

Critical & Analytical Essays

Ideology as the Final Arbiter of Truth: A Critique

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Editor's Note:

Pranab Kumar Sen's reflections on ideology remain among the lesser-travelled paths in his otherwise widely studied philosophical corpus. This essay brings that neglected terrain into focus, arguing that Sen's identification of dogmatism and closure as the defining marks of ideology carries significant implications for how we understand the proper conduct of philosophical and scientific enquiry.



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Abstract

This paper examines Pranab Kumar Sen's distinctive and comparatively lesser-known analysis of the concept of ideology, as articulated in his 1992 seminar paper "Philosophy, Science and Ideology," later included in *Knowledge, Truth and Realism*. While Sen is widely recognized for his contributions to debates on truth, meaning, logic, and the realism-anti-realism controversy, his reflections on ideology reveal a striking moment of intellectual courage. Against the prevailing and often populist invocations of ideology, Sen undertakes a conceptual inquiry into its very meaning. The paper focuses on one central issue Sen treats with seriousness: the relation between philosophy, science, and ideology. By identifying certain defining characteristics of ideology, such as dogmatism, closure to criticism, and resistance to self-correction, Sen argues that ideology is fundamentally incompatible with philosophy and science, both of which are essentially self-critical and epistemically open enterprises. This study reconstructs Sen's analysis of ideology without engaging the broader political-philosophical literature on the subject, as its primary concern is his conceptual framework. In doing so, it also offers a critical reflection on Sen's position, assessing its implications for understanding the normative role of philosophy in society.

Keywords: Ideology, Epistemology, Pranab Kumar Sen, Coherence Theory of Truth, Foundationalism

While reading P.K. Sen, one can be absorbed effortlessly in the subject at hand, whether it be truth, theory of meaning, logic, or the realism-anti-realism debate. But his understanding of ideology, which is relatively lesser known, is a unique exposition of his intellectual courage in which he challenged the populist notion of ideology, going at its very root. In 1992, Sen presented a paper titled "Philosophy Science and Ideology" at a seminar at Aligarh Muslim University, and this paper was later included in his collection of essays named *Knowledge, Truth and Realism*¹. This paper deals with some major intellectual concerns, namely the relation between ideology, philosophy, and science, and the role philosophy can play in the larger society. This paper seeks to examine one of the issues that Sen took very seriously while discussing the relationship between science, philosophy, and ideology: namely, Sen's analysis of the notion of "ideology." In addition, an attempt will be made to offer a critical understanding of Sen's position.

What Sen undertakes, in critically analysing the very notion, is an inquiry into the meaning of the term "ideology." He identifies a few defining characteristics of ideology and attempts to demonstrate how these characteristics are not compatible with philosophy or any epistemic body we entertain. It must be acknowledged that a vast literature exists in the field of political philosophy on this subject; however, those broader understandings fall outside the scope of the present discussion, as the primary concern of this paper remains Sen's conceptualisation of ideology.

The term *ideology* was coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy, a French Enlightenment philosopher. He introduced this term in order to explain various rational or irrational perspectives of human behaviour in the aftermath of the French Revolution. He also used the term ideology as a "science of ideas" that could be

¹Sen, Manidipa, Sen, Madhucchanda, Chakraborty Nirmalya Narayan, eds. *Knowledge, Truth and Realism: Essays in Philosophical Analysis by Pranab Kumar Sen*. Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 147-160.

used as a weapon to face the irrational impulses of the mob. This was how the word "ideology" entered the academic world. The notion of ideology in the hands of Antoine Destutt de Tracy stands for a method that helps one to understand human rationality. But gradually the connotation of the term changed. Later, with the arrival of Marxism, the notion got a rigid political inclination and its epistemological aspect became completely suppressed (Kennedy 353–368). In 1917, with the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent foundation of the Soviet Union in 1922, ideology became synonymous with Marxism and the state began to use ideology as a faithful intellectual machinery unto which people had to surrender their free rational wills (Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses").

Sen has noticed this shift, writing "it is, in fact, a shift from 'ideas' to 'ideals'" (Sen et al. 151). As has been established above, with the advent of Marxist political scholarship, the implied meaning of the term ideology was compelled to stand for a set of political beliefs alone, excluding broader epistemic beliefs of any kind. If one wishes to explain the cognitive condition of human beings or rational human actions using a set of epistemological ideas as its method, modern scholarship will refuse to name this epistemic endeavour as "ideology." But Sen raises the question: what is wrong with not understanding ideology only through a particular set of political beliefs? What if the word ideology were used to denote any existent set of beliefs that determines thought and action? Though Sen does not answer what would follow if the term ideology were taken in the above way, his understanding of the relation between philosophy and ideology can give some hints (Sen et al. 151–152).

Sen lists three defining features of ideology (Sen et al. 154): first, it claims a kind of finality for itself; second, it claims to provide the final set of true understanding while interpreting the human condition and rationality; third, it is inevitable — attempting to escape one's own ideology is like trying to jump out of one's own skin. The first two features are related to each other insofar as they position ideology as the final arbiter of truth. The third feature concerns the inevitability of ideological participation. According to Sen, taking part in an ideological framework is inescapable. He writes, "I cannot but have the ideology that I

have, because it is something which arises out of a historical necessity" (Sen et al. 154). This is illustrated through the example of a worker enrolled in a trade union — given the economic mode of production and the related societal conditions, participation in a particular ideological framework becomes practically compulsory (Sen et al. 154). These three features, taken together, constitute the ideological framework as Sen understands it.

There is a longstanding and influential tendency in scholarship to understand ideology as a means of theoretical oppression (Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"). If ideology tends to oppress, and if oppression is morally unacceptable, then ideological oppression is equally indefensible. Social institutions exist that seek to justify this particular kind of oppression by demonstrating how it can produce effective change in society. A notable example is the United States Department of Defence's 2016 solicitation for biodegradable training ammunition — framed as an environmental initiative, yet one that simultaneously naturalizes and legitimizes weapons production as a socially beneficial enterprise, which is itself an ideological operation. Sen recognizes this very dynamic: the problem with ideological oppression is that neither the oppressor nor the victim often realizes their respective roles, precisely because ideological oppression is manifested through sanctioned social institutions (Sen et al. 154–155). Ideology designs social institutions in such a way that those institutions derive their very substance and justification from the ideology itself (Sen et al. 155).

One might mistakenly treat Sen as a postmodernist, as he theoretically challenges the grand narrativity of ideology throughout his paper. Certainly, he was not a postmodernist — his philosophical work maintained a consistent commitment to binary logic and classical analytic method. Rather, his theoretical framework remained critically open and resistant to dogmatic commitment of any kind. Sen did not advocate freedom from ideological inclinations altogether; he sought instead to encourage the critical questioning of what he calls *unwanted ideological growths* (Sen et al. 159). In his paper, Sen does not provide an alternative theoretical space where an ideological framework can sustain itself without becoming an apparatus of intellectual oppression. An ideology becomes a successful

oppressive apparatus when it promotes false consciousness by distorting the meaning of a certain discourse or manipulating the real state of affairs. The present discussion therefore turns to two theoretical models capable of preventing ideology from spreading false utopian narratives.

It cannot be denied that foundationalism helps an ideology to grow in various ways. Specifically at the very dawn of an ideology, the entirety of its theoretical understanding rests on this very notion of foundationalism. Foundationalism acts as a powerhouse for any ideological enquiry as it can satisfy the enquiry by providing grounded set of premises, conceptual strategy, and justification. As time passes by, this very notion of foundationalism endorses the manifestation of power disguised as naturalised knowledge.² Ideologies are thus deployed to consolidate power or promote a false discourse. In short, foundationalism enables an ideological discourse to legitimise its own point of view at the expense of others; this self-legitimising and totalising vision promotes a rigid inevitability within ideological frameworks.

Sen conceived the fact that foundationalism was often used as a theoretical ploy to spread hegemonic ideas through language, visual images, and texts. An alternative truth-theoretic model will therefore be proposed here that can lead to a conclusion, perhaps, where Sen wishes to arrive. Sen neither planned to see an ideological discourse as an extension of an all-engulfing grand narrativity nor insisted that anyone subscribe to any anti-foundational standpoint.³ But he vehemently criticized any dogmatic ideological pursuit throughout his life, since this kind of pursuit bears a tendency to stop the growth of human progress. Taking this understanding of Sen into consideration, Davidson's formulation of the coherence theory of truth is invoked here as the proposed backdrop of a healthy ideological pursuit. Davidson's formulation of coherence stands in contrast

² The notion of power disguised as naturalised knowledge draws implicitly on Foucault's concept of power/knowledge. See Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1977.

³ For a contrasting postmodern perspective on grand narrativity and the rejection of foundationalism, see Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

with foundationalism. In his formulation, the idea of coherence is not divorced from the idea of correspondence. Davidson never sketched his notion of coherence as the competitor of correspondence — Davidson, in fact, aims at providing an argument which shows that his kind of coherence yields correspondence, even if he is not suggesting any kind of primacy of coherence over the correspondence theory of truth (Davidson 137). Hence for Davidson, while correspondence remains the nature of truth, coherence serves as its epistemological test — the means by which beliefs can be assessed for their likely correspondence with reality (Davidson 137-39). If a set of ideological beliefs seems to be pernicious while it promotes any utopian truth which lacks the nature of correspondence, then the idea of coherence can prevent that promotion of truth by scrutinising the central belief mechanism of that particular set of ideological beliefs. Beliefs entailed from an ideological discourse can be accepted as true only insofar as they cohere with a pre-existing set of beliefs. One can accept Stalin's interpretation of Marxism to be true until it coheres with pre-existing Marxist beliefs; otherwise one is permitted to give away her entire existing set of beliefs regarding Marxism.⁴ Thus, the coherence theory of truth can detain an ideology from becoming a putative judge that obligates an individual to accept the truth it promotes without any scrutiny or revision.

Another model which can go with Sen's position is Quine's theoretical understanding, popularly known as naturalized philosophy. What does naturalising philosophy mean? It means we can think of two kinds of truth: truths which lie on the periphery and hold a direct relation with the empirical world, and truths which are inside the system (Quine 20-43). The truths inside the system are connected in various ways to the truths lying on the periphery. The implication of adopting this model is very unique: if somebody wishes to change one truth inside the system, it will affect the entire system. In scientific practice it often happens that you change one truth in your system and this paves the path for restructuring the entire system. This epistemic articulation of Quine can be applied to any ideological pursuit

⁴Trotsky considered the version of Marxism propounded during the Stalinist regime to be self-made and oppressive, as it did not cohere with pre-existing Marxist beliefs and praxis.

and will hopefully produce amazing changes inside any ideological discourse. Needless to say, this theoretical model is capable of warning an ideology from taking any bold normative call. This particular model can also scientifically organize any ideological discourse, where an ideology is not treated as a mere future predictor but as a fallible platform that always remains subject to critical analysis, self-criticism, and revision.

The above two models remind us that a system of beliefs which sustains an ideology must have an inner coherence; otherwise we have to think twice before accepting them to be objectively true. Any ideological system must allow one to re-evaluate his beliefs and should also promote those criteria by which one can change his belief system if needed. Ideology is such a theoretical discourse which hardly has any resting place. And for this very reason, the claim “ideology as the final arbiter of truth” cannot be objectively validated according to philosophers; rather such a claim seems doubtful. The reason behind the doubt is: what is the criterion of truth we refer to while talking about any ideological pursuit? Those who are committed to a particular ideology can answer this question by showing that the truth involved within an ideological pursuit does not need any other criteria to justify itself—truth is self-evident for them. Perhaps this is the reason why revisionism or fallibilism is viewed with so much antagonism by those committed to a given ideology (Sen et al. 154).

Sen has accepted the fact that many philosophers had tried to envision their own philosophical system as the final arbiter of truth—viz. Kant and the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. On the contrary, there are many philosophers who had rejected this claim also. A philosophical truth is the subject of a rational enquiry and neither demands to be accepted widely nor bulldozes anyone who does not wish to subscribe to it. Even those who envisioned their philosophical system as the protector of truth would also condemn the act of bulldozing someone unwilling to subscribe to their system. Descartes,⁵ who conceptualised his system as the final protector

⁵For Sen's discussion of Descartes and the cogito as an example of a philosophical system that envisions itself as the final protector of truth, see Sen et al., p. 156.

of truth based on the *cogito*, was empathetic towards those thinkers who had to start anew, arrive at his own *cogito*, and build their own philosophy, although it should coincide with the philosophy Descartes had advocated.

Sen in this paper never insists that we be free from any ideological inclination. Rather he asks us to critically evaluate the theory which stays behind any ideological succession. Sen observes that the theory which supervises an ideology to grow also promotes a self-evident truth while that ideology undertakes the process of indoctrinating its followers. Thus ideology becomes “action-centric” instead of being “truth-centric,” though the action of that ideology is guided by a self-evident model truth. Sen has questioned the very nature of this self-evident account of truth which assures the objective acceptance of an ideology. It is true, ideology is like a growing tree, and if it is so, it is not at all static. But that self-evident truth that helps an ideology to grow sometimes requires a pruning. In pruning ideologies, we have to invite the notion of coherence that will act as a truth-testing criterion while that self-evident account of truth claims a kind of finality for itself. Sen makes a humble appeal to those who are committed to a given ideology to depend upon their rational faculties, as the notion of coherence is one of the greatest gifts of these faculties.

It is needless to say that coherence is able to produce an alternative eye for seeing any particular pursuit of ideology, as the theory of coherence opens up a space for fallibilism, revisionism, and self-criticism in assessing one’s own beliefs and generates a kind of epistemic humility. If an ideology aims at easing human progress, it must open the window for criticism and revision; otherwise it will be reduced into some mere historical happening or social descriptive fact.

From Bakhtin to Paul Ricoeur, or from Althusser to Sen, these rational minds always talked about how ideology alienates itself from philosophy. Ideology sometimes appears to be the thinking machinery of the state, or it has been dialogically imposed on pliant followers. But these minds are optimistic about a collaboration—one in which epistemology and philosophy shall guide any ideological pursuit by critically reflecting upon the

self-evident account of truth which lies at the very heart of any ideological discourse. And there is no compelling reason to say that we cannot theoretically formulate any collaboration or peaceful coexistence between philosophy and ideology. Sen hopes this collaboration can give philosophy its legitimate position and role, as that which can ask any question, doubt anything, examine every view for whatever it is worth, and come up with a judgment that has a status superior⁶ to that of any other judgment we can think of (Sen et al. 159).

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⁶According to Sen, a judgment entailed from an epistemological discourse is superior in the sense that this judgment is guided by reason and is not dogmatically articulated.

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