

The Ideological Receptor in Normal Cognitive Function

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Abstract

In this article I review the defining qualities of an ideology, and I introduce the notion of an *ideological receptor*, which I propose to be an innate cognitive structure in normal human beings. The existence of this ideological receptor would explain the common human tendency toward embracing ideologies essentially spontaneously and uncritically. This tendency is relevant to critical thinking due to the fact that some ideologies are comprised of beliefs that are false, or maladaptive, or beliefs that prescribe actions that are immoral. The ideological receptor should be relatively uncontroversial since it simply groups together several widely acknowledged functions of normal human cognition into a larger, functional cognitive system. That being said, grouping these independent functions together under a unifying label can constitute an arguably useful model of yet another obstacle to critical thinking, and in theory, an awareness of this obstacle can potentially facilitate its neutralization.

Keywords: receptor, ideology, salience bias, causal attribution, aversive salience, need for closure, cognitive structure, critical thinking

The defining qualities of an ideology – a simplified account

Let us begin by noting that the term *ideology* seems to have been coined originally in the late 1700s, and in the intervening centuries its meaning has evolved. Today, the term is decidedly ambiguous, and it is marked by a wide and varying range of *stipulative definitions*. The term is commonly defined explicitly by an author when it is invoked in substantial theoretical works, and what follows is a stipulative account of ideologies that is tailored for our purposes here. That being said, I believe that this account is fair, justifiable, and generally consistent and compatible with most alternative accounts.

In the most general sense, an *ideology* is a set of inter-related *beliefs*, among which there will typically be beliefs that identify and articulate each of the following three things:

- a purported fundamental undesirability of our prevailing circumstances
- the purported *cause(s)* of this undesirability
- a purported remedy for this undesirability

Thus, an ideology is comprised of an overall set of beliefs wherein that set of beliefs will describe and explain one's purported circumstances, and it will make recommendations for either specific actions or general practices that the adherent expects will produce desirable effects. The various types of ideologies run the gamut, and among other possibilities, they would include personal, *political*, *religious*, and *economic* ideologies. Some ideologies delve

into multiple arenas (e.g., *socialism* and *communism* are ideologies that are both political and economic). Note that an ideology need not actually be effective in practice, nor be otherwise accurate as regards the facts.

Some examples will serve to illustrate how one might map a specific ideology onto the generic model as described above. Thus, following the framework of our generic model, the political ideology of *classical liberalism* might be expressed as shown here:

Prevailing undesirability: Unjust coercion of the people by the state.

Cause: Excessive state authority/power.

Remedy: Limit the power of the state.

As another example, the political ideology of *modern American liberalism* might be characterized as follows:

Prevailing undesirability: Unjust exploitation of the people by the market economy.

Cause: Insufficient state regulation of the market economy.

Remedy: Sufficient state regulation of the market economy.

Lastly, following the framework of our generic model, the religious ideology of Christianity could be crystallized as follows:

Prevailing undesirability: Separation from God.

Cause: The Fall of man.

Remedy: Redemption/salvation.

Whether any of these examples is fair and accurate will be debated, but speaking hypothetically, they all serve to illustrate what might be done with our generic conception of an ideology.

The adherents of any given ideology believe that their ideology bears the *qualities* of both *sufficiency* (i.e., explanatory power) and *efficacy* (i.e., practical usefulness), but even further than this, there is often a social element to ideological thinking, wherein ideologies are embraced by an entire culture or sub-culture. Thus, an ideology is likely to be shared across a community of like-minded adherents, and as is the case with *cultures* generally, the ideology then comes to be regarded by its adherents as being *objective*, or universal in some sense. Thus, an ideology is often implicitly regarded (by its adherents) as bearing the further quality of *correspondence* (connection with objective reality) beyond the aforementioned qualities of sufficiency and efficacy.

Importantly, although ideologies do tend to actually bear the quality of *sufficiency* to some degree (that is, they do provide descriptions/explanations of some sort), ideologies do not necessarily bear the qualities of *correspondence*, nor *logical consistency*, nor even the practical *efficacy* conceived by their adherents, and critics contend that speaking generally, ideologies tend to fall well short of such lofty ambitions. It is perhaps worth noting here that

despite these potential shortcomings, embracing an ideology could still give a subjective sense of meaning to one's endeavors.

The ideological receptor

Borrowing the notion of a receptor from brain physiology, the ideological receptor is a proposed cognitive "receptor" that is structured functionally so as to cause us to embrace certain sets of inter-related beliefs. This ideological receptor is proposed to consist of the following widely accepted functions of normal human cognition:

- **salience bias** – *This is the predisposition toward recognizing and taking into consideration the things that seem conspicuously relevant to our lives. (Among other things, this would include any conditions or circumstances to which we are averse.)*
- **causal attribution** – *Often truncated to simply "attribution," causal attribution is the normal human tendency to adopt causal beliefs concerning the conditions and circumstances (the "effects") that we experience.*
- **aversive salience** – *a specific form of motivational salience, aversive salience consists of the cognitive awareness and intent to remedy or avoid the things in our lives to which we are averse.*
- **the need for closure** – *The need for closure is the normal human need for understanding, marked by a distinct aversion to ambiguity, uncertainty, and mystery. (In practice, this need manifests particularly with an eye toward using that understanding to control one's life.)*

We can connect these tendencies of normal human cognition with the types of beliefs that constitute an ideology (i.e., a fundamental undesirability, its purported cause(s), and a purported remedy): **Salience bias** makes us receptive to any ideological claims that specify a fundamental undesirability of our prevailing circumstances. **Causal attribution** makes us receptive to any ideological claims that specify the cause(s) of the fundamental undesirability of our prevailing circumstances. **Aversive salience** makes us receptive to any ideological claims that prescribe remedies for the fundamental undesirability of our prevailing circumstances. The **need for closure** makes us receptive to the overall explanations that ideologies provide.

Taken together, these distinct cognitive tendencies are proposed to function in concert with one another. This "ideological receptor" pushes us to develop some sense of understanding of our circumstances, along with some sense of control, and to whatever extent that our newly developed understanding might fail to impart any relevant control, at the very least it potentially yields a modicum of relief from the cognitive angst arising from our ongoing subjection to our aversions: We *feel* as if we are empowered, even if we are not.

Conclusions

To my knowledge, the notion of an *ideological receptor* as described above is a novel proposal, though I certainly may have missed a parallel proposal from a predecessor. That

being said, we would do well to note that to my knowledge, the larger proposal as such has not been tested empirically. To be clear, what has been said is a speculative proposal that is offered for its *sufficiency* as well as its potential efficacy in facilitating critical thinking.

In effect, our *ideological receptors* are like holes in our overall understanding that our brains are predisposed toward filling – no matter the cost. Thus, overall, the larger message here can be crystallized as follows:

The ideological receptor is so needy as to be effectively indiscriminate; we will embrace almost any ideology so as to avoid living our lives without one.

To the extent that the ideological receptor exists as described, it can foment a wide array of beliefs, including the following kinds of problematic beliefs:

- beliefs that are false
- beliefs that are maladaptive
- beliefs that prescribe immoral actions

This is especially troubling for humankind in light of the innate human tendency toward *ideological intransigence* - i.e., *confirmation bias* with respect to one's ideology. (Once we adopt a belief, or a belief system, we are terribly unlikely to change our minds).

With all of this in mind, the remedy for the problematic fruits of the ideological receptor will consist in remaining ever mindful of the various functions of normal human cognition that shape our overall understanding, and subjecting our beliefs to ongoing critical scrutiny. As a conceptual construct, the ideological receptor can be employed to help identify and contextualize the various cognitive errors that critical thinking is intended to resolve.