

The Falsity of Ideology

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Critical theory can be understood as a body of theories and research programs which aim to transform social systems, so as to alleviate the oppression to which agents might be subjected within those systems. This task has led many theorists to use some version of the notion of “ideology”, understood very broadly as systems of beliefs and/or practices that make agents participate in patterns of unjust oppression.

Ideology is a multi-faceted concept, and the word “ideology” has been used to refer to many different things across very different theories, for very different purposes. But some common themes are typically shared across different interpretations of the term. In particular, *ideology*, when used in a pejorative sense, is often described as necessarily involving some kind of *falsity* or *illusion*. My goal in this paper is to assess the relevance of this idea to ideology critique. Are all ideological beliefs necessarily false? To what extent should ideology critique focus on the *falsity* of such beliefs?

I argue that we must be careful when making the assumption that ideology is by essence “false” or “illusory”. In particular, it should not be taken to mean that criticizing ideological beliefs must necessarily require focusing on their truth-values or epistemic properties. A belief ϕ that is neither false nor epistemically flawed might nevertheless have the “ideological function” of making agents accept an oppressive system S . Beliefs of this kind, I argue, should be the target of *functional* ideology critique, but cannot be effectively subjected to any kind of *epistemic* critique. When this occurs, ϕ does not play its ideological role in virtue of being itself false or unwarranted, but in virtue of being the object of a false higher-order belief ϕ^* of the form “the truth of ϕ makes S acceptable.” I argue that there is a legitimate sense in which beliefs such as ϕ can be said to be “ideological”, although they are not “false”. But even if we want to deny that such beliefs are ideological *stricto sensu*, we must at the very least recognise their relevance to ideology critique.

In a first section, I describe the theoretical background on which my arguments are based. In a second section, I explain the sense in which the assumption that ideology must be “false” has to be nuanced: many beliefs that are not false or “illusory” in any plausible, non-metaphorical sense nevertheless contribute to oppressive systems by making them appear acceptable. This observation, I argue in the last section, suggests that the ideology critique of beliefs must go beyond the mere epistemic dimension, and that the critique of practices and norms cannot be based on epistemological considerations alone.

Section 1 – Ideology

A) Forms of consciousness

The term “ideology” has historically been used in a number of different senses: sometimes neutrally, sometimes pejoratively, sometimes positively (Larraín 1979, *Introduction*). I am interested here

mostly in “ideology” in its pejorative sense.

Raymond Geuss (1981) provides a useful framework for thinking about the concept of ideology. He first provides an account of ideology in a normatively neutral, descriptive sense. An ideology (descriptive sense) should be understood as a *form of consciousness*, that is, “a particular constellation of beliefs, attitudes, dispositions, etc.” that the members of a group hold (*ibid.* 12). But what does “constellation” mean here? This set of beliefs, attitudes, etc., Geuss explains, are “systematically interconnected.” The minimal assumption we can make about this “systematic interconnection” is that the elements of a form of consciousness are related – at the very least – in the sense that they support each other to various degrees. For example, religious sentiment reinforces the acceptance of certain religious rituals, these rituals reinforce the authority of the Church, etc. The nature of the relation between these different elements (belief in God, religious practices, religious institutions) might be analysed as a causal one, in the sense that the existence of a certain element is a (more or less important) part of what makes other elements possible.

B) Competing approaches to ideology and ideology critique

What makes a form of consciousness an ideology in the *pejorative* sense, then? Geuss (1981, 13) usefully identifies three different ways in which this question has been answered by different theories of ideology. Let us consider them in turn.

1. A form of consciousness can be an ideology¹ in virtue of some *epistemic* properties of the beliefs that are its constituents, i.e. properties related to epistemic warrant, truth, etc.
2. A form of consciousness can be an ideology in virtue of its *functional* properties, i.e., properties that have to do with the *effects* that a certain form of consciousness has. (Does the form of consciousness in question contribute to oppression, domination, injustice, etc.?)
3. A form of consciousness can be an ideology in virtue of its *genetic* properties, i.e. properties that have to do with its *origin*. (Does the form of consciousness have an origin which makes it worthy of being rejected?)

I call these three different ways of conceiving of ideology the epistemic, functional, and genetic approaches to ideology respectively. Now, it should be noted that the way in which I present these three approaches differs significantly from Geuss’s account, to the degree that Geuss interprets the question,

(a) What makes a form of consciousness an ideology (in the pejorative sense)?
as equivalent to the question,

(b) What does it mean to say that a form of consciousness is “false”/an “illusion”?
Since I do not want to assume that ideology is necessarily “false” or an “illusion”, I reject the assumption that (a) and (b) must be equivalent. Nevertheless, Geuss’s typology is useful as it highlights the different

¹ In what follows “ideology” – without further indication – should always be interpreted as meaning “ideology in the pejorative sense.”

ways in which critical theorists often present/criticise particular forms of consciousness and their elements.

In accordance with the three dimensions along which a form of consciousness can be an ideology in the pejorative sense, ideology critique can take an epistemic, functional, or genetic form. Cordelia Fine's critique of "neurosexism", for instance, is above all epistemic, as it is based on a series of arguments showing that certain claims about sex differences are not warranted by scientific evidence (see for example Fine 2010, part 2). This type of critique can be contrasted with, for example, many of the arguments that MacKinnon raises against pornography (1994). Pornography, MacKinnon argues, should not be analysed as a discursive item but rather as a *practice* which is harmful to women. This critique is a *functional* one, as it focuses on the *effects* of a certain practice.

An interesting question to ask is whether these different ways of conceiving of ideology – and the different forms that ideology critique can take – can be shown to be related in some way. Shelby (2003), for example, argues that whether a form of consciousness is ideological depends at the same time on epistemic, functional and genetic factors (Shelby 2003, 183-184). Now, what I want to argue is that there is a substantial degree of independence between *epistemic* ideological properties and *functional* ideological properties – so it might seem that accounts such as Shelby's, which try to show that these two types of properties are interdependent, threaten the claim defended in this essay.

So it is worth clarifying this point at the outset. I do not take issue with the claim (made by Shelby and others) that the functional and epistemic properties of *forms of consciousness* are interconnected. What I argue is that, *at the level of individual beliefs*, these two types of property can come apart. I introduce this question more fully in what follows.

C) ***“General” accounts of ideology***

Let us call a “general account” of ideology a theory of ideology which tries to make sense of the different forms that ideology critique can take in different contexts, and of the different properties which have traditionally been associated with the concept of ideology. These theories often either assume that ideological belief systems must be *false* or assume that the functional properties of an ideological form of consciousness must essentially be a *result* of their falsity. Jorge Larraín for example summarizes Marx's conception of ideology in the following way:

[Ideology] has a particular specific connotation whose two specific and connected features are, firstly, that it conceals social contradictions and, secondly, that it does it in the interests of the dominant class. (Larraín 1979, 48)

Sally Haslanger similarly claims that:

Very broadly, ideology is best understood functionally: ideology functions to stabilize or perpetuate unjust power and domination, and does so through some form of masking or illusion. (Haslanger 2017, 150)

Finally, we must consider Tommie Shelby's ingenious attempt to define ideology in a way which shows a systematic link between the epistemic, functional, and genetic dimensions identified by Geuss. His account

has the following form:

A form of social consciousness is an ideology if and only if

- (i) its discursive content is epistemically defective, that is, distorted by illusions;
- (ii) through these illusions it functions to establish or reinforce social relations of oppression;
and
- (iii) its wide acceptance can be (largely) explained by the class-structured false consciousness of most who embrace it. (Shelby 2003, 183-184)

What these different general definitions of ideology have in common are the assumptions that ideology has a certain function, namely, reinforcing relations of oppression/domination; that ideology must involve false or unwarranted beliefs (“concealment”, “masking or illusion”); finally, that ideology has the function that it has *in virtue of* involving epistemically defective beliefs. Hence, all of these accounts point out the important fact that the *functional* and *epistemic* properties of ideological forms of consciousness are intertwined. However, these general accounts of ideology leave it unclear whether the functional and epistemic properties of forms of consciousness are also connected *at the level of ideological beliefs*. This gives rise to the hypothesis that is the focus of this essay: do beliefs that have ideological functional properties also have epistemically problematic properties? Is the ideological function of beliefs a result of their epistemic properties?

Section 2 – The limits of the epistemic approach in regard to ideological beliefs

A) Epistemically problematic beliefs

Many accounts of ideology assume that ideology must be essentially “false” or an “illusion” in some way but these accounts are not always clear about the sense in which ideological beliefs are supposed to be “false” or “illusory”. In what follows I will try to determine what this idea could plausibly amount to. For this purpose, it is sensible to draw a distinction between (1) beliefs that are false, (2) beliefs that are “epistemically defective/unwarranted”, (3) beliefs that are illusory, and (4) beliefs that are the consequence of illusions.

(1) I understand “false belief” in a standard way. If I believe that *p* is the case, then my belief is false iff the proposition “*p*” – which says that *p* is the case – is false (it “fails to correspond to reality,” let’s say). I assume that it is possible for someone to have *unconscious* beliefs, i.e. to believe that *p* without being aware that they have such a belief. Many, if not most, ideological beliefs (e.g. “Racist discrimination is uncommon”) are false in this standard way and can be held consciously or unconsciously by the agents who have them.

(2) I understand “epistemically defective” as meaning the same as “epistemically unwarranted”. My belief that *p* is epistemically unwarranted iff it is not justified, i.e. not warranted by the evidence that is available to me. Many ideological beliefs are not demonstrably false but can be shown to be epistemically defective in this way, e.g. “Men are naturally better leaders than women” – it may be difficult to *disprove*

this claim for a number of reasons (the vagueness of the terms, the appeal to “nature”) but that does not mean we would be justified in believing it.

(3) Let us say that an “illusion” is what G. A. Cohen – in his discussion of Marx – calls “a discrepancy between reality and appearance.” So an illusion occurs “when and only when the explanation of a state of affairs falsifies the description it is natural to give of it if one lacks the explanation” (Cohen 2000, 399). Here is a very brief outline of this idea. A state of affairs *A* can be “illusory” in the following way: (i) It is “natural” to infer that a certain proposition *p* is true as a result of being exposed to that state of affairs. In this case, *p* is the “natural description” of *A*. (ii) There is a *correct explanation* of *A* which shows that the natural description *p* of *A* is actually false. If (i) and (ii) obtain, *A* is illusory because the *correct explanation* of *A* shows that the *natural description* *p* of *A* is false. So an illusion occurs.

Let us say that my belief that *p* is *illusory* if *p* is the *natural description* of an illusory state of affairs *A*. In that case, my belief that *p* is false because the correct explanation of *A* shows that *p* is false. If I am given the correct explanation, I will cease to believe *p*. However, as long as I do not have access to this correct explanation, I will continue to believe *p*. This belief, moreover, is *epistemically justified* because it corresponds to what can be “naturally” inferred from *A*.

From a Marxist perspective for example the social form in which capitalism operates is an illusory state of affairs because it is natural for people living under capitalism to infer that e.g. “Commodities possess their value independently from labour.” But the correct (Marxist) analysis of this state of affairs reveals that in fact commodities do not have value independently from labour (Marx 1976, 163-177). So from this perspective, the belief that “Commodities possess their value independently from labour” is an *illusory ideological belief*.

(4) A belief that is both true and justified is neither false nor epistemically defective and it cannot be illusory. It is theoretically possible however that a true and justified belief could be the *product of an illusion* in the sense of being itself (at least partly) justified by a belief that is illusory. So-called Gettier cases are good examples of how this could occur.

Now I define an *epistemically problematic belief* as any belief that is either false, or unwarranted, or illusory, or the product of an illusion. To provide an *epistemic critique* of a belief, let us say, is to show that this belief is epistemically problematic in at least one of these four ways.

It should be clear from the examples given above that many – if not most – examples of ideological beliefs are epistemically problematic. But of course, not every epistemically problematic belief is also ideological: my false belief that “Wuhan is a province and not a city” can be the subject of epistemic critique but that does not mean that this belief is ideological in any plausible sense.

What seems to mark the difference between my epistemically problematic belief that “Wuhan is a province” and the epistemically problematic belief that e.g. “Everyone from Wuhan, or who is the same race as those from Wuhan, is a carrier of disease” is that the latter might have the effect of reinforcing or maintaining an oppressive system or practice; for example, it might contribute to racist discrimination

against Asian people. So this latter belief seems to have an “ideological function” that the former lacks. It is not only epistemically problematic but also functionally problematic, so to speak.

Now it is not clear whether having one particular set of functional properties must be necessary or sufficient for a belief to count as “ideological” – the answer to this question depends on the account of ideology we adopt. For my purposes all I need to show is that *there can be some belief ϕ that is not epistemically problematic but can be meaningfully called “ideological” in virtue of its functional properties*. This is the central claim of this essay, and the rest of the essay is geared towards its defence.

B) Are crop-tops cute? – the problem of social norms and shared values

Let us start by finding a belief that could be true, epistemically justified, but nevertheless ideological in the sense of playing an ideological role in an oppressive system or practice. Judgments of taste (e.g. artistic/aesthetic judgements, beauty and appearance norms, etc.) are good examples in that regard (Chambers 2017, 187).² Sally Haslanger (2007) for instance has convincingly argued that the truth-value of a proposition such as

“Crop-tops are cute.”

should be assessed relative to the social milieu of the person, or group of people, who make the judgement that crop-tops are cute. In other words, the criteria of assessment of the extension of “cute” are determined by the existing norms in the milieu of the person (or group of people) making that judgement (Haslanger 2007, 72). Let us consider then a social milieu where patterns of interaction obtain that make the proposition “Crop-tops are cute.” true.

Haslanger uses the example of a school where it is fashionable for 7th-grade girls to wear crop-tops. Suppose one of these girls, D, judges that crop-tops are cute. If Haslanger’s analysis is correct, D’s belief is true relative to her milieu, and probably justified. It is plausible to say that, in D’s milieu, “Crop-tops are cute” is not just a belief: it is a kind of important social knowledge (*ibid.*, 73). Her belief is not epistemically problematic properly speaking.

At the same time, Haslanger observes, there seems to be much to criticise about the opinion that crop-tops are cute as it is held in D’s social milieu. Since the belief that crop-tops are cute is – we assume – widely held among members of D’s school, it is part of a set of conditions that make crop-tops fashionable, thus inciting 7th-grade girls to wear crop-tops. But this *practice* is itself worthy of criticism: “One might argue, it would be better if seventh grade (roughly age 12) girls were wearing ordinary – midriff covering – tops instead (because the crop-tops sexualize the girls who wear them, further marginalise the chubby girls, etc.)” (*ibid.*, 71-72). In other words, it seems that D’s judgement that crop-tops are cute could rightly be the object of a *functional* critique because this belief helps maintain a social practice (the fashion of wearing crop-tops) that reinforces problematic social patterns. Hence, the form of consciousness which characterises fashion trends in D’s social milieu can rightfully be the target of ideology critique, in the

² The idea that aesthetic judgments can have an ideological function has been forcefully defended by critical theorists such as, for example, Pierre Bourdieu (1984, see for example 7).

functional form, *even though* the beliefs it contains are not necessarily false and its oppressive properties are not necessarily the result of false beliefs and illusions.

The general point to make here is that ideologies do not just proceed by making agents have false or illusory beliefs about what is true or valuable but also by *shaping* what is true and valuable, so to speak (Haslanger 2017, 162; see also Chambers 2017, 186-190). That is to say, the fact that agents in a social group share an oppressive form of consciousness sometimes creates the conditions that make some beliefs within that form of consciousness true and justified. As a result, certain beliefs that are epistemically unproblematic can nevertheless play an essential role within systems of oppression, and should therefore be criticised. But the kind of criticism which is at stake here cannot be a purely epistemic one.

Section 3 – Consequences for ideology critique

“Crop-top cases” such as the one discussed by Haslanger show that certain beliefs can motivate oppressive practices which, at the same time, create the conditions that make those same beliefs true and justified. Those beliefs cannot be criticised on epistemic grounds, and their oppressive character does not depend on them being “illusions”. What are the conclusions that should be drawn from such cases in regard to ideology critique?

I want to suggest that there are two main reasons why such beliefs are relevant to ideology critique and can thus legitimately be called “ideological”. First, like other ideological beliefs, these beliefs exert an *oppressive ideological function*: they support patterns of unjust oppression. Second, like other ideological beliefs, these beliefs are *embedded* within ideological systems: they do not unilaterally reinforce *other* beliefs/practices/attitudes within the form of consciousness they are part of; they are *themselves* reinforced by the same beliefs, practices and attitudes they support.

A) Analysing the oppressive function of epistemically warranted beliefs

As I already suggested, we can distinguish two main forms that the ideology critique of beliefs can take. The epistemic critique consists in showing that a certain belief is epistemically problematic. The functional critique consists in showing that it has a certain oppressive function. General accounts of ideology sometimes attempt to show that these two forms of critique are systematically connected. But examples such as the one presented by Haslanger show how this idea can be misleading. Even if we accept the claim that *forms of consciousness* play the ideological role that they do in virtue of containing epistemically problematic beliefs, we should not conclude that every belief which plays a similar oppressive function is false, or unjustified, or illusory, or the product of an illusion.

Perhaps we might object that in Haslanger’s example it is not the belief ϕ that “Crop-tops are cute.” which has an *oppressive* function but a “higher-order belief” ϕ^* that “Crop-tops are cute therefore it is acceptable for 7th-grade girls to wear crop-tops.” In this way, we might try to argue that ϕ^* , but not ϕ , is really ideological. But this response seems *ad hoc*. Compare with the following pair of propositions, where ψ is epistemically problematic:

ψ : “There is no racism in our current society.”

ψ^* : “ ψ , therefore attempts to alleviate racism in our society are unjustified.”

It seems implausible to deny that ψ has the oppressive function of supporting racism. And there seems to be no relevant difference between the pair ψ/ψ^* and the pair ϕ/ϕ^* which would justify the claim that ψ has an oppressive function but ϕ does not. Therefore, this objection to the claim that certain beliefs can be functionally problematic but epistemically unproblematic is unsatisfactory.

Nevertheless, the comparison between ϕ/ϕ^* and ψ/ψ^* is illuminating in regard to the way in which ideology critique should analyse the oppressive function of beliefs such as ϕ . In both cases, the first-order belief ϕ/ψ supports an oppressive system S in virtue of being the object of a higher-order belief ϕ^*/ψ^* . But only in the ψ/ψ^* case is it possible to provide an epistemic critique of the higher-order belief by providing an epistemic critique of the first-order belief. In the ϕ/ϕ^* case, this is not possible, because ϕ is not epistemically problematic strictly speaking.

Furthermore, we can note that *if* neither ϕ *nor* ϕ^* were epistemically problematic, then we would be justified in inferring that “It is acceptable for 7th-grade girls to wear crop-tops.” So, if we want to *show* that ϕ really has the function of making an unacceptable system S appear acceptable (that is, if we want to provide a *functional critique* of ϕ), we must be ready to show that ϕ^* is epistemically problematic. Hence, criticizing ϕ requires providing an epistemic critique of ϕ^* , which consists in a moral critique of the claim that the truth of ϕ makes S acceptable.

B) Analysing the self-supporting properties of epistemically warranted ideological beliefs

An ideology in our framework is a *form of consciousness*, that is, a system of inter-connected practices, attitudes, and beliefs. It works as a *system* to the extent that the elements it contains mutually support each other: racist beliefs not only reinforce racist practices but are also reinforced by the very same practices they support. The other reason why beliefs such as ϕ should be called “ideological” is that, like “traditional” (i.e. epistemically flawed) ideological beliefs, ϕ is *systematically embedded* within the form of consciousness it supports.

To define this idea more precisely, let us say that a belief p is *ideologically embedded* in a form of consciousness F iff:

- (i) p supports a set of practices/attitudes in F .
- (ii) F is oppressive (in which case F is an *ideology* in the pejorative sense defined in section 1).
- (iii) p is itself supported by those same practices/attitudes.

Now, when we consider beliefs such as ϕ (“Crop-tops are cute”), we find that ϕ not only supports certain practices – such as 7th-grade girls wearing crop-tops – but is itself supported by those same practices to the extent that those practices *create the conditions that make ϕ true and justified*. So it follows that ϕ satisfies (i)-(iii):

- (i) ϕ supports the practice of 7th-grade girls wearing crop-tops.

(ii) This practice is part of an oppressive form of consciousness that sexualizes young girls, marginalizes the chubby girls, etc. (according to Haslanger).

(iii) ϕ is supported by the practice it motivates, since 7th-grade girls wearing crop-tops makes the belief “Crop-tops are cute” true in their social milieu.

The fact that an epistemically grounded belief such as ϕ satisfies (i)-(iii) just as most beliefs that are interesting targets for ideology critique satisfy (i)-(iii), gives us additional reason to think ϕ can meaningfully be called “ideological”. The main difference lies in the fact that epistemically problematic ideological beliefs usually satisfy (iii) by creating the conditions that make them *appear* reasonable or justified, while a belief such as ϕ satisfies (iii) by creating the conditions that make it *actually true, justified, and epistemically unproblematic*. This difference, however, arguably makes the latter an even more interesting target for ideology critique. Indeed, while it seems possible to undermine an epistemically problematic belief by merely providing an *epistemic* critique of it, the same cannot be said of ϕ since, as I have argued, no such epistemic critique of it is available. Undermining belief in ϕ will thus require transforming directly the practices that make it true and justified, rather than trying to demonstrate that it is epistemically flawed.

Conclusion

There is an intuitive way of understanding ideology according to which ideology contributes to oppression *in virtue of being false*. In this paper I have argued that this view must be nuanced. Some beliefs can be called “ideological” in a meaningful sense, not by virtue of being false or epistemically problematic, but in virtue of their *functional properties*. Let ϕ be such a belief. I conclude this essay by highlighting some key conclusions about beliefs of this type.

First: ϕ fulfills its ideological function in virtue of being the object of a *false/unwarranted* higher-order belief ϕ^* of the form “ ϕ makes S acceptable” or “ ϕ justifies S ” (where S is an oppressive practice/social system). Second: To provide a functional critique of ϕ , we must provide an *epistemic critique* of the higher-order belief ϕ^* , i.e. we must show that it is false or unwarranted. Third: to show that ϕ^* is “false”, we must provide a *moral critique* of the claim that ϕ justifies S . Fourth: undermining belief in ϕ requires – in addition to such functional criticism – actually transforming the practices that render it epistemically unproblematic.

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