



Keeping ideology in its place

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Abstract

Most people don't want their teachers, scientists, or journalists to be too ideological. Calling someone an "ideologue" isn't a compliment. But what is ideology and why exactly is it a threat? I propose that ideology is fruitfully understood in terms of three ingredients: a basic moral claim, a worldview built on top of that claim, and the attempt to politicize this worldview by injecting it into social institutions. I further argue that the central danger of ideology is that activating these three ingredients tends to undermine liberal social institutions. And yet a certain amount of ideology is both unavoidable and desirable, as I show, since it supplies us with important goods like social cohesion and mobilization. This means the best we can do is to try and set boundaries on ideology.

Keywords Ideology · Politics · Marxism · Capitalism · Political philosophy

Ideology has been neglected among anglophone philosophers of late, with few foundational studies dedicated to the subject.¹ And yet, ideologies shape social movements and cause revolutions, and the concept of ideology informs our everyday thinking, as when we criticize constraints on scientific inquiry as ideological, roll our eyes at those who censor art or comedy on ideological grounds, or criticize talking

¹ A search of *Ethics* and of *Philosophy & Public Affairs* on JSTOR, for example, returns four entries for "ideology" in the title of the article in the period 1972–2017 (the latest year available), none of which discusses foundational issues at length. Overviews of the extant literature can be found in Heywood, 2017, Freeden et al., 2013, Freeden, 2003 and, 1996, and Hinich and Munger, 1994. For a conceptual history of *ideology*, see Stråth, 2013. The foundational discussion of Marx & Engels, 1998 (*The German Ideology*) is of limited relevance, given the long distance the concept of ideology has traveled over the centuries (Leopold, 2013). For work in political science, see Bell, 1960, Connolly, 1967, and McLellan, 1995.

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heads as ideologues. Intellectuals face an increasingly ideological landscape; even scientific journals like *Nature* or *Cell* now support (editorially) specific politicians and social movements, and urge scientists to “get political.”²

I defend the theses that (i) ideology is fruitfully understood in terms of three ingredients: a basic moral claim, a worldview built on top of that claim, and the attempt to politicize this worldview by injecting it into social institutions; (ii) that ideology is best thought of in evaluatively neutral terms that don’t presuppose ideology to be either delusional or oppressive; (iii) that the distinctive danger posed by ideology as such is that it undermines liberal institutions like the free press or the university; and yet (iv) a certain amount of ideology is both unavoidable and *desirable*, since it supplies us with important goods like social cohesion and mobilization.

Making sense of ideology thus requires a skill that we aren’t always eager to deploy: evaluating in light of messy trade-offs rather than decisive arguments. My conclusion will be that, although ideology was traditionally conceived of as a specific, oppressive manifestation of capitalism we should struggle against, the truth is almost the opposite. It is best viewed as a completely general phenomenon most of us get swept up in and that we cannot abandon, yet in view of its dangers we must try to mark out proper bounds for ideology.

1 1

What is ideology? It may seem bold to answer without retracing the many answers that have been proposed over the years. But most of these have been offered in the context of a complex, Continental tradition of Marxism that is difficult to treat without a great deal of textual nuance, which would derail the problem-based approach that I will pursue.³ Our interest isn’t historical, but practical—how should we identify and deal with the threats ideology seems to pose? For this reason I will advance a simple account that seems to capture most of the phenomena that give rise to our fears. Later, I will defend the one, genuinely controversial feature of this account, its neutrality.

I suggest a three-part recipe:

Ideology: a set of attitudes (beliefs, hopes, fears, expectations) that are:

- A. rooted in a basic moral (or other normative) concern, that is...
- B. developed into a large-scale theory informed by a worldview, that...
- C. motivates a political agenda that its adherents seek to inject into social institutions.

What is at stake, on this view, is fundamentally a moral concern, a worldview, and a broadly political agenda.

² <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02852-x>, <https://www.cell.com/black-lives-matter>, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01100-0>.

³ See Rehman, 2013, Eagleton, 2007, Shelby, 2003, and Geuss, 1981.

Obviously this leaves out a great deal.⁴ The goal isn't to capture everything an ideology *does*. Ideologies, it is often noted, serve to legitimate certain ideas, to disarm critics, and many other things.⁵ But we can explain what cars are without explaining the vast set of social functions cars serve, and the three ingredient story is meant only to distill the essence of what an ideology *is*, not all of its purposes or consequences. (It may help to consider an incipient ideology, before it is very successful. A group of students can develop an ideology around environmentalism without it doing much of anything.)

To illustrate these abstractions, let us turn to some examples in Table 1. I choose Marxism as a paradigmatic case of an ideology, American post-War anti-Communism as a typical right-wing example, and the emerging social justice ethic in the United States, focused on sexism and racism, as a contemporary left-wing example. Labeling these as ideologies isn't intended to imply they are wrong, and I think we are wise to contemplate at least some examples that are still active. Of course, these sketches are radically incomplete; I intend only to gesture toward the three ingredients at work, and to give a sense of the far flung political agendas involved. Other examples of ideology include Nazism, white supremacism, anti-colonialism (e.g., in Algeria or Vietnam), and pro-market capitalism, at least when it involves brandishing copies of *Atlas Shrugged*.

The first ingredient, the basic moral concern, is the beating heart of ideology, the thing that makes us mad, that motivates marches and chants. Of course, an ideology can be calmly held, but in matters of great moral importance emotional engagement is more likely the norm, unless we take specific countermeasures. Typically this will

Table 1 Ideological schemas

	Marxism	Anti-Communism	Social Justice
Moral concern	Poverty is bad...	Totalitarian communism is bad...	Racism is bad...
Worldview	History of the world as class struggle...	Geopolitical struggle of liberty vs. totalitarianism...	American society as structurally racist... ¹
Political agenda	Seize means of production, Socialist Realism in art...	Create client regimes, Hollywood blacklist... ²	Defund/reform police, identity requirements for movies... ³

¹See, e.g., Bailey et al. 2021, Kendi 2019 (but see p. 18), and Alexander 2012, 25.

²On Hollywood, see Schrecker and Deery 1998, 202-210.

³<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/07/us-cities-defund-police-transferring-money-community>; <https://www.oscars.org/news/academy-establishes-representation-and-inclusion-standards-oscar-eligibility>

⁴ Among the intricacies open to debate is the question of whether to see ideology as primarily a belief-system or a set of norms (cp. Heywood, 2017, pp. 11-14), whether to emphasize practices over beliefs (Haslanger, 2017, pp. 11-16), and whether a single person is enough for an ideology, or whether a respectable number of adherents is required.

⁵ See, e.g., Jost, Federico, and Napier, 2013 and Geertz, 1973, 237-238.

be a moral or political judgment, like that gross inequality or the Gulag system is outrageous, though we should leave room for other concerns, like that God is to be revered or that nature must remain pure. Typically, the basic normative judgment is uncontroversial in the community from which it emanates, though of course other communities may look on in horror. As controversial as Marxism or anti-Communism are in the West, the sticking point has rarely been that gross poverty is a terrible thing or that totalitarianism is wrong; everyone in the relevant communities agrees on *that*.

But individual attitudes do not make an ideology. Nor do a few local judgments about history or politics or society. A crucial feature of an ideology is that it is *big*. An ideology represents a way of seeing the world—perhaps a national myth (or anti-myth), or a story about who has power in society, that helps explain why things like poverty or racism are taking place. A 19th century Marxist observing children eating sawdust isn't just moved by the particular case or even the class of cases; he has a *theory* of the case based on a picture of the world that explains why children suffer while factory owners drink champagne. Basic concerns lend ideology commitment and fervor; a worldview gives history a narrative arc and populates it with protagonists and villains, and thus provides us with a sense of meaning in virtue of where we fit into this story (usually as the heroes, naturally). As we shall see, because worldviews are epistemically ambitious, they are also error-prone and virtually guarantee conflict.

We might object that ordinary people absorb ideologies without holding a complicated theory of the case, at least not one that they could make explicit or defend. The traditional Marxist view of bourgeois capitalism certainly wasn't intended to apply only to intellectuals, but to shopkeepers and bankers. But worldviews and the complicated theories they embody can be implicit and instinctual. Medieval peasants had plenty of ideas, if only implicit, about how the world worked. A high school graduate of the 1950s may have despised Communism and later felt certain that we should fight in Vietnam while knowing very little about any of the geopolitics involved. Talk radio, cable news, and memes on social media are perfectly capable of dispersing complicated worldviews developed by others. To name some of the stock figures involved in this process, artists and journalists may be especially sensitive to the moral outrages that animate the movement (think of Blake's "satanic mills"); intellectuals then theorize and develop pictures and stories to make sense of what is wrong in the world; and then activists push these ideas into the schools, the press, media, and increasingly the sciences and the academy.

This brings us to the third ingredient. We began with moral fervor and often outrage; we developed a picture of the world to make sense of it all; now we take to the streets for change, or shape the discussion of the smoke-filled room, or denounce ideological enemies on social media, as the case may be. What is most striking in the third row of Table 1 is the imperial tendency of ideology. Given how high the stakes are ("Children are eating sawdust!"), ideologues are unlikely to be satisfied with piecemeal change or formal protections of the law. The goal is usually much broader social change, which means that eventually athletics, business, and TV shows are subjected to ideological pressure. We boycott the Olympics; we are outraged that athletes do not share our opinions; we demand that movies and musicians support us in our struggle for the Cause—beauty and individual excellence can wait another day.

In defending this analysis, I can only suggest that it seems to be a fruitful way of engaging the phenomena, of capturing the features that are distinctive and interesting about ideology. There is an element of legislating here, whose advantages can only emerge as we proceed. For now, though, notice that this frame at the very least helps us to make sense of some edge cases and disputes. Are religions ideologies on this view? Not if they are restricted to a couple of mystics studying sacred texts in the mountains, which seems right. On the other hand, Hindu nationalism, political Islam, or Reagan-era evangelicalism might be, if these are animated by a normative concern developed into a theory of the case (“Religion is no longer respected because of a hostile state and the rise of secularism”), culminating in calls for politicizing religious views, e.g., introducing them into the school curriculum. “Render unto Caesar” is as useful in thinking about ideology as in thinking about Christianity.

What about outlooks like liberalism or conservatism? This, too, depends. In most cases, these are better categorized as political orientations than ideologies. We should resist the temptation to make any approach to politics an ideology. If conservatism is just resistance to social change or an emphasis on individual responsibility, then it may not inspire much fervor or develop into a worldview. (More likely, it’s the other way around—some independent worldview motivates resistance to various social changes.) But if it takes a more concrete form, say of devotion to a national myth or origin story that is threatened by upstart radicals, it may develop into right-wing nationalism, which is recognizably ideological. To a good approximation, if there aren’t angry people marching for it, it’s not an ideology, unless it is already an orthodoxy or still in its infancy, and how many people have marched for “liberalism” or “conservatism” (as such), as opposed to more specific causes?

2 2

There is one deep disagreement about the concept of ideology. This is whether or not to think of ideology in pejorative terms, so that ideology is always bad or wrong because the attitudes involved are epistemically flawed or else oppressive. In the Marxist tradition, ideology is often associated with the political enemies of the Marxists, and so it is natural to describe them—the capitalists—as epistemically confused and morally bankrupt. Our goal, then, is to avoid having *any* ideology, while exposing and attacking ideology in others. (Marx’s goal wasn’t to replace capitalist ideology with his own; it was to move from mere ideology to genuine “science.”)⁶ Many contemporary views follow in this tradition. Tommie Shelby, for example, proposes that we think of ideology as “A widely held set of loosely associated beliefs and implicit judgments that *misrepresent* significant social realities and that function, through this *distortion*, to bring about or perpetuate *unjust* social relations” (italics

⁶ See Schwartz, 1993 for analysis of whether Marxism is itself an ideology, and Breiner, 2013 on the “Mannheim Paradox” of the apparent inescapability of ideology. For criticism of the idea that Marx and the early Marxists had a neutral conception of ideology in mind all along, see Rehman, 2013, 55–58. See Giaquinto, 1984 for a defense of the distinction between ideology and science.

added),⁷ while Sally Haslanger suggests that “ideologies...are technēs that produce or sustain *injustice* by guiding us to enact *unjust* practices” (italics added).⁸

But another tradition seeks to explain ideology in neutral terms, as does my three ingredient story. Not all ideologies are oppressive, and not all of them are the result of epistemic confusion, “false consciousness,” or the like. Anthropologists like Clifford Geertz and economists like Thomas Piketty and Hinich and Munger tend to take a detached, neutral approach, according to which ideology is pervasive and largely unavoidable, and our goal, far from eliminating it, is to come to grips with our and other people’s ideologies, and try to choose better rather than worse ones.⁹ Some philosophers have embraced something like this approach as well; Elizabeth Anderson, for instance, explains ideology in neutral terms: “An ideology is an abstract model that people use to represent and cope with the social world.”¹⁰

In a sense, not much hangs on this dispute; there is no use arguing over words. But taxonomies can matter. Whether we group whales with mammals or fish is in one sense merely verbal, but in another sense of great moment. Taxonomy reflects our view of the world and its history, and can illuminate or obscure. And there are four problems with defining ideology pejoratively. First, doing so does obscure the role that structural features of an ideology may play in *making* it oppressive or otherwise bad. For if it’s built into an ideology that its holders are confused and unjust, obviously we won’t tend to consider the role of structural features of ideology itself—the moral fervor, a worldview, politicization—in making it bad. Yet it would be a mistake to close off the possibility that it is in the very nature of ideology to bring about the features people object to in some ideologies.

Secondly, in legislating that ideologies are intrinsically oppressive or at least confused, we make it impossible to see *ourselves* as in the grip of an ideology. On the pejorative approach, our political enemies suffer from delusions preventing them from seeing the truth, whereas we are freedom fighters and truth tellers. (Geertz: “I have a social philosophy; you have political opinions; he has an ideology.”¹¹) This is an invitation to motivated reasoning if ever there was one. Charity to our political opponents and sober reflection on our own fallibility counsels a neutral conception of ideology that may at times apply to ourselves. If we are honest, we sometimes have merely ideological objections to viewpoints that we should reconsider, or we pursue good ends with an ideological fervor that does damage that we ignore. The appeal of the pejorative conception is thus ultimately superficial. Demonizing our political opponents as ideologues while pretending that we are doing something fundamentally different is gratifying at first, but ends with us blinded to our own vulnerabilities.

Third, I argue below that there are reasons we may want or even need ideology. It is a mistake to make this impossible by definition.

⁷ 2014, 66. Cp. Shelby, 2003, 162–164.

⁸ 2017, 16.

⁹ Geertz, 1973; Piketty, 2020, p. 3; Hinich and Munger, 1994, 11. For additional discussion of this distinction see Freedman, 1996, p. 15 and Geuss, 1981, 4–44.

¹⁰ Anderson, 2019, 20. See also Stanley, 2016, 3.

¹¹ 1973, 212.

Finally, there is proof-by-existence. There are prominent historical instances of movements taking ideology in the neutral sense and defending it. One example is NSC-68, the 1950 policy paper drafted under President Truman, which is often viewed as a distillation of the anti-Communist ideology of the postwar period. NSC-68 explicitly refers to “the fundamental ideological conflict” between the United States and the Soviet Union, going so far as to suggest that “war...cannot definitively end the fundamental conflict in the realm of ideas.”¹² There is no attempt to argue that the American view is “scientific” or “moral” while the Soviet position is ideological. From the authors’ point of view, the problem isn’t that the Soviet Union engages in mere ideology; it’s that the *content* of its ideology is wrongheaded. To give a little of the flavor, the authors assert that “the Kremlin’s objective[s]...is the total subjective submission of the peoples now under its control. The concentration camp is the prototype of the society which these policies are designed to achieve, a society in which the personality of the individual is so broken and perverted that he participates affirmatively in his own degradation.” By contrast, “The free society attempts to create and maintain an environment in which every individual has the opportunity to realize his creative powers.”¹³ In context, it’s clear that these contrasting characterizations are supposed to demonstrate the superiority of American ideology, while highlighting the stakes of the conflict.

Cynics will treat this as deluded jingoism, but in any case, it is a striking example of accepting the evaluatively neutral framing of ideological conflict and then trying to make the case for a particular brand. My claim is not that the content of NSC-68 is right or wrong, but that it demonstrates the possibility, indeed the reality, of the neutral conception of ideology. Clearly not just theorists but actual policy-makers have sometimes thought of ideology in something like the way that the three-part recipe suggests, which allows for a *positive* moral concern to serve as animating principle. Those opposed to this conception, we may observe, don’t argue against the neutral conception; they tend simply to pass over the possibility altogether, which is a mistake in light of its historical importance.¹⁴

Nor is NSC-68 an eccentric one-off. Similar cases include the anti-capitalism of Thomas Piketty,¹⁵ or Pericles’ Funeral Oration, which amounts to the NSC-68 of ancient Athens in relation to Sparta. (“I have therefore spoken so much concerning the city...to show you that the stakes between us and them, whose city is not such, are not equal.”¹⁶) Those who regard ideology as a product of modernity are much mistaken, and the neutral conception has been widely held, though rarely made explicit and defended.

¹² May, 1993, 32.

¹³ May, 1993, p. 33, 27.

¹⁴ This is true of Shelby, 2014 and Haslanger, 2017, for instance.

¹⁵ 2020, 971-972.

¹⁶ Thucydides, 1989, 2.42.

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We can now take up the dangers posed by ideology. One approach is to think about the pathologies of ideology in the abstract, which include the gradual politicization of all domains of society, conformism, taboos, blacklists, witch-hunts, purges, purity spirals, pressures to “confess,” attempts to “educate” or reeducate, anonymous informants, and “officers” tasked with evangelism or enforcement. But for the sake of concreteness, let us focus on some specific scenarios, both left- and right-facing.¹⁷

Science A government research panel is to issue a report on climate change, but politicians influenced by a pro-market ideology demand that key recommendations be toned down. (Left-facing version: a scientific journal publishes research suggesting police shootings aren’t biased by race, but is forced to retract this work after a social media campaign rooted in ideological objections.)

Education The administration of the University insists that applicants for a job in mathematics be screened for their commitment to the cause of social justice, as evidenced by a three-page letter. (Right-facing version: the administration insists mathematicians should be screened on the basis of their commitment to liberty and democracy, as evidenced by a letter on what they have done personally to fight the scourge of Communism.)

Art The Academy decrees that awards will not be conferred on work that is inconsistent with the Family Values Code, forbidding depiction of things like adultery or abortion. (Left-facing version: the Academy decrees that only art focused on the plight of the worker (or other sympathetic victim-group) in the manner of Socialist Realism is eligible for awards consideration.)

The traditional Marxist diagnosis of the ills of ideology is partly normative and partly epistemic.¹⁸ Normatively, ideology is said to aid a dominant group in oppressing the weak. Epistemically, Marxists suggest that the dominant group engages in motivated reasoning to produce a picture of the world that *legitimizes* their oppressive endeavors (Kipling’s “white man’s burden” captures this thought in regard to colonialism). Commenting on racism, for instance, Shelby suggests that the epistemic problems arise from “cognitive defects” or “ideological illusions,” such as the essential inferiority of certain people defined by race, fostered by sometimes unconscious motives such as the desire to profit from racist social systems. (In their delusions about their true motivations or the true role they play in the social system, they suffer from a “false consciousness,” in Engels’ phrase.¹⁹)

There is much that is right in this diagnosis, which we can connect to the first two ingredients in my own account. Essentially, the first suggestion is that ideology can be dangerous in virtue of its basic moral concern, if the content of that concern in

¹⁷ See Anderson, 2020, pp. 14–18 for discussion of what ideology looks like in action, particularly in relation to the “epistemology of injustice.”

¹⁸ Geuss, 1981, 12–22.

¹⁹ 2003, 166–168. For more on the theory of false consciousness, which is disputed, see Eagleton, 2007, 10–26.

malign, as with Nazism or xenophobic nationalism. This is important to hold onto. Even if it turns out that all ideologies pose a danger, we shouldn't forget that the specific content matters. But of course not all ideologies have malign ends; many of them sound great in theory. Who doesn't agree that children eating sawdust is awful? And yet, ideologies like Marxism *can* run amok and produce purges and purity spirals, so there must be more to the story. More generally, even when we're sympathetic to the concerns of an ideology, we may nevertheless worry about the specifically *ideological manifestation* of those concerns in a case like *Science* or *Education*. What we are after are the distinctive pathologies of ideology that are problems whether or not its content is benign.

We can also agree that there is something worrisome about the epistemology we observe in ideological thinking, which connects to the second ingredient, the worldview. Ideology frequently gives rise to motivated reasoning and other epistemic defects, though some of these are just a reflection of human nature in general. More distinctive is the inflationary process that takes us from some platitude like that poverty is bad to an enormous edifice of ideas touching on all of humanity. ("The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."²⁰)

This is worth setting out in more detail. Developing a theory of the economic history of the world or of global geopolitics requires having views on both a vast number of topics (worldviews are big), and on topics that are intrinsically difficult and so easy to misjudge. A worldview will involve confident proclamations on such topics as the French Revolution, the effect of the Industrial Revolution on childhood poverty, the criminal justice system, the male-female wage gap, Soviet intentions in Nicaragua, the war on drugs, psychology, history, sociology, and economics. The epistemology of worldviews is, in short, dubious. Some worldviews are no doubt correct, but only in the sense that they lie written somewhere in Borges' infinite library of Babel.²¹ As I will argue later, we cannot help (and are right to) continue to draw up largescale pictures of the world as best we can, but in a sober hour we recognize how easy it is to go astray, and put forward our theories with the appropriate modesty. And yet, as intellectuals inflate basic moral concerns into full-blown ideologies, they rarely become less confident; if anything, they tend to project *more* confidence. (There is precious little hedging to be found in Marx and Engels or NSC-68.)

Another set of epistemic defects involves narrative-fitting and air-brushing. Reality rarely cooperates with our ideological positions. Facts inconveniently obtrude, forcing us to decide whether to retreat from our fixations to a more nuanced picture or whether to press ahead. We are inevitably tempted by procrustean remedies, lopping off what doesn't fit, or else we stuff *in* what doesn't belong, forcing the latest social media factoid or viral video to support our story. Or sometimes we simply compromise by airbrushing. For nationalists of a certain sort, the atrocities of slavery and the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans are a poor fit for a more upbeat telling of the national epic. We don't, in this softer version of ideology, erase the facts, but we pass over episodes like slavery quickly, or airbrush over the embarrassing biographies of our national heroes. One reads the relevant books, and the camera pans away grace-

²⁰ Marx & Engels, 1992, 3.

²¹ Borges, 1998.

fully, or lights the protagonists in a flattering haze. Proponents of an anti-national myth, by contrast, tend to indulge the complementary tendencies. The national heroes are portrayed in razor sharp focus with each of their sins catalogued exhaustively, but we then gloss over other inconvenient facts, like the indigenous African role in the slave trade or the imperialism and atrocities of native American groups.²² Ideologies turn history into stories of saints and villains.

However, just as appealing to the content of an ideology cannot explain why ideology as such poses a threat, so too epistemology isn't enough. Even the more distinctive mechanisms mentioned just now aren't especially dangerous on their own. In fact, even malign content and poor epistemology combined are unlikely to produce what ideology gone haywire looks like. Disconnected from a political agenda, these are likely to result in something pretty innocuous, like books of eccentric philosophy or a cranky neighbor who relates unsavory opinions. There is nothing here to set in motion marches, purges, or *Education*.

4 4

The distinctive danger of ideology, I want to suggest, is that combining moral outrage, a worldview, and a political agenda threatens liberal institutions. And at the limit, ideology may threaten the liberal social order defined by those institutions.

This claim rests on two assumptions. First, quite trivially, there exist social institutions that have important roles to play, functions to perform, in a healthy society. Social institutions, in my sense, are organizations and systems that promote goods such as justice, material well-being, entertainment, and knowledge. There is a division of labor that allows different institutions to perform their distinctive roles, including the legal system, the business community, Hollywood, the free press, and the universities.²³ Less trivially, I assume that these institutions must be liberal, by which I mean *free*, in order to function optimally within the division of institutional labor. (It is worth remembering the Latinate derivation of “liberal” relates to freedom, but of course the point isn't just etymological.)²⁴ To the extent that institutions' autonomy is compromised because they must serve other masters, there is a danger that they won't promote the relevant goods, or will do so less well. Artists are to seek out beauty and other aesthetic values unencumbered by slavish devotion to the Cause; scientists' role is to discover new truths about the world without worrying about upsetting activists. In other words, liberal institutions must be free from sources of authority from outside the domain in question, which have their own agendas. The king wants to control the courts; the church wants to control the academy; some billionaire wants to control the news. According to a liberal conception of these institutions, they must remain free to pursue the goals internal to the institutions themselves. As institutions are captured by an ideology, they are made to serve the Cause instead of their

²² Thornton, 1999, pp. 127-147; Davies, 1987, 38-68.

²³ This is not, of course, Rawls' “basic structure” (1999, 6); what I have in mind is much more prosaic.

²⁴ On liberal institutions and the meaning of “liberalism” in this context, see Fawcett, 2018, p. 9 and Rosenblatt, 2018, 8-36.

domain-specific roles. It is this, I believe, that ultimately explains our unease with cases like *Science*, *Education*, and *Art*. Later on I will suggest that there is a role for ideology, but the point is that any such role must be narrowly circumscribed so as not to trespass on the proper aims of liberal institutions.

I haven't said much about the positive aims of these institutions beyond a few examples, and that is intentional. Different societies in different epochs will pursue somewhat different goals depending on their attitudes toward art or education. The liberal view I am sketching here does not prescribe a particular content. The idea is rather that *whatever* scientists, educators, or artists decide is worth pursuing within their domains is at risk if they must answer to an outside agenda.

If the liberal conception of institutions isn't founded on specific content—a particular theory of education or good art—then it may seem puzzling to insist on the autonomy of these domains. The insistence cannot be rooted in allegiance to a particular school of education or art that is threatened. But on reflection, this seems right. Return to *Science*, *Education* and *Art* once more. The objection to intrusions in these areas is ultimately that the *kinds* of goods involved are likely to be contaminated and degraded when they are heteronomous. The objection to Socialist Realism or Family Values art isn't that these are worse conceptions of art than Impressionism or Abstract Expressionism; it's that the very endeavor of artistic expression is degraded when it is made to serve the church or social justice.

Of course, sometimes things will work out for the best. If the church demands that all art represent Madonna and child, no doubt many quite wonderful Madonnas will emerge. Socialist Realism will produce some brilliant propaganda posters. Nevertheless, under the liberal conception, on the whole, important goods advanced by the arts will be at risk if artists must kowtow to outside influences. (It is worth contrasting artists motivated by their own devotion to the Madonna or to Communism and those working under compulsion, barred from pursuing their idiosyncratic passions. The alternative isn't between being permitted or barred from painting Madonnas, but between being permitted and being *forced*.)

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Although the institutional liberalism I have all-too-briefly sketched is quite different from Rawls' political liberalism and related theories of state neutrality, it may provoke an analogous doubt.²⁵ Just as we may not be persuaded that a "neutral" state really is neutral between secularists and orthodox religious citizens, or between other rival worldviews, so we may worry that neutrality within social institutions is just another ideology, perhaps even one wielded as a bludgeon by reactionaries. Neutrality may be viewed as privileging the status quo or the powerful over whomever the critic views as righteous victims. More broadly, we might worry that communities of journalists, scientists, and artists inevitably tend toward *some* set of commitments or other, and thus that the dream of purifying these domains of ideology is a fan-

²⁵ See Rawls, 2005, pp. 134–139, and for responses, e.g., Gaus and Vallier (eds.) 2022. For more on confusions about ideology and neutrality, see Stanley, 2016, 77.

tasy. Institutions embody values by which they chart their course, and so there's no escape from the clash of irreconcilable creeds. Maybe nationalism is unwelcome in the newsroom, but the solution is to displace it with a better ideology, not some supposed neutral perspective.²⁶

This is a powerful objection in the abstract, but one that becomes less appealing once we make it concrete. Pick your *least* favorite ideology, and imagine it infiltrating the newsroom. “Fire on Main Street—proving once again that socialism is a failed project contrary to the American way of life.” You complain, and the reply is, as above, that the neutrality you demand is itself an ideological stance, or more subtly, that your proposed neutral approach to reporting is a fantasy, since journalism invariably reflects prior commitments. My example is cartoonish, but of course it's easy to find real-life instances, say universities persecuting Communists in the 1950s. How persuasive does the above objection seem in such a case? I think this shows that we are tempted to dismiss complaints about ideological capture only when we imagine ourselves as victors in the struggle.

But this is just a preliminary diagnosis. To answer more directly, it isn't true that resistance to ideology must itself take the form of an ideology (of neutrality or otherwise), nor is it true that the alternative to ideological capture is absolute neutrality shorn of all commitments. Resisting ideologically inflected science or journalism need not take the form of taking up a moral cause, joining it to a worldview, and then injecting it into social institutions, the picture of ideology that I've been developing. We needn't have a moral cause at all when we object to journalism that seeks to advance an ideological narrative in its reporting. We can just think that doing so makes journalism worse. If scientists are ordered to sign oaths or promote some moral cause when applying to the university, we can object that this undermines the scientific enterprise, since the practices of science are made to answer to external masters, which may corrupt them. And there is even less need to produce a worldview. These objections can be “local,” without any grand theory of the case involving a questionable history of the proletariat or of geopolitics. All we need a theory of is what makes for better or worse science or journalism. And although the subject we are treating is of course social institutions, those complaining about ideological capture need not themselves wish to imbue institutions with some positive outlook. This is clear from the fact that those with incompatible and indeed rival worldviews may join in objecting to ideological capture, not because they share some substantive cause, but because they fear compromising the social institution and the goods it is supposed to produce.

What the objection does get right is that those resisting ideological influence must have their own commitments, if only those associated with a concern for healthy social institutions. But there is nothing inconsistent about this. Worrying about ideological capture is not the same as the radical proposal that institutions shouldn't reflect any value commitments at all. The latter is clearly hopeless, since the whole point of social institutions is to advance various goods that their members will presumably care about. Consider again the journalist who makes every story connect-up with

²⁶ Ongoing debates about the role of “objectivity” in journalism partly reflect this concern. See, e.g., Downie, 2023 and Cunningham, 2003.

some hobbyhorse involving nationalism or Communism. We can complain about this without demands of full value-neutrality. Sure, journalists should care about all kinds of things, like informing the public, but that doesn't mean that it's anything goes. In particular, it doesn't mean that journalism won't be negatively affected when pursued through an ideological prism.

One way of putting this is that resistance to ideology is indeed likely to spring from a commitment to liberal values, in some sense. But that sense shouldn't be exaggerated. "Liberal values" in this context doesn't mean commitment to value-free institutions, nor does it mean a liberal ideology as I have defined it. A perfectly natural sense in which liberal values may conflict with ideology is simply this. Some of us hold that a healthy, free society requires institutions that include the free press, legal system, educational and research establishments, and so on. And we think that to produce the relevant kinds of goods, these institutions must be free (or liberal) in the sense that they are not dominated by the king, the church, or some ideology, whether it be right- or left-wing. A journalist or historian encumbered by pressure to find the "right" result favored by the king or priest or ideologue is not free. Hence the tension between ideology and liberal values.

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If we accept the argument so far, it may seem obvious that we ought to reject ideology altogether. (If we have the pejorative conception of ideology, following Shelby and Haslanger, this is true by definition.) Surprisingly, though, I don't think this can be our response. There are countervailing reasons for wanting or even needing ideology. One kind of reason is top-down: ideology itself is sometimes desirable and draws us toward itself. This can be framed as a (better) objection to the argument we have developed: "Clearly there have been important, successful, and *noble* ideologies that have served us well in the past, such as anti-Communism, which arguably contributed to toppling the Soviet Union, or the Civil Rights Movement, and the argument thus far doesn't seem to allow for these benign ideologies."

First, though, consider another kind of reason which is bottom-up: ideology is simply the result of other important things we do that it would not be easy or wise to forego. To see this, consider the three ingredients of ideology I have emphasized. How easy is it to give up on them? Letting go of our basic moral convictions is out of the question. Perhaps we should all be a little more modest about these opinions, but the prospects for toning down our attitudes toward poverty, totalitarianism, and sexism seem dim, and on reflection I don't think many of us really want to change our attitudes in these areas. Nor is it easy to imagine giving up on our worldviews. Beliefs are to some extent involuntary, and we can't help theorize about how the world came to be the way it is and what lies behind problems like poverty or totalitarianism. Moreover, some worldviews are presumably true, and we are right to seek them out, even if we fall short most of the time. Finally, if we feel confident that we can change the world for better by changing our institutions, it isn't clear why we wouldn't want to do so. And yet, if we simply follow these mundane strategies for holding on to our

moral convictions, trying to make sense of the world, and trying to improve society, ideology is a natural consequence.

There is, however, a bottom-up way of keeping ideology in its place. This is to moderate the *intensity* with which we hold and press forward with our views. Certainly when it comes to our worldviews, the grand theories in which we embed our moral or political convictions, there seems plenty of room for additional modesty. Even if our moral convictions are strong, there is plenty of room for shoulder-shrugging. Perhaps nothing will persuade us that children eating sawdust isn't an outrage, but this is consistent with acknowledging that it may be unclear whether the best *remedy* is collective ownership or capitalist-style growth. We can insist on the appalling tragedy of a particular miscarriage of justice while accepting that the long-term effects of defunding or radically reforming the police are complex and hard to predict in advance. This kind of fallibilism won't appeal to the temperament of radicals and revolutionaries, but it has the virtue not just of being an antidote to ideology, but of being substantively correct, given our epistemic limitations.

Returning to the objection that a great deal of good has been accomplished by social movements, we can acknowledge that we often *want* a certain amount of ideology. We can argue about particular cases and about how much ideology contributed to the outcome, or how ideological the movements really were—a social movement that makes a simple demand like the vote needn't be especially ideological. (Many suffragettes would have rolled their eyes at talk of The Patriarchy.) On the contrary, effective agents of change often display a great deal of pragmatism, a willingness to work with their enemies. Still, I think there is something to the top-down idea. Less ideology isn't always better.

Geertz notes that figures like Winston Churchill were nothing if not ideological, yet surely had their uses.²⁷ What ideology can give us, specifically, is social unity around a cause, and the kinds of beliefs and motivational structures needed to attain the ends of our causes. Ideology makes us enthusiastic and fervid, willing to make sacrifices, which is no small matter. Terry Eagleton comments that ideology is usually thought to be “unifying, action-oriented, rationalizing, legitimating, universalizing, and naturalizing,” and it's hard to imagine successful social organization without a great deal of unifying, rationalizing, and legitimating.²⁸ We can see this more clearly if we imagine important social organizing in the *absence* of ideology:

Normandy Your men are about to storm the beaches of Normandy. Mindful of the dangers of ideology, you refrain from indoctrinating them with a rah-rah speech about American values and history. In fact, you say, “As you know, America is very far from perfect, its history littered with injustice and hypocrisy. Still, we're better than the Nazis. Ok, over the top, boys!”

Civics You are teaching fifth grade civics. Mindful of the dangers of ideology, you teach them that American civic institutions are so-so and widely rejected by many thoughtful people in other countries. You constantly remind them of how imperfect American policy and social outcomes have been. As a result, your

²⁷ Geertz, 1973, 250–251.

²⁸ 2007, 45.

students grow up viewing public life with detachment and moderate contempt, devoid of any civic-mindedness. They wouldn't dream of serving as public officials or joining the military.

Healthcare As President, you introduce a sweeping new bill to promote better healthcare. But mindful of the dangers of ideology, the political rallies that you organize are filled with modest admissions of past failures and uncertainty. Maybe there's only a 60% chance your plans will work, you concede at every turn. Instead of sweeping rhetoric rooted in morality and history, you project timidity and meekness. As a result, those opposed to the bill find it easy to kill after an avalanche of negative ads.

With the right details, I take these cases to implicate ideologies like nationalism and egalitarianism. They involve deep moral concerns embedded in a view of history that leaders wish to inject into social institutions in order to effect change. And as these cases seem to illustrate, there are serious trade-offs involved. Without the unity, fervor, and enthusiasm ideology can induce, it's not easy to see how effective leadership at scale is possible. Perhaps this is too pessimistic, but it's hard to think of variations on these cases that accomplish the same without something resembling ideology.

But this gives us another way to think about keeping ideology its place. Here, the question isn't one of intensity, but one of *domain*. It is reasonable to accept a certain amount of ideology in the Marine Corps, among children learning civics, and in political leadership. (Which isn't to say that even here, there aren't important trade-offs and limits; no one should *lie* to those in their charge.) By contrast, the nature of institutions like the academy or the arts seem much worse suited to ideology, at least in their liberal interpretation. When university deans or movie critics adopt the tone of morale officers or politicians, something has gone wrong. The way to explain this, on my view, isn't by inveighing against ideology in general as in the traditional Marxist approach, or in Shelby and Haslanger, but by thinking more carefully about where it belongs and its limits. If the University demands that mathematicians first prove their loyalty to the Cause, the objection isn't so much that ideology is intrinsically wrong, it's that they have most likely failed to understand the place of the academy in the liberal order and the kind of trade-off they are making. In fifth grade civics, a little national pride might make sense (though even this is something to be weighed carefully); domains like the press or the academy are almost never better for being politicized by ideologues.

Let me close with a sentimental analogy. Relationships, too, often revolve around a fundamental idea, perhaps that our family is a happy one, or that our marriage is loving and fulfilling to both people. And like ideologies, relationships are full of narrative, mythmaking, and glamor shots that obscure harsh realities we don't wish to see in focus. Was the family trip to France notable for that time Dad called Mom "a real bitch" and she made him pull the car over and threatened to walk home? Or didn't that make the family album? Was their marriage nearly destroyed by the time she cheated on him, or is that glossed over in the personal mythology? Here, too, there is a tradeoff. At times, reality must be tack-sharp, as when one party wishes to renegotiate the terms of the relationship or else exit, or in certain domains, like the therapist's office. But how much reality can we take? You don't need personal

mythology for a one-night stand, but to make things work for 20 years you probably do. No one wants their family albums to include every time Dad went crazy or Mom had too much to drink. I'm skeptical that our most important relationships would work for very long without organizing them around a shared picture that is mostly positive and that lends value and significance to its continuing, like the moral core of an ideology and its associated narrative. A completely "scientific" approach would probably make this impossible. If so, then at both the social and the personal level, there can be such a thing as too much realism and we will have to face up to the trade-offs.

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