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Emotional Contingency and Ideological Curation

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Abstract

Our daily lives make evident that ideologies of all kinds can impact our emotions. Consider, for example, the self-directed shame a working class person might feel when paid too little to make ends meet, the intense anxiety a person of color might feel when entering a majority white space, or the discomfiting pride a woman might feel when she senses a male gaze ogle her body. In each example, classism, racism, and sexism seem intimately connected with how these emotions are generated. What can we say about the role ideology might play in these cases?

In this paper, I offer an explanation of how ideology generates such emotions by proposing a process I term *ideological curation*. Ideological curation centrally locates the intervention point of ideology at moments of contingency within our emotional lives, where our emotions are generated or become something different than what they were. Focusing on this space of contingency enables us to understand how ideology might impact our emotions because it brings into view the overall mental playing field in which ideology operates. Ideological curation occurs within such spaces to subtly guide our emotions towards ideological meanings by:

1. Significantly impacting the set of emotions available to us; or,
2. Significantly exerting pressure towards which emotions we feel.

An analysis of ideological curation, I suggest, provides explanatory benefits that reach beyond the current literature on the interface between ideology and emotion, contributes to growing literatures on emotional injustice, psychological oppression, and finally, can aid in our individual journeys of psychological resistance.

Keywords: Emotion, ideology, ideology critique, psychological oppression, injustice, resistance

“The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.” – David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*

1. Introduction

In *The Second Sex* ([1949] 2010), Simone de Beauvoir remarks on a certain kind of older woman who, near death in our patriarchal world, finally realises that “they have been duped and mystified their whole lives” (637). A main project of de Beauvoir and other theorists of ideology critique is to uncover these harmful social mystifications before our lives end—that is, to know if, when, and how certain beliefs, values, goals, or attitudes that we

hold are mistaken or disvaluable for us as individuals and/or our pursuit of a just world. This paper aims to contribute to this project by focusing on how emotions can be such a site of harmful ideology.

Our daily lives make evident that ideologies of all kinds can impact our emotions. Consider for example, the self-directed shame a working-class person might feel when paid too little to make ends meet, the intense anxiety a person of colour might feel entering a majority white space, or the discomfiting pride a woman might feel when she senses a male gaze ogle her body. In each example, classism, racism, and sexism seem intimately connected with how these emotions are generated. What can we say about the role that ideology might play in cases like these? While most accounts of ideology admit that emotions can be subject to ideological influence,¹ the literature within ideology critique focuses less on emotions and more on delineating or defending accounts of ideology critique² or otherwise analysing how other mental states or phenomena such as beliefs,³ preferences/desires,⁴ goals,⁵ implicit bias,⁶ or language practices⁷ may be ideological. Outside of ideology critique, significant research confirms robust connections between harmful ideologies and various negative effects on our emotions,⁸ but remains wanting in two main respects: first in explaining exactly *how* ideology might influence our emotions, and second in answering questions of emotional *variance*, which arise when we wonder why not all working-class persons feel shame even when in the same environment, or why a person of colour only sometimes feels anxiety when entering white spaces.

In this paper, I offer an understanding which speaks to this “how” question and issues of emotional variance by proposing a process that I term *ideological curation*. Ideological curation centrally locates the intervention point of ideology at moments of contingency within our emotional lives, where our emotions are generated or become something different than what they were. By introducing and focusing on this space of contingency, I suggest we are better able to understand how ideology impacts our emotions because we bring to view the overarching mental playing field in which ideology operates—we take a look beneath the hoods of our minds, so to speak, and understand ideological influence within the broader context against which all our emotions are being generated or transformed. I argue that the role of ideology in this space is curatorial, insofar as it subtly guides our emotions towards ideological meanings by:

1. Significantly impacting the set of emotions available to us; or,
2. Significantly exerting pressure towards which emotions we feel.

In addition to its explanatory benefits, I argue that an analysis of ideological curation contributes to growing literatures on emotional injustice and psychological oppression, and can aid in our individual journeys of psychological resistance.

¹ For an exception, see Shelby 2003.

² See Eagleton 1991, Larrian 1979, and Rosen 1996 for helpful surveys; more contemporarily see Shelby 2003, Haslanger 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2021, Jaeggi 2009, Celikates 2006, Stanley 2015, and Bremner and de Canson 2025.

³ See Shelby 2003, Elster 1982, Stanley 2015, Wilson 2021, and Dror forthcoming.

⁴ See Nussbaum 2000, 2001a, Khader 2009, 2011, 2012, Elster 1983, Stoljar 2014, Bruckner 2009, and Levey 2005.

⁵ See Jost 2020 for an overview.

⁶ See Brownstein 2025 for an overview.

⁷ See for example Haslanger 2007, 2010, and Beaver and Stanley 2023.

⁸ See for example Wilkins and Pace 2014, Carretta 2018, Banks 2014, Bonilla-Silva 2019, Szymanski et al. 2009, Wei et al. 2010, Szymanski and Feltman 2014, Harper and Tiggemann 2008, David et al. 2019, and Russell 1996.

I proceed as follows. In Section 2, I set out the world of “emotional contingency” in greater detail and canvass existing work on how ideology might operate in such spaces. I focus on ideology in the pejorative sense,⁹ and follow Sally Haslanger’s view whereby ideology is defined as those social meanings which undergird social practices and social structures such that they prevent us from recognising or creating forms of value and/or organise us in unjust ways (2017a; 2017b; 2021). In Section 3, I offer my argument for ideological curation, centred around a case of patriarchal ideology. In Section 4, I argue that an analysis of ideological curation can provide several contributions to the growing literatures on psychological oppression and emotional injustice. I conclude in Section 5 by extending my discussion to other forms of ideology (e.g., racism, classism) and discussing what bearing this argument has on our ability to resist.

2. Emotional Contingency

2.1 Contingency Across Our Lives

Before all our angers, humours, joys, and surprises is a moment where our emotions could have been otherwise—anger instead of disappointment in reply to a rude remark; humour instead of disgust towards an off-colour joke; joy instead of anxiety in navigating a new city. Each scenario draws attention to a kind of contingency in our emotional lives, where our emotional responses do not necessarily follow a singular, predetermined path. There is, rather, a moment that contains many possibilities for how we might feel in response to the same situation.

This moment captures the central notion of *emotional contingency* that this paper rests on, which we encounter throughout our lives. Say a colleague made a strange comment about me, and I feel odd about it. What am I feeling? Confused? Angry? Disappointed? Anxious? Many options seem possible. Interpersonally, we notice this contingency when comparing how different our emotionality is from others’. I feel quite ashamed when I fail to respond to an email or text message quickly, but when my friend is confronted with the same situation, he approaches the notifications calmly. What makes me ashamed and him not, and could the roles be reversed? And perhaps most readily, such contingency becomes apparent through emotional regulation.¹⁰ In the face of too much anxiety, anger, and jealousy we take deep breaths, count to 10, divert our attention, or recontextualise our environment. With practice, we are surprisingly able to change how we feel.

There are many metaphors we can use to capture such contingency—Robert Frost’s diverging roads, the plump fruit adorning Sylvia Plath’s fig tree, Jorge Luis Borges’ winding labyrinths, or the paths traced forward in the potential growths of a plant. Across all metaphorical rendering, this space of possibility puts forward the essential situation of contingency: myriad pathways or directions are available that, when followed, route us to a distinct place. And while a single emotional response does not determine something deep about who we are, a lifetime of particular responses can shape our self-constitution.

In the next sub-section, I distinguish various aspects of such contingency and explain how it may resolve into what we feel.

⁹ See Geuss 1981.

¹⁰ For an overview, see Gross and Ford 2024.

2.2 Contingency and Resolution

*Emotional contingency*¹¹ is the idea that our emotions can arise or develop to become one of many psychological possibilities.¹² The *contingency* involved describes the set of emotional possibilities one might feel in a given situation, and its *resolution* describes how these possibilities are influenced to yield the concrete emotion(s) a person comes to feel. I take most movements from contingency to resolution as outside of conscious control, but at times consciously manipulated through regulation techniques. While I believe there are many kinds of contingency in our emotional lives,¹³ in this paper I focus on the contingency contained within synchronic cases of emotion generation where:

Emotion generation: S goes from feeling no emotion to feeling one or multiple emotions.

For example, we may imagine S not feeling anything before a joke is told, but upon hearing its punchline, becoming amused. This process of going from feeling no emotion to feeling an emotion is what occurs in emotion generation. Its contingency is all the other emotions S could feel instead or in addition to amusement (e.g., upset, embarrassed, angry, surprised), and its resolution is the path taken to feeling amusement instead of other possibilities.

This description of emotional generation, contingency, and resolution is consonant with research within psychology, psychotherapy, and philosophy. Research into emotion regulation, for example, assumes emotional contingency—many possibilities *must* be open if we can change how we feel. Similarly, in philosophy, emotional contingency is assumed by most, if not all, theories of emotion—cognitivist theories,¹⁴ evaluative perception theories,¹⁵ affect program theories,¹⁶ attitudinal theories,¹⁷ and constructivist theories,¹⁸ for example, all accept contingency. Even in situations where we might think an emotion inevitable, like fear in the face of imminent danger, we can imagine persons with biological mutations or deep emotional training not feeling that emotion. Shared across theories of emotion, then, is the thought that, under the right conditions, we could feel other than what we do. Given this broad compatibility, I do not take a stance here on what an emotion is, and move forward with this general overview of contingency, which will enable us to better understand its normative contours and stakes.

We might now consider two further questions: what helps determine the set of possibilities? And what mediates the transition from contingency to its resolution? Here, psychology and philosophy present a suite of influences: we may be influenced by our personality traits or temperaments,¹⁹ various biological or

¹¹ For space considerations, I restrict my discussion to contingency only as it arises in relation to and between our emotions. I do not discuss other kinds of contingency in our affective lives—e.g., going from no affective state to a certain mood, feeling, or other affective disposition, or other such transitions.

¹² Psychological possibility picks out what may be psychologically instantiated as a real feeling that an agent could feel in this world. Compare this to a more capacious metaphysical or logical possibility, where one can feel things that one has never been taught given one's cultural background, or that agents in nearby possible worlds could feel.

¹³ In addition to emotion generation, I suggest that contingency also underlies *emotion maintenance*, where an agent goes from feeling an emotion to either ceasing or continuing to feel that emotion, and *emotion progression*, where an agent goes from feeling one emotion to feeling a distinct emotion.

¹⁴ See e.g. Solomon 1980, Neu 2000, and Nussbaum 2001b.

¹⁵ See e.g. Prinz 2004, Roberts 2003, and Tappolet 2016.

¹⁶ See e.g. Tomkins 2008 and Ekman et al. 1972.

¹⁷ See e.g. Deonna and Teroni 2012, 2015.

¹⁸ See e.g. Barrett 2017 and de Sousa 1987.

¹⁹ See Costa and McCrae 1980, 1995, Shiota et al. 2006, Marengo et al. 2021, Revelle and Scherer 2009, and Kagan 1994.

evolutionary imperatives (e.g. hunger, survival, reproduction),²⁰ goals or practical incentives,²¹ perceived norms of all kinds (e.g. moral, fittingness, aesthetic),²² paradigm scenarios from which we learn to match emotions to particular contexts,²³ or beliefs reflective of broader cultural worldviews or political orientations.²⁴ These influences can help generate what we do feel (as when a norm of fittingness inclines us to admire an admirable person) as well as what we are unable to feel. The Korean emotion of *han*,²⁵ for example, captures a complex sense of loss, grief, and resentment resulting from an absence of collective identity in the wake of colonialist violence. There is no American or British equivalent, as Americans and British people lack the relevant cultural background to feel *han*. Every metaphysically or logically possible emotion one could feel, therefore, is not psychologically relevant. Rather, what is relevant are the emotions one could feel given the various influences one has in their mind.²⁶

These influences contain dissimilarities. Some are perhaps innate (e.g. neurobiology, arguably some personality traits) while others are learned (e.g. standards of fittingness, goals, worldviews). Some may be more salient or determinative than others (e.g. our hunger moving us towards annoyance, despite efforts to the contrary). But what these influences share is defining what is possible and moving us from our range of emotional possibilities to our realised feeling. In the next section, I canvass several ways ideology may play a role in this mediation.

2.3 Ideological Mechanisms

In this paper, I adopt Sally Haslanger's definition of ideology, where ideology is understood as social meanings which undergird social practices and social structures (*cultural techné*), and are ideological when they prevent us from recognising or creating forms of value and/or organise us in unjust ways (2017a; 2017b; 2021). This definition is meant to functionally pick out pejorative instances of ideology, leaving aside forms of consciousness which may operate similarly (e.g. some forms of religion or culture)²⁷ but fail to be objectionable insofar as they do not hamper our ability to create or recognise value or lead to unjust social organisation. On this view, such social meanings may be internalised to generate various emotions.²⁸

For example, Sandra Lee Bartky (1982) argues that women's disproportionate feelings of narcissism are not innate, but rather result from an internalisation of messages delivered by the "fashion-beauty complex" of the United States. This complex blends patriarchal incentives with economic incentives of the fashion industry to inundate women with magazines, advertisements, self-help books, and other popular media that tell us to obsess about our appearance (and buy this workout plan or makeup in turn). Frantz Fanon ([1952] 2008), similarly, puts forward French colonialist education as the explanation for why Black Antilleans feel inferior to their white European counterparts: "We said rather too quickly that the black man feels inferior. The truth is that he is made to feel inferior" (127). Iris Marion Young (2005), Carol Ryff et al. (2003), and Sandi Nenga (2003)

^{20.} See Swami et al. 2022, Groër 2005, and LeDoux 2012a, 2012b.

^{21.} See Carver and Scheier 2013, English et al. 2017, and Mauss and Tamir 2014.

^{22.} See Haidt 2003, Packard and Schultz 2023, D'Arms and Jacobsen 2000, 2023, Gallegos 2021, Srinivasan 2018, Vishkin and Tamir 2023, and King 2021.

^{23.} See de Sousa 1987, 1990.

^{24.} See Mesquita and Frijda 1992, Mesquita, Frijda, and Scherer 1997, Eid and Diener 2001, and Jost and Amodio 2012.

^{25.} See Shin 2019.

^{26.} One could, over time, develop the capacity to feel more emotions than what was originally possible; for example, the cultivation of an Epicurean sense of savouring might produce emotions one has not felt before its cultivation. Since this paper only considers movement from contingency to resolution synchronically, the development of our emotional capacities over time is outside our scope. However, there are many interesting questions to explore about the relationship between ideology and emotion diachronically—how, for example, might ideology impact the capacities we have to develop certain emotions and not others over time? Thanks to Lucas Stanczyk for discussion on this point.

^{27.} See Geuss 1981.

^{28.} Though my argument should be compatible with any account of ideology that does not exclude emotion as a potential vehicle.

provide arguments about the relationship between patriarchy and shame, racism and emotions associated with well-being, and classism and disgust, respectively.

Building on these insights, others have proposed several ways these social meanings are mentally taken up to generate emotion. For example, norms against menstruation can lead those who menstruate to feel guilt, shame, and disgust during their periods,²⁹ system-justification goals can decrease negative affect (e.g. outrage) and increase positive emotions towards the status quo,³⁰ various kinds of “feeling rules” imposed in workplaces can induce particular feelings in workers (e.g. cheer in airline hostesses),³¹ adaptive preferences can lead oppressed women to not feel angry or upset at gendered economic inequities,³² and learned paradigm scenarios can signal the appropriateness for a white person to feel fear in an all-black neighbourhood because of previous modelling by their parents. On each account of how ideological influences operate, ideology is not its own distinct influence on emotion; rather ideology resolves moments of contingency by corrupting, creating, or otherwise making its way into mentally instantiated norms, goals, political perspectives, etc. that lead us towards certain emotions.

These accounts both provide an explanation for why we might feel emotions with ideological social meanings and how we might go about changing them. If I ask why I feel shame for menstruating, I can point to the bad norms or adaptive preferences making me feel this way. If I ask how to rid myself of these emotions, I will be led to think about how I can get rid of the grasp these bad norms and adaptive preferences have in my head or as socially transmitted through broader cultural education.

I think these accounts are on the right track in helping us to better understand the relationship that ideology bears to our emotions. However, on their own, they fail to speak to several important issues. First, they do not provide an informative answer to how ideology generates our emotions. Take, for example, a woman who has within her mind an ideological norm which holds that it is appropriate for women to feel disgusted when menstruating. On these accounts, this woman could feel disgust because the ideological norm is in some sense operative. This is helpful, but much more needs to be said—what, exactly, is meant by operative? These accounts do not often explain in virtue of what they generate emotion, and we thereby only know *that* these influences are related to generating emotions, not *how*.³³ Second, and correspondingly, these accounts do not help us to understand questions of emotional variance—why do I feel disgust when I menstruate but my

^{29.} See Roberts 2004. See also Pismenny et al. 2024 for more examples of unjust norms, and Archer and Matheson 2020, 2023 on emotional imperialism.

^{30.} See Jost 2019, 2020.

^{31.} See Hochschild 1983.

^{32.} See Nussbaum 2000.

^{33.} Could we appeal to a general account of what makes norms psychologically operative, i.e., by positing that they satisfy some basic psychological needs (for predictability, belonging, etc.)? See Michael and Tummolini forthcoming and Gelfand and Harrington 2015. This response assumes that what makes norms generally operative makes ideological norms operative. However, this assumption requires further defence, as in virtue of having ideological content or aims, ideological norms may function differently to satisfy psychological needs than other norms, or may come at the cost of other psychological needs not in the picture with non-ideological norms. For example, following this sexist norm about disgust may help a woman feel a greater sense of belonging in her sexist environment, but at the cost of her self-esteem. This cost would not be incurred if she were to follow other kinds of non-ideological norms, e.g. norms about which side of the road to drive on, how to evaluate evidence, etc. So absent further argument, we lack a satisfactory answer to what makes ideological norms operative. We similarly could not appeal to general accounts of what makes ideology psychologically operative, as they would lack the specificity of how ideology gets incorporated into particular influences to generate emotion(s). What we need is an answer to what makes ideological influences operative such that emotions are generated. Could system-justifying goals be a potential solution, as system-justification theory is specifically concerned with how these goals generate ideological responses? I think it is tenuous to draw an explanatory link from the motivation for system-justifying tendencies to a motivation for various emotions that only sometimes result from those tendencies, but even if we could do so, this would explain only a minority of cases where ideology generates emotion and would not meet our third concern.

friend does not? And why, even intra-personally, do I not always feel disgust at my menstruation? The variance on these accounts would be explained as the ideological norm not being operative, but in virtue of what is the norm operative for some and not others, or operative for one only at some points in time? We are left again with an explanation which is on the right track, but for which much more needs to be spelled out.

Third, even provided an explanation of what makes ideological influences operative, this would only provide a partial explanation of what led to a certain emotion or set of emotions. Influences do not work in a vacuum, and a full explanation of how ideology generates emotion requires an understanding of how the many influences vying to impact our emotions work together. Even if an account were, for example, able to fully articulate how an ideological norm generates disgust, this account would only provide the connection that holds between that norm and the emotion. It would not tell us anything about how other influences, like those motivated by one's personality, level of hunger, or other competing norms, might motivate against, further motivate towards, or otherwise make a difference to the disgust that the ideological norm motivates towards. So even with a good understanding of how a particular ideological influence might operate, absent an understanding of how it would work within a broader sphere of influences we lack a comprehensive understanding of how ideology generates emotion. And absent an explanation containing the full story of how various influences work to generate emotion, we fail to understand how ideology overall generates emotion. For that story, other influences, both ideological and not, need to be in focus.

Building upon existing accounts to speak to these issues, in the next section I present my argument for ideological curation. In my explanation, I provide a framework for how we might explain how ideological and non-ideological influences can operate alone and in relation to each other to generate emotional responses. The framework highlights broad intervention points for conceptual clarity and identifies where experimental work is still needed.

3. Ideological Curation

3.1 Ideological Curation—Sophie

To develop the argument for ideological curation, I focus on the following case of Sophie. Consider this episode from her life:

Catcalling. Sophie is walking home from her job at a biotech startup. She's just finished a presentation to potential investors she thinks has gone well and is recounting how it went to her partner on the phone. She passes through a park, and as she walks, a group of men in front of her seem to get louder and louder. She can't quite make out what they are saying, so she pauses her story to her partner and listens. The smile leaves her face as she begins to hear what they're saying. They are in fact addressing their remarks to her, with familiar epithets—"Hey baby, how you doin'?" "Where ya going, dressed all sexy like that?" "C'mon sweetie, come over here and give me a smile" "Why don't you come over here and talk to me instead?" Her partner, confused by the long pause, asks her what's wrong. She rushes away as quickly as she can, with the jeers and whistles still ringing in her ear until she's left the park. She feels sick to her stomach all the way home.

The catcalling Sophie experiences is an uncomplicated episode of sexism, which leaves her with a bad feeling. That feeling could be one or more of many possible emotions: anger, sadness, shame, guilt, hurt, confusion, rage, objectification, disgust, or fear. What leads her to feel how she does?

I suggest ideology functions to guide Sophie to what she ends up feeling through curating both (1) her set of possible emotions and (2) what she is moved to feel or not feel. To understand both modes, it is helpful to think by analogy to ordering food off a menu at a restaurant.³⁴ When your waiter comes by, the menu lists all the options from which you can choose. You can order one thing or many, but your choices are constrained by this menu. Your waiter offers recommendations—what customers love the most and what the chef suggests. You similarly see the menu annotated with notes by certain dishes, indicating some reserved for “risk-takers.” Ultimately, you pick something that has been highlighted for you. The first curational mode is like ordering off a pre-set menu which ideology helps curate, and the second curational mode is like being guided toward options on the menu by ideology.

Of course, there are important disanalogies with the largely unconscious process of moving from contingency to resolution. We do not choose our emotions like we choose dinner, and while there is debate over the extent to which emotions are subject to rational control, we can minimally say that how these two movements occur are likely quite distinct. Furthermore, at a restaurant one can go “off-menu,” which is not possible in my model of emotional contingency, as the set of emotional possibilities an agent has should exhaust every psychological possibility. But, while imperfect, thinking in terms of this analogy helps us understand these two modes of curation, which we can consider in turn.³⁵

3.2 Mode 1

The first mode of ideological curation occurs when ideology significantly influences the set of emotional possibilities open to us. This mode is the affective version of being presented with a pre-set menu. What is presented to you is not something you have had any direct control over—it is crafted by the chefs and owners of the restaurant. Similarly, the options Sophie has for what she might feel are not options she has control over in this immediate situation. Rather, the influences canvassed in Section 2 will set her range of emotional possibilities—the various norms, goals, larger worldviews, etc. will determine what she can feel.

What makes ideology a factor which curates the menu, significantly influencing the set of affective possibilities she may feel? This explanation comes into focus when we home in on the emotions of shame and guilt that present as options for Sophie to feel. Shame, as Vida Yao (2020) offers, is

the painful experience of being viewed in “the wrong way” by a real or imagined (internalised) other, where this other is (i) a person whose view the agent recognises as partly authoritative, (ii) an embodiment of a real social expectation, and (iii) a person with whom the ashamed person can partly identify. (26)

³⁴ Thanks to Quinn White for this analogy.

³⁵ I do not think the mechanism of curation would necessarily vary for non-pejorative forms of ideology or other socially-based influences; however, the normative upshots I highlight would not follow. It is not obvious that all influences on our emotions are curational, however—hunger or hormonal influences, for example, need not work this way. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for asking for clarification on this point.

In contrast, guilt is typically about specific actions one has taken. As June Price Tangney et al. (2007) explain, “the most dominant basis for distinguishing between shame and guilt centers on the object of negative evaluation and disapproval. Shame involves a negative evaluation of the global self; guilt involves a negative evaluation of a specific behaviour” (349). But Sophie has done nothing but walk through the park—why would she feel there is a real social expectation to have acted otherwise, or negatively evaluate actions she took?

I propose that one plausible answer is patriarchal ideology, which, following Haslanger, is a set of social meanings which aim at and maintain the subordination and domination of women and gender minorities. In Sophie’s case, we can easily imagine how patriarchal ideology might lead Sophie to have internalised various relevant patriarchal social meanings. Through her years becoming a woman, Sophie has likely learned what most women learn about harassment—“If you didn’t want to be whistled at, why’d you wear that skirt?” “Why would you be there in the first place?” In her own and other women’s experiences with harassment, these judgmental epithets reinforce the claim that women are responsible for, or “asked for,” their harassment. Of course, these responses make no sense; women are harassed regardless of what they wear, and if the advice is to avoid locations where harassment occurs, then there is quite literally no place for women to go. But this is what women hear, and how we learn it is our responsibility to not be harassed. When every time a woman is harassed and the finger immediately gets pointed to her and not her harasser—to her actions, her inactions, her clothes, her expressions, her affect—we create and cement the association that situations of harassment are women’s responsibility, where they must have violated social expectation through some behaviour or another. This education is then taken up and internalised by individuals as practical norms, norms of fittingness, goals, paradigm scenarios, or any of the ways we have canvassed ideology to influence our emotional lives. These influences finally, in turn, make shame and guilt psychological possibilities for what Sophie might feel in this scenario.³⁶

We can also see how patriarchy explains why shame and guilt appear as possibilities if we compare Sophie’s menu to a cis, heterosexual man, or a woman living in a non-oppressive world in the same situation. If such a man were catcalled, it seems unlikely that shame or guilt would be emotions he would feel, as there would be no frame of reference to social expectations he may have violated, or behaviour for which he would negatively evaluate himself. While he may feel anger, confusion, fear, or many other feelings Sophie could also feel, I do not take shame and guilt to number among them. Similarly, a woman raised in a world free of patriarchy and its rationales for why women who are sexually harassed should feel shame and guilt would not find these emotions to feel. And so, by focusing on shame and guilt, we are in a good position to see how ideology can be the factor responsible for creating these emotions in Sophie’s affective menu.

Could we not claim that guilt and shame are possibilities for what Sophie might feel for reasons that have nothing to do with ideology? Perhaps, for example, Sophie is excessively shy; any time someone pays any kind of attention to her, she feels she is doing something wrong, making guilt and shame enter the picture. Why claim patriarchal ideology is *the* explanatory factor? And similarly, couldn’t this cis, heterosexual man or woman in the non-oppressive world not feel guilt or shame because of particular parenting practices or certain disorders? I don’t deny that other influences can, as these cases show, also help curate emotional possibilities. However, the presence of non-ideological influences leading to the same emotional possibilities does not undermine the claim that ideological influences can, and often do, perform this work. My argument

³⁶. This connection should not be surprising; feminist thinkers have long pointed out that shame and guilt are often affective states used to maintain patriarchal oppression—see Shefer and Munt 2019 and Fischer 2018 for overviews, but also Calhoun 2004 and Thomason 2014, 2018 for ways these emotions can have resistant and/or moral functions.

is not that *only* ideological influences can curate what is possible for us to feel, just that they can so curate. It is not that the cis, heterosexual man and the woman in the non-oppressive world can *never* have shame or guilt as possibilities for what they might feel; it is rather that *patriarchy* will not be the influence that leads them to shame or guilt as possible feelings. And in the shy Sophie case, patriarchy can explain why shame and guilt feature as possibilities for her to feel, even if it may not explain in every instance, or even if it is overdetermined that she may feel shame or guilt. What I am aiming for is relatively modest—simply the claim that ideology can at times be the explanatory force for what is possible for us to feel.

3.3 Mode 2

The second mode of ideological curation occurs when ideology significantly exerts pressure towards what Sophie comes to feel. Following our restaurant analogy, this likens the movement of ideology to how the waiter and menu guide our choices towards certain dinner options. To depict how and why this might work, we can first extend our discussion of shame and guilt whereby patriarchal ideology not only makes shame and guilt possibilities for what Sophie feels but also motivates her towards these emotions. Because of various ways Sophie has learned that women are responsible for their harassment, she not only potentially feels these emotions but will, in some cases, *in fact* feel shame and guilt. Patriarchal norms, paradigm scenarios, or whatever influences ideology has embedded itself in can exercise force or pressure towards these options.

But ideology does not merely guide Sophie toward certain feelings—it can also guide her away from other feelings, like anger. Feminist philosophy canvasses³⁷ many ways that anger in women is educated against; I discuss two ways this education might play out in Sophie’s case. First, we can compare Sophie to Laura Bates, quoted in Soraya Chemaly 2018. Bates recounts her experience after being sexually harassed and assaulted on a train:

At first, I felt fear, I felt embarrassment, shame, anxiety, all these other emotions that we feel when we are experiencing these things . . . [but] *I didn’t feel like I had the right to be angry at the time.* . . . We are so socialized to accept this treatment that we don’t realize we have the right to anger in the moment. I thought, “This is the way things are. This is what it means to be a woman. I just have to deal with it.” (151; emphasis added)

Bates highlights how women—especially when harassed—are often socialised to think no normative violation has happened when it has. It is the natural rite of being a woman to find yourself subject to the jeers of men, and so being angry can seem as nonsensical as being angry at the sun for setting at night. Such social meaning arises out of patriarchal ideology because it leads women in particular away from true normative contours of the world, and such socialisation is not present for men.³⁸ Thus, even if anger is a possibility for women like Sophie and Laura, ideology can exercise force against feeling it through this internalised norm that it is unfitting (even if this norm is itself normatively mistaken).

Second, we may consider how stereotypes about certain emotions can affect which ones Sophie feels. As Leslie Jamison (2018) writes, the angry woman “conjures a lineage of threatening archetypes: the harpy and her talons, the witch and her spells, the medusa and her writhing locks” (9). She continues to discuss how, in comparison, the aesthetics of sadness have a comparatively stronger pull:

³⁷. See Frye 1983, Spelman 1989, Cherry 2020, Brown 1998, Scheman 1980, and Brody 2010.

³⁸. See Shields 2002. Following Gallegos (2021), this would also be an example of affective injustice.

If an angry woman makes people uneasy, then her more palatable counterpart, the sad woman, summons sympathy more readily. She often looks beautiful in her suffering: ennobled, transfigured, elegant. Angry women are messier. Their pain threatens to cause more collateral damage. (10)

Given these stereotypes, we can imagine their uptake via various internalised norms and goals moving Sophie away from anger, and perhaps instead towards sadness. Insofar as these stereotypes limit what make women “real” or “better” women, we can find such a pull being routed by ideology.³⁹

The internalisations which could move Sophie away from anger are not absolute claims about what all women feel in these circumstances. Many women do get angry at their harassment, making it clear that ideology does not always succeed in moving women away from anger. However, even without an absolute claim about how all women feel, the above internalisations are still *actual reasons* women cite for why they do not feel angry when being harassed. And so, it remains true that ideology can move women away from anger, even given the many angry women in this world. And even if ideology fails in moving some women to not feel angry, it can still exercise significant pressure against anger which women may have to overcome to feel angry. I explore the implications of such pressure in the following section.⁴⁰

Overall, then, another way ideology impacts our emotional lives is by exerting significant pressure towards or against certain emotions. The precise way this pressure works requires empirical investigation—we will need to understand how different internalisations of ideology exercise pressure towards and away from various emotions, and more broadly how these ideological influences may interact with other influences which are also operative, both ideological and non-ideological.⁴¹ But what I have attempted to provide here is a framework that highlights a few kinds of investigation we should pursue to better understand how ideology impacts our emotional lives.⁴²

3.4 Explanatory Upshots

Analysis of Sophie’s case illustrates how modes of ideological curation can occur: ideology can both curate the possibilities for feeling and exert pressure towards which emotions we might come to feel or not feel.⁴³ Not every instance of coming to feel or not feel a particular emotion will be curated by ideology in the way

^{39.} Stereotypes will change given intersectional considerations; for example, Monet Patrice Thomas (2019) writes that, as a black woman in the US, her anger is perceived as an “attitude” (32), with authors like Pilgrim, following Hill Collins (2000), relatedly arguing the trope of an “angry black woman” “is a social control mechanism that is employed to punish black women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, nonthreatening, and unseen” (2015, 121). See also Cherry 2020, 2023.

^{40.} But I offer one implication here, nicely brought out through the case of anger. Anger is a well-recognized form of emancipatory change, helping to tell us when injustice is occurring, motivating us to take actions against it, bringing us closer with those who share in it, and empowering us as full normative agents in the world (see Silva 2019, Cherry 2021a, 2021b). Anger does not always have these results, but could in Sophie’s case—for example, by alerting her that some normative violation was occurring or encouraging her to act against harassment as other victims of harassment and assault like Bates (see her Everyday Sexism Project at everydaysexism.com). Insofar as ideology precludes anger and other emotions which may have emancipatory value, it will function to reinforce oppression and will thereby be a form of psychological oppression, as discussed in the next section.

^{41.} See Rangel et al. 2008 for helpful discussion.

^{42.} We might also wonder how ideology influences the strength/behavioural expressions of emotions in this vying with/against other influences. I unfortunately lack space to discuss this here.

^{43.} Why not think that ideology provides reasons that make certain emotions more or less apt (in a broad sense) to feel, rather than operating on possibilities for feeling? While I am sympathetic to this approach, I have two reservations. First, this approach would collapse Modes 1 and 2, leaving us without a clear denotation of how ideology *creates* certain emotional possibilities for us. As I continue on in Section 4, there are forms of psychological oppression and emotional injustice which arise from both modes of curation, and thus collapsing Modes 1 and 2 might risk neglecting these various forms of harm. Second, to be a sufficiently general claim, it will need to be shown that *every* influence ideology embeds within to exert pressure on our emotions is reason-giving, which I am sceptical of in cases of habit and affective conditioning (unless “reason” is just taken descriptively to be any consideration in favour of or against certain emotion(s), in which case reason and influence can be used interchangeably). I thank Lucas Stanczyk and Quinn White for raising versions of this objection.

described. Sophie might feel how she does out of hunger or personality traits unaffected by ideology. And nothing I have said here immediately helps to sort out the difficult task of knowing whether and when ideology routes our emotions compared to other influences.⁴⁴ But through ideological curation, we have a clearer grasp on the causal psychological mechanism by which ideology generates our emotions,⁴⁵ which helps us with the three issues raised in Section 2.

First, ideological curation provides a theoretical framework for how ideology operates. This secondarily helps us to diagnose why there is variance between individuals who may have the same ideological influences in their minds, or even within a single individual at different points in time. The variance will be explained either by a difference in what is possible for individuals to feel or how effectively ideology pressures towards/against certain possibilities. Lastly, as both modes of ideological curation are situated within a broader environment of influences that can lead one to feel or not feel certain emotions, this framework enables us to further investigate how ideological influences work within a larger nexus of influences. The ways that influences can work dynamically with or against one another are myriad, but my analysis sets us up for reaching a more comprehensive understanding. Ideological curation provides not just a specific understanding of a particular way ideology can influence our emotions (e.g. through a particular norm or stereotype), but a holistic picture of how ideology can impact our emotions.

4. The Harms of Ideological Curation

Given this understanding of ideological curation, what might we say about the harms that arise from it? Most broadly, these harms are those of psychological oppression or emotional injustice. There are a few accounts of psychological oppression. Bartky, following Fanon ([1952] 2008), holds that “to be psychologically oppressed is to be weighed down in your mind; it is to have a harsh dominion exercised over your self-esteem” (1990, 22). The oppressed themselves “become their own oppressors” (22) by internalising stereotypes, their sexual objectification, or mystifications about their capacities which ultimately make them unable to exercise their full agency. Bartky’s account collapses psychological oppression into internalised oppression, but others have wider-ranging accounts. Ann Cudd (2006), for example, presents both “direct” and “indirect” psychological forces whereby in virtue of one’s group membership, harms are imposed either directly by a dominant group or indirectly via the oppressed’s internalisations of beliefs and values which harm them and benefit the privileged. Direct forces can inflict emotions involved with trauma, humiliation, and degradation, whereas indirect forces can lead the oppressed to feel shame and emotions associated with low self-esteem. Katie Stockdale (2024) similarly proposes psychological oppression as “the ways oppression takes up residence in people’s minds through mental states and processes that reinforce their oppression” (5). Generally, then, we can classify as psychologically oppressive any mental state or process inflicted upon the oppressed *qua* membership in an oppressed group or that the oppressed internalise in ways that reinforce or support their oppression *qua* membership in that group.

⁴⁴ In other work, I explore how critical genealogical investigations of our emotions can help us with this practical endeavour. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to consider this point.

⁴⁵ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this point.

“Emotional injustice” is a concept developed by Arina Pismenny et al. (2024) as an attempt to organise into a cohesive literature various ways in which the treatment of emotions is unjust or emotions are used to treat people unjustly (154).⁴⁶ They present seven different categories of how emotions can be treated unjustly (misinterpretation, discounting, extraction, policing, exploitation, inequality), and one by which emotions are used to treat people unjustly (weaponising), with copious examples of each category. While there is considerable overlap between the examples of emotional injustice and psychological oppression, the two differ insofar as theorists understand the scope and application of oppression and injustice differently. In what follows, I suggest three ways ideological curation contributes to discussions of psychological oppression and emotional injustice.

First, ideological curation builds out how psychological oppression works by offering an understanding of the underlying process by which the emotional ends of psychological oppression are achieved. For example, on Bartky’s theory, ideological curation can be understood as the mechanism by which stereotypes, sexual objectification, and self-mystification influence how our emotions arise. Similarly, on Cudd’s theory, ideological curation underlies how indirect psychological forces yield various emotions. On both accounts, ideological curation helps answer questions of “how” the emotions involved in psychological oppression can arise and what we might look to so as to explain emotional variance. Ideological curation also provides a basis for how “emotion policing” might work under Pismenny et al.’s taxonomy. “Emotion policing” encompasses efforts made to distort the emotions an individual or social groups are disposed to feel, through, for example, the use of stereotypes or hegemonising certain emotions (e.g. encouraging patriotic feelings, love of one’s parents, admiration for one’s colonisers). Ideological curation similarly explains how these efforts to police emotions work within individual minds.

Second, ideological curation enables us to see an oppressive harm arising from the psychic effort required to emotionally overcome the forces of ideology. To speak more candidly to this harm, it is helpful, perhaps, to move away from Sophie and place myself into the story. As an Indian-American woman, racist, patriarchal ideology has featured heavily into many feelings about my body, particularly feelings about my body hair. The hair that grew naturally across my legs, arms, and face has been taken both as a sign of unfemininity and the inability to remain within civilised, kempt patterns of hygiene. These ideological social meanings have moulded significant aspects of my life—perhaps most starkly, the fifteen years of daily rituals where I shaved my whole body, compelled by feelings of disgust, shame, guilt, self-hatred, and anxiety. These negative emotions were only possible because of the grasp that racist, patriarchal ideology had on my life; absent a culture where the existence of my body hair signified transgression of ideological norms, why would this natural feature be such a source of cruel feeling towards myself? I have now spent many years trying to “unlearn” these responses, but even now as a dedicated feminist, I look at my body and feel the pull of these negative emotions. Ideology places them as possibilities for me, and it remains horribly difficult on many days to overcome its force and the painful emotions it guides me towards, to feel neutral or maybe even happy at the sight of healthy, growing hair.

In my case, one of the functions of psychological oppression is to place me in a seemingly endless struggle against these forces embedded within myself. I did not choose to be born in the body I was, nor in a world where such bodily functions are so stigmatised, and yet I am forced to deal with significant amounts of mental and emotional toil that must be actively tended to. This example also draws out the deep-seated way that ideology does not just at a single moment guide our decisions and choices, but moreover how it can

⁴⁶ This concept builds on existing work about affective injustice offered by Srinivasan (2018), Whitney (2018), Archer and Mills (2019), Archer and Matheson (2020), and Gallegos (2021).

fundamentally change our basic emotional orientation towards the world through the possibilities it enables or disenables. The feelings that ideology curated within me did not just impact me in a single moment like our case with Sophie; for my entire life, it has impacted my basic emotional dispositions towards my body, and it becomes difficult to imagine who I might be without this endless source of negative feeling. What more could I have done with my time not spent mechanically shaving, what more could I have dreamt or mentally worked towards without so much mental and emotional energy depleted?

As the pressure that ideology exerts over emotions can require extensive psychological resistance, it is a form of psychological oppression insofar as it is a harmful mental process inflicted upon oppressed groups *qua* membership in that group. This need for resistance can also be theorised as “emotion exploitation” as it involves emotions as a form of labour that oppressed individuals must take on (164). This harm is not as easily seen on other accounts of the interrelationship between ideology and emotion—on existing views, because we do not see a wide expanse of emotional possibilities in front of us, we do not immediately see how ideology exerts power in this landscape which we must struggle to overcome. Ideological curation, however, places these possibilities in sight, allowing us to quickly and easily locate this harm.

Third and lastly, ideological curation can extend what might count as psychological oppression. On each account of psychological oppression, what is most pertinent is that certain mental states are concretely produced—one is psychologically oppressed when one actually feels guilty, ashamed, inferior, etc. An analysis of ideological curation, however, highlights that ideology can influence our emotions even when it fails to produce them. For example, we can imagine a version of Sophie’s case where patriarchal ideology puts guilt and shame on the menu and guides her towards these emotions, but she does not end up feeling them. I want to suggest there is reason to think that, even without actually coming to feel an emotion, the sheer presence of ideology in our minds is also psychologically oppressive.

Ideology enters our minds aiming to work against our interests as individuals and the world we want to build. While other non-ideological influences on our emotions can also work against our interests—e.g. if one’s volatile temperament leads them to feel angry at the smallest excuse—ideological influences present a distinctive harm, as they contain social meanings which operate structurally on a society and lead us, collectively, to organise our social structures unjustly. Its sheer presence makes it more likely that one will feel in accordance with it. Compare, for the sake of analogy, a person with a volatile temperament. Given this temperament, they have a greater propensity to feel angry in a broader range of situations. We would consider it harmful not only when the temperament succeeds in producing anger in inappropriate contexts, but also when the temperament is itself present, as it is likely to be the root cause of anger in inappropriate contexts. That is why the work of anger-management therapy is to calm one’s temperament in response to certain triggers, so that one is angrier in fewer situations. Similarly, given an ideological influence curating one’s emotions, one has a greater propensity to feel an ideologically-driven emotion in a broader range of situations. Just as the angry temperament is itself a source of harm, so too is the ideological influence’s presence in one’s mind. As such, the mere presence of ideology is an oppressive harm, as it raises the likelihood that one will feel an ideologically-driven emotion.

Another reason hinges again on the thought that ideology often requires significant force to overcome. As depicted in my case, substantial time, effort, and energy can be required to weaken the grasp that ideology has on our minds. Anything that aims at an ideological result and requires this level of resistance should clearly count as oppressive. Compare the situation to if one verbally told a victim of sexual harassment that they deserved what happened to them. That verbal utterance is a clear instance of oppression, insofar as the goal

is to dominate women and other victims of harassment. Even if the verbal utterance fails in imparting that meaning to its audience, the utterance itself is still oppressive because of the force it has attempted to exercise upon its audience to accept its patriarchal meaning.

While this extension of psychological oppression is not directly stated in existing accounts, I do not take it to be at odds with central theoretical goals. As Bartky states at the end of her paper, psychological oppression is akin to the alienation a worker may face when estranged from their labour:

Alienation is not a condition into which someone might stumble by accident; it has come both to the victim of psychological oppression and to the alienated worker from without, as a usurpation by someone else of what is, by rights, *not his to usurp* . . . to be a victim of alienation is to have a part of one's being stolen by another. (32)

This is precisely what ideological curation does, even when it fails in producing emotion—part of one's being, one's very emotional constitution, is at stake when ideology is simply present and aiming to exert its force upon one's emotional life. It is essential to acknowledge this intervention into our emotional lives to fully canvass its deleterious effects.

Overall, ideological curation can therefore help explain how mechanisms of psychological oppression and forms of emotional injustice might operationally work, and can help extend our understanding of psychological oppression.

5. Conclusion: Resisting Fatalism

Thus far, we have mostly spoken about ideological curation as it applies to Sophie and my case. But these are two of countless examples. Another version of Sophie could leave the scene of her harassment with a good feeling instead of a bad one; here, ideological curation could explain how she might feel emotions like flattery or pride. Men and non-binary persons, too, are impacted by patriarchal ideology in a way explained by ideological curation. We might imagine patriarchal ideology curating the emotional landscape of men whose wives earn more than them by making possible and guiding them toward emotions like resentment, shame, guilt, anger, or feelings of emasculation. We might also imagine various emotions involved in gender dysphoric situations reflecting forms of patriarchal ideology for non-binary persons.

The range of cases extends to many other forms of harmful ideology. Racist ideological curation can help explain both Malcolm X's prescient proclamation, "Who taught you to hate yourself?" (1962), as well as the phenomenon of white grievance as analysed by Juliet Hooker (2017; 2020; 2023), where white Americans who expect white dominance experience a grave sense of loss at gains in representation of non-white populations. Similarly, we might understand ideology as curating a broad set of social meanings which incline working-class persons' various negative affects towards their economic situation as disappointment (a negative response to how one *wishes* the world would be), over anger (a response to a perceived normative *violation*)⁴⁷ or feelings of shame when they fail to meet middle-class norms.⁴⁸

^{47.} I take this distinction from Srinivasan (2018).

^{48.} See Scheff 2002.

When ideological curation occurs to oppressed individuals, I have argued that it can both be an explanation and a form of psychological oppression. In the cases of men being upset that their wives earn more than them, or of white grievance, is psychological oppression an apt label for what ideological curation does? Following Aimé Césaire ([1955] 1972), who sees colonialism as an oppressive system which includes the degradation and deformation of colonisers, I think it might. But, absent the space to defend such a view, one can understand these cases of ideological curation under different terms—perhaps as a description of how structural affective justice advocated for by Stockdale (2024) can impact the mental lives of everyone living under unjust conditions.

No matter how we categorise the harms of ideological curation, in closing, I want to suggest that its analysis can aid our individual journeys of resisting ideology. What is distinctive about ideological curation is that it locates ideology in a space of broad emotional possibility. On this view, ideology does not necessarily determine, repress, or suppress any particular emotion; it functions, often with force, but nevertheless within a broader set of other influences which also vie to impact how our emotions are generated. This vantage point first allows us to be freed from a sort of determinism about ideology and our emotions. It is easy to fall into despair imagining ideology as a brute force hammer—that ideology sinks into our emotional influences and, somewhat inevitably, makes it so that we must feel the way we do.⁴⁹ This analysis of ideological curation aims to not invite such fatalism. Thinking in terms of ideological curation necessarily invites reflection on the many possibilities for feeling that can be flipped into a liberatory register. Some emotions on our affective menu are curated by ideology, but we can bring into focus plenty of others which aren't—the ideological, non-ideological, and liberatory emotional options sit side by side. And so, in imagining ideology's role in generating our emotions, it need not seem as inevitable that ideology will always prevail. The possibilities for what it could otherwise be like are in sight.

Relatedly, the contingency space that ideological curation brings into focus is a helpful location of mental resistance.⁵⁰ On existing accounts of how ideology influences our emotions, the primary fault-line and intervention point is the set of values and norms congruent with ideology. To intervene on ideology would mean cultivating liberatory beliefs, preferences, paradigm scenarios, etc.⁵¹ Whatever its other virtues, this analysis is not always the most useful advice. In my own case of trying to overcome my negative orientation towards my body hair, for example, I certainly had feminist values and norms internalised, but when it came to apprehending my body, they simply were not operating strongly enough to overcome the ideological influences in play. Simply trying to rationally pick the right values and norms or otherwise inducing myself to such change via alterations to my environment or conceptual repertoires did not change how I felt.

Instead, what did help was focusing on my emotional responses. First, with a pause to notice what I was feeling; and then, second, an apprehension of everything else I could be feeling instead. With time and practice, understanding that my emotions could be otherwise, that I could focus on the influences which *might already be present* in moments of contingency and bring them more fervently to life, ultimately led me to some of the first moments of breakthrough. The focus on possibility was vital, highlighting that ideology's grasp on

^{49.} The worry is similar to Uma Narayan's (2002) "engulfing view," where patriarchy is seen as an inevitable, overwhelming force in the lives of third world women, which they lack the agency to overcome.

^{50.} Here I am narrowly discussing methods of resistance that agents can employ towards ideology within their own minds; resisting ideology overall will require fundamentally changing the material conditions which make it possible through collective action.

^{51.} For how to do so, see Bicchieri's (2017) excellent analysis of how we might change social norms like those around child marriage.

our emotional lives is merely one of many possible sources of feeling. To echo Graeber: we make our emotional lives, and if we try, we can make them differently.⁵²

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