

# Ideology as modes of being-with: An existential-phenomenological contribution to ideology critique

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## Abstract

According to a broad historical and contemporary consensus, ideology resides in the mind, as a sort of belief system gone wrong. Recently, however, a minority view has challenged this cognitivist consensus by highlighting ideology's social function. This group of authors, including Rahel Jaeggi, Karen Ng, Robin Celikates, and Sally Haslanger, underline the importance of analyzing ideology through the lens of our social practices. We think these challengers move the conversation about ideology in the right direction, but their views still suffer from some weaknesses – weaknesses that we think an existential-phenomenological account of ideology can overcome. We develop such an account here. We conceive of ideology as a set of modes of being-with that attack our normative competence by placing us under unwarranted normative pressure, changing our normative stance to benefit some political group. We offer a four-fold account of normative competence and illustrate how ideology, understood in our terms, attacks it. Finally, we show that our approach shares the strengths but not the weaknesses of the minority view.

## Keywords

ideology, normativity, existentialism, applied phenomenology, critical phenomenology

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In the months leading up to the 2024 US presidential election, anyone paying attention to contemporary public discourse expects to be flooded by false accusations, abrasive rhetoric, thinly veiled manipulation, and disinformation (much of it generated by AI; see [Robins-Early, 2023](#)). Both political parties, arguably one with more reason than the other ([Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018](#)), will accuse their opponents of ideological tactics, pundits will decry the ‘post-truth’ state of the world, and voters will lament it too. Everyone involved seems to agree: Ideologues deserve no attention, let alone votes.

But what *is* ideology exactly?<sup>1</sup> Political science and critical theory<sup>2</sup> boast a wide array of sophisticated answers to this question. Yet, while the former tends to situate ideology firmly in the mind, recent work in the latter increasingly emphasizes ideology’s social dimension. What are the links between the mind and the social world under conditions of ideology? Which one deserves analytic priority? Or is there a third, more promising route to make sense of ideology and ideological tactics?

To answer these questions, this article offers a fresh account of ideology that builds on insights from existential-phenomenology. Given that for the existential-phenomenological tradition, existence involves a constant call to freedom in the face of worldly constraints,<sup>3</sup> one might expect it to offer valuable insights into the ways ideology seduces and coerces agents into heteronomy. Yet, few contemporary approaches to ideology explicitly draw on existentialist insights. What’s more, although important historical figures like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir dealt with many of the questions at stake in critical theory’s discourse on ideology, they say little about ideology *per se*.<sup>4</sup> We hope this article helps to fill this lacuna.<sup>5</sup>

The article unfolds as follows. The first section introduces two important approaches to conceptualizing ideology: The dominant view that conceives of ideology as a belief system, and a minority view that sees it as a set of shared meanings and tools to intervene in the social world. We argue that the minority view advances our understanding of ideology, but it also suffers from some weaknesses. The next section sketches our existential-phenomenological account of the political world and draws on that account to develop a new account of ideology. We argue that, to the extent that ideology targets our normative competence, we can conceive of it as a set of modes of being-with that exert unwarranted (or misleading) normative pressure on the various elements of that competence. We then explore in more detail how these modes of being-with attack four of these elements, namely, our capacities to recognize normative claims, to care, to empathize, and to exercise our judgement. With the main features of our account spelled out, we then position and defend the approach by showing that (a) it preserves what’s appealing about the dominant approach and (b) it shares the strengths but not the weaknesses of the minority view. Finally, we situate our account in the wider academic and trans-academic debate on ideology, and we identify some important tasks that lie ahead for phenomenologically informed ideology critique.

## Competing conceptions of ideology

In this section, we briefly describe the dominant approach to conceptualizing ideology; then, we highlight some relatively recent state of the art challenges to that orthodoxy; finally, after acknowledging the important contribution these challengers make, we identify four weaknesses of their views.

### *The dominant approach*

Looking at the historical literature in the Marxist tradition, Michael Rosen argues that ideology has, for the most part, been conceptualized as a cognitive instrument that induces agents to accept ‘oppressive or otherwise illegitimate social orders’ by promoting ‘a certain state of mind (a set of beliefs, attitudes, values or whatever’ (Rosen and Wolff, 1996, p. 210). What’s more, in a meta-analysis of the multidisciplinary contemporary literature on ideology, Maynard and Mildenerger (2018) find a similar consensus, claiming that ‘Essentially all conceptions of ideology agree that it refers to some sort of idea system’ (p. 565), ‘some sort of systematized political thinking’ (p. 564) or ‘some manner of patterned and politically oriented belief system’ (p. 567). Thus, a broad historical and cross-disciplinary contemporary consensus conceives of ideology as a set of beliefs (or ideas) that influences how we think in order to shape what we do.

### *The challengers*

A relatively recent vein of work challenges this cognitivist consensus with a more social conception of ideology. To capture the basic drift of this work: Ideology is not, for the most part, ‘in the head’ but rather must always be understood in relation to the social world. We consider four such views, ordering them by publication date, and, as it happens, by their increasing emphasis on ideology’s social character. To set our readers’ expectations, we cannot do full justice to these complicated views here; we only aim to capture how they oppose the dominant cognitivist conception.

We begin with Rahel Jaeggi’s (2009) work, which, we think it’s fair to say, essentially qualifies the dominant cognitivist approach. To the question, ‘What are ideologies?’, Jaeggi answers – much like the dominant approach – that they consist of ideas and beliefs; however, she adds that they are *not just* ideas and beliefs:

...ideologies *are ideas*, but they are not just some disconnected ideas one might have or not have; rather, they are ideas that (necessarily or at any rate systematically) exist and evolve under particular conditions. Ideologies *are systems of beliefs*, but they have practical consequences. They have a practical effect and are themselves effects of a certain social practice (Jaeggi 2009, *our emphasis*).

With this, Jaeggi acknowledges the value of the dominant approach, but she also signals a need to amend it, insisting that we always understand ideological ideas and beliefs in relation to their material conditions, practical consequences, and the social

practices that give rise to them. What's more, her view entails that ideologies are 'hidden not only within systems of ideas, but also in practices and forms of habitus' (2009 *fn* 4 p 81); therefore, ideology critique, for Jaeggi, must interrogate and challenge all three.

Karen Ng (2015) emphasizes ideology's social dimension even more. Grounding her approach in a reading of Marx, she argues that he would have rejected the cognitivist interpretation of his position. According to Ng (2015), Marx maintained that we must resist 'the temptation to view ideologies exclusively or primarily in terms of false ideas or beliefs' (400); and we must grasp ideology's emergence from and its ineliminable relation to 'the productive activities of real, living individuals' (399). On Ng's reading of Marx, then, ideology critique 'is not a critique of ideas at all, but rather, a method that aims to reveal the embeddedness of ideas and conceptions in the actual activities of human beings as they individually and collectively reproduce their lives' (*ibid.*). On this basis, Ng recommends a working definition of ideologies as 'at once social practices and forms of rationality that distort the relation between life and self-consciousness and block the full actualization of human reason and freedom' (*ibid.*, 393).

Robin Celikates (2018) also contributes to this recent social turn in the theory of ideology with his claim that ideology consists of 'second-order pathologies' that thwart the 'development and exercise of [agents'] reflexive capacities' (*ibid.*, 124). Such pathologies, for Celikates, are 'second-order' in the sense that they prevent agents from enjoying clairvoyant 'access to "problematic" situations of a first order, so that they do not recognise these situations as problematic, or, if they recognise them as such, they do not understand and thus criticise them' (*ibid.*, 124). Importantly for our purposes, according to Celikates, these second-order pathologies are part of the social world – that is, they are 'social conditions' – but they also denote what we would ordinarily call mental phenomena, that is, 'forms of self-understanding' and 'symbolical orders' (*ibid.*, 127). Finally, ideology critique is also a second-order affair for Celikates, because, he claims, the critic has no business imposing their first-order values on other people; the critic's task, rather, is to help create conditions free from factors that block the development and exercise of agents' reflexive capacities, so they can freely deliberate about and determine their own first-order values.

Finally, Sally Haslanger (2018) defends what is arguably the most radical departure from the dominant approach with her 'practice-based' account of ideology. She defines social practices as 'patterns of learned behavior that enable us (in the primary instances) to coordinate as members of a group in creating, distributing, managing and eliminating a resource (or multiple resources), due to mutual responsiveness to each other's behavior and the resources in question, as interpreted through shared meaning/cultural schemas' (2018, p. 245). And she calls the shared meanings that enable such interpretation 'cultural technē', a term of art that denotes 'social meanings, tools, scripts, schemas, heuristics, principles, and the like, which we draw on in action and which give shape to our practices' (Haslanger 2017, 155). She then defines ideology as a cultural technē that 'organizes us in ways that are unjust, or in ways that skew our understanding of what is valuable' (*ibid.*, 159). In sum, cultural technē are 'tools for us to coordinate in managing resources' (*ibid.*, 156) within our social practices; and ideology consists of cultural technē that lead us to manage those resources in ways that perpetrate and perpetuate injustice. What's more,

while Haslanger admits that ‘we internalize these tools’ (ibid., 157), she insists that such internalized social meanings cannot properly be construed as ideas ‘in the sense of private psychological phenomena’ (ibid., 155). Ideologies do not exist in the head but rather structure our social practices and thereby set the stage for action in the social world.

### *Some weaknesses of the challengers’ views*

As we see it, these authors make some valuable contributions to the discourse on ideology. To understand ideology, we cannot lose sight of the way it often emerges from social conditions; and to combat it, we must interrogate not only beliefs but also the social conditions and practices that often engender, embody, and entrench them. These insights matter. However, these views also suffer from some weaknesses that we think our account of ideology can overcome without sacrificing the challengers’ gains.

First, the challengers’ break with the dominant approach comes at a cost, namely, a significant loss of theoretical simplicity. The dominant approach straightforwardly tells us what ideology is and what makes it bad: It is a kind of bad belief that prevents us from seeing things as they are. In their attempt to capture ideology’s social character, the challengers’ views lose this simplicity. Jaeggi claims that ideologies are ideas and beliefs, but we can also find them in social practices and habituses; Ng defines ideologies as social practices *and* forms of rationality; Celikates tells us to look for ideologies in social conditions, forms of self-understanding, and symbolic orders; finally, Haslanger seems to offer a simpler ontology, claiming that ideologies consist of cultural technē, but the latter denotes a grab bag of diverse things – ‘social meanings, tools, scripts, schemas, heuristics, principles, *and the like*’ (Haslanger 2017, 155, *our emphasis*). The challengers thus leave us with lingering ontological worries. Just what *is* ideology on these views? How can something be a social practice *and* an idea? Worries like these make the simplicity of the cognitivist approach look appealing.

To name a second weakness, these views strike us as ambiguous, reflecting a desire to, in a sense, ‘have it both ways’. In one breath, they challenge the view that ideologies are ideas or beliefs, but in the next, they describe ideologies as ideas and beliefs of a certain kind (Jaeggi), forms of rationality (Ng), forms of self-understanding and symbolical orders (Celikates), and internalized social meanings (Haslanger). So, in one moment, they distance themselves from the orthodox approach, but in the next, they seem to endorse a version of it. Haslanger does this the least, insisting that ideological ideas are never perfectly ‘private psychological phenomena’. But we think any plausible reading of her view still entails that beliefs that individuals entertain alone in their minds are ideological; internalized social meanings, however intrinsically social, are also thoughts that individuals think. When the racist sits there thinking to himself that his race is the best race, he’s entertaining a largely private ideological mental state. The fact is that none of these views fully parts ways with the dominant approach; and that, we think, is part of what makes them compelling. If these authors were to fully break with the cognitivist view and say that ideologies just *are* social conditions, habituses, or social practices, their views would lose much of their appeal, because ideology shapes the social world *and* the way

individuals think. We need a view that accommodates this fact without becoming confused about what ideology is.

This leads directly to our third worry about the challengers' views. We think their strong emphasis on ideology's social dimension commits them to an implausible claim, namely, that beliefs only count as ideological if they are embedded in the social world and have already had a considerable negative impact. That is, on these views, ideologies are partly defined by their actual negative practical impact. We consider this a mistake. Beliefs can be ideological without making *any* impact. Indeed, some of the most impactful, harmful ideologies circulated for a long time before they caught on and wreaked real-world harm. If we reserve the adjective 'ideological' only for beliefs already embedded in and negatively impacting the social world, then the very same beliefs would be non-ideological before they catch on and ideological after. This seems absurd. What's more, in our digital age it's increasingly important to detect ideological beliefs before they catch on, because once they spread, it's often too late to do anything about it (Del Vicario et al. 2016).

Finally, while we appreciate the emphasis these views place on the emergence of ideologies from social conditions and practices, we think they fail to do justice to the fact that things often move in the other direction. Merleau-Ponty's (2012) classic quip comes to mind here: 'As Marx said, history does not walk on its head; but neither does it think with its feet' (p. xxxiii). We have no doubt that many ideologies emerge from material conditions, and that we can sometimes hope to comprehend, at least in broad outlines, the logic of that emergence. But we also think that our ideas and beliefs shape our practices, institutions, and social conditions. Any adequate account of ideology must appreciate this bi-directional dynamic between mind and world and back again.

As signalled in the introduction, we believe that such an account can benefit greatly from engaging with existential phenomenology. In the next two sections, we try to develop an existential-phenomenological account of ideology that accommodates the challengers' valuable insights, while overcoming what we see as the weaknesses of their views.

## Ideology targets our normative competence

To avoid misunderstandings, we open this section with a rough guide to some key terms.<sup>6</sup> First, we use the term 'normative' in a wide sense to mean, roughly, assessable in light of a standard of success. If we can fail to  $\phi$  appropriately, then  $\phi$ -ing has a normative dimension in the intended sense.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, as this wide sense of normative implies, 'normative claims' here refer not just to moral claims but rather to any claims that an agent experiences as demanding a good (or appropriate) response that she could in principle fail to answer well (or appropriately). Finally, the term 'normative competence' here denotes an agent's ability to make sense of and respond to the normative claims that impinge on her as an epistemic and practical agent.

On our account, ideology's primary target is the normative competence of agents. When we reflect on our everyday lives as agents in the world, we notice that we always find ourselves *en medias res*, situated in some normative-practical context, faced with the

possibility of action, while diverse normative claims impinge on us. Ideology targets our normative competence to influence how we respond to these claims.

In *Existential Flourishing*, Irene McMullin (2019) divides the normative claims that impinge on us into three domains: The first-person claims of the self, the second-person claims of the other, and the third-person claims of shared public norms. We largely agree with this breakdown, but we adapt it somewhat to suit our present purposes.

As we interpret her work, McMullin presents first- and second-person normative claims strictly in the singular case. First-person claims emanate from the self – its desires, aims, interests and so on – and second-person claims come in the form of the demands and expectations of concrete, particular others. What’s more, McMullin situates all plural claims – for example, claims made by the groups to which the agent belongs or does not belong – in the third-person domain of the shared world (2019, 56). While we find this approach attractive, we frame things slightly differently.

Namely, we think there are distinctly first-personal plural claims that we face in virtue of our sense of belonging to different groups (e.g. family, clan, and political group.); and there’s a distinctive set of second-person plural claims that groups we do not belong to make on us (e.g. vulnerable populations, opposing political parties, and interest groups.). What’s more, when it comes to third-person normative claims, we consider number irrelevant. That is, we see third-personal claims as *anonymous* – they are simply ‘out there’, coming from no one in particular. As agents, then, in any given context, we face normative me-claims, we-claims, thou-claims (in the singular and plural case), and they-claims.

To be clear here, we should roughly define these types of claims to better delineate their boundaries. A normative me-claim is a demand that I place myself under (or a reason I take myself to have), in virtue of what I think or feel I owe myself, often in relation to considerations about self-directed norms such as autonomy, authenticity, integrity, self-respect, self-esteem, and the like. A normative we-claim is a demand I take myself to be under (or a reason I take myself to have), in virtue of the groups I belong to and my sense of what I owe those groups, often in relation to considerations about prevailing social norms in those groups. A normative thou-claim is a demand laid upon me by either an individual person (singular) or a group of persons (plural), often in relation to considerations about ethical norms such as fairness and equality. Finally, normative they-claims are publicly shared normative epistemic and practical expectations that constitute a social sense of how one putatively ought to perceive, feel, think, and act across diverse circumstances.

When we act, we strike a balance between these claims that reflects our sense of what matters, though we mostly do so without explicitly considering which claims we have privileged and why. An agent’s normative competence, as we understand it, allows them to navigate these diverse claims.<sup>8</sup> In what follows, we focus on four core capacities that partly constitute our normative competence, namely, the capacity to recognize normative claims, the capacity to care, empathy, and judgement.

To be clear, we do not pretend to offer an exhaustive list of the constitutive features of normative competence here; what’s more, we acknowledge that our list is somewhat motley. Indeed, these four capacities are arguably not even on the same level, for example,

one might see empathy as a precondition for recognizing normative claims. Why, then, do we focus on these four? We made the choice pragmatically to highlight certain ways that ideology attacks our normative competence. Assuredly, it targets other aspects of our normative competence too, and we hope other authors explore how it does so.

To begin with the first capacity, to navigate a practical context, an agent must possess a suite of normative sensitivities that allow her to reliably recognize the diverse normative claims at stake in that context, that is, sensitivities that allow her to recognize (i) her relevant first-personal aims and interests, (ii) the relevant aims and interests of the groups she identifies with, (iii) the relevant normative demands placed on her by specific others and (iv) particular social groups, and (v) the impersonal normative expectations currently at play. When I teach, for example, I need to be able to identify and keep track of (i) my pedagogical aims, (ii) what I take to be the aims of my department, (iii) the needs of my individual students and (iv) my class as a group, and (v) my sense of the prevailing normative expectations associated with teaching. If I cannot reliably recognize these claims, only luck would allow me to respond appropriately to the situation.

Mere recognition, however, is necessary but not sufficient for normative competence. I also need to be able to weigh competing normative claims against each other, often spontaneously, but sometimes deliberately. Weighing normative claims requires a non-cognitive endowment that enables such claims to matter to me – an affective dimension that registers their normative force. What's more, to find that one claim outweighs another, this affective dimension must register normative force differentially. The capacity to care underwrites these agential powers.<sup>9</sup> Caring ties my fate to the people and things that matter to me: If I care about something, I flourish or flounder as it does. This does not mean that I do not care about things for their own sake. It means, rather, that cares are reflexive: My own flourishing partly hangs on how well the people and things I care about fare. This implies an equivalence relation: What I care about is what I take to matter and vice versa. Finally, the degree to which I care about things determines how much they matter to me. My cares play an important role, then, in allowing me to weigh different claims against each other and to prioritize some over others. To be clear, I can recognize normative claims in a practical context without caring about them, for example, I can recognize that social status functions as an important normative claim for some people in certain contexts while that claim carries little normative force for me. Thus, among the total set of normative claims that I recognize in some context, my cares determine which of them weigh with me and how much.

The fact that we can recognize normative claims (like social status) as paramount to others but insignificant to ourselves highlights one of the crucial roles that empathy plays in our assessment of normative claims. Here we understand empathy as a capacity to enter into what [Maibom \(2022\)](#) calls the 'space between' self and other, by using one's first-person perspective as a basis for imagining or intuiting another's point of view. Without empathy, we would be blind to normative claims that matter to others but make no claim on us. To be clear, this does not mean that we necessarily assign such claims weight in our deliberations. Empathy allows us to see normative claims, to varying degrees, as others see them. More specifically, it allows us to see – again, to varying degrees – *that, how* and *how much* something matters to someone else. Whether what matters to others takes on



weight in our deliberations, however, hangs on whether (a) we come to care about it too, (b) we care about the fact that someone else cares about it, or (c) some combination of (a) and (b). Empathy allows us to bring the cares of others into view.

Finally, to reach a determination of the thing to do *now* in *this* context, in addition to the three capacities just described, we need judgement. Why? There are more reasons than we can enumerate here, so we focus on the three we consider most important for our purposes. First, even if I know which normative claims are at play and how much I think they matter, I still need to put that knowledge to work in my current circumstances. For example, say I sense, in the moment, that a student's need to discuss their problems trumps the other normative claims impinging on me; that does not mean that I know *how* to handle that conversation. What, if anything, would help *this* person work through *their* problems in *this* situation? And how can I do what needs to be done without losing track of other important claims? Answering these questions requires situation-sensitive practical judgement. Secondly, as we saw above, many of the third-personal claims we face take the form of norms, rules, principles and so on. But when it comes to determining the thing to do *now* in *this* context, it's not enough to simply sense which norm or rule is relevant – I also need to know how to apply that norm or rule to *these* circumstances. Rules, after all, are not self-interpreting, and, as Wittgenstein famously argues, we cannot rely on further rules to interpret them, because if you need a rule to interpret a rule, you need an infinite series of rules just to follow one. What we need, then, is a kind of discernment that allows us to apply abstract rules to determinate situations. Judgement does this work too – it settles on the thing to do, given the specifics of the normative-practical context. Finally, when it comes to competing normative claims, we often find no clear winner. I care about my family and my work; my spouse and my employer both make valid claims on me; and which one demands a response *now* isn't always straightforward. When such claims face me with comparable force, I must adjudicate the tension, while keeping an eye on other claims at stake in the situation. This takes judgement. In sum, judgement allows us to determine the thing to do by applying our stance on the relevant normative claims to a specific situation.

To troubleshoot a potential confusion: We do not mean to equate judgement with reflective deliberation. In fact, we understand judgement as first and foremost a spontaneous skilful know-how that allows us to do the work described above without reflection. When necessary, however, we also rely on judgement to engage in explicit deliberative reflection about how best to satisfy the normative claims at play in a situation. Finally, judgement also determines when such explicit deliberation is the thing to do.

### *What ideology is*

Now that we have ideology's target in view, we can shift to the crucial ontological question: What is ideology such that it can so effectively target our normative competence? To this we answer: Ideology consists of a set of modes of being-with selected to exert normative pressure on the various elements of our normative competence. This answer needs some unpacking.

By ‘exert normative pressure’, we have in mind the endeavour to influence the stance that another agent takes on their normative-practical context, that is, to make them feel, see, and/or understand the force of certain normative claims as you intend for them to feel, see, and/or understand that force. We derive the term normative pressure from the more familiar ideas of peer pressure and social pressure. Agents bring peer pressure and social pressure to bear on other people in order to bring their behaviour in line with group norms. As we intend the term, agents exert normative pressure on other people in order to change their normative stance on some normative-practical context.<sup>10</sup> Thus understood, normative pressure is clearly a ubiquitous phenomenon that takes countless forms, as trying to get other people to change their minds is a core feature of human life.

The term ‘mode of being-with’ also requires elaboration. ‘Being-with’ (or *Mitsein*) is one of Heidegger’s terms of art in *Being and Time* (1927, §26), and we intend the term here in the sense that we take him to use it there. To put our hermeneutic cards on the table, we read Heidegger as a transcendental phenomenologist in the sense explored in the essays edited by [Crowell and Malpas \(2007\)](#) and more recently by [Burch and McMullin \(2020\)](#); and we understand phenomenology – in the sense developed by [Crowell \(2001, 2013\)](#) and elaborated by several of the essays in [Burch et al. \(2019\)](#) – as a reflective method that studies the normatively structured space of meaning in which we dwell and the structures of subjectivity that enable us to constitute (or make sense of) that space of meaning. On this interpretation of his work, Heidegger reflects on experience from the first-person perspective to identify ‘existentials’ – that is, the constitutive features of subjectivity – and their ‘modes’ – that is, the different ways those existentials manifest across individuals and populations ([Fernandez 2017](#)). Being-with, for Heidegger, is an existential – a constitutive feature of all meaningful experience like our own – which means that all experience has an ineliminably social dimension. What’s the basis for this claim?

For Heidegger, each of us acquires the kind of normative competence described above by learning how to participate in social practices. A social practice, roughly, is a set of purposive activities organized around a human interest (or interests) and structured by an open-ended set of publicly shared third-person normative expectations (or they-claims) that are at stake and recursively worked out in those activities. And, for Heidegger, our ability to experience any phenomenon *as* this or that determinate kind of phenomenon – that is, our ability to have any meaningful experience whatsoever – depends on our being socialized into such practices. Every item and every person at home, at work, in the world of leisure, and so on can only show up *as* this or that type of item or person in virtue of our mastery of shared norms of meaning-attribution that can only be acquired and deployed within the social practices that make up our world. Obviously, this is a major claim that we cannot fully defend here.<sup>11</sup> But at the same time, it’s a mainstay of 20th-century philosophy that all meaning is intrinsically social because meaning-attribution presupposes a standard of correctness which in turn presupposes a community of mutually accountable meaning-attributors. At any rate, for Heidegger, because all meaning is acquired and deployed within social practices, all intelligible experience contains at least a tacit pretheoretical reference to others. For instance, even my journaling alone in my room about my private phenomenal experiences situates me in relation to others through the

fundamentally shared (and so social) practice of journaling and through my sense that other appropriately socialized agents could in principle read it and know what I was up to as I wrote it. This is why Heidegger considers being-with an existential: ‘The world of Dasein is a *with-world* [*Mitwelt*]. Being-in is *Being-with* Others’ (Heidegger 1962, 155).

As an existential, being-with can manifest in myriad modes across individuals and populations. We define a ‘mode of being-with’ here as a normatively governed pattern of relating to others in which we recognize them, often tacitly and to varying degrees, as agents capable of reaching their own stance on the normative-practical context at hand. Modes of being-with are embedded in social practices in the sense that one can only deploy them if a community of participants familiar with the relevant normative expectations can recognize what you’re up to as a viable move in that practice. Take flirting with someone at a bar as an example. Flirting is a mode of being-with embedded in the social practices that structure the human pursuit of romantic partners. One can deploy this mode of being-with only if there exists a community of people who can see that, in most circumstances, offering to buy a stranger a drink is a flirtatious act, while pouring a drink over their head is not. What’s more, to deploy a mode of being-with competently, one must oneself be a member of that community of people who can reliably recognize viable moves and rule out non-starters. This means that to take up a mode of being-with, we ourselves and our activities must be embedded in socially shared webs of meaning. Only then will we possess the requisite skill, affective associations, and articulative capacities needed to respond sensitively to the normative expectations of the practice.

Before we explore how ideology consists of a set of modes of being-with selected to exert normative pressure, it would help to first consider an illustrative, non-exhaustive list of some standard modes of being-with that agents use to exert normative pressure, because ideology achieves its aims by exploiting these standard modes. Here’s the list:

- (a) Reason-giving: ‘Here are some good reasons to believe, value, or care about X’.<sup>12</sup>
- (b) Coercion by conditional threat: ‘Value X, or else!’
- (c) Lying/misinforming: P says, ‘These are good reasons to value X’; but P knows no such reasons obtain.
- (d) Bullshitting: P says, ‘These are good reasons to value X’; but P neither knows nor cares whether such reasons obtain.
- (e) Exaggerating: P says, ‘Here are strong reasons to value X’; but the reasons are weak.
- (f) Downplaying: P says, ‘Those are weak reasons to value X’; but the reasons are strong.
- (g) Distracting: P draws your attention away from X.
- (h) Selectively highlighting: ‘Look at these positive (or negative) aspects of X!’ [where doing so masks X’s negative (or positive) aspects].
- (i) Flooding: P produces a flood of information to drown out knowledge about X.
- (j) Impossibilizing: P says, ‘It’s impossible to protect X’; but the alleged impossibility is spurious or depends on a contingent status quo.

- (k) Inevitabilizing: P says, 'It's inevitable that X will (not) prevail'; but its alleged inevitability depends on a contingent status quo.
- (l) Passive aggression: 'Fine. I'll defend X all by myself'.
- (m) Emotional blackmail: 'If you cared about me (or us), you would care about X'.
- (n) Exemplification: 'I care about X. Be like me'.
- (o) Deference: 'You trust P, and she values X. You should value X too'.
- (p) Selective trust: 'Only this person (or group) is trustworthy. Trust no one else'.
- (q) Stigmatizing: 'Members of group G are depraved/lawless. Stand against G'.
- (r) Demonizing: 'Members of group G are evil. Stand against G'.
- (s) Norming: 'People around here do A. You should too' [where A bolsters or undermines some X].
- (t) Appealing to tradition: 'Our ancestors/forefathers valued X. You should too'.
- (u) Grandstanding: 'Caring about X reflects my profound moral goodness. Be like me'.
- (v) Outrage-stoking: 'It's outrageous that anyone would not care about X!'
- (w) Disgust-mongering: 'X is disgusting! You should hate it'.
- (x) Desire-inflaming: 'X is desirable! You should want it'.
- (y) Scripting: 'In contexts like C, one should say S and/or do A' [where S&A bolster or undermine some X].
- (z) Valorizing gut reactions: 'Regarding X, always trust you gut!'

Notice four things about this list. First, these modes of being-with all have affective, skilful, and articulative dimensions. Characteristic moods and feelings associate with them and play an integral role in making them effective. For example, if your addressee fails to feel your passive aggressive resentment or your hateful disgust, (l) and (w) are unlikely to work. What's more, we can deploy each mode with varying degrees of skill, and our skill tends to improve with practice. Bullshitting, for example, is an art, and the best bullshitters display impressive skill at winning over audiences while saying nothing substantive. Finally, these modes of being-with always articulate – or make sense of – some normative-practical context in a determinate way. This can be done through actions, gestures, discourse, or some combination of the three. What's more, the discourse can be speech in embodied face-to-face encounters, but it's also frequently writing and broadcasting that addresses an absent other. Either way, the modes of being-with used to exert normative pressure are intrinsically aimed at others and they exhibit affective, skilful, and articulative dimensions.

The second thing to highlight about these modes of being-with is that although we sometimes reflectively choose to use them, we most often deploy them in unplanned pre-reflective intentional action (Burch 2018). This point is crucial, because we want to maintain that ideology, although sometimes deliberately deployed, most often spreads through social learning and the pre-reflective use of these modes of being-with.

Thirdly, these modes of exerting normative pressure vary in their degree of intrinsic rationality. Reason-giving is paradigmatically rational, aiming to create normative pressure with nothing but a clear view of relevant first-order reasons, that is, considerations that bear directly on endorsing or rejecting X. Coercion by conditional threat, on

the other hand, is intrinsically irrational – it has no bearing on the value of X but rather mobilizes my fear to force me to act as if I value X. For instance, Vito Corleone’s threat to break my kneecaps has no rational bearing on my moral assessment of his racketeering, but it could easily influence my normative stance on the matter.

Finally, many of these modes of being-with exert normative pressure via second-order means, that is, rather than offering first-order reasons, they *indirectly* calibrate our normative competence to such reasons. In a word, they require the other to trust someone without ever receiving relevant first-order reasons. For example, take o) deference: When a doctor exhorts me to get more exercise, I take their advice not because they directly furnish me with first-order scientific evidence but rather because I trust that their advice is based on such evidence; thus, I assume (often rightly) that their exhortation *indirectly* calibrates my normative competence to relevant first-order reasons for exercising, without me having to critically assess these first-order reasons myself. In our approach to these modes that exert normative pressure by second-order means, we take inspiration from Neil Levy’s (2021) social epistemological analysis of knowledge. Drawing heavily on the ‘Californian School’s’ (Sterelny 2017)<sup>13</sup> account of cultural evolution, Levy starts from the premise that human knowledge is socially distributed and vastly complex – too complex for any individual to hope to master more than a fraction of it. But this limitation on individual cognition, he argues, is not a bug but a feature: By storing our knowledge in the wider community and on external information technologies, we can access shared epistemic resources whenever we need them, without the burden of carrying them in our heads; what’s more, through the so-called ‘ratchet effect’, we can build on past epistemic achievements, often without even understanding them ourselves. Levy argues that two major ways we access shared cultural knowledge is through social reference and deference. When trying to figure something out, we *refer* to people like us and consider/ask what they think, because we see them as less likely to exploit us and more likely to share our interests; and we *defer* to people who seem better informed than we are on certain topics, because we think them better placed to answer questions about those topics.<sup>14</sup> ‘Doing so is rational’, Levy argues, because it’s ‘a mechanism for calibrating belief to evidence, albeit indirectly’ (2021, 83). We agree with Levy here. Under normal circumstances, it’s rational to be guided by trust in this way, because we cannot know everything on our own, and trusting others reliably calibrates our normative competence to first-order reasons. But, as Levy points out, and as we’ll soon discuss, this intellectual dependence on others makes us vulnerable.

Let’s turn now to the peculiar way ideology deploys the modes of being-with listed above. That peculiarity best comes into view when we contrast it with reason-giving. The latter, as we said, is the paradigmatically rational mode of being-with that we use to exert normative pressure because, in its ideal form,<sup>15</sup> it aims to get the matter under discussion right and to influence others with nothing but good reasons, inviting one’s audience to make up their own mind. The pursuit of good reasons alone drives the process.

Ideology, on the other hand, deploys modes of being-with that exert normative pressure without offering much, if any, substantive rational content. Ideology is ‘peculiar’ because it masquerades as rational discourse while it in fact involves little genuine reason-giving. Like many traditional accounts, then, our approach maintains that ideology differs

from philosophy and science in that it serves no genuine ‘cognitive purposes’ (Seliger 2019 [1976], 14). The pursuit of normative influence alone drives the process.

We can divide the modes of being-with that ideology uses into two main types. The first type deploys modes of being-with that exert normative pressure by distorting, misrepresenting, and/or obscuring the first-order reasons that count in favour of desiring, believing, valuing, or caring about some X. These modes of being-with seek to influence the normative stance of others by offering a false and/or warped impression of the normative-practical context. As a shorthand, from here on we will refer to these as Type 1 modes. The second type exploits our aforementioned dependence on others by using modes of being-with that exert normative pressure not by adducing first-order reasons but rather by harnessing the power of trust – they ask (or demand) the addressee to trust the speaker and/or some person or group endorsed by the speaker – but what they say (or write) cannot in fact be backed by much (or sometimes any) substantive rational content. In other words, this second type exploits our intellectual dependence on others, and by trusting them we fail to calibrate our normative competence to relevant first-order reasons. We will call these Type 2 modes.

To be clear, type 1 modes are called such because they operate on the level of *first-order* reasons; specifically, they offer spurious or misleading first-order reasons and tend to draw our attention away from relevant first-order reasons. And type 2 modes have the *second-order* character described above in our discussion of Levy (2021), that is, they make no first-order claims but rather demand our trust on the pretence that they *indirectly* calibrate our normative competence to such claims.

Type 1 modes are easier to spot and explain. When deploying these ideological modes of being-with, the agent affects the rhetoric, tone, posture, and atmosphere of reasoning, while they are in fact exerting normative pressure by distorting the normative-practical context. We think modes c)-k) belong to Type 1 (though there are surely others that didn’t make our list).<sup>16</sup> Type 1 modes aim to exert normative pressure not by offering a clear view of the relevant first-order reasons but rather by distorting or obscuring them.

Type 2 modes are more insidious. Although, as we saw, it’s rational to be guided by second-order evidence, our need to take so much on trust leaves us vulnerable to manipulation. Type 2 modes exploit this vulnerability by requesting (or demanding) our trust on the pretence that what they say (or write) could in principle be traced back to relevant first-order reasons, when they are in fact backed up by little to no rational content. We think modes (l)-(z) belong to Type 2 (though, again, there are surely more). The key to the modes in this category is that they rely not on adducing spurious reasons but rather on winning the trust (or allegiance) of their audience. With this trust won, people who deploy Type 2 modes of being-with can get others to take up a normative stance that is not – and never could be – backed by first-order reasons, without having to provide any reasons themselves. What’s more, countering Type 2 modes with a clear view of relevant first-order reasons is unlikely to work. If the people you hope to influence trust someone who tells them not to trust opposing viewpoints, then they will be poised to reject any counterevidence you adduce as suspect and spurious. In Nguyen’s (2020) terms, Type 2 modes place their targets in a kind of ‘echo chamber’, wherein information from

alternative sources shows up as fundamentally untrustworthy. In this way, Type 2 modes contribute massively to what Levy aptly calls ‘epistemic pollution’ (2021, p. 112).

Ideology, however, is not just a set of Type 1 and Type 2 modes of being-with that exert normative pressure by providing a false or distorted picture of a normative-practical context. After all, sophists, con-artists, and charlatans do similar things without necessarily trafficking in ideology. Ideology’s distinctive mark is its *political* character – political groups use diverse modes of being-with to foster conformity among their members, recruit new members and neutralize rivals by shaping their normative stance, that is, by getting people to endorse beliefs, behaviours, principles, habits, practices, social arrangements, laws, institutions, and so on, that play to some group’s political advantage. To offer a more complete definition, ideology consists of normatively misleading Type 1 and Type 2 modes of being-with deployed under the guise of reason to promote a normative stance that benefits some political group.

### *A closer look: Attacks on four fronts*

Ideological modes of being-with attack our normative competence on at least four fronts, that is, our capacities (i) to recognize normative claims, (ii) to care, (iii) to empathize, and (iv) to exercise judgement. Due to the linear form of the essay, we consider how it targets each element in turn. In experience, however, it targets all four at once, in mutually reinforcing ways.

*The capacity to recognize normative claims.* To respond well to normative claims, we first need to recognize them. Ideology can shape the normative stance we take, then, by partially or totally (a) obscuring, (b) blinding us to, or (c) getting us to misrecognize normative claims. Here are some examples of different ideological modes of being-with deployed to this end:

- (a) Me-claims: According to Jane Mansbridge, ‘oppositional consciousness’ begins with ‘a gut refusal to be subordinated’ (2001, 4).<sup>17</sup> Given the importance of such first-person claims for liberation movements, ideologies try to quash them. For example, for women’s liberation movements to get off the ground, individual women need to see this gut refusal for what it is; thus, patriarchal ideology aims to get women to misrecognize it. Among the normatively misleading modes of being-with it uses to this end, we mention two. First, patriarchal ideology t) appeals to tradition: ‘Did generations of mothers waste their lives? Did your mother waste her life, raising you?’ This move might then be reinforced by traditional religious texts, for example, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, which tells us that ‘Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord’ (Eph. 5:22, NABRE). Secondly, appeals to tradition are bolstered by s) norming: ‘Why can’t you be like the other girls? You don’t hear them complaining’. In the terms explained above, these are Type 2 modes: Traditional practices and social norms are repositories of cultural knowledge and wisdom; but in these cases, the appeals to tradition cannot be backed by first-order reasons. They amount to normatively

vacuous ideological posturing that encourages women to see their gut refusals as evidence not of injustice but of their own corruption.

- (b) We-claims: Liberation movements also depend on people recognizing valid we-claims. For example, the Black community's recognition of their entitlement to equal normative standing helped fuel the Civil Rights Movement. As part of a countermovement, anti-Black ideology sought to obscure that we-claim by, among other things, (c) spreading misinformation and (d) bullshitting. Some of the bullshit in this case consisted of pseudo-scientific theories based not on empirical evidence but on epistemically insouciant speculation.<sup>18</sup> These theories promoted a picture wherein Black people simply were not on equal standing with 'superior races', which were then reinforced by the spread of lies and misinformation, for example, claims that Black US-Americans landed in ghettos and remained in poverty due to natural tendencies and poor choices, rather than as a downstream consequence of slavery, segregation, redlining, mass incarceration, and so on. Thus, anti-Black ideology used Type 1 modes to imbue Black citizens with an 'inferiority complex' (Fanon 2017) and so blind them to the valid we-claim at the heart of their liberation movement; at the same time these ideological modes generated and reinforced the superiority complex of the people who 'believed they were white' (Baldwin 2011).
- (c) Thou-claims: Xenophobic ideology (q) stigmatizes and (r) demonizes specific ethnic groups, and the persistent exposure to trusted individuals claiming that these groups are damaged, deprived, lawless, subhuman, and downright evil renders many blind to the harms these groups suffer and deaf to their legitimate demands for better treatment. Of course, these Type 2 ideological modes are often mixed with Type 1 modes that distort the relevant first-order evidence about these groups to reinforce the same normative stance taken on trust.
- (d) They-claims: Say a politician violates the norms of their office. In the wake of their offence, partisan media hacks can rely on the Type 2 modes of (p) selective trust to maintain group coherence and neutralize external criticism, because members who only trust their own group will remain effectively blind to the third-personal normative claims raised by external critics. What's more, the group can further obscure these claims with the Type 1 modes of (f) downplaying, (g) distracting, (h) selective highlighting, and (i) flooding, ensuring that group members attend to other issues, or remain generally overwhelmed, until the public outcry dissipates.

These examples illustrate the basic idea: Ideological modes of being-with obscure, blind us to, mislead us about, and get us to misrecognize normative claims.

*The capacity to care.* Recall that our cares shape what matters to us and how much. Thus, even if we recognize normative claims, ideology can still intensify (or attenuate) their normative force by affecting how much we care about them, thereby influencing our normative stance. Once more we proceed by way of examples:



- (a) Me-claims: Ideology that promotes laissez-faire capitalism intensifies ordinary desires for consumer products to unreasonable degrees. It does so in part by means of (x) desire-inflaming: Marketing campaigns for commodities that satisfy a need or desire by gratuitous, excessive means present those commodities as hyper-desirable by associating them, in Type 2 style, with images of sexy, cool, rich and/or beautiful people. Such campaigns also often rely on the Type 2 mode of (n) exemplification: enlisting celebrities, as exemplars of ideal lifestyles, to vouch for the product's value. Finally, perhaps the most powerful ideological mode deployed to inflame consumer desire is (s) norming: As economists like Robert Frank (2021) have shown, the greatest determinant of what people buy is what their actual (or aspirational) peers buy. These Type 2 modes once again exploit our tendency to trust that the views of others tune our normative competence to what matters.
- (b) We-claims: Nationalist ideology – like the ‘America First’ discourse – foments an intense we-claim among certain members of the national polity. Ideological Type 1 modes used here include: (e) Exaggerating – ‘They’re taking all our jobs!’; and (f) downplaying – ‘Migrant workers have it easy. They pay no taxes, but they soak up public services!’ Type 2 modes like (u) grandstanding also come into play – ‘I will not stand for this flagrant violation of the Constitution!’ These modes ape rational discourse but in fact border on being normatively vacuous.
- (c) Thou-claims: Many ideological modes of being-with are ‘designed’ to diminish how much we care about the demands for respect of certain individuals and groups. For instance, (o) deference is used to generate suspicion and mistrust of immigrants, for example, ‘They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. [Trust me.]’<sup>19</sup> Another well-worn Type 2 mode used for this purpose is (w) disgust-mongering, for example, using terminology associated with vermin to describe immigrants encourages readers and viewers to see them as disgusting and subhuman. Finally, people inflame anti-immigrant sentiment by (v) stoking outrage in their audience with anecdotes that (h) selectively highlight bad actors, while they (f) downplay the significant positive economic and social contributions that migrant workers and immigrants make.
- (d) They-claims: Managers deploy bureaucratic ideology to enhance the force of their normative expectations. For example, say you are a university professor, and management expects you to spend 10 hours writing a report that no one will ever read, and they act as if an ideal of professional integrity imposes a demand on you to write it. They might enhance the force of that normative expectation by means of (l) passive aggression from a line manager – ‘Fine! I’ll do it myself!’, (m) emotional blackmail – ‘Don’t you care about the team? If you don’t do it, someone else will have to’, or (k) inevitabilizing – ‘This part of the job will never go away, so you might as well step in line’. None of these warrants the alleged link between writing the report and your professional integrity, but each one will likely increase the normative pressure you feel to write it.

*Empathy.* Given its central role in our assessment of what we have reason to do, many ideological modes of being-with target empathy. This is obvious in the case of thou-claims. Empathy allows us to see *that*, *how*, and *how much* something matters to someone else. So, ideological modes that obscure, blind us to, or get us to misrecognize thou-claims try to target our empathic powers and thereby prevent us from being able to put ourselves in the shoes of others. All of the examples in ((i)c) and ((ii)c) can be seen in this light – the ideological modes we mentioned there aim to diminish our ability to empathize with certain individuals or groups. Similarly, ideological modes that aim to affect how sensitive we are to thou-claims will try to enhance or attenuate the degree to which we can put ourselves in the shoes of others. Consider the asymmetries in reporting on the US crack cocaine epidemic in the 1980s and the more recent and ongoing opioid epidemic (Shachar et al. 2020). Reports on the crack cocaine epidemic, which principally impacted urban Black communities, tended to (q) stigmatize and (r) demonize users by framing their conduct in criminal and moral terms, whereas reports on the opioid epidemic, which predominately impacted rural white communities, tended to (v) stoke outrage over the shady conduct of pharmaceutical companies and to (h) selectively highlight sad stories about ‘normal people’ who fell into a pattern of addiction. In this case, then, we see ideological modes of being-with shaping their audiences’ sensitivities (in opposing directions) to affect the normative force of thou-claims from different demographics.

But it’s important to note that empathy plays a role in our experience of the other claims as well. To see a we-claim and feel its force, for example, we often need to see and feel the claims that other members of our group want to make on us from their perspective, and empathy makes that possible. Likewise, many third-personal expectations involve putting ourselves in the place of others to see the value of a pro-social normative expectation or the disvalue of an anti-social one. Finally, modes of being-with that aim to enhance or attenuate first-person claims often involve attenuating or enhancing our ability to put ourselves in the shoes of others, for example, (x) desire-inflaming keeps us focused on ourselves rather than others who might benefit from us sharing our wealth, rather than spending it on gratuitous luxuries. In a word, most ideological modes of being-with directly or indirectly target empathy.<sup>20</sup>

*Judgement.* Since all ideology ultimately aims to get agents to do whatever benefits some group, and judgement, as we understand it, determines what agents do, it’s fair to say that all ideology targets judgement to some extent. It does so indirectly by affecting the contents that judgement works with and directly by impacting the judgement-formation process itself.

Everything discussed thus far in this section has highlighted how ideology indirectly targets judgement. As we said above, judgement allows us to determine the thing to do by applying our stance on the relevant normative claims to a specific situation; thus, ideological modes of being-with that affect our stance on the relevant normative claims – that is, modes that affect which normative claims we recognize, how much we care about those claims, and our ability to put ourselves in others’ shoes – will also indirectly affect our judgement about the thing to do.

Some ideological modes of being-with, however, directly target the judgement-formation process itself. For instance, among these modes we find (s) norming, (y) scripting, and (z) valorizing gut reactions. These directly target judgement in the sense that they encourage agents to bypass the process of weighing all the relevant reasons and to produce a thin-slicing, snap judgement when a thick, all-things-considered judgement is called for. To be clear, we're not saying thin-slicing judgements are intrinsically irrational; when pressed for time, a snap judgement based on a conventional norm, script, or gut reaction is often the best we can do, while dithering and pursuing more evidence can be disastrous. However, these go-with-the-flow, thought-stopping strategies can be contextually irrational. For instance, ideological modes of (s) norming, (y) scripting, and (z) valorizing gut reactions can be used to reinforce systemic forms of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007). To give just one example: One of us knows a female auto-mechanic who tells us that men regularly leave her shop upon realizing that its lead mechanic is a woman. In this way, ideologically informed norms, scripts, and gut reactions motivate unwarranted snap judgements that might be corrected with a little reflection. As we said earlier, judgement not only determines the thing to do; it also determines when explicit deliberative reflection is the thing to do. Certain ideological modes target that ability, encouraging us to eschew all but the most superficial reflection.

Of course, ideology also deploys strategies that work in the opposite direction, sowing seeds of uncertainty and ambiguity in situations where the right thing to do is clear-cut. Take the consensus around the negative effects of smoking or anthropogenic climate change. The relevant epistemic authorities will tell you that there's no good reason to doubt either consensus; 'merchants of doubt' (Oreskes and Conway 2011), however, deploy ideological modes of (f) downplaying, (i) flooding, (o) deference, (p) selective highlighting, and so on to make people feel as if there's room for reasonable disagreement about these things.

In sum, ideology fosters internal coherence among group members, recruits new members, and neutralizes internal and external critics by targeting all four dimensions of our normative competence with ideological modes of being-with.

## Situating our view

In this section, we aim to show that our view can incorporate the strengths of both the dominant cognitivist approach to ideology and the challengers' more social conception of ideology, while overcoming their respective weaknesses.

We begin with the challengers' insights. Their views emphasize that ideologies often emerge from social practices and thus they insist that ideology critique must interrogate not only beliefs but also their material social conditions. Our view is fundamentally compatible with these insights. Ideological modes of being-with are deeply embedded in social practices; indeed, they can only be deployed in a community of participants familiar with the relevant normative expectations. Ideological modes cannot be deployed without agents, and agents cannot deploy them outside a normatively structured social practice. Any ideology critique that ignores social practices and their material conditions would thus be incomplete.

What's more, our view can also account for what the challengers see as the main harms inflicted by ideology. Among the challengers, Celikates and Haslanger offer the most developed accounts of these harms. For Celikates, ideology is bad because it blocks the development and exercise of agents' reflexive capacities; and our view clearly shows how ideology does this – by targeting our normative competence it renders us less capable of effectively processing relevant first- and second-order reasons in our theoretical and practical reasoning. For Haslanger, ideology is bad because it organizes us in ways that perpetrate and perpetuate social injustice. Our view accounts for this harm too – as our examples show, ideology's tendency to distort normative claims frequently results in and reinforces social injustice. The benefit of our view, however, is that it can account for both types of harm (and others) without insisting that something only rises to level of ideology once it inflicts significant social harm. An ineffectual ideological mode is ideological all the same, a point we return to below.

What about the challengers' weaknesses? The first weakness we identified is a relative loss of theoretical simplicity compared to the dominant cognitivist approach. The latter approach argues that ideology consists of ideas and beliefs that warp our view of the world; and the challengers maintain that it consists of a much more complex, diverse array of seemingly very different things, for example, beliefs *and* social practices, symbolic orders, *and* social conditions, and so on. Our view mirrors the ontological simplicity of the dominant approach with the claim that ideology consist of modes of being-with. Thus, on our view, ideology does not consist of a motley mix of radically disparate things but rather a single ontological kind. (Of course, we do say that practices and beliefs can be *ideological*, but that's not the same as claiming that ideology *consists of* these things. We return to this point below).

We further said that the appeal of the dominant approach lies not only in its clarity vis-à-vis what ideology is but also in the fact that it clearly tells us what makes ideology bad. We think our view manages this too. We argue that ideological modes of being-with masquerade as reason-giving when they in fact exert unwarranted (or misleading) normative pressure; and we see this deceptive, distorting character as the core badness of ideology from which the knock-on harms of damaged reflexive capacities, social injustice, and other pathologies flow. On our view, then, all ideology is bad, even if it has no real-world impact, because it masquerades as reason-giving when it in fact exerts unwarranted (or misleading) normative pressure.

It follows from this that our view also avoids the second weakness we identified, that is, it does not try to have it both ways by declaring that ideology consists of ideas and beliefs while also denying that claim. We maintain that ideology consists of one kind of thing, namely, modes of being-with. But does this amount to another problem, namely, that we lose the ability to talk about ideological beliefs, habituses, social practices, institutional structures, and so on?

No. On our view, though we can no longer equate ideology with anything on this list, we can still use the adjective 'ideological' to modify these nouns to the extent that they flow downstream from ideological modes of being-with. Take the racist we mentioned earlier who is on his own entertaining the proposition that his race is the best race. That belief – understood here as a representational mental stance about some aspect of the

world – still counts as an ideological belief, on our view, if it's the downstream consequence of ideology in our sense, for example, if he acquired the belief via ideological modes of being-with like (c) spreading misinformation and (d) bullshitting. Indeed, we think that deploying such ideological modes of being-with will typically give rise to related beliefs. It's unusual, after all, for someone to spread racist bullshit without having any accompanying racist beliefs. Of course, it's not unheard of, for example, sometimes people spread bullshit instrumentally to serve the interests of some group. Similarly, on our view it makes sense to refer to aspects of social practices as ideological insofar as they derive from or facilitate the deployment of ideological modes of being-with. Thus, our view preserves something like the ontological simplicity of the dominant approach, but it also allows us to characterize a variety of things as ideological in a way that brings us closer to the challengers' views.

This leads directly to how we overcome the third weakness, namely, the mistaken assumption that a belief only qualifies as ideological if it has already caused significant harm. On our view, a belief qualifies as ideological if it is a downstream consequence of ideological modes of being-with; and such beliefs can arise well before the relevant mode of being-with does any measurable harm. It still counts as ideological because it flows from ideology's attacks on our normative competence.

Finally, we noted that while the challengers' views make headway by capturing the way ideological beliefs tend to arise from social conditions, we think they fail to capture the fact that things also move in the other direction. Our view, we think, can make sense of this too. In a word, the normative stances spread by ideology are progressively entrenched and reinforced by the connected processes of the institutionalization of ideological social practices and the internalization of the identities promoted by these practices.

Regarding the former, there are many mechanisms through which ideologically motivated normative commitments get *institutionalized* over time.<sup>21</sup> To name just two: Constitutions can be ratified, and laws can be formally passed that embody the normative orientation promoted by ideological modes of being-with. More fundamental, however, are informal social rules that set the stage for interactions between individuals that grow up around and partially constitute the normative stances shaped by ideology. For instance, ideological modes of being-with often promote norms for 'appropriate' behaviour that become deep conventions, entrenched in everyday practices, structuring our face-to-face encounters, conversations, debates, collaborations and conflicts in ways that systematically benefit one group over another, for example, consider traditional norms that encourage women to defer to male authority in any exchange of opinions. What's more, ideology can even embed discriminatory norms for how ideological modes of being-with themselves get deployed, such that the social group one belongs to determines the scope of their possibilities for wielding them. For instance, in certain contexts, a Black person may be expected to supply substantial evidence to defend their position (and *even then* enjoys no guarantee of suitable epistemic credibility), while a white person can more safely indulge in (q) stigmatizing, (r) demonizing, and (d) bullshitting without facing repercussions (Rautenberg 2023). Thus, via institutionalization, ideology entrenches the normative stances spread by ideological modes of being-with in our everyday social practices.

Of course, these entrenched normative stances also tend to travel back from the world into individual agents as they are socialized, from the beginning of their lives, into these practices, learning how to deploy the relevant modes of being-with, including ideological modes. In other words, through consistent engagement with a social world that embodies a normative stance spread by ideological modes of being-with, individuals *internalize* that stance – a process that begins long before we’re ready to understand its implications. People tend to acquire modes of being-with that align with the social framework in which they find themselves; insofar as ideological modes shape that framework, then, they also shape the possibilities for being a self that are available to agents within that framework. This is not to say that internalization rules out critical distance from the social order; the highly stylized thought experiment of the ‘happy slave’ is just that: a fiction (Celikates 2018). Nonetheless, persistent exposure to an ideology-driven normative stance shapes a person’s self-understanding. Ideology, in that sense, no longer comes purely ‘from the outside’.

But the feedback loop doesn’t stop here because internalization in turn affects the social world. When taking on an ideological identity, we take up and subsequently employ Type 1 and Type 2 ideological modes of being-with. That is, we engage in the processes of exerting normative pressure on others. In doing so, however, we also understand ourselves as behaving in ways that are appropriate or even called for. For instance, when (t) appealing to a ‘Confederate heritage’, a US-Southerner understands themselves as upholding and carrying on indispensable values passed on from their ancestors. In other words, they constitute their actions and the background of socially shared meanings and practices enabling them as legitimate. This affects institutionalization, for ideological modes of being-with can only be entrenched and upheld when those who are ‘supposed’ to take them up continuously disclose them as ‘the thing to do’. Thus, the ideological agent takes part in the ongoing institutionalization of ideology as a legitimate social order. And in turn internalization ‘recruits’ new members born or migrating into that social order and bolsters the ideological identity of those already socialized accordingly.

In sum, ideology exhibits a dynamic bi-directional flow from world-to-agent and agent-to-world. Ideological modes of being-with are always already embedded in the social world; when deployed, they affect the stance agents take on their normative-practical context and they also place constraints on what agents see as viable possible ways of being a self in a way that serves the interests of different political groups (world-to-agent). What’s more, by deploying and internalizing ideological modes of being-with, agents spread normative orientations and entrench them in the social order (agent-to-world). In this ongoing cycle, institutionalization and internalization constantly reinforce each other, mediated by agents who deploy – and are targeted by – ideological modes of being-with.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article, we introduced an existential-phenomenological model that understands ideology as a set of modes of being-with that exert unwarranted (or misleading) normative pressure on others to bring them closer to the normative stance endorsed by some political

group, distinguishing between Type 1 and Type 2 ideological modes. We argued that this account preserves the best insights from the dominant cognitivist approach and the more recent, socially oriented challengers to the dominant approach.

We appreciate that our account must be able to respond to a series of relevant challenges regarding ideology analysis and critique. Three problems seem particularly pressing: (i) Does our locating the badness of ideology in normatively suspect modes of being-with commit us to a problematic form of normative realism (the meta-normative challenge)?<sup>23</sup> (ii) Does our view border on a conspiracy theory that thinks ideology ‘is everywhere’ (the paranoia challenge)? Finally, (iii) do we arrogate an epistemically privileged perspective that allows us to ‘know better’ than ‘the stupid masses’ (the halitosis challenge)?<sup>24</sup>

Regarding the meta-normative challenge, we agree with Celikates (2018) that ideology critique is largely a second-order practice that aims to reveal problematic modes of relating to others; but we also agree with Haslanger (2017) that the critic need not shy away from certain first-order normative claims, for example, that slavery is wrong.

When it comes to the paranoia challenge, our approach in a way counteracts conspiracy theories, as our descriptions of the bi-directional process of institutionalization and internalization explains why there is no need for an evil, global elite pulling the strings behind the curtains of the world stage (paranoia challenge). Since the internalization of ideological ways of being-with is simply part of the socialization process, we always already take part in ideology.

Finally, we want to close with a couple remarks on the halitosis challenge. We in no way claim to occupy a privileged epistemic position vis-à-vis ideology. Indeed, our view implies that we are all of us entangled in and prone to deploy ideological modes of being-with. Given the ubiquity of such blind spots, we think that a model like ours needs to engage with the empirical social sciences and critical-theoretical approaches to show in more detail how ideology affects our normative competence.<sup>25</sup> What’s more, it needs to engage directly and broadly with the agents it talks about. We agree with Celikates (2018) that we can especially learn from the emancipatory movements of marginalized groups who are disproportionately impacted by ideology’s negative effects. Engaging with their ideas and practices, we think, can help tune us into the excess in our experience where ideology’s ordering power reaches its limits (Merleau-Ponty 1968; Waldenfels 2011).

We know that each of these replies needs further explication, but we will have to leave that work for another occasion.

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## Notes

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2. Here we use critical theory as an umbrella term uniting diverse schools of thought such as Marxism, the Frankfurt School, Foucauldian genealogy, feminism and critical race theory.
3. For example, see Merleau-Ponty's famous chapter on freedom in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012).
4. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a minor spike in activity in this regard (Bien 1982; Harvey 1990; Kisiel 1970; Marsh 1980; Ricœur 1977; for a more recent example, see Cameron 2006).
5. Unlike much of the work on ideology in the Frankfurt School tradition, our analysis here does not draw on psychoanalysis (e.g. Adorno [1951] 1977; Allen 2021; Celikates 2018; Habermas [1968] 1971; Honneth 2009). However, we are working on another article that explores how unconscious defence mechanisms interact with the ideological modes of being-with discussed below.
6. This is only a *rough* guide – we offer no Socratic definitions.
7. See Lavin (2004) for a rich characterization of sort of failure we have in mind.
8. Here we try to characterize what you might call the 'typical form' of human normative competence. We do not mean to suggest that all humans necessarily possess every dimension of normative competence as we describe it here; nor do we defend the view that it is 'normal' in some normatively significant sense.
9. Our use of the term care here broadly resonates with Heidegger's (1962) use of the term and Frankfurt's (1988) use of the term; but we do not assume our reader is familiar with either.
10. Although we cannot defend the claim here, we think of normative pressure as an umbrella term that encompasses phenomena like peer pressure and social pressure.
11. See Theunissen (1986), Olafson (1998) and McMullin (2013) for the richest expositions and elaborations of Heidegger's account of *Mitsein*.
12. In this list, X stands for anything someone might desire, believe, value or care about, for example, an object, commodity, belief, mental state, action, event, habit, norm, social arrangement, person, group, practice, institution, principle, law and so on.
13. For seminal Californian School texts, see Henrich (2016, 2020).
14. This holds not just in everyday life, Levy points out, but also at the highest levels of science. Scientists depend on testimony even in the domain of their own expertise; they use 'tools they didn't develop (and that they may not be able fully to understand), often applied to data they didn't gather and which they can't verify, to test hypotheses that are constrained by theories they may not grasp. These constraints *enable* them to do science' (Levy 2021, 54).
15. We are happy to concede that such an ideal exists only as an ideal.
16. We leave (a) and (b) off our list because (a) reason-giving is the contrast case to ideological modes and (b) coercion by conditional threat is arguably too blatantly coercive to count as an ideological mode.
17. Cited in Haslanger (2021, 46).
18. For an account of epistemic insouciance as an epistemic vice that underwrites a tendency to spout bullshit, see Cassam (2018).
19. As many will recall, Trump kicked off his first presidential campaign with these remarks.
20. Regarding the debate on empathy, whether it tends to lead us away from properly moral decisions (Bloom 2016; Prinz 2011) or tunes us into to what matters morally (Maibom 2022; Zahavi 2023), we think that ideologically motivated empathy does the former while properly calibrated empathy does the latter.



21. For a detailed, phenomenologically informed breakdown of how meanings established intersubjectively during we-experiences become institutionalized over time, see [Berger and Luckmann \(1967\)](#). Their account is based on the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (e.g. see [Schutz 1967](#); [Schutz and Luckmann 1973](#)).
22. For work in a similar vein that draws on Alfred Schutz's distinction between (phenomenological) constitution and (social) construction, see [Dreher and López \(2015\)](#).
23. In determining the badness of ideology, our existential-phenomenological account has already answered what is normally known as the 'normative challenge' (e.g. see [Haslanger 2017](#)): what, if anything, is wrong about ideology?
24. The name stems from Terry Eagleton's remark, that, too often, authors seem to think that 'ideology, like halitosis, ...is what the other person has' ([Eagleton 1991](#), 2).
25. We consider our approach thus as a version of applied and critical phenomenology. For our understandings of these two projects, see our discussions in [Burch \(2021, 2023\)](#) and [Rautenberg \(2023, 2024\)](#).

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