The Fuss About Ideology

Everything is "ideological"—or so many in and around the academy would now have us believe. To accept the proposition, however, is to move toward the position that there is no moral or critical knowledge, only opinion. George Watson explains why this is "no place to be and no place to stay."

by George Watson

The world of thought is bothered and bewildered about ideology: the world of education above all. Distortions of the vantage point, such as Eurocentricity or linear logic, it fears, invalidate everything that historians, critics, even scientists have ever done or may ever do.

In seminars the word acts like a silencer. It can bring rational debate to a stop, and the fear of its use can inhibit critical debate even before it begins. Softened, at times, into vague, emollient talk about structures of feeling, the word still has enormous subversive power. It bears within it the killing implication that assertions about morality and the arts are only seemingly certain, that the matter would look entirely different if one were to use a different language or start the argument from somewhere else, that all belief is in any case conditioned and, for that reason alone, easily discredited. A Victorian philosopher, John Grote, aptly called skepticism in that style, almost as familiar to his century as to ours, "running to history," the skeptic being confident he can ascertain *how* concepts arose but never whether they are true or false. In the introduction to his half-forgotten book *Exploratio philosophica* (1865)—a book William James knew and admired—Grote called positivism of that sort "blinking the great and real questions" about mankind, noting and deploring its trivializing effects on the critical mind.

Ideology is a term familiar in literary debate, too. "It is all ideology," a literary colleague once remarked to me about critical judgments, adding that until theorists cleared the problem up he would find himself unable to take the academic study of literature seriously. Ideology is the bugaboo of humane studies in our time. Even everyday experience, a group of British structuralists wrote triumphantly in the *Guardian* some years ago, "is culturally produced." That state of mind can lead to a sort of half-despairing whimsy highly characteristic of certain schools of advanced thought. "They are afraid to look at what they are doing," a friend remarked the other day of his colleagues in a literary department in which he worked, noting a profound pessimism characteristic of critical theory since the fashion for deconstruction in the 1960s.

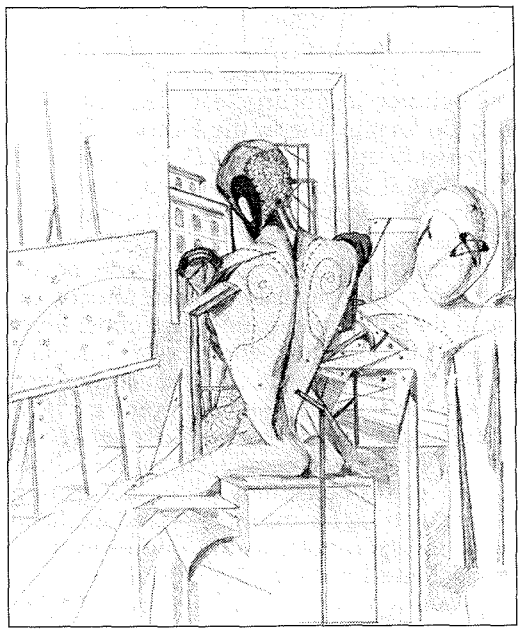
Such pessimism cannot be reassured, since it is prone to believe in advance of all argument that no assurance is to be had.

That is no place to be and no place to stay. The trouble is that ideology, as a term, has been ill-famed almost from the start, and it finds it hard to live down its disreputable past. Its ultimate origins in late-18th-century France may have been respectable, when it meant no more than the formal study of ideas. But Napoleon, shortly after, is said to have used the word to dismiss the failed revolutionary theorists he supplanted in 1799, and in the 1840s Marx and Engels confirmed the slighting sense of the word by using it only with reference to their enemies. Since then ideology, like bad breath, has been something noticed only in others.

I have explored the early, disreputable history of the word in *The Certainty of Literature* (1989); what matters here is that *ideology*, along with its derivatives like *ideologue* and *ideological*, has for more than a century been known only as a term of contempt. To commit Grote's mistake, one could be content to run to history here, identify sources, and call that contempt Napoleonic or Marxist. But that is not enough. It is to blink the great question, which is why it is so easily assumed that no ideology could ever be true.

But even to ask that question takes a lot of courage, and it means running counter to all known academic and political debate. In Britain, for example, the Labor Party, once accustomed to being called ideological by its enemies, has been throwing the insult back across the floor of the House of Commons since 1979 (when Margaret Thatcher became prime minister), usually with monetarism in mind. Mrs. Thatcher, plainly stung by the charge, would commonly reply that monetary restraint was not ideology at all but "just common sense." That suggests that the word is by now past all possibility of respectability. "It is just common sense not to spend more than you have," she once told an interviewer. If it had indeed been ideological not to print or borrow more money, she plainly implied, her policies might have been open to reasonable criticism.

There are two powerful implications in all such arguments, whether political or academic, that are seldom questioned. One is



The Philosopher and the Poet *(1915–16), by Giorgio de Chirico.*

that all ideologies are false, that all vantage points distort, that all total claims about the world are no more than prejudices of their place and time. It is easy to make such an assumption in an age where celebrated ideologies like fascism and Marxism have lately scored spectacular failures, and it is an assumption that offers endless opportunities for easy argumentative victory. If ideologies are expressed as "isms," then all isms are false, in which case it is enough to construct a new abstract term to dismiss a view, sometimes with powerful practical consequences. Racism—discrimination between races—is wrong. Therefore discrimination between sexes is wrong, once it is called sexism; or between ages, once it is called ageism; therefore nobody can be retired against his will. That example shows how potent a force the terror of ideology is in public policy. To speak up against it would take real audacity.

"Our own society," a theorist has written, "is no different from any other in having its own local beliefs," concluding that there are no timeless concepts, as we once thought, but "only the various different concepts which have gone with various different societies." Our own society has

placed "unrecognized constraints" upon our imaginations; "We are all Marxists to that extent." Let us hope not. That is Quentin Skinner in an article called "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" in *History and Theory* (1969), and later events and later reflection may well have altered his view about an all-conquering Marxism.

Presumably, too, he would now accept that, if he and his friends have already noticed that our imaginations are constrained by social pressures, then those restraints cannot reasonably be called unrecognized. Given the familiarity of the point by 1969, they might better be called over-recognized. What is unrecognized, on the whole, is that some constraints—the law of noncontradiction, for example—are beneficial, even indispensable, to the due exercise of critical and historical thought.

If the constraints in question were unrecognized, after all, then one could not know they were there. And if such timeless concepts as are formed by time and place are on that ground alone undependable, then in order to discount them the historian would need some reliable way of distinguishing those that are socially imposed from those that are not. If they cannot be recognized, it is hard to see how he can even begin. Like most relativistic arguments, this one is as leaky as a sieve. Why, in any case, should concepts formed by a given time and place be less credible than those that are not? Presumably 2 + 2 = 4 is a timeless concept. But it was formed by a time and place—perhaps ancient Babylon—and nobody, I imagine, supposes that it is to be discredited simply by identifying its origin. That would be an instance of Grote's running to history reduced to its ultimate absurdity. But in truth the argument is absurd all along the line. All beliefs have origins, after all. Even the two-times table was thought of by somebody. So running to history, as Grote saw, is running away from the whole business of truth-seeking. It is blinking the issues.

The other unquestioned assumption here is that ideology always underlies, and never overlies, our perception of values. It is seldom allowed that general beliefs about morality, politics, or the arts might be an effect rather than a cause (or an effect as much as a cause) of what one knows about the world. But why not? Ideological beliefs, in other words, may be postconceptions rather than preconceptions. Either way, they are nothing to be ashamed of. "Most people," Terry Eagleton remarked in *Ideology: An Introduction* (1991), "would not concede that without preconceptions of some kind . . . we would not even be able to identify an issue or situation, let alone pass judgment upon it." One wonders whom the theorist has been talking to. Who in the world would deny that? One might more sensibly boast of it. A view offered without preconceptions, or in total ignorance, would surely be a view not worth having.

All this is odd, in the sense that it runs counter to instances that are common, familiar, and easily called to mind. Consider slavery. The moralists who decided some two centuries ago that slavery was wrong knew a great deal about slavery and the slave trade, whether directly or by report. No doubt they had moral preconceptions too about the value of human dignity and the rights of man under God and the law, and it was a perceived conflict between that moral consensus and the facts of the trade that made reformers of them. Idle to try to answer the question whether the ideology or the facts came first; but equally idle to assume that the ideology can only have come first. One of William Wilberforce's friends, the Reverend John Newton (1725–1807), supplied him with facts about the slave trade based on experience he had acquired at sea after becoming a clergyman; so it is a matter for speculation whether Newton's moral views preceded his acquaintance with the facts or vice versa. I make no assertion here either way, but only suggest that the assumption that ideology is where we start and never where we end is enormously unsafe. It is independent, in any case, of the question whether a given ideology is true or false. A view might be acquired on no experience at all, as most people acquire the view that murder

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is wrong on no experience of murder, and yet prove dependable.

The assumption that ideologies always and necessarily underlie what individuals and communities believe is an aspect of the foundationist fallacy, or the notion that all knowledge needs to be grounded on agreed or mutually agreeable propositions before it can be allowed to count as that. Since all knowledge is not propositional, such as a knowledge of how familiar foods taste, that assumption too is rash. The foundationist fallacy is nonetheless potent in schools and colleges. "How do you know?" and "What are your criteria?" are challenges usually taken seriously, whereas in fact they are often merely impertinent. One can know, and certainly know, without being able to answer any questions in that form. Consider the question "How do you know you are eating an apple?"

The matter goes far further than simple sensory perception. We know, for example, and certainly know, that everybody has had two parents: so certainly that any case claiming to be an exception would be dismissed, and rightly dismissed, out of hand, and any evidence claiming to validate it as an exception would instantly discredit itself. That example shows that it is not always culpably dogmatic to believe without evidence, or to refuse to consider counterevidence when it is offered.

The proposition that murder is wrong, or slavery, is an instance of justified certainty too. It is not that nothing can usefully be said in defense of such propositions, or against them. But what is said is seldom, if ever, a sufficient ground for believing in them. One would continue to believe that murder and slavery were wrong without any supporting arguments, and any argument designed to force an abandonment of those certainties would rightly be seen as discreditable even before it was heard.

The foundationist assumption about knowledge now urgently needs to be replaced, if only as a child whose favorite toy has been removed needs to be distracted with another. Theorists need a new toy. What can helpfully replace it is not a new idea, strictly speaking, but an old one reworked. That idea is coherence theory, which proposes that beliefs are seen to be true when they cohere with other views one already holds and accepts. It is horizontal, so to speak, whereas foundationism is vertical; it asks not for grounds or criteria but for consistency. It accepts that certainties may be unfounded, such as the belief that everyone has had two parents, and yet certain. Such certainties are confirmed by the cases one knows—by an understanding of how human beings are born, and by a general sense of probability. Coherence theory accepts that, in speaking of morality and the arts, we know what to value and are not, in condemning or commending, merely pontificating, revealing truths about our social origins and education, or trying to cheer ourselves up.

Coherence theory is ancient and medieval as well as modern, but instances from the last 100 years or so may serve best here, and in order to link them to the rest of the argument I shall expand and offer them in paraphrase.

John Henry Newman never circumnavigated his native island of Great Britain. He was convinced, nonetheless, and with certainty, that it was an island. The foundationist would ask on what sufficient ground he, or anyone else in such a situation, could lay claim to such certain knowledge. There is after all no convincing single foundation to that claim, unless satellite photographs are accepted in evidence, and even then one would have to be very sure they were photographs of Britain. Cardinal Newman, in any case, lived before the space age. But he could reply with a series of considerations none of which, as he knew, was singly sufficient: that he had seen maps of Britain; that he had heard of people who had sailed around it and even met one or two; that he had often heard it spoken of as an island and read that it was. All rather thin, it might be objected by the skeptic, since atlases are fallible and travelers lie. But Newman was surely right to argue, in *A Grammar of Assent* (1870), that his certainty was not irrational, and it is not even clear that it would have been reinforced if he had sailed around Britain.

William James, in a similar way, never went to Japan, and for similar reasons he was utterly convinced that it existed. Skeptics are driven to desperate whimsy in denying that such matters are certain and un-

touched by considerations of ideology. Of course Japan is there. Such cases as Newman's defense, or James's, illustrate how coherence theory in practice works, how rational beings believe and rightly believe what they do even when no single consideration is sufficient and when they know that to be so. Our deepest beliefs about morality and the arts, in a similar way, like the wrongness of slavery or the greatness of Michelangelo, need not be grounded on any single argument or set of arguments. To the foundationist challenge "How do you know?" or "What are your criteria?" one need only answer that no answer to that challenge is necessary. We know because the numerous considerations that bear on the matter cohere and fit.

A recent incident reminded me vividly of the marked superiority of coherence theory. On publishing an article on Nazism, I received letters from a number of total strangers who (I hope) will remain that, enclosing pamphlets meant to prove that the Holocaust never occurred: Survivors had lied, the camp sites were faked, and the alleged victims had emigrated and assumed new identities. Perhaps there is no single argument by which one could rebut that farrago of nonsense. But if I have to choose between the traditional view that the exterminations happened and the neo-Nazi view that it was all a Zionist invention, I choose the traditional view without hesitation. The weight and number of the considerations I should have to give up—the veracity of refugees, the camps themselves, and the evidence of witnesses at the war-crimes trials—easily outweigh, as a whole, the claims of small and sinister pressure groups. If asked if the Nazis committed genocide, I reply unhesitatingly, Yes. If asked how I know, I reply not with a single answer but, as William James might have done when asked about Japan, with a series of inconclusive answers that hang together and fit.

To all that the earnest and persistent skeptic may reply that he is still not convinced, and his refusal to be convinced usually takes one of two forms.

The mirror of the world. The skeptic may reply that my beliefs about morality and the arts fail, time and again, to reflect the real world. History, he will say, and above all the history of criticism, shows there is no such thing as the One Correct Interpretation of any work of art. Other civilizations as well as other individuals hold distinct views about virtue and beauty, slavery and murder, and any certainties in such matters are no more than one view among many. Judgments may cohere, in short, as a system of beliefs; but they still fail to mirror the untidy facts of human preference and human behavior across time and space.

The mirror-image view of truth is potent, in the sense that it is widely accepted. It is also known as "correspondence theory." Telling the truth about anything, it is often assumed, including the truth about the moral life, must mean offering accounts that correspond to the real world and explaining how things are what they are. But though plausible, the assumption is inadequate and ultimately false. Consider this counter-instance. I am playing chess and ask the advice of a friend who, unlike me, is an expert, about the best move, and he tells me what it is, though I fail to take his advice. Situations in chess are infinite; so it may be further supposed that the proposed move has never been made in the entire history of the game. The right answer to the question "What is the best move?" in that event, was known but never acted on. In that case it corresponds to something that has never existed in the world. It is still the right answer.

Answers can be true, then, without corresponding to anything in the world; the objection to moral and critical certainties that they fail to do so is not, in itself, an objection to their certainty.

Vantage points. The other difficulty concerns ideology and vantage points more directly. It is often supposed that truth requires some ideal vantage point from which alone it can be seen. Usually the implication is that, as in viewing a building, there is no single point from which the whole is to be seen, that perspectives inevitably change as one moves, and that the truth, in consequence, or at least the whole truth, is not to be had. The critical skeptic who demands the One Correct Interpretation of *Hamlet* and bases his skepticism on the undoubted fact that there is none would be an example of the vantage point thinker. Quentin Skinner, for example, con-

demns the view that history allows anyone to assume that the best moral vantage point must be that of his own age and time, but he does not doubt that a vantage point is what there must be. In *The View from Nowhere* (1986), similarly, Thomas Nagel, without making any special play with the term ideology, remarks that the problem of objectivity is "to combine the perspective of a single person inside the world with an objective view of that same world," which implies at the outset that a single vantage point is always unobjective. He goes on to puzzle at length over how to "transcend" an individual view and see the world as a whole. It is simply assumed, in other words, that personal and particular views are partial, inadequate, and false.

There are several difficulties here. One, unremarked by Nagel, is self-regarding: If all personal views are unobjective, then his view of objectivity, being personal to him, would be that too. In *The Certainty of Literature* I have called such claims arguments-against-themselves, since they require a rigorous self-exemption, and it is not clear why any such exemption should be claimed or granted.

Another difficulty is the emphasis on wholeness. The skeptic is right to insist, like the non-skeptic, that in critical and moral issues the whole of everything is never told. But critical or moral objectivism is not a claim to know everything, or even most things; it is merely a claim about the logical status of such questions. Of course the best view of the Taj Mahal, if there is one, is still only one view among many; of course the best view of *Hamlet* still leaves things out.

The fuss about ideology is ultimately a fuss about leaving things out, and it is not always noticed that it can be a good idea, in offering descriptions, to leave things out. Maps do, after all, and they would be useless if they did not. So does justice, in the sense that the judge rightly sides with the law against the criminal. There is no impartiality, as Lord Acton memorably remarked in his Cambridge inaugural *The Study of History* (1895), like that of a hanging judge. Knowing that murder is wrong, as I do, and still more mass-murder, I am still (the skeptic might complain) failing to take the historical background of others into account: the history of Central Europe, for example, and its centuries-old tradition of anti-Semitism that might put Nazism in a different light. The next step, for the foundationist, would be to challenge me to explain why my view is any better grounded than Hitler's; and if I reply in terms of coherence rather than foundations—civic rights, for example, and what it costs communities and peoples to lose them—he is unlikely to be impressed by an explanation so long-winded and palpably inconclusive.

That impatience is characteristic of the skeptic in all ages. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) wrote: "'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer." Demanding an answer, and yet not staying when one is offered, is how the skeptic satisfies himself that there is in truth no such thing as moral or critical knowledge, only opinion, and how he hopes to satisfy others that there is none. Skepticism is argument in a hurry. "How do you know *Middlemarch* is better than *Betty Blue*?" a student militant once defiantly wrote in a manifesto sent to the chairman of a literature department at the university where I worked. That was less a question than a challenge, and its simplistic implications are unmistakable: that only a single ground or foundation would do to convince *him* that anyone could be certain George Eliot was a greater novelist than the author of some trifling children's story.

The business of convincing the skeptic that certainties of judgments neither have nor need foundations might easily take more time than he would be willing to give. He will not stay for an answer. But he might be relieved of his fear of ideology and set on the right road, at least, if his blunt question were countered with another: "How do you know that we need an answer to that in order to know?"