
**Selection for Oppression:
Where Evolutionary Biology Meets Political Philosophy**

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1. Introduction

In my introduction to the edited volume *How Biology Shapes Philosophy: New Foundations for Naturalism*, I made a distinction between two kinds of philosophical project that are often lumped together. I differentiated philosophy of biology from what I call “biophilosophy.” Philosophy of biology is a subdiscipline of philosophy of science that examines biological concepts, patterns of inference, and the relationships between biology and other disciplines (Smith 2017). In contrast, biophilosophy draws on biological science to address distinctively philosophical questions in paradigmatically philosophical ways. Unlike philosophy of biology, biophilosophy does not have a proprietary domain. It seeks guidance and inspiration from biology to ask and answer questions pertaining to any area of philosophical endeavor.

Not every philosophical enquiry can benefit from a biophilosophical treatment, but quite a few can. Among these, Alex Rosenberg lists “the purpose of life, the meaning of human existence, free will, and personal identity” (Rosenberg 2017, 24). Daniel Dennett (2017) draws lessons about anti-essentialism from the Darwinian revolution, Philip Kitcher (2017) tells a biophilosophical about the ethical life, and Luc Faucher (2017) explores the biophilosophy of race. These are just a few examples to illustrate the diversity of biophilosophical thinking. In the present paper, I add another topic to this list by offering a biophilosophical

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contribution to the theory of ideology. My aim is to show how a biological *form* of thinking can significantly clarify how to understand a functional conception of ideology. I do this by drawing on philosophy of biology to disambiguate the idea of function, carving it into two distinct notions of what functions are. Having done this, I argue that only one of these—the *teleological* conception of function—provides a suitable basis for a theory of ideology. Finally, drawing more deeply on evolutionary biology and its elaboration in Ruth Millikan’s theory of proper functions, I provide an analysis of how ideological beliefs get their oppressive function, and proceed trace out some of the entailments of this view.

2. What Is Ideology?

Ideology has long occupied a central place in the theoretical apparatuses of political science, political philosophy and related fields, but there is not agreement about what ideology is. (e.g., Mannheim 1972; Mullins 1972; Larrain 1979; McCarney 1980; Geuss 1981; Thompson 1984; Mills and Goldstick 1989; Gerring 1997; Eagleton 2007). The *functional view* is one of the most popular of these conceptions of ideology. According to functionalism, ideologies consist of beliefs with the function of promoting oppression. Tommie Shelby and Sally Haslanger are two philosophers who advocate a functional account of ideology. Shelby writes that ideologies “function...to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations” (Shelby 2014, 66) and Haslanger similarly writes that “very broadly, ideology is best understood functionally: ideology functions to stabilize or perpetuate power and domination” (Haslanger 2017, 150).

The functional approach is tied to some claims about how ideology works. Functionalists typically also claim that, as Shelby puts it, “ideologies perform their social operations by way of illusion and misrepresentation,” and consequently, “were the cognitive failings of an ideology to become widely recognized and acknowledged, the relations of domination and exploitation that it serves to reinforce would, other things being equal, become less stable and perhaps even amenable to reform” (Shelby 2003, 74). Likewise, Haslanger says that ideology achieves its ends “through some form of masking or illusion” and can be undermined by exposing its “distortion, occlusion and misrepresentation of the facts” (Haslanger 2017, 150).

There are three components of the functional definition that require clarification. Two of them are straightforward and uncontroversial. To *promote* oppression is to contribute to its establishment or persistence. The condition that ideologies promote—*oppression*—is “a system of interrelated barriers and forces which reduce, immobilize and mold people who belong to a certain group, and effect their subordination to another group” (Frye 1983, 33) that is often “embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutions and rules, and the collective consequences of following

those rules. It refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions that are supported by the media and cultural stereotypes as well as by the structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms" (Young 1990, 41). The third element—the notion of *function*—is more complex and contentious.

3. What are functions?

It is not informative to say that ideological beliefs have the function of promoting oppression unless one also specifies what functions are and how things acquire them. Functionalists about ideology typically proceed as though the concept of function does not require elucidation. This is a problem, because to have an adequate functional theory of ideology we need a suitable, explicitly articulated theory of function. Fortunately, there is an extensive literature in the philosophy of biology addressing the question of what functions are. Philosophers of biology distinguish between a *causal* conception of function and a *teleological* conception of function. In light of this, the claim that ideologies have the function of promoting oppression can be understood in two different ways, each of which has a different set of entailments.

According to causal account, the function of a thing is the causal contribution that it makes to some capacity of a system of which it is a part. The function of a thing is something that it *does*. In contrast, according to the teleological account, the function of a thing is what that thing is *for doing*—its purpose. Often, we distinguish between the two by distinguishing between the function that a thing *performs* (causal) and the function that a thing *has* (teleological), but there are exceptions. For instance, a physician might use the term "kidney function"—the noun rather than the verb—to refer to how a person's kidneys are performing.

Often, causal and teleological functions overlap, and can be distinguished only conceptually. This is the case when a thing does what it is for doing—when it performs its teleological function. This is easy to see when considering artefacts. The igniter on a gas oven has the job of causing the oven to light, and if the oven is working properly that is what the igniter does. Under those circumstances, it succeeds in performing its function. However, there are also circumstances in which causal and teleological functions come apart. Sometimes an oven igniter malfunctions and does not light the oven. There are two ways that an artefact might fail to perform its function. Sometimes this happens because the igniter is broken and needs to be repaired or replaced. In that case, the failure is the "fault" of the igniter. The igniter still has its teleological function, but it has lost its causal function. Sometimes an artefact fails because it is situated in an environment to which it is not suited. If a gas oven placed in an oxygen-free chamber, or submerged in water, or not connected to an electrical outlet, or not supplied

with gas, the igniter will not perform its function. In addition to cases like these, it is also possible for something to have a causal function that does not with its teleological function. Suppose that someone was to accidentally drop a lit cigarette into the oven, thereby causing the oven to ignite. The cigarette was not for lighting the oven, but it nevertheless performed that function. In this case, the cigarette performed its causal function accidentally.

4. The Function of Ideology

As I have indicated in the discussion of function, there are two options for how to interpret the claim that ideological beliefs are beliefs with the function of promoting oppression. One is as the claim that promoting oppression is the causal function of such beliefs, and the other is that promoting oppression is their teleological function. Which of these one chooses makes a big difference to one's theory of ideology. If ideologies are beliefs with the causal function of promoting oppression, then beliefs are ideological only insofar as they *actually* contribute to oppression. For example, misogynistic beliefs are only ideological insofar as they actually contribute to the oppression of girls and women. In a society where social and legal protections prevent such beliefs from having these effects, misogynistic beliefs would not be ideological, even though their representational content (roughly, "girls and women are inferior") would be indistinguishable from the corresponding ideological beliefs. Suppose that at one point in time misogynistic beliefs contributed to the oppression of girls and women in a certain society, but at a later time they ceased having those effects because of new legal protections and social norms being put in place. On the causal account, the misogynistic beliefs would lose their ideological status if they no longer cause girls and women to be oppressed. This seems peculiar. Even more peculiarly, misogynistic beliefs that did not spread through a population *because* they oppressed girls and women would not count as ideological beliefs, whereas beliefs about girls and women that, although not aimed at their oppression, accidentally produced oppressive consequences, would count as ideological.

The teleological conception takes us in quite a different direction. From a teleological perspective, what makes a belief ideological is that it is *for* promoting oppression. Whether or not such beliefs produce this effect has no bearing on their ideological status. Unlike its causal counterpart, the teleological account does not allow for the existence of accidentally ideological beliefs: beliefs that just happen to promote oppression, but are not aimed at promoting oppression, do not fall into the category of ideology. And unlike the causal account, the teleological conception of ideology allows for failed ideologies—beliefs that are aimed at oppressing others but which do not do so. This might happen in two ways (recall the example of the oven igniter). The beliefs might be "broken"—that is, configured in such a way that prevents them from realizing their oppressive

purpose—or they might be causally impotent in virtue of being situated in a social milieu to which they are poorly adapted.

I think that most readers should and will agree that the teleological conception of ideology seems more adequate than its causal alternative. It seems right that the ideologicity of a belief is determined by its oppressive purpose, whether or not that aim gets realized, and it also seems right that beliefs can fail to have oppressive effects without losing their status as ideologies. But notwithstanding these advantages, there is a major challenge that the teleological account must surmount. The teleological account seems to imply that people embrace ideological beliefs deliberately in order to promote oppression—that ideologies are, so to speak, oppressive *projects*. But this is unacceptable, for several reasons. One is that the very idea of instrumental belief is inconsistent with the nature of belief. To believe something is to regard it as true. Those who embrace ideological beliefs regard them as true, and embrace them *because* they regard them as true. Of course, our desires can influence our beliefs, and we may be attracted to beliefs that we think will benefit our group at the expense of another, which may lead to us preconsciously lowering the evidential standard for accepting such beliefs. But this is a far cry from the claim that we adopt such beliefs *in order to* reap those benefits. Second, the idea that ideological beliefs are instrumental also flies in the face of the phenomenology of ideology. People who entertain ideological beliefs often do so with great conviction. They regard their beliefs as unquestionably true, and often think of those who cast doubt on them either deluded or dishonest. Sometimes, they are willing to die for them. Finally, the instrumental conception of teleological function flies in the face of the principle that ideologies are products of impersonal social forces, by tying them too closely to the intentional psychology of individuals. I call this bundle of concerns the Problem of Instrumental Belief.

The Problem of Instrumental Belief arises when we try to explain the teleological function of ideology in the same way that we explain functions of artefacts. We explain artefacts' teleological functions by citing their designers' intentions. For instance, the engineers who design gas ovens also design a part—the igniter—for causing the gas entering the oven to ignite. The igniter has that function because that is what engineers intended it to do. However, artefacts are not the only things with teleological functions. Teleological functions are also ubiquitous in nature. Such items are what biologists call “adaptations.” For example: wings are adaptations for flight, protective coloration is an adaptation for predator avoidance, and threat displays are adaptations for repelling predators or rivals. In a pre-Darwinian world, philosophers and scientists often of adaptations as artefacts fashioned by the hand of God. God intended that birds fly, so he equipped them with wings for flying. Darwin offered a better origin story—one that was further developed by generations of scientists after him. It explains how exquisitely complex functional design can arise without any intervention from a

supernatural engineer. I will henceforth use the term “teleofunctions” (Millikan 1993) for these naturally arising, non-intentional teleological functions to distinguish them from the teleological functions that are derived from intentional design.

Biological items with teleofunctions acquire those functions from their evolutionary history. Their function consists in whatever effects they had—or, more accurately, that their precursors had—that accounted for the reproductive success of the organisms that are their bearers. Evolutionary explanations that cite effects that caused a trait to proliferate in ancestral *populations*. The wings of the robin sitting in the maple tree behind my house did not evolve. That robin was never subject to natural selection. However, the robin wing—the design to which properly functioning robin wings conform—did evolve. It was shaped by the reproductive trajectory of many, many birds, over many, many generations. Evolutionary explanations are *historical*. They concern the effects that ancestral traits had in the past, rather than the effects that reproductions of this trait have in the present. Evolutionary explanations are also *satisficing*. Traits may undergo selection even if they enhance fitness (reproductive success) only some of the time—which in some cases can be quite rarely. And evolutionary explanations are *ecological*, because biological items come under selection only those environments where they promote reproductive success. A trait that enhances reproductive success in one environment may not do so, or might do so in quite a different way, in a different environment. Finally, evolutionary explanations are *anti-intentional*. They do not describe evolution as striving towards some goal, or of biological items undergoing selection *in order to* enhance fitness. Instead, evolutionary explanations are entirely concerned with charting the differential reproductive consequences of random variations.

Ideological beliefs are not biological traits, so the evolutionary approach to teleofunctions cannot provide a theoretical underpinning for the theory of ideology—one that is immune to the Problem of Instrumental Belief—unless it can be uncoupled from the biological domain and applied more generally to social phenomena. Ruth Millikan’s account of proper functions does (Millikan 1984). It preserves the form of Darwinian explanation while abstracting away from the biological specifics to give an account of how anything—whether paradigmatically biological or not—can have a teleofunction. Her theory is complex and layered, but its main components are easily summarized. Items acquire teleofunctions if they satisfy two conditions. They must be part of a “reproductively established family,” “Reproduction” denotes a process of copying, by whatever mechanism, so for a thing to be a member of a reproductively established family is for it to be part of a lineage of copies of some prototype. The second condition is that earlier links in the chain of reproductions—the “ancestors” of the item in question—were reproduced on account of their effects in the environment where they were copied.

Ideological beliefs satisfy both of these conditions. They belong to reproductively established families, and spread through societies by a process of copying, which is achieved by means of apparatuses of reproduction: word of mouth, educational institutions, mass media, and so on. Further, they proliferate because they support, justify, stabilize, or otherwise promote relations of domination.

Consider the ideology of White supremacy that spread in the wake of European colonial expansion. Present-day White supremacist beliefs belong to a reproductively established family of beliefs that began to proliferate during the fifteenth century. The transatlantic slave trade was central to the development of notions of racial hierarchy that emerged during this period.¹ From Brazil to Virginia, slave labor was a seemingly inexhaustible source of prosperity for European colonists.

The peoples of West Africa, as well as those of every maritime nation in western Europe and every colony in the New World, played a part in the world's first system of multinational production for what emerged as a mass market—a market for slave-produced sugar, tobacco, coffee, chocolate, dye-stuffs, rice, hemp, and cotton. For four centuries, beginning in the 1400s with Iberian plantation agriculture in the Atlantic sugar islands off the African coast, the African slave trade was an integral and indispensable part of European expansion and the settlement of the Americas (Davis 2006, 10).

Slave-based agriculture was hugely successful in the Caribbean islands and Latin America, whose exports dwarfed those of the more northerly colonies. However, slavery was also a hugely important force in North America, and grew in significance with increased cultivation of cotton, as “slaves became the main form of Southern wealth (aside from land) and slaveholding became the means to prosperity” (Davis 2006, 10). Consequently:

Southern investment flowed mainly into the purchase of slaves, whose soaring price reflected an apparently limitless demand... The large planters soon ranked among America's richest men. Indeed, by 1860 two-thirds of the wealthiest Americans lived in the South... By 1840 the South grew more than sixty percent of the world's cotton and supplied not only Britain and New England, but also the rising industries of continental Europe, including Russia. Throughout the antebellum period, cotton accounted for over half the value of all American exports, and thus it paid for the major share of the nation's imports and capital investments. A stimulant to northern industry, cotton also contributed to the growth of New York City

¹ I concentrate here on the oppression of people of African descent for illustrative purposes. This does not exhaust the ideology of White supremacy.

as a distributing and exporting center that drew income from commissions, freight charges, interest, insurance, and other services connected with the marketing of America's number-one commodity (Davis 2006, 183)

Forced labor by enslaved people fueled the industrial revolution (Williams 1944) and thus technological innovations that generated even greater wealth and power on the international stage. And it is widely accepted by historians of slavery that this made belief in racial hierarchy attractive to beneficiaries of slave-driven wealth—not only the planter and industrial elites, but also the merchants, insurers, and consumers of the goods that these industries produced in such abundance. However, the enjoyment of these goods and benefits needed to be reconciled with the brutality of the economic system that produced them. As Barbara J. Fields explains:

Racial ideology supplied the means of explaining slavery to people whose terrain was a republic founded on radical doctrines of liberty and natural rights, and, more important, a republic in which those doctrines seemed to represent accurately the world in which all but a minority live... Race explained why some people could rightly be denied what others took for granted: namely, liberty, supposedly a self-evident gift from nature's God (Fields 2014, 141).

The ideology of White supremacy reconciled the ideals of liberty and equality with the denial of liberty and equality to the enslaved. At its center was the belief that Black people are irredeemably inferior to Whites, that they are primitive and bestial, and that their proper status in the social order is as subordinate to White people. Add to this the fact that those who benefitted most directly and extravagantly from the forced labor of Black people also had an overwhelmingly powerful influence on the apparatuses whereby such representations are reproduced—publishing, legislation, the academy, and science—and the conditions were in place for a social world that was marinated in the ideology of racial hierarchy. This latter feature explains how ideologies can colonize the minds not only of the beneficiaries of oppression, but also of its victims.

This account of White supremacist ideology conforms to the four components of Darwinian explanations discussed earlier. First, it is a population-level explanation. It concerns the epidemiology of representations, rather than individual attitudes, motives, or intentions as such. The vast majority of White people in the United States did not own slaves. Even in the South, most were poor, subsistence farmers that did not acquire tangible, material benefits from the institution of slavery. And yet, the ideology of White supremacism became an entrenched feature of the European-American social order. Second, it is historical. It looks to the past. Racial slavery in the strict sense is no longer a feature of American life, so present-day beliefs about racial hierarchy no longer perform the

function of reconciling chattel slavery with the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality. Nevertheless, they *have* that function on account of their etiology. Third, is satisficing. Most instances of White supremacist belief probably had no appreciable impact on the propagation and persistence of slavery, and later manifestations of racial oppression. But these beliefs were causally efficacious enough of the time to consolidate their oppressive function. And fourth, the account is ecological. White supremacist beliefs could promote the oppression of Black people only because they unfolded in a social-political-economic environment that was hospitable to their having this impact.

5. Ideology Unmasked

I have mentioned that functional theorists typically claim that ideologies accomplish their aim through some form of masking, concealment, or misdirection. On this view, oppressing some group of people is a hidden agenda that is concealed from others and perhaps even from the ideological believers themselves. If this is really what occurs, then when White supremacists claim that they believe that Black people are inferior to Whites *because this is true*, they are engaged in an act of deception.

Seen from the teleofunctional perspective, this line of reasoning rests on an erroneous assumption. It assumes that the ideological content of a belief must be represented in the believer's mind. But teleofunctionalism offers a different way of looking at ideological content: the content of an ideological belief is the teleofunction of that belief, and the teleofunction need not be represented in the believer's mind, either consciously or unconsciously. Returning to the example, White supremacists need not mentally represent the ideological content of their racial beliefs, because this content is not mental. Rather, it is constituted by the circumstances of the belief's reproduction.

The idea that ideological beliefs conceal their true purpose is bound up with another incorrect assumption: the assumption that ideological must be false. The teleofunctional approach need not insist on the falsity of ideological beliefs. Indeed, the truth value of such beliefs is orthogonal to their function. For example, White supremacists sometimes state that the murder rate for Black Americans is six times that of White Americans. According to FBI records, this is a true statement. But it is nevertheless an ideological statement because, although true, it has an ideological function. It is a reproduction of the representation of Black men as inherently violent that spread in the aftermath of abolition, and which promoted the continued oppression of Black people (Muhammad 2019).

The assumption that ideological content must be mentally represented, and its corollary that ideological beliefs must be false, is at the root of common misunderstanding of Friedrich Engels' notion of "false consciousness." Often, people interpret Engels as claiming that ideological beliefs are false. But Engels'

point was that those who hold ideological beliefs have a false idea of these beliefs' ultimate origin. He set this out in an 1893 letter to Franz Mehring.

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real driving forces (*Triebkräfte*) impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent driving forces... He works with mere thought material which he accepts without examination as the product of thought, he does not investigate further for a more remote process independent of thought; indeed its origin seems obvious to him, because as all action is produced through the medium of thought it also appears to him to be ultimately based upon thought (Engels 1968, 434-435).

Engels does not claim that the content of ideological beliefs must be false. What is false is their view of where these beliefs come from. Although it seems to them that their beliefs are products their own thinking, they are products of social forces. As Torrance (1995) puts the point, false consciousness is false *self*-consciousness.

Engels claimed that the explanation of ideological beliefs is ultimately (“in letzter Instanz”) social. The translation of “*in letzter Instanz*” as “ultimately” is fortuitous, because it resonates with the biological use of the term “ultimate,” which was introduced by Ernst Mayr in 1961. Mayr used the term “ultimate cause” to describe the evolutionary explanation for a trait’s proliferation. He contrasted it with the proximate causes of a trait, which are the developmental processes that give rise to it. Ultimate explanations—explanations citing ultimate causes—do not say anything about the causes of individual tokens of the trait. They address the effects that the trait produced in an ancestral environment that caused it to spread. Similarly, Engels contrasts the proximate psychological causes of ideological beliefs (those occurring in the “medium of thought”) with their more “remote” ultimate social causes.

The teleofunctional theory of ideology entails that we cannot distinguish ideological beliefs from non-ideological ones by psychological means. The ideologicity of a belief is fixed historically rather than psychologically, and ideological beliefs do not have any psychological properties that set them apart from those that are not ideological. Similarly, one cannot determine that a belief is ideological on the basis of its effects, because a belief can have oppressive effects without oppression being its teleofunction. The *only* way to determine whether a belief is ideological or not is to examine its history. To discover whether any given belief is ideological, one gets nowhere if one asks, “What are the motives for adopting this belief?” Instead, one must ask, “Why, did the ancestors of this this belief spread through that population at that time?.”

6. Conclusion

“Ideology” is an essentially contested notion. There are multiple conceptions of what ideology is, and multiple conceptions of how ideology works. There is no single “correct” account of ideology. So, when discussing ideology or labelling something as “ideological,” it is incumbent on the speaker to specify what phenomenon they take the word to name. But this is often just a point of departure for further analysis. This is certainly true of the functional theory of ideology. Saying that beliefs are ideological just in case they have the function of promoting oppression is ambiguous, because of the ambiguity of “function.”. Once we separate the causal notion of function from the teleological one, it becomes evident that only the latter is suitable for a conception of ideology. However, settling on a clear *conception* of ideology is only half the battle such conception needs to be harnessed to a *theory* of how ideology works. In the case of the teleological view, the resources for doing this are uniquely found in evolutionary biology.

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