

## *Ideology, Culture, and Social Meaning*

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).

### **1. Introduction**

The concept of ideology is beginning to play a more significant role in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy, and different scholars are entering the discussion from different traditions. The various traditions use the term ‘ideology’ in different ways and controversies over whether the idea of ideology is theoretically or politically useful have appeared, disappeared, and reappeared over time (Purvis & Hunt 1993).<sup>1</sup>

My aim in this paper is to sketch a conception of ideology that draws on the critical theory tradition. This conception of ideology is a response to a particular challenge for those working on social justice: Why is it that most of us, most of the time, act in ways that perpetuate injustice? To begin to answer this question, I will develop an account, inspired by Althusser among others, that embeds ideology in social practices.<sup>2</sup> Social practices enable both human and non-human animals to coordinate fluently and flexibly in response to each other and our environment; and they depend on something like a “language” – a system of signs and signals – that makes socially intelligible agency possible. I call such a framework of meaning and its material apparatus a *cultural technē*. I use the term ‘cultural technē’ rather than ‘culture’ because, on my view, culture is not a coherent body of beliefs or values, but is something like a set of tools for communication and coordination that emerge in and sustain practices.<sup>3</sup> An ideology is a kind of cultural technē. It is one that produces or sustains oppression when taken up by a community in practice. So rather than ask what an ideology is, we might equally well ask: What makes a cultural technē ideological? Although J.M. Balkin has a different overall conception of ideology than mine, we are similar in this respect:

When our cultural software helps create or sustain unjust conditions, I say that it has ideological effects. But our tools of understanding do not always produce these effects. Hence ideology, in the

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss some of these in Haslanger 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Some sections of this paper draw on my first Spinoza Lecture “Ideology and Materiality” (Haslanger 2017a). I have been working on these topics since 2015 and several of my other papers are relevant and spell out further details of the view I develop here (Haslanger 2017b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 202b, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> The idea of culture as a set of tools is developed in Sewell (2005), Balkin (1998), Swidler (1984). Balkin (1998, Ch. 1) also discusses ways in which culture is also *not* like a set of tools.

pejorative sense, is not a phenomenon separate from the general mechanisms of cultural understanding; it is an effect produced by these mechanisms when they are placed in particular contexts and situations. I retain the familiar adjective ideological to describe these contextually produced effects.<sup>4</sup> (1998, 3-4)

This conception of ideology is functional, pejorative, but, I will propose, it is not primarily doxastic. In other words, an ideology is not just a set of implicit or explicit beliefs or other psychological attitudes; it is a framework of signs. Although the framework must be taken up in practice, or more precisely, in a system of practices, in order to be oppressive, it shapes us as much as we shape it.

In the next section, I will situate my account of ideology in relation to two different traditions, the “sociological” and the “critical” traditions in social theory. I’ll suggest that the primary question within the critical tradition is how and why we are (all) recruited into perpetuating oppression. In §3, I will sketch an approach to the construction of social subjects through participation in practices, drawing on Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and others, and will discuss the role of social meanings and their symbolic apparatus. In §4, I argue that Grice’s distinction between natural and non-natural meaning is too coarse to provide us an account of social meaning, and drawing on Skyrms and others working on signals, I propose that a cultural technē is a framework or system of signs. I then consider how we might capture the publicity of social meanings in terms that don’t require complex metacognition. In §5, I return to the question of recruitment into ideology and suggest that an account of ideology as a cultural technē “gone wrong” provides us a way to answer the question.

The paper, as a whole, aims to support three ideas:

1) We become social subjects by participating in practices, by gaining social know-how. Social practices shape us both mentally and physically to coordinate with each other in identifying, creating, distributing, and discarding things taken to have positive or negative value. Some of the practices we rely on, even if they produce some value, are crucial parts of an oppressive system. We should not lose sight of this.

2) Social practices rely on a toolbox of social meanings, some quite specific to a practice and others more general. This toolbox – the cultural technē – is not a set of psychological attitudes. It is a system of signs that invests an apparatus (signifier) with a meaning (signified). It is material part of our social lives; however, in order to become fluent in a practice, one must take up the cultural technē (which is not necessarily a matter of believing). A cultural technē – the local system of signs – is ideological to the extent that the system of practices it sustains is oppressive.<sup>5</sup>

3) Social meanings cannot have their coordinating function unless the system of signs is, in some sense or to some degree, public. The required publicity, however, does not require common knowledge, common

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<sup>4</sup> Note that Balkin uses the term ‘cultural software’ as a kind of know-how; my conception of cultural technē is a set of tools that we use when we have the relevant know-how.

<sup>5</sup> As Balkin (1998) puts it, “When our cultural software helps create or sustain unjust conditions, I say that it has ideological effects. But our tools of understanding do not always produce these effects. Hence ideology, in the pejorative sense, is not a phenomenon separate from the general mechanisms of cultural understanding; it is an effect produced by these mechanisms when they are placed in particular contexts and situations. I retain the familiar adjective ideological to describe these contextually produced effects.” (3-4)

belief, or common acceptance; it is not, strictly-speaking, common ground. Non-human and non-linguistic animals are also social and are not capable of complex metacognition and mindreading. 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.

## 2. Conceptions of Ideology

### *a. Descriptive and Pejorative*

One major divide in conceptions of ideology is between what Raymond Geuss (1981) calls “ideology in the descriptive sense” and “ideology in the pejorative sense.”<sup>6</sup> Both conceptions use the term ‘ideology’ to describe “*the framework of meanings and values within which people exist and conduct their social lives*” (Purvis & Hunt 1993, 479, my italics).

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

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

So, there are differences – between what I’ll call the *sociological* and *critical* traditions respectively – in how the term ‘ideology’ is used. But are there any disagreements about the facts? Of course, there is plenty of room for disagreement, but there need be no fundamental disagreement on two points: there are

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<sup>6</sup> The descriptive sense is also characterized as “positive,” “sociological,” or “anthropological” and the pejorative is also characterized as “negative” or “critical” (for example, Purvis and Hunt 1993 479, 477-78; Geuss 1981, 4, 12). Geuss also adds a third category “ideology in the positive sense.” In the United States, this positive sense seems to be employed when people describe (usually explicit) statements of political commitments as ideology, e.g., Liberal ideology. I’m not going to be concerned with this third conception of ideology in this paper.

frameworks of meaning and value that guide social agency and some of these frameworks are problematic (though particular versions may disagree about what frameworks of meaning are or what social agency consists in).<sup>7</sup> The key disagreement is about whether to use the term ‘ideology’ for all such frameworks or only the bad ones. But what difference does it make which of the two conceptions we use?<sup>8</sup>

### *b. Motivating Questions*

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

For those in the critical tradition, the core issue is not the broad one about how we develop coordinated practical orientations, but more specifically how and why, without being coerced, we come to enact *oppressive* social structures. Surely, most of us are not knowingly and intentionally dominating others or allowing ourselves to be dominated. Yet this happens, nonetheless. A rather straightforward example is the division of labor in the household, i.e., women’s “second shift” (Hochschild 2003). Even those who are conscientiously egalitarian in their politics live in ways that burden women with housework, childcare, eldercare, care of the sick and disabled, maintenance of community and kinship relations (and more), to an extent that far exceeds their fair share. Another example, of course, is the regular enactment and tolerance of racial privilege. We might also ask: why do we consistently act in ways that frustrate our own self-interest? Why do we become agents of the injustices we abhor? And not just a few of us, and not just now and then, but pretty much all of us all the time?

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

## **3. Social Subjects**

### *a. Ideology, Self-Interest, and Belief*

The point of the concept of ideology, for the critical tradition, is to answer this question: how and why, without being actively coerced, do we enact *oppressive* social structures. Why are we complicit in oppressive

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<sup>7</sup> By the ‘critical tradition’ I mean to include the Frankfurt School, but also related work in cultural studies, critical race theory, feminism, critical science studies, and such. I will use the term ‘critical theory’ in lower case to refer to work in this broad tradition and ‘Critical Theory’ in upper case for the Frankfurt School.

<sup>8</sup> Special thanks to Robin Celikates for his patience in guiding me as I think through this question and learn about the Critical Theory approach, for teaching me why ideological oppression is a distinctive phenomenon worthy of its own theory and for his (2018) book on the topic. I also draw insight and inspiration from Jaeggi (2009; 2018), Stahl (2017), Shelby (2003), Gooding-Williams (2011; 2017); Ng (2015); Lepold (2018; 2021).

systems, whether as winners or losers? An individualistic answer is that it is in each of our best interests to do so. For the privileged, they gain advantages, and for the subordinated, the option of not participating is typically worse. But this is not an adequate answer. Oppressive systems aren't really in anyone's self-interest because they are brutal, violent, exploitative, harmful, unjust; they wreak havoc on non-dominant cultures and the environment; they diminish our capacity to flourish. To contribute to them is morally wrong. And only an implausibly narrow sense of self-interest would recommend that we act in ways that are wrongful and diminish our long-term well-being.

It is more plausible that we *take it to be* in our self-interest (either implicitly or explicitly) to participate in the dominant system. According to the critical tradition, this is the crux of the matter: the harms and the wrongs of the system and our agency in perpetuating it are mostly hidden from us, and our motivational structure is distorted so that we come to want the wrong things. We don't have a clear sense of how the system is misguided and our desires and actions are shaped to conform to it. However, this is not because there are people in power who design and enforce oppressive systems to serve *them*, though there are individuals who do wield power to keep them in place. Rather, we are born into a social system that is oppressive and it takes insight and work to resist it. It is hard to imagine anything else. And the reason it is hard to imagine is that ideology frames almost all of our interaction. Ideology is invoked here as part of a self-organizing system. Moreover, the very individualism that attempts to explain (and justify) our participation in the system also blocks our understanding of how the system works.

It might seem like the next step in explaining how we are recruited into oppressive agency is to point to the broadly accepted (implicit or explicit) beliefs of those who are in the grip of an ideology; their beliefs are false or unjustified. I don't deny that beliefs play an important role in our practical reasoning and guide agency, and if the relevant beliefs are misguided, then they can lead us to engage in oppressive practices. However, this just pushes the question back.<sup>9</sup> Why do we have such misguided beliefs? We are not all stupid. We are not all just trying to further our narrow self-interest to the greatest extent possible. We seem to have evidence for our misguided beliefs. Our desires, at least to some extent, track what's valuable. We are limited in our sense of what is possible because, realistically, other options for living together are quite remote. Those enacting oppressive structures – which is, recall, most of us most of the time and the rest at least some of the time – are not living in an illusion. What the critical theorist is looking for is *why* this is the case. Why do smart and caring people have the beliefs, desires, and such that keep us going on with how things are, even when they are contrary to our interests (individually and as a group) and unjust?

There are several reasons: first, the world is shaped by our agency so it can appear to confirm unwarranted beliefs. As Catharine MacKinnon says, "...the more inequality is pervasive, the more it is simply "there." And the more real it looks, the more it looks like the truth." (MacKinnon 1989, 101) So "successful" ideology isn't necessarily false. This is, in fact, how we often end up forming the "ideological" beliefs in question – we look around us. For example, women, as a group, are actually better caregivers than men; after all, we do most of the caregiving of the young, disabled, and elderly. The poor, as a

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<sup>9</sup> I return to this point later in §4b.

group, are less able to hold time-intensive jobs that impinge upon other responsibilities; after all, they can't afford childcare, depend on public transportation, and often hold more than one job.<sup>10</sup>

An example that better shows the depth of the problem is food production. We interpret some, but not all, edible things as food. Edible things come to have different social meanings (around here we don't consider grasshoppers to be food, but elsewhere they are a special treat). 'Food' is a normative or evaluative term.<sup>11</sup> Agricultural practices produce, distribute, and dispose of what our culture recognizes as food. These items are easy to get in the market, we know how to cook them, and our palates adjust to them. And this reinforces how cultures divide edible things into food and non-food and, in turn, the material reality of agriculture. An unjust social practice, or structure, might fail to provide us the semiotic tools to interpret and value things aptly. For example, it is a moral mistake to view and treat animals "for eating," but dead cow flesh is considered tasty. Or it might organize us around what's valuable (or not) in unjust ways, e.g., by distributing it unfairly or unfairly burdening others with its production. But because social practices don't just represent reality, but also act on it and shape it to conform to our practices, the fit between practice and world can appear natural and good. This is a mistake.

Second, some goods are internal to practices, even problematic practices (there are amazing meat-based cuisines and this culinary know-how can be transferred to vegetarian cuisines). And there are goods that would not have existed, were it not for oppressive conditions. The blues and "Negro" spirituals have been long cited as examples (Du Bois 1903/1987, Davis 1998). This is also a point Catharine MacKinnon makes:

I think quilts are art. I think women have a history. I think we create culture. I also know that we have not only been excluded from making what has been considered art; our artifacts have been excluded from setting the standards by which art is art. Women have a history all right, but it is a history both of what was and of what was not allowed to be. (MacKinnon 1987, 39)

More generally, value is path-dependent, and we are not always wrong in valuing and desiring some things that depend on oppressive practices. But we should not lose sight of the bigger picture.

### *b. Ideology and the Construction of Social Subjects*

My own approach to this question of ideological oppression is broadly Althusserian, so let me begin by briefly sketching his view. In his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser distinguishes *repressive state apparatuses* (RSAs) and *ideological state apparatuses* (ISAs). (See Althusser (1971/2014, esp. 243-44.) RSAs include the "government, administration, army, courts, prisons," that

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<sup>10</sup> The observation that ideology makes itself true must be qualified, however, depending on what claim is at issue. If ideological belief essentializes or naturalizes the patterns of social life, then it plausibly is false: women are not better caregivers by nature; those who are poor are not by nature unreliable. (See Haslanger 2012, Ch. 17.) But ideological belief need not be essentializing (though some is) to play a crucial role in an ideological orientation.

<sup>11</sup> I assume here that 'food' is not a scientific term but an evaluative term – what is apt or appropriate for eating (under normal conditions). Admittedly, we can say that what's at issue is what's *socially* apt – so grasshoppers are food in one culture but not in another. But we can criticize cultures, on moral grounds, for what they take to be apt for eating, i.e. what they treat as food. Surely great apes are not food; chemical additives are not food. We can also describe what a species of animals actually eats as their food, but I think this is, properly speaking, an overextension of the term.

“function by violence” or, “massively and predominantly by repression” Ideological state apparatuses, including religion, education, the family, the legal system, the political system, trade unions, communications/media, and culture (“literature, the arts, sports, etc.”) “function massively and predominantly by ideology.” (No state apparatus is purely one or the other, and each depends crucially on the other (1971/2014, 244); though Althusser suggests that in modern society, the ISAs are the dominant mode of social management.)<sup>12</sup>

On Althusser’s view, the role of ISAs and RSAs, together, is to reproduce the productive forces (for our purposes we can focus on labor power) within specific relations of production. Althusser highlights the educational system (or the “school-family”) as the primary contemporary ISA, because students learn in school the “know-how” required for participation in production.<sup>13</sup> However, learning technical “know-how” is not enough:

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

He continues:

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

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

This process by which we become socially legible subjects who interact and communicate effectively with others, Althusser calls ‘interpellation.’ Althusser focuses on “State Apparatuses”, but this is overly limiting. Individuals are socialized to occupy particular social positions – to be socially legible subjects – through many social processes that are not state managed.<sup>14</sup> The way this happens, however, is crucial. The

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<sup>12</sup> In any system, the ISA and RSA work together and cannot be easily separated. Non-compliance with the ISA is punished, and the RSA can be used for this. And the RSA depends on the interpellation of subjects who are willing to use coercion, violence, torture, to enforce the structure. Although Althusser focuses attention on “State Apparatuses,” the state is not the only agent of coercion or interpellation. In critical theory, we should attend to ideological apparatuses and repressive apparatuses more broadly.

<sup>13</sup> I discuss further the role of the school as a contemporary ideological apparatus in (Haslanger 2014).

<sup>14</sup> The terms ‘subject,’ ‘subjectivity,’ ‘subjection,’ ‘subjectivation’ (or ‘subjectivization’) are used in multiple ways in the literature on Althusser and Foucault. I will use the term ‘subjection’ for the construction of subjects (and only

function of an ideological apparatus is to create subjects who identify with their role in oppressive social relations, and to internalize the relevant expectations and norms, through “discipline” (in Foucault’s terms), so that coercion to perform the role is not needed. Oppression comes in many forms. Ideological oppression is a *particular form of oppression* that recruits our agency in our own subordination and/or domination of others. There are other forms of oppression – or repression – that are directly coercive rather than ideological, for example, systematic violence (Young 1990b).

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

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

...the ‘ideas’ of a human subject exist in his actions, or ought to exist in his actions, and if that is not the case, it lends him other ideas corresponding to the actions (however perverse) that he does perform. This ideology talks of actions: I shall talk of actions inserted into practices. And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the rituals in which these practices are inscribed, *within the material existence of an ideological apparatus*, be it only a small part of that apparatus: a small mass in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at a sports’ club, a school day, a political party meeting, etc.... (1917/2014, 260).

According to Althusser’s conception of ideology, then, an ideology is a public framework of meanings and values that guides fluent participation in materially engaged practices. What makes the framework *ideological*, however is that it produces and reproduces oppression through subjection, i.e., through the making of the social subject to occupy roles in an oppressive structure.<sup>15</sup> An ideological framework, such as binary gender, would not be ideological in a context where it is held in place entirely by direct coercion. And an individual may accept the framework for the purposes of social interaction (assuming that others are ideologically shaped subjects) but not identify with their proper role in it. In such a case

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derivatively subjectivity), will assume (as should be clear) that one is active in becoming a subject, and that subjection happens in both subordinate and dominant positions. See also Lepold (2018).

<sup>15</sup> The idea that the process creates a social subject is sometimes misunderstood as suggesting that the process creates human beings, or creates persons, *de novo*. This, of course, is rightly rejected. A better way to describe the process is that it forms human beings (or other social animals) into social subjects by situating them in social space and providing them with social identities (Althusser (1917/2014, 264) says as much). If one is Lockean, one might say that here in the space of my body there is a human being, a person, and a social self. But we don’t need to multiply entities this way if we say that the human being becomes a person and becomes a social self through processes of development and socialization.



they would act in accordance with the ideology but not be “in its grip.” (This would be parallel to someone accepting an assumption in the common ground for the purposes of communication, but not believing it.)<sup>16</sup>

My conception of ideology is Althusserian in the following sense. Like Althusser, I take ideology to be a set of public meanings that guide social practices. 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 the role of student by being sent to school and finding ourselves responding to the teacher as an authority (nudged by coercion); 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 students, fluent rent-paying adults. The ISAs 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.

A more detailed example may be helpful. For the moment, let’s set aside the issue of ideology’s oppressive function and focus on how frameworks of meanings and values are material: how they are embedded in practices, and have a material apparatus. Consider learning to drive. When one learns to drive a car, one learns the rules of the road, the meaning of signs and lines on the surface of the street, the values encoded in the rules (show attentive concern for others on the road such as cyclists, pedestrians, and other drivers, given that lives are at stake), and in time, the unstated habits and customs of those using the road in the area (never stop at a yellow light in Boston!). But one cannot be said to know how to drive simply by having propositional knowledge of this information. One must be able to “put it into practice” – to develop “know how,” skill, bodily competence, until eventually one becomes fluent in driving and can manage without second thought. Moreover, driving requires a vehicle and other background material conditions such as roads, traffic lights, an energy source (gasoline or electricity or solar power); this is the material apparatus for driving. I understand the material apparatus to include both the material objects that convey relevant information – such as traffic lights and signs – and the parts of the world that the practice manages (vehicles, bicycles, bodies moving from place to place).

On this approach, an ideology is a framework of social meanings – including a material apparatus – that guides participation in oppressive social practices. Although ideology is not, on this view, psychological, in the process of interpellation – or discipline – we “take it up” and become fluent in it. It affects not just what we think, and want, and imagine, but also our embodiment. But what are these “social meanings”?

#### **4. Social Meaning**

Where do we stand? I’ve argued that a crucial task for a critical theory of ideology is to give an account of how and why our agency is recruited in perpetuating oppressive social systems. I’ve drawn on Althusser’s account of ideology to make a case for the claim that individuals are interpellated as social subjects

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<sup>16</sup> In Haslanger 2021, I discuss the idea of using common ground as a way to think about ideology. Táiwò (2018) has also made fruitful use of this idea; unfortunately, I hadn’t read Táiwò’s work on this until after my 2021 paper was published, so didn’t reference his work in that paper. I agree with Táiwò that common ground is a good way to think about ideology, though Stalnaker (2002) and others (e.g., Yalcin 2007) think of common ground as highly conversation sensitive and fleeting. One goal of this paper is to explore related tools for expanding the conversational notion of common ground to include more stable and default common ground, to do the work of ideology.

through participation in social practices, and these practices depend on a public framework of social meanings that we rely on to coordinate. Not all such frameworks – or what I call *cultural technē* – are ideological. A cultural technē is ideological if, as part of a system, it produces or sustains oppression, e.g., it prevents us from recognizing things of value or ways of valuing, or if it distributes what is valuable wrongfully, or organizes us in harmful or unjust ways.<sup>17</sup>

We are highly motivated, as social animals, to coordinate, and so to engage in the practices that are available to us to do so. We come to both social and linguistic competence by habituation in a set of existing practices. For example, we grow up in a language and become fluent in using it. We don't make it up from scratch as we go along. Individual speaker intentions matter in determining what we say, but communication depends on a shared background that gives our utterances content, an apparatus (signs and symbols) for expression, and opportunities for uptake. But language does not control what an individual says – we pick and choose our words – but it structures and shapes what is said. The same is true of ideology: ideology is somehow, or to some extent, “prior” to socially intelligible agency, but our agency also shapes it. Action takes place against and also forms the backdrop of social meaning.<sup>18</sup> In other words, there is a dynamic looping effect between the content of ideology and our actions and attitudes.

It is reasonable to wonder, however, what on earth are social meanings? And how do they provide tools for coordination? In this section, I will suggest a way of understanding a cultural technē as an apparatus that carries information.<sup>19</sup> Like a language, it has a lexicon, but it doesn't always have the complexity of a language with a compositional semantics or a grammar. Roughly, a cultural technē is a cluster of social meanings that are the *content* of an apparatus; these contents are taken up in a community's concepts, background assumptions, norms, (and so on). Taking up a cultural technē enables one to process and organize socially significant information, communicate, and coordinate action, thought, and affect. The relation between action and a cultural technē, however, is loopy: when a cultural technē is taken up in a practice, it shapes the agents' consciousness and practical orientation towards the world; however, what agents do and say with the technē has the power to change it.

Can we make progress in an account of social meaning? In what follows, I'm going to focus on examples of simple meanings such as pink means girl. Complex social meanings will require more than I can accomplish in this paper, and I'm not sure I have an adequate way to capture them yet. But starting with simple meanings will enable us to do a bit of the work.

#### *a. Externalism*

Let's begin with linguistic meaning. What is the meaning of a term such as 'dog.' This, of course, has been a highly controversial question in philosophy of language. Is the meaning of 'dog' a concept, a representation in thought? Is the representation a mental entity? If so, then how do we get from the mental entity to the furry, slobbery, domesticated animals that many of us enjoy as pets? When I say, “Look, there's a dog!”, surely I am not talking about a mental dog or a representation of a dog. I'm

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<sup>17</sup> In Chapter 8 I differentiate systems and structures and allow that a practice or structure may be oppressive in one system and not in another, depending on other structures it interacts with in the system.

<sup>18</sup> Rawls (1955) makes this point about the relationship between (some) action and practices as well.

<sup>19</sup> I've not provided a systematic account to account for all of the kinds of contents that can be taken up, or the many ways they might be taken up (and their connections); in fact, I've spoken of the term technē as a “placeholder” that requires further theorizing. Here too, I'm just providing a sketch.

talking about an animal in the world. *Very* roughly speaking, semantic internalists maintain that meaning should be divided into two relations. The first is a relation between a word such as ‘dog’ and a mental representation, and then another relation between the representation and the animals.<sup>20</sup> Semantic externalists drop the relation between the word and the representation and take ‘dog’ to mean dogs, the animals. Meaning doesn’t require mental representation. I am an externalist.

To have some terminology to work with, I will use the distinction used in semiotics between a signifier, a sign, and the signified. A *signifier* is something that has or is given meaning, such as movement of the hand, a sound, or inscription. A *sign* is a signifier with its meaning. So the inscription m-b-w-a (just the sequence of letters) is a signifier. In Swahili the inscription m-b-w-a means *dog*. So the *sign* ‘mbwa’, distinct from the *signifier*, is the inscription with its meaning; when we use the term, write it, etc., we use the sign. And the *signified* is what we would call the referent: a dog, the property being a dog (whatever the term picks out, depending on your view and the use). I have so far used words and language as examples, but signifiers need not be linguistic. Signifiers also take non-linguistic form.

Let’s consider pink means girl. Until recently, it was important, in speaking English, to know when speaking of someone whether they are male or female because we needed to use the correct gender pronouns (she/her/hers; he/him/his). (This became more pressing when the ‘he’-series was no longer acceptable as “generic” for humans, and before the singular ‘they’ came along.) As a result, we have many ways to mark our genders and the genders of our children. We have a common interest in speaking intelligible English in order to communicate, the options were limited (‘she’-series or ‘he’-series), and pink ribbons, blankets, sweaters, strollers, and the like gave us the information we needed to refer to someone properly. The color pink is the signifier. It is what Althusser would call the material *apparatus*. It “carries” the information. The property of being a girl/woman/female is the signified. The sign is pink-with-its-meaning. None of the elements of this picture are mental representations. Meaning is not in the head.

This is not to say that psychological states have nothing to do with meaning. I haven’t yet said anything about *how* signifiers come to have meaning. What made it the case that pink came to mean girl? (After all, pink used to be at least “slightly” masculine; it was also associated with the working class (men and women).<sup>21</sup>) This is a question in *meta-semantics*. I also haven’t said anything about what is required to use an apparatus to communicate or to take up the information sent. These are separate questions from what the meaning *is*. 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. So to give a full account of how a cultural technē is “taken up” by participants in a practice, there have to be a psychological story. But this is to be expected.

Let’s return now to reflect on how this bears on the Althusserian tradition for thinking about ideology. Recall: “Thesis II: Ideology has a material existence.” (1917/2014, 258). And “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). We can now make a bit more sense of Althusser’s thesis that ideology is material. As he says, ideology exists in an apparatus. I think it is fair to say that he is attentive to the fact that social

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<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that not all Fregeans (including Frege himself) take concepts (in the role just mentioned) to be mental entities.

<sup>21</sup> (Broadway 2013) <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/08/pink-wasnt-always-girly/278535/>

meanings adhere to signifiers. In interpellation through practices, we learn to read the signs and respond to them fluently, and this shapes us as social subjects. For example, we read pink on an infant and use feminine pronouns; if we use masculine or plural pronouns, we are subject to criticism. This interpellates us as participants in the gender binary system.

I've focused here on *signs* and simple meanings such as “pink means girl.” Insofar as a cultural technē is a frame of meaningful signs, and because such signs – both the signifier and the signified – “have a material existence,” a cultural technē is not a set of beliefs or psychological states. I don't mean to suggest, however, that a cultural technē consists *only* in simple signs such as ‘dog’ or pink. In fact, a cultural technē will also provide contents for default assumptions, narratives, tropes, norms, and such, and an apparatus for learning and conveying them. Here too, I adopt externalism: just as word meanings are not in the head, neither are propositions. For the purposes of this paper, I won't get into the details of how externalism works for more complex signifiers and signifieds, but will stick with the simple cases.<sup>22</sup>

### *b. Publicity*

In the previous section, I argued that *the content* of a cultural technē is a system of signs. But I left open the question how a cultural technē functions in a practice. I have argued for an account of social practices elsewhere (Haslanger 2018; Chapter 1 and Addendum), but it will be useful to provide a sketch of the view here. On my view,

*Social practices are patterns of learned behavior that enable us (in the primary instances) 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.*

For the purposes of our discussion, there are two points in this account that are important. First, social practices are patterns of *learned behavior*. Social learning, which is what I have in mind, involves a variety of mechanisms and comes in different degrees, but the key is that the knowledge or skill in question is not the product of “preinstalled, competence-specific information” (Sterelny 2012: xi) but instead depends on “local (or stimulus) enhancement; conformity or copying; and emulation” (Andrews 2020, 266). I'm relying here on the idea that learning of this sort is constitutive of the social domain. One consequence of this is that non-human animals who engage in social learning are capable of sociality and can also engage in practices and form social structures. Neither language nor complex forms of meta-cognition are required.<sup>23</sup>

Second, *what* we learn in becoming social is a cultural technē. We learn what (apparatus) to notice and devote attention to, what to do with the information (content), and how to go on in relation to others. But in order for the information to coordinate us, it must be taken up and, importantly, public. Social learning facilitates publicity; we learn the cultural technē from each other. But what exactly does publicity require?

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<sup>22</sup> Provide references to Stalnaker, et al.

<sup>23</sup> This is at odds with much of late 20<sup>th</sup> c. social ontology that focuses on collective intentionality. REFS.

One approach to publicity is to define it as “common knowledge” or “common belief.”<sup>24</sup> On this approach, publicity is not simply a matter of individuals being in the same psychological state, because individuals can believe, desire, experience, the same content – let’s say they *share* the content of, e.g., a belief – without knowing that others do as well. According to this approach, at the very least what’s needed is something like mutual awareness of being in the state. In the case of belief, it would seem that publicity requires *common belief*: You and I not only both believe *p*, but also believe that the other believes *p*. In other words, it is recognized by both of us that we share the belief that *p*. (We might generalize this to say that we have a common desire/experience/emotion if we all desire that *p* and believe that the other(s) desires/experiences/has the emotion that *p*.)

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

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

In recent work (Haslanger 2021), I took up the idea of common ground as a way to understand how a cultural technē functions in a practice. But I’m no longer satisfied. Common ground – and common knowledge or common belief – presumes a kind of cognitive sophistication that I don’t think is necessary for social learning or sociality. In addition, the kind of publicity that common ground provides is not necessary for coordination. If each of us know what we are supposed to do – we’ve learned this from others through imitation, correction, etc. – and we do what we are supposed to do, then we can manage

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<sup>24</sup> See also Táíwò (2018) who fruitfully draws on the idea of a common ground in thinking about ideology. Táíwò’s “practice first” (2017, 2018) approach is similar to mine, but he takes ideology to be a set of public mental representations. So common ground is more apt for his view than mine. (Unfortunately, I was not aware of these papers in time to cite them in Haslanger 2021.)

to coordinate, at least on simple tasks. Surely many non-human animals, and most of us in our everyday activities, coordinate in this way. Mindreading is not necessary.

More importantly, relying on common ground reintroduces a problem we considered before. Recall that we considered the proposal that an ideology is a set of beliefs (or other attitudes). I argued that this just pushed the question back: why *these* attitudes, especially if they are so problematic? J.M. Balkin (1998) makes a similar point about common ground in considering Lewis's account of convention:

David Lewis, for example, defines conventions as regularities of behavior; yet his account depends on prior concepts like "common knowledge" of a state of affairs, mutual expectations, and individuals conforming to a regularity. "Common knowledge," in turn, depends on certain states of affairs indicating the same thing to everyone in a population. The hermeneutical problems that I am concerned with enter at precisely these points in his account...*In short, conventions do not explain shared understandings; they presuppose them.* (11, my italics)

If the shared social meanings – the cultural technē – in my account of a practice must be common knowledge, then I face the same problem. The challenge, then, is to provide an account of publicity that can make social meanings sufficiently public to enable coordination, but does not require a capacity sophisticated meta-cognition, and does not already assume the very meanings that are being explained.

### *c. Signaling*

In his famous paper, "Meaning," Paul Grice distinguishes natural meaning from non-natural meaning. He starts the paper with three examples that he characterizes cases of natural meaning (p. 213):

"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."

Grice doesn't spend much time on natural meaning in the paper, given his focus is to provide an account of non-natural meaning. But it is useful to recap his conclusions about non-natural meaning:

- (1) "A meant<sub>NN</sub> 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...
- (2) "x meant something" is (roughly) equivalent to "Somebody meant<sub>NN</sub> something by x." Here again there will be cases where this will not quite work. I feel inclined to say that (as regards traffic lights) the change to red meant<sub>NN</sub> that the traffic was to stop; but it would be very unnatural to say, "Somebody (e.g. the Corporation) meant<sub>NN</sub> by the red-light change that the traffic was to stop." Nevertheless, there seems to be some sort of reference to somebody's intentions.
- (3) "x means<sub>NN</sub> (timeless) that so-and-so" might as a first shot be equated with some statement or disjunction of statements about what "people" (vague) intend (with qualifications about "recognition") to effect by x.

Along the way, Grice criticizes what he calls a "causal theory" of non-natural meaning attributed to C.L. Stevenson on the grounds that it would be a circular, due to its reliance on a notion of communication

that (he seems to think) is what is at issue in giving an account of non-natural meaning. This is Grice's characterization of Stevenson's view

[F]or  $x$  to mean<sub>NN</sub> 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."

I suggest that Grice's distinction between "natural" and "non-natural" meaning is too coarse and that there are forms of social meaning that don't fit well in either category. The kinds of cases I have in mind fit better with Stevenson's account, echoes of which can be found in 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)

In the case of natural meaning, it seems that there is often what Skyrms calls a "natural salience" between the signifier and the signified: smoke means fire. One can learn that smoke means fire, presumably, as an individual, by induction, without social learning. Grice's example of spots meaning measles is a bit more complicated because the postulation of a disease such as measles requires a more systematic inquiry into diseases and their symptoms, and it may not be feasible to undertake this without social support. (Could it be that the relationship between different symptoms of measles, the pattern of contagion, and potential outcomes, could be determined by induction, by an individual, without social learning? Unlikely.) Other examples, however, seem to rely on a basic capacity for social learning, and this seems to be what Stevenson had in mind by "an elaborate process of conditioning attending the use of the sign in communication."

Skyrms discusses a famous example of signaling in vervet monkeys in which they communicate, not by virtue of a "natural salience" between signifier and signified, but because they learn the signal from its use among their conspecifics:<sup>25</sup>

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)

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

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<sup>25</sup> Or so it seems. It is not altogether clear from my brief look at the literature what kind of social learning is plausibly involved and some may think that it isn't "social learning" properly so-called because it is, e.g., only a matter of stimulus enhancement (?).

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

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 have been known to use the signals deceptively (Cheney and Seyfarth 1990).

What are we to make of this phenomenon? It is not clear whether the vervets would satisfy Grice’s conditions for non-natural meaning: Vervet V intended the utterance of a bark to produce some effect in V’s group G by means of Gs’ recognition of this intention. This would seem to require that V would have an idea not only of what’s in the minds of the other members of G, e.g., that they don’t already know there is a leopard nearby, but also that the members of G would be able to discern V’s intention to produce an effect on them, specifically the effect of warning them, with the utterance of the bark. Whether this is plausible depends on one’s account of propositional attitudes.<sup>26</sup> However, it is clear from the animal minds literature that sociality does not require language or a capacity for full blown belief, much less complex metacognition.<sup>27</sup> As Kim Sterelny (2012) points out,

[c]ultural learning...can begin and can become important without the active cooperation of the source of information. Agents leak information in their everyday activities. Moreover, they often adaptively structure the learning environment of their young as a by-product of their own utilitarian activities. (Sterelny 12-13)

In other words, it is possible to send information without intending to do so. It should be obvious that this is possible, given how often we convey information about ourselves and our attitudes even contrary to our intentions (think of the “tell” in gambling), or make an attempt at communication that sends information, but not the information intended (perhaps due to ignorance of or insufficient fluency in the system of signs).

Social learning requires, at least, a basic capacity to see the behavior of others as (sometimes) goal directed and as taking an efficient means toward achieving that goal. (This is clearly something that any predator must be capable of.) It requires dispositions to mimic others. This minimal cognitive capacity (which may involve more than I just listed) is sometimes referred to as a “teleological stance” (Zawidzki 2013, \*\*). Social agents, including very young children, need not have a theory of mind or be capable of sophisticated mind-reading. On the account I favor, mind-reading is an achievement that is possible only after agents have been shaped through social interaction (Zawidzki 2013). And the shaping is how and where culture, and ideology, gets a grip on us.

In an attempt to keep to minimal commitments on issues of significant controversy, I think we can say just that there is a symbolic system used by the vervets which conveys information from sender to receiver,

<sup>26</sup> As I read Stalnaker, he would have no problem with attributing such higher-order mental states to non-human animals [ref].

<sup>27</sup> Zawidzki (2013) defines “full blown” propositional attitudes as “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” (11-12).



and this system relies on *social learning* – immature vervets do not innately respond to con-specific barks by climbing a tree, nor is it learned by “natural salience” between signifier and signified and induction. This capacity for learning and using signals is also a capacity found in humans.

Plausibly, then, the vervet bark 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. Nevertheless, information is transmitted, specifically, information that is relevant to agency. And given the significance of warnings, vervets begin to listen for them, respond quickly to them, and produce them when circumstances demand it.

A significant part of this story is the idea of transmitting information. There is a whole discipline of information science that is beyond my pay grade. But it may be helpful to step back for a moment to consider in a more general way how signals convey information. Consider an example. Suppose you and a friend have gone on a hike. You twist your ankle. After doing what they can to help you, they decide to go ahead to scope out the difficulty of the path ahead, to determine whether there is a place to get cell reception, whether there are others who might be of help, etc. You start to feel better and decide to catch up and put your friend at ease. When you proceed along the path you find that, after a bit, it forks into three branches. Which path has your friend taken? The paths, we might suppose, look equally pleasant, equally manageable, etc. Then you notice that there is a stack of three rocks in the middle of one of the forks. You assume that your friend put them there, because otherwise it would be astonishing for them to be so neatly arranged. This breaks the symmetry between the paths; you have no reason to think that your friend is trying to ditch you, so the stack of rocks provides some information about which path your friend took, and it does so without any prior conventions or arrangements about how to communicate the information. With repetition, the piling of rocks in different shapes can become a conventional way to communicate.

Notice that information is communicated in this case 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.<sup>28</sup> Cailin O'Connor suggests that “We can think of the amount of information in a message as corresponding to how surprised one would be to receive it. Holding other aspects fixed, this measure will be larger if there are more possible messages and if they are closer to equiprobable.” (87) Something similar happens with the vervets: there are four salient options (hide in underbrush, run up tree, scan and move, carry on as normal) and the signal provides the information about the surroundings to choose the best option to avoid a predator. Young vervets notice the adult vervet’s bark because it is surprising, they mimic the behavior of others in their group who, upon hearing it, run up a nearby tree. (If the youngsters don’t run up themselves, they may be “reprimanded” or taken up by an adult.) At least on some occasions, they experience the agitation of others around them at the same time that they see a leopard. They learn that a bark means leopard and calls for tree climbing.

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<sup>28</sup> Skyrms: “Transmission of information clearly consists of more than the quantity of information in the signal. To deal with this example, you might think that we have to build in mentalistic concept of information—specifying what the sender intended the signal to mean and what the receiver took it to mean. Within the framework of Lewis signaling games this is not necessary. Sender and receiver have pure common interest. Perfect information about the state is transmitted perfectly if the receiver acts just as he would if he had direct knowledge of the state.” (9)

So we can pick up information from signals when there is a salient structure of options, and one option stands out, e.g., perhaps there is a footprint of one's friend on the path (natural salience) or a surprising ("unnatural"?) difference maker. But where does the salient *structure of limited options* come from? What is the source of the choice architecture? In games, the options are set by explicit rules (think of the rules of baseball or chess). I propose that in primitive cases, what options are salient may emerge from taking the teleological stance. (Recall that the teleological stance is available to both human and non-human animals.)

The teleological stance helps when one needs to interpret the behavior of an agent, but has little to go on, e.g., mindreading isn't an option either because one can't mindread, or the information needed to mindread is not available. One hypothesizes, so to speak, that the agent's behavior aims at a goal and is likely to take most rational means to the goal given environmental constraints. So 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 a probable goal? Does one option stand out? Would one be more efficient or rational? Signs and signals are difference-makers. When options are (or seem to be) on a par, the marking of one option carries information. The marking becomes a signifier. What signifiers carry what information can be learned by observation, mimicry, trial and error, and practice, without assuming metacognition or common ground. We anticipate that action is goal-directed and relatively efficient. Humans, and plausibly some other species, can develop full-blown mindreading capabilities that become common ground.

#### *d. Lessons and Qualifications*

Does the discussion of signaling in the previous section help us understand social meanings and the way in which social meanings function in practices?<sup>29</sup> I think we are a couple of steps further along. First, a cultural technē is a framework or system of signs (signified + signifier) that provide a way to convey information. Signified and signifier need not be (and are not usually) connected by a natural salience; the connection is made through social learning. If we assume a broad externalism (as I have done), then meanings, i.e., the signifieds, are parts of the world that are highlighted for the purposes of coordination by the fact that they are marked with a signifier. We can discover through empirical investigation or moral inquiry that we have marked the wrong thing in our efforts to coordinate (we thought something was food, but it turned out to be toxic over the long run), or that an assumption about how signs are connected to each other (whales are not fish) is misguided. I think of this as an advantage that comes with externalism.

Second, social learning typically happens through habituation in local practices. Over time, practices set things up so that some options are ruled out, others made salient, and others still are made possible through material interventions (including technology), skill-building, and signs. For example, in 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 part of the choice

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<sup>29</sup> I strongly recommend Sewell (2005) as a guide to much of what I say in this section. Although some have suggested that viewing culture as a system of signs is at odds with practice theory, Sewell argues that "System and practice constitute an indissoluble duality or dialectic: the important theoretical question is thus not whether culture should be conceptualized as practice or as a system of symbols and meanings, but how to conceptualize the articulation of system and practice" (47). I am attempting to make progress on that theoretical question in this paper.

architecture because they were not available, the skill to use them was not widespread and passed down, and other available cutlery options were satisfactory. Shifts in the material conditions or cultural exchange can lead to broadening the options because the material apparatus is part of the system of signs, i.e., part of culture.

Third, a cultural *technē* is public in a very weak sense. The *technē* may function as common ground in some contexts, but neither common knowledge, common belief, nor common acceptance is required. Typically, a shared fluency in a set of signs is what provides a background for coordination in a context.<sup>30</sup> However, we should not assume that there is a single coherent cultural *technē* that governs all practices in a society. Societies are fragmented, dynamic, and contested, and the cultural tools that enable us to coordinate have a life of their own and can be in tension with each other, e.g., the norms for being a good woman, wife, mother, colleague, breadwinner, are not co-realizable.

In describing the multiple factors that “mutually shape and constrain” practices, William Sewell (2005) emphasizes that

...the network of semiotic relations that make up culture is not isomorphic with the network of economic, political, geographical, social, or demographic relations that make up what we usually call a "society." A given symbol – mother, red, polyester, liberty, wage labor, or dirt – is likely to show up not only in many different locations in a particular institutional domain (motherhood in millions of families) but in a variety of different institutional domains as well (welfare mothers as a potent political symbol, the mother tongue in linguistic quarrels, the Mother of God in the Catholic Church)... The meaning of a symbol in a given context may therefore be subject to redefinition by dynamics entirely foreign to that institutional domain or spatial location... (49)

Once there is a system of signs, the sender and receiver attempting to coordinate may not even share interpretive tools due to the complexity of the semiotic network. The same signifier may have multiple meanings, or the meanings of the signifier on a particular occasion may be contested. Much of the time, especially in complex and pluralistic societies, even socially fluent agents struggle to make sense of the social world and find a path through it.

However, there are several ways in which my discussion of signaling may be misleading.

First, the example of the vervets may lead one to think that all signaling, and more generally, all coordination, is about survival. This is not my view. On my account of social practices, we coordinate around resources – things taken to have positive or negative value – as interpreted through the cultural *technē*. The cultural *technē* orients us practically towards the world and each other in a wide variety of ways. For example, consider the arts:

Culture does not merely enable us to make increasingly finer distinctions; it also enables us to create new possibilities for musical enjoyment and musical evaluation by creating new types of instruments, new forms of musical expression, and new musical compositions. These cultural

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<sup>30</sup> Recall that Stalnaker distinguishes shared belief, i.e., A believes p and B believes p, from common belief, i.e., A believes p, B believes p, A believes that B believes p and B believes that A believes p, etc. Signaling just requires sharing the system.

constructions are passed on and modified from generation to generation. They become part of our developing sense of musical taste and enable us in turn to make new evaluative distinctions, distinctions that were not previously possible because they partly presuppose cultural constructions that had not yet come into being. In this way culture continually creates new tools for musical evaluation and expression. (Balkin 1998, 28)

Survival is one value, but there are many others we orient ourselves around and coordinate in producing, some of which may conflict with survival, either of the individual or the society.

Second, the example of signaling suggests that social meaning is best understood in terms of communicative, or information conveying, acts, e.g., the vervet's bark has meaning. But we also want to say that naturally occurring things can bear meaning. For example, objects (the full moon) and events (breaking a mirror) also have meaning.<sup>31</sup> Such meaning is, on my view, parasitic on the way in which the object or event functions as a sign, i.e., how it is used as a signifier associated with a signification. For example, a group of teens may occasionally sneak out at night to party. One time they party when there is a full moon and they dance happily in the moonlight. A few weeks later, one texts the others, "It is a full moon tomorrow!" The full moon becomes a signal for them to meet up the next night, and it may become a stable sign.

Another kind of example is when a practice becomes entrenched and the participants in the practice do not recognize the meanings they enact, e.g., the cultural *technē* is taken up in know-how, but without the agents having an understanding of the meanings that it conveys.<sup>32</sup> In such cases, does an agent's behavior still have meaning, even if it is unknown or unintended on their part? This often occurs linguistically when we use words that we don't understand or slip up in uttering (as in a malapropism). The most famous philosophical example is when a patient complains to her doctor that she has arthritis in their thigh. Even when she intends 'arthritis' to include thigh pain, the term means inflammation of a joint. (Burge) Intention doesn't determine word meaning. Nor does it determine social meaning.<sup>33</sup>

For example, consider a context in which men regularly open doors for women. It is an established practice. Does it have meaning? If so, what does it signify? Some might critique the practice by arguing that it signifies that men are strong and women are weak, or that men should be in control and women should be compliant and grateful. However, in response to such critique, it is not uncommon to hear, "I didn't mean anything by it! I was just being polite." Or "I just meant to be helpful!" Here the *technē* helps solve a coordination problem: if two people are walking together and the doorway requires them to go single file, who goes first? The *technē* relies on gender coding to solve the problem when the two are of different genders (though two women and two men seem to manage just fine!). Someone fluent in the practice may not have any meaning in mind as they wait for the door to be opened (or open it). But it may still have meaning, depending on the genealogy of the practice, the effects of the practice, and how it is related to other practices, whether or not the meaning is intended. Once a sexist meaning has been found collectively convincing, it is better just to avoid the practice, for it starts to take on that meaning.

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<sup>31</sup> Thanks to Jack Spencer for calling attention to such cases.

<sup>32</sup> Thanks to Sam Berstler for raising this question.

<sup>33</sup> Note that we saw above that intention is not necessary for social meaning, so it is neither necessary nor sufficient.

Of course, we don't always coordinate or want to coordinate, but coordination is a common interest for those participating in a practice. And in order to coordinate it is important to share information about the world, the available options, the actions of other participants in the practice, and what needs to be done. Social meanings provide an apparatus for us to do this.

## **5. Conclusion: Explaining Ideological “Recruitment”**

Let's recap. Recall that the point of postulating an ideology, on the critical account, is to explain our stable coordination in perpetuating unjust structures. On the account I've proposed, social structures are constituted by relations formed in social practices, and individuals enact practices under conditions of constrained choice. We are constrained by our basic human needs (for food, shelter, engagement with others, and so on), the material conditions of our situation, and the social meanings that enable us to coordinate with each other. Such constraints are usually organized in ways that produce injustice and harm, though not intentionally so (there is no one doing the organizing, of course). Many practices we engage in fluently but not deliberately; and the fallout of interactions between practices is hard to notice, much less predict.

I've suggested that a cultural *technē* is ideological when it contributes to a system of oppression by deflecting our attention from what's properly valuable, by organizing us in unjust or harmful ways, by distributing what is valuable unfairly. However, this is helpful in answering the guiding question only if we have some idea of how we are recruited into a practice, what a cultural *technē* is, and what it is for a *technē* to “go wrong.” I've argued that we are recruited into participation in social practices by engaging in activities that distribute resources and becoming fluent in them. The cultural *technē* makes salient some options rather than others and provides signals so we can better figure out what others are doing and what we need to do. We are highly motivated to learn the social meanings that frame the practice in order to become fluent, both to benefit from the goods of coordination and to avoid the punishment for defecting. But an ideology may be less than fully “transparent” to the agent 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 deliberately chosen or intended. It is relatively easy, then, for a cultural *technē* to distort the range of good options and information about them: a wide range of practices become “second nature” to us and we rarely reflect on them. Material conditions can be confusing, and practices give us an easy way to navigate them. The interaction between practices is difficult to manage and predict. Meanings drift in ways that are hardly noticeable. Moreover, those who have power can manipulate meanings and resources to make salient options that aren't good for the agent. The taking up of a cultural *technē*, however, is not just a matter of copying. It allows for elaboration, improvement, contestation, and such. It is a dynamic and evolving process. We “live in” ideology, then because it shapes the social world we navigate and also shapes us as social subjects to occupy our place in it; but our agency also shapes it.

To determine whether a cultural *technē* is ideological, we need a normative account of what's valuable, how we ought to organize, produce, distribute, appreciate things of value/disvalue, and what are acceptable terms of distribution and cooperation. This requires attention to material disparities, distributions of productive and reproductive labor, and insight into the pathologies and potential of collective action. The methods and starting points for such a normative account are controversial, but the issues cannot be side-stepped. I have not provided such a normative account here.

Ideology recruits us into harmful, wrongful, and unjust systems. Socially intelligible agency within an unjust system is always at risk of sustaining the system. But social intelligibility is not only difficult but can be deadly. Our fluency in the system makes it easy to participate unreflectively. To see structural injustice, we need to step back from our self-conscious agency and consider how we are molded (socially, physically, historically) by our environments to participate in practices that present themselves as worthwhile and meaningful yet result in often broad and deep injustice.

The take-home message may seem to be that there is little we can do to make things better. The system is in place, and our agency keeps it in place. But the point of providing an account of ideology is to better understand how intervention is possible. To make the social world less oppressive, we need to change our practices. The account sketched here suggests that are multiple sites of intervention. We can change the material conditions, i.e., what is available in our choice architecture. For example, the development of vegan cheese and meat has had an impact on animal meat and dairy consumption in the United States Europe, and the UK.<sup>34</sup> We can change social meanings. For example, the efforts to make veganism “manly” has resulted in the term ‘hegans’ (a male vegan)<sup>35</sup> and cookbooks like *Thug Kitchen* (2013). We can organize to resist the control of agriculture by Big Ag, e.g., the Agriculture Fairness Alliance is a national advocacy organization that is “pushing for policy changes that make sustainable plant-based foods accessible to all consumers at an affordable price, while empowering communities to develop local plant-based agriculture systems, and help farmers align with this mission.”<sup>36</sup> It also has a vegan voter hub. But we must also be prepared to give up things we value, activities that have meaning for us. Yes, you’ll eventually have to give up turkey on Thanksgiving. For some people, this is not a small thing. Traditions are important. Family is important. Turkey is not just meat on the table, it has social meaning. And breaking tradition can bring anxiety, dislocation, and punitive measures (even if it is just shaming or ridicule). We have been intepellated as subjects embedded in oppressive practices. Refusing to participate by oneself is a hard. But doing it with others can be both effective, liberating, and fun.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks especially to the following for their help in thinking through the ideas discussed here: Sam Berstler, Amandine Catala, Nikki Ernst, Sahar Heydari Fard, Pat Hope, Jonathan Ichikawa, Chike Jeffers, Paula Keller, Kristina Lepold, Devin Morse, Kevin Richardson, Jennifer Saul, Naomi Scheman, Jack Spencer, Stephen Yablo, Audrey Yap, and others tbd.

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<sup>34</sup> The industrial meat industry has “begun the shift into plant-based protein amid pressure from upstarts and changes in consumer behavior. JBS, one of the world’s largest meat companies, launched its own meatless protein in June 2020 and acquired Dutch plant-based meat manufacturer Viverra, Europe’s third-largest plant-based foods producer, for \$408M (€341M) in April 2021. Other meatpackers offering their own lines of plant-based alternatives include Tyson, Smithfield, Hormel, and Cargill.” <https://www.cbinsights.com/research/future-of-meat-industrial-farming/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/mar/05/vegan-bros-busting-myth-that-real-men-eat-meat>

<sup>36</sup> <https://agriculturefairnessalliance.org>

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## Addendum

I am going to work with an externalist framework. On this approach, we express, believe, suppose, (etc.) propositions. Propositions should be understood in terms of informational/intensional content, i.e., “as truth conditions, propositions as functions from possible circumstances to truth values, or equivalently, as sets of possible situations.” (Stalnaker 1998, 343).

How should we understand concepts on a view of this sort? Let’s start with the idea that the informational content of a concept is a partition of possible individuals. A partition of possible dogs is just all the actual and possible dogs – the furry, slobbery, barky, ones in our lives, plus the ones that have existed, will exist, and ones we only imagine.

We have access to content through different modalities, from different vantage points, and at different levels of granularity.

- (Roughly), for an individual to *possess* (in the most minimal sense) a concept of X is to have a cluster of capacities that enables them to process information about Xs. Possessing a concept is a matter of having dispositions towards a space of possibilities. Possessing a concept is not like owning a car – it isn’t having a mental particular in one’s head. It is like possessing a skill.
- From a psychological point of view, *possession* of the concept may occur by virtue of different cognitive mechanisms and give rise to different dispositions in different individuals. Possession, like skill, comes in different forms and degrees. We may share the concept of X – we both have the capacities to process information about Xs – but we differ in how refined or idiosyncratic our capacities are; we can say, then, that different individuals who share the concept of X form different *conceptions* of Xs.
- Sharing concepts, however, is crucial for communication and coordination. Concepts marshal and organize our capacities for attention, categorization, interpretation, memory, language, inference, affect, and the like, for coordinating with others in response to particular kinds of information.
- This role for concepts requires a kind of standardization of what counts as an adequate appreciation of Xs for the purposes at hand. To be *conversant* with the concept of X in a context C one must be able to process a subset of information about Xs that is socially “approved” in C. (Putnam 1975: tiger, beech/elm).
- Those who are conversant with a concept in a context have an approved *orientation* that privileges certain exemplars, features, responses (affective and cognitive), experiences, inferences, sub-categories. A vet and a child may both *possess* the (same) concept of DOG, but the vet can take the *orientation* of veterinary medicine and will be *conversant* with DOG in contexts that call for that orientation.<sup>37</sup>
- We sometimes introduce different words to pick out the same partition of logical space, e.g., vets might use the term ‘*canis familiaris*’ in certain contexts, reflecting the context of inquiry. Yalcin considers WATER and H<sub>2</sub>O:

For example, the former [WATER] concept might (inter alia) be understood as embedding the partition into a subject matter reflecting parochial human interests and concerns, one including, say, the subject matter beverages — so that with the concept WATER, we (inter alia) locate that stuff amongst the beverages<sup>38</sup> — while the latter [H<sub>2</sub>O] embeds it in some part of the subject matter chemistry — so that with the concept H<sub>2</sub>O, we inter alia locate that stuff amongst the chemicals. (Yalcin 2016, 15)

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<sup>37</sup> Yalcin: “Rather than a single map, an agent’s beliefs determine something more like a set of maps. Each map in the set is internally consistent, but it may be that some of the maps conflict with each other about how things are. We still steer by a map at any given time, but not always by the same map. We could try putting the new motto like this: belief is the possibly inconsistent atlas from which we select maps by which we steer.” (6)

<sup>38</sup> In some ways this is an odd suggestion, because it is not plausible to count ice or steam as a beverage, but both are, on the intended interpretation, water. To make this more plausible, I’ll understand ‘beverage’ to mean ‘beverage, when in liquid form.’

The subject matter is plausibly delimited by a set of questions that arise in inquiry, but also in relation to our practical concerns.

- If we want to reify an orientation, it might be thought of as a temporally extended abstract particular that is the evolving cluster of socially approved (epistemic/affective/agential) responses to some privileged subset of information. (Rituals?) The veterinary orientation privileges the distinction between sick and healthy non-human animals and requires epistemic and affective responses that guide the exercise of agency.
- Fluency in an orientation can also involve being conversant with a broad range of signaling mechanisms and social meanings employed in the context. The concept PINK has the color pink as its informational content.<sup>39</sup> But to be conversant with PINK in some contemporary contexts requires responses linked to femininity, the use of feminine pronouns, etc.

My focus will on concepts, understood as a public resource for coordination, so on orientations rather than individual conceptions.

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<sup>39</sup> The details about how to spell this out is controversial.