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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ideational Structure

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Abstract

This essay characterizes one way people are organized by their ideas about the ideas of others, namely, "ideational structure." I clarify its role in social explanation, compare it to some standard social ontologies, and propose that it is an important element in an ideology.

Keywords: ideation; social structure; social organization; coordination; common knowledge; social ontology; John Searle; Michael Bratman; Margaret Gilbert; ideology

Introduction

In this essay I characterize a form of social reality that sociologists call "ideational structure." My main suggestion is that the social phenomenon in question is distinctive and important. I define the phenomenon, develop its contours and explanatory role, and suggest that it has yet to be accounted for by familiar social ontologies. I also explain how ideational structure can be an element in or even a form of ideology, understood as a way people are organized by their ideas about the ideas of others.[1]

Initial examples

In a well-known Hans Christian Andersen folk tale, an emperor wore no clothes, yet each courtier presumed that all the other courtiers must see fine robes. No one dared suggest otherwise, for fear of seeming to be a simpleton, so the parade went forth into the streets, the emperor striding along in regal nudity.[2]

A group of friends agreed to a lunch meeting. The friend who first proposed this did not wish to eat, on account of her sour stomach. She suggested lunch anyway, presuming everyone else will want to eat, in which case she should hide

[1] On the question of what "ideology" is, see other essays in this volume—especially those by Allen Buchanan and Elizabeth Levinson and Molly McGrath as well as the section "Ideology" below.

[2] Hans Christian Andersen, "The Emperor's New Clothes" (1837).

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her preferences and not spoil the occasion. The group gathered, with everyone eating, obligingly, despite their own sour stomachs. All went home dyspeptic.

In the run-up to a financial crisis, most investors have serious doubts about rising asset valuations. Speculators keep betting on a continued rise anyhow, on the presumption that enough others are also still betting on the continued rise, perhaps only because other betters are continuing to bid up prices. Each has secret hopes of cashing out before the valuation drops.

The regime appeared unshakable. Murmurs and grumblings were kept to kitchen tables because most people presumed that most others were loyalists, until, one day, people took to the streets. Now, with doubts being expressed so boldly, it was easy for everyone to imagine that most everyone else disapproved of the regime. Even loyalists could no longer suppose that most others support the regime. Its days are numbered.

In each of these examples, a group of agents is organized by their ideas, that is, by a pattern of "ideation" that may or may not be consciously present or even readily available to an agent. "Ideation" is just "thinking," but here thinking has a "structure" that moves people into action together, perhaps so as to act *as if* from a shared purpose. What chiefly does the organizing, though, is not a shared purpose or any given person's thinking, but rather the prevalence in the group of a certain way of thinking about what *other* people are thinking.

Proposed definition

Take a possible object of thought A. The thought could be a simple aim, value, purpose, principle, norm of action, or custom or a more complex institution or set of rules and meanings, including propositions, imperatives, images, or symbols, all of which may be rationalized by a larger purpose.

Let's say that an *ideational structure* obtains in a group of two or more agents when, and only when, its members are such that:

(1) Enough members presume that enough of the others accept A (whether or not A is in fact accepted).
(2) Each member guesses or estimates what others in the group accept (perhaps mistakenly), generalizing from local cues by some heuristic.
(3) Enough members prefer to comply with coordination around A if enough others likewise comply (as the circumstances of each require).

The generality of this formulation is meant to allow for variation across a complex range of examples. Preferences for compliance (in condition [3]) can vary widely in a population, for instance. This may be called a sort of "conditional commitment" if it is assumed to be highly sensitive to perceptions of what others are doing. The operative motive may be concern for reputation, showing solidarity, the desire to fit in or go with the flow ("When in Rome ..."), a strategic choice to "pick one's battles," conserving resources perhaps to violate *other* norms, and so on.

Likewise, the heuristics that agents use to guess or estimate the attitudes of others (in condition [2]) can vary widely. For some, the shortcut is

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"representativeness," judging probability by similarity or salience. For others, it is "availability," the ease with which an idea comes to one's attention, for example, for being vivid to the mind, often repeated in public discourse, or both. For still others, it is "deference," trusting surveys or certain motherly or friendly advice about what "everyone" knows, and so on.

Finally, where the proposed definition refers to "enough" members (twice in each of conditions [1] and [3]), this is meant to indicate a relevant threshold. The first appearance of "enough" in each condition is meant to be primary, for there must be a high enough proportion of members who make the presumption if coordination is to happen. The "embedded" ratio, which figures into the content of a given member's presumption, might vary from member to member and still organize action as long as enough members at least *think* that "enough" others accept or comply with the relevant end.

Crucially, in interpreting these notions for a specific population, there is no requirement to find or assume any *actual commitment* to any end, aim, value, purpose, coordinating norms, convention, or institution. Yet, the idea goes, the group may coordinate its behavior around an ideationally accepted end all the same, as if there is genuine commitment.

To be sure, there may well be such commitment in a group. The relevant patterns of motivation and ideation might exist but be layered atop widely and truly felt love of country, for example, or an abiding sense of fairness that reproduces just institutions from one generation to the next.[3] Perhaps a group can be said to jointly or collectively share an intention or purpose and generally accept norms that coordinate their conduct around it. Even so, the group could nevertheless have an ideational structure just for having the relevant pattern of thoughts and motives. What people think about what others think would just turn out to be correct.

Real cases perhaps fall on a spectrum. In cases of full alignment, signs of support signal real commitment and people are more or less right about how supportive people are of a practice. In perhaps the typical range of cases, there is real commitment, but it varies across agents and over time much more than people presume. In perhaps special, limiting cases—of what may be called *merely* ideational structure—the support people presume is not in fact there; there is a large gap between perception and reality.

Instability and stability

This last case—of *mere* ideational structure—becomes salient in cases of collapse. In Andersen's folk tale, the triggering cause was a child calling out the naked truth. Suddenly, no one could presume that anyone thought otherwise any longer. What collapsed is an ideational structure.

Revolutions (for example, France in 1789, Russia in 1917, Iran in 1978–1979, the USSR in 1989) can also be explained by a sudden shift in social perception,

[3] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), Part III.

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given an "information cascade."[4] People may have long concealed their true preferences, allowing an impression of wide support for a regime. However, once grievances are aired that few previously dared to voice, suddenly, everyone realizes that there are far more doubters than had appeared. Actual support for the regime need not have changed at all. What can change is the presumption of support, that is, the ideational structure wherein enough people assume that enough others are supportive.

Likewise happens for a collapse in financial markets. "Confidence" is not simply a matter of a substantive prediction of rising asset prices based on fundamentals. It is also (or in highly speculative markets mainly or entirely) a matter of enough investors betting that enough other investors are betting on rising prices, ideationally. Especially where ideational presumption is the only or the main explanatory factor, a salient news item may be all it takes to reverse the optics. When suddenly there are not enough investors betting that enough others are confident, prices tumble.

Although collapse scenarios are vivid for their high drama, this should not lead us to conclude that ideational structures are invariably unstable or short-lived. They may be prone to last so long as relevant preferences, heuristics, and background information and other conditions are constant. To illustrate this point, take the case of two identical restaurants established next door to each other. The first patrons pick one arbitrarily. The next patrons presume that the first patrons must know the restaurant that they chose is better and join them. Further patrons follow the crowd, wondering, "Why take a chance on that empty restaurant? What do these people know that we don't?" Indeed, every newcomer might stably pick the peopled venue, until such time as some patrons change their heuristics or their preferences, advertising corrects the false impression, or the empty restaurant goes out of business.

Likewise, in public risk assessment and regulation, especially in large populations, an "availability cascade" can similarly create a lasting shift in opinion and preferences once it takes hold.[5] Alternatively, to return to the case of financial markets, assets often show long trends in price movements before or after a crash. Prices can remain stable for long periods of time, when ideational presumptions about the betting of others are themselves stable.

The potential stability of ideational structure allows us to see how far less volatile market relations, such as international trade, may also be organized and sustained by ideation. On a view I have proposed elsewhere,[6] international trade as we know it is a social practice among states of mutual reliance on common markets. Its rationalizing aim is the one that economists have long defended: augmenting national income. But does that mean the various officials who uphold the practice, by negotiating or applying trade rules (such as on tariffs

[4] Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[5] Cass Sunstein and Timur Kuran, "Availability Cascades and Risk Regulation," *Stanford Law Review* 51 (1999): 683–768.

[6] Aaron James, *Fairness in Practice: A Social Contract for a Global Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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or regulations), must themselves share the "aim" or "organizing purpose" of national income augmentation? It may seem implausible to suppose that many do.

Fortunately, such commitment is not necessary. It suffices for the operation of trade practice that enough officials assume that enough other officials share the national income objective. Perhaps many or all of them nod at its mention during meetings and at conference cocktail parties, displaying their professionalism. Even if each does his or her part mainly or only for personal reasons, be they professional advancement, avoiding embarrassment, or social posturing, the global flow of goods, services, and capital can run, decade after decade, on an ideational structure maintained by state officials.[7]

The same may be true of the state system itself, including international law and custom. Perhaps the presumption of state sovereignty is indeed an "organized hypocrisy," as Stephen Krasner calls it.[8] Even if international norms are mainly paid lip service and routinely violated, it can matter that lip service is paid in a public performance, which upholds social perceptions of general acceptance. Ascribing *aims* to the territorial state system—such as securing peace and prosperity, conditions for collective self-determination, basic justice, and so on—can seem puzzling among largely cynical and self-interested actors. Yet such aims, given appropriate preferences, can nevertheless organize international conduct by their ideational acceptance. It suffices that enough officials presume that enough other officials accept them, even if few in fact do.

During the Treaty of Westphalia, for example, the value of peace had presumably become widely shared, if only due to exhaustion by protracted wars on the European continent. Still, the actual endorsement of peace was not necessary at that point. Even if most simply paid lip service to "peace," a wave of cynical nodding and declarations could reinforce the impression of general support. Suspicious kings and princes could presume that enough others would go along with the new system, now setting their sights on finding advantage within it. Once the initial impression of wide enough support is established, it might embolden solemn sanctioning of would-be aggressors, along with secret hopes for strategic cheating. The resulting coordination, perhaps still honored by lip service in breach, might then organize global politics over decades or centuries.

Ideational explanation

Beyond such examples, I conjecture that a broad range of forms of social organization can be realistically described as ideational structures, with varying degrees of actual—let alone conscious—commitment, including little to no commitment at all. I will not attempt to defend this conjecture about the

[7] For elaboration, see Aaron James, "Replies to Critics," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 44, no. 2 (2014): 286–304; Aaron James, "How Cynical Can Ideal Theory Be?" *Journal of International Political Theory* 12, no. 2 (2016): 118–33.

[8] Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

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concept's breadth of application here, however. Instead, I focus on further defining its role in social explanation.

The examples canvassed above suggest that ideational structure can, in some important contexts, explain why people coordinate as they do, even without genuine commitment. One might still question how much this shows. Perhaps in ordinary cases of cooperation, people seem to be organized by their genuine commitment to norms and shared purposes. Perhaps appeal to ideational structure is needed only to explain curious or marginal social phenomena, where the normal basis for cooperation breaks down.

The worry might be put this way: Where we find genuine, wide support for a practice, what explanatory work is left for ideational structure to do? Is not the fact of wide support itself a sufficient explanation? If so, ideational structure would become unnecessary, otiose, or necessary only when real support is lacking and coordination runs on false pretenses—this last being a special sort of case.

The operative assumption here is that when there is real commitment to a practice, there is no work for ideational structure to do. I take this to be a mistake. However, since it is consistent with the definition proposed above, which is merely a piece of conceptual analysis, and since it might be suggested by the examples canvassed above, I should further clarify how the relevant pattern of attitudes is supposed to help us explain why people coordinate as they do.

In cases of *mere* ideational structure, what people think others think seems *sufficient* in context to explain why people coordinate as they do. These are interesting cases, but the normal role of ideational structure is, instead, as a *necessary* explanatory factor. Ideational presumption is generally necessary for a simple reason: we cannot directly divine the souls of our fellows.

Cases of mere ideational structure highlight the potential gap between *real* and *perceived* support for a practice. However supportive people in fact are, few might be aware of that fact. Lacking powers of mental telepathy, we act on our perceptions of others even in close, face-to-face contact. We do so all the more when forming an impression of larger-scale patterns of conduct in a mainly anonymous population. To guess, with any confidence, what people are doing or thinking, we are left to generalize from the scant signals we see, often in fast, rough-and-ready inferences. The degree of genuine support among others may often matter, but it will generally matter only because *signs* of support are sent, received, and interpreted.

We can distinguish at least three ways perceived and real support interact as explanatory variables over time. First, there is *bootstrapping.* Where actual support for a norm or social purpose is sorely lacking, perceptions of increasing support may generate actual support. People may become supportive in larger numbers when they think others are also becoming more supportive, even when perceptions of support are manufactured.

Second, there is *undermining.* What genuine support there is may be weakened because of increasing (perhaps incorrect) social perceptions that support is waning. In some instances, this may degrade valuable social norms. Perhaps an abusive public figure and his legion of trolls trash democratic norms daily, making them seem increasingly like a hopeless ideal rather than inviolable requirements. In happier instances, an entrenched unjust practice might unravel

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because real support becomes less salient and perceived support for reform hits a critical threshold or "tipping point" (for example, as sentiment about gay marriage did in the United States).

Third, there is *stabilization.* The propensity of coordination to last for an extended period may depend on the continuous mutual reinforcement of real and perceived support. In John Rawls's stability conjecture about a just society, for example, a well-ordered society, once established, generates its own support from one generation to the next.[9] It does so in part because, feeling treated fairly themselves, people support ongoing cooperation and are disposed to personally comply from reciprocity. Insofar as each person's continued support also depends on his or her being assured enough others are also supportive, though, ongoing *signals* of support in word and deed are also needed. The system's signaling systems, including its media, must generate the *perception* of ongoing support over time, especially at crucial junctures, for example, in the face of contrary signals such as reactionary propaganda or coup attempts.

Social ontology

In view of the epistemological realities just noted, analyses of joint or shared action often stipulate, albeit often with little or no elaboration, a requirement of "common knowledge." This presents a difficulty. *Knowledge*, let alone common knowledge, is demanding—too much so for most cooperation, especially at scale, beyond face-to-face interaction.

Yet what is often needed to explain the large-scale coordination we observe in a population is not common knowledge or even mere common belief or attitude.[10] What is needed is only a general presumption about what others generally accept, though no one may in fact have a presumed belief or attitude. This is not difficult to come by, even at scale. People need only form presumptions about what others in a population are thinking, generalizing from daily observation, gossip and chit-chat, and news media or commentary over what may be very large numbers.

Can a theory of social ontology simply swap its common-knowledge stipulation for a relevant ideational structure? It can and should. To the extent it does so, however, we can ask why the rest of the proposed account is necessary to explain much of the social coordination we find.

Consider, for example, John Searle's sweeping social ontology, which is meant to cover money, marriage, law, and much more. In a given case, we are supposed to find "status functions" (of the form "X counts as Y in C") with "deontic powers" becoming established by declared "we-intentions," which are "collectively accepted or recognized."[11]

Searle never explains what "collective acceptance or recognition" amounts to. He explains, eventually, that it is different from a "we-intention," for being

[9] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Part III.

[10] Christian List, "Three Kinds of Collective Attitudes," *Erkenntnis* 79, no. 9 (2014): 1601–22.

[11] John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

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"reducible to I-intentionality plus mutual belief."[12] He does not elaborate what he has in mind. What his account seems to require is ideational structure, but if he is willing to take that on board, we might wonder why "we-intentions" ever had to figure into the story in the first place.

Once elaborated as ideational structure, the idea of "collective acceptance" can arguably do much of the work in Searle's story of money, marriage, law, and other institutions.[13] This would go as follows. In a given case, enough people presume that enough others accept a relevant status function, with its deontic powers, and then coordinate as though relevant agents do have those powers. No "we-intention" to accept or comply with a status function would be specifically required. Perhaps, given some salient declaration (such as a minister saying, "I now pronounce you married"), enough people presume (perhaps correctly) that enough others accept some assignment of powers, ideationally. People then coordinate accordingly by their various "I-intentions" (for example, to show respect for the newlyweds). So, again, why must "we-intentions"—a seeming centerpiece of the story—figure in at all?

The accounts of shared intention or activity that Margaret Gilbert and Michael Bratman offer are not open to this challenge.[14] These accounts start from interpersonal examples (such as walking together or painting a house) and posit genuinely shared or joint commitments, intentions, or activity on the merits of the cases being explained. The question of how or whether the proposed accounts apply beyond their paradigm cases is left open for further investigation.

In that case, though, we might grant that genuinely shared intentions or commitments are needed in interpersonal cases and ask whether or how far the proposed analyses can be "scaled up" to the larger-scale cases of the sort Searle suggests he could explain. Given a large population, how far, if at all, can a commitment, intention, or activity be genuinely "shared" in the sense specified?

Scott Shapiro elaborates Bratman's analysis that, roughly, "[e]ach of us intends: I intend that we J" for cases of massively shared agency.[15] In doing so, he drops Bratman's requirement of plural intention "that we J." A large group can simply coordinate around a "shared plan," which is designed by a planner to enable them each to do their part in a joint activity understood as an abstract type, with coordinated subplans. "As long as participants accept the plan, intentionally play their parts, resolve their disputes peacefully and openly, and all of this is common knowledge," Shapiro suggests, "they are acting together intentionally."[16]

[12] John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 58.

[13] On money, see Aaron James, "Money, Recognition, and the Outer Limits of Obliviousness," *Synthese* 202, no. 2 (2023): 1–24.

[14] Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Michael Bratman, *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[15] Scott Shapiro, "Massively Shared Agency," in *Rational and Social Agency: The Philosophy of Michael Bratman*, ed. Manuel Vargas and Gideon Yaffe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 257–93.

[16] Shapiro, "Massively Shared Agency," 282. Compare Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), whose account of "complicity" with large-scale coordination similarly relies only on "participatory intention."

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Again, a common-knowledge condition may be too demanding for many or most real cases, especially at scale. I take it that Shapiro does not simply mean to describe an abstract type that may have little application to the world; indeed, it is supposed to shed light on law. In that case, perhaps he would relax his common-knowledge stipulation for an ideational presumption condition, as suggested. Leaving that aside, once we drop any requirement of plural intention for cooperation at scale, we can ask why we should nevertheless still require a shared plan or even bare plan acceptance. Even that may seem more than is needed to explain much of the large-scale coordination we find.

We have already seen how people might coordinate at scale without any genuine acceptance. Whether or not people themselves accept A, the presumption that enough of some larger number of others accept A can be enough, given relevant preferences, to keep them coordinated around A. Acceptance may help *stabilize* coordination, but, in that case, it explains one feature of coordination—its stability—not the fact of coordination itself (which may or may not be prone to last).

To be sure, an ideationally presumed plan or end could well be conceptualized by those involved as "shared" *as part of its content.* If enough of us just presume that enough of us accept that "we share A," people may coordinate accordingly. This may fit the facts in some cases, but even then, we can ask how essential that feature of coordination is if the coordination observed can equally be explained ideationally. Perhaps the coordination observed might also work, even if the end is not regarded as "shared." Enough of us just accept that enough of us each accept A (shared or not) and we act for our various reasons around what A requires. Perhaps the image of a shared plan helps stabilize cooperation, encourage solidarity, and so forth. Then again, it may explain stability rather than coordination itself. It might even do that merely as an *image* and nothing more.

Again, Shapiro's model may be appropriate in some cases, but it may not seem apt as a general model even of most "massively shared agency." Bratman himself is uncertain about whether his theory of shared intention scales up beyond the interpersonal cases it is tailored to.[17] The present suggestion is that it may not need to; we can readily explain cooperation at scale ideationally.

Gilbert tells me that she is amenable to allowing a role for ideational structure, perhaps as an elaboration or weakening of her own common-knowledge condition.[18] She argues that her "joint-commitment" account applies at large scale. In the case of law, for instance, she develops H. L. A Hart's legal positivism in her own terms.[19] She also applies her joint-commitment analysis to a wide range of social phenomena, in each case defending the analysis on the merits of the case in question.[20]

[17] Michael Bratman, email message to author, Fall 2016.

[18] Margaret Gilbert, email message to author, Spring 2017.

[19] Margaret Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment, and the Bonds of Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Part III.

[20] Margaret Gilbert, *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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Here, Gilbert can agree that ideational structures exist and help explain coordination in the case she hopes to account for. She can also allow a role for them where joint commitments have not been established. Her account is thus consistent with supposing, as I have suggested, that ideational structure has a distinctive nature and important role in social explanation, perhaps especially in large-scale cases where attribution of "shared intentions" or "joint commitments" may strain plausibility.

Ideology

An ideational structure might be called an "ideology" in a literal, if trivial, sense. It is a way people are organized by their (perhaps implicit) ideas about the ideas of others. Perhaps not every ideational structure could properly be called an "ideology." However, it is, I think, plausible to regard all ideologies as ideational structures—that is, as at least maintained by some ideational structure or itself a complex form of one.

The term "ideology," in this thin sense, need not have pejorative meaning. The end people are presumed to accept may be entirely unobjectionable, laudatory, or the true principles of justice. At the same time, used in context, the term "ideology" can be marshalled as a term of criticism. Perhaps the ideas others are presumed to accept are aptly derided as "so much ideology" because they are false, misleading, or immoral or because coordination around them leads to injustice.

In this respect, an ideational structure is comparable to an "ideology" on a sociological conception. On Allan Buchanan's account, an ideology is a "shared evaluative map of the social world" that "orients individuals" and "facilitates coordinated action."[21] Ideology is by itself neutral social technology, to be used for ill or for good. It may serve to rationalize and reinforce existing oppressive orders or to aid liberation or revolution.[22]

An ideational analysis of ideology adds several points of elaboration. First, it offers an articulation of the structure of coordination by ideas in widely made presumptions about the ideas of others. Second, it highlights the explanatory importance of social perception of what others think based on heuristics. Third, it draws attention to the signaling and performative dimensions of ideological maintenance.

Since I have commented on the first two points already, I will focus here on the third point about how ideologies are maintained. What is crucial is not the inculcation of genuine belief in the content of an ideology, but rather continued social *performance* (including insincere performance) that signals to others in ways that reinforce ideational presumptions.

[21] See Allen Buchanan, "The Explanatory Power of Ideology," elsewhere in this volume.

[22] Allen Buchanan and Alex Motchoulski, "Ideology and Political Revolutions in Conditions of Disorder," in *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy* (forthcoming).

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Take, for example, an ideational structure organized around what a group calls "law and order," which, in context, is understood to mean preserving an existing social hierarchy. Perhaps the understood meaning includes a smorgasbord of associated slogans, images, memes, and symbols,[23] along with methods for performing a sense of grievance and a sense of entitlement to mete out hostility and abuse where needed for enforcement of presumed privileges.

Here, it may be that some in-group members genuinely believe, explicitly or implicitly, in their own "natural" superiority and moral entitlement to rule, perhaps rationalized by some larger set of ideas. Some out-group members may join them, believing in their own inferiority, if only half-believing as inhibiting "double mindedness." And yet, on an ideational analysis, no such belief in superiority or inferiority is necessary for an ideology to rationalize and sustain a social hierarchy. The ideology can do its work ideationally, by shaping how widely people presume that others accept its assumptions about superiority and inferiority (whether or not they do). That may be all it takes to serve vested interests, whether by preserving privileges or simply affirming a sense of worth and belonging.

What is crucial for shaping presumptions about what is accepted is not belief but performance. In-group members must be willing to perform in words and deeds, that is, in acts of domination or fealty, regurgitation or re-invention of current slogans and rhetorical tropes, and so on. The words and deeds signal personal allegiance to the group and help conjure an impression of continuing wide support for its ends in a larger audience (an impression that may in fact be false). In-group members may then be further emboldened, while out-group members become more prone to self-silencing. That serves the main social objective, which is not truth, rightness, or even plausibility, but giving assurance of "being on top," "putting people in their place," and so on.

To be sure, when in-group members come to believe what may have begun as performative rationalizations, they can be faulted for their odious views—perhaps being aptly derided as an "ideologue" or "in the grip of an ideology." Even so, since truth or falsehood is not to the point in the first place, what is believed, one way or the other, is not where the action is explanatorily. At least in principle, no one needs to believe for the ideational structure to work as an ideology. Accordingly, debunking the associated beliefs may do little or nothing to hobble its social operation. In the face of challenge, much of what is said may be brushed off as "just a joke"—perhaps because it never did or need to reflect sincere belief.

An ideational analysis thus differs from proposals that treat ideologies as *essentially* false or distorting, taken as objects of belief. Tommie Shelby defines an ideology as "a widely held set of associated beliefs and implicit judgments that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations."[24] For Sally Haslanger,

[23] Compare Virgil Henry Storr, Michael Romero, and Nona Martin Storr, "Ideology and Extreme Protests," elsewhere in this volume.

[24] Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 22.

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"ideology is best understood functionally: ideology functions to stabilize or perpetuate unjust power and domination, and does so through some form of masking or illusion."[25]

Again, in context, the term "ideology" can certainly be used with pejorative meaning on the grounds that certain ideas or expressions are false or distorting, but ideologies need not be false, distorting, or even believed. An ideology, understood as an ideational structure, can also help preserve or advance justice, by eliciting or sustaining social perception and coordination around true moral principles, as suggested above.

Political philosophy for practices

An ideational account of ideology stresses the potential gap between social ontology and moral evaluation. In closing, I mention one way that ideational structure can bear directly on political justification.

Elsewhere, I have argued for a method for justifying substantive principles of justice for and in the light of a given social practice, as interpreted by our best constructive interpretation of its aims, purposes, and distinctive structure.[26] The result, I submit, is an account of justice that can address and guide how people organize themselves in the real world, in a broad range of areas of domestic and global social life.

This approach raises the question of what sort of coordination is needed for a "social practice" with "aims and purposes" and, in turn, whether or how far it is to be found in the domestic or international contexts where principles of justice are wanted. To the extent there must be genuinely *shared* purposes or intentions, however, one might doubt how far they can be found outside interpersonal or local cooperation, giving any principles justified by the method limited scope of application.

As suggested above, here I take it that nothing more than ideational structure is needed.[27] Using the practice-based method of justification, we identify norms or patterns of conduct that define roles, rights, and duties, rationalized by some understood aim or purpose. However, these norms or purposes need not be accepted by anyone; they can simply be attributed ideationally, even if no one supports them. Since ideational structures can readily exist at scale, we can readily identify practices operating in large-scale domestic or even global settings.

[25] Sally Haslanger, "Culture and Critique," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary* 91, no. 1 (2017): 150. See also Brian Leiter, "How Are Ideologies False?" elsewhere in this volume; Ann E. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); David Leopold, "Marxism and Ideology: From Marx to Althusser," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden, Lyman Sargent, and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 22; Denise Meyerson, *False Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 7. For critical discussion, see Brian Kogelmann, "The Demand and Supply of False Consciousness," elsewhere in this volume.

[26] Aaron James, "Constructing Justice for Existing Practice: Rawls and the Status Quo," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2005): 281–316; James, *Fairness in Practice*; Aaron James, "Why Practices?" *Raison Politiques* 51 (2013): 43–61.

[27] James, *Fairness in Practice*; James, "Replies to Critics"; James, "How Cynical Can Ideal Theory Be?"

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To be sure, a "protestant" version of constructive interpretation will put less stock in prevailing social understandings in any case; the theorist will simply cast what coordination there is in its best moral light.[28] (Think of Martin Luther divining the Bible's meaning without aid of tradition, but in this case the social interpreter relies mainly on his or her own moral judgment.) A "catholic" version will be more deferential to going understandings among participants in a practice (think of Catholic deference to traditional Biblical understandings), and so need to attribute aims and purposes to those involved.[29] Even then, what is "understood" by a group can be just an ideational structure within a larger culture of ideas. An aim or purpose can be "understood" ideationally and then frame a substantial moral argument about how the agents involved ought to revise their associated common practice or institution.

The practice-based method of justification is only one suggestion about how social ontology and political philosophy might relate to each other. If nothing else, it shows how ideational analysis can help bridge the gap.

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[28] Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).
[29] James, "Why Practices?"

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