

## 1. Introduction

In a common understanding of it, ideology consists in attitudes (beliefs, desires, values, etc.) whose presence contributes to sustaining, by making them seem legitimate, social orders that are in fact problematic. An important way a social order can be problematic concerns the prospects for well-being facing the people living in it. It can make some people wind up worse off than they could and should be. They have “real interests” that are not properly served by the social order, and the interests aligned with it are in fact “false,” merely “apparent,” or “distorted.” Ideology critique consists in part in noting the existence of such different interests, and in challenging the latter to facilitate the fulfillment of the former. This picture of ideology critique implies that ideology thwarts well-being—i.e. that it blocks or hampers people’s pursuit of what would make their lives go well for them. This paper aims to clarify, develop, and vindicate this picture.

Should ideology critique really draw on considerations of well-being? If so, what kind of conception of well-being would be most appropriate? In recent work in the field of critical theory<sup>1</sup>

the idea of real interests. An objectivist view holds that what is non-instrumentally good is that in their lives they engage certain goods which they have reasons to want, even if they already want them. This position contrasts with a purely subjectivist view (that what is non-instrumentally good to the satisfaction of individuals is what they want, etc.). I will consider how this approach to the good in critical theory (in its epistemological, social-scientific) dimensions of critical theory, and how it might emerge in reflective equilibrium.

My main objective is to illuminate core normative structures connecting ideology critique and well-being. But I will show how my two these are related by considering the specific case of the critique of working practices in the workplace in particular regarding the problem that in them workers’ self-determining and supportive social relationships are stunted rather than unleashed.

significance of well-being in it (2.2), and the defense of this paper's theses in reflective equilibrium (2.3). Section 3 then shows that the approach has illuminating implications regarding some important topics in critical theory, including the relations between the good and the right (3.1), the assessment of critical pronouncements (3.2), the plurality of types of critique (3.3), and the combination of social criticism and anti-authoritarianism (3.4).

## **2. The approach proposed**

### **2.1. Ideology critique**

**2.1.1.** The term "ideology" is often used to refer to more or less widespread beliefs, desires, normative commitments, and other attitudes constituting a "form of consciousness" that are relevant for explaining the reproduction and change of social orders.

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how extensive our new critical understanding is, and how ambitious our transformative projects become. In Marx's case, the processes involve the understanding and dissolution of exploitative economic structures, but processes targeting other injustices (such as oppression and domination based on nationality, race, or gender), or envisioning less radical changes, can of course be entertained.

Another important insight from Marx is that o

proceeds from moral facts to judgments about what ought to be done. Moral facts are facts about what is right or just (or wrong or unjust). The fact that it would be right to help that elderly person cross the street gives me reason to do it. The fact that it would be wrong to humiliate that co-worker gives me reason not to do it. Finally, technical reasoning is instrumental reasoning. It explores causal relations between various events, with an eye to identifying, favorably, sequences that lead to final ou

something we favor.<sup>11</sup> The paradigmatic subjectivist view focuses on favorable conative attitudes. Thus, according to the desire satisfaction theory, something benefits us if and only if, and because, we desire it or it helps us get something we desire.<sup>12</sup> Having a job we don't want, and which does not help us get something else we want, could not benefit us. By contrast, *objectivist theories* say that some things could be intrinsically good for us independently of whether we have favorable attitudes towards them. We can have a direct interest in an object even if we don't want it (and we can want an object without it being in our interest to get it).

There are several objectivist theories of well-being. For example, objective list theories enumerate some items, such as pleasure, knowledge, achievement, autonomy, and friendship as objective (non-





freedom, and full freedom would include perfect knowledge. Geuss acknowledges that the tests face challenges. The first might yield what strike us as problematic results, as even after gaining perfect knowledge some people could insist in forming monstrous interests. Geuss thinks this challenge smuggles an unduly moralistic view of ideology critique. The second test might in turn seem problematically “utopian,” yielding results that are irrelevant for actual people in their current circumstances. But the tests could still be put to good use. The critic could deploy them to show that current circumstances are not optimal, and recommend that we move closer to the optimal state. We could be in an intermediate situation in which deprivation, coercion, and ignorance are not so intense that we cannot glimpse at better arrangements. Even if we are also far from an optimal state, we could envision and pursue significant improvements.

Geuss’s discussion is illuminating. But for our purposes it has two limitations. First, it does not distinguish between the descriptive and normative senses of “interest.” I presume, however, that the interests arising in the favorable conditions of knowledge or freedom would be interests in the normative sense as well as in the descriptive sense. Second, Geuss’s approach is epistemic, and thus does not tell us what makes interests real. That we would “form” an interest

AL4 and AL5;

I5: an interest in gaining knowledge of the surrounding world, which is blocked by AL2;

I6: an interest in forming a positive sense of themselves. This self-identification would include self-esteem and self-respect, but AL6 makes this quite hard. Arguably, the other features of alienated labor indirectly undermine positive self-identification as well.

The critics would next ask: Why do workers accept labor conditions that are problematic in these ways? To answer this question, they can first note some relevant facts in the background of their practices. They could cite general features of a capitalist economy like the following. There is material scarcity such that work is typically necessary to secure any level of well-being. Property of the means of production is largely private and concentrated in the hands of capitalists. Workers own their labor power, but cannot access means of subsistence and other necessary goods without selling it to capitalists employers, who will own what they produce and sell it for profit. To maximize profit in a competitive environment, capitalists tend to direct production in such a way that workers' activities display AL1-AL6. There is also competition among workers to get and maintain employment. On the other hand, capitalists and workers engage in collective action, forming business associations and trade unions to improve their lot, especially when they face more intense conflicts with each other as they shape the terms on which they interact. Bargaining and disputes reach the wider political process. Social movements, cultural outlets, political parties, and other forms of collective agency are used by capitalists and workers to influence how the government regulates their economic positions and activities. Given their greater economic power, however, capitalist typically have more influence in this process.

This rough and stylized picture of background conditions (which could of course be spelled out in much more detail) would lead us to conclude that, although not powerless, workers are significantly disadvantaged when it comes to setting the terms on which they work. Now, critics will also have to explore ideological mechanisms to understand how a social order that exhibits AL1-AL6 and problematically frustrates interests such as I1-I6 is reproduced. Here scripts such as S1-S10 come into play. Thus, S1 might convince workers that they face capitalists as their equals. S7 might lead them to hope that they will eventually be much better off than they are now if they apply themselves and carry on. When they face hardship in the short term—working long hours on unfulfilling tasks and in toxic social conditions—they can embrace S5 and adopt a positive attitude to make their daily lives less unpleasant or hopeless. If none of this suffices to reconcile themselves to their predicament, they can still, if reluctantly, accept the inequalities they find in their society by adopting some version of S6. A more egalitarian society might seem desirable, but not really feasible. After all, as S3 says, people simply are selfish. Regulating inequalities somewhat so that the less advantaged don't do too badly is all that can be realistically envisioned. Or, more cynically, workers can accept S2 and think that more egalitarian or solidaristic proposals are not even desirable—they would level everyone down and crush their life-affirming s (g)2 ( s)1ts as, as,



proves correct, then it would also be possible to conclude (at least with respect to the matters considered) that we would be better off if we made institutional changes moving our societies in the direction of the alternative conditions. This would be an argument for the prudential desirability of the changes. It could and should be coupled with arguments showing that the changes are also

the right, and of the critical beliefs that ideological scripts are problematic when they lead people to accept forms of life that are not as good as they could and should have?

**2.3.2.** I submit that the method of reflective equilibrium, construed in a certain way, is an appropriate approach to epistemic justification in our area of inquiry. In general, the method consists in “working back and forth among our considered judgments (some say our ‘intuitions,’ ... about particular instances or cases, the principles or rules that we believe govern them, and the theoretical considerations that we believe bear on accepting them) and these judgments, principles, and theoretical considerations are revised in light of the others.”





privileged in the current, unjust society will oppose social transformation, thinking that it would make them worse off. And the oppressed may be risk-averse, or reluctant to engage in collective action instead of free-riding on the risky efforts of others. These weaknesses regarding prudential judgments seemingly do not arise when it comes to moral judgments, which appear to provide more robust reasons to move to a more just society and to stay in it, and apply impartially to all agents. Motivation should be built on them rather than on prudential reasons.



The distinction between the desiderata of Truth, Epistemic Justification, Fitting Address, and Effectiveness helps us explore the prospects and limitations of different structures of social criticism. We can use Jaeggi's (2018: chs. 5-6) illuminating classification, which, in a nutshell, identifies the following structures:

In general, *social criticism* typically involves (1) challenging a set of practices P by noting that it conflicts with a set of norms N.

The approach of *internal criticism* adds to (1) that (2) criticism concentrates on norms that are already accepted by participants in the practices assessed, and recommends that they change P to meet what N (thus understood, as a set of internal norms) requires.

The approach of *external criticism* adds to (1) that (3) criticism concentrates on norms that are true, or correct, independently of whether they are already accepted by the participants in the practices assessed, and re-ond ree

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It might be objected that endorsing an objectivist approach makes no difference. Since we cannot adopt a God’s eye viewpoint, we cannot have a pure grasp of the normative facts and compare them with our normative attitudes and tell which of the latter correspond to the former. So the truth of objectivism, if it is a truth, is a wheel that turns no mechanism. However, an objectivist outlook is not idle. It can help us be more open to learning. If subjectivism were correct, then it could not be false that something is good for us if we happen to desire or value it. But surely there are cases in which we change our mind as to what to desire or value, and think that these changes involve revising a normative mistake. Such a sense of the possibility of progress in our attitudes only makes sense if objectivism is correct. Once we see this point, we are more likely to be humble and open to revise our views in the face of new evidence or challenges by others, and to actually seek them out to improve our normative knowledge. By contrast, subjectivism seems dogmatic. It can even work as an ideological attitude, facilitating complacency and adaptation to social circumstances that are problematic. “I am doing what I want” would mechanically silence any objection. It can also cement fantastic forms of voluntarism. Our predicament would become unproblematic if we simply decided to approach it in a positive way, by coming to want it to be as it is (as S5 suggests, for example).

### 3.4. The “Critical Dilemma” and self-determination

I mentioned in 3.1 the conceptual distinction between normative and motivating reasons. I also accept a substantive claim—sometimes referred to as “externalism” about practical reasons—according to which being motivating is not a necessary condition for something to be a cogent normative reason.<sup>36</sup> It is true, however, that critical theory aims at the formulation of both kinds of reasons. Recall that we are aiming not only at Truth and Epistemic Justification, but also at Effectiveness. The latter must engage motivating reasons. Furthermore, the emancipatory perspective calls for forms of interaction, including that between critics and their interlocutors, which are respectful and enact Fitting Address.

The difficulties of this endeavor surface sharply if we consider the so-called “Critical Dilemma.” As Haslanger articulates it, the dilemma arises for views in critical theory that challenge conditions of social injustice and aim to “motivate and guide social change.” The horns are these:

- (a) When criticizing a certain practice, social criticism might rely on “a set of ‘external’ imported values.” The problem here, in Honneth’s words, is that “any ‘strong,’ context-transcending form of social criticism necessarily brings the risk of paternalism or even despotism.”
- (b) Alternatively, social criticism might “rely on the locally entrenched value horizon” of participants in the practice. The problem then, however, is that “it is unclear that one will have the resources to break through the grip of ideology.”<sup>37</sup>

This dilemma has different aspects. I concentrate on its normative dimension.<sup>38</sup> In particular, I claim that the approach proposed in this paper, with its two theses urging explicit engagement with issues about well-being and favoring an objectivist take on them, can avoid the worries mentioned

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<sup>36</sup> On both points, see Scanlon (1998) and Parfit (2011).

<sup>37</sup> Haslanger (2021b: 40-1). When stating the first horn, Haslanger cites Honneth (2009: 44). She relies on Honneth (2017) to formulate the second.

<sup>38</sup> See Celikates (2023), Haslanger (2021b), and Ng (2015) for discussion of conceptual, epistemological, scientific, and metaphysical aspects.

in the two horns of the dilemma. Regarding the second horn, recall that the approach rejects subjectivism about fundamental prudential and moral principles. So it does not require any “internal” type of critique that implies conventionalism and relativism—which are forms of subjectivism. In their critical and deliberative pursuit of reflective equilibrium, people can challenge any existing normative belief, however entrenched (and this includes, of course, ideological views).

The approach proposed is not only convincing regarding Truth and Epistemic Justification. It can also cater for important considerations concerning Fitting Address and Effectiveness. In this way, it can also respond to worries about the first horn of the dilemma. Crucially, the approach involves no necessary, or even tendential, alignment with a paternalistic or despotic outlook. Objectivist critics can be duly humble and considerate in their treatment of their addressees, approaching them with the respect owed to them as fellow autonomous reasoners. Effectiveness remains a challenge, but critics can and should explore with their interlocutors ways to develop motivating visions that reflect the normative reasons they have discovered through their best efforts of inquiry. The task is far from hopeless, as people have a tendency to seek what they believe is right and good for them.

What animates the worries regarding the first horn of the Critical Dilemma is the value of self-determination. But the objectivist approach presented here can recognize and mobilize this value. Self-determination is indeed important in a number of ways. It is, first, directly morally important. Agents capable of practical reasoning may not be treated in condescending ways as mere rule-takers who are not also rule-makers, or as mere passive receptacles of aid with no say on how their own good is to be advanced. People have a right to set the terms on which they live, which includes the terms on which their well-being is promoted. This is an instance of the priority of the right over the good which I have been acknowledging all along. Second, self-determination has great epistemic significance. Each of us is often better placed than others to know what benefits us.<sup>39</sup> Third, self-determination is arguably an objective component of well-being. When we are engaged as autonomous reasoners and decision-makers in the processes that affect us, we get a benefit that is independent of the value of the final results—that of partaking as dynamic shapers of our own lives. Indeed, paternalism is not only morally problematic but also as prudentially bad.<sup>40</sup> Finally, engaging the self-determination of those affected by certain rules and policies could enhance the feasibility of their implementation, as people are often more ready to sustain normative orders they see as their own achievement rather than as an external imposition.

So, returning to Fitting Address and Effectiveness, the objectivist approach is compatible with an outlook that rejects authoritarianism. Agents’ own reasoning, through which they assess views about the good and the right and search for reflective equilibrium, is the fundamental standpoint for normative reflection.<sup>41</sup> We should address others (and ourselves) in ways that engage this standpoint. To appropriately shape inquiry, deliberation, and action in social contexts, we should proceed together in a broadly democratic fashion, as free and equal partners in a common endeavor to improve our lot. Basic individual liberties should be respected as well. Thus, in the context of labor practices, it would be appropriate to give people real options for non-alienated work, but not to force them to engage in it. And well-being should not be directly served to others as a meal. Instead, enabling social conditions should be fostered so that each can achieve well-being on their

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<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, nobody is infallible or without blind spots, and we can learn a great deal from engaging in cooperative inquiry with others—both about what is right and about what is good, for ourselves and for them.

<sup>40</sup> Crisp (2021: sect. 4.3) and Wall (2017: sect. 3.5).

<sup>41</sup> Scanlon (2014: 14). See also the discussion on epistemic justice in Haslanger (2021a: 51-5).

own initiative and terms.

A related worry that arises when philosophers formulate substantive ideas is that they seem to assume an inappropriate status over and above everyone else in society. The proper role of philosophers is to identify and defend procedures of autonomous reasoning, not to say what the use of those procedures should select, which is a task for people themselves, individually or collectively. Philosophers should not overstep these boundaries and pretend to be philosopher kings, prophets, or judges. We see elements of this worry in Habermas's (1990: 122; 1998: chs. 2-3) critique of Rawls's theory of justice. Habermas complains that Rawls overreaches when, in addition to trying to articulate the standpoint of impartial moral and political reasoning (through his accounts of the original position and public reason), he tries to identify the correct norms of social justice (with his two principles of justice). A similar instance of the worry could be formulated for conceptions of well-being to say that philosophers should articulate and defend the best procedures of prudential reasoning, not dictate what well-being consists in.

The worry seems to assume that philosophical theorizing is radically discontinuous from the practical standpoint of ordinary people engaging in moral and political reasoning. But philosophy can be seen as a continuation of that reasoning. On this different view, philosophers simply spend more time and energy exploring the same questions. They can offer the results of their inquiry as hypotheses to be discussed by everyone as equals rather than as commandments handed down by superior philosophical experts.<sup>42</sup> The assessment of philosophical theses must occur, in the end, in everyone's critical and deliberative pursuit of reflective equilibrium. Philosophers can formulate hypotheses about issues of substance besides procedure, and ponder questions about well-being besides morality and justice. If there is no radical discontinuity between philosophy and the ordinary reasoning of people trying to solve their personal and social problems, then philosophers need not adopt unreasonable pretensions. Their inquiry is simply an intensification of ordinary critical thought, an intellectual devise of self-enlightenment. It tackles aspects of our shared and commanding question: "How should we live?"

The foregoing points apply to critical theory. It is an exercise in intersubjective freedom. I use my freedom and address you in yours, and you do the same.<sup>43</sup> Effectiveness will have to be sought in ways that respect rather than circumvent or bend the self-determination of any agent affected. If circumstances are however nonideal because we face powerful dominant and oppressive agents who are not ready to deliberate with us and in fact undermine our efforts of democratic debate and change, then of course our interactions will have to be more conflictive and strategic.<sup>44</sup> But, even then, we could and should aim at enabling, and eventually activating more respectful arenas of common deliberation and decision-making that include them.

#### 4. Conclusion

The two theses defended in this paper are plausible and survive the challenges discussed. They are worthy of further exploration and debate. Ideologies often operate by invoking pictures of well-

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<sup>42</sup> Rawls's (2005: 426-7) response to Habermas effectively makes this point.

<sup>43</sup> Jaeggi (2018: Introduction and Conclusion) provides an illuminating defense of practical philosophy and critical theory as continuous with people's ameliorative reasoning and practices. Surprisingly, however, she claims that the task of the philosopher is best seen as a formalist one of proposing procedures of rational assessment rather than substantive views about the good and the right. But once the continuity is recognized, we need not think that if philosophers tackle substantive

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