Comments on *Knowledge and Ideology: The Epistemology of Social and Political Critique*

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Michael Morris' *Knowledge and Ideology* is an original and valuable contribution to the philosophical debate concerning the meaning and validity of the concept of ideology critique. While the concept of ideology has occupied a pivotal role within the tradition of critical social theory, as Terry Eagleton had already pointed out in his 1994 study, the term nevertheless has "a whole range of useful meanings, not all of which are compatible with one another."[1] Morris takes Eagleton's analysis as his point of departure, distinguishing between "epistemic" and "functional" varieties of ideology critique. Unlike Eagleton's earlier study, however, which focused on the historical development of these two dominant ways of conceiving ideology, Morris' work attempts to show how the cognitive and noncognitive dimensions of belief can be productively reconciled in a "Neo-Hegelian variation of epistemic ideology critique."[2] Morris' work makes a compelling case that critical social theory can be sensitive to the social dimensions of belief without abandoning the legitimate goals of the traditional epistemological project. I have some questions, however, regarding how he proposes to reconcile these two competing visions of ideology critique.

First, Morris considers authors like Stirner, Nietzsche, Marcuse and Foucault, who look to the "social origins and functions of belief"[3] in order to unmask the hidden interests which every theory wittingly or unwittingly serves. These figures represent what Morris calls the tradition of "functional critique of ideology." What unites the figures within this tradition, for Morris, is their "guiding concern with the functional role that beliefs play in the perpetuation of social oppression."[4] While these thinkers do well to consider beliefs as *entities in the world* tied to systems of oppression, Morris rightly notes that these same thinkers often fail to consider the specifically *cognitive* dimensions of belief. That is to say, functional critics of ideology often fail to adequately treat beliefs as *claims about the world*. Morris devotes Parts One and Two of *Knowledge and Ideology* to an examination of the problems he identifies in this majority tradition of ideology critique. In Part One, Morris joins Jürgen Habermas[5] among others in voicing his concern that functional critics of ideology often become ensnared within a performative contradiction

that threatens to undermine their criticisms. In taking recourse to the very same "rationality" which their analyses condemn as a function of power, these functional critics open themselves to the charge of self-refutation. While I share Morris' concern here and appreciate his articulation of this important point, I wonder whether these critics, in reducing all rational criteria to their functional role in the expression of power, would be moved by such logical scruples. After all, Nietzsche for his part affirms that "the nihilist does believe that one needs to be logical."[6]

In Part Two of *Knowledge and Ideology*, Morris elaborates a second important point of criticism of functional ideology critique: "If every belief and custom expresses and serves multiform power, then our general orientation toward the world becomes little more than a personal and quasi-aesthetic preference."[7] If, that is, functional ideology critique leads us to regard all beliefs, all norms, and all forms of social organization as equally arbitrary incursions upon an otherwise radically individual and unmediated subject, then it effectively eliminates its own normative basis. Once the functional critic throws the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, the decision between violence and non-violence becomes one of mere personal preference. Further, Morris suggests that it is because the tradition of functional ideology critique views all norms as fundamentally oppressive that it often ends up promoting and even glorifying their violent disruption as "liberation." Now, I share the author's concern about the way that functional ideology critique can promote violent and antisocial behavior when it becomes severed from its normative core. I wonder whether the chief problem with such authors as Nietzsche, Foucault, Stirner, etc., however, is not that they end up *actually* glorifying violence, but that they can't offer any satisfactory justification for why, for instance, we should be concerned to reduce violence in the first place. Accordingly, I would ask the author to clarify whether he thinks that functional ideology critique becomes problematic only when it is put in the service of violent and ignoble ends, or when it comes to serve ends that cannot be satisfactorily justified. If, as I suspect, it is the latter, then I wonder whether a metacritique of the tradition of functional ideology critique wouldn't be better suited to turn to such questions of justification.

Here's another way of putting the same question: Morris suggests a certain family resemblance between the bohemian, the irrationalist, the postmodern, the skeptic, the fideist, and the fascist. What is the basic problem that links each of these figures together? To my mind, it is their suspicion toward all rational criteria – a suspicion which slides, all too easily, into dogmatism and, ultimately, chauvinism. But if my diagnosis is correct, then doesn't this suggest that functional ideology critique must come to terms with

its epistemic deficit? Isn't this the chief problem that the critique of ideology must come to grips with? It is because Morris finds that the minority tradition of ideology critique – what he calls the "epistemic critique of ideology" – promises to address such concerns that he considers it to be a necessary corrective to the more dominant tradition of functional ideology critique.

Morris finds representatives of the tradition of epistemic ideology critique in Karl Marx – the author, of course, of *The German Ideology* – Jürgen Habermas, Karl Mannheim, György Lukács, and more recently, in Jon Elster and Tommie Shelby. The strong variation of this paradigm construes the critique of ideology – here understood as the scientific unmasking of cognitively distorted belief – as a necessary and radical outgrowth of the traditional epistemological project. Because, as Morris points out, traditional epistemology insists upon a "sharp distinction between (a) properly epistemic accounts of truth and justification and (b) all psychological, sociological, historical, and rhetorical studies that examine the causes and associative patterns of belief,"[8] it fails to recognize the inherently social dimension of cognition. Epistemic critics of ideology, therefore, are those figures like Marx, Mannheim, and Lukács who, in acknowledging the "constitutive and legitimate role of social roots and functions in the formation of most types of knowledge, without thereby undermining the difference between knowledge and error,"[9] insist upon the "ideological" character of the traditional epistemological project. Thus, in quasi-Hegelian fashion, Morris positions the tradition of epistemic ideology critique as the "truth" which reconciles the important insights of the functional critique of ideology with the legitimate aspirations of the traditional epistemological project. Part Three of *Knowledge and Ideology* is devoted to Morris' attempts to synthesize the cognitive and noncognitive dimensions of belief within the context of a "Marxist Theory of Knowledge."

Now, I find Morris' argument regarding the need to reconcile the aspirations of traditional epistemology with those of social theory to be quite clear and compelling. I agree with his basic thesis that a metacritique of ideology ought to integrate the social and cognitive dimensions of belief and to reject the traditional opposition between theoretical and practical reason upon which the former opposition rests. Nevertheless, I cannot follow Morris to his eventual conclusion that such a metacritique of ideology ought to be grounded in a Neo-Hegelian social ontology because I fail to see how it satisfies the traditional concerns of epistemology. I understand that Morris finds in the Neo-Hegelian framework an account which affirms that beliefs are determined by particular practical aims embedded within social practices. But what, in turn, does Morris suppose it is that determines those particular practical aims which he considers so decisive in the formation of beliefs? Indeed,

why should we believe that social practices and the particular aims which guide them are the most salient features in belief-formation in the first place? Even if beliefs are largely determined by such aims, what is it that makes some beliefs justified and others not? Following from this, what is it that legitimates Morris' own social-epistemic position as Neo-Hegelian metacritic of ideology? Why ought we to accept Morris' metacritique of ideology over the competing visions of ideology critique he engages throughout the study other than the fact that it aims to integrate the social and cognitive dimensions of belief? If there are "no sufficiently robust and determinate standards of 'truth,' 'reality' and 'knowledge' that exist above and prior to all cognitive practices,"[10] as Morris argues, because these categories are always already rooted in specific cognitive practices which are themselves rooted in social practices, then what sort of justification can he provide for why we should prefer his account of ideology over any other?

Hegel's philosophy provides an astonishing, if not overwhelming, attempt to answer each of the questions I have tried to raise here. Though Hegel does not have a critique of ideology per se, I wonder whether Morris thinks that Hegel – rather than, say, Lukács or Mannheim – can ultimately provide the theoretical resources for the same sort of metacritique of ideology that Morris advocates. I find this question particularly urgent in view of Morris' frequent appeal to Hegel's concept of "concrete universality." It is my impression that Morris is hesitant to pursue those questions of justification which, for Hegel, lead to the "standpoint of philosophical science."[11] Indeed, Morris explicitly concedes at one point that "without the metaphysical and theological guarantees provided by Hegel, the existence of some such universal remains uncertain, perhaps something that can only be approached or approximated."[12] But if Morris wishes to avoid these justificatory questions, then I am left wondering why we ultimately ought to accept his Neo-Hegelian metacritique of ideology over some competing account other than, say, mere personal preference?

Moreover, if Morris does not think that we are in the position to appeal to traditional conceptions of "truth," "reality," or "knowledge" because they emerge from social practices which are themselves guided by particular interests, then I fail to see what ultimately distinguishes Morris' own metacritique of ideology from the functionalist variant he criticizes for eschewing traditional epistemological concerns. If the functional critic of ideology can only treat skepticism as an *entity in the world*, as part of the social reality she hopes to explain, surely this cannot mean that she can avoid its specific epistemological challenges. In view of such concerns, I would request further clarification as to which traditional epistemological standards the author

thinks the metacritique of ideology must satisfy and, further, how he propos-
es to incorporate these requirements in his own Neo-Hegelian vision of the
critique of ideology.

Finally, if, as I have suggested above, functional critiques of ideology
are problematic not only because they often encourage the violent disrup-
tion of norms, but because their suspicion toward all norms compels them
to observe the disruption of every norm with the same stolid indifference,
I wonder what means Morris' metacritique can offer to mitigate this last
concern. Morris explains at one point that he has called attention to the links
between functional ideology critique and the glorification of violence in order
to "undermine the more sanguine attitudes of postmodern radicalism, with
its conviction that endless debunking, unmasking, and deconstructing must
naturally promote tolerance and militate against aggression."[13] Morris' treat-
ment of Rousseau, Stirner, Nietzsche and other figures he associates with the
tradition of functional ideology critique makes it quite clear that he considers
the glorification of violence to be distasteful, even abhorrent, but it remains
ambiguous whether Morris' own metacritique of ideology can offer anything
other than aesthetic criteria in support of its denunciation.

Endnotes

1   Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso Books, 2007), 1.

2   Michael Morris, *Knowledge and Ideology: The Epistemology of Social and Political Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 248.

3   Morris, *Knowledge and Ideology*, 10.

4   Morris, *Knowledge and Ideology*, 5-6.

5   See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 106-130. and Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 18.

6   Morris, *Knowledge and Ideology*, 117.

7   Morris, *Knowledge and Ideology*, 50.

8   Morris, *Knowledge and Ideology*, 14-15.

9   Morris, *Knowledge and Ideology*, 241.

10   G.W.F. Hegel, Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part I: Science of Logic, trans. Klaus Brinkmann & Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 66.

11   Morris, *Knowledge and Ideology*, 22.

12   Morris, *Knowledge and Ideology*, 179.