

Moral Realism and the Search for Ideological Truth: A Philosophical-Psychological Collaboration

John T. Jost, Professor of Psychology and Politics and (by affiliation)
Sociology and Data Science, New York University
Email: john.jost@nyu.edu

Lawrence J. Jost, Professor of Philosophy, University of Cincinnati
Email: jostlj@ucmail.uc.edu

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“Yesterday’s ideology is today’s fact or fiction.”
(Sylvan Tomkins, 1963, p. 389)

1. Introduction

Scholars of ideology in social-scientific disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and political science, stand to benefit from taking seriously the philosophical contributions of Professor Peter Railton. This is because Railton provides much-needed conceptual precision—and a rare sense of epistemological and moral clarity—to a topic that is notoriously slippery¹ and prone to relativistic musing² and the drawing of false equivalences.³ In an essay entitled “Morality, Ideology, and Reflection: Or, the Duck Sits Yet,” Railton (2000/2003) aptly identified the purpose of ideological analysis as the unmasking of “nonepistemic” interests—that is, interests other than truth-seeking, accuracy, or warrant⁴—that contribute to the development, adoption, and dissemination of political and religious belief systems.

In this earlier essay, Railton (2000/2003) sought to defend the concept of *morality*—as used in key philosophical accounts—from the charge that its purported universality, impartiality, concern for well-being, and its practical import bear “the symptoms of an ideology” (pp. 360-361). If so, morality would be ripe for the strategy of “debunking,” i.e. undermining from the point of view of classic ideological critique, as in the Marxian tradition, by “unmasking” the historically and culturally contingent, chiefly Enlightenment conceptions of reason, human nature, and so on (p. 363). Railton seeks a vindicatory account of moral “practice[s] as opposed to a debunking explanation,” that is, an account that philosophers, upon due self-reflection and self-criticism, can use to rebuild the “boat” of morality while sailing in it, to reform or discard elements in the conception of morality that are arbitrary or relativistic when seen through the lens of such ruthless critics of conventional morality as Marx and Nietzsche. In this essay Railton writes mainly in the critical tradition of ideological analysis, which is generally seen as one classic example of debunking arguments in ethical philosophy.⁵

Importantly, Railton understands that ideology can lead people astray when it comes to rationality and other epistemic—and, for that matter, ethical—virtues. He writes, for instance, that “[c]ertain characteristic features of an ideology might in a given instance constitute *defect-making* features” (p. 8). In this way, he departs wisely from the assumption of many political scientists that ideology is “an altogether good thing” that helps people to perceive the “world clearly, understand it well, and form opinions and make decisions that faithfully reflect their core beliefs” (Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017, p. 13).

However, unlike other critical theorists, Railton does not *equate* ideology with false or unwarranted

¹ Ideology has been described as “the most elusive concept in the whole of social science” (McLellan, 1986, p. 1), and many have lamented its “semantic promiscuity” (Gerring, 1997, p. 957; see also Converse, 1964, p. 207).

² To take just one example, an article entitled “Tribalism is Human Nature” includes the claim that because “modern liberals and conservatives share evolutionary histories that favor loyalty signals and tribal biases, it is a priori likely that the psychological propensities for bias would be similar on the political left and right” (Clark et al., 2019, p. 589).

³ A quantitative review of studies by Ditto and colleagues (2019) concluded that liberals and conservatives were equally “biased,” because both groups evaluated scientific information more favorably when it was consistent (vs. inconsistent) with their pre-existing beliefs, but they did not check to see whether the pre-existing beliefs were equally valid (see Baron & Jost, 2019).

⁴ Railton (1994, p. 75) writes: “It is quite unlikely that truth is the only goal or ‘target,’ ... and we certainly value, even value *epistemically*, more than truth: we also care about whether our beliefs are justified, coherent, manageable, applicable, informative, confident, explanatory, fruitful, etc.”

⁵ Sauer (2018) cites Marxist critiques of capitalist ideology as one classical example of “genealogical debunking,” akin to other types of refutations inspired by Nietzsche or, in other contexts, Darwin (pp. 66-67).

belief, and he points out that “often our nonepistemic interests will be advanced more effectively by true belief or reliable belief-forming practices than by error or arbitrariness” (p. 357). Some ideological belief systems, in other words, could well be closer to the truth than others. This parallels Railton’s efforts to defend certain truth claims about morality. The observation that some ideological perspectives illuminate, while others obscure, the nature of social and political realities is an extremely important one that many social scientists miss (or studiously avoid), and we will return to it in the final section of this chapter.

2. Beyond Self-Interest: The Role of System Justification Motivation

In his earlier work, Railton (2000/2003) emphasized the function of legitimation, but in the present volume he adds valorization, understood as the tendency to validate or assign value or merit to something (Railton, 2021). This amendment is a friendly one from our perspective, because it fits snugly with social psychological research linking implicit and explicit favoritism toward high status individuals and groups—at the expense of those who are low in social status—to political conservatism and other ideological processes of system justification (Essien et al., 2021; Jost, 2020).

According to Railton, then, the primary nonepistemic interests served by ideology are *legitimation* and *valorization*, including the representation of “particular institutions, practices, or norms as good—or as obligatory, natural, universal, or necessary,” along with the representation of “alternative institutions, practices, or norms as bad—or as unnatural, impermissible, foreign, or, especially, impossible” (Railton, 2000/2003, p. 356). Importantly, he is quick to note that the “interests in question need not be the interests of all of those holding the beliefs” (p. 356). That is, people may hold ideological beliefs that are contrary to their own objective interests, as in putative cases of false consciousness (e.g., Cunningham, 1987; Jost, 2020; Lovibond, 1989; Lukes, 2011; MacKinnon, 1989; Neville et al., 2005; Thompson, 2014). Consequently, “ideological analysis is not to be confused with the sort of cynicism that attributes everything to self-interest” (Railton, 2000/2003, p. 359). But some evolutionary psychologists have taken precisely this tack, treating ideological outcomes as little more than the product of strategic coalitions and attempts to maximize individual and/or group self-interest (e.g., Clark et al., 2019; Pinosof & Haselton, 2016; Weeden & Kurzban, 2014; see also Hoffarth & Jost, 2017).

In his book *How Propaganda Works*, Jason Stanley (2015) acknowledged the possibility that “oppressed groups [may] accept the ideology of their own inferiority” (p. 222), but his explanation of the origins of flawed ideological beliefs hinges on self-conceptions, material interests, group identities, and “cultural cognition.” Thus, he noted that “those benefitting from large material inequalities will tend to adopt flawed ideologies in the form of false legitimation narratives [that might] blind them to injustice, and hence from realizing their ethical goals” (p. 8). Likewise, Stanley emphasized the self-interested basis of racial attitudes used to justify the institution of slavery:

It is difficult to contemplate giving up luxuries that one has spent one’s life enjoying. It is natural to expect the members of the plantation family . . . to believe that Blacks are inherently lazy and require the institution of slavery to instill in them a work ethic that they naturally lack. One might expect their ideology to lead them to believe that Blacks, by virtue of culture or genetics, are not capable of self-governance. One might expect them to believe that Blacks are inherently violent and dangerous and require harsh punishment and control to keep them from posing a threat to civil society. (p. 194)

We readily concur that self-justification and group justification can explain many cases of ideological distortion, but they cannot explain all of them. Among other things, self-interest cannot explain why members of disadvantaged groups sometimes hold the same ideological beliefs as members of

advantaged groups (Jost & Banaji, 1994). It cannot explain, for instance, why millions of *non-slave* owners—including Aristotle (Kraut, 2002)—came to believe that systems of slavery were legitimate, desirable, and morally defensible. Nor can self-interest alone explain many other important phenomena, including working class conservatism (Jost, 2017b), the devaluation of dark skin among people of color (Choma & Prusaczyk, 2018), women’s endorsement of hostile and benevolent forms of sexism (Cassese & Barnes, 2019; Drolet & Drolet, 2019), obese people’s adoption of anti-fat ideology (Crandall, 1994), and various forms of internalized homophobia (Hoffarth & Jost, 2017; Pacilli et al., 2011).

In the present volume, Railton (2021) elaborates on the need for an ideological analysis that goes beyond considerations of self-interest: “It perhaps does not seem hard to explain why people might hold beliefs or other attitudes in line with their interests, needs, or purposes, but it is precisely the point of ideological analysis that this relation is *not* automatic—that wide portions of a population may hold beliefs and values contrary to their interests, owing to the effects of ideology” (p. 3). We heartily agree (see also Jost et al., 2017).

By emphasizing that ideological belief systems serve to legitimize more than individual and collective forms of self-interest, Railton’s philosophical account is highly compatible with a large program of social psychological research on system justification, defined as the tendency to legitimize aspects of the status quo, even at the expense of self-interest (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2010; Kay et al., 2009). A theory of system justification—and its underlying motivational basis—helps to explain all of the phenomena described above. More broadly, it illuminates such varied manifestations of so-called “dominant ideology” (Kluegel & Smith, 1986) as the socially shared, consensual nature of stereotypes and other attitudes held by members of different groups within the same society; the internalization of inferiority and depressed sense of entitlement among members of disadvantaged groups; tolerance of exploitation, injustice, oppression, and abuse; and the denial and downplaying of systemic problems such as economic inequality, institutionalized racism, sexism, and heteronormativity, as well as anthropogenic climate change (Jost, 2020).⁶ System justification motivation can also account for the psychological appeal of political and religious ideologies that are inherently conservative, that is, belief systems that are resistant to social change and protective of existing political and economic institutions, hierarchical arrangements in the family and society, and familiar social and cultural traditions and practices (Jost et al., 2003; see also Jost, 2020).

Railton’s (2021) current formulation is extremely compatible with system justification theory in several other ways as well. Among other things, he stresses that: ideology is associated with “the consolidation and maintenance of the social status quo or dominance hierarchy” (p. 2); dominant or hegemonic ideology represents “existing social relations as legitimate and ‘natural’” and “holds things in place by structuring the experience and thought, and limiting the horizons, even of those subordinated by it” (p. 2); “even members of dominated groups have internalized certain representations of how things are, should be, or must be” (p. 2); “ideological analysis must inquire into how it happens that those in subordinate, exploited situations come to hold views that align with the interests or purposes of the dominant classes” (pp. 3-4); and this “cannot be explained by the ‘obvious’ theory that people tend to believe or value what it is in their interest to believe or value” (p. 4). Railton’s observations here are not only consistent with system justification theory, they are the very kinds of observations that provided the impetus for the development of the theory in the first place (see Jost, 2020).

Before proceeding further, we should note that the use of the term “epistemic” is potentially confusing in the context of discussions about ideology, because it is used very differently by philosophers and psychologists. As noted above, Railton (2000/2003) proposes that ideology serves “nonepistemic” interests, by which he means that it is motivated by something other than truth-seeking, accuracy, and

⁶ For very helpful philosophical discussions of system justification theory, see Celikates (2009, 2018), Emerick (2016), Hundleby (2016), Dror (2022), and Engelstad (2023).

warrant—such as legitimation and valorization. Psychologists, on the other hand, describe several types of “epistemic motives” (e.g., see Jost et al., 2018). One of these is the “need for accuracy” (Thompson et al., 1994; Trope, 1979), and it dovetails nicely with the truth-seeking function emphasized by philosophers. However, other “epistemic motives” studied by psychologists include “personal needs for order and structure” and the “need for cognitive closure,” both of which may lead people to reduce uncertainty or ambiguity prematurely and therefore sub-optimally from the standpoint of normative theories of rationality (e.g., Kruglanski, 2004).

On our view, system justification is one of the most significant “nonepistemic” interests (in Railton’s sense) that is served by ideology. System justification helps to explain social stability, cultural inertia, and, indeed, the disturbing longevity of social norms and practices that are fundamentally unjust:

A glance at history shows . . . a succession of norms—all at one point or other widely viewed as moral—that have sanctioned slavery, the subjugation of women, and a host of other purported rights and duties that seem to us in retrospect to correspond more closely to the prevailing distribution of power, privilege, and interests than to conditions of absolute value or universal reason. (Railton, 2000/2003, p. 353)

What we need from a satisfying account of ideology, then, is an explanation of how and why people adopt belief systems that serve interests in legitimation and valorization—rather than interests in truth-seeking, accuracy, warrant, or, indeed, the attainment of social justice.

Although this idea has yet to be developed fully, it seems to us that the interests or functions served by ideology may be distinguished not only from truth-seeking, accuracy, and warrant, as Railton (2000/2003) suggested, but also justice-seeking or morality-seeking in an objective, realistic sense. Railton’s view, which we share, is that scholars should strive to unmask not only the nonepistemic interests served by ideologies, but also the non-moral and non-just interests that ideologies can serve. This is because ideologies often contain normative elements—such as values and norms—as well as non-normative descriptive beliefs.

There should be parallels between epistemic unmasking and the unmasking of injustice. Indeed, we suspect, as does Haslanger (2017), that “epistemic and moral wrongs are connected” (p. 151). This proposal may be compatible with certain claims made by Railton (1986b/2003) in his essay on “Moral Realism.” For instance, he described a “moral point of view” that was “impartial, but equally concerned with all those potentially affected” and that thereby reflected “rationality not from the point of view of any particular individual, but from that which might be called a social point of view” (p. 21).

Moving forward, we might therefore consider prospects for identifying and promoting ideological perspectives that are closer—rather than further—from the truth and from normative standards of justice and morality. We see all of this as highly compatible with Railton’s overarching project to develop forms of “ethical naturalism” and “moral realism” that seek “a plausible synthesis of the empirical and the normative, [retaining] a recognizable moral force” (2003, p. 3). Enthusiastically, then, we accept the invitation extended by Railton and the editors of this volume to join a truly interdisciplinary collaboration between philosophers, on one hand, and social and political psychologists, on the other. We find such a collaboration to be highly desirable, even necessary if social science is to fulfill its true potential as a liberating force in society (Bottomore, 1975; Cantril & Katz, 1939; Eagly, 2018; Gouldner, 1970; Lewin, 1948; Lynd, 1939; Myrdal, 1969; Railton, 1984/1991; Sears, 1994; Smith, 1969; Wilson, 2021).⁷

⁷ Railton (2021), too, calls for inclusiveness “about *levels* of ideological analysis, recognizing the need, within any given approach to ideology, for micro- as well as macro-theory,” taking into account “large-scale structural features of

3. Ideology and Social Change

Perhaps the most novel aspect of Railton's (2021) current formulation, which builds on his earlier remarks about trial-and-error learning in the moral domain,⁸ is the proposal that certain everyday experiences may violate expectations derived from an ideological position and that such violations may weaken the influence of that ideology. Thus, ideologies are potentially "*vulnerable* to the evidence of experience" and this vulnerability may contribute to the "radical *destabilization* of the status quo and *mobilization* of social change" (p. 8, emphasis in original).

Railton (2021) goes on to suggest that the undermining effect of expectancy violation "might produce only alienation and social fragmentation if the conditions do not exist for an *oppositional ideology* to emerge" (p. 2) But what, exactly, are the conditions that would "galvanize a sufficiently large and unified collection of individuals and groups willing to undertake the costly task of challenging the established order"? One likely factor is class identification. Scholars in the Marxian tradition have long suggested that by working in close proximity, industrial laborers in Europe came to see that they shared common interests that were very different from the interests of the bourgeoisie and other groups in society (e.g., Archibald, 1989). Empirical research in social psychology should help to clarify the necessary and sufficient conditions for the development of an oppositional ideology.

An example that Railton offers is that of the remarkable change in recent decades of attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ population. He notes that between 1972 and 2016 support for "gay rights" climbed 32.75 percentage points among U.S. adults, a change that he ascribes to a sudden increase in social interactions with gay men and lesbians who were "out of the closet." Railton is quite right that, according to social psychological research, positive forms of cultural exposure—including the formation of parasocial bonds with likeable TV or movie characters (Bond & Compton, 2015; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001) and intergroup contact, especially the development of close friendships with out-group members (Hässler et al., 2020; Tropp et al., 2017)—are capable of reducing prejudice, at least under certain circumstances.

Still, what needs to be said is that some people updated their prejudiced beliefs much more quickly than others, and ideology is part of the story of why. Thus, when Railton (2021) suggests that in the context of attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people, "the mechanisms of attitude-change were not strongly dependent upon specific religious, political, or cultural convictions" (pp. 22-23), he may be overstating things. According to the results of Gallup Polling, a majority of Democrats (51%) supported gay marriage in 2004. At that time only 19% of Republicans supported it. Even now, in 2020, slightly less than half of Republicans (49%) support gay marriage, whereas 83% of Democrats support it (McCarthy, 2020). It is certainly possible that Democrats have been interacting more with gay men and lesbians than Republicans over the last 20 years, but even in this case it is unlikely that belief systems are irrelevant. Is it not Democrats' stronger commitment to liberal and progressive values, which stress equality and social progress (Jost, 2021), that accounts for their openness to LGBTQ+ people in the first place and their (relatively) early adoption of anti-discriminatory norms and policies?

The same dynamic was observed with respect to racial attitudes in the U.S. only a few decades earlier. According to data from the American National Election Studies, extreme liberals held very favorable attitudes about African Americans as early as 1972 (with average "warmth ratings" near 70 out of a

society" as well as "individual-level psychological phenomena such as perception and the formation and revision of attitudes and identities" (p. 3).

⁸ For instance, Railton (1986b/2003) noted that, much as someone may come to recognize over time both the symptoms and remedies of dehydration, an individual may "experience feedback of a kind that promotes learning about his good and development of more rational strategies" (p. 24).

possible 100), whereas extreme conservatives did not (with average ratings near 55). By 2004, the ideological gap had disappeared (Nosek et al., 2009, p. 499). In short, it took extreme conservatives 32 years to “catch up” to the racial attitudes of extreme liberals. Again, ideological differences in the commitment to equality and progress seem to be at work, and these differences presumably shape the kinds of personal experiences and social interactions that people have. Thus, changes in society can shift the attitudes of most people, but this does not mean that ideology is irrelevant. Compared to their liberal counterparts, conservative citizens are significantly more resistant to social change (e.g., Grossman & Thaler, 2018; White et al., 2020; Zorn & Gill, 2007).

On a great many policy positions that strike contemporary observers as obviously beneficial, progressives in the U.S. pushed for social innovations that were opposed, often strenuously, by political conservatives. These include support for smallpox vaccinations, child labor laws, voting rights for women, social security programs, Medicare, admission of women and African Americans to universities, racial integration, clean air and water acts, and enactment of a national minimum wage (see Sugar et al., 1992, pp. 91-93). Most of these legislative achievements, which we now take for granted, increased the overall extent of social, economic, and/or political equality, and this, presumably, is why progressives were in a much better position to recognize their value and importance than conservatives were (Jost et al., 2009, pp. 185-186). On the plus side, once laws such as these are enshrined long enough to become part of the societal status quo, even self-identified conservatives are likely to support them, at least in part because of system justification motivation (see Jost, 2020). As Railton (2021) notes, this helps to explain how and why “policies that are on the leading edge of liberalism of one generation—e.g., government provision of economic and health security for the older population, or fiscal actions by central banks to stimulate the economy—can become conservative touchstones in subsequent generations” and that “what was a radical liberal innovation in a previous generation can become, once established, part of what conservatives are averse to changing” (p. 6).

Thus, we readily agree with Railton (2021, pp. 2-3) that “ideology can play a key role in social change” and that, under some circumstances at least, “even dominant ideologies” may contribute to the “process of social destabilization and change.” At the same time, we note that some ideologies play a much larger role than others when it comes to promoting social change—and, indeed, social justice. It is progressive, rather than conservative ideology, for example, that helps to explain why “members of subordinated groups are sometimes willing to risk their personal security and even lives in opposition to an established social order, when the benefits of this social transformation will come primarily to others” (Railton, 2021, pp. 3-4; see also Piven & Cloward, 1977).

The broader point, with which we agree, is that not all ideologies serve to legitimize the status quo; some challenge it quite forcefully. In this respect, Railton’s analysis parallels several in social psychology, including Serge Moscovici’s (1988) theory of social representations, which distinguishes between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic (or emancipated) social representations, Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto’s (2001) theory of social dominance, which distinguishes between hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths, and the theory of system justification, which distinguishes between system-justifying and system-challenging ideologies (Jost, 2020).

4. Facts and Values

Railton (2021) writes that the “ideology construct,” as utilized in system justification theory and the model of political ideology as motivated social cognition, “is intended to be wholly descriptive” in the tradition of “value-free” social science (p. 5). He seeks to develop instead a “more substantive conception of ideology” that is “explanatorily richer” (p. 7) because it contains “both descriptive and normative elements” (p.10). This critique of our work in political psychology, it seems to us, is mistaken. Our view is

not “wholly descriptive,” nor does it “abjure any critical evaluation” (p. 5), as our frequent references to the concept of false consciousness may imply (e.g., Jost, 2020; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Jost, 2007).

Railton is correct that most, if not all other, empirical perspectives in social psychology adhere to a rigid fact/value dichotomy of the sort he critiqued convincingly in an earlier essay entitled “Facts and Values” (Railton, 1986a/2003). That is, the majority of social and political psychologists probably do assume, often tacitly, in an unexamined manner, that moral and political values are inherently subjective and more or less entirely independent of factual questions about what is objectively true and false. Consequently, researchers are often called upon to suppress their own ideological biases—especially “liberal” biases, it turns out—in the service of purely scientific goals (e.g., Baumeister, 2015; Chambers & Schlenker, 2015; Ditto et al., 2015; Duarte et al., 2015; Haidt, 2011; Tetlock, 1994; Washburn et al., 2015). In at least one case, it has been proposed that social psychologists abandon the study of *prejudice* altogether in favor of a value-neutral exploration of positive and negative attitudes (McCauley, 2015). Still others define prejudice in such a way that it is devoid of moral content altogether (Brandt & Crawford, 2020). This has many unfortunate implications, including the preposterous conclusion that Jewish people were as “prejudiced” against the Nazis as the Nazis were prejudiced against Jews (Badaan & Jost, 2020). The philosophical assumption underlying all of these various conceptual errors is that realism and objectivity are possible in the realm of fact, but not in the realm of value.

But this is not our position. On the contrary, we believe that the role of social science is not to develop a value-free, “purely” factual understanding of reality (whatever that would mean), but rather to help us determine on the basis of empirical observations which moral and political perspectives are closer to truth and social justice—and which are further from it (see also Eagly, 2018; Lewin, 1948; Myrdal, 1969; Sears, 1994; Smith, 1969; Wilson, 2021). We fully embrace Putnam’s (2002) critique of logical positivism and Railton’s (1994) critique of “orthodox” logical empiricism, which assumes that “objective inquiry is value free and disinterested,” “based upon theory-neutral evidence,” and is “not biased by factual or theoretical preconceptions” (pp. 76-79; see also McGuire, 2013).

As Hilary Putnam (2002) has pointed out, the distinction between facts and values has often been treated, misleadingly, as a dichotomy, as if concepts that are studied scientifically cannot have both descriptive and normative elements. Putnam lists numerous concepts that combine descriptive and normative properties—for which facts and values are “entangled,” as he put it—such as cruelty, rudeness, generosity, skillfulness, elegance, strength, weakness, bravery, justice, vulgarity, warrant, accuracy, bias, rationality, and irrationality (pp. 34-40). Is it possible to imagine a useful and robust social science that does not touch on any of these concepts? We think not. Thus, Putnam rejects the “relativism derived from contemporary scientism” that “threatens to toss much more than ethical judgments into the bag of truths that are only valid from some ‘local perspective’ or other” (p. 43).

At the same time, we recognize that the community of scientists may be led astray by ideological assumptions that are questionable or unwarranted. Indeed, the history of science is full of dreadful cases of racism, sexism, and classism (e.g., Kühl, 1994; Saini, 2018). Nevertheless, the methods of science may contribute (over time) to “a very reliable process of knowledge production” that may be considered “objective” (Railton, 2021, p. 7, fn 1). As Silvan Tomkins (1963) might have put it, it is the job of the social scientist to sort out which of today’s ideologies are fact and which are fiction.

Thus, we join Railton (1991, 1994, 2000, 2003) and other philosophers (e.g., Foot, 1978, 2001; Kirchin, 2013; Kovesi, 1967; Putnam, 2002) in pushing back against a rigid fact/value dichotomy and instead working toward projects of ethical naturalism and moral realism that make the most of philosophical and social psychological insights about rationality and social justice, among other things. This is very different from the kind of moral and political relativism that led Jonathan Haidt (2011), for example, to draw skeptical, even nihilistic conclusions such as these: “But if it’s true that *morality binds and blinds*, then *no* partisan community is based in reality. If a group circles around sacred values, they’ll evolve into a

tribal moral community. They'll embrace science whenever it supports their sacred values, but they'll ditch it or distort it as soon as it threatens a sacred value." All of this leads to highly dubious conclusions, such as: (a) ideologies of the left and right are equally valid (or invalid), and (b) all ideologies are nothing more than motivated rationalizations for emotional, gut-level intuitions—and yet they deserve equal acceptance nonetheless (Haidt, 2012). The realist, by contrast, understands that some moralities and ideologies bind and others blind—but still others have the capacity, at least, to liberate and illuminate (for critiques of moral foundations theory, see also Jacobson, 2008; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Jost, 2012; Kugler et al., 2014; Nagel, 2012; Strupp-Levitsky et al., 2020; Suhler & Churchland, 2011).

To show Professor Railton that, like the gardeners in Robert Frost's "The Tuft of Flowers," we have in fact been working together even while "working apart," we highlight a recent passage in which one of us sought to explicitly integrate—rather than segregate—normative and empirical considerations about ideology:

My own view is that if political psychologists have anything at all to contribute to the development of a good society, and I firmly believe that they do, it is not "Swiss-style neutrality," as comfortable as that may be for people living in Switzerland. In times of trouble, as Elie Wiesel knew all too well, "Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented" . . . As Myrdal (1969) and many others have pointed out: "A 'disinterested' social science has never existed and, for logical reasons, can never exist" (p. 55)... It is one of the primary responsibilities of the social scientist to consider things critically, even (or perhaps especially) when there is immense pressure in society to see them uncritically, to accept them as they are (Jost, 2017a, p. 195).

We therefore disagree that research in social psychology should be contrasted sharply with the work of "critical theorists and philosophers [who] may wish to make, rather than avoid, substantive normative assessments" (Railton, 2021, p. 7). Far from embracing any deep disconnect between description and criticism, we see "no [necessary] conflict between critical and non-critical [i.e. merely descriptive] accounts of ideology" (Leopold, 2013, p. 35).

Whether they like it or not, and whether they realize it or not, social scientists are working with *both* facts and values. Certain facts may inform and, indeed, improve the quality of reasoning about values, and certain values may improve, while others may detract from, the quality of reasoning about facts. Descriptive and normative claims about ideology should be integrated, rather than artificially divorced. Indeed, the conception of ideology at work in system justification theory (and related perspectives) was marked from the start by a synthesis of these complementary perspectives, with the goal of identifying social and personal circumstances that are likely to facilitate—rather than hinder—the objective attainment of rationality and social justice (see Jost, 2020).

5. Reverse-Engineering Ideological Truth?

Thus far, we have joined Railton in defending moral and political realism, including the view that some ideologies are truer (and more just) than others, but we have not said much about how ideological truth is to be ascertained. Years ago, the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* wrote: "Knowledge of the psychological determinants of ideology cannot tell us what is the *truest* ideology; it can only remove some of the barriers in the way of its pursuit" (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 11, emphasis in original). This formulation suggests to us that it may be possible, at least in principle, to *reverse-engineer* ideological truth by clearing away the various epistemic and other contaminants of political reasoning and deducing "where" the

soundest and most just beliefs are likely to be. This is clearly an ambitious task that will require the collaboration of philosophers and psychologists, among many others. Here we merely sketch the outlines of what such a project would involve; the real work, of course, remains to be done.

We may start with a multidimensional space based on various abstract dimensions, such as individualism vs. collectivism, freedom vs. authority, equality vs. inequality, tradition vs. progress, cooperation vs. competition, order vs. chaos, etc. Specific ideological beliefs and belief systems—such as the tenets of Communism, socialism, liberalism, conservatism, colonialism, capitalism, nativist populism, right-wing authoritarianism, racism, anti-Semitism, militarism, fascism, religious fundamentalism, benevolent paternalism, hostile sexism, feminism, pacifism, left and right versions of libertarianism, anarchy, and so on—may be located in this multidimensional space. We also plot empirical data about the psychological characteristics of adherents of each of these belief systems. Conceptually, the goal is to identify (and adjust for) all of the epistemically irrelevant sources of motivation that lead people to embrace these beliefs, such as self-deception, lack of cognitive ability or effort, death anxiety, ego justification, group justification, system justification, social dominance, etc. We may also attempt to develop measures of “ground truth,” to distinguish between propositional beliefs that are consistent vs. inconsistent with the best available scientific evidence and, in the case of normative claims, the best available philosophical argumentation. Once we remove, using statistical methods, the “nonepistemic” contaminants, what is left standing should be truer than what has been removed.

One clear limitation of this method is that we may fail to identify, in practice, all of the contaminants. Therefore, it is better to think in relative terms about which belief systems are closer or further from the truth than in absolute terms about which belief system(s) ought to be considered true. Another problem is that if researchers begin with a set of hypotheses that does not contain any nearly true hypotheses, then removing contaminants may not lead them closer to the truth. Historically speaking, there are scientific observations we now regard as well-established that were not even on the epistemic horizon in the past. Intellectual humility requires us to recognize that, from the limited perspective of the present time, there may be valid hypotheses that are not even on our radar yet. Still, the process we are envisioning could help scholars to move from some well-entrenched errors into a position from which we might be better able to appreciate important alternatives that have not yet been considered, or be in a better position to gather new kinds of evidence (or to re-evaluate old evidence) that might suggest such alternatives.⁹

But what are the various contaminants that contribute to what Railton (2021, p. 8) refers to as the “defect-making” features of ideology? Here we call on empirical research in political psychology. In Figure 1 we have summarized the results of 181 studies of epistemic motivation involving 133,796 individual participants from 14 different countries, including the U.S., Canada, U.K., Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Israel, New Zealand, and Peru, (Jost et al., 2018). Results reveal that people who gravitate toward conservative and rightist ideologies score consistently higher on measures of dogmatism, cognitive and perceptual rigidity, intolerance of ambiguity, needs for cognitive closure, and personal needs for order and structure, in comparison with people who gravitate toward liberal and leftist ideologies. These psychological variables tend to pull people away from judgmental accuracy, all other things being equal (Kruglanski, 2004). Conversely, people who gravitate toward liberal and leftist ideologies tend to score higher on measures of integrative complexity, cognitive reflection, need for cognition (or enjoyment of thinking), and tolerance of uncertainty, in comparison with people who gravitate toward conservative and rightist ideologies. These variables are likely to foster judgmental accuracy, all other things being equal (Baron & Jost, 2019).

There is, in fact, a fairly extensive research literature on individual differences in rationality (e.g., Stanovich & West, 2000). It has not yet been applied to the topic of ideology, but it could be pressed into

⁹ We thank Peter Railton for raising this important point about the role of historical omissions.

service for the purposes of reverse-engineering sound political reasoning. Other studies find that conservatives score higher on measures of self-deception (Jost et al., 2010; Wojcik et al., 2015), judgmental overconfidence (Ruisch & Stern, 2020), and pseudo-profound bullshit receptivity (Evans et al., 2020; Pfattheicher & Schindler, 2016; Sterling et al., 2016). Recent work suggests that, in comparison with conservatives, liberals score higher on measures of actively open-minded thinking (Baron, 2017; Price et al., 2015), value truth-seeking more (Medlin et al., 2020), and may be better at updating their beliefs on the basis of informational feedback (Sinclair et al., 2020). Finally, research conducted in the U.S., U.K., Germany, and Australia reveals that liberals and leftists score higher than rightists on objective measures of intelligence and cognitive ability (Bell et al., 2020; Choma et al., 2019; Deary et al., 2008; Heaven et al., 2011; Hodson & Busseri, 2012; Onraet et al., 2015).

To be clear, we are not proposing an elitist solution in which scientific experts arrogantly assert what is true and false in domains of politics and religion. We believe that historical reflection and intellectual modesty are crucial to the enterprise of reverse-engineering ideological truth. Furthermore, we expect that even when members of disadvantaged groups lack formal educational training they will have much to teach the experts, based on their life experiences. That said, would we not learn something important about ideological truth by identifying specific beliefs and belief systems that are favored by people who are higher (vs. lower) in terms of need for cognition, cognitive reflection, actively open-ended thinking, integrative complexity, truth-seeking, and rational belief updating? And, conversely, the beliefs favored by people who are lower (vs. higher) in terms of dogmatism, cognitive and perceptual rigidity, intolerance of ambiguity, self-deception, bullshit receptivity, and needs for order, structure, and cognitive closure? Even if each psychological variable accounts for a relatively small amount of variance in the quality of information processing, their compound effects may be profound. In recent years, algorithms in data science have made it possible to detect and capitalize on even weak signals in large data sets. It is possible, for instance, to teach facial recognition software to distinguish accurately between the faces of liberals and conservatives (Kosinski, 2021). Perhaps the reverse-engineering of ideological truth is not beyond scientific reach for ethical naturalists and moral realists who are quantitatively sophisticated.

What we are imagining, in other words, is a non-relativist, non-skeptical approach to the study of moral and political values—an approach that strives to integrate both descriptive and normative considerations, as Railton has urged. If it is the case that some ideologies are truer than others, then we should be able to use the methods of data science to estimate the locations of ideological truths in multidimensional space. Such a method could help us to home in on beliefs that are especially appealing to people who possess epistemic virtues and are less susceptible to epistemic vices, such as faulty reasoning processes and gullibility when confronted with propaganda, fake news, and conspiratorial thinking.

This general method could also be used to evaluate other propositions about ideological truth, such as the belief of Marx and Lukács that the worldview of the proletariat (or working class) is more accurate, universal, and/or experientially grounded than that of the bourgeoisie (or upper class). Ultimately, what we are seeking is something that Railton is also seeking, namely a means of determining which specific ideologies thwart the interests of subordinated groups and delay efforts to improve societal conditions for everyone.¹⁰ The goal, in other words, is to use scientific methods to determine which beliefs, opinions, and values should be defended and which should be set aside, given their unmasked character as motivated by cognitive defects, irrational fears, self-deception, false consciousness, system justification, and a litany of other harmful nonepistemic interests. We should not allow the ideology of the fact-value dichotomy—the

¹⁰ As Railton has suggested to us, certain ideologies may primarily benefit advantaged groups through the development of cultural or educational institutions that may also benefit disadvantaged groups.

assumption that only the factual can be justified by evidence and experience, whereas values cannot—to prevent us from appreciating the potential of social science to diagnose and challenge normative claims that are detrimental to the fuller realization of human well-being.

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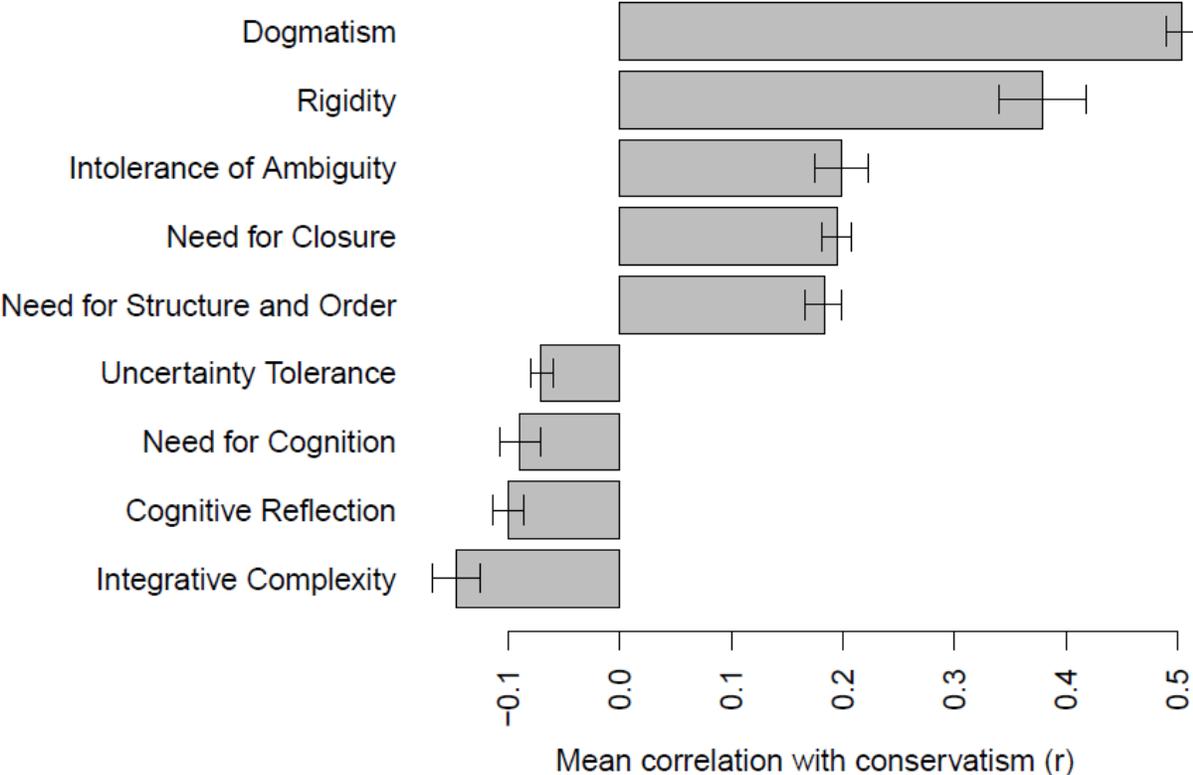
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Figure 1: Summary of Empirical Evidence Concerning Associations between Epistemic Virtues and Vices and the Endorsement of Liberal vs. Conservative Ideology



Source: This figure is taken from Baron and Jost (2019) and is based on meta-analytic data summarized by Jost, Sterling, and Stern (2018).

