signals:

Darwin sees some kind of natural salience operating at the origin of language. At that point signals are not conventional, but rather the signal is somehow naturally suited to convey its content. Signaling is then gradually modified by evolution. Darwin is thinking of biological evolution, but for humans (and some other species) there is a version of the account that substitutes cultural evolution or social learning for biological evolution. (20)

Vervets

- Cheney and Seyfarth [1990] show that vervets have distinct alarm calls for different classes of predator: a "cough" for an eagle, a "bark" for a leopard, and a "chutter" for a snake. For each predator a different evasive action is optimal. For leopards it is usually best to run up a tree and out on a branch where a leopard cannot follow; for snakes one should stand tall and scan the ground to locate the snake and then move away from it; for eagles it is best to exit a tree, take cover in the underbrush, and look upward to detect the location of the predator. Each alarm call elicits the appropriate behavior—both in the natural setting and in experiments where recorded alarm calls are played back. (Skyrms 2010, 22-3)

- Moreover, vervets can learn the calls of birds (the Superb Starling) and respond appropriately to their warnings as "eavesdroppers" (Skyrms 2010, 24; also Deshpande 2022). And vervets are known to use the signals deceptively (Cheney and Seyfarth 1990).

Vervet meanings
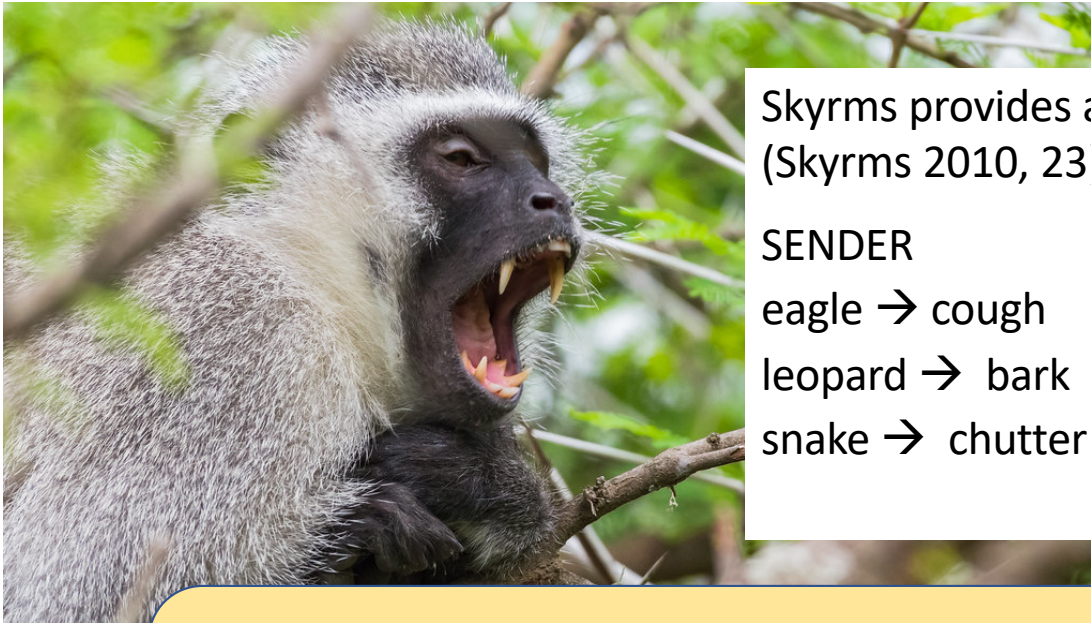
Skyrms provides a simple model of a signaling system (Skyrms 2010, 23):

SENDER	RECEIVER
eagle → cough	cough → underbrush
leopard → bark	bark → run up tree
snake → chutter	chutter → scan and move

Plausibly the vervet cough has social meaning in the vervet group. Social meaning of this sort does not require (though it may, in some cases or in some species, involve) sophisticated mental states and metacognition and neither the carrier of social meaning (the signifier), nor the information transmitted, need be linguistic. Nevertheless, information is transmitted, specifically, information that is relevant to agency.

Communicating Information

Which way did your friend go?

- Notice that this works due to several background conditions: you have a common interest (you both want to meet up), there are a limited number of live options (your friend will have stuck to a path and not wandered off into the underbrush), and the stack of rocks was unexpected, surprising.

- Where does the structure of options come from?

Teleological interpretation of options

- If we have no prior practices to rely on to interpret others or to deliberate, we begin by considering: what options would make the most sense, given the goal?

- Social practices build on this through social learning: some options are ruled out, others made salient, and others still are made possible through material interventions (including technology), skill-building, and contestations, transpositions, and permutations of social meanings.

For example, traditional Euro- American contexts, there might be a question about whether to eat a particular kind of food (fruit salad?) with a fork or spoon; chopsticks were not an option. Chopsticks were not an option because they were not available, the skill to use them was not widespread and passed down, and other available options (cutlery) were satisfactory. Shifts in the material conditions or cultural exchange can lead to broadening the options.

Uptake

Because a cultural technē is part of a practice (or system of practices), then this gives us the resources to explain both how it is taken up and how it functions.

- It is taken up through social learning in forming and engaging in activities that distribute resources. The taking up, however, is not just a matter of copying. It allows for elaboration, improvement, contestation, and such. It is a dynamic and evolving process.

- And it functions by making collectively salient some options rather than others and providing signals so we can better coordinate.

Risks of over-intellectualizing

The "taking up" in question, may or may not be a matter of *believing.*

First, the information may not be, properly speaking, propositional.

Second, it might be a matter of belief in different senses. It might be a low-level responsiveness (think of the "teleological stance") to the signal and the information it provides; or it might be a sophisticated propositional attitude whose content is determined holistically and that presents the information with an individual mode of presentation.

And third, believing the information transmitted is not necessary for coordination. One may only need to accept it for the purposes of the immediate need to coordinate. It also follows from this that the particular social meanings at work in a particular context may be neither widespread or dominant.

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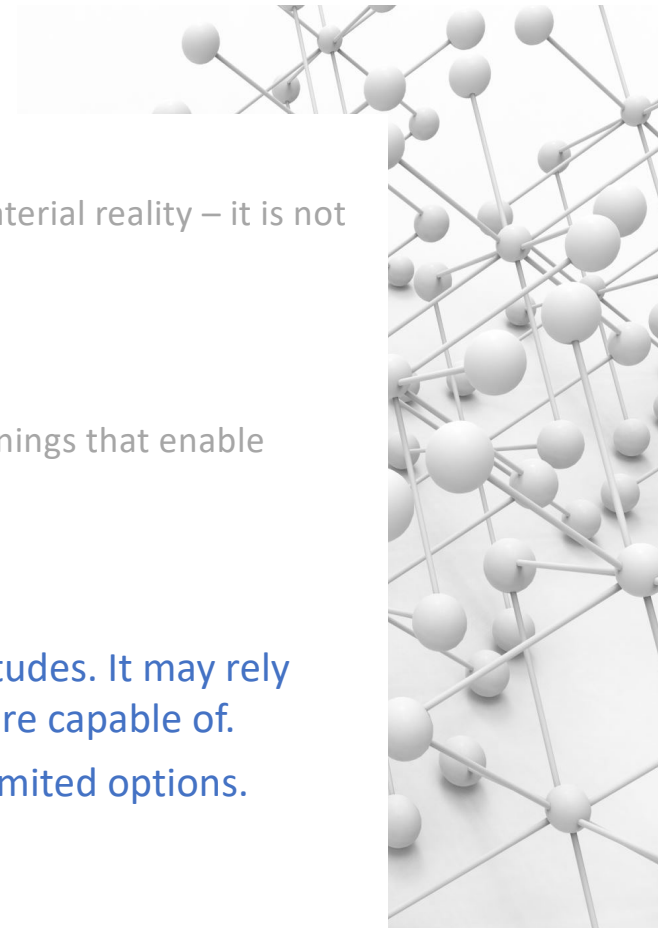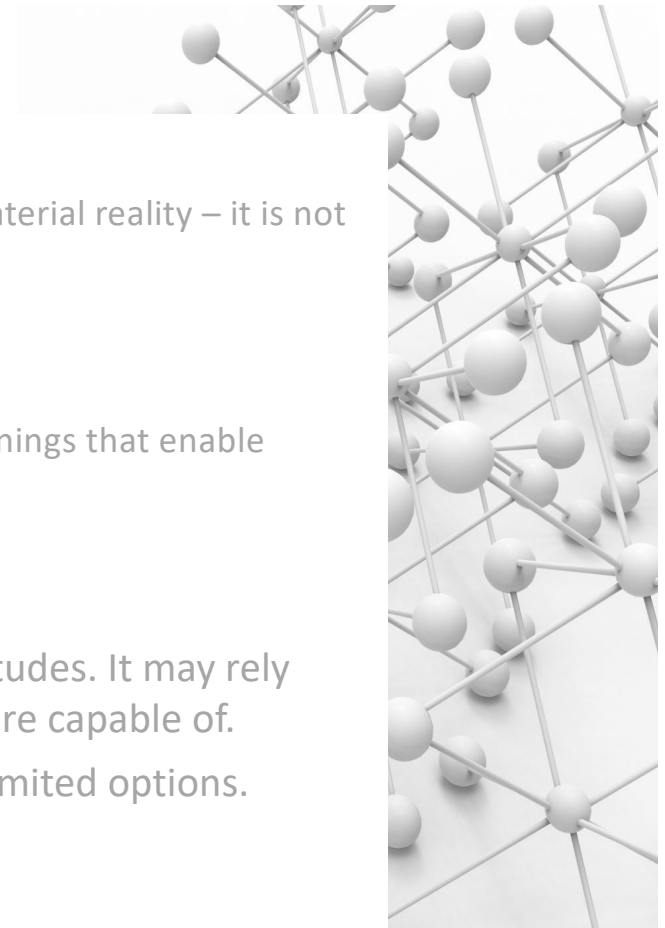2. Social Practices and Ideological Cultural Technēs
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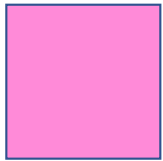3. **Signaling and Content**
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Content

One thing we get from a cultural technē is a set of signals that convey important information that is relevant to meeting our common interests.

Consider: pink means girl. The color pink is a signal. One hypothsis about its function: We have a common interest in speaking intelligible English. Until recently, the options were limited ('she'-series or 'he'-series), and pink ribbons, blankets, sweaters, and the like gave us the information we needed to choose. In this case, the color pink is the signifier. It is the apparatus "carrying" the information.

The property of being a girl/female is the signified. This is relevant because the content of a cultural technē/ideology is not a set of beliefs or (usually) a set of psychological states (unless we are signaling something about psychological states).

If we are simply thinking about a framework or system of meanings, and if meaning is information conveyed by signifiers (the apparatus), then a framework can be described without reference to the psychology of those who take it up.

Materiality of signifiers and signified

In an actual practice, the signs are gestures, vocalizations, bits of paper, cloth, or metal. Because a cultural technē is a frame of meaningful signifiers, or signs, and because such signs – both the signifier and the signified – have a material existence, a cultural technē is not "in the head," it is not psychological.
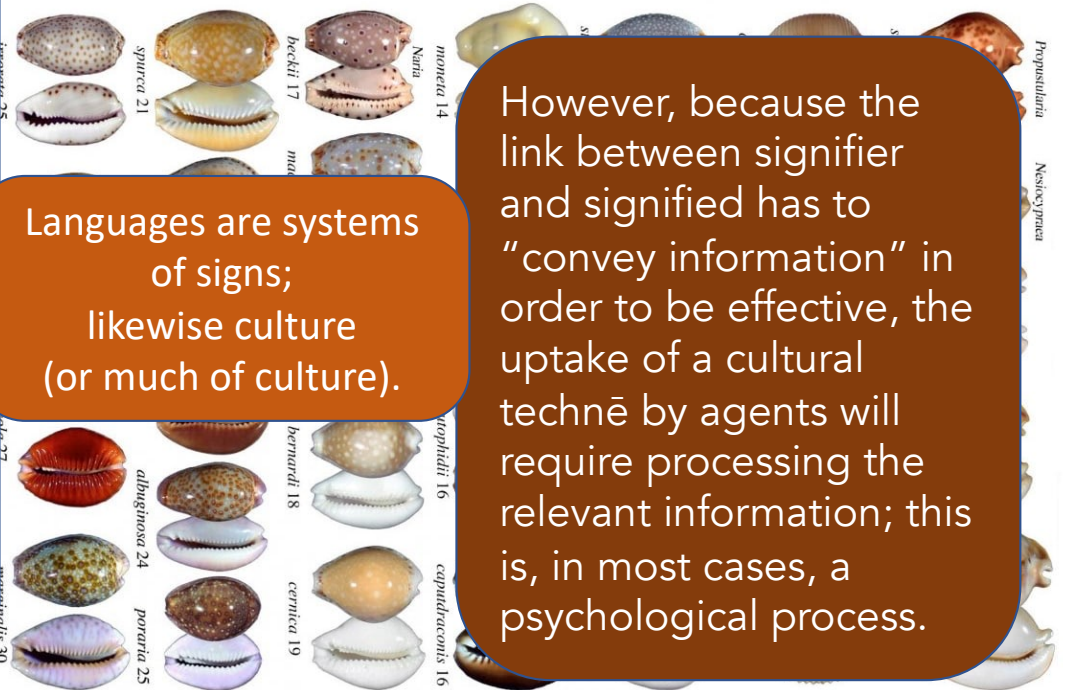
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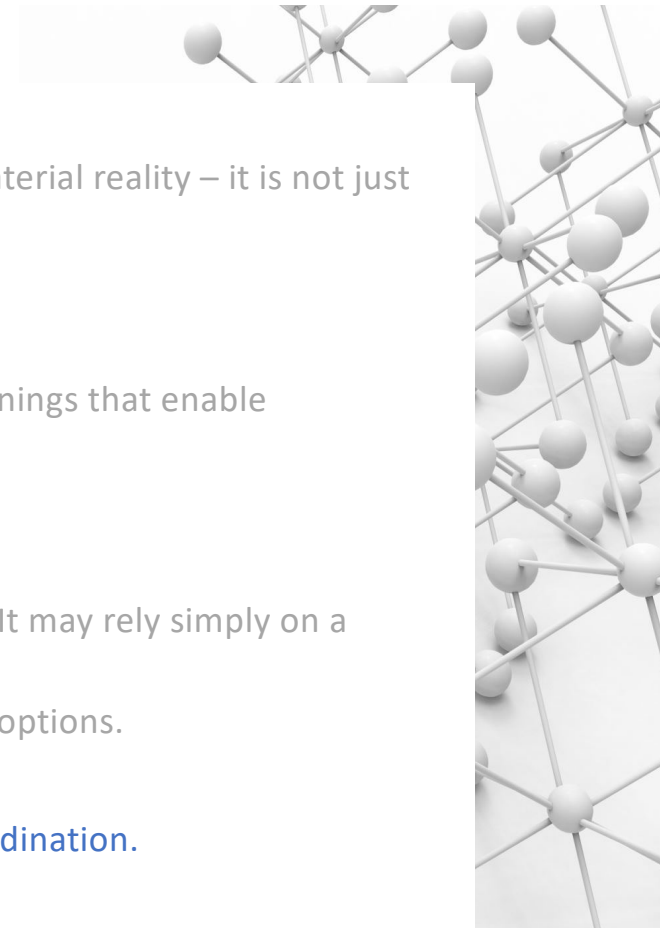
Languages are systems of signs; likewise culture (or much of culture).

However, because the link between signifier and signified has to "convey information" in order to be effective, the uptake of a cultural technē by agents will require processing the relevant information; this is, in most cases, a psychological process.
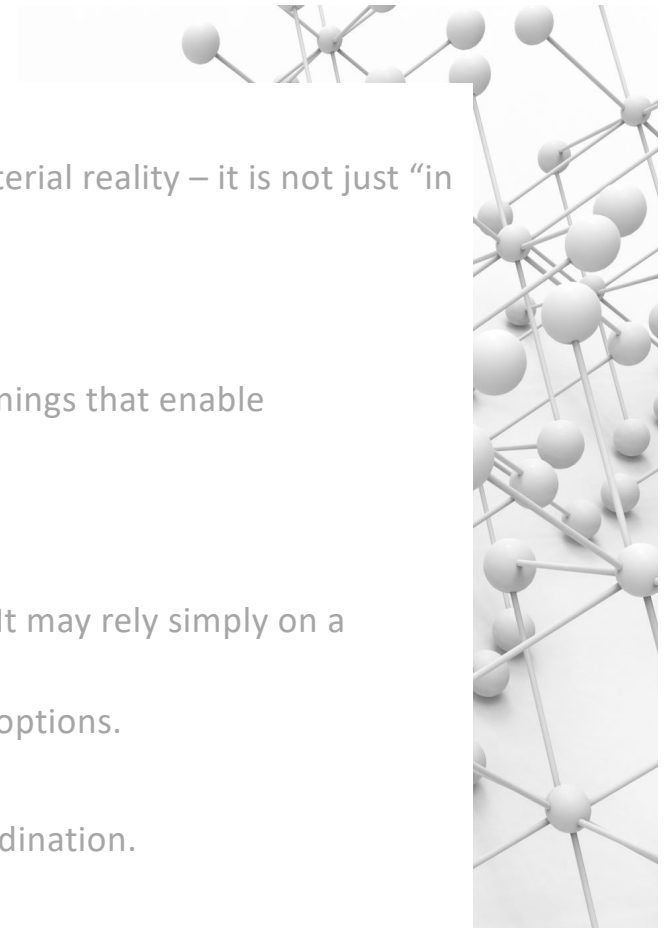

Meaning and Use of the Cowrie Shells

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    - A system of signs has a material apparatus that guides fluent coordination.

5. Conclusion

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Return to Desiderata

For a cultural technē to function as ideology, it should have several key features:

(i) it should be public (this is necessary for it to serve its coordinating function)

- It is public because it is learned in the process of coordination from others who are participants.

(ii) it should not be fully transparent to us (in some cases we should be guided by cultural technē and not realize that we are and potentially be wrong about its content),

- It may be less than fully "transparent" because as a guide to fluent action, it need not be explicit or conscious. In simple cases, it may be little more than an apt responsiveness that is not chosen or intended.

(iii) it should sometimes distort or occlude parts of the world in ways that promote or sustain unjust social stratification.

- It is possible for it to distort the range of good options because efforts to build on natural salience are not reliable, or those who are engaged in the practice can make salient options look good – that aren't good for the agent.

Conclusion

1) What exactly are the constituents of a cultural technē? I characterize it sometimes as a "framework of meanings and values". It is also supposed to contain default assumptions and even material parts of the world, e.g., architecture. Is there a coherent ontology here?

I've argued that a cultural technē is a system of signs. It includes an apparatus (signifiers, symbols, and such) and the information they carry. There are many possible frameworks that could enable us to coordinate, some better and some worse than others for achieving just coordination.

2) What is it for a group to "take up" a cultural technē or for an individual to be "in the grip" of an ideology?

A group takes up a cultural technē in the evolution and intergenerational transmission of its social practices, practices that manages the framing of options, the production, distribution, recycling of resources, and contestation over their values, beliefs, and organizing principles. A group is in the grip of an ideology when its cultural technē obscures valuable options and ways of valuing and if it organizes resources in unjust ways.

Conclusion, continued

3) How does a cultural technē manage us? In particular, how does an ideological technē manage us, given that it is typically false or misleading and produces unjust or harmful social stratification?

Because we act on resources in ways guided by the technē, the world comes to conform to what we are asked to believe. Then we aren't believing falsehoods, but are actually believing truths! So it is hard to reveal the problem.

Thanks for your attention!!

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4. **Materiality of Culture/Ideology**
   - A cultural technē is a system of signs that is taken up in practices.

5. **Conclusion**