they must be actively taught this definition, and some of them prove to be brilliant graduates in this process. It is astonishing how subtle, resourceful and quick-witted men and women can be in proving themselves to be uncivilized and thickheaded. In one sense, of course, this 'performative contradiction' is cause for political despondency; but in the appropriate circumstances it is a contradiction on which a ruling order may come to grief.

Over the past ten years I have discussed the concept of ideology with Toril Moi perhaps more regularly and intensively than any other intellectual topic, and her thoughts on the subject are now so closely interwoven with mine that where her reflections end and mine begin is, as they are fond of saying these days, 'undecidable'. I am grateful to have had the benefit of her keener, more analytic mind. I must also thank Norman Geras, who read the book and gave me the benefit of his valuable judgement; and I am grateful to Ken Hirschkop, who submitted the manuscript of the book to a typically meticulous reading and thus saved me from a number of lapses and lacunae. I am also much indebted to Gargi Bhattacharyya, who generously spared time from her own work to give me valuable assistance with research.

T.E.

1

WHAT IS IDEOLOGY?

Nobody has yet come up with a single adequate definition of ideology, and this book will be no exception. This is not because workers in the field are remarkable for their low intelligence, but because the term 'ideology' has a whole range of useful meanings, not all of which are compatible with each other. To try to compress this wealth of meaning into a single comprehensive definition would thus be unhelpful even if it were possible. The word 'ideology', one might say, is a text, woven of a whole tissue of different conceptual strands; it is traced through by divergent histories, and it is probably more important to assess what is valuable or can be discarded in each of these lineages than to merge them forcibly into some grand global theory.

To indicate this variety of meaning, let me list more or less at random some definitions of ideology currently in circulation:

(a) the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life;
(b) a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class;
(c) ideas which help to legitimize a dominant political power;
(d) false ideas which help to legitimize a dominant political power;
(e) systematically distorted communication;
(f) that which offers a position for a subject;
(g) forms of thought motivated by social interests;
(b) identity thinking;
(l) socially necessary illusion;
(n) the conjunction of discourse and power;
(k) the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world;
(l) action-oriented sets of beliefs;
(m) the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality;
(n) semiotic closure;
(o) the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure;
(p) the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality.\(^1\)

There are several points to be noted about this list. First, not all of these formulations are compatible with one another. If, for example, ideology means any set of beliefs motivated by social interests, then it cannot simply signify the dominant forms of thought in a society. Others of these definitions may be mutually compatible, but with some interesting implications: if ideology is both illusion and the medium in which social actors make sense of their world, then this tells us something rather depressing about our routine modes of sense-making. Secondly, we may note that some of these formulations are pejorative, others ambiguously so, and some not pejorative at all. On several of these definitions, nobody would claim that their own thinking was ideological, just as nobody would habitually refer to themselves as Fasos. Ideology, like halitosis, is in this sense what the other person has. It is part of what we mean by claiming that human beings are somewhat rational that we would be puzzled to encounter someone who held convictions which they acknowledged to be illusory. Some of these definitions, however, are neutral in this respect – ‘a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class’, for example – and to this extent one might well term one’s own views ideological without any implication that they were false or chimerical.

Thirdly, we can note that some of these formulations involve epistemological questions – questions concerned with our knowledge of the world – while others are silent on this score. Some of them involve a sense of not seeing reality properly, whereas a definition like ‘action-oriented sets of beliefs’ leaves this issue open. This distinction, as we shall see, is an important bone of contention in the theory of ideology, and reflects a dissonance between two of the mainstream traditions we find inscribed within the term. Roughly speaking, one central lineage, from Hegel and Marx to Georg Lukács and some later Marxist thinkers, has been much preoccupied with ideas of true and false cognition, with ideology as illusion, distortion and mystification; whereas an alternative tradition of thought has been less epistemological than sociological, concerned more with the function of ideas within social life than with their reality or unreality. The Marxist heritage has itself straddled these two intellectual currents, and that both of them have something interesting to tell us will be one of the contentsions of this book.

Whenever one is pondering the meaning of some specialized term, it is always useful to get a sense of how it would be used by the person-in-the-street, if it is used there at all. This is not to claim such usage as some final court of appeal, a gesture which many would view as itself ideological; but consulting the person-in-the-street nonetheless has its uses. What, then, would be meant if somebody remarked in the course of a pub conversation: ‘Oh, that’s just ideological!’ Not, presumably, that what had just been said was simply false, though this might be implied; if that was what was meant, why not just say so? It is also unlikely that people in a pub would mean something like ‘That’s a fine specimen of semiotic closure!’ or hotly accuse one another of confusing linguistic and phenomenal reality. To claim in ordinary conversation that someone is speaking ideologically is surely to hold that they are judging a particular issue through some rigid framework of preconceived ideas which distorts their understanding. I view things as they really are; you squint at them though a tunnel vision imposed by some extraneous system of doctrine. There is usually a suggestion that this involves an oversimplifying view of the world – that to speak or judge ‘ideologically’ is to do so schematically, stereotypically, and perhaps with the faintest hint of fanaticism. The opposite of ideology here, then, would be less ‘absolute truth’ than ‘empirical’ or ‘pragmatic’. This view, the person-in-the-street might be gratified to hear, has the august support of the sociologist Emile Durkheim, who characterized the ‘ideological method’ as consisting in ‘the use of notions to govern the collation of facts rather than deriving notions from them.’\(^2\)

It is surely not hard to show what is wrong with such a case. Most people would now concede that without preconceptions of some kind – what the philosopher Martin Heidegger calls ‘pre-understandings’ – we would not even be able to identify an issue or situation, let alone pass judgement upon it. There is no such thing as presuppositionless thought, and to this extent all
of our thinking might be said to be ideological. Perhaps rigid preconceptions makes the difference: I presume that Paul McCartney has eaten in the last three months, which is not particularly ideological, whereas you presuppose that he is one of the forty thousand elect who will be saved on the Day of Judgement. But one person's rigidity is, notoriously, another's openness-mindedness. His thought is red-neck, yours is doctrinal, and mine is deliciously supple. There are certainly forms of thought which simply 'read off' a particular situation from certain pre-established general principles, and the style of thinking we call 'rationalist' has in general been guilty of this error. But it remains to be seen whether all that we call ideological is in this sense rationalistic.

Some of the most vociferous persons-in-the-street are known as American sociologists. The belief that ideology is a schematic, inflexible way of seeing the world, as against some more modest, piecemeal, pragmatic wisdom, was elevated in the post-war period from a piece of popular wisdom to an elaborate sociological theory. For the American political theorist Edward Shils, ideologies are explicit, closed, resistant to innovation, promulgated with a great deal of affectivity and require total adherence from their devotees. What this comes down to is that the Soviet Union is in the grip of ideology while the United States sees things as they really are. This, as the reader will appreciate, is not in itself an ideological viewpoint. To seek some humble, pragmatic political goal, such as bringing down the democratically elected government of Chile, is a question of adapting oneself realistically to the facts; to send one's tanks into Czechoslovakia is an instance of ideological fanaticism.

An interesting feature of this 'end-of-ideology' ideology is that it tends to view ideology in two quite contradictory ways, as both blindly irrational and excessively rationalistic. On the one hand, ideologies are passionate, rhetorical, impelled by some benighted pseudo-religious faith which the sober technocratic world of modern capitalism has thankfully outgrown; on the other hand they are arid conceptual systems which seek to reconstruct society from the ground up in accordance with some bloodless blueprint. As Alvin Gouldner sardonically encapsulates these ambivalences, ideology is 'the mind-inflaming realm of the doctrinaire, the dogmatic, the impassioned, the dehumanising, the false, the irrational, and, of course, the "extremist" consciousness'. From the standpoint of an empiricist social engineering, ideologies have at once too much heart and too little, and so can be condemned in the same breath as lurid fantasy and straitjacketing dogma. They attract, in other words, the ambiguous response traditionally accorded to intellectuals, who are scorned for their clinical remoteness from the very moment they are being censored for their clinical remoteness from common affections. It is a choice irony that in seeking to replace an impassioned fanaticism with an austere technocratic approach to social problems, the end-of-ideology theorists unwittingly re- enact the gesture of those who invented the term 'ideology' in the first place, the ideologues of the French Enlightenment.

An objection to the case that ideology consists in peculiarly rigid sets of ideas is that not every rigid set of ideas is ideological. I may have unusually inflexible beliefs about how to brush my teeth, submitting each individual tooth to an exact number of strokes and favouring mauve toothbrushes only, but it would seem strange in most circumstances to call such views ideological. ('Pathological' might be rather more accurate.) It is true that people sometimes use the word ideology to refer to systematic belief in general, as when someone says that they abstain from eating meat 'for practical rather than ideological reasons'. 'Ideology' here is more or less synonymous with the broad sense of the term 'philosophy', as in the phrase 'The President has no philosophy', which was spoken approvingly about Richard Nixon by one of his aides. But ideology is surely often felt to entail more than just this. If I am obsessive about brushing my teeth because if the British do not keep in good health then the Soviets will walk all over our flabby, toothless nation, or if I make a fetish of physical health because I belong to a society which can exert technological dominion over just about everything but death, then it might make more sense to describe my behaviour as ideologically motivated. The term ideology, in other words, would seem to make reference not only to belief systems, but to questions of power.

What kind of reference, though? Perhaps the most common answer is to claim that ideology has to do with legitimating the power of a dominant social group or class. 'To study ideology', writes John B. Thompson, '... is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination.' This is probably the single most widely accepted definition of ideology, and the process of legitimation would seem to involve at least six different strategies. A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to its naturalizing and universalizing such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; denigrating ideas which might challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and obscuring social reality in ways convenient
to itself. Such 'mystification', as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions. In any actual ideological formation, all six of these strategies are likely to interact in complex ways.

There are, however, at least two major difficulties with this otherwise persuasive definition of ideology. For one thing, not every body of belief which people commonly term ideological is associated with a predominant political power. The political left, in particular, tends almost instinctively to think of such dominant modes when it considers the topic of ideology, but what then do we call the beliefs of the Levellers, Diggers, Narodniki and Suffragettes, which were certainly not the governing value systems of their day? Are socialism and feminism ideologies, and if not why not? Are they non-ideological when in political opposition but ideological when they come to power? If what the Diggers and Suffragettes believed is 'ideological', as a good deal of common usage would suggest, then by no means all ideologies are oppressive and spuriously legitimating. Indeed the right-wing political theorist Kenneth Minogue holds, astoundingly, that all ideologies are politically oppositional, sterile tokenizing schemes as opposed to the ruling practical wisdom: 'ideologies can be specified in terms of a shared hostility to modernity, to liberalism in politics, individualism in moral practice, and the market in economics.' On this view, supporters of socialism are ideological whereas defenders of capitalism are not. The extent to which one is prepared to use the term ideology of one's own political views is a reliable index of the nature of one's ideological ideology. Generally speaking, conservatives like Minogue are nervous of the concept in their own case, since to dub their own beliefs ideological would be to risk turning them into objects of conterpart.

Does this mean, then, that socialists, feminists and other radicals should come clean about the ideological nature of their own values? If the term ideology is confined to dominant forms of social thought, such a move would be inaccurate and needlessly confusing; but it may be felt that there is need here for a broader definition of ideology, as any kind of intersection between belief systems and political power. And such a definition would be neutral on the question of whether this intersection challenged or confirmed a particular social order. The political philosopher Martin Seliger argues for just such a formulation, defining ideology as 'sets of ideas by which men [sic] posit, explain and justify ends and means of organised social action, and specifically political action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uphold or rebuild a given social order.' On this formation, it would make perfect sense to speak of 'socialist ideology', as it would not (at least in the West) if ideology meant just ruling belief systems, and as it would not, at least for a socialist, if ideology referred inescapably to illusion, mystification and false consciousness.

To widen the scope of the term ideology in this style has the advantage of staying faithful to much common usage, and thus of resolving the apparent dilemma of why, say, fascism should be an ideology but feminism should not be. It carries, however, the disadvantage of appearing to jettison from the concept of ideology a number of elements which many radical theorists have assumed to be central to it: the obscuring and 'naturalizing' of social reality, the spurious resolution of real contradictions, and so on. My own view is that both the wider and narrower senses of ideology have their uses, and that their mutual incompatibility, descending as they do from divergent political and conceptual histories, must be simply acknowledged. This view has the advantage of remaining loyal to the implicit slogan of Bertolt Brecht - 'Use what you can!' - and the disadvantage of excessive charity.

Such charity is a fault because it risks broadening the concept of ideology to the point where it becomes politically toothless; and this is the second problem with the 'ideology as legitimation' thesis, one which concerns the nature of power itself. On the view of Michel Foucault and his acolytes, power is not something confined to armies and parliaments: it is, rather, a pervasive, intangible network of force which weaves itself into our slightest gestures and most intimate utterances. On this theory, to limit the idea of power to its more obvious political manifestations would itself be an ideological move, obscuring the complex diffuseness of its operations. That we should think of power as imprinting our personal relations and routine activities is a clear political gain, as feminists, for instance, have not been slow to recognize; but it carries with it a problem for the meaning of ideology. For if there are no values and beliefs not bound up with power, then the term ideology threatens to expand to vanishing point. Any word which covers everything loses its cutting edge and dwindles to an empty sound. For a term to have meaning, it must be possible to specify what, in particular circumstances, would count as the other of it - which doesn't necessarily mean specifying something which would be always and everywhere the other of it. If power, like the Almighty himself, is omnipresent, then the word ideology ceases to single out anything in particular and becomes
wholly uninformative - just as if any piece of human behaviour whatsoever, including torture, could count as an instance of compassion, the word compassion shrinks to an empty signifier.

Faithful to this logic, Foucault and his followers effectively abandon the concept of ideology altogether, replacing it with the more capacious 'discourse'. But this may be to relinquish too quickly a useful distinction. The force of the term ideology lies in its capacity to discriminate between those power struggles which are somehow central to a whole form of social life, and those which are not. A breakfast-time quarrel between husband and wife over who exactly allowed the toast to turn that grotesque shade of black need not be ideological; it becomes so when, for example, it begins to engage questions of sexual power, beliefs about gender roles and so on. To say that this sort of contention is ideological makes a difference, tells us something informative, as the more 'expansionistic' senses of the word do not. Those radicals who hold that 'everything is ideological' or 'everything is political' seem not to realize that they are in danger of curting the ground from beneath their own feet. Such slogans may valuably challenge an excessively narrow definition of politics and ideology, one convenient for a ruling power intent on depoliticizing whole sectors of social life. But to stretch these terms to the point where they become coextensive with everything is simply to empty them of force, which is equally congenial to the ruling order. It is perfectly possible to agree with Nietzsche and Foucault that power is everywhere, while wanting for certain practical purposes to distinguish between more and less central instances of it.

There are those on the political left, however, who feel uneasy about this whole business of deciding between the more and less central. Isn't this merely a surreptitious attempt to marginalize certain power struggles which have been unduly neglected? Do we really want to draw up a hierarchy of such conflicts, thus reproducing a typically conservative habit of thought? If someone actually believes that a squabble between two children over a ball is as important as the El Salvador liberation movement, then you simply have to ask them whether they are joking. Perhaps by dint of sufficient ridicule you might persuade them to become properly hierarchical thinkers. Political radicals are quite as dedicated to the concept of privilege as their opponents: they believe, for example, that the level of food supplies in Mozambique is a weightier issue than the love life of Mickey Mouse. To claim that one kind of conflict is more important than another involves, of course, arguing for this priority and being open to disapproval; but nobody actually believes that

'power is everywhere' in the sense that any manifestation of it is as significant as any other. On this issue, as perhaps on all others, nobody is in fact a relativist, whatever they may rhetorically assert.

Not everything, then, may usefully be said to be ideological. If there is nothing which is not ideological, then the term cancels all the way through and drops out of sight. To say this does not commit one to believing that there is a kind of discourse which is inherently non-ideological; it just means that in any particular situation you must be able to point to what counts as non-ideological for the term to have meaning. Equally, however, one might claim that there is no piece of discourse which could not be ideological, given the appropriate conditions. 'Have you put the car out yet?' could be an ideological utterance, if (for example) it carried the unspoken implication: 'Or are you being your usual shiftless proletarian self?' Conversely, the statement 'men are superior to women' need not be ideological (in the sense of supporting a dominant power); delivered in a suitably sardonic tone, it might be a way of subverting sexist ideology.

A way of putting this point is to suggest that ideology is a matter of 'discourse' rather than 'language'. It concerns the actual uses of language between particular human subjects for the production of specific effects. You could not decide whether a statement was ideological or not by inspecting it in isolation from its discursive context, any more than you could decide in this way whether a piece of writing was a work of literary art. Ideology is less a matter of the inherent linguistic properties of a pronouncement than a question of who is saying what to whom for what purposes. This isn't to deny that there are particular ideological 'idioms': the language of fascism, for example. Fascism tends to have its own peculiar lexicon (Lebensraum, sacrifice, blood and soil), but what is primarily ideological about these terms is the power-interests they serve and the political effects they generate. The general point, then, is that exactly the same piece of language may be ideological in one context and not in another; ideology is a function of the relation of an utterance to its social context.

Similar problems to those of the 'pan-powerist' case arise if we define ideology as any discourse bound up with specific social interests. For, once again, what discourse isn't? Many people outside right-wing academia would nowadays suspect the notion of some wholly disinterested language; and if they are right then it would seem pointless to define ideology as 'socially interested' utterances, since this covers absolutely anything. (The very word 'interest', incidentally, is of ideological interest: as Raymond
Williams points out in *Keywords*, it is significant that 'our most general word for attraction or involvement should have developed from a formal objective term in property and finance ... this new central word for attraction, attention and concern is saturated with the experience of a society based on money relationships'. Perhaps we could try to distinguish here between 'social' and purely 'individual' kinds of interest, so that the word ideology would denote the interests of specific social groups rather than, say, someone's insatiable hankering for haddock. But the dividing line between social and individual is notoriously problematic, and 'social interests' is in any case so broad a category as to risk emptying the concept of ideology once more of meaning.

It may be useful, even so, to discriminate between two 'levels' of interest, one of which might be said to be ideological and the other not. Human beings have certain 'deep' interests generated by the nature of their bodies: interests in eating, communicating with one another, understanding and controlling their environment and so on. There seems no very useful sense in which these kinds of interest can be dubbed ideological, as opposed, for example, to having an interest in bringing down the government or laying on more childcare. Postmodernist thought, under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, has typically conflated these different sorts of interests in an illicit way, fashioning a homogeneous universe in which everything from tying one's shoelaces to toppling dictatorships is levelled to a matter of 'interests'. The political effect of this move is to blur the specificity of certain forms of social conflict, grossly inflating the whole category of 'interests' to the point where it picks out nothing in particular. To describe ideology as 'interested' discourse, then, calls for the same qualification as characterizing it as a question of power. In both cases, the term is forceful and informative only if it helps us to distinguish between those interests and power conflicts which at any given time are fairly central to a whole social order, and those which are not.

None of the argument so far casts much light on the epistemological issues involved in the theory of ideology – on the question, for example, of whether ideology can be usefully viewed as 'false consciousness'. This is a fairly unpopular notion of ideology nowadays, for a number of reasons. For one thing, epistemology itself is at the moment somewhat out of fashion, and the assumption that some of our ideas 'match' or 'correspond to' the way things are, while others do not, is felt by some to be a naive, discreditable theory of knowledge. For another thing, the idea of false consciousness can be taken as implying the possibility of some unequivocally correct way of viewing the world, which is today under deep suspicion. Moreover, the belief that a minority of theorists monopolize a scientifically grounded knowledge of how society is, while the rest of us blunder around in some fog of false consciousness, does not particularly endear itself to the democratic sensibility. A novel version of this elitism has arisen in the work of the philosopher Richard Rorty, in whose ideal society the intellectuals will be 'ironists', practising a suitably cavalier, laid-back attitude to their own beliefs, while the masses, for whom such self-ironizing might prove too subversive a weapon, will continue to salute the flag and take life seriously.

In this situation, it seems simpler to some theorists of ideology to drop the epistemological issue altogether, favouring instead a more political or sociological sense of ideology as the medium in which men and women fight out their social and political battles at the level of signs, meanings and representations. Even as orthodox a Marxist as Alex Callinicos urges us to scrap the epistemological elements in Marx's own theory of ideology, while Göran Therborn is equally emphatic that ideas of false and true consciousness should be rejected 'explicitly and decisively, once and for all'. Martin Seliger wants to discard this negative or pejorative meaning of ideology altogether, while Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, writing in a period when the 'false consciousness' thesis was at the height of its unpopularity, peremptorily dismiss the idea as 'ludicrous'.

To argue for a 'political' rather than 'epistemological' definition of ideology is not of course to claim that politics and ideology are identical. One way one might think of distinguishing them is to suggest that politics refers to the power processes by which social orders are sustained or challenged, whereas ideology denotes the ways in which these power processes get caught up in the realm of signification. This won't quite do, however, since politics has its own sort of signification, which need not necessarily be ideological. To state that there is a constitutional monarchy in Britain is a political pronouncement; it becomes ideological only when it begins to involve beliefs – when, for example, it carries the implicit rider 'and a good thing too'. Since this usually only needs to be said when there are people around who consider it a bad thing, we can suggest that ideology concerns less signification than conflicts within the field of signification. If the members of a dissident political group say to each other, 'We can bring down the government', this is a piece of political discourse; if they say it to
Obviously true. In certain definite respects, some individuals are indeed inferior to others: less good-tempered, more prone to envy, slower in the fifty-yard dash. It may be false and pernicious to generalize these particular inequalities to whole races or classes of people, but we can understand well enough the logic by which this comes about. It may be wrong to believe that the human race is in such a mess that it can be saved only by some transcendental power, but the feelings of impotence, guilt and utopian aspiration which such a dogma encapsulates are by no means illusory.

A further point can be made here. However widespread 'false consciousness' may be in social life, it can nevertheless be claimed that most of what people say most of the time about the world must in fact be true. This, for the philosopher Donald Davidson, is a logical rather than an empirical point. For unless, so Davidson argues, we are able to assume that most people's observations are most of the time accurate, there would be an insuperable difficulty in ever getting to understand their language. And the fact is that we do seem to be able to translate the languages of other cultures. As one of Davidson's commentators formulates this so-called principle of charity: 'If we think we understand what people say, we must also regard most of our observations about the world we live in as correct.' Many of the utterances in question are of a fairly trivial sort, and we should not underestimate the power of common illusion: a recent opinion poll revealed that one in three Britons believes that the sun moves round the earth, and one in seven holds that the solar system is larger than the universe. As far as our routine social life goes, however, we just could not in Davidson's view be mistaken most of the time. Our practical knowledge must be mostly accurate, since otherwise our world would fall apart. Whether or not the solar system is bigger than the universe plays little part in our daily social activities, and so is a point on which we can afford to be mistaken. At a fairly low level, individuals who share the same social practices must most of the time understand one another correctly, even if a small minority of them in universities spend their time agonizing over the indeterminacy of discourse. Those who quite properly emphasize that language is a terrain of conflict sometimes forget that conflict presupposes a degree of mutual agreement: we are not politically conflicting if you hold that patriarchy is an objectionable social system and I hold that it is a small town in upper New York state. A certain practical solidarity is built into the structures of any shared language, however much that language may be traversed by the divisions of class, gender and race. Radicals who regard such a view as dangerously
sanguine, expressive of too naive a faith in 'ordinary language', forget that such practical solidarity and reliability of cognition are testimony to that basic realism and intelligence of popular life which is so unpalatable to the elitist.

What Davidson may be accused of overlooking, however, is that form of 'systematically distorted communication' which for Jürgen Habermas goes by the name of ideology. Davidson argues that when native speakers repeatedly point at a rabbit and utter a sound, this act of denotation must for most of the time be accurate, otherwise we could never come to learn the native word for rabbit, or – by extension – anything else in their language. Imagine, however, a society which uses the word 'duty' every time a man beats his wife. Or imagine an outside observer in our own culture who, having picked up our linguistic habits, was asked by his fellows on returning home for our word for domination, and replied 'service'. Davidson's theory fails to take account of these *systematic* deviations – though it does perhaps establish that in order to be able to decipher an ideological system of discourse, we must already be in possession of the normative, undistorted uses of terms. The wife-beating society must use the word 'duty' a sufficient number of times in an appropriate context for us to be able to spot an ideological 'abuse'.

Even if it is true that most of the ideas by which people have lived are not simply nonsensical, it is not clear that this charitable stance is quite enough to dispose of the 'false consciousness' thesis. For those who hold that thesis do not need to deny that certain kinds of illusion can express real needs and desires. All they may be claiming is that it is false to believe that murderers should be executed, or that the Archangel Gabriel is preparing to put in an appearance next Tuesday, and that these falsehoods are significantly bound up with the reproduction of a dominant political power. There need be no implication that people do not regard themselves as having good grounds for holding these beliefs; the point may simply be that what they believe is manifestly not the case, and that this is a matter of relevance to political power.

Part of the opposition to the 'false consciousness' case stems from the accurate claim that, in order to be truly effective, ideologies must make at least some minimal sense of people's experience, must conform to some degree with what they know of social reality from their practical interaction with it. As Jon Elster reminds us, ruling ideologies can actively shape the wants and desires of those subjected to them; but they must also engage

significantly with the wants and desires that people already have, catching up genuine hopes and needs, reinterpreting them in their own peculiar idiom, and feeding them back to their subjects in ways which render these ideologies plausible and attractive. They must be 'real' enough to provide the basis on which individuals can fashion a coherent identity, must furnish some solid motivations for effective action, and must make at least some feeble attempt to explain away their own more flagrant contradictions and incoherencies. In short, successful ideologies must be more than imposed illusions, and for all their inconsistencies must communicate to their subjects a version of social reality which is real and recognizable enough not to be simply rejected out of hand. They may, for example, be true enough in what they assert but false in what they deny, as John Stuart Mill considered almost all social theories to be. Any ruling ideology which failed altogether to mesh with its subjects' lived experience would be extremely vulnerable, and its exponents would be well advised to trade it in for another. But none of this contradicts the fact that ideologies quite often contain important propositions which are absolutely false: that Jews are inferior beings, that women are less rational than men, that fornicators will be condemned to perpetual torment. If these views are not instances of false consciousness, then it is difficult to know what is; and those who dismiss the whole notion of false consciousness must be careful not to appear cavalier about the offensiveness of these opinions. If the 'false consciousness' case commits one to the view that ideology is simply unreal, a fantasy entirely disconnected from social reality, then it is difficult to know who, these days at least, actually subscribes to such a standpoint. If, on the other hand, it does no more than assert that there are some quite central ideological utterances which are manifestly false, then it is equally hard to see how anybody could deny this. The real question, perhaps, is not whether one denies this, but what role one ascribes to such falsehood in one's theory of ideology as a whole. Are false representations of social reality somehow constitutive of ideology, or more contingent to it?

One reason why ideology would not seem to be a matter of false consciousness is that many statements which people might agree to be ideological are obviously true. 'Prince Charles is a thoughtful, conscientious fellow, not hideously ugly' is true, but most people who thought it worth saying would no doubt be using the statement in some way to buttress the power of royalty. 'Prince Andrew is more intelligent than a hamster' is also probably true, if somewhat more controversial; but the effect of such a
pronouncement (if one ignores the irony) is again likely to be ideological in the sense of helping to legitimate a dominant power. This, however, may not be enough to answer those who hold that ideology is in general falsifying. For it can always be argued that while such utterances are empirically true, they are false in some deeper, more fundamental way. It is true that Prince Charles is reasonably conscientious, but it is not true that royalty is a desirable institution. Imagine a management spokesperson announcing that ‘If this strike continues, people will be dying in the streets for lack of ambulances.’ This might well be true, as opposed to a claim that they will be dying of boredom for lack of newspapers; but a striking worker might nevertheless see the spokesperson as a twister, since the force of the observation is probably ‘Get back to work’, and there is no reason to assume that this, under the circumstances, would be the most reasonable thing to do. To say that the statement is ideological is then to claim that it is powered by an ulterior motive bound up with the legitimization of certain interests in a power struggle. We might say that the spokesperson’s comment is true as a piece of language, but not as a piece of discourse. It describes a possible situation accurately enough; but as a rhetorical act aimed at producing certain effects it is false, and this in two senses. It is false because it involves a kind of deception – the spokesperson is not really saying what he or she means; and it carries with it an implication – that getting back to work would be the most constructive action to take – which may well not be the case.

Other types of ideological enunciation are true in what they affirm but false in what they exclude. ‘This land of liberty’, spoken by an American politician, may be true enough if one has in mind the freedom to practise one’s religion or turn a fast buck, but not if one considers the freedom to live without the fear of being mugged or to announce on prime-time television that the president is a murderer. Other kinds of ideological statement involve falsity without either necessarily intending to deceive or being significantly exclusive. ‘I’m British and proud of it’, for example. Both parts of this observation may be true, but it implies that being British is a virtue in itself, which is false. Note that what is involved here is less deception than self-deception, or delusion. A comment like ‘If we allow Pakistanis to live in our street, the house prices will fall’ may well be true, but it may involve the assumption that Pakistanis are inferior beings, which is false.

It would seem, then, that some at least of what we call ideological discourse is true at one level but not at another: true in its empirical content but deceptive in its force, or true in its surface meaning but false in its underlying assumptions. And to this extent the ‘false consciousness’ thesis need not be significantly shaken by the recognition that not all ideological language characterizes the world in erroneous ways. To speak, however, of ‘false assumptions’ broaches a momentous topic. For someone might argue that a statement like ‘Being British is a virtue in itself’ is not false in the same sense that it is false to believe that Ghenghis Khan is alive and well and running a boutique in the Bronx. Is not this just to confuse two different meanings of the word ‘false’? I may happen not to believe that being British is a virtue in itself; but this is just my opinion, and is surely not on a level with declarations like ‘Paris is the capital of Afghanistan’, which everyone would agree to be factually untrue.

What side you take up in this debate depends on whether or not you are a moral realist. One kind of opponent of moral realism wants to hold that our discourse divides into two distinct kinds: those speech acts which aim to describe the way things are, which involve criteria of truth and falsity; and those which express evaluations and prescriptions, which do not. On this view, cognitive language is one thing and normative or prescriptive language quite another. A moral realist, by contrast, resists this binary opposition of ‘fact’ and ‘value’ (which has in fact deep roots in bourgeois philosophical history), and denies that we can draw any intelligible distinction between those parts of assertoric discourse which do, and those which do not, genuinely describe reality. On this theory, it is mistaken to think that our language separates out into steel-hard objectivism and soggy subjectivism, into a realm of indubitable physical facts and a sphere of precariously floating values. Moral judgements are as much candidates for rational argumentation as are the more obviously descriptive parts of our speech. For a realist, such normative statements purport to describe what is the case: there are ‘moral facts’ as well as physical ones, about which our judgements can be said to be either true or false. That Jews are inferior beings is quite as false as that Paris is the capital of Afghanistan; it isn’t just a question of my private opinion or of some ethical posture I decide to assume towards the world. To declare that South Africa is a racist society is not just a more imposing way of saying that I happen not to like the set-up in South Africa.

One reason why moral judgements do not seem to us as solid as judgements about the physical world is that we live in a society where there are fundamental conflicts of value. Indeed the only moral case which the liberal pluralist would rule out is one which would interfere with this free market
in values. Because we cannot agree at a fundamental level, it is tempting to believe that values are somehow free-floating - that moral judgements cannot be subject to criteria of truth and falsehood because these criteria are as a matter of fact in considerable disarray. We can be reasonably sure about whether Abraham Lincoln was taller than four feet, but not about whether there are circumstances in which it is permissible to kill. The fact that we cannot currently arrive at any consensus on this matter, however, is no reason to assume that it is just a question of some unarguable personal option or intuition. Whether or not one is a moral realist, then, will make a difference to one's assessment of how far ideological language involves falsehood. A moral realist will not be persuaded out of the 'false consciousness' case just because it can be shown that some ideological proposition is empirically true, since that proposition might always be shown to encode a normative claim that was in fact false.

All of this has a relevance to the widely influential theory of ideology proposed by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. For Althusser, one can speak of descriptions or representations of the world as being either true or false; but ideology is not for him at root a matter of such descriptions at all, and criteria of truth and falsehood are thus largely irrelevant to it. For Althusser does indeed represent - but what it represents is the way I 'live' my relations to society as a whole, which cannot be said to be a question of truth or falsehood. Ideology for Althusser is a particular organization of signifying practices which go to constitute human beings as social subjects, and which produces the relations by which such subjects are connected to the dominant relations of production in a society. As a term, it covers all the various political modalities of such relations, from an identification with the dominant power to an oppositional stance towards it. Though Althusser thus adopts the broader sense of ideology we have examined, his thinking about the topic, as we shall see later, is covertly constrained by an attention to the narrower sense of ideology as a dominant formation.

There is no doubt that Althusser strikes a lethal blow at any purely rationalistic theory of ideology - at the notion that it consists simply of a collection of distorting representations of reality and empirically false propositions. On the contrary, ideology for Althusser alludes in the main to our affective, unconscious relations with the world, to the ways in which we are pre-reflectively bound up in social reality. It is a matter of how that reality 'strikes' us in the form of apparently spontaneous experience, of the

ways in which human subjects are ceaselessly at stake in it, investing in their relations to social life as a crucial part of what it is to be themselves. One might say that ideology, rather like poetry for the literary critic I.A. Richards, is less a matter of propositions than of 'pseudo-propositions'. It appears often enough on its grammatical surface to be referential (descriptive of states of affairs) while being secretly 'emotive' (expressive of the lived reality of human subjects) or 'constative' (directed towards the achievement of certain effects). If this is so, then it would seem that there is a kind of slipperness or duplicity built into ideological language, rather of the kind that Immanuel Kant thought he had discovered in the nature of aesthetic judgements. Ideology, Althusser claims, 'expresses a will, a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality'; it is fundamentally a matter of fearing and denouncing, reverencing and revelling, all of which then sometimes get coded into a discourse which looks as though it is describing the way things actually are. It is thus, in the terms of the philosopher J.L. Austin, 'performative' rather than 'constative' language; it belongs to the class of speech acts which get something done (cursing, persuading, celebrating and so on) rather than to the discourse of description. A pronouncement like 'Black is beautiful', popular in the days of the American civil rights movement, looks on the surface as though it is characterizing a state of affairs, but is in fact of course a rhetorical act of defiance and self-affirmation.

Althusser tries to shift us, then, from a cognitive to an affective theory of ideology - which is not necessarily to deny that ideology contains certain cognitive elements, or to reduce it to the merely 'subjective'. It is certainly subjective in the sense of being subject-centred: its utterances are to be deciphered as expressive of a speaker's attitudes or lived relations to the world. But it is not a question of mere private whims. To assert that one doesn't like tinkers is unlikely to have the same force as asserting that one doesn't like tomatoes. The latter aversion may just be a private quirk; the former is likely to involve certain beliefs about the value of rootedness, self-discipline and the dignity of labour which are central to the reproduction of a particular social system. On the model of ideology we are examining, a statement like 'Tinkers are a flea-ridden, thieving bunch of layabouts' could be decoded into some such performative utterance as Down with tinkers! This in turn could be decoded into some such proposition as There are reasons connected with our relations to the dominant social order which make us want to denigrate these people.' It is worth noting, however, that if the speaker himself could effect the second decode...
be well on the way to overcoming his prejudice.

Ideological statements, then, would seem to be subjective but not private; and in this sense too they have an affinity with Kant’s aesthetic judgements, which are at once subjective and universal. On the one hand, ideology is no mere set of abstract doctrines but the stuff which makes us uniquely what we are, constitutive of our very identities; on the other hand, it presents itself as an ‘Everybody knows that’, a kind of anonymous universal truth. (Whether all ideology universalizes in this way is a question we shall take up later.) Ideology is a set of viewpoints I happen to hold; yet that ‘happen’ is somehow more than just fortuitous, as a reasoning to prefer parting my hair down the middle is probably not. It appears often enough as a ragbag of impersonal, subjectless tags and adages; yet these shop-soiled platitudes are deeply enough entwined with the roots of personal identity to impel us from time to time to murder or martyrdom. In the sphere of ideology, concrete particular and universal truth glide ceaselessly in and out of each other, by-passing the mediation of rational analysis.

If ideology is less a matter of representations of reality than of lived relations, does this finally put paid to the truth/falsehood issue? One reason to think that it might is that it is hard to see how someone could be mistaken about their lived experience. I may mistake Madonna for a minor deity, but can I be mistaken about the feelings of awe this inspires in me? The answer, surely, is that I can. There is no reason to believe in a post-Freudian era that our lived experience need be any less ambiguous than our ideas. I can be as mistaken about my feelings as I can be about anything else: ‘I thought at the time I was angry, but looking back I see that I was afraid.’ Perhaps my sensation of awe at the sight of Madonna is just a defence against my unconscious envy of her superior earning-power. That I am experiencing something can’t be doubted, any more than I can doubt that I am in pain; but what precisely my ‘lived relations’ to the social order consist in may be a more problematical affair than the Althusserians sometimes seem to think. Perhaps it is a mistake to imagine that Althusser is speaking here primarily of conscious experience, since our lived relations to social reality are for him largely unconscious. But if our conscious experience is elusive and indeterminate – a point which those political radicals who appeal dogmatically to ‘experience’ as some sort of absolute fail to recognize – then our unconscious life is even more so.

There is another, rather different sense in which the categories of truth and falsehood may be said to apply to one’s lived experience, which returns us to the issue of moral realism. I really am furious that my teenage son has shaved off his hair and dyed his skull a flamboyant purple, but I retain enough shreds of rationality to acknowledge that this feeling is ‘false’ – in the sense of being, not illusory or a self-misinterpretation, but one based upon false values. My anger is motivated by the false belief that teenagers ought to appear in public like bank managers, that they should be socially conformist and so on. One’s lived experience may be false in the sense of ‘inauthentic’, untrue to those values which can be held to be definitive of what it is for human beings in a particular situation to live well. For a moral realist of radical persuasion, someone who believes that the highest goal in life is to amass as much private wealth as possible, preferably by grinding others into the dust, is just as much in error as someone who believes that Henry Gibson is the name of a Norwegian playwright.

Althusser may be right that ideology is chiefly a question of ‘lived relations’; but there are no such relations which do not tacitly involve a set of beliefs and assumptions, and these beliefs and assumptions may themselves be open to judgements of truth and falsehood. A racist is usually someone in the grip of fear, hatred and insecurity, rather than someone who has dispassionately arrived at certain intellectual judgements on other races, but even if his feelings are not motivated by such judgements, they are likely to be deeply entwined with them; and these judgements – that certain races are inferior to others, for example – are plainly false. Ideology may indeed be primarily a matter of performative utterances – of imperatives like ‘Rule, Britannia!’ or optatives like ‘May Margaret Thatcher reign for another thousand years!’ or interrogatives like ‘Is not this nation blessed under heaven?’ But each of these speech acts is bound up with thoroughly questionable assumptions: that British imperialism is an excellent thing, that another thousand years of Thatcher would have been a deeply desirable state of affairs, that there exists a supreme being with a particular interest in supervising the nation’s progress.

The Althusserian case need not be taken as denying that judgements of truth and falsehood may be at some level applicable to ideological discourse; it may simply be arguing that within such discourse the affective typically outweighs the cognitive. Or – which is a somewhat different matter – that the ‘practico-social’ takes predominance over theoretical knowledge. Ideologies for Althusser do contain a kind of knowledge; but they are not primarily cognitive, and the knowledge in question is less theoretical (which is strictly speaking for Althusser the only kind of knowledge there is) than
pragmatic, one which orients the subject to its practical tasks in society. In fact, however, many apologists for this case have ended up effectively denying the relevance of truth and falsehood to ideology altogether. Paramount among such theorists in Britain has been the sociologist Paul Hirst, who argues that ideology cannot be a matter of false consciousness because it is indubitably real. "Ideology... is not illusion, it is not falsity, because how can something which has effects be false?... It would be like saying that a black pudding is false, or a steamroller is false." It is easy enough to see what kind of logical slide is taking place here. There is a confusion between ‘false’ as meaning ‘untrue to what is the case’, and ‘false’ as meaning ‘unreal’. (As if someone were to say: ‘Lying isn’t a matter of falsehood; he really did lie to me!’) It is quite possible to hold that ideology may sometimes be false in the first sense, but not in the second. Hirst simply collapses the epistemological questions at stake here into ontological ones. It may be that I really did experience a group of badgers in tartan trousers nibbling my toes the other evening, but this was probably because of those strange chemical substances the local vicar administered to me, not because they were actually there. On Hirst’s view, one would have no way of distinguishing between dreams, hallucinations and reality, since all of them are actually experienced and all of them can have real effects. Hirst’s manoeuvre here recalls the dodge of those aestheticians who, confronted with the knotty problem of how art relates to reality, solemnly remind us that art is indubitably real.

Rather than ditching the epistemological issues altogether à la Hirst, it might be more useful to ponder the suggestion that ideological discourse typically displays a certain ratio between empirical propositions and what we might roughly term a ‘world view’, in which the latter has the edge over the former. The closest analogy to this is perhaps a literary work. Most literary works contain empirical propositions; they may mention, for example, that there is a lot of snow in Greenland, or that human beings typically have two ears. But part of what is meant by ‘fictionality’ is that these statements are not usually present for their own sake; they act, rather, as ‘supports’ for the overall world view of the text itself. And the ways in which these empirical statements are selected and deployed is generally governed by this requirement. ‘Constructive’ language, in other words, is harnessed to ‘performative’ ends; empirical truths are organized as components of an overall *rhetoric*. If that rhetoric seems to demand it, a particular empirical truth may be bent into falsehood: a historical novel may find it more convenient for its suasive strategies to have Lenin live on for another decade. Similarly, a racist who believes that Asians in Britain will outnumber whites by the year 1995 may well not be persuaded out of his racism if he can be shown that this assumption is empirically false, since the proposition is more likely to be a support for his racism than a reason for it. If the claim is disproved he may simply modify it, or replace it with another, true or false. It is possible, then, to think of ideological discourse as a complex network of empirical and normative elements, within which the nature and organization of the former is ultimately determined by the requirements of the latter. And this may be one sense in which an ideological formation is rather like a novel.

Once again, however, this may not be enough to dispose of the truth/falsity issue, relegating it to the relatively superficial level of empirical statements. For there is still the more fundamental question of whether a ‘world view’ may not itself be considered true or false. The anti-false-consciousness case would seem to hold that it is not possible to falsify an ideology, rather as some literary critics insist that it is not possible to falsify or verify the world view of a work of art. In both cases, we simply ‘suspend our disbelief’ and examine the proffered way of seeing on its own terms, grasping it as a symbolic expression of a certain way of ‘living’ one’s world. In some senses, this is surely true. If a work of literature chooses to highlight images of human degradation, then it would seem futile to denounce this as somehow incorrect. But there are surely limits to this aesthetic charity. Literary critics do not always accept the world view of a text ‘on its own terms’; they sometimes want to say that this vision of things is implausible, distorting, oversimplifying. If a literary work highlights images of disease and degradation to the point where it tacitly suggests that human life is entirely valueless, then a critic might well want to object that this is a drastically partial way of seeing. In this sense, a way of seeing, unlike a way of walking, is not necessarily immune to judgements of truth and falsehood, although some of its aspects are likely to be more immune than others. A world view will tend to exhibit a certain ‘style’ of perception, which cannot in itself be said to be either true or false. It is not false for Samuel Beckett to portray the world in sparse, costive, minimalist terms. It will operate in accordance with a certain ‘grammar’, a system of rules for organizing its various elements, which again cannot usefully be spoken of in terms of truth or falsehood. But it will also typically contain other sorts of component, both normative and empirical, which may indeed sometimes be inspected for their truth or falsity.

Another suggestive analogy between literature and ideology may be
gleaned from the work of the literary theorist Paul de Man. For de Man, a piece of writing is specifically ‘literary’ when its ‘constative’ and ‘performative’ dimensions are somehow at odds with each other. Literary works, in de Man’s view, tend to ‘say’ one thing and ‘do’ another. Thus, W.B. Yeats’s line of poetry, ‘How can we know the dancer from the dance?’, read literally, asks about how we can draw the distinction in question; but its effect as a rhetorical or performative piece of discourse is to suggest that such a distinction cannot be drawn. Whether this will do as a general theory of the ‘literary’ is in my view distinctly dubious; but it can be coupled with a certain theory of the workings of ideology, one outlined by Denys Turner. Turner has argued that one notable problem in the theory of ideology turns on the puzzle of how ideological beliefs can be said to be both ‘lived’ and false. For our lived beliefs are in some sense internal to our social practices; and if they are thus constitutive of these practices, they can hardly be said to correspond (or not correspond) to them. As Turner puts it: ‘Since, therefore, there seems to be no epistemic space between what is socially lived and the social ideas of it, there seems to be no room for a false relationship between the two.’

This, surely, is one of the strongest points which the anti-false-consciousness case has going for it. There cannot be a merely external or contingent relation between our social practices and the ideas by which we ‘live’ them; so how can these ideas, or some of them, be said to be false? Turner’s own answer to this problem resembles de Man’s case about the literary text. He claims that ideology consists in a ‘performative contradiction’, in which what is said is at odds with the situation or act of utterance itself. When the middle class preaches universal freedom from a position of domination, or when a teacher hectors his students at tedious length about the perils of an authoritarian pedagogy, we have a ‘contradiction between a meaning conveyed explicitly and a meaning conveyed by the act itself of conveying’, which for Turner is the essential structure of all ideology. Whether this in fact covers all that we call ideological practice is perhaps doubtful as whether de Man’s case covers all that we call literature; but it is an illuminating account of a particular kind of ideological act.

So far we have been considering the role within ideology of what might be called epistemic falsehood. But as Raymond Geuss has argued, there are two other forms of falsity highly relevant to ideological consciousness, which can be termed functional and genetic. False consciousness may mean not that a body of ideas is actually untrue, but that these ideas are functional for the maintenance of an oppressive power, and that those who hold them are ignorant of this fact. Similarly, a belief may not be false in itself, but may spring from some disreputable uter motive of which those who hold it are unaware. As Geuss summarizes the point: consciousness may be false because it ‘incorporates beliefs which are false, or because it functions in a reprehensible way, or because it has a tainted origin’. Epistemic, functional, and genetic forms of false consciousness may go together, as when a false belief which rationalizes some disreputable social motive proves useful in promoting the unjust interests of a dominant power; but other permutations are also possible. There may, for example, be no inherent connection between the falsity of a belief and its functionality for an oppressive power; a true belief might have done just as well. A set of ideas, whether true or false, may be ‘unconsciously’ motivated by the selfish interests of a ruling group, but may in fact prove dysfunctional for the promotion or legitimation of those interests. A fatalistic group of oppressed individuals may not recognize that their fatalism is an unconscious rationalization of their wretched conditions, but this fatalism may well not prove serviceable for their interests. It might, on the other hand, prove functional for the interests of their rulers, in which case a ‘genetic’ false consciousness on the part of one social class becomes functional for the interests of another. Beliefs functional for a social group, in other words, need not be motivated from within that group, but may, so to speak, just fall into its lap. Forms of consciousness functional for one social class may also prove functional for another whose interests are in conflict with it. As far as ‘genetic’ falsity goes, the fact that the true underlying motivation of a set of beliefs sometimes must be concealed from view is enough to cast doubt on its reputability; but to hold that the beliefs which disguise this motive must be false simply on account of their contaminated origin would be an instance of the genetic fallacy. From a radical political viewpoint, there may be positive kinds of unconscious motivation and positive forms of functionality; socialists will tend to approve of forms of consciousness which, however displacedly, express the underlying interests of the working class, or which actively help to promote those interests. The fact that a motivation is concealed, in other words, is not enough in itself to suggest falsity; the question is rather one of what sort of motivation it is, and whether it is of the kind that has to remain hidden from view. Finally, we can note that a body of beliefs may be false but rational, in the sense of internally coherent, consistent with the available evidence and held on what appear to be plausible grounds. The fact that ideology is not at
root a matter of reason does not license us to equate it with irrationality.

Let us take stock of some of the argument so far. Those who oppose the idea of ideology as false consciousness are right to see that ideology is no baseless illusion but a solid reality, an active material force which must have at least enough cognitive content to help organize the practical lives of human beings. It does not consist primarily in a set of propositions about the world; and many of the propositions it does advance are actually true. None of this, however, need be denied by those who hold that ideology often or typically involves falsity, distortion and mystification. Even if ideology is largely a matter of ‘lived relations’, those relations, at least in certain social conditions, would often seem to involve claims and beliefs which are untrue. As Tony Skillen scathingly inquires of those who reject this case: ‘Sexist ideologies do not (distortingly) represent women as naturally inferior? Racist ideologies do not confine non-whites to perpetual savagery? Religious ideologies do not represent the world as the creation of gods?’

It does not follow from this, however, that all ideological language necessarily involves falsehood. It is quite possible for a ruling order to make pronouncements which are ideological in the sense of buttressing its own power, but which are in no sense false. And if we extend the term ideology to include oppositional political movements, then radicals at least would want to hold that many of their utterances, while ideological in the sense of promoting their power-interests, are nonetheless true. This is not to suggest that such movements may not also engage in distortion and mystification. ‘Workers of the world, unit! you have nothing to lose but your chains’ is in one sense obviously false; workers have a good deal to lose by political militancy, not least, in some cases, their lives. ‘The West is a paper tiger’, Mao’s celebrated slogan, is dangerously misleading and triumphalist.

Nor is it the case that all commitment to the dominant social order involves some sort of delusion. Someone might have a perfectly adequate understanding of the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation, but conclude that this kind of society, while unjust and oppressive, is on the whole preferable to any likely alternative. From a socialist viewpoint, such a person is mistaken; but it is hard to call them deluded, in the sense of systematically misinterpreting the real situation. There is a difference between being mistaken and being deluded: if someone lifts a cucumber and announces his telephone number we may conclude that he has made a mistake, whereas if he spends long evenings chatting vivaciously into a cucumber we might have to draw different conclusions. There is also the case of the person who commits himself to the ruling social order on entirely cynical grounds. Someone who urges you to get rich quick may be promoting capitalist values; but he may not necessarily be legitimating these values. Perhaps he simply believes that in a corrupt world you might as well pursue your own self-interest along with everyone else. A man might appreciate the justice of the feminist cause, but simply refuse to surrender his male privilege. It is unwise, in other words, to assume that dominant groups are always victims of their own propaganda; there is the condition which Peter Sloterdijk calls ‘enlightened false consciousness’, which lives by false values but is ironically aware of doing so, and so which can hardly be said to be mystified in the traditional sense of the term.

If dominant ideologies very often involve falsity, however, it is partly because most people are not in fact cynics. Imagine a society in which everybody was either a cynic or a masochist, or both. In such a situation there would be no need for ideology, in the sense of a set of discourses concealing or legitimating injustice, because the masochists would not mind their suffering and the cynics would feel no unease about inhabiting an exploitative social order. In fact, the majority of people have a fairly sharp eye to their own rights and interests, and most people feel uncomfortable at the thought of belonging to a seriously unjust form of life. Either, then, they must believe that these injustices are en route to being amended, or that they are counterbalanced by greater benefits, or that they are inevitable, or that they are not really injustices at all. It is part of the function of a dominant ideology to inculcate such beliefs. It can do this either by falsifying social reality, suppressing and excluding certain unwelcome features of it, or by suggesting that these features cannot be avoided. This last strategy is of interest from the viewpoint of the truth/falsity problem. For it may be true of the present system that, say, a degree of unemployment is inevitable, but not of some future alternative. Ideological statements may be true to society as at present constituted, but false in so far as they thereby serve to block off the possibility of a transformed state of affairs. The truth of such statements is also the falsehood of their implicit denial that anything better could be conceived.

If ideology is sometimes falsifying, then, it is for what are on the whole rather hopeful reasons: the fact that most people react strongly to being unjustly treated, and that most people would like to believe that they live in
reasonably just social conditions. It is strange in this light for some radicals to argue that deception and concealment play no part in a dominant ideological discourse, since to be a political radical commits one to the view that the current social order is marked by serious injustices. And no ruling class concerned with preserving its credibility can afford to acknowledge that these injustices could only be rectified by a political transformation which would put it out of business. If, then, ideology sometimes involves distortion and mystification, it is less because of something inherent in ideological language than because of something inherent in the social structure to which that language belongs. There are certain kinds of interests which can secure their sway only by practising duplicity, but this is not to claim on the other hand that all of the statements used to promote those interests will be duplicious. Ideology, in other words, is not inherently constituted by distortion, especially if we take the broader view of the concept as denoting any fairly central conjuncture between discourse and power. In an entirely just society, there would be no need for ideology in the pejorative sense since there would be nothing to explain away.

It is possible to define ideology in roughly six different ways, in a progressive sharpening of focus. We can mean by it, first, the general material process of production of ideas, beliefs and values in social life. Such a definition is both politically and epistemologically neutral, and is close to the broader meaning of the term ‘culture’. Ideology, or culture, would here denote the whole complex of signifying practices and symbolic processes in a particular society; it would allude to the way individuals ‘lived’ their social practices, rather than to those practices themselves, which would be the preserve of politics, economics, kinship theory and so on. This sense of ideology is wider than the sense of ‘culture’ which confines itself to artistic and intellectual work of agreed value, but narrower than the anthropological definition of culture, which would encompass all of the practices and institutions of a form of life. ‘Culture’ in this anthropological sense would include, for example, the financial infrastructure of sport, whereas ideology would concern itself more particularly with the signs, meanings and values encoded in sporting activities.

This most general of all meanings of ideology stresses the social determination of thought, thus providing a valuable antidote to idealism; but otherwise it would seem unworkably broad and suspiciously silent on the question of political conflict. Ideology means more than just, say, the signifying practices associated by a society with food; it involves the relations between these signs and processes of political power. It is not coextensive with the general field of ‘culture’, but lights up this field from a particular angle.

A second, slightly less general meaning of ideology turns on ideas and beliefs (whether true or false) which symbolize the conditions and life-experiences of a specific, socially significant group or class. The qualification ‘socially significant’ is needed here, since it would seem odd to speak of the ideas and beliefs of four regular drinking companions or of the Sixth Form at Manchester Grammar School as an ideology all of its own. ‘Ideology’ is here very close to the idea of a ‘world view’, though it can be claimed that world views are usually preoccupied with fundamental matters such as the meaning of death or humanity’s place in the universe, whereas ideology might extend to such issues as which colour to paint the mail-boxes.

To see ideology as a kind of collective symbolic self-expression is not yet to see it in relational or conflictive terms; so there might seem to be a need for a third definition of the term, which attends to the promotion and legitimation of the interests of such social groups in the face of opposing interests. Not all such promotions of group interests are usually dubbed ideological: it is not particularly ideological for the army to request the Ministry of Defence to supply it on aesthetic grounds with flared trousers rather than with straight ones. The interests in question must have some relevance to the sustaining or challenging of a whole political form of life. Ideology can here be seen as a discursive field in which self-promoting social powers conflict and collide over questions central to the reproduction of social power as a whole. This definition may entail the assumption that ideology is a peculiarly ‘action-oriented’ discourse, in which contemplative cognition is generally subordinated to the furtherance of ‘artificial’ interests and desires. It is doubtless for this reason that to speak ‘ideologically’ has sometimes in the popular mind a ring of disreputable opportunism about it, suggesting a readiness to sacrifice truth to less reputable goals. Ideology appears here as a suasive or rhetorical rather than veridical kind of speech, concerned less with the situation ‘as it is’ than with the production of certain useful effects for political purposes. It is ironic, then, that ideology is regarded by some as too pragmatic and by others as not pragmatic enough, as too absolutist, otherworldly and inflexible.

A fourth meaning of ideology would retain this emphasis on the promotion and legitimation of sectoral interests, but confine it to the activities of a dominant social power. This may involve the assumption that such
dominant ideologies help to unify a social formation in ways convenient for its rulers; that it is not simply a matter of imposing ideas from above but of securing the complicity of subordinated classes and groups, and so on. We shall be examining these assumptions more closely later on. But this meaning of ideology is still epistemologically neutral and can thus be refined further into a fifth definition, in which ideology signifies ideas and beliefs which help to legitimate the interests of a ruling group or class specifically by distortion and dissimulation. Note that on these last two definitions, not all of the ideas of a ruling group need be said to be ideological, in that some of them may not particularly promote its interests, and some of them may not do so by the use of deception. Note also that on this last definition it is hard to know what to call a politically oppositional discourse which promotes and seeks to legitimate the interests of a subordinate group or class by such devices as the ‘naturalizing’, universalizing and cloaking of its real interests.

There is, finally, the possibility of a sixth meaning of ideology, which retains an emphasis on false or deceptive beliefs but regards such beliefs as arising not from the interests of a dominant class but from the material structure of society as a whole. The term ideology remains pejorative, but a class-generic account of it is avoided. The most celebrated instance of this sense of ideology, as we shall see, is Marx’s theory of the fetishism of commodities.

We can return finally to the question of ideology as ‘lived relations’ rather than empirical representations. If this is true, then certain important political consequences follow from this view. It follows, for instance, that ideology cannot be substantially transformed by offering individuals true descriptions in place of false ones – that it is not in this sense simply a mistake. We would not call a form of consciousness ideological just because it was in factual error, no matter how deeply erroneous it was. To speak of ‘ideological error’ is to speak of an error with particular kinds of causes and functions. A transformation of our lived relations to reality could be secured only by a material change in that reality itself. To deny that ideology is primarily a matter of empirical representations, then, goes along with a materialist theory of how it operates, and of how it might be changed. At the same time, it is important not to react so violently against a rationalistic theory of ideology as to abstain from trying to put people right on matters of fact. If someone really does believe that all childless women are thwarted and embittered, introducing him to as many ecstatic childfree women as possible might just persuade him to change his mind. To deny that ideology is fundamentally an affair of reason is not to conclude that it is immune to rational considerations altogether. And ‘reason’ here would mean something like: the kind of discourse that would result from as many people as possible actively participating in a discussion of these matters in conditions as free as possible from domination.