

They Woke Up This Morning, They Had Those Ideological Blues

My end, in this essay, is to try to shed some light on the recently influential "woke" movement that has captured much so much attention of late. However, I plan to move towards that end by first taking what might seem to be a detour, during which I will examine the character of what I will call "ideology."

Now, like many English words, "ideology" is overloaded with meanings. I have even heard it used to describe things like a sports strategy: "The Chiefs' passing ideology has worked well this season." I plan to offer my own definition here.

I certainly do not claim the meaning I will assign to the word is "the correct" one: Definitions, in and of themselves, are never "correct" or "incorrect." If I say, from now on, in this essay, I will use "horse" to mean "a sad man sitting alone in a diner," you may think my usage very odd, but it is not "wrong," in that those particular sounds have no inherent meaning, and I have explicitly told you I am using them in an unusual way. Of course, if I then claim, "And this is how most English speakers use the

word 'horse,'" my claim is untrue, but not because I defined the word in an idiosyncratic way, but because of my empirical claim that my definition is widely shared. In general, definitions of words should be judged based upon whether a proffered definition, even if it might diverge from common usage, helps us to think more clearly on some topic, or not. So I ask you to suspend judgment on the definition of "ideology" I will use here, until you have considered my case for why this this definition is useful. This definition of ideology is drawn primarily from the work of Eric Voegelin, although Michael Oakeshott and Aristotle are present in it as well. It can be briefly summarized as:

An ideology is a collection of axioms and their supporting slogans used for constructing and keeping intact a second reality.

Now let me expand upon and explain that brief definition. First off, by a "second reality" is meant a fantasy, a dream world, a wish about how the world *really ought to be*, that is taken to be, in some sense, more real than the actual world the ideologue lives in. Of course, all practical action seeks to replace what is with what ought to be: if, in 1870, I "dream" of a bridge across the East River, I may be able to succeed in getting the Brooklyn Bridge constructed. But I can only do so by

accepting the truth of reality as it is when I first imagine my dream: there is no bridge at that moment, to construct one is going to take a lot of resources and some great engineering, I must work to persuade many people it is feasible, and so on.

The difference between this and an ideological "second reality" is that in the latter case, what we have is not a practical plan for moving from the current, realistically appraised state of the world, to a different, state, deemed more desirable, but a *denial* of reality as it is, and the attempt to blot out that reality with the magical invocation of an alternate reality in which essential aspects of "first" reality are banished by incantation. To the ideologue, primary reality is in some sense a fake world, a shadow of the ideologue's dream. For instance, Marxism is not a reality-based, practical plan for improving the conditions of the working class -- Marx and Engels despised such efforts -- it is an attempt to replace the real world, in which life is hard and people suffer for a myriad of reasons, with a fantasy world, in which life is simple and endlessly joyous... or at least it *would* be, if not for the existence of those rotten capitalists.

This brings us to a second aspect of an ideology (as Voegelin used the term): given that there is an obvious discrepancy between the actual world and

the ideological dream world, what explains this divergence? Ideologies seem to generally explain this gulf by asserting that their dream world *would* be real, if not for the existence of some nefarious group working to block its realization. For Marxists, this is the capitalists. For Nazis, it is the Jews. For neoconservatives, it is those who "hate our American values." And for the current "woke," it is "white, cisgendered males." And the obvious corollary of such a finding is, "Well, if we could just eliminate all of the [fill in the evil group here], then the dream world would become real!"

The final, general consideration I want to introduce here is how the "arguments" that make up an essential part of an ideology are not really "arguments" at all, in that they are not attempts to rationally respond to criticisms of the ideology. Rather, they are defensive measures designed to prevent reality from penetrating the ideological dream world. This point is most easily understood by considering some examples.

A few years ago, I was struck by a poster hanging in the hallway of the institution in which I was teaching at that time. The poster showed a legless person sitting in a wheelchair, and under that image, in large text, was written, "My only disability is in your mind." Now, the members of the human race

present to us a glorious variety of abilities and disabilities. I, for instance, am only 5'9" tall, and not much of a jumper. I don't for a moment believe that these limitations of mine make me less of a person than someone who is 7'1" tall, and who can leap like a rabbit. But it would be absurd to say that "My only disability to play as a center in the NBA exists in your mind." No, I'm (relatively) short, and don't jump that well: these are very real shortcomings for playing center in the NBA, and they certainly do *not* exist only in the mind of NBA scouts!

Furthermore, I will note that I am strongly in favor of helping out those who have a disability such as having no legs, by, for instance, building wheel chair ramps to enable them to access buildings where they could not climb the stairs to get in. But look, the very fact that we ought to build such ramps, when feasible, testifies to the fact that these disabilities are *not* only "in the mind" of the "ableists," but actually exist in reality. After all, if the wheelchair-bound person's disabilities were actually "only in our minds," then all we would have to do to get the person in the building would be to stop thinking that they had any problem getting in! No ramp would be needed.

So let us examine what purpose this slogan ("my disabilities exist only in your mind") serves. First of

all, it is a bit of raw material in the construction of a "second reality," in which not having legs, or being blind, or being only 5'9" and not a very good jumper, are not *facts of reality* but, instead, are merely the arbitrary *beliefs* of some "privileged" social group which has legs, or is "sighted," or is tall and can jump. But what's more, and I what think is even more important, is that it serves as part of a defensive shield that protects the ideological second reality from being dissolved by exposure to reality itself. *The preponderance of the contents of an ideological system* consists of ritualized responses to any interrogation of the system's assumptions. Such responses protect the adherent of the ideology from having to rationally engage in discussion with anyone who has not already embraced the ideology's dream reality. So, for instance, any person possessed of a normal degree of common sense, encountering a poster like the one I described above, would be likely to say, "But wait a second: that person in the picture has no legs: certainly that makes doing many things that I take for granted extremely difficult for that person!" (And that common-sensical person, if possessed of a minimal degree of charity, might furthermore entertain the idea that, "Thus, we should really try to give that person, lacking legs, a hand in getting through life!") But no! The "anti-abelist" ideologue

responds, "The fact that you think the person depicted in our poster has some inherent problems dealing with stairs, 100-meter dashes, or what have you, is just a symptom of your oppressive, ableist mindset!" The crucial fact to recognize here is that the response of the ideologue to any criticism arising from outside of the ideologue's second reality is *not* an attempt to rationally engage in dialogue with the critic: it is simply a *defense mechanism* functioning to protect the ideological second reality from dissolution due to exposure to the facts of primary reality.

I think it is important to note that this understanding of ideologies, is not a "partisan," "conservative" strategy for dismissing all "leftist" thought. Quite to the contrary, this critique of ideological thinking cuts across conventional "left-right" boundaries, and is shared by, for instance, a left-leaning semi-anarchist such as James C. Scott. What's more, it can equally be used to critique "right-wing" ideologies, such as neo-conservatism, or doctrinaire belief in the unmitigated beneficence of "unfettered" free markets. For example, many neo-conservative ideologues forward a "dream world" in which the United States has always and everywhere been a force for peace and justice, and in which the only reasons America has not been able to reach the

"end of history" in a perfect, global republic of universal, democratic capitalism is the opposition to this earthly paradise on the part of "Islamo-fascists" and other reactionaries, such as "Russian authoritarians" or "Christian fundamentalists." If it is pointed out to them that, perhaps, Iranians who suffered under the autocratic rule of the US-supported Shah, or Filipinos whose relatives died fighting the American efforts to "Christianize" the Phillipines (which had been Catholic for 300 years by the time the US sought to Christianize them), or [I WILL PUT ONE MORE EXAMPLE HERE -- GC]...?, might be skeptical of plans to place the entire globe under US hegemony, the person noting this will be accused of "blaming America first." This "comeback" serves the same purpose as the response to the "ableist" described in the previous paragraph: neither are attempts to rationally engage the critic of the ideology in question. No, both serve, instead, to *dismiss* the voice of any outsider criticizing any aspect of the ideology in question: such critics most emphatically should *not* be heard, because to actually engage their critique would be to give encouragement to... well, whatever enemy the ideology in question has identified as the demonic resistance to the establishment of paradise on earth: perhaps it is "the capitalists," or "the

Jews," or "the Islamo-fascists," or "the patriarchists," or "the cis-gendered," or... well, you get the idea!

To see that the ideology virus is not particularly a left or right wing disease, and that identifying it is not a partisan campaign, but a mission of public service, I think it will be helpful to look at several more examples. In each, we will see that the ideological response to reasonable criticism is *not* an attempt to engage with or rationally refute the critic, but instead is a way to erect a defensive shield that renders the ideology impenetrable to criticism from outside.

My first example has little to do with politics, and the adherents of this dream world, in fact, range all over the "political spectrum." Their dream world insists that "computation," something many of them understand well, as this ideology is particularly popular with programmers and other computer professionals, is an all-encompassing description of reality. A mathematician friend of mine, faced with a "computationalist" ideologue, asked, "Well, don't you think a uncomputable number like Pi is real?" The response he got was, "If you think noncomputable numbers are real, then prove it by computing one of them for me." Quite clearly, from any reasonable point of view, this response is complete nonsense: if someone thinks that a non-

computable number like Pi or e is real, they are claiming that these numbers are real, *despite the fact that they cannot be computed* (because their decimal expansion is infinite and non-repeating). To demand that such a person prove that these non-computable numbers really exist by computing them is like asking that someone prove that there are no living dodo birds by shooting some and bringing in their corpses. Given the complete irrationality of this response, it should be clear that its purpose wasn't to rationally engage with this argument against computationalism, but rather to block it, and prevent it from disturbing the dream world of the computationalist.

To turn to a more political example, in one of Rod Dreher's recent blog posts at TAC (<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/queering-children-imaginations-rudolph-drag-queen-story-hour/>), he objected to a public school bringing a drag queen who had worked as a prostitute into the school to read stories to young children, one commenter responded: "You don't want your children to even know that gay people exist." This response is, quite obviously, not an effort to seriously engage Dreher's case that "inviting drag queen prostitutes to read to young children might be a bad idea": to jump from that to "you don't want

your children to even know that gay people exist" makes no rational sense. So why in the world would a commenter post this? Once again, we are witnessing an ideology as consisting of "axioms and slogans for constructing and keeping intact a second reality." The axiom in play here is that any person who objects to any aspect of the ongoing sexual revolution, whatever their argument might be, in reality is just a reactionary puritan. The axiom is then given efficacy by being formulated as a slogan. The utility of adopting this stance is that the adoptor never needs to address any actual arguments put forward by anyone who dissents from their ideology: no need, such people are just repressed neurotics who wish to impose their own inability to "realize themselves as sexual beings" on to others. Given this identification of the foe as "oppressive other," the need to deal with any of their actual arguments is swept away.

But, let us again turn away from hotly contested political examples, and look at another case that has little to do with any left-right alignment: in this instance, the ideology in question is "physicalism," which holds that the only aspects of what we experience every day that "really exist" are those that appear as measurable by physics. You think that you are in love? Well, that is "really" just some

electrical activity in your brain. Perhaps you had an experience of contact with some transcendent reality? Nope, that too was just electrical activity in your brain. In fact, everything you think you "know" about the world is really just your experience of your own brain states. Prominent entrepreneur Elon Musk recently expressed a cornerstone of this ideology when he tweeted: "We are literally a brain in a vat. The vat is your skull. Everything you think is real is an electrical signal." Once again, the problem with this sort of statement *ought* to be obvious, at least to anyone seriously engaged in contemplating reality, and not just trying to shore up some previously embraced dream world: if our ideas of what is real don't make reliable contact with what *is* real, then how does Musk know that human beings really have "skulls"? After all, aren't "skulls" just another one of those items we believe are real but are, in fact, just "an electrical signal"? Going even further... how does Musk even know there is any such thing as "electrical signals"? After all, our only evidence for the existence of electrical signals comes to us through our perceptual apparatus... which, according to Musk, can't be relied upon as being genuinely in touch with reality. Since it is only through these "electrical signals," which may have little inherent connection to reality, that we know about skulls, or even about electricity... well, Musk's

whole "profound" insight falls apart as self-undermining rubbish. Nevertheless, over 8000 Twitter users "liked" this bit of nonsense. Why? Because it offered them a concise statement of how they could shield their physicalist ideology from being penetrated by reality: if, for instance, you argue against it by noting that affection between living creatures seems to be commonplace and not simply physical, the physicalist can respond, "Well, you think so just because of some electrical activity in your skull." The trope serves to defend an ideology against penetration by reality, not to rationally respond to outside criticism.

Recently, in the United States, as well as in much of Europe, and in many other areas of the world as well, what is often called "woke" ideology has had significant influence, as well as having been the target of much criticism. But too often, I suggest, people have sided for or against "wokeness" based upon partisan considerations: does this new movement promote policies I like, or not? Do the "woke" tend to vote for candidates from my party, or don't they? I will argue that such methods of judging whether to support an ideological movement are misguided, since any success such movements achieve comes at a cost that even those non-ideologues who support many policies endorsed by

an ideology will find too high. "Wokeness," I will argue:

1. Woke ideology shares significant features with the many other "political religions" that have arisen over the last several centuries.
2. Recognizing those common characteristics is beneficial to those who wish to protect social order from the pathenogenic effects of all political religions.
3. Identifying such commonalities among the political religions (ideologies) could, most hopefully, even aid those suffering from infection by one or the other of them in recognizing that from which they suffer, and point the way towards a healing from such an affliction.

So, how do these musings on ideology help us to understand the tide of "wokeness" that is currently inundating many US (and other) college campuses, as well as coursing through the public pronouncements of a multitude of major corporations? First of all, it is important to identify

the "woke" movement as an ideology, and recognize its kinship with other ideologies, such as Communism and Nazism. That recognition alone could wake many to the dangers of wokeness: since ideologies promise heaven on earth, but can never actually deliver on the promise, to continue in existence, they must continually discover more and more pockets of resistance that are thwarting the realization of the kingdom. Thus, in the Soviet Union, if reality continued to fall short of the communist paradise, the solution was to ferret out more and more "enemies of the people," and eliminate them. If Nazi Germany's plans for European domination were experiencing setbacks, the only explanation permissible from inside their ideological "second reality" was that they had not yet achieved the "final solution" of the "Jewish problem."

And so, even as "wokeness" has achieved one after another of its aims... diversity departments in every major corporation and university, the legalization of gay marriage, "bathroom rights" for transsexuals, and "multicultural" curriculums in public schools, the woke continually become ever more shrill and dissatisfied about how oppressive our culture remains. (I use scare quotes around "multiculturalism" above because, while I would

enthusiastically endorse *real* multiculturalism in schools -- for instance, requiring students to become fluent in an Asian or Native American language, to master some polyrhythmic West African or Indian music, or to learn to read the Koran in Arabic -- what passes for multiculturalism today is generally just a very superficial "museum tour" of a gallimaufry of trendy cultures: the Cubans, don't they have great music! The Chinese, great vases, and the Mexicans, what tasty tacos!) Once we understand the pattern common to all ideologies, their promise to create heaven on earth, coupled with their inherent inability to deliver on that promise, and thus their need, if they are continue in existence, to assign blame for that failure to a demonized enemy who resists the coming of the kingdom, we can understand the dynamic at work wherever the woke are in charge. Thus, anyone who refuses to learn the ever-increasing number of new pronouns that the woke demand we use, or who objects to confused young children being subjected to hormonal therapy to "help" them become their "true" selves, is labeled as "transphobic" and ordered to check their "cisgendered" privilege. Any white person who finds themselves a member of an ever more woke organization must declare their very genetic heritage, a thing that they certainly did not choose

to adopt, to be in itself a mark of their sinfulness, for which they must continually atone.

Once we understand this dynamic, common to all ideologies, it is clear that there is no "reasonable, middle ground" upon which the "non-woke" can reach a *modus vivendi* with the woke. Every concession made to woke ideology will soon enough prove to be inadequate, since each concession will not result in the realization of the kingdom of heaven on earth. A demand that elementary school children read books like *Heather Has Two Mommies*, will, once the effect of the concession has proven to be inadequate, be followed by a demand that one of those mommies, who turns out to be a drag queen, be allowed to come to school and read to the children. And once it is admitted that that has not been enough to perfect earthly life, those children will be asked to play out roles in which they are the opposite sex of their own, or to write love letters in which they romance a potential same-sex partner (<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/queering-children-imaginations-rudolph-drag-queen-story-hour/>). And when that doesn't work... well, I leave it to the reader's imagination as to what will come next, if they have the stomach to do so.

Coming to recognize the pernicious effects of all ideologies, of all attempts to act as though one's dream world were real, and reality only a conspiracy foisted on us by some Satanic foes of everyone else's happiness, does not entail supporting (or resisting) Donald Trump, embracing (or opposing) Brexit, rejecting (or advocating) the existence of the Federal Reserve, voting for (or against) affirmative action, working to lower (or raise) tax rates, or, in general, adopting any particular policy positions or political platforms at all. In fact, it is probably the case that every ideological movement contains within its construct at least some true insights into social problems, without which it would lose all plausibility. Marxism is nonsense, but Marx himself was a genius, albeit a twisted one, who often had brilliant insights into social reality. We can and should recognize the value of those insights, even while we reject the dream world Marx built around them. Similarly, rejecting woke ideology should not mean that we reject wholesale every complaint the woke voice about our current situation: many of those complaints are valid, or at least contain a kernel of validity. It is the fact that "the woke" are saying many things that are true that attracts people to their movement, just as the fact that many capitalists *were* greedy bastards made Marxism plausible.

Rather, once we reject the siren song of ideologies offering easy answers to the complex problems of the real world, we can accept that fixing those problems is usually difficult and fraught with unforeseen side effects, that our own judgement of the best way to address them is at best an educated guess, and that acknowledging these facts is not "selling out," but, in truth, the only honest way forward.