Ideology, Confrontation and Political Self-Awareness

By Adrian Piper

Adrian Piper is a conceptual artist with a background in sculpture and philosophy. Her performance work and writing during this period asked the observer to consider the construction of his/her own beliefs and their relation to action in the world. Art historian Moira Roth has written that Piper's work of this period "deals with confrontations of self to self and self to others, exposing the distances between people and the alienation that exists in our lives—personally, politically, emotionally." Here she puts forth some basic considerations about ideology. —Eds.

We started out with beliefs about the world and our place in it that we didn't ask for and didn't question. Only later, when those beliefs were attacked by new experiences that didn't conform to them, did we begin to doubt: e.g., do we and our friends really understand each other? Do we really have nothing in common with blacks/whites/ gays/workers/the middle class/other women/other men/etc.?

Doubt entails self-examination because a check on the plausibility of your beliefs and attitudes is a check on all the constituents of the self. Explanations of why your falsely supposed "X" includes your motives for believing "X" (your desire to maintain a relationship, your impulse to be charitable, your goal of becoming a better person); the causes of your believing "X" (your early training, your having drunk too much, your innate disposition to optimism); and your objective reasons for believing "X" (it's consistent with your other beliefs, it explains the most data, it's inductively confirmed, people you respect believe it). These reveal the traits and dispositions that individuate one self from another.

So self-examination entails self-awareness, i.e., awareness of the components of the self. But self-awareness is largely a matter of degree. If you've only had a few discordant experiences, or relatively superficial discordant experiences, you don't need to examine yourself very deeply in order to revise your false beliefs. For instance, you happen to have met a considerate, sensitive, nonexploitative person who's into sadism in bed. You think to yourself, "This doesn't show that my beliefs about sadists in general are wrong; after all, think what Krafft-Ebing says! This particular person is merely an exception to the general rule that sexual sadists are demented." Or you think, "My desire to build a friendship with this person is based on the possibility of reforming her/him (and has nothing to do with any curiosity to learn more about my own sexual tastes)." Such purely cosmetic repairs in your belief structure sometimes suffice to maintain your sense of self-consistency. Unless you are confronted with a genuine personal crisis, or freely choose to push deeper and ask yourself more comprehensive and disturbing questions about the genesis and justification of your own beliefs, your actual degree of self-awareness may remain relatively thin.

Usually the beliefs that remain most unexposed to examination are the ones we need to hold in order to maintain a certain conception of ourselves and our relation to the world. These are the ones in which we have the deepest personal investment. Hence these are the ones that are most resistant to revision; e.g., we have to believe that other people are capable of understanding and sympathy, of honorable and responsible behavior, in order not to feel completely alienated and suspicious of those around us.
Or: Some people have to believe that the world of political and social
catastrophe is completely outside their control in order to justify their
indifference to it.

Some of these beliefs may be true, some may be false. This is difficult to
ascertain because we can only confirm or disconfirm the beliefs under
examination with reference to other beliefs, which themselves require
examination. In any event, the set of false beliefs that a person has a
personal investment in maintaining is what I will refer to (following Marx)
as a person's ideology.

Ideology is pernicious for many reasons. The obvious one is that it makes
people behave in stupid, insensitive, self-serving ways, usually at the
expense of other individuals or groups. But it is also pernicious because of
the mechanisms it uses to protect itself, and its consequent capacity for
self-regeneration in the face of the most obvious counterevidence. Some of
these mechanisms are:

(1) The False-Identity Mechanism

In order to preserve your ideological beliefs against attack, you identify
them as objective facts and not as beliefs at all. For example, you insist
that it is just a fact that black people are less intelligent than whites, or
that those on the sexual fringes are in fact sick, violent or asocial. By
maintaining that these are statements of fact rather than statements of
belief compiled from the experiences you personally happen to have had,
you avoid having to examine and perhaps revise those beliefs. This denial
may be crucial to maintaining your self-conception against attack. If you're
white and suspect that you may not be all that smart, to suppose that at
least there's a whole race of people you're smarter than may be an
important source of self-esteem. Or if you're not entirely successful in
coping with your own nonstandard sexual impulses, isolating and identifying
the sexual fringe as sick, violent or asocial may serve the very important
function of reinforcing your sense of yourself as "normal."

The fallacy of the false-identity mechanism as a defense of one's ideology
consists in supposing that there exist objective social facts that are not
constructed of beliefs people have about each other.

(2) The Illusion of Perfectibility

Here you defend your ideology by convincing yourself that the hard work of
self-scrutiny has an end and a final product, i.e., a set of true, central and
uniquely defensible beliefs about some issue; and that you have in fact
achieved this end, hence needn't subject your beliefs to further
examination. Since there is no such final product, all of the inferences that
supposedly follow from this belief are false. Example: You're a veteran of
the anti-war movement and have developed a successful and much-lauded
system of draft-avoidance counseling, on which your entire sense of self-
worth is erected. When it is made clear to you that such services primarily
benefit the middle class—that this consequently forces much larger
proportions of the poor, the uneducated and blacks to serve and be killed in
its place—you resist revising your views in light of this information on the
grounds that you've worked on and thought hard about these issues, have
developed a sophisticated critique of them, and therefore have no reason to
reconsider your opinions or efforts. You thus treat the prior experience of
having reflected deeply on some issue as a defense against the self-
reflection appropriate now, that might uncover your personal investment in
your anti-draft role.

The illusion of perfectibility is really the sin of arrogance, for it supposes
that dogmatism can be justified by having "paid one's dues."
(3) The One-Way Communication Mechanism

You deflect dissents, criticisms or attacks on your cherished beliefs by treating all of your own pronouncements as imparting genuine information, but treating those of other people as mere symptoms of some moral or psychological defect. Say you're committed to feminism, but have difficulty making genuine contact with other women. You dismiss all arguments advocating greater attention to lesbian and separatist issues within the women's movement on the grounds that they are maintained by frustrated man-haters who just want to get their names in the footlights. By reducing questions concerning the relations of women to each other to pathology or symptoms of excessive self-interest, you avoid confronting the conflict between your intellectual convictions and your actual alienation from other women, and therefore the motives that might explain this conflict. If these motives should include such things as deep-seated feelings of rivalry with other women, or a desire for attention from men, then avoiding recognition of this conflict is crucial to maintaining your self-respect.

The one-way communication mechanism is a form of elitism that ascribes pure, healthy, altruistic political motives only to oneself (or group), while reducing all dissenters to the status of moral defectives or egocentric and self-seeking subhumans, whom it is entirely justified to manipulate or disregard, but with whom the possibility of rational dialogue is not to be taken seriously.

There are many other mechanisms for defending one's personal ideology. These are merely a representative sampling. Together, they all add up to what I will call the illusion of omniscience. This illusion consists in being so convinced of the infallibility of your own beliefs about everyone else that you forget that you are perceiving and experiencing other people from a perspective that is, in its own ways, just as subjective and limited as theirs. Thus you confuse your personal experiences with objective reality, and forget that you have a subjective and limited self that is selecting, processing and interpreting your experiences in accordance with its own limited capacities. You suppose that your perceptions of someone are truths about her or him; that your understanding of someone is comprehensive and complete. Thus your self-conception is not demarcated by the existence of other people. Rather, you appropriate them into your self-conception as psychologically and metaphysically transparent objects of your consciousness. You ignore their ontological independence, their psychological opacity, and thereby their essential personhood. The illusion of omniscience resolves into the fallacy of solipsism.

The result is blindness to the genuine needs of other people, coupled with the arrogant and dangerous conviction that you understand those needs better than they do; and a consequent inability to respond to those needs politically in genuinely effective ways.

The antidote, I suggest, is confrontation of the sinner with the evidence of the sin: the rationalizations; the subconscious defense mechanisms; the strategies of avoidance, denial, dismissal and withdrawal that signal, on the one hand, the retreat of the self to the protective enclave of ideology, on the other hand, precisely the proof of subjectivity and fallibility that the ideologue is so anxious to ignore. This is the concern of my recent work of the past three years.

The success of the antidote increases with the specificity of the confrontation. And because I don't know you I can't be as specific as I would like. I can only indicate general issues that have specific references in my own experience. But if this discussion has made you in the least degree self-conscious about your political beliefs or about your strategies for preserving them; or even faintly uncomfortable or annoyed at my...
having discussed them; or has raised just the slightest glimmerings of
doubt about the veracity of your opinions, then I will consider this piece a
roaring success. If not, then I will just have to try again, for my own sake.
For of course I am talking not just about you, but about us.

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