

# Political Philosophy and Ideology: An Awkward or Complementary Relationship?

## Filosofía política e ideología: ¿Una relación difícil o complementaria?

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**RESUMEN.** Este trabajo examina la relación entre los campos de la filosofía moral y política y el estudio de las ideologías. Comienza por abordar una serie de reservas que los filósofos tienen usualmente sobre el estatuto científico de la investigación sobre ideologías. Procede a continuación a destacar el estilo singular de la investigación filosófica: su continuidad sin ruptura entre el estudio de la filosofía y los argumentos que examina, que contrasta con el lenguaje profesional del estudio de las ideologías, claramente diferenciado del lenguaje de los ideólogos. El trabajo presenta a continuación una perspectiva conceptual para el estudio de las ideologías, que complementa las contribuciones de la filosofía moral y política. Finalmente defiende que la filosofía moral y política y los estudios sobre ideologías pueden compartir de un modo fructífero métodos y visiones.

*Palabras clave:* filosofía política; filosofía moral; ideologías; metodología; análisis conceptual.

**ABSTRACT.** This paper examines the relationship between the fields of moral and political philosophy and the study of ideology. It begins by addressing a number of reservations philosophers usually have regarding the scholarly status of ideology research. It then proceeds to highlight the distinct style of philosophical inquiry, namely, its seamless continuity between the study of philosophy and the arguments it examines, which contrasts with the professional language of the study of ideologies, clearly distinguished from that of ideologists. The paper then presents a conceptual perspective for the study of ideologies that complements the contributions from moral and political philosophy. Arguably, moral and political philosophy and ideology studies can fruitfully share methods and insights.

*Key words:* Political Philosophy; Moral Philosophy; Ideologies; Methodology; Conceptual Analysis.

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When I first started working on the study of ideologies over twenty-five years ago, a philosophy colleague at Oxford approached me and said disapprovingly: “The study of inferior minds can only produce inferior work”. Whether that colleague was right or wrong as concerns my own research is beside the point, and not for me to say. Of far greater significance was the question I went away with, one that I have been pondering to this very day: why would my colleague’s remark have made sense to him and what could I have said in response that would have made him more intellectually receptive and less emotionally dismissive towards thinking ideologically as well as towards the methods of studying it? The following pages are not, consequently, an apology for my academic perversions, but a consideration of the attraction/repulsion modes that the interrelated fields of moral and political philosophy on the one hand, and the study of ideology on the other, may have for each other.

### 1. FIVE RESERVATIONS ENTERTAINED BY PHILOSOPHERS

There are a number of reasons why philosophers might be sceptical about ideologies as a suitable subject for serious research. First, in particular on the European continent, the main respectable way of dealing with ideologies has been through *Ideologiekritik*, whether in a conventional Marxist approach or in more recent critical theory. For those who believe in social truths, ideologies are representations of a false or distorted consciousness. The role of the scholar –or in the Marxist tradition, also the inevitable outcome of the historical process of ending alienation– is to negate ideology, to ensure that it withers away, to remove the mask that conceals the truth once and for all.<sup>1</sup> But that is no longer typical of recent theories of ideology. While recognizing that some ideologies may be deliberately manipulative or deceitful, on the whole they need to be analysed as ways of organizing collective social understandings that are inevitably –and usually non-maliciously– selective. That is the case for the simple reason that all exercises in social understanding occur in a given and limited context. Ordinary language is ambiguous, indeterminate and vague and the meanings it carries are multiple and complex.<sup>2</sup> One major role of ideologies is to make sense and to communicate in that world of linguistic and conceptual imprecision. Ideologies thus serve as filters that offer semantic simplifications –often culturally-specific as well– marking out a path through unstructured ideational environments.<sup>3</sup> Rather than focusing on removing masks, their anal-

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<sup>1</sup> For their basic position see Marx and Engels (1974).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Empson (2004); Bahti (1986); Sorensen (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Freeden (1996: 47-95).

ysis is devoted to explaining what the masks look like, what roles they serve, and how they can be meaningfully decoded.

Second, there are scholars who regard ideology as a manifestation of the self-interested power of a ruling class intended to control the minds of its targets—once again an interpretative framework with Marxist origins, now typically taken up in critical discourse analysis. For those scholars, ideology makes a mockery of the nobler ends of social philosophy—the pursuit of justice, of fairness, of solidarity, and of well-being as substantive ideas; and of reflectiveness, transparency, and reasonableness as pedagogical and heuristic aims of good philosophical method. But that view of ideology is regarded as narrow and one-sided by a new generation of ideology students. It overlooks the fact that ideologies also emerge from grass roots origins, from down-up, that the old notions of a ruling class have made way for theories invoking a broader distribution of social power, that ideologies are vehicles through which the fundamental need for social identity is satisfied, and that the power of language and ideas is unavoidable and can be used for good as well as for bad ends.<sup>4</sup>

Third, there is a common assumption among political philosophers that, at best, any study of ideologies is a ‘lower level’ exercise in description, not in the ‘higher’ demands of logical, rational or ethical analysis. Many philosophers regard investigation into ideologies as a mere mapping of evidence that requires limited intellectual energy. To ‘describe’ has a derogatory connotation in certain academic circles. It is a word that I would never use in explaining what ideology-studies are about. They are exercises in interpretation, not in description. No event or discourse—whether a war, a meal, a lecture, or a protest march—is subject to unambiguous description. It is at best an assortment of facts that are accorded different weighting and evaluation in each of the narratives that replicate them. The activity of describing is always itself one of interpretation and of selectivity; first, because our capacity for detailed and accurate description of social complexity is limited, and second, because description of political ideas and practices will differ from beholder to beholder.

Fourth, ideologies are often considered to be dogmatic or doctrinaire—a characterization popularized by Napoleon but cemented during the interwar years of the twentieth century, when mega-ideologies of the right and the left clashed in fierce and irreconcilable conflict.<sup>5</sup> That supposed tendency apparently makes them anathema as bodies of social thinking when judged against the subtlety and critical assessment of knowledge that philosophers claim to produce as their scholarly hallmark, in particular the professional code of philosophers that

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<sup>4</sup> Geertz (1964: 47-76); Thompson (1990).

<sup>5</sup> Lichtheim (1967); Stråth (2013: 3-19).

involves a readiness to revise and modify their own arguments. However, we now identify ideologies as fluid and malleable, subject to continuous reformulation and far more fragmented than was assumed in the past. Behind the façade even of the seemingly doctrinaire there are subtleties of movement and realignment.

Fifth, and importantly, there is more than one dimension of alleged ‘inferiority’ in play here. It is not only the assumed inferiority of the subject-matter, of the ideas, but of two further features: their level of articulation and their provenance. Most philosophers—though of course not all—are not trained to deal with vernacular discourse. They focus on highly sophisticated and complex forms of expression and argumentation, not on average conversation, or on inadequately thought-out opinions—that is, not on *doxa* but on *episteme*. That is particularly the case with analytical philosophy, described by one of its proponents as “based on dry hard reasoning rather than on a dubious mixture of philosophical ideas, ideology and political allegiances”.<sup>6</sup> In that sense, mainstream philosophy is an exclusionary practice, one in a large measure designed for conversations among philosophers.

## 2. THE UNIQUE AND THE SEAMLESS

Most political philosophers are in search of the unique rather than the representative: not the voices of social groups or crowds, but of distinguished individuals. How else can one explain that the history of political thought is not its history at all but an examination of the thinking of some 50 individuals? No social historian, for example, could get away with such a ludicrously small sample. But the conventional history of political thought has not been written by historians; it has been invented and perpetuated by philosophers (and, in the past, theologians as well). Those who constructed the history of political thought, and the ancient universities that incorporated it into their studies, were elitists of a specific kind: concerned mainly with men of genius and public impact who conducted perennial conversations with each other across time, seemingly in both directions—the living to the dead and the dead to the living—complemented by the exegesis of interpreters and commentators. Alternatively, evolutionary and quasi-teleological theories of intellectual and ideological development were pinned onto the ‘greats’, as if a giant tapestry of increasingly complex and fine-tuned contemplation of the human condition was being unrolled, often towards some form of democracy. For university students and professors alike, the shared corpora fashioned a unity of tradition, of values and of guidelines that could be passed down the generations: an ethical *vade*

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<sup>6</sup> Glock (2008: 200).

*mecum* navigating through familiar terrain that seemed to encompass all that was valuable in the western political tradition. In its outline, one is reminded of Hegel's grand design of the ideas of reason and of freedom as purposively unfolding in history: a partial and selective history whose deviations from the path of reason were simply attributed by Hegel to the cunning of reason itself.

There is another feature of what might be called disciplinary style that deserves attention. Unusually for most areas of knowledge, the subject-matter of philosophy tends to fuse with its study. Thus whereas the study of ideologies, for example, is conducted in a professional language and with analytical tools that differ considerably from the language employed by ideologists and ideologues, the study of philosophy can be seamlessly connected—in language and frequently in approaches—with the discourses and arguments that are its subject of study. Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, and those who study them now, are broadly after the same thing: to clarify thinking and to set up and pursue the good life. Admittedly, that fusion is not always the case—say, in some instances of applied philosophy—but it is nonetheless a distinguishing characteristic of the discipline. We do not find that congruence and commonality between the mental world of the scholar and that of his or her objects of study in sociology, history, anthropology, or political science. This problematic is even reflected in the title of this article, abbreviated for reasons of efficient style. There is an asymmetry between the labels 'political philosophy' and 'ideology' it singles out. A cumbersome but more accurate title would be: 'Political Philosophy and Ideology; Political Philosophy and the Study of Ideology: An Awkward or Complementary Relationship?'

### 3. THE CONCEPT: CHOOSING IDEOLOGICAL ARRANGEMENTS

In any contemplation of public challenges, no attempt to engage with them can ignore the nature, role and relevance of ideologies. Obviously, I entertain a different understanding of ideology than the one coming from Marxist or *Ideologiekritik* origins. To begin with, I believe that it is better to refer to ideologies in the plural rather than to the monolith of ideology in the singular. It is noteworthy that Marx and Engels were completely uninterested in this 'thing' called ideology. Because they assumed it was a uniform cover that would disappear, never to return, once human alienation was abolished, there was no need to investigate its contents or to interrogate its internal diversity. Conversely, the assertion here is that ideologies are the always multiple, contested, actual manifestations of political thinking in a society. By 'actual', I do not mean to suggest that there is a conservative bias in the scholar approaching the study of ideologies. More likely, the opposite is true. For if political language is indeterminate and vague—as it in-

variably is—and if the meanings that concepts can accrue are multiple, then change and malleability are at the heart of the ‘behaviour’ of concepts. And the most significant feature of ideologies is that they compete over the fashioning and control of public political language. Whoever controls such language—and that control shifts continuously over time and across space—exercises crucial directive power over a society. To that extent, ideologies are indeed vehicles of power, but that is the immediate power of words, ideas, and their rhythms. Nor can ideologies be reduced to power practices alone.

Here is another potential meeting point between the study of ideology and political philosophy. The political concept can serve as the basic unit of analysis in both cases. Justice, liberty, rights, equality, democracy, legitimacy, solidarity, and so on figure as central foci around which the two disciplines revolve. Hence one similarity and one difference initially emerge, and they cut across the distinction between the political thinker as practitioner and as analyst. First, the similarity: it lies in the tendency of moral and political philosophers as well as *ideologists* (those giving voice to ideologies, not those studying them) to advocate the truth, the superiority, or at least the merits, of a single meaning of the concept they wish to promote and implant into public understanding. The American founding father Patrick Henry’s impassioned cry of “give me liberty or give me death” is structurally no different from John Rawls’s “justice is the first virtue of social institutions”.<sup>7</sup> They both are prescriptive and selective about their values, often stipulatively so, and they both offer a ranking of those values (assuming that liberty and death are not equally attractive choices). Indeed, political philosophers also operate as ideologists of a rather sophisticated kind, though they express their ideological views in different ways. Political philosophers may wish to see their value judgments as impartial, reflective and even true. But, in the mode of ideologists, they opt to decontest concepts and arguments that are essentially contestable, and that are embedded in identifiable cultural proclivities.<sup>8</sup> It may well be that some ideologues are trapped in millenarian visions or in collective fantasies. Others are too quick on the draw, shooting recklessly from the hip without the mandatory cooling period on which a cautious political philosopher would insist as part of her or his professional responsibility. But both ideologists and political philosophers compete over the control of political language with the aim of preserving, changing or criticizing existing social and ideational practices, however much either group will hide under the mantles of universality or truth.

Second, the difference: for the *student* of ideologies, unlike the normal political or moral philosopher, it does not make much sense to study single concepts,

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<sup>7</sup> Henry (1775); Rawls (1971: 3).

<sup>8</sup> Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu (2006).

because an ideology is a cluster of political concepts that together—and only together—constitute a field of meaning. Liberal ideology is not about one stand-alone concept, not even liberty. At its core it is about the interplay between liberty and other major concepts such as human development and individuality.<sup>9</sup> For a student of liberty to speak of liberty as an isolated, abstract, and ideationally decontextualized concept is meaningless. Socialism is not about one stand-alone concept, not even equality. At its core, it is about the interplay between equality and other major concepts such as sociability, well-being, and activity as labour.<sup>10</sup> What gives the many concepts contained in an ideology meaning is their positioning vis-à-vis each other, their proximity or distance from each other, and the differential qualitative weight each concept is assigned in that agglomeration. The internal combinations of an ideology are continuously reshuffled to create new variants. Attaching liberty to the development of individuality creates the outline of an ideological field that is noticeably remote from a field in which liberty is matched with unlimited property accumulation, or with a nihilistic licence to realize one's will at the costly expense of others. And allotting greater or lesser weight to either markets or welfare has sent liberalism along diverse paths for well over a century.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. DISCURSIVE POWER AND DISCURSIVE PASSION

Perhaps surprisingly to some, power plays a distinctive role not only in the language of ideologists but of philosophers, and it is from the perspective of a *political* theorist that this shared feature can be traced. “Give me liberty or give me death” is an impassioned plea for a particular value to be realized in human relationships. Ideologies, it is generally assumed and not without justification, have strong emotional content: from the extreme example of the overwhelming effect of the Nuremberg rallies on their participants, to the fury displayed by the American anti-abortionists, to the righteous passion shown by liberals who oppose torture or the death penalty. Passion, too, from a political viewpoint, is a manner of exercising power.<sup>12</sup> It is designed, consciously or unconsciously, to have a fast and immediate impact on mobilizing action. But let us not be misled into replicating the tired distinction between passion and reason as a stark dividing line between ideology and philosophy. All ideologies have salient rational components: the planning of future action, the quest for coherent articulation, the categorizing of distinct characteristics between the preferred ideology and others and, in many

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<sup>9</sup> Mill (1910: 114-7).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Jackson (2013: 348-63); Wright (1987).

<sup>11</sup> Freedon (1978 and 1986).

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. James (1998: 1358-96); Thompson and Hoggett (2012).

cases, the quest for universality that many see as the *modus operandi* of moral and social philosophy. But philosophers, too, exercise discursive power, in particular the power of persuasion and of fashioning their arguments so as to possess the high quality that engenders optimal impact on their selected readership—usually other philosophers. John Stuart Mill wrote about his father, the eminent utilitarian James Mill: “My father’s moral convictions, wholly dis severed from religion, were very much of the character of those of the Greek philosophers; and were delivered with the force and decision which characterized all that came from him”.<sup>13</sup>

There is now a growing literature by political and moral philosophers on emotions. But in the main part they are strangely quiet about the role of their own emotions in their work and discipline. Yet philosophers can be quietly emotional about their own arguments. Is it an accident that Rousseau, as did many others, enjoins citizens to love law and justice and refers to “sentiments of sociability, without which it is impossible to be either a good citizen or a loyal subject”?<sup>14</sup> Or take again the younger Mill’s shrewd assessment of his father. On the one hand, “for passionate emotions of all sorts, and for everything which has been said or written in exultation of them, he professed the greatest contempt”. Yet, as John Stuart went on to observe, Mill senior’s “aversion to many intellectual errors... partook... of the character of a moral feeling ... in a degree once common, but now very unusual [written in the 1850s], [he] threw his feelings into his opinions”. And Mill junior added significantly: “which truly it is difficult to understand how any one, who possesses much of both, can fail to do.” Consequently, Mill wrote, “The cultivation of the feelings became one of the cardinal points in my ethical and philosophical creed.”<sup>15</sup> Later, he talked in his *On Liberty* about the need to ‘kindle enthusiasm’ and to stir up the mind of a people when the large and important public issues that subsequently shaped Europe were at stake.<sup>16</sup> Ideologists and moral or political philosophers are not entirely different animals, either in the various modes of expression they utilize or in the social ends they pursue.

But are moral and political philosophers different animals from *students* of ideology? The ‘no’ is perhaps easier to demonstrate than the ‘yes’, and I will begin with that. By training, moral and political philosophers are most at ease with written texts and, as I noted earlier, texts of high quality. Although that is changing slightly with a reinvigorated consideration of the everyday, one only has to look at university courses in moral and political philosophy to see the durability of that tradition. The remit of ideology studies is broader in its

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<sup>13</sup> Mill (1971: 29).

<sup>14</sup> Rousseau (1968: 186).

<sup>15</sup> Mill (1971: 31-2, 86).

<sup>16</sup> Mill (1910: 93).



sources: in addition to texts, spoken as well as written, which still supply the major raw material, it encompasses the importance of myth and fantasy as a vital component of what the human mind produces in imagining social life. It also draws considerable information from visual material: social rituals such as the honouring of the war-dead or parades, the body-language of border-control officers, or the public architecture of cities. And it focuses on group thinking, whether as disseminators of collective belief-systems or as consumers of ideological messages. The analytical skills which it harnesses overlap with those needed by philosophers, but they do not coincide entirely.

At one end of the spectrum, to study an ideology is to acquire as firm a control of a text as is required by philosophers—to pore over it, to categorize its main issues and to subject it to a critical appraisal of the highest possible order. But at the same time the texts will be interrogated for a different set of qualities. Their relevance to perennial issues, or to improving the quality of thinking and of social life, is not usually the point of the critical analysis of ideology scholars. Rather, those scholars focus on the nature of the work that an ideological speech-act, text, or visual image, may be thought to discharge. And what they do significantly complements the work of moral and political philosophers. They test the ideology in terms of its own criteria of success. Does it communicate well? Can it be easily consumed by its intended audiences and thus make an impact? Does its inevitable simplification of political ideas for the purpose of mass consumption strike an appropriate balance between dumbing down and over-technical sophistication? Is it firm enough to have a durable agenda, yet flexible enough to adapt to the barrage of contingencies that will constantly assail it? Does it display an imaginative and experimental creativity and an attractive way of ordering ideas from which public policy can materialize?<sup>17</sup> The issue here is that the same texts do different work for those examining them. As I have argued elsewhere, John Rawls can be understood—through the very same passages—as a superb and inventive political philosopher, as an ideologist who reflects an esoteric North American, East coast, academic liberalism shared by a tiny, loyal but eccentric tribe, and as a terrible literary stylist whose prose borders on the impenetrable.<sup>18</sup> Take your pick, depending on what interests you most!

## 5. MORAL PHILOSOPHIES AND IDEOLOGIES

As for moral philosophers versus ideologists—ideological practitioners—here too is a distinction. Charles Larmore has characterized moral philosophy as “fo-

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<sup>17</sup> Freeden (2003: 122-8).

<sup>18</sup> Freeden (1996: 228-36).

cusing on the proper application of certain moral truths to political reality”.<sup>19</sup> But that is rarely the case and Larmore skips over a missing link. Moral philosophy designs solutions to a very broad range of problems and dilemmas evident in social practices: torture, punishment, work, various forms of discrimination, the global maldistribution of resources, the ethics of immigration, protection of human rights, *modus vivendi*, medical research, and so on. But it does not actually apply them to political reality. That is what *ideologies* do, as they compete over fashioning public policy. Moral philosophers concentrate on producing the best *ideas* they can for the purposes of addressing public challenges, but ideologists identify the areas in which public challenges have left the intellectual drawing board and actually become part of broad political discourse, often translated into a more accessible language. Those are then either scattered among different ideological positions or capable of securing space within existing ideological structures, or, indeed, encouraging new ideological variants to develop—for better or for worse. Ideological creators and propagators may convert individual philosophical proposals into socially held-thought practices, and they may well alight on significant moral issues despite no training in moral philosophy at all. In sum, ideologies—and only ideologies—are the mechanisms through which public challenges are met and translated into policy.

If we take liberalism as an example, it may engage us as scholars on three different dimensions. First, in current political philosophy liberalism is regarded more or less as coterminous with contemporary ethics. It seeks universal justification for a decent society grounded on a formulaic exploration of justice and fairness, even more than of liberty. It conjures up ideal social relationships based on the premise that individuals are rational, autonomous and purposive agents. It promotes the desideratum that a reasonable outline consensus on communal policy can be achieved. And in many of its versions, the state is entrusted with securing the political end of neutrality among the different conceptions of the good held by its citizens. Second, in current ideology research liberalism is a parochial European and North American family of ideologies containing slightly different variants. It promotes a civilizing mission based on the free development of individuals commensurate with political institutions that secure a regulated liberty. It regards the state as a patently non-neutral organization geared to advancing human welfare through social and political rights. It encourages market relationships, though only as long as they do not impinge on fundamental human well-being. And in recent decades it has advocated cultural and ethnic pluralism as the sign of a tolerant and mature society. All along, it is aware that the promotion of those values is a competitive enterprise that involves a struggle with other ideologies

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<sup>19</sup> Larmore (2013).

and that consequently requires the patient and often elusive building-up of public support. Third, there is a more general methodological sense that links a liberal outlook with good research. The methodology of research nourishes a fundamental pluralism of curiosity that avoids *a priori* conclusions. It cultivates a distance from the subject-matter inspired by openness, mutability and flexibility of interpretation that is also endemic to a liberal mindset.<sup>20</sup>

Of these three levels of liberalism, let me pick out the notion of human beings as rational, autonomous, purposive agents. The discovery of emotion aside, that notion of agency is still a guiding set of features that most moral and political philosophers hold as given in their normative theories. Here are two further dividing lines that distinguish the study of ideologies from what is loosely called Anglo-American philosophy. First, ideology scholars are less impressed by the ‘ideal-type’ of autonomous and purposive agents, recognizing the normal imperfections that are at play in everyday communal life. Second, ideology scholars recognize unintentionality as well as intentionality in human practices. Individuals and groups send out messages they did not wish to communicate; and they send out messages that are received or consumed in a way not intended by the author of the message. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur put this brilliantly when referring to the surplus of meaning contained in an utterance.<sup>21</sup> He referred mainly to the differences between the intent of a message and its reception and interpretation. The dissemination of public norms may emanate from assumptions, or dispositions, about which individuals have little or no awareness, yet they permeate social and moral thinking. That is precisely where the analysis of ideologies can develop tools that illuminate the possibilities and hindrances to the realization of certain normative goals—say, through discourse analysis that uncovers the impact of racism or nationalism; or the prevalence of linguistic clichés that colour perceptions of the world, as in the populist phrase “take back control” that propelled the UK towards Brexit, or the incantation of President Trump, “make America great again”.

Can all this assist the task of moral and political philosophers? Most assuredly, in three ways. First, ideologies occupy the domain of the typical, and a moral philosophy that wishes to descend from the academic stratosphere must adapt itself to the typical in a range of parallel normal languages—those of the general public, of politicians, bureaucrats, educationalists, social reformers, journalists and lawmakers. Second, the study of ideologies includes the good, the bad, and the horrific. As objects of study they all are of equivalent interest—excellent books have been written about the ideas of heinous dictators. Moral

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<sup>20</sup> Freeden (2015).

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur (1976).

philosophers can benefit from understanding those permeable boundaries of human thought and action. While I do not recommend a new subject called ‘immoral philosophy’, there might be space for the philosophy of the immoral and the amoral—for opening up the gap between professional study and its subject matter that has been seamlessly closed in many philosophical practices. Third, ideologies filter the contingent and the ephemeral towards their more durable cores and long-term values. They act as a significant two-way process in which the ideological cores referred to above absorb and are embellished by what happens in their ideational periphery, namely, at the interface between the collectively-held central principles and preferences of an ideology and the concrete events and circumstances that impinge and impact on them. In parallel, the cores channel—at least in part—which contingency or particularity is offered access to existing ideological spaces, and which is denied entry.

To illustrate, recent experiences of terror are located at the peripheries of European ideological families and undergo alternative patterns of absorption within each ideology. Some ideologies will interpret them as brutal assaults by evil individuals and alien cultures on indigenous lifestyles that require steadfast protection through sealing borders and strong counterattacks. Other ideologies—which may be equally appalled and condemnatory about terror—will nonetheless be moved to address some of the social causes of terror and to assist in some of its social consequences, such as mitigating the plight of refugees. To comprehend the ideological maps by means of which significant social groups interpret and react to terror, and to identify and explain the highways and byways through that particular terrain—part of which is *terra incognita*—is one of the chief functions of ideological analysis and should serve as an indispensable aid to moral philosophy in its search for feasible solutions.

## 6. ABORTION AND RIGHTS

To conclude, a few words about how a moral or political philosopher and a student of ideologies would address the same issue, say the right to abortion. Abortion has always been a social, legal and moral minefield. In the space provided, I can only run briefly through some characteristic arguments, in order to distinguish them from another set of ideologically challenging considerations. The older established position regards abortion as a proscribed practice, even a sin or an abomination, from a number of religious viewpoints. Whether or not moral philosophers subscribe to that, the arguments have since become immensely more complex. One class of contentions revolves around the obligation we have to unborn children: do we have a duty to protect them, or not to deny them fu-

ture experiences as human beings? Not all duties entail corresponding rights of the immediate object, so an additional line of reasoning might be introduced, maintaining that foetuses are rights bearers, even if they cannot make moral claims themselves. Other moral arguments involve consistency claims: those who oppose the death penalty on principle should not condemn foetuses to death without fear of contradiction. Then there is some confusion over whether as-signing foetuses the status of a person entails their being a moral person; whether the two concepts are indissolubly interlocked. A moral person may be one capable of making justifiable moral choices (not a foetus, then), or such choices may be made on a foetus's behalf by a prospective mother, father or by society at large. But a person may more basically be one who should be treated ethically—which might not distinguish between a foetus and animals. An entirely different set of moral debates revolves around ownership and choice. If the mother is the sole owner of her body, is a foetus located inside her entirely her property or is she its trustee, a vehicle through which the person of the foetus passes? There is also the question of the paternal ownership, or at least joint control, over abortion decisions, regarded as of lesser importance in most moral and cultural systems. Related to that is the case of forced pregnancy, where the woman's choice of conception was withheld or disabled.<sup>22</sup>

Turning to the analysis of those problems, the question posed by the student of ideology is not: is that a good or a bad moral claim, a right or a wrong principle, or a valid and legitimate philosophical argument. The question is, rather, what has to hold for those claims, principles, and arguments to make sense both to their originators and to those to whom they are addressed? Indeed, that question ought also to be a crucial consideration for moral and political philosophers concerned on the one hand with understanding the impact and interpretation of their arguments, and on the other with the social weight of their arguments as candidates for public policy.

An ideological analysis of the abortion issue reveals further dimensions vital to formulating public policy. One raises the conceptual question of when does life begin, to which any scientific or philosophical response can be contested ideologically. Another is the public or private standing of abortion issues—do they fall within the domain of state responsibility or outside it? Some forms of liberalism will press for the state being *hors de combat* on this issue, while traditional conservative ideologies will accord the state and its agents direct responsibility for enforcing whichever moral position is the 'proper' one. Even if one follows the (unattainable) view that a state should be neutral among different conceptions of the good, the silence of the state—given its standing as the ultimate legitimate source

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<sup>22</sup> For many of the above issues see, e.g., Rudy (2001); Glover (1990).

of publicly concerned decisions in a society—would implicitly endorse whichever practice regarding abortion prevailed in that society and thus, in the eyes of the opponents of that practice, be biased against them. That is exacerbated by the asymmetry between pro- and anti-abortionists. Pro-abortionists need not trouble themselves with those who want to carry a pregnancy to its full term. They merely exempt exceptions to the typical practice of giving birth to conceived fetuses. Anti-abortionists will regard deliberate termination as tantamount to the crime of murder and thus rule out any exception to the practice of permitting a foetus to go through whatever its biological course of development may be.

Tellingly, Supreme Courts in Germany and in the USA have taken ideologically opposed views on termination based on philosophically principled arguments. In Germany the court emphasized the dignity of unborn life, regarding abortion as “an act of killing”. It saw itself as objectively ordering public morality with due sensitivity to the shadow of the Nazi past that hung over Germany.<sup>23</sup> In the USA the broader right to abort, within certain constraints, was based not on the right of a woman to choose but on her right to privacy—a salient example of a liberal ideology nourished on a secure private sphere.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, in theories of *modus vivendi* abortion is a clear instance of a zero-sum problem for which no compromise is possible between the two opposing principles.<sup>25</sup> In such cases ideologies offer logically arbitrary but culturally meaningful solutions to intractable conflict, because temporary decisions of one kind or another have to be urgently attempted.

As examples of actual political thinking, rights are consequently regarded not only as moral claims but as devices with an important discursive function. A right is always a service concept to the good attached to it. The right is invariably to something else: the right to life, to liberty, to welfare, to property, etc. From that perspective a right is an empty yet crucial capsule designed to protect and prioritize whatever social value is considered to be of overriding significance by those who advocate it. Among the fundamental features with which the political sphere is entrusted is the role of assigning different measures of significance to its members, institutions and practices. It effects that distributive function by ranking social aims, demands, processes and structures and by attempting to bestow on their relative standing an aura of non-negotiability—an obvious act of discursive power. Rights are the concept par excellence that distributes such significance. By attaching the word ‘right’ to the claim or good one is articulating, it is propelled to the top of the ranking hierarchy of such goods. ‘I want’ or ‘I need’ can never accomplish with such eloquent and rhetorical force what ‘I have a right to’ can. In

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<sup>23</sup> German Constitutional Court (1976).

<sup>24</sup> Touro Law Center (1973).

<sup>25</sup> See May (2005).

employing terms such as rights, legitimacy, or the public interest, ideologies distribute significance differentially across the spectrum of moral and political concepts embraced by each of them, regulating the variability of the persuasive intensity those notions command. Here again lies the important difference between philosophical and ideological argumentation, yet both are indispensable to accounting for the manner in which societies work.

### 7. A FINAL CODA

Ultimately it is important that the fields of moral philosophy and of ideology studies take each other seriously, both with regard to insights they can share and methods they can learn from. The field of ideology studies can emulate the reflective precision and eye for subtle distinctions that is the mark of good philosophical analysis. And the field of *political* philosophy needs to concede that it does not have a monopoly on political theory. In particular, rather than consigning the common human practices of thinking politically and ideologically to a place beyond the horizons of philosophy, such thinking should be regarded as a real ideational pursuit demanding decoding and offering insights into the human condition, however attractive or unattractive the contents of that practice are. That too is what good political theory should do. And for political philosophers, ideologies can serve as the training ground in which arguments, principles and recommendations for improved social living can be shaped and tested.

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