# The Hermeneutics of Polarized Ideologies
## Conflict, (Ir)rationality and Dialogue

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## Abstract

This article devises a social hermeneutical framework to make sense of the problem of the conflict of polarized ideologies. First, it discusses the problem of irrationality in belief and behavior, arguing for a contextual and non-reductionist account of rationality. Second, it shows how a social hermeneutical approach can provide a useful toolbox for social epistemology. Third, drawing from Paul Ricœur's notions of the conflict of interpretations and of constitutive and pathological ideologies, it redescribes pathological ideologies as totalizing systems of beliefs in which subjects fall under the spell of a mechanism of hermeneutical delusion, leaving them in a state of ideological bias. Finally, it discusses the possibility of tackling the problem of hermeneutical delusion and polarized ideologies through fostering hermeneutical dialogue geared towards mutual understanding.

*Keywords: Conflict of Interpretations; Hermeneutical Delusion; Ideology; Social Hermeneutics.*

## Résumé

Cet article propose de saisir dans le cadre d'une herméneutique sociale le problème du conflit des idéologies polarisées. D'abord, en discutant le problème de l'irrationalité dans les croyances et le comportement, il offre une approche contextuelle et non réductionniste de la rationalité. Ensuite, l'article montre de quelle manière une approche d'herméneutique sociale peut être un outil pour l'épistémologie sociale. En partant dans un troisième temps des notions ricœuriennes de conflit des interprétations et de l'idéologie – dans son sens à la fois constitutif et pathologique –, l'article réalise également une description des idéologies pathologiques comme des systèmes de croyances totalisants dans lesquels les sujets sont en proie au mécanisme d'illusion herméneutique qui les laisse dans un état de cécité idéologique. Finalement, sera ici discutée la possibilité d'attaquer le problème de l'illusion herméneutique et des idéologies polarisées via un dialogue herméneutique visant la compréhension mutuelle.

*Mots-clés : conflit des interprétations ; illusion herméneutique ; idéologie ; herméneutique sociale.*
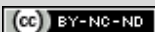
# The Hermeneutics of Polarized Ideologies[1]
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## I.        Introduction

Conflict is an inextricable element in the political and social spheres, as attested to in the work of authors such as Ernesto Laclau[2] and Chantal Mouffe.[3] We can also see how in its symbolic form conflict is pervasive in interpretation, and Paul Ricœur's work offers us remarkable examples of how to identify, arbitrate and dialectically relate radically different interpretations in conflict so as to make the opposition productive, as well as to respond to practical (moral, political, and social) conflicts. When applied to the human capacity to make and grasp meaning, and to form beliefs that might be widely shared, the problem of conflict becomes an epistemic problem related to rationality itself. People come to believe different things, but in principle this should not prevent or significantly hinder the possibility of communication and rational discussion unless the fact of holding on to different beliefs places subjects in opposing camps and shared beliefs turn into self-sealing spheres.

In the last decade phenomena like populist political movements, fake news, conspiracy theories and other types of disinformation have put the limelight on the problem of a "fractured public sphere."[4] These problems, in turn, generated an extraordinary amount of research concerning their political, social and psychological aspects, including a surge in the fields of social epistemology and political epistemology within analytical philosophy. Given the significant theoretical background of hermeneutics and its longstanding engagement with social analysis in the work of Paul Ricœur and others, it should perhaps be expected that applied exercises of social hermeneutics would be an integral part of these discussions, to show how a hermeneutical approach to these problems can be helpful both to diagnose and attempt to go beyond them. But

[2] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* [1985] (London: Verso, 2001).

[3] Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

[4] See Carolyn M. Hendricks, Selen A. Ercan and John Boswell, *Mending Democracy. Democratic Repair in Disconnected Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

somewhat surprisingly this has not been the case, and thus there is a need to spell out the significant contributions that a social hermeneutical standpoint can bring to the debate.

In this article I contribute to that effort by tackling the issue of polarization through an update of Ricœur's notions of conflict and ideology. My aim here is to grasp the phenomena of polarization through the angle of what I propose to call a "hermeneutics of polarized ideologies." This involves going beyond Ricœur's own investigation of ideology, which ties it to the justification of political power. Following Ricœur's lead, I extend it to encompass beliefs pertaining to other domains. This theoretical move allows us to take up Ricœur's diagnosis of pathological ideologies and to unpack their effects in the subjects caught in their web.

The article makes a further theoretical contribution to the assessment of these problems by introducing the concept of "hermeneutical delusion." Discussions of these phenomena sometimes tend to simplify the picture of truth and rationality as if it were always self-evident what amounts to rational belief or to verify what turns out to be true. But these depictions overlook that we are, as Charles Taylor[5] puts it, "self-interpreting animals." As such, the key notion to take stock of here is one that is often overlooked: interpretation. What makes an interpretation fit or unfit given a certain epistemic and social context? In order to approach these issues, I adopt a hermeneutical framework that not only encompasses a specific view of rationality but also uncovers deceptive mechanisms and ultimately argues for corrective measures such as the fostering of hermeneutical dialogue. In the second section of the article, I briefly spell out the description of rationality and irrationality at stake here. In its third section I recall some of the advantages of taking up a hermeneutical standpoint to analyze these problems. In the fourth section I show how Ricœur's hermeneutics, particularly his notions of the conflict of interpretations and of ideology, can be used in this specific case of social analysis, which I call the "conflict of polarized ideologies." In the fifth section I introduce the concept of hermeneutical delusion in order to explain the origin and spread of irrational beliefs, identifying them with the phenomenon of ideological bias. Finally, in the sixth section, before my very brief conclusion, I offer some suggestions on how to move beyond this state of affairs.

## II.        Rationality and Irrationality

Some attempts to diagnose the web of interconnected problems alluded to in the introduction claim that they are instances of irrationality. This claim is partially true, even though it must be qualified. For instance, those who instrumentalize disinformation and who stand to gain from its spread are not behaving irrationally, but they are causing harm to those affected by disinformation. The further we enter the domain of "post-truth" or "echo chambers" in which truth becomes partisan, the more we find examples of irrational belief; conversely, the more we see social agents apparently acting against their own self-interests (e.g., refusing to be vaccinated amid a pandemic) the more we find proof of their apparent irrational behavior, at least if we take into stock the best scientific evidence at hand. In turn, this irrationality is problematic not only for the agents caught in its web but also for their social surroundings, as holding on to irrational beliefs

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[5] Charles Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," in *Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1, Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 45-76.

and behaving irrationally when one could have known better involves infringing both epistemic and normative duties. Furthermore, and regardless of the definition of rationality one adopts, it must be acknowledged that properly analyzing these phenomena entails recognizing their social, collective dimension. These are collective irrationalities and, as such, we can untangle the problem of their origin (e.g., of discovering how a false belief originates) from the problem of their reproduction, for instance by identifying different levels of responsibility for producers and consumers of conspiracy theories.[6]

Perhaps the first question to ask is the following: are agents inherently rational? One influential philosophical strand prevalent since the 18th century would seem to suggest it. Indeed, ever since the Enlightenment, a particular view of rationality has captured the imagination of Western civilization and became a guiding ideal. Closely associating rational behavior and beliefs with the acquisition of verified knowledge through evidence, and later establishing a plethora of criteria able to demarcate mere beliefs from proper knowledge, this vision equated rationality with science, science with progress, and the dissemination of progress with access to education. Arguably, this would also lead to moral progress and to a rationalized public sphere of discussion,[7] in which the commanding force of the better argument would trump any constraints imposed by status or power relations. The corresponding view of the subject as being rational, autonomous, and master of himself – including his or her desires, decisions and conscious volition – was mostly unchallenged until the late 19th century/early 20th century,[8] and we can argue that until very recently this view of encompassing rationality was still dominant in different fields, including the social sciences. To give only one example, rational choice theory in neoclassical economics came to view agents as inherently rational, and much public policy was, perhaps problematically, devised with such an assumption in mind. More recently, however, solid empirical evidence from the neurosciences has emphasized the role of emotions in decision-making,[9] and behavioral economics has shown the extent to which our perceptions can be misguided by certain heuristics and thus mislead our reasoning.[10] In philosophy, especially within practical philosophy and analytical philosophy, an extensive body of research on rationality has been steadily developing. That said, some of these approaches still risk adopting an essentialist view of rationality, as if the meanings of rationality were not themselves historical and evolving.

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[6] On conspiracy theories see Quassim Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

[7] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [1962] (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991).

[8] Marx, Nietzsche and Freud provided significant contributions to the critique of this model of the subject, as we shall briefly recall when analyzing Ricœur's take on the "masters of suspicion." We can argue that earlier counter-Enlightenment movements, such as the German *Sturm und Drang* and Romanticism in general, also provided a different view of the subject in terms of the role of emotions in human life, but their critique was by no means as radical as the ones put forward by the hermeneutics of suspicion.

[9] See António Damásio, *Descartes' Error. Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* [1994] (London: Penguin, 2005).

[10] See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

On the other hand, and despite the great catastrophes of the 20th century, the last two centuries saw an overall progress in many key indicators,[11] such as global GDP per capita, access to education and healthcare, technological innovation, and in the number of democracies around the world. As such, extrapolating from the Enlightenment hypothesis, one should perhaps expect an increasing democratization of knowledge and a corresponding rationalization of the public sphere, especially with the possibilities opened by the Internet. And yet recent decades have witnessed a surge in beliefs and theories that sometimes are wildly delusional, and thus an increase in holding certain forms of epistemic vices, e.g., cultivating an ignorance for which they might, at least in some cases, be deemed responsible. The degree to which this responsibility is intentional (i.e., that ignorance is "willful") depends on whether the subject is open to revise his or her beliefs, as will be discussed below.

This perceived irrationality has baffled social scientists and policymakers alike and poses the question of how it should be dealt with. As will be argued in the sixth section below, we should strive not to antagonize people holding these beliefs; as such, policymakers and all those belonging to a perceived "intellectual elite" should be wary of coming across as arrogant, so as not to further fragment the public sphere. However, it must be emphasized that these phenomena need not be encapsulated in irrationality *tout court*. To understand this point, we will have to broaden our perspective on rationality, so that it is no longer understood as a one-size-fits-all universal yardstick. A key hermeneutical lesson is the rejection of a reductionist account of rationality. Instead, we might ask the following question: is there any plausible rational explanation for the beliefs and behavior of these groups? The answer will depend on the specific criteria laid out for determining rationality in belief and behaviour, and as such there are different possibilities. To give an example, when analysing the rationality of (religious) fundamentalist belief, Finlay Malcolm argues that these beliefs are *not* irrational "on evidentialist standards, but are nevertheless epistemically problematic since they are formed in environments that are not truth-conducive and which cultivate intellectual vice."[12] This is an important conclusion, since it puts us on the track of the specific social origin of beliefs. A belief formed in an environment in which there are no incentives for verification and what is instead at stake is just reinforcing adhesion to some prior belief or belonging, to which the subject might adhere only because of practical considerations (such as those pertaining to identity formation) can turn out to be misleading. And by this, I mean that it is putting forward a flawed interpretation. In this case, there might be a rational (even if misled) motive for the belief, while the process undergirding the continued adhesion to that belief might be flawed and thus irrational.

I suggest that to assess these beliefs and behavior we should untangle, at least for analytical purposes, the normative assessment from the explanation of the motives leading people to adhere to such beliefs and behave according to them. A believer in a given conspiracy theory might have a strong reason for his or her belief and strive to put forward plausible interpretations to justify that belief, even appealing to empirical or other types of evidence, while at the same time being blatantly wrong and helping to disseminate that false belief, thus wronging others. To give an

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[11] See Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now. The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018).

[12] Finlay Malcolm, "The Rationality of Fundamentalist Belief," *Journal of Social Philosophy* (2021), 1-20, here 2.

example, take Lee McIntyre's experience talking with science deniers and Flat Earthers specifically: "Flat Earth wasn't so much a belief that someone would accept or reject on the basis of experimental evidence, but instead an *identity*. It could give purpose for your life. It created instant community, bound together by common persecution."[13] Indeed, when challenged, Flat Earthers did appeal to evidence. However, McIntyre claims, the evidence they were seeking was no more than a "huge rationalization" for their social identity and this, in turn, helps explain why they took it personally when their belief in Flat Earth was challenged: an attack on the truth of their belief turned out to be an attack on them. That is to say, the conspiracy theory had become a conviction, or a core belief, one that formed a specific system of beliefs and indeed became resistant to revision for personal reasons tied to practical identity formation. Where do the irrationality and normative fault lie here?

Let us take the case of science deniers. Concerning irrationality, I would like to recall that there is a first overall problem tied to the entire way in which they reason. Several investigations[14] concluded that features like 1) cherry-picking evidence, 2) belief in conspiracy theories, 3) reliance on fake experts, 4) committing logical errors and 5) setting impossible expectations for what science can achieve, are common in many science deniers, from Flat-Earthers to climate-change deniers. These features will likely also apply to anti-vaxxers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems that the way in which science deniers reason is not particularly truth conducive and includes a misinterpretation of the role of evidence, logic and the revision of beliefs. The latter is also an important point: when faced with proof that a given belief is simply false or a claim is simply not valid, yet one refuses to relinquish that belief or claim, this refusal is also specifically irrational. But note that by some criteria even these beliefs and behavior might be considered to have a rational undertone to it. People might prefer to ward off some aspects of the truth to live more comfortably; and while this is certainly wrong from a normative standpoint (both in terms of epistemic duties and sometimes also of ethical duties), decision theory would hardly consider it irrational. Furthermore, given the ideological surroundings one might be cultivating these beliefs in, a given belief might actually make sense against the backdrop of the whole ideology – and in that case the whole ideology is at fault. As such, what is needed is an assessment of the way in which ideologies form and originate beliefs, and how the interpretations put forward within them might be epistemically robust or, on the contrary, inherently deceptive. This analysis also needs to be aware of the social factors guiding these processes. But which type of theory could we be looking for here?

### III.    Hermeneutics as a Tool for Social Epistemology

I would like to suggest that an appropriate perspective to understand the subtleties of rationality is hermeneutics and, in the case of the social phenomena dealt with in this paper, social

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[13] Lee McIntyre, *How to Talk to a Science Denier. Conversations with Flat Earthers, Climate Deniers, and Others Who Defy Reason* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021), 16.

[14] See Martin Hoofnagle and Chris Jay Hoofnagle, "What is Denialism?," 30 April 2007, online: https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4002823; Pascal Diethelm and Martin McKee, "Denialism. What Is It and How Should Scientists Respond?," *European Journal of Public Health*, vol. 19/1 (2009), 2-4, online: https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckn139; John Cook, "The 5 Characteristics of Science Denialism," 17 March 2010, online: https://skepticalscience.com/5-characteristics-of-scientific-denialism.html, all cited by McIntyre, *How to Talk to a Science Denier.*

hermeneutics.[15] This is an application of the hermeneutical method to social analysis, and by this we should understand: 1) a contextual view of rationality; 2) an analysis of the entanglement between facts and norms in most interpretations; 3) a wager on the interpretive paradigm as an alternative both to idealism and naïve realism; 4) a connection to a reflection on selfhood, intersubjectivity and agency; and 5) an interest in meaningful social change, that is, a practical vocation to remedy social problems.

Before I unpack these traits, it might be useful to show how they compare to the growing body of literature on social epistemology. As a first step, allow me to position it vis-à-vis traditional epistemology and to deal with an objection often invoked, that of relativism. Ever since Plato's *Theaetetus* epistemology is concerned with the conditions of possibility for knowledge formation and specifically with the justification of beliefs. As for hermeneutics, whether in its methodological or ontological versions, it is chiefly concerned with interpretation. It could thus be stated, in a first approach, that epistemology's first concern is truth, while for hermeneutics that concern is meaning. But the two are obviously connected. In the wake of Heidegger, hermeneutics is of course intrinsically tied to the ontological questioning of the being who interprets; and while it might be argued that to some extent with Gadamer and Heidegger the methodological question of validity might have been downplayed, the same does not apply to the work of Dilthey, Betti, Ricœur, Walzer or Taylor, where the question of validity claims indeed arises. This discussion boils down to the distinction between "weaker" and "stronger" versions of hermeneutics.[16] While this article is not the place to settle these matters, I want to argue that even though most hermeneutics will tend to reject naturalism and reductionism and therefore put forward post-foundationalist and non-essentialist descriptions and normative claims, this does not amount to reducing hermeneutics to a relativist project. To the contrary, positing a hermeneutic circle, spelling out the hermeneutics of action or analyzing the interpretive texture of social reality and the way it impacts individual sense-formation and the construction of selfhood only forces us to pay closer attention to the intricacies of interpretation and the several ways in which it can be misguided. In other words, hermeneutics can be rule-based and set criteria distinguishing between better and worse interpretations according to a logic of probability.[17]

One notable feature of phenomenological hermeneutics, though, is its insistence on the importance of the first-person perspective and specifically on the operation of understanding. And even though not every hermeneutician will relegate explanation to the natural sciences as if it were to be left out of the human and social sciences – as is well known, Ricœur refuses this move – a key

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[15] Social hermeneutics is a well-established methodology within social and political philosophy and the social sciences. For examples of this line of work, see Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Johann Michel, *Homo Interpretans. Towards a Transformation of Hermeneutics* (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Gonçalo Marcelo, "Making Sense of the Social. Hermeneutics and Social Philosophy," *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 3/1 (2012), 67-85, online: DOI: 10.5195/errs.2012.131.

[16] See Nicholas Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics. Contingency and Moral Identity* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997).

[17] Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory. Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

concern of hermeneutics is to ultimately position knowledge and interpretation in the horizon of understanding, thus allowing us to grasp how meaning is conferred upon the self and the world through interpretation. Accordingly, non-reductionism is a key feature, one that puts hermeneutics at odds with any scientistic epistemology.

But to refuse to see in the natural sciences the *only* key to rationally making sense of the world is *not* tantamount to refusing to recognize an objective domain of validity pertaining to the sciences. Hermeneutics is not equivalent to science denialism. If anything, it can be a key to uncovering the motives behind poor or delusional interpretations. But to understand this aspect we need to uncover its collective dimension. And here there is a common feature running through both epistemology and hermeneutics: for a long time, their collective dimension was somehow neglected. Indeed, social epistemology is a relatively recent field, aiming to investigate the epistemic effects of social interactions.[18] This includes investigating intersubjective communication, such as the epistemology of testimony (a feature shared with virtue epistemologists and the booming field of epistemic injustice, in the wake of Miranda Fricker)[19] or disagreement. It also investigates the trustworthiness of sources such as experts and delves into the specific epistemic features of collective agents. There are, of course, several different strands within the field, including formal approaches. But a recent trend, given the surge in online disinformation and all the political and social problems tied with it, is the analysis of the epistemic features of online communication and their connections with populism and other ailments affecting democracy.

But how can social hermeneutics be of use here? A brief description of the underlying traits mentioned at the beginning of this section can put us on track of the answer to that question. First, the contextual view of rationality: given its non-reductionist stance and the assumption of the potentially endless nature of interpretation, there is a specific attentiveness to the plurality of ways in which rationality can express itself. As such, in addition to rational features such as logical reasoning and the capacity to both recognize evidence and be open to revise beliefs in light of it, hermeneutics is open to recognizing other forms of rationality, such as those stemming from narrative imagination or communicative rationality. Furthermore, as mentioned above, it is also prone to function in an epistemic mode of plausibility rather than demanding foolproof certitude in every case. Following the motto of Aristotle often quoted by Ricœur, we should "look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits,"[20] which means, for instance, that in the domain of human action, including the political and social domain, the assessment of beliefs and behavior must take into account the context in which these beliefs and behavior are taking place. A given belief might make sense against the backdrop of a certain tradition or widely shared social practice and thus in that context it should not appear as irrational for someone to hold on to it. If, however, the "system of beliefs," as I shall refer to it in the next section, is debunked and the subject still holds on to it, his or her behavior can then be deemed

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[18] See Alvin Goldman and Cailin O'Connor, "Social Epistemology," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 28 August 2019, online: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-social/.

[19] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice. Power & the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

[20] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1094b 24-25.

irrational. But here hermeneutical "tact" and its attentiveness to particular situations and contexts can be invaluable.

A second trait is the recognition of the entanglement between facts and norms in many interpretations. This feature is in line with the rejection of positivism and scientism, and it means that the very nature of speech, including our use of thick concepts, often blurs the neat distinction between description and interpretation. In this aspect, the hermeneutical project is in the vicinity of Hilary Putnam.[21] For the purposes of this article, what this might mean is that the very assessment of a given belief might be tangled in normative and even affective considerations, and this is something to take into account when probing the rationality in belief and behavior.

The third feature is the wager on the interpretive paradigm as an alternative both to idealism and naïve realism. This means that if, on the one hand, hermeneutics is far from relying on a cogito posited a priori, on the other hand it also does not rely on mere empiricism; its wager is rather on the analysis of the mediations between the subject and reality that are made up of the complex web of interpretations whose origin, method and result must be probed. How to properly form interpretations is thus a major concern and this is a useful tool to understand how subjects acquire knowledge.

The fourth trait alluded to above is the connection to a reflection on selfhood, intersubjectivity and agency. Indeed, in the "hermeneutics of selfhood" what is at stake is always how the self makes sense of him or herself – in the case of Ricœur's hermeneutics, through the mediation of the works of culture (including texts and theories in conflict) and, more generally, through narrative. This analysis has a practical vocation given that reading action as a text and reflecting on the self-interpreting animal as a being acting in the world entails discerning the possibilities of action. But agency is always exercised in the context of a common world, and thus many recent hermeneutical philosophies – notably those of Ricœur and Charles Taylor – do reflect on the intersubjective conditions of possibility for selfhood to develop. This reflection includes probing how meaning is co-constructed and is again a feature of remarkable importance for social epistemology.

Finally, I mentioned hermeneutics' interest in meaningful social change, which is to say, an inbuilt practical vocation to remedy social problems. This is perhaps not a feature of every hermeneutical philosophy, but it is certainly a feature of those hermeneutical projects that are closer to critical theory, such as Ricœur's and Charles Taylor's, and that can be placed under the label of "critical hermeneutics." This includes a concern with the the problem of structural domination, including symbolic domination, and with what Miranda Fricker proposes to call "hermeneutical injustice,"[22] i.e., the gaps in the common hermeneutical resources of societies that lead to symbolic exclusion.

Taken together, these traits of the hermeneutical project and its potential for social analysis can make major contributions to the ongoing debates within social epistemology. In the next section I intend to make one such contribution by tackling the issue of polarized ideologies.

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[21] See Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact-Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[22] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice. Power & the Ethics of Knowing.*

## IV.     The Conflict of Polarized Ideologies

What are "polarized ideologies"? If we define them in terms of their interaction with other ideologies, we can start by saying that these are ideologies that are in the state of an unmediated conflict and seem irreconcilable. If we assess them in terms of their substantive content, we might also conclude that these can perhaps be marked by what has been called "extreme beliefs,"[23] but here "extreme" might only mean that they are outside of the mainstream. That is, to borrow Laclau and Mouffe's terminology, they have not become hegemonic. Note, therefore, that nothing a priori qualifies an ideology in a state of polarization as being intrinsically false or distorted. The fact that it is polarized might only be a result of the social environment in which it is located, for instance in a conflict of interpretations. Consequently, there is no constitutive link between polarized ideologies and delusion. But such a link does exist when the ideology is pathological, as we shall see below.

Before we take a closer look at polarization and ideology it is useful to briefly unpack the conflict of interpretations. For the purposes of this article only a few major traits need to be highlighted. The first is its diagnosis of language and interpretation. In *Freud and Philosophy* Ricœur claims that there is no unification of human discourse; he states that "the unity of human language poses a problem"[24] because "there is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon for exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation. The hermeneutic field […] is internally at variance with itself."[25] Note, however, that what Ricœur states about language and the hermeneutic field ultimately involves inner and outer reality. What this means is that in the conflict of interpretations, what is at stake is both the constitution and reliability of human consciousness (its capacity to make and grasp meaning) and the way to interpret the world soundly.

Indeed, when Ricœur pinpoints the two major hermeneutic styles in conflict (i.e. hermeneutics as recollection of meaning and the hermeneutics of suspicion) a radical hypothesis is tested: "truth as lying,"[26] the lapidary formula summing up the hermeneutic style embodied by the three "masters of suspicion," Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, is nothing less than the constitutive deceitfulness of patent meaning – that is, meaning as it appears to our minds in the first person experience. This "school of suspicion" is actually credited with "the invention of an art of *interpreting*"[27] insofar as they create a "mediate *science* of meaning"[28] to unveil the latent meaning that is concealed behind patent meaning. Allow me to emphasize a few traits of this hermeneutic style of suspicion. First, Ricœur refuses to see in Marx, Nietzsche and Freud mere skeptics – even though they are labeled as three great "destroyers," the moment of destruction is meant to be

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[23] See Rik Peels' ERC funded project "Extreme Beliefs. The Epistemology and Ethics of Fundamentalism" online: https://extremebeliefs.com.

[24] Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*. *An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1970), 4.

[25] Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 26-7.

[26] Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 32.

[27] Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 34.

[28] Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 34.

encapsulated in a wider movement containing a new foundation.[29] As Ricœur blatantly puts it: "idols must die – so that symbols may live."[30] The emphasis of the hermeneutics of suspicion on demystification is therefore not understood as a purely nihilistic endeavor but ultimately as a way to access a truer meaning, a reduction of the illusions of immediate consciousness. Second, the reduction of illusions explored by Nietzsche in the moral sphere, Freud in the unconscious and Marx in the economic sphere through the critique of ideologies is a testament to the fact that misled beliefs can originate in different domains and that in one way or another they are all tied to larger interpretations of reality. Third, as Alison Scott-Baumann[31] has emphasized, the hermeneutics of suspicion should be handled with care. This means, to reiterate, that for Ricœur suspicion is a necessary step towards demystification but only to bring to light better interpretations. It can, however, be used in a pathological way to conceal reality itself, as we shall see below with pathological ideologies – namely, conspiracy theories. In other words, suspicion can both debunk or form pathological ideologies. Something along those lines can also be stated about the exercise of criticism as such. Some critical judgments will be sound while others will not, and this all depends on the robustness of the arguments put forward and the evidence on which they rely.

A second trait of the conflict of interpretations that I would like to stress is the way it impacts the hermeneutics of selfhood.[32] Indeed, at the time of the *Conflict of Interpretations* and the exploration of the "long route" of hermeneutics in which understanding is mediated by the epistemology of interpretations, Ricœur roots self-understanding in the understanding of what is outside the self: symbols, theories and alterity (in the sense of other selves).[33] This means that selfhood has to conquer itself in the passage by the critique that allows the self to go from misunderstanding to understanding.[34] As such, even ontology is broken because the conflicting interpretations reveal different aspects of existence.[35] Ricœur concludes that the self needs to go through an "ascesis of subjectivity," losing hold of the original certitude of the "I" in order to conquer selfhood. Thus, the work of interpretation and the interpreted self are co-implicated; this much is at stake in the dialectics between the archaeology and the teleology of consciousness in *Freud and Philosophy* and *The Conflict of Interpretations*, where Ricœur describes the "war of hermeneutics"[36] and their specific existential function. We can conclude from this brief analysis of the conflict of interpretations that going beyond false beliefs is tied to going beyond misunderstanding and thus that restoring meaning goes hand in hand with a function of critique; the interpretation of inner reality (selfhood) and outer reality (world) are therefore interwoven.

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[29] Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33.

[30] Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 531.

[31] Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Continuum, 2009).

[32] See Scott Davidson and Johann Michel (eds), "L'herméneutique du soi/Hermeneutics of the Self," *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 1/1 (2010), online: https://ricoeur.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/ricoeur/issue/view/2.

[33] Paul Ricœur, "Existence et herméneutique," in *Le conflit des interprétations* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 20.

[34] Ricœur, "Existence et herméneutique," 22.

[35] Ricœur, "Existence et herméneutique," 23.

[36] Ricœur, "Existence et herméneutique," 27.

With these provisional conclusions in mind, we can proceed to the specific overall interpretations of the world that we can call ideologies and their polarization. Conflict has up to now been analyzed in general as the conflict of interpretations and as bearing on selfhood. But ideologies are specific cases of interpretation[37] in which we can usually pinpoint the link between interpretation of some outside reality and the interpretation of selfhood. Thus far we have seen that interpretations are inescapably in conflict. But today, *mutatis mutandis*, we can apply the same diagnosis of conflict to ideological beliefs such as they appear in the public sphere – namely, in the digital public sphere. As shall be argued below, non-pathological ideologies must leave space for conceivable alternatives. But this also means, in line with the hermeneutical approach to social reality outlined in the previous section, that polarized ideologies opposing one another are a specific case of social conflicts of interpretations and are thus inscribed in a conflictual social and political praxis.

However, one caveat needs to be mentioned here. What has been said concerning the epistemological conflict of interpretations as analyzed by Ricœur in the 1960s suggests that the hermeneutical field is *constitutively* broken. But the same does not apply to polarized ideologies. Two ideologies might be in a state of polarized opposition (an antithetic) without that opposition being unsurpassable – the opposition is not posited as being *constitutive*, which is to say that they might be put into a dialectical productive opposition. If, however, we are to avoid pathological ideologies in the sense defined below, what we need to respect is a principle of hermeneutical openness. Take, as an example, political ideologies. In a liberal public sphere, the possibility to hold different political ideologies must be respected in the name of the principle of political pluralism, and therefore an ideology can never be forced upon individuals by political authorities. In such conditions, the likelihood that one single ideology comes to take hold of the whole society is feeble – although not impossible. As such, what needs to be assured is that the ideological field remains constitutively *open*, i.e., prone to change and revision.

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[37] The concept of ideology and the advocacy of ideology critique have a very long and intricate history from Marx to Piketty and contemporary social and political science and social epistemology. Indeed, ideology is simultaneously one of the most important concepts in the social sciences and an "essentially contested concept," so it might seem surprising that I am taking it up here while only explicitly discussing Ricœur (who, in turn, in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* discusses definitions of ideology given by Marx, Althusser, Mannheim, Weber, Habermas and Geertz) as a precedent. It goes without saying that doing justice to this history and compare my own tentative, working definition of ideology with this immense body of literature falls out of the scope of this article, as it would entail a more substantive development than what I can fit here. I also discuss the epistemological dimension of ideology in more detail below and refrain from fully delimiting its "ontological" status. However, it should be understood that I am taking ideologies to be symbolic mediations (i.e., interpretations) of inner and outer reality and which I am defining as systems of beliefs with a social origin that tend to disseminate. I am also claiming that ideologies, like any other interpretation, are subject to critique, i.e., to the exercise of an applied judgment through the appeal to reasons, justifications, facts and arguments. And I am claiming with Ricœur that the constitutive function of ideology makes it very hard to discern in many cases (such as the domain of politics) what is outside of ideology, because in the domain of human action validity and objectivity cannot be expected to have the same epistemic degree of certainty that is proper to science. But I am also arguing that this does not deprive us of the possibility of assessing ideologies, as we assess other interpretations, according to criteria of plausibility.

Another specificity of the case at hand here, of what has been called political polarization in recent years, is that the "polarization" at stake concerns the adhesion to specific beliefs, usually taken to be radical or extreme political beliefs that make communication in the public sphere difficult and at times even impossible. Consequently, the issue of (mis)communication or misunderstanding is key here, and it is in tension with the possibility of hermeneutical dialogue. We can note in passing that this issue makes the Habermasian interpretation of a rational public sphere[38] seem even more farfetched than what we would have thought some decades ago, and brings us closer to a conflictual, agonistic public sphere such as the one thought by Arendt.[39] However, the pluralism that is supposed to go along with the agonistic tension is itself under threat when no possibility of rational discussion or persuasion seems possible because subjects might just refuse to listen. And it is with this problem in mind that we come to the framework of analysis of belief formation and ideology. Here I shall start proposing this framework before I come back to Ricœur.

How do beliefs originate and relate to one another? Most beliefs do not stand alone. Instead, in our conscious experience they are integrated within a certain interpretive horizon in which they mutually support one another. Insofar as most beliefs originate in social settings, not only through formal education but also through other intersubjective socialization processes, it thus makes sense to take this intrinsic social embeddedness and the entanglement between different beliefs into account. I propose to analyze this entanglement in terms of "systems of beliefs." For the purposes of this analysis, we can take a system of beliefs to be: 1) a bundle of beliefs dialectically related to one another, in which new beliefs are influenced by previously existing beliefs; 2) this bundle of beliefs is intrinsically social, i.e., even if different subjects can have slightly different beliefs (e.g., likely no two subjects will hold exactly the same beliefs on every state of affairs), they can share a system of beliefs insofar as many core beliefs, and hence epistemic attitudes, will be similar; 3) insofar as some of its core beliefs are shared, systems of beliefs can gather the adhesion of multiple subjects and form subcultures, i.e., general attitudes towards the world, others, and a whole set of different themes, such as scientific topics; 4) even though systems of beliefs can theoretically become so dominant socially as to exclude any other such system – e.g., we can imagine a culturally homogenous society in which, ultimately, only one system of beliefs would exist – there is the likelihood that several such systems might coexist, each forming around specific core beliefs of a political, social, cultural or other nature.[40] As such, pluralist societies will bear witness to the existence of multiple systems of beliefs cohabiting with one another, insofar as basic freedoms (including freedom of expression, religious freedom, etc.) are respected and people can thus adopt different forms of life, express different opinions, and so forth. And ultimately, even in non-pluralist societies in which basic freedoms are not respected, people can of course refuse to

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[38] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.*

[39] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

[40] To be sure, I am not implying that within certain groups all members will share exactly the same beliefs, as if there would be a total communitarian stranglehold on individual minds. This would entail looking at group affiliation as totally scripting individual lives and would be an exaggeration. But this caveat does not invalidate what is being said about the influence of such beliefs and their tendency to disseminate.

believe what the authority wants them to believe. But the likelihood of this happening is of course severely affected where no such freedoms exist.

Among systems of beliefs, ideologies occupy a special place. In this context, I am proposing that we define a "pathological ideology" as being a totalizing system of beliefs. Totalizing not in the sense that in a given society it allows for no other system to exist, but in the sense that for those who inhabit it – that is, who see the world through its angle – an ideology can seep through all internal borders and reduce all meaningful experience to that same confined perspective. Ultimately, adhesion to a totalizing ideology can go so far as to deny evidence that would be sufficient for a non-biased perspective to gather adhesion or to change one's mind. It should be noted, however, that not all ideologies have this effect. And here I think that the distinction proposed by Ricœur between ideology in a constitutive sense and ideology in a pathological sense can be useful. Ricœur contends that social imagination is constitutive of social reality.[41] It is constitutive insofar as it provides a symbolic function without which no community could be built, that of legitimating a given social order; so, in Ricœur's social philosophy, it is a function of reproductive imagination.[42]

In this constitutive sense, "ideology occurs in the gap between a system of authority's claim to legitimacy and our response in terms of belief […] to add a certain surplus-value to our belief in order that our belief may meet the requirements of the authority's claim."[43] Ideology in a constitutive sense is actually needed for societies to endure through time and is not inherently pathological. But ideologies can be pathological and assume a distorting function that calls for critique when they become petrified and admit of no alternative. This is why, he argues, we need utopias, which are products of productive (rather than reproductive) imagination that reveal the contingency of any given social order and formulate the possibility of alternative states of affairs,

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[41] Paul Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 3.

[42] To be more precise, in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* Ricœur distinguishes three levels of ideology. The first level, discussed in Marx, looks at it as a distortion. At its second level, ideology assumes a legitimating function, which Ricœur unpacks by grafting onto the notion of ideology Weber's motivational model and the way in which ideology adds the surplus value of belief that confers legitimacy to power. As for the third level, which Ricœur approaches when discussing Clifford Geertz and the ineradicable symbolic mediation of action, ideology assumes an integrative function. This means that it is tied to the reproduction of social identity. My point above is meant to emphasize that in the case of non-pathological ideologies, integration and legitimation operate in tandem because no deceit is at work in justification; whereas in the case of pathological ideologies, the attempt at justification does not provide real legitimation, but is just a rationalization meant to preserve the ideology in place. On these three levels of ideology and the way in which they operate within Ricœur's theoretical framework, see George H. Taylor's excellent introduction to the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*.

[43] Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 183.

thus providing a possible path for social change.[44] I will take up this distinction while adding some further qualifications to it.

George Taylor, in the wake of Ricœur, argues that "the pervasiveness of ideology and the symbolic mediation of action […] provide crucial understanding into the dynamics of contemporary politics."[45] Taylor uses Daniel Kahneman's[46] distinction between system 1 and system 2 of our brains to argue that system 1 (the one that "thinks fast"), which is based on affection and prototypes rather than slow rational deliberation (which is the feature of system 2), is mostly in charge of our political decisions. He thus argues that if we are to understand contemporary politics, we need to grasp the role of belief. Taylor gives the example of Trump, who owed his electoral success in 2016 to the creation of a mythos "where not only America would be made great again but so would individual, particularly working-class Americans."[47]

Taylor argues, following Kahneman, that most of our perceptions, beliefs and decisions are not "rational" in a traditional, Enlightenment-type view of rationality; rather, they are guided much more by affection and intuition, which can be at the root of most of our beliefs. But this only means that ideologies need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, including the ideologies which, as systems of beliefs, go beyond the political level. Ricœur himself admits that "anything can become ideological: ethics, religion, philosophy,"[48] and that an underlying trait of ideology is that "all ideology is simplifying and schematic."[49] Accordingly, it is always a justification and a project;[50] when it is pathological or reified it calls for a critique (the exercise of which is even the condition of possibility to determining the pathological nature of the ideology at stake) that is itself a radically situated interpretation.

Polarized ideologies thus entail a double danger, the danger of illusion and delusion and of creating a public sphere in which communication is de facto almost impossible. A good example is, for instance, the influence of conspiracy theories that can be interpreted as an excess of suspicion, to the point of getting lost in the rabbit hole. Here, beliefs are intrinsically tied with practical

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[44] Ricœur suggests that there can be a productive dialectics between ideology and utopia, which means that utopias can be the yardstick to criticize ideologies and denaturalize them, revealing their contingency. Utopia is thus for Ricœur an exploration of the possible as it exercises a function of distanciation vis-à-vis existing social reality. I follow Ricœur in seeing utopias as a possible tool to criticize pathological ideologies; but, as I have argued before, utopian criticism is not the only possible path for ideology critique, and the relation between the several types of critique – which include immanent, transcendent, normative, and others – that can be addressed to ideologies and utopias goes well beyond the dialectical relation between these two concepts that Ricœur puts forward. See Gonçalo Marcelo, "Critique des idéologies, critique des utopies," *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 9/1 (2018), 28-41, online: DOI: 10.5195/errs.2018.430.

[45] George H. Taylor, "Why Ideology and Utopia Today?," *in* Stephanie N. Arel and Dan R. Stiver (eds), *Ideology and Utopia in the Twenty-First Century. The Surplus of Meaning in Ricœur's Dialectical Concept* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 225.

[46] Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow.*

[47] Taylor, "Why Ideology and Utopia Today?," 226.

[48] Ricœur, "Science and Ideology," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 226.

[49] Ricœur, "Science and Ideology," 226.

[50] Ricœur, "Science and Ideology," 226.

considerations of identity formation – namely, the construction of a perceived enemy. The next section will shed light on these last claims.

## V.     Hermeneutical Delusion and Ideological Bias

In order to clarify the inner workings of pathological ideologies, let us provide some additional clarifications on the epistemic framework proposed here: 1) pathological ideologies rely on core beliefs that can be formed without proper verification or evidence, and, as such, be disproved; 2) even if a certain belief is refuted by a rational confrontation with facts and reasons, subject p that holds ideology z can still hold to belief y, in virtue of a contaminating effect of z over y, which is to say that p will believe y no matter what evidence might tell him or her, because z can have a manipulating or distorting effect on what p *ought* to believe about y; and 3) being an intrinsically social totalizing system of beliefs, z can come to coordinate the actions and beliefs of whole groups of individuals.

Now, when condition 2 above applies, subject p is under what I would like to describe as a condition of *ideological bias* because he or she will refuse to grant epistemic validity to someone who refutes belief y, no matter how binding the reasons presented. Moreover, given that totalizing ideologies are confrontational and mutually exclusive, he or she will also refuse to believe those identified as *ideological others* because they will tend to be seen, due their social identity being tied – more often than not without verification, just out of a prejudiced angle – to a rival ideology, as inherently suspicious. So here we have ideology in its function of distortion and with severe implications. People who are placed in the position of an ideological other are thus denied the status of a valid partner in interaction.

Now, I would like to contend that people who are under the spell of pathological ideologies in the abovementioned sense are both victims and perpetrators of a process of *hermeneutical delusion*. I am well aware that the concept of delusion has pathological undertones, and I am willingly using it here in a similar way to which some critical theorists, for instance Axel Honneth,[51] use the concept of social pathologies of reason, understood as impediments to realizing a society's higher standards of rationality. This process is hermeneutical because it obviously involves an interpretation, and this interpretation relies on a dialectics (i.e., a hermeneutic circle) between the part (the new belief formed in this specific case) and the whole (the system of beliefs integrating and guiding the new belief). It is a delusion because the subject's interpretation is misguided, systematically leading to a false belief.[52] But here we might ask the extent to which this

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[51] Axel Honneth, "A Social Pathology of Reason. On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory," in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, trans. James Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 19-42.

[52] It should be noted that I am distinguishing hermeneutical delusions from simple factual mistakes. In fact, our perception and judgment are often flawed given our limited rationality and the fact that in our judgments we are influenced by affective reasons, utilize cognitive heuristics, have limited access to information and cannot process all information at once. However, the state of hermeneutical delusion is characterized by the dominance of an ideology that is totalizing and tends to last because it is tied to the identity of the subject who holds it, which helps explain why people might cling to it even when confronted with the fact that their interpretation is implausible.

process is wholly unintentional and, if it is not, what responsibility can be ascribed to subjects in this process. This is evidently a very important question, but I would like to argue that it does not have an answer that is universally valid for all situations. Instead, the degree of responsibility that can be ascribed to the subject that is under the spell of a hermeneutical delusion will vary in degree, because p can be simply misled, but he or she can also, in a second step, willingly refuse to revise his or her belief, due to a steadfast (let us call it emotional) adhesion to the pathological ideology. And in this second case we are faced with a phenomenon of bad faith, which is properly irrational.

It should be noted that I am not suggesting that hermeneuticians, critical theorists or social epistemologists have access to a privileged viewpoint somehow outside of the social fabric and are able to get out of the ideological access to social reality with a "scientific" method that can discern the truth where the others could not. As might be hinted by the distinction between constitutive and pathological ideologies drawn by Ricœur that I recalled above, there is very likely no view of social reality that totally escapes ideologies, insofar as they have a constitutive symbolic function. Moreover, even with the caveats mentioned before, rationality and agency must be understood as widely shared (even if limited) capacities. Be that as it may, people can be victims and perpetrators of hermeneutical delusion by being captured by pathological ideologies. A picture of rationality and agency as widely shared capacities is not necessarily incongruent with recognition of the fact that ideologies permeate our social fabric and that some of these ideologies can be distortive and manipulative in the abovementioned sense. Ideologies' inherent tendency to try to gather adhesion in their function of integration and legitimation remind us that they possess a motivational basis.[53] Being inherently social, ideologies have a tendency to disseminate. And this tendency, in our digital day and age, is of course taking place at a faster pace than ever before in human history.

Given this interpretive framework, one could raise the following question: should the concept of ideology be confined to the political domain? Not necessarily. To reiterate, in the broad definition of pathological ideologies I am offering, even systems of beliefs that seem prima facie non-ideological (i.e., non-political) can be deemed "ideological" insofar as they are totalizing systems of beliefs that tend to exclude meaningful exchanges with other viewpoints and can be resistant to evidence.[54] This includes beliefs held on scientific topics, such as vaccines and climate change, in which adhesion or rejection of what can count as evidence is more easily attested. But often these beliefs are actually entangled with political beliefs and tied to processes of perceived social marginalization, including what Fricker[55] calls "hermeneutical marginalization."

People engaged in processes of hermeneutical delusion usually have lower access to hermeneutical resources. Perhaps they are less educated or feel marginalized because they do not hold a privileged position in terms of social power or have less access to instruments associated

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[53] In line with the Weberian motivational framework mentioned above, one finds a telling example in the depiction of the functioning of the "new spirit of capitalism" by Boltanski and Chiapello. See Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2017).

[54] See Mona Simion, "Resistance to Evidence and the Duty to Believe," Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

[55] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice. Power & the Ethics of Knowing.*

with epistemic authority, such as traditional media.[56] But often they will feel they are going "against the grain" of what they see, with suspicion, as a grand scheme designed to hide something vital from them or otherwise manipulate them. So here the mechanism is particularly elusive, because, as mentioned above, they will find themselves in a position of exacerbated suspicion, believing they are being manipulated by something or someone with hidden motives, when in fact they are being deluded by the ideology itself, which is far detached from any plausible interpretation of reality. Whether or not they are actually being manipulated by other interests (such as those of political ideologues in the classical sense) or just participating in a collective delusion with no direct responsibility imputable to concrete agents depends on concrete cases, for both possibilities exist. But this places them in a specific position of marginalization because it not only puts them on the fringes of society but also exacerbates the incommensurability between the ideology they are caught in and the reality that other people are perceive, which only makes communication even harder. What makes this problem even more elusive is that at least some of these people will genuinely believe – without bad faith – that they are exercising sound social critique (even though they likely will not spell it out in these terms). COVID-19 negationists provide a good example because, as some have noted, what from the outside is (rightly) seen as a wildly delusional conspiracy theory can be experienced from the inside as the rightful denunciation of unjust social processes against which they feel compelled to demonstrate. In other words, there is a connection between populism, conspiracy theories and other forms of mis- and disinformation, in what has been termed "populist gullibility."[57] Given this stark picture we might ask what solutions there could be for this problem, and this is the issue addressed next.

## VI.    Moving Forward. Fostering Hermeneutical Dialogue

Hermeneutical delusions are not akin to clinical delusions, insofar as they can affect whole collectives and do not necessarily involve any mental health disorder. Hence, we can discuss degrees of responsibility for the delusion. This entails that given certain conditions, subjects should be able to, phrasing it simply, "snap out of it" and come back to the common ground of a reality widely shared outside of their echo chamber. But how?

Here, two types of approaches can be discussed, and while they are often presented as alternatives, I argue that they are not incompatible. The first approach focuses on individual behavior and is ultimately grounded on a virtue-theoretical account. It concentrates on the possibility to change people's minds on an individual basis. The second approach claims that the

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[56] This is another complex problem. By no means do I wish to suggest a naïve view of scientific consensus, nor do I ignore the role of conflict or paradigm change in science. And of course, it is true that even educated people with access to the same facts can arrive at different interpretations. It all hinges on what hermeneutical keys are used to interpret those facts. Be that as it may, it cannot be denied that putting forward sound arguments and interpretations has a strong correlation with the acquisition of certain tools that serve as its preconditions. Two examples are access to education and cherishing an epistemic climate that is not vicious.

[57] Jan-Willem van Prooijen *et al.*, "Populist Gullibility. Conspiracy Theories, News Credibility, Bullshit Receptivity, and Paranormal Belief," *Political Psychology* (2022), 1-19, online: https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12802.

former is in itself insufficient and argues for structural changes, specifically in tackling the harms in online communication. This involves changing how social media works and how policy can prevent the spread of fake news or conspiracy theories.

The focus is thus on "consumers" rather than "producers" of mis- and disinformation,[58] and before discussing what should be done, it might be useful to stress what should not be done. Here I argue that we should treat those suffering from hermeneutical delusion as we should also treat, for instance, rightwing populist audiences. In the case of the latter, criticizing their political views should not be tantamount to antagonizing those who hold them. In other words, the right approach to curbing populism is not to dehumanize or relegate populist supporters to the domain of the utterly irrational, because that might have the effect of further pushing them to the fringes; instead, the motives behind their behavior should be understood and political fixes for the problems causing this behavior should be developed – for example, curbing the economic inequality that fosters resentment toward elites by adopting more sensible redistributive measures. The same applies to the cases discussed in this article, and so I argue, against Cassam,[59] that the right strategy does not lie in "outing" or shaming these people. The aim here is, if we can put it this way, healing rather than exacerbating the divide.

This puts us on track for the approach I would like to argue for here, which is the individual strategy alluded to above. In the context of the diagnosis of today's fractured public sphere,[60] some have suggested that dialogue[61] or narrative exchange[62] might be a possible remedy to reach people with radically different beliefs or who are in a position of enmity towards us. This is consistent with a view of epistemic justice[63] and of cultivating epistemic virtues (e.g., being a trustful and patient hearer) in dialogue.

To my mind, this is the most promising path to help people break free of their hermeneutical delusions and thus to curb the collective irrationalities at least partially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic or other similar events that foster wild beliefs in a polarized public sphere with self-contained belief bubbles. The first step must therefore perhaps be one of listening to and treating even those at the fringes with respect while patiently trying to show where and how their interpretations are misguided. This is, for instance, McIntyre's[64] approach to science deniers: talk. And in this the hermeneutical model of dialogue seems especially promising[65] given that it puts the attitude of understanding the belief horizon of the other as the first step; only then

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[58] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories.*

[59] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories.*

[60] Hendriks *et al*., *Mending Democracy.*

[61] See Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay. *How to Have Impossible Conversations. A Very Practical Guide* (New York: Lifelong Books, 2019); McIntyre, *How to Talk to a Science Denier.*

[62] Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality. From Thought to Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).

[63] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice. Power & the Ethics of Knowing.*

[64] McIntyre, *How to Talk to a Science Denier.*

[65] Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

will the pedagogic virtue of helping the other revise his or her beliefs (something which can also be achieved by Socratic dialogue) come to the fore.

Elsewhere I propose that in our relations with others we are subject to recognitional dialogic duties, insofar as recognizing others as valid partners of interaction is a prerequisite for every successful intersubjective communication. This is precisely what is hindered when one is affected by ideological bias, insofar as the testimony of the other is denied its validity. Having this in mind, what needs to be done to fulfil these duties, which involve both ethical and epistemic dimensions, is precisely to foster mutual understanding in light of the other's best interests. In this case the goal to educate is also included, but we should strive to do so without being patronizing or coming across as arrogant so as not to foster divide. It might be argued, as a limitation to this strategy, that the efficacy of cultivating dialogue falls short of changing mentalities on a wider scale because, as has been noted, dialogic exchange works better in face-to-face interaction and is thus limited to small groups and settings. However, it can also be argued that there is great potential in experimenting with this possibility given what it might teach us about the possibility of changing minds and attitudes. It also goes without saying that this strategy needs to be complemented with further efforts to educate the public and to foster what one we might call the virtue of open-mindedness, which is precisely the opposite of ideological bias. In this, philosophy and public intellectuals might have a role, even if anti-intellectualism is another feature of our current predicament – but this serves as another reminder to avoid arrogance.

## VII.    Conclusion

In this article I provided a rough outline of what a hermeneutics of polarized ideologies can look like. The article argued that a social hermeneutical framework is useful to probe the rationality and irrationality in behavior and belief in a contextual and non-reductionist way, thus providing instruments to assess interpretations and distinguish justified from misleading interpretations. Putting forward the concept of hermeneutical delusion as the mechanism behind pathological ideologies understood as totalizing systems of beliefs, it also argued that it is possible to overcome the delusion in what could be called a virtue-theoretical account of hermeneutical dialogue fostering mutual understanding. This individual approach is not by itself able overcome the structural causes behind epistemically misleading environments and, as such, it should be combined with structural approaches. But it can indeed make a difference in terms of intersubjective communication and that, in itself, is a valuable contribution.

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