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Morality or “False Consciousness”?

How Moral Naturalists Can Answer Thrasymachus’s Challenge¹

“Democracy makes democratic laws, tyranny makes tyrannical laws, and so on with the others. And they declare what they have made—what is to their own advantage—to be just for their subjects, and they punish anyone who goes against this as lawless and unjust. This, then, is what I say justice is...namely, the advantage of the stronger.”

—Plato, *Republic*, Book I (338e)

1 Introduction

In Book I of Plato’s *Republic*, Thrasymachus argues that justice is the interest of the “stronger.” Morality, he insists, is nothing more than an ideology indoctrinated in people to benefit the powerful. It isn’t long before Thrasymachus is defeated by Socrates, who exposes a contradiction in Thrasymachus’s own premises (*Republic*, 339a – 339e). However, Thrasymachus was not the ablest spokesman for his ideas. The challenge he put forward is not so easily dispelled. In the following, I argue that *functionalist naturalism*, a variant of moral naturalism, is particularly vulnerable to a modern way of articulating Thrasymachus’s challenge.

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This formulation of Thrasymachus's challenge holds that at least some social arrangements, including some moral norms, are products of *false consciousness*. False consciousness occurs when a dominant or elite social group shapes the beliefs and desires of a subordinate group in such a way that the subordinates act for the benefit of the dominants, but against their own interests (Lukes 2005: 27 – 28, 42 – 44). It remains controversial whether false consciousness so described exists (cf. Scott 1990). I shall take the idea seriously, however, and grant that moral norms sometimes result from false consciousness. I shall adopt the term *false consciousness norm* to refer to norms—including some moral norms—that either emerge or persist because of false consciousness. Although I grant that false consciousness norms exist, I argue that false consciousness norms have the function of impartially promoting the interests of all persons in their range of application. Moreover, even if the actual effect of false consciousness norms is to benefit a powerful class while being harmful and discriminatory toward others, it does not follow that their function is to serve the powerful exclusively. Rather, since false consciousness norms are designed through a process of intentional selection, their function is the *intended* effect that they were designed to have. And the crucial feature of false consciousness norms is that their designers—particularly subordinates—teach, preach, follow, and enforce them with the intention of promoting the mutual interests of everyone to whom the norms apply. Because the actual effects of false consciousness norms are so at odds with their intended effects, they are *dysfunctional*, and this failure to function is the key to explaining why false consciousness norms are unjust.

2 Functionalist Moral Naturalism

I apply the term “moral naturalism” to any meta-ethical view which holds the following three theses:

Moral naturalism

- (MN1) Moral properties are *natural* properties—i.e., properties that can be investigated through methods typically used in the natural and social sciences.
- (MN2) Some moral judgments are objectively true in virtue of accurately representing the moral properties of actions, institutions, and character traits.
- (MN3) Moral properties either supervene upon, or are reducible to, the effects that actions, institutions, and character traits have on the interests of persons.

Moral naturalists have proposed various rationales for (MN3): the claim that moral properties are either supervenient upon, or reducible to, the effects that actions, institutions, and character traits have on the interests of persons. I will defend one particular approach to linking moral properties with the interests of persons.

Throughout the following, I take an *interest* to be a constituent part of a person’s well-being. I shall take for granted a number of assumptions about interests. I assume that people are capable of representing some of their interests through their intentional attitudes—i.e., through their beliefs, desires, and their plans or intentions. Furthermore, I allow that a person’s interests may be either self-regarding or other-regarding. I shall also assume that a person can

have an interest in realizing his or her values. A person's values may include a moral code to which one is committed, as well as a conception of the good life.

Although I assume that a person may have an interest in realizing his or her values, I do not assume that people's values are necessarily well-founded. A person's values may be products of faulty reasoning, ignorance, bigotry, or as will be emphasized, false consciousness. The pursuit of a person's values may even be detrimental to other interests he or she has. Nevertheless, I assume that a person can have an interest in pursuing his or her values *to some extent*, regardless of how warranted those values are, and regardless of how the pursuit of one's values affects one's other interests.

In my view, the strongest rationale for (MN3) can be found in a particular strand of moral naturalism. I hereafter call this variant *functionalist naturalism*, due to the centrality of the concept of a function in this theory. According to functionalist naturalism, *moral properties are features of actions, institutions, and persons that have the function of impartially promoting the interests of persons*. Functionalist naturalism has been articulated in greatest detail by David Copp (1995, 2008, 2009), William Casebeer (2003), and Philip Kitcher (2011). It also figures in the work of David B. Wong (2006), William Rottshaefer (2012), Scott James (2009), Kurt Baier (1958, 1995), William K. Frankena ([1967] 1970), and G.J. Warnock (1971). There are, of course, important differences in the details of these accounts. Some of these authors are more specific than others about the concept of *function* that they invoke. And some of these authors appeal to a different conception of function than others. Copp appeals to the “systems” analysis of function developed by Robert Cummins, whereas Casebeer embraces Peter Godfrey-Smith's “modern history” theory of *proper* function (Copp 2009; Casebeer 2003:

53). However, I shall adhere to what Kitcher identifies as a “unity of conception” that all ascriptions of function share. In a landmark essay titled “Function and Design,” Kitcher argues that “the function of an entity *S* is *what S is designed to do*” (Kitcher [1993] 1998: 159). The term “design” is to be broadly construed here. It can refer to intentional, deliberate design by intelligent agents—as when a watchmaker designs a watch. Alternatively, “design” can refer to *non-intentional selection* by impersonal forces—as when natural selection selects giraffes with relatively long necks, or when market competition selects relatively profitable firms. A non-intentional selection mechanism selects some entities over others when that mechanism causes some entities to have a higher probability of persisting or reproducing than others.

According to the functionalist naturalists, moral properties have a function with two essential characteristics. First, moral properties have an *optimific* function; their effect, or at least their intended effect, is to promote some aggregation of the interests of persons. Second, moral properties have an *impartial* function; they assign similar priority to the similar interests of different individuals, and they do not assign greater priority to one person’s interests over another’s merely due to a difference in their identities. Moral properties have this optimific and impartial function, because they’re designed to promote the interests of persons in an impartial way.

According to the functionalist naturalists, moral properties perform their function by solving generic problems which regularly threaten the interests of persons. To allow for a clearer exposition of functionalist naturalism, I’ll focus on Philip Kitcher’s presentation of the view in *The Ethical Project* (2011). Kitcher offers a detailed and empirically informed rationale for the basic functionalist naturalist thesis that moral properties have an optimific and impartial

function. He highlights the “fragilities and tensions” of social life which pose obstacles to the fulfillment of human interests in food, shelter, and protection against physical attack (Kitcher 2011: 221, 223). Kitcher attributes the fragilities of social life to “altruism failures”—situations in which individuals fail to respond altruistically to one another’s needs (Kitcher 2011: 222). When altruism failures arise, they “lead to conflict, to pain inflicted, to rough discipline, and lengthy peacemaking” (Kitcher 2011: 222). And to the extent that altruism failures are remedied, “life goes more smoothly, with increased opportunities for cooperation and, consequently, greater mutual benefits. Group members satisfy more of their desires and protest less” (Ibid.).

According to Kitcher, “ethical practice” is a human activity, designed by human beings to perform the function of remedying altruism failures. Kitcher describes *ethical practice* as the collective articulation, teaching, learning, and following of norms. *Norms* are shared rules, generally followed within a society, which classify actions as permissible, impermissible, praiseworthy, or blameworthy (cf. Bicchieri 2006; Elster 2009; Brennan et al. 2013). Kitcher argues that ethical practice is a social technology. As such, ethical practice is and always has been designed to overcome recurrent threats to human interests caused by altruism failures (Kitcher 2011: 221 – 225; Kitcher 2012: 10 – 11, 18). Accordingly, a function of ethical practice is that of “allowing a smoother, more peaceful, and more cooperative social life, through remedying altruism failures” (Kitcher 2011: 223).

Kitcher, like other functionalist naturalists, attributes an *optimific* function to ethical practice. Ethical practice produces systems of norms which Kitcher calls “*ethical codes*” (Kitcher 2011: 97). Ethical codes are designed to correct altruism failures. When the collective

observance of an ethical code eliminates altruism failures, it alleviates social conflict and promotes the interests of those affected. Hence, ethical practice, and ethical codes in particular, have an optimific function.

Moreover, according to Kitcher, ethical codes also have an *impartial* function. For they are designed to meet the *endorsable desires* of all members of a population. Endorsable desires are those which could be satisfied for everyone in a population (Kitcher 2011: 223). Kitcher gives the example of an environment in which adequate food is available for all. In such an environment, the desire for food is endorsable. By contrast, the desire to monopolize a good would not be endorsable, since this desire could not be satisfied for everyone in a given population. Kitcher specifies that the function of ethical practice consists of “clearing up those altruism failures involving the most urgent endorsable desires on the part of the potential beneficiaries” (Kitcher 2011: 223). If ethical practice has the function of serving endorsable desires, then it has an impartial function in the sense that it is oriented at satisfying the desires of all persons affected, and it doesn’t prioritize the satisfaction of any particular person’s desires merely because of his or her identity.

Functionalist naturalists do not take a given ethical code to perform its function solely with respect to the social group that happens to follow it. Ethical codes can require altruistic behavior towards social outsiders, and functionalist naturalists suggest that this is precisely what well-functioning codes would do. Copp points out that “a society is likely to do better at meeting its needs if the societal [i.e. ethical] code calls for compassion and kindness toward animals and toward humans generally than if the code explicitly limits its call for compassion to members of the society” (Copp 1995: 205). One reason why altruism toward outsiders would

serve the interests of people in a social group is that prosperous living often requires cooperation with outsider-groups (Kitcher 2011: 116 – 117). Another reason is that human sympathy is naturally expansive. Consequently, human beings have other-regarding interests that extend to outsiders, and even to non-humans (Kitcher 2011: 308 – 309).

In sum, functionalist moral naturalists share the view that moral properties have the function of promoting the interests of persons in an impartial manner. Moreover, functionalist moral naturalists agree that moral claims should be evaluated with reference to the function of moral properties. A moral claim is objectively true in virtue of accurately representing successful or unsuccessful performances of the function of moral properties. According to Kitcher, a moral claim is objectively true if it is the “descriptive counterpart”² of a norm which would be retained in an evolving system of norms that successfully performs the function of remedying altruism failures (Kitcher 2011: 7, 186 – 187, 260 – 262; Kitcher 2012: 12). To take one of Kitcher’s examples, the claim that “Slavery is wrong” is objectively true, because this claim is the descriptive counterpart of a norm—a norm prohibiting slavery—which would be kept as part of a system of norms that is increasingly successful at remedying altruism failures (Kitcher 2011: 186 – 187).

My next order of business is to explain how Thrasymachus’s challenge threatens moral naturalism. As noted, I take functionalist moral naturalism to offer the most plausible rationale for (MN3). However, functionalist naturalism is particularly vulnerable to Thrasymachus’s

² For a norm of the form “Do X,” a descriptive counterpart may be “It is right to do X.” For a norm of the form “Act as Y acts,” a descriptive counterpart may be “What Y does is good” (Kitcher 2011: 186).

challenge, because it throws doubt on the idea that morality has an impartial and optimific function.

3 Thrasymachus's Challenge and Moral Naturalism

Thrasymachus's challenge suggests that morality is nothing but a tool of oppression which enables one powerful subset of the population to serve its own interests at everyone else's expense. This idea has been echoed by some great voices in the history of philosophy. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx depicts morality as a pillar in the edifice of bourgeois domination over the proletariat: "Law, morality, religion, are to him [i.e., the worker] so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests" (Marx [1848] 1977: 230). Whereas Marx takes morality to be an ideological means by which an elite few oppress the many, Nietzsche portrays morality as a system of ideas designed to valorize the mediocre masses while suppressing the aptitudes of relatively few strong, intelligent, and creative "higher men." In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche declares: "men of great creativity, the really great men according to my understanding, will be sought in vain today...nothing stands more malignantly in the way of their rise and evolution...than what in Europe today is called simply 'morality'" (Nietzsche 1968: 957).

Regardless of who exactly the subjects of oppression happen to be, Thrasymachus's challenge to morality is especially threatening to functionalist moral naturalism. Functionalist moral naturalists cannot accept Thrasymachus's refrain: *justice is the advantage of the stronger*. They are committed to the thesis that moral properties function to impartially promote the interests of all persons. The crux of the problem is that functionalist naturalists take moral properties to be natural properties—*inter alia*, learned behaviors, discourses, and

norms—that were designed to perform a function. But it would seem that human behavior, moral discourse, and the evolution of moral norms have all been profoundly shaped by power relations. Human societies developed entrenched inequalities in wealth, social status, and political influence. With social stratification, it would seem that the ability to design norms, and hence to determine the *function* of norms, could easily have fallen into the hands of a powerful elite. Considering the rise of kingdoms, empires, modern states, and capitalism, it seems that this is exactly what has happened. As we shall appreciate below (in section 4), elites may be able to design moral norms in ways that suit them. If that’s true, then it would appear that the function of some moral norms—i.e., what some moral norms are designed to do—is to serve the interests of elites. The implication is that functionalist naturalists seem forced by the logic of their own arguments to accept that some moral properties have the function of serving only the powerful. Thrasymachus’s challenge returns with a vengeance.

4 The Theory of False Consciousness: A Modern Formulation of Thrasymachus’s Challenge

In this section, I articulate a way that Thrasymachus’s challenge to morality could be updated in light of recent sociological theory and evidence. Developments in sociology since the late 20th century have made Thrasymachus’s challenge an even more potent objection to functionalist naturalism. In particular, the *theory of “false consciousness”* raises the possibility of a modern vindication of Thrasymachus’s ideas.

The concept of “false consciousness” is an influential legacy of Marxist thought. It was refined by Steven Lukes in his groundbreaking book, *Power: A Radical View* (Lukes 2005). In that book, Lukes theorizes a “*third dimension*” of power: the power to instill false consciousness. The third dimension of power operates when a dominant social group, A, shapes the beliefs and

desires of a subordinate social group, B, and thereby causes B to behave in a way that is beneficial to A but detrimental to B (Lukes 2005: 27, 149 – 150). Due to the influence of A, members of B willingly act against their own “real” interests, but only because they incorrectly *believe* that they’re promoting their own interests by conforming to a hierarchical social order in which they occupy a subordinate position.³ When B’s beliefs, desires, and behavior are influenced in this way, B acquires “false consciousness.” False consciousness thus serves as a low-cost means by which elites can secure the participation of the whole of society in a division of labor necessary for the elites to retain their privilege.

I use the term “false consciousness” mainly because it is recognizable as a hallmark of Marxist theory. However, the term should be regarded with a sense of suspicion and detachment.⁴ Lukes has pointed out that “false consciousness” is used frequently in an dogmatic strain of Marxist thinking that invokes “some sort of privileged access, external to the actors, to a ‘true’ account of what is ‘real’ and of what are ‘appropriate’ and ‘rational’ responses to subordination” (Lukes 2005: 145). Leninists, Trotskyists, Stalinists, and Communist officials of the mid-20th century presumptuously laid claim to having expert knowledge of the real interests of the working class (Lukes 2011: 19). Lukes warns us against lapsing into the unfounded self-assurance with which these ideologues claimed to see false consciousness at work. Accordingly, “false consciousness” is a term I use with some reluctance, considering its association with the politics of tyranny. On the other hand, Lukes also stresses that in careful

³ Lukes earned a fair bit of notoriety by drawing a distinction between the “real” interests of subordinates, on the one hand, and their merely “perceived” or “subjective” interests, on the other (Lukes 2005: 28 – 29, 36 – 38, 136, 149). He argues that dominant groups can cause subordinates to misperceive their own real interests by shaping the latter’s beliefs and desires. As a result, subordinates act in pursuit of their erroneously perceived interests, when in fact this action is detrimental to subordinates’ real interests.

⁴ I thank Steven Lukes for alerting me to this point.

and empirically-informed analyses, “false consciousness” may be non-dogmatically ascribed, with evidential justification, to people who are enmeshed in power relations (Lukes 2005: 145 – 149). My intent is to speak of “false consciousness” in this epistemically modest, empirically disciplined sense.

The notion of false consciousness has long been controversial (see, e.g., Elster 1983; Scott 1990). But Lukes maintains that none of his critics “succeed in showing that...the third dimension of power is not also often and widely at work in shaping preferences, beliefs, and desires and influencing judgment...” (Lukes 2005: 130). As evidence for the operation of false consciousness, Lukes cites John Gaventa’s study of acquiescence among Appalachian coal miners (Gaventa 1980); Martha Nussbaum’s analysis of “adaptive preferences” generated by traditions of feminine deference in India (Nussbaum 2000); John Stuart Mill’s observations of Victorian gender roles in *The Subjection of Women* (Mill [1869] 1989); and Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984) (cf. Lukes 2005: 137 – 142). In a more recent essay, Lukes adds Michael Graetz and Ian Shapiro’s (2005) study of the successful campaign in the United States to repeal the estate tax, as well as American conservatives’ implacable faith that free markets will always produce socially beneficial outcomes (Lukes 2011: 25).

I believe that Lukes has identified a sufficient amount of evidence to show that a theory of false consciousness—more precisely, third-dimensional power—stands a good chance of being true. Therefore, I will grant for the sake of argument that false consciousness does occur. I now press the point that the phenomenon of false consciousness throws into question the central claim of functionalist naturalism: namely, that morality has the function of impartially promoting the interests of all persons.

I shall discuss a particular case which is very plausibly interpreted as an instance of false consciousness. Consider the institution of slavery in Mauritania—an institution which has existed for at least two thousand years. The Islamic Republic of Mauritania was the last country in the world to abolish slavery in 1981. However, notwithstanding the denials of Mauritanian government, slavery remains a common practice. The United Nations estimates that 10 to 20 percent of Mauritania's 3.4 million people still live in slavery (Sutter 2012). While slaveholders profit from the slaves' labor, the slaves are denied any form of salary, sick pay, or pension. They do not receive even basic education or training in any marketable skills. They are fed only scraps left over from their masters' meals. Crimes against slaves perpetrated by slaveholders—including violence, sexual abuse, and kidnapping—are rarely prosecuted.

The theory of false consciousness may help to explain why slavery in Mauritania has persisted for two millennia, despite so adversely affecting the interests of slaves. One obvious reason for the stability of slavery in Mauritania is the use of brute violence. The government has beaten, imprisoned, and lynched opposition (Bales 1999: 86, 89 – 90). Slaveholders use physical abuse and death threats to keep their slaves from running away (Okeowo 2014). However, another very curious reason for the long history of slavery in Mauritania is that many slaves *accept* their condition (Bales 1999: 83). Observers stress that slaves willingly submit to a life of bondage in no small part due to their own beliefs. Some of these beliefs are theological, and some seem to be moral beliefs. As Dr. Kevin Bales recounts, “[m]any people in Mauritania see [slavery] as a natural and normal part of life, not as an aberration or even a real problem; instead, it is the right and ancient order of things” (Bales 1999: 118). This is a fact lamented by Bouboucar Messaoud, who was once a slave before he became an anti-slavery activist:

“Chains are for the slave who has just become a slave, who has...just been brought across the Atlantic...But the multigeneration slave, the slave descending from many generations, he is a slave even in his own head. And he is totally submissive. He is ready to sacrifice himself, even, for his master. And, unfortunately, it’s this type of slavery that we have [in Mauritania] today” (Sutter 2012).

Messaoud stresses the explanatory import of the Mauritanian slaves’ beliefs. According to Messaoud, these beliefs lead the slaves to submit willingly to their adverse station. Because slaves and their descendants are bound by custom to serve the master and his descendants, there is an emotional tie between master and slave. Many slaves even consider it *immoral* to leave their master. Bales notes that “as devout Muslims, many slaves believe that they are placed by God into their master’s household, and that to leave it would be sinful” (Bales 1999: 84 – 85). Slaves are told—and many believe—that service to the master in this life earns a slave his or her way to paradise in the afterlife. Older slaves teach young ones that “[t]o struggle for liberty...is to upset God’s natural order and put one’s very soul at risk” (Bales 1999: 108). According to an old Mauritanian adage, “paradise is under the master’s foot” (Yessa 2006: 182). Slaves take this saying to heart, to the point of suppressing fellow slaves who aspire to freedom. Messaoud points out that “[i]f a slave becomes free, others will judge him as evil. The society he belongs to does not accept, nor forgive, him for being free” (Sutter 2012). Judging by these observations, slavery in Mauritania is upheld not just through the efforts of masters to

coerce slaves into submission. Rather, Mauritanian slavery is maintained in large part by the slaves themselves.

According to Lukes, false consciousness is a set of shared beliefs that motivates subordinates to act willingly in service of dominants' interests, but against their own interests. In Mauritania, slaves evidently believe that slavery is natural, inevitable, and even divinely ordained. Among other things, it's thought that a slave's faithful obedience to his or her master is a path to paradise in the hereafter. As Messaoud attests, these beliefs may contribute to explaining the longevity of slavery in Mauritania. They may help account for the fact that generations of slaves submit to a regime that oppresses them.

Alas, false consciousness is called "false" for a reason. It is constituted by false beliefs. For instance, the belief that servitude to the master is required for a slave's entry into paradise is false even by the lights of Islam, Mauritania's dominant religion. Far from being an offense against God for slaves to seek freedom, it's actually required by Islam to free slaves who have embraced Islam. As Bales explains,

“[t]he Koran declares that only captives taken in a holy war may be enslaved, and that once they convert to Islam they are to be freed. It is possible that the ancestors of today's slaves were captured in just this way, but today all Mauritians are Muslim and have been for hundreds of years—and no general freeing of slaves has resulted” (Bales 1999: 85).

Because Mauritanian slaves falsely believe that, according to Islam, obedience is rewarded by God, this belief creates an incentive among slaves to be obedient, even without coercion by slaveholders.

Another aspect of the falsehood in false consciousness is evident in Mauritania. It involves false beliefs about the characteristics and capabilities of the slaves. These beliefs in turn lend credence to the further false belief that slavery is a natural and inevitable fact of social life. Such beliefs are held by both masters *and* slaves. For example, Abdel Nasser Ould Yessa, who was born into the slave-owning caste but later became a leading Mauritanian abolitionist, had a slave named Yebawwa. After Abdel became persuaded of the injustice of slavery, he confronted Yebawwa and urged him not to underestimate his own abilities. Yebawwa was merely amused to learn that his master had taken up the abolitionist cause.⁵ He went on to explain to Abdel what he saw as a plain truth: that slaves are naturally inferior. The following is Abdel's recollection of what Yebawwa told him (Yessa 2006: 203 – 204).

“‘...I was born to be a slave, and I’ll always be a slave. If my master doesn’t want me, I must’ve done something wrong.’

“‘...We [slaves] are lazy...We’re here to serve; that’s what God wants. My master was created for poetry, for beautiful things. He is fine and strong. We are unfinished. God forgot to refine us; he was too busy to finish us.’

⁵ Abdel would eventually set Yebawwa free, though Yebawwa never fully understood this fact. “He’s my slave—he’d say nothing different even today,” Abdel remarked in an interview (Sutter 2012).

“...Look at that slave. He walks like a duck. He can be a free man? Look at him!’

He laughed and shook his head. Then he looked at me with pity, as though I had failed to grasp something obvious, something any child can understand. As though I refused to believe in gravity.”

Yebawwa internalized some stereotypes about the inferiority of slaves. To be sure, these stereotypes are false. Nevertheless they are widely believed in Mauritania, even among slaves, and they create a strong disincentive against challenging the extant social order. The stereotypes convince slaves that their condition cannot be changed. If God made slaves for the purpose of servitude, if slaves are capable of nothing but a life of bondage, then it would be futile for a slave to aspire to freedom.

It is significant that the ideology which rationalizes Mauritanian slavery has an apparent moral dimension. Many Mauritanian slaves believe it’s sinful to seek freedom; they judge slaves who do escape to freedom as evil; and they strongly feel an obligation to be loyal to their masters. Many slaveholders likewise think—as Abdel once did—that they have a right to hold slaves, as well as a duty to look after them. To be perfectly frank, I do not think that these normative judgments should be taken at face value as *moral* judgments. However, I’m willing to grant, once again for argument’s sake, that Mauritanian slavery is supported in part by *moral* judgments and *moral* norms that motivate people to comply with the institution of slavery.

There is considerable evidence that false consciousness is a mechanism by which slavery persists in Mauritania. Scholarly, journalistic, and official reports of conditions on the ground are available (Bales 1999; Okeowo 2014; Sutter 2012; UNHRC 2010; Yessa 2006). In addition,

there are testimonials from Mauritians with first-hand experience of the Mauritanian slave system and its supporting ideologies (see Okeowo 2014; Sutter 2012; Yessa 2006). These accounts consistently describe prevalent beliefs and attitudes among people in Mauritanian society that would be predicted by the theory of third-dimensional power.

On the other hand, I wish to avoid making overreaching claims about the evidentiary weight of the Mauritanian case with respect to theory of false consciousness. To date, no theoretically sophisticated ethnography has been carried out to investigate whether the effects of third-dimensional power are present in Mauritania. However, I believe there is adequate evidence to treat Mauritanian slavery as a *potentially* problematic case for functionalist moral naturalism. If slavery in Mauritania is a product of false consciousness, the functionalist moral naturalist must be prepared to explain how moral norms supportive of slavery in that country still have the function of impartially promoting the interests of everyone. A similar explanation must be given for the existence of any moral norms produced by false consciousness. Thus, my main aim shall be to outline an argumentative strategy for demonstrating that the existence of false consciousness norms does not refute functionalist naturalism. If it turned out that false consciousness does not in any way explain conditions in Mauritanian society, the points made about Mauritania could apply just as well to confirmed cases of false consciousness norms. Indeed, wherever possible, I shall extend my defense of functionalist naturalism to empirical cases where false consciousness has been explicitly argued to have existed. For this reason, I will devote considerable attention to John Gaventa's study of power dynamics in late 19th century Appalachia (see sections 6 – 7 below).

The moral norms that support the Mauritanian slave system, then, seem to persist in virtue of false consciousness. For this reason, they may qualify as moral norms which are also false consciousness norms. The idea that some moral norms are generated and sustained by false consciousness is threatening to the central claim of functionalist naturalism. Lukes maintains that false consciousness can be inculcated in subordinates by dominant groups (Lukes 2005: 27, 136). But when false consciousness is instilled by the dominant class, wouldn't any moral norms resulting from false consciousness be moral norms designed by the dominants, in service of dominants' interests? If so, wouldn't it follow that moral norms propagated by false consciousness have the function of benefiting dominant groups while harming subordinates? If the answer to both these questions is *yes*, then false consciousness norms do not have an impartial, optimific function. Rather, the unpalatable conclusion we come to is that, in some societies, moral properties do *not* have the function of impartially promoting the interests of persons.

5 Phantom Functions

In the rest of this essay, I attempt a response to Thrasymachus's challenge—one that I believe vindicates functionalist naturalism. My answer to Thrasymachus is that even false consciousness norms *are* designed to perform an impartial and optimific function. To see this, we must appreciate that the process of designing norms is mediated by the intentions of norm-followers. Consequently, a function of a false consciousness norm is determined by an *intended* effect of the norm, rather than the norm's *actual* effects. I will argue that although the *actual* effects of false consciousness norms are injurious to subordinates, false consciousness norms

have the intended effect—and thus the function—of impartially promoting the interests of everyone.

To begin, we must understand that norms are artifacts. An artifact is any object whose use or existence is explained by the intentional attitudes of agents (Sperber 2007: 124 – 126; Preston 2009a). Norms qualify as a kind of artifact, since they exist in virtue of the beliefs, desires, emotions, and intentions of an entire community of agents. A norm is generated by shared expectations of the circumstances under which it is to be followed or enforced. These expectations concern what sorts of conduct are permissible, impermissible, and obligatory. The idea that norms are produced by collectively held expectations is a core point in Cristina Bicchieri's analysis of *social* norms (Bicchieri 2006). According to Bicchieri, a social norm exists just in case a sufficient number of individuals within a social group are *conditional followers* of the norm. An individual, *A*, is a conditional follower of a social norm if (1) *A* knows that the norm applies to a specified range of situations, and (2) *A* is motivated to follow the norm on the basis of two sets of expectations. First there are *empirical* expectations, which are beliefs that a sufficient number of other agents follow the norm in situations where the norm applies. Second, there are *normative* expectations. An individual has a normative expectation with respect to a norm when he or she believes that *others* think that the norm *ought* to be followed (cf. Bicchieri 2006: 11, 13 – 14). Additionally, normative expectations may be accompanied by a willingness to either reward compliance or punish noncompliance with the norm (cf. Bicchieri 2006: 11). When empirical and normative expectations are shared by a sufficiently large proportion of individuals within a society, conditional followers are motivated by a “conditional preference” to follow the norm. On the other hand, when these expectations are not

sufficiently shared, there is no widespread motivation among members of the society to follow the norm. And, in Bicchieri's terms, when there is no such widespread motivation, the social norm does not exist.

Bicchieri's theory of the existence-conditions of social norms also applies to *moral* norms. At one point in her 2006 book, Bicchieri suggests that moral norms are distinct from social norms, because the existence of moral norms is relatively less conditional on collectively shared expectations (Bicchieri 2006: 20):

“Even if I were to find myself in a Hobbesian state of nature, without rules or rights, I would still feel repugnance and anguish at the idea of taking a life...by their very nature, moral norms demand (at least in principle) an unconditional commitment” (Bicchieri 2006: 20).

However, Bicchieri immediately qualifies the above point in a footnote. She acknowledges that moral norms exist in virtue of normative and empirical expectations that are shared among members of a community:

“It might be argued that even what we usually understand as moral norms are conditional. One may be thoroughly committed to respect the sanctity of human life, but there are circumstances in which one's commitment would waver. Imagine finding oneself in a community where violence and murder are daily occurrences, expected and condoned by most. One would probably at first resist violence, then react to it, and

finally act it out oneself. Guilt and remorse would in time be replaced by complacency, as one might come to feel the act of murder to be entirely necessary and justified. The testimonies of survivors of concentration camps, as well as the personal recollections of SS officers, are frightening examples of how fragile our most valued principles can be” (Bicchieri 2006: 20, note 10).

Evidently, Bicchieri holds that the difference between moral and social norms is really a matter of degree, not of kind. Compliance with social norms is strongly conditional on shared expectations, while compliance with moral norms is less dependent on—but not entirely independent of—shared expectations.

In addition, Bicchieri stresses that compliance with moral norms is motivated to a relatively strong degree by moral judgments about the *legitimacy* of others’ normative expectations, and also by moral emotions such as repugnance evoked by harmful actions (Bicchieri 2006: 21). But moral judgments and moral emotions are intentional attitudes as well. Thus, both moral and social norms are artifacts whose existence is explained by the shared beliefs, desires, emotions, and intentions of an entire community of agents.

Many artifacts are designed through an *intentional process of selection*. In an intentional selection process, an object is selected over alternatives due to having particular effects that agents perceive and intend to maintain (Griffiths 1993: 420 – 421). When an artifact is selected intentionally, its functions are determined by the effects that its designers *intend* for it to have. My points hereafter will be informed by Paul Griffiths’s account of the functions of intentionally selected artifacts (Griffiths 1993). Griffiths attempts to demonstrate that ascriptions of

functions for both artifacts and biological structures can be explained by a general “etiological” theory of function (Griffiths 1993: 415 – 416, 418 – 421). Here is an explicit formulation⁶:

A token of an intentionally selected artifact type has the function of producing an effect, if the intention to produce this effect must be cited in the best explanation of the existence of tokens of this artifact type.

To simplify, a function of an intentionally selected artifact is an intended effect that *must* be cited to explain the existence of artifacts of its type.

Crucially, as Griffiths and others have noted, the *intended* effects of an artifact can come apart from its *actual* effects. Agents can sometimes select a given artifact because they mistakenly believe it produces certain effects that it does not really produce. When this happens, the function of the artifact is a *phantom function* (Griffiths 1993: 420 – 421; Preston 2013: 138, 177 – 187). A type of artifact has a phantom function when it has been selected to perform a function, but due to a flaw in the structure of that artifact type, no token of it was ever capable of performing that function. Examples of artifacts with phantom functions are catalogued by Beth Preston (2013). They include bug zappers and ineffectual medicines. Bug zappers are made, bought, and sold because they’re intended to kill mosquitoes by attracting and electrocuting them. However, studies have revealed that bug zappers may attract more mosquitoes than they kill, consequently increasing the population of mosquitoes in one’s yard (Preston 2013: 138). Also, a drug called Laetrile is produced and used in Mexico to treat cancer.

⁶ This formula also follows Beth Preston’s gloss on Griffiths’s account in her 2009b, p. 47.

But it is not used in the United States, since the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) declared it illegal on the grounds that there is insufficient evidence of its efficacy. If the FDA's verdict is correct, then Laetrile does not fight cancer, even though it's made and used because it's intended to have that effect (Preston 2009a: 217 – 218).

In both the cases of Laetrile and bug zappers, we have artifacts that are designed—made, bought, or used—to bring about an intended effect. Intentions to bring about the relevant effect are necessary to explain the existence of these artifacts: Laetrile would not have been manufactured if its makers had not intended to produce a cancer-fighting drug, and bug zappers would not be a commodity if its makers (and users) had not intended to kill mosquitoes with them. In both cases, the intended effect necessary to explain the artifact's existence is its function. But these artifacts are incapable of performing their respective functions. And so, these artifacts' functions are *phantom* functions. Furthermore, the artifacts are clearly both *dysfunctional* because they systematically fail to bring about the intended effects they were designed to have: bug zappers are dysfunctional mosquito-killers; Laetrile is a dysfunctional cancer-fighting medicine.

Another example suggests that a coordinated pattern of social behavior can have a phantom function. In his encyclopedic survey of maladaptation in human societies, Robert B. Edgerton describes one group's rather self-defeating procedure for treating arrow wounds (Edgerton 1992: 106):

“[T]he Mae Enga of highland Papua New Guinea...had great need of medical skill as their almost incessant warfare left many men wounded, some gravely so. Yet...their

medical knowledge and surgical skills were woefully inadequate. Many arrow wounds were simply left untreated, or else the shaft was pulled out...Some grievously wounded men were also subjected to a surgical procedure that was more likely to hasten their death than their recovery. Acting on the Mae Enga belief that the wounded man's blood was contaminated, a specialist used a bamboo knife to make an incision under the victim's armpit and then broke a rib with a wedge so that he could insert two fingers into the thorax, collapsing a lung in the process. He next poured water into the cavity and shook the patient vigorously to mix the blood and water. Finally, he rolled the patient over to drain out the mixture."

The Mae Enga's traditional medical practice had the function of healing battle wounds. Healing wounds was, after all, the effect that this practice was intended to have. But the practice was incapable of healing arrow wounds—if anything, it would worsen the wounds. Thus, the Mae Enga practice only had the *phantom* function of healing arrow wounds. Moreover, this practice was a coordinated pattern of social behavior, since it was socially transmitted through the generations and it presupposed a relationship of trust between healers and patients.

Like healing practices, norms are coordinated patterns of social behavior. And they, too, can have phantom functions. In the following section, I argue that *false consciousness norms have an impartial, optimific function—but it is a phantom function*. False consciousness norms have the *phantom* function of impartially promoting the interests of all persons in their range of application. However, false consciousness norms systematically fail to perform their function, because their actual effects (as opposed to their intended effects) are harmful to subordinates.

6 The Phantom Function of False Consciousness Norms

Earlier I noted that norms are artifacts. I'll now elaborate on this observation, and suggest that false consciousness norms, like all norms, are intentionally selected artifacts endowed with a function. Since norms are designed by a process of intentional selection, both their emergence and persistence are explained by the intentions of norm-followers.

The *emergence* of a norm occurs at the point in time when most people in a given population begin following it. Norms can emerge for a number of reasons (see Brennan et al. 2013: Part II). False consciousness norms, in particular, emerge when dominants instill false consciousness into members of subordinate groups. Dominants shape the beliefs and desires of subordinates, and this process has the effect of making subordinates comply with norms that benefit the dominants. The norms are in fact harmful to the subordinates, but the subordinates willingly comply with the norms because they mistakenly *believe* that compliance promotes their interests as well. According to Lukes, dominants may or may not produce false consciousness deliberately (Lukes 2005: 53 – 54, 136). Either way, however, the emergence of false consciousness occurs through a coordinated effort to transmit certain ideas and behaviors. At the level of individuals, this coordinated transmission effort involves intentions to preach, teach, learn, enforce, and practice a code of conduct. Hence, false consciousness norms emerge due to a process of intentional selection.

A norm *persists* so long it continues to be followed by most people in the relevant population over time. Crucially, *all* norms persist because a sufficient number of people intend to keep following them. Bicchieri's research has shown that people intend to keep following a norm if they believe others are following it, if they believe that others *think* the norm *ought* to

be followed, and if they believe that others are disposed to punish those who deviate from the norm. In the case of moral norms, widely shared moral attitudes and moral emotions also prompt agents to form persistent intentions to follow a relevant norm. When the intentions sustaining a norm cease to be widely shared, the norm ceases to be widely followed. So, norms persist because we intend to follow them, and because we intend to make others comply with them as well. Norms persist due to a process of intentional selection, and false consciousness norms are no exception.

So, false consciousness norms are intentionally selected artifacts. The central question is: *what is their function?* Hereafter I argue that even false consciousness norms have the *phantom* function of impartially promoting the interests of everyone to whom they apply. Crucially, as we shall see, false consciousness norms could not be explained without the intentions of subordinates to preach, teach, learn, and enforce them. Subordinates, and at least occasionally dominants as well, follow false consciousness norms with the intention to serve the *mutual benefit* of all members of society. Indeed, this intention is necessary to explain the existence of false consciousness norms. Therefore, false consciousness norms have the function of impartially promoting the interests of both dominants and subordinates. However, this optimific and impartial function of false consciousness norms is a phantom function, because the actual effects of false consciousness norms are harmful to subordinates.

False consciousness norms are products of false consciousness, and false consciousness arises when the beliefs and desires of subordinates are shaped in such a way that they are motivated to serve the interests of elites. However, the subordinates' incentive to serve elite interests does not amount to an intention to serve dominants while entirely discounting their

own interests. Instead, Lukes argues that false consciousness causes subordinates to believe that the extant social order is either good for them, consonant with their own values, or at least not worse for them than any other feasible arrangement:

“...is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people...from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?” (Lukes 2005: 28).

Subordinates in a state of false consciousness are not persuaded that their own interests should be sacrificed so that the dominants' interests may be furthered. They do not renounce what they recognize to be in their interests, and then form the intention to serve the elite at the expense of their own interests. Rather, subordinates come under the grip of false consciousness when they misconstrue their own interests as being in harmony with the interests of dominants. They then preach, teach, follow, and enforce norms with the intention of upholding a social order which they falsely *believe* to serve the mutual interests of everyone. But if this is true, dominant groups are not the sole designers of false consciousness norms. Subordinates also design false consciousness norms with the intention of advancing their own perceived interests. It's just that the subordinates, having been blinkered by false consciousness, fail to recognize that the norms in force are actually harmful to them.

The key point being emphasized, here, is that false consciousness norms do not exist in virtue of the intentions of the powerful alone. Rather, subordinates partake in the design of false consciousness norms. As a potential example of how subordinates contribute to the *persistence* of false consciousness norms, we can again look to Mauritania. Yebawwa's lecture to Abdel (section 4) shows how efforts to transmit beliefs that legitimate the social order do not flow exclusively in one direction, from dominants to subordinates. Rather, members of subordinate groups also attempt to justify prevailing institutions to members of dominant groups. Moreover, subordinates attempt to persuade *other* subordinates to accept their lot. As Bouboucar Messaoud attests, Mauritanian slaves browbeat each other into remaining slaves. Old slaves teach young slaves that aspiring to freedom is an offense against God, not to mention a danger to one's very soul (Bales 1999: 108). Slaves who become free are judged to be evil. Thus, in Mauritania, both masters and slaves take part in disseminating the belief systems that keep slavery in existence.

Next, consider that subordinates also contribute to the *emergence* of false consciousness norms. John Gaventa has identified several mechanisms that explain the genesis of false consciousness. In a historical case study, Gaventa traces the processes by which false consciousness took root among working mountainfolk in Appalachia at the turn of the twentieth century (Gaventa 1980: 61 – 68). The city of Middlesboro, Kentucky, was founded in 1890 by the American Association, Ltd., of London. The American Association had purchased 80,000 acres of mineral-rich land in the Cumberland Gap—a passageway through the lower Appalachian Mountains, located slightly east of what was to become Middlesboro. The American Association's director, Alexander Arthur, had ambitions to transform this backwater

region into an industrial center that would supply iron, coal, and steel throughout the southern United States. As Gaventa recounts, the industrialization of Cumberland Gap by British and American financial interests would radically transform social and economic relations in the area. Prior to the industrial boom, Cumberland Gap was sparsely populated by self-sufficient farmers, also known as “mountaineers.” Among them, land resources were “more or less equally divided” (Gaventa 1980: 50). But following industrialization, control of the region’s valuable natural resources and their means of extraction became concentrated in the hands of capitalists. As a result, the population of Middlesboro and surrounding counties became divided into at least three social strata: (1) a class of absentee British and Northern American landowners, (2) a middling class of small-time entrepreneurs, merchants, and professionals, and (3) a laboring class of “ditch-diggers, construction workers, and miners” (Gaventa 1980: 57). With these socio-economic changes, economic inequalities intensified. The laborers of Cumberland Gap became subjected to low wages and adverse working conditions. Still today, Central Appalachia is characterized by extreme economic inequality and poverty (Gaventa 1980: 35 – 36). One of the major theses of Gaventa’s book is that capitalists and their government allies have maintained the “quiescence” of working people in relation to these inequities. According to Gaventa, false consciousness had bred reluctance on the part of Central Appalachian workers to organize and demand better terms of employment.

It is worth examining Gaventa’s account of the emergence of false consciousness in Central Appalachia. Gaventa speaks of a first mechanism as one of “shaping wants” for luxuries and consumer goods among the mountaineers (Gaventa 1980: 65). These consumer wants were “shaped” by the obvious disparities between the opulent lifestyles of industrialists and

the toilsome condition of the laboring classes. A second mechanism of false consciousness formation involved “the degradation of the culture and society of the mountaineers” (Gaventa 1980: 65). Gaventa elaborates:

“While the mountaineer was not exactly of another race, he could be portrayed as a breed whose lifestyle represented a deficient way of existence...Glorification of one culture and degradation of the other could combine with the ideology of openness and hard work to help ensure a ‘choice’ by the mountaineers to pursue the new values” (Gaventa 1980: 65 – 66).

A third process of false consciousness formation was carried out through “control of the socializing agencies of government, church, and school” (Gaventa 1980: 67). These agencies made it their mission to educate the mountaineers in the ways of the “city man.” According to Gaventa, the three aforementioned processes had one cumulative effect on the mountaineer: “a shaping and influencing away from his ‘stock’ to participation in the ways and values of the new order” (Gaventa 1980: 68).

The mechanisms of false consciousness formation, as described by Gaventa, are unmistakably rooted in interests that subordinates would have had independently of, and prior to, the influence of the dominant elite. Gaventa emphasizes that before the acquisition of land by the American Association, “peasant-like” mountaineers had led an austere, egalitarian lifestyle (Gaventa 1980: 48 – 50). However, an existing interest in material wealth would explain

why the mountain workers found the industrialists' ostentatious consumerism so attractive in the first place. Gaventa also underscores the popular faith that the benefits of economic development "were attainable by all, but only hard work would provide them" (Gaventa 1980: 61). Under this ideology of an "open system," the prospect of upward mobility rendered working Appalachians tolerant of the growing economic inequalities associated with industrialization. They saw these inequalities as necessary steps toward an improved quality of life. Additionally, an interest in imitating the successful would also explain why the mountaineers would have any inclination to adopt the values of industrialist outsiders in the first place. Industrialists occupied positions of power and prestige. They were employers, managers, city officials, and wealthy investors. They were the tangible exemplars of the acquired wealth and standing made possible by the new order.

Even willing collaboration between subordinates and dominants can be a factor in the emergence of false consciousness. By Gaventa's reading, the Appalachian miners and mountaineers internalized new values that demanded the active transformation of their traditional way of life:

"Where there had been a solidarity of family and farm there was now an industrial solidarity, witnessed as together men swung their axes, laid rail, raised capital, or weighed coal...Where there had been a sense of contentment, there was a progress that transformed. Where there had been a struggle to obtain a harmony with nature, this civilization would dominate nature and free the creating capacities of man" (Gaventa 1980: 62).

According to Gaventa, the prominence of this “industrial, humanist ideology” served to establish a “felt consensus about the new order” among industrialists and indigenous mountainfolk alike (Gaventa 1980: 68 – 75). Such a consensus was particularly acute in the city of Middlesboro. Compared with other miners in nearby areas, who aired their grievances through strikes and even armed insurrection, the Middlesboro miners were far less disposed to taking organized collective action (Gaventa 1980: 71 – 75). Union organizers reported in 1889 that they had more difficulty organizing the workers there than elsewhere. Additionally, while Middlesboro miners did request more uniform and accurate procedures for weighing the amount of coal they dug, the bosses refused, and Gaventa finds no sign that the Middlesboro miners took any further action. By contrast, only about 30 miles west in the Jellico area, miners engaged in “militant, collective organization” that culminated in an agreement to establish uniform standards for the weighing of coal (Gaventa 1980: 73).

In Gaventa’s analysis, the relative quiescence of the Middlesboro miners was due to their acceptance of a set of values which portrayed their disadvantageous working conditions as necessary sacrifices on the path to industrialization. The miners endured a meager wage for the sake of contributing to a “common purpose” in spurring the growth of Middlesboro (Gaventa 1980: 61). Industrialization was not some fetish pursued for its own sake; rather, the miners and mountaineers understood it to be a process that would redound to the benefit of all stakeholders, including their own benefit:

“Booms have a habit of instilling reckless enthusiasm, and in Middlesboro there developed a spirit of excitement, almost drunkenness, often found in frontier expansion. Stories abounded of the money to be made. For a brief, critical juncture between the old way of life and the new, the social structure appeared fluid; it seemed everyone stood an equal chance of loss or gain of in the new venture” (Gaventa 1980: 56).

“While there would be opportunities, they were by no means equal opportunities...But while the spirit of the boom lasted, the interests of the absentee owners and the interests of the majority of the people of the city—the small entrepreneurs, miners, and labourers—would appear as one” (Gaventa 1980: 58).

Consequently, the growing disparities in wealth and political power associated with the industrialization of Appalachia were tolerated by working people themselves. The potential for upward mobility, though wildly exaggerated, had convinced many that hardship in the present would bear the fruit of prosperity later on. It’s important to observe from the above passages that the Middlesboro laborers saw the industrial boom as something that would serve the mutual interests of everyone in the city. This suggests that the laborers acquiesced to the new capitalist order with the intention of promoting everyone’s interests, and not just their own.

The point we’ve come to is that false consciousness emerges in subordinates when they come to believe that their pre-existing interests in wealth, social esteem, acceptance, or

even spiritual salvation are served by participating in a hierarchical social order. Subordinates may even have other-regarding interests in promoting the common good—interests which they intend to advance by going along with the existing order. Subordinates are not passive receptacles for thoughts and wants that dominants find it expedient to give them. In no way are the beliefs and desires of subordinates unilaterally controlled by dominants. Instead, subordinates contribute to the emergence of false consciousness by erroneously perceiving a consonance between their own prior interests and the system of social inequality they inhabit.

Up to this juncture, I've commented primarily on the role of subordinates' intentions in explaining false consciousness norms. However, an account of the existence of false consciousness norms cannot overlook the role of dominants. Here I will show that in the two cases of false consciousness being discussed—Mauritania and Middlesboro—members of dominant groups do not deliberately intend to inculcate false consciousness as a means of exploiting subordinates. While there may be some deliberate manipulation at work, the dominants do not intend for this manipulation to exclusively benefit themselves. Instead, dominants believe that the ideology that they ingrain in subordinates will ultimately serve the mutual interests of all members of society.

Modest evidence for this premise can be drawn from the Mauritanian case. To be sure, members of the slaveholding caste—known as White Moors—are keenly aware of their vested interests in owning slaves. Purchasing slaves in Mauritania can be very expensive, but profits reaped from slave labor can be high (Bales 1999: 118). Hence, the White Moors aggressively guard their power to own slaves. The Mauritanian government, which rules only with the backing of the White Moors, doesn't dare to abolish slavery in actual practice (Bales 1999: 112).

Although in 2007 a law was passed criminalizing the act of owning a person, only one slave owner has been successfully convicted since (Sutter 2012). The Mauritanian courts grant masters rights to own the children of their slaves, and to take any inheritances that slaves pass to their children who become free (Okeowo 2014). Consequently, escaping slavery can entail the prohibitive cost of separation from one's children, or abject poverty. When talk of abolition grows, slaveholders step up threats and physical abuse to deter slaves from running away. They send their slaves to the remote countryside, where they can be held in secrecy. To ensure that the slaves don't form common cause with the free black Afro-Mauritanian opposition, White Moor slave owners allege to their slaves that they share an Arab ethnic identity with their masters (Bales 1999: 94, 113). The slaves are told they *are* Arabs, although White Moors privately deny that they share any ethnic heritage with slaves. Slaves are taught to speak only in Arabic, to distance them from Afro-Mauritanians who speak African languages or French.

Without a doubt, Mauritanian White Moors collectively pursue a political agenda aimed at maintaining the institution of slavery. To some extent, this political agenda involves deliberately inculcating beliefs that the White Moors privately reject—for instance, the notion that the slaves are Arabs, just like their masters. The important question, however, is the question of what intentions motivate the slaveholders in carrying out their agenda. Do they intend to protect a system that they know to be beneficial to themselves but harmful to their slaves, or do they intend to keep slavery in existence because they believe it to be good and mutually beneficial for them *and* their slaves? White Moors' commonly held convictions about slavery strongly support the latter interpretation. Like many Mauritanian slaves, White Moors regard slavery as a just and natural affair. In his youth, Abdel Yessa thought he had a solemn

responsibility to keep slaves. He considered slaveholding to be a way of caring for people who could not care for themselves:

“...as a young boy I considered ownership of another human being not only my right, but an obligation to the slave. After all, I saw slaves as stupid and helpless. What could they do besides serve? Set free, they would wander out into the desert and starve to death. We masters had to protect them from themselves and their animal natures. Owning slaves was as much a responsibility as it was a luxury” (Yessa 2006: 179).

Abdel also remembers a moment from his past when he and fellow slaveholders laughed at the chattering teeth of the slaves who were ordered to stay outside on a cold rainy night, to keep water from leaking into his family’s tent:

“This was actually quite innocent because, for us, slavery was really a natural state. One must really have in mind that when one is born into a certain environment, it is considered the right one—just and fair” (Sutter 2012).

Abdel’s attitudes were not idiosyncratic. He attributes them to the culture that he was socialized into during his youth (Yessa 2006: 201, 204). After Abdel turned to the abolitionist cause, he was ridiculed by his own family for being so foolish as to think he could destroy a slavery regime that they believed to be an inevitable product of Nature Itself (Yessa 2006: 202).

Abdel's testimony supports a non-cynical interpretation of what slaveholders in Mauritania intend to do by maintaining the slave system. They sincerely believe that slavery is part of the just and natural condition of humankind, and that the slaves themselves are benefitted by the care that their masters generously provide. If false consciousness explains the Mauritanian pattern of slavery, it is evidently a false consciousness that leaves both dominants and subordinates convinced that perpetuating the *status quo* serves the mutual interests of everyone.

The same conclusion is reached when we consider Gaventa's third mechanism of false consciousness formation: use of socializing agencies to shape values. This process may strike the reader as one where elites carry out a deliberate plan to exploit subordinates by manipulating the latter's beliefs and desires. However, Gaventa's description of the use of socializing agencies is more complex. Industrialists did use socializing agencies to shape the values of the mountaineers, but Gaventa also suggests that the industrialists themselves were enthusiastically committed to those same values. On March 14, 1891, a mass meeting was convened and attended by hundreds of Middlesboro citizens. The purpose of the meeting was to express appreciation to the American Association. A resolution passed at the meeting declares, in soaring prose:

“...a determination of law-abiding people who came here to live, together with the refining influence of civilization, and the earnest endeavor of the officers [of the American Association], have combined to thoroughly convince the ‘native element’ of the error of their ways...”

“...but for the grand efforts and liberal expenditures of the American Association...this great city could not have been, as they are the fountain head where the stream had its rise and from which it continually flows and drives the great wheels of our progress...” (Gaventa 1980: 69 – 70).

All resolutions proposed at the meeting were adopted by a unanimous vote; Alexander Arthur himself was honored with “deafening applause.” Gaventa points to this event as evidence of “a felt consensus about the new order amongst the people” (Gaventa 1980: 68). However, Gaventa also suggests it was mainly the local elites who overtly endorsed the values of progress and modernity that were the foundation of this consensus. A list of the names and occupations of those in attendance at the March 1891 meeting were “smaller capitalists, owners, and managers” such as small merchants, proprietors, contractors, real estate developers, lawyers, bankers, and insurance agents (Gaventa 1980: 70). But when it came to the hundreds of workers in Middlesboro, particularly the miners, the available evidence suggests that the consensus manifested among the city’s non-elites as merely “a lack of either endorsement or opposition” (Gaventa 1980: 72). The Middlesboro miners were relatively uninclined to agitate for change, even though their working conditions were worse than those of miners in neighboring counties (Ibid.). This comparison suggests, in Gaventa’s analysis, that the Middlesboro miners had only tacitly accepted the values of the new industrial order. They were party to a consensus around these values, but only to the point that they did not oppose the exploitation rationalized by the consensus.

The last several paragraphs have argued that even members of dominant groups can adopt the beliefs and attitudes that underlie false consciousness. In the two putative cases of false consciousness I've assessed, dominants themselves regard extant social arrangements to be mutually beneficial—that is, beneficial for themselves and for people in subordinate groups. A well-studied psychological mechanism can explain this phenomenon: namely, the disposition to form beliefs and attitudes which align with those of others. Solomon Asch's famous "conformity experiments" demonstrated that many people made incorrect judgments of the length of a line, if they observed that incorrect judgment to be endorsed by a majority of surrounding people. Some of Asch's subjects who deferred to the incorrect group opinion privately believed the majority to be wrong, but did not want to contradict the majority. However, other subjects reported being genuinely convinced that the majority was correct (Sutherland 2013: 33 – 34). Additionally, in an experiment conducted by Ken Binmore and colleagues, it was found that perceptions of fairness are influenced strongly by prior conditioning and bargaining (Binmore et al. 1993). Subjects were presented with a Nash bargaining game, and were initially trained to play the game in conformity with one of four bargaining solutions: the Equal Increments solution, the Kalai-Smorodinsky solution, the Nash bargaining solution, and the utilitarian solution. Then the subjects were allowed to play the game against one another for money. They played in groups of 12 potential partners, rotating partners randomly. When the bargaining game ended, subjects were asked whether they thought that the outcome of the game was fair. The result was that the final bargain subjects arrived at depended on their prior training. Moreover, subjects tended to identify the median outcome reached in their bargaining groups as a fair outcome. This particular study suggests

that people's perceptions of fairness tend to endorse whatever behavior is predominantly followed by their group (Alexander 2007: 290). The findings discussed here suggest that members of both dominant and subordinate groups will be inclined to conform their own attitudes to the prevailing attitudes within society. Dominants will adopt the beliefs and attitudes underlying false consciousness norms just as readily as subordinates do, since the psychologies of dominants are just as susceptible to conformist tendencies.

The empirical cases discussed so far support the proposition that *at least some false consciousness norms have the phantom function of impartially promoting the interests of everyone in their range of application*. As noted previously, false consciousness norms are selected intentionally. When a norm is selected intentionally, its functions are fixed by the effects its designers intend for it to have that are necessary to explain its existence. With respect to false consciousness norms, dominant groups propagate an ideology that induces subordinates into complying with the norms. Since widespread compliance is a necessary condition for a norm to exist, the functions of false consciousness norms are set by the intentions that motivate people to comply with false consciousness norms. Crucially, as the experiences of Middlesboro and Mauritania suggest, subordinates comply with false consciousness norms due to the belief that prevailing social arrangements have the effect of promoting not only their own interests, but the interests of everyone. Even dominants can be drawn in by the myth of an order that brings prosperity to all. They can actively seek to instill false consciousness in subordinates, not because they intend to exploit subordinates, but because they are just as beholden to false consciousness as subordinates are. Dominants, like subordinates, may act to preserve or even establish hierarchical social arrangements with the

intention of maintaining a system they believe to be just and favorable to all parties. Of course, in reality, the prevailing arrangements do not benefit the subordinates—at least not as much as alternative arrangements could benefit them. It remains true, however, that both dominants and subordinates can *intend* to fulfill their mutual interests by preaching, teaching, following, and enforcing norms that uphold the current order. And when this occurs, even false consciousness norms have the optimistic function of promoting people's interests.

Furthermore, the two empirical cases I've examined suggest that, in at least some instances, false consciousness norms also have an *impartial* function. In those cases, designers of false consciousness norms expect that the social order delivers benefits to all. People are, of course, aware that some have less status, privilege, or wealth than others. But these asymmetries are not believed to arbitrarily discount the subordinates' interests. Rather, they are legitimated in people's minds as (i) conditions that are justly determined by the presence or absence of meritorious virtue (e.g., ingenuity and perseverance), (ii) as an inevitable fact about which nothing can be done, or (iii) as a state of affairs which, all things considered, is also favorable to the interests of everyone. We found an example of (i) in the ideology of an "open system" that took hold during the industrialization of Central Appalachia. This ideology was embraced by the industrialist elite, even more overtly and enthusiastically than it was by the laborers. An example of (ii) and (iii) is furnished by the ideology of slavery in Mauritania, where it's believed by both masters and slaves that servitude is the natural condition of slaves, a passageway to heaven, and a source of social esteem. In Middlesboro and Mauritania, false consciousness is a state in which both dominants and subordinates endorse a system that they believe to be mutually advantageous. In this sense, false consciousness can lead people to

believe that the social order they help to maintain is an impartial one. But in truth, false consciousness deflects attention away from the fact that the prevailing social distinctions are discriminatory and harmful toward subordinates.

In summary: the functions of false consciousness norms are fixed by the effects their designers intend for them to have that are necessary to explain their existence. I have argued that at least some false consciousness norms are intended by their designers to impartially promote the interests of everyone to whom they apply. Hence, at least some false consciousness norms have an impartial and optimific function. However, because false consciousness norms are harmful and discriminatory with respect to some groups, their function is a phantom function. This conclusion is consistent with the basic commitment of functionalist moral naturalism, according to which moral properties have the function of impartially serving the interests of all persons. Once we have taken account of the notion of phantom function, we can see how the phenomenon of false consciousness does not necessarily pose a threat to functionalist naturalism.

7 False Consciousness and Deliberate Manipulation

So far I've argued that *at least some* false consciousness norms have an optimific and impartial function. In the two empirical cases of false consciousness studied here, it was found that dominants instill false consciousness in subordinates, but do so in the belief that the social hierarchy is just or beneficial for everyone. Indeed, there was even evidence that dominants are at least as strongly committed to the beliefs and values which constitute false consciousness as subordinates. However, to fully rebut Thrasymachus's challenge in favor of functionalist naturalism, it must be shown that *all* moral norms which are also false consciousness norms

have the function of impartially promoting the interests of everyone. At this juncture I'll contend that the functions of false consciousness norms are *always and only* fixed by the intentions of subordinates. Since subordinates design false consciousness norms with the intention of promoting the mutual interests of everyone, false consciousness norms have the function of promoting everyone's interests.

It might be objected that surely *some* false consciousness norms exist because elites deliberately inculcate false consciousness in subordinates as a means of gaining an advantage at the subordinates' expense.⁷ Lukes himself sees no reason to rule out the possibility that false consciousness is implanted by dominants as a means of controlling subordinates for the dominants' own benefit (Lukes 2005: 136). In cases like this, wouldn't it be true that a function of some false consciousness norms is to benefit the elite and oppress the subordinate classes of society? The answer, I argue, is *no*. Benefiting dominants at the expense of subordinates cannot be a function of false consciousness norms, since the self-interested intentions of elites to exploit subordinates would not be necessary to explain the existence of any false consciousness norms.

According to Griffiths' theory of artifact functions (cf. section 6 above), a function of an intentionally selected artifact is an intended effect of the artifact which is necessary to explain its existence. But not all factors that contribute to the explanation of an artifact's existence are *necessary* to explain its existence. So, not all factors that help to explain an artifact's existence count as the artifact's function. Imagine a watchmaker who designs a new model of watch. Suppose the watchmaker is motivated to produce the watch by the self-interested intention to

⁷ I thank an anonymous referee for the *Journal of Philosophical Research* for pressing me on this.

turn a profit from selling it. Certainly, the watchmaker's intention to profit is relevant to explaining the existence of the new device. It helps to explain why a particular model of watch was designed at a particular time, by a particular person. Even so, the watch does not have the *function* of increasing the wealth of its maker, since the watchmaker's intention to make money from selling the watch need not be cited to explain the watch's existence. For even if the watchmaker had no intention to profit from selling a new model of watch, she could very well have had other intentions motivating her to design the new watch. She might, for instance, have intended to win professional recognition for her skill and ingenuity. Or, she might have been moved by an altruistic desire to design a new kind of watch as a gift to humanity.

However, some intentions we can attribute to the watchmaker *are* necessary to the explanation of the new watch's existence. In particular, the watch would not exist, unless the watchmaker intended to make a wearable device that could track time. People buy watches because they have a use for a wearable time-tracking device. If a watchmaker didn't build watches that could reliably track time, few people would have any use for it, and so few would buy what she is selling. Knowing this, watchmakers design watches to be wearable devices that do track time. Thus, a function of watches corresponds to an intended effect of watches which is necessary to explain their existence. This conclusion is corroborated further by the conditions under which watches are said to *malfunction*. Watches are said to *malfunction* when they fail to track time—when they stop running, or run too fast or too slow. Watches do not malfunction when they fail to make profit-seeking watchmakers wealthier.

The point here is general: when an artifact is intentionally selected, an intended effect of the artifact which is not necessary to explain its existence does not count as one of its

functions. The same general point can be applied to false consciousness norms. As with any intentionally selected artifact, many intentions can be relevant to explaining the existence of a false consciousness norm. Such intentions may include the deliberate, self-interested intentions of dominant groups to exploit subordinates for their own gain. These intentions may indeed be relevant in explaining why a particular norm, and not some other norm, came to exist at a particular moment in a particular society. Nevertheless, they do not count as a function of a false consciousness norm, since it is not *necessary* to cite them in the best explanation of a false consciousness norm's existence. Now it is true that no false consciousness norm would exist, if a dominant group hadn't instilled false consciousness in a subordinate group in the first place. Thus, the inducement of false consciousness into subordinates *by* dominants is necessary to explain the existence of false consciousness norms. But even so, the *intentions* of dominants are not necessary to explain the existence of false consciousness norms. This is because dominants need not intend to bring about any particular effect by instilling false consciousness.

A false consciousness norm could come into existence even if dominants had no self-interested intention to exploit. Indeed, Lukes identifies three ways in which false consciousness may be instilled unintentionally by dominants. First, dominants may be unconscious of the "real" motives driving their interactions with subordinates. Perhaps dominants unconsciously oppress subordinates, without consciously intending to do so. Second, dominants may be unaware of how subordinates interpret their actions. For instance, subordinates may internalize an oppressive ideology they believe to be advocated by dominants, when in fact the dominants never intended to advocate any such thing. Third, interactions between dominants and subordinates may have the unintended effect of inculcating false consciousness into

subordinates, even while dominants are completely unaware of this effect (Lukes 2005: 53 – 54). In each of these possible scenarios, false consciousness is not explained by the intentions of dominants to exploit subordinates for their own gain.

Additionally, the two cases of Middlesboro and Mauritania reveal that dominants' intentions to exploit subordinates are not necessary to explain the existence of false consciousness norms. Gaventa's account of false consciousness in Middlesboro suggested that dominants themselves were ardently committed to the values of progress and modernization. These values portrayed the industrialization of Middlesboro as a boon to everyone, *not* just the elite. They were at the heart of false consciousness in central Appalachia, since people who internalized them were persuaded to take part in efforts to "civilize" the region, regardless of the entrenched inequities that would ensue. In Gaventa's account, we find that the Middlesboro elite were not intent upon indoctrinating values that they knew were contrary to the subordinates' interests. Rather, we find sincere endorsement of those values on the part of the elite. A similar dynamic is manifest among the "White Moor" slaveholding caste of Mauritania. According to the accounts discussed earlier (section 4), White Moors themselves are convinced that it is in fact their moral responsibility to hold slaves. If false consciousness has taken hold in Mauritania, this arguably occurred without a deliberate plot by the White Moors to create false consciousness as a way to maintain their privileged status. The two cases of Middlesboro and Mauritania do not rule out the possibility that some false consciousness norms result from the deliberate intentions of elites to further their own interests at the expense of subordinates. But these cases do show that such intentions are not necessary to explain the existence of false consciousness norms. Thus, by Griffiths's theory of artifact

functions, it cannot be said that a function of false consciousness norms is to further the interests of dominants at the expense of subordinates' interests.

On the other hand, the intentions of subordinates uniquely determine any functions that false consciousness norms might have. No false consciousness norm would exist, unless subordinates believed, incorrectly, that compliance with such norms was mutually beneficial for everyone. False consciousness norms are norms that result from false consciousness. False consciousness is a state in which subordinates are led to believe, mistakenly, that compliance with prevailing norms and institutions is consonant with their own interests, as well as the interests of others. Recall that third-dimensional power, as Lukes describes it, is the power "to prevent people [i.e. subordinates]...from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial" (Lukes 2005: 28). False consciousness is the condition in which one's perceptions, cognitions, and preferences are shaped in this way. James C. Scott, a critic of Lukes, describes false consciousness in similar terms. Scott distinguishes two forms of false consciousness:

"...we can discern a thick and a thin version of false consciousness. The thick version claims that a dominant ideology works its magic by persuading subordinate groups to believe actively in the values that explain and justify their own subordination...The thin theory of false consciousness, on the other hand, maintains only that the dominant

ideology achieves compliance by convincing subordinate groups that the social order in which they live is natural and inevitable” (Scott 1990: 72).

The characterizations of false consciousness offered by Lukes and Scott reveal that subordinates in a state of (“thick”) false consciousness can have a perceived interest in maintaining the existing social structure insofar as they value the existing order and they have an interest in pursuing their own values. Alternatively, subordinates in a state of (“thin”) false consciousness may perceive the *status quo* to be at least non-threatening to their interests, insofar as they believe the existing order to be unchangeable and deem it futile to seek an alternative arrangement. Moreover, we can observe in the empirical studies of false consciousness that subordinates are well aware of the benefits that a stratified social order brings to dominants. Both Appalachian mountaineers and Mauritanian slaves noticed that capitalists and slaveholders, respectively, benefitted from their privileged status. Appalachian workers were taken in by an ideology of an “open system” which presented new opportunities for all to prosper. Mauritanian slaves are well aware that their services are valued by their masters, but they ostensibly believe it is right and natural to serve their masters. Consequently, these subordinate groups either actively supported or passively acquiesced to the norms of their societies because they regarded the norms as *mutually beneficial*.

Ultimately, the existence of false consciousness norms cannot be explained without reference to the intentions of subordinates to uphold a structure that they consider mutually beneficial to those who live under it. It is for this reason that the intentions of subordinates exclusively determine the function(s) of false consciousness norms. Because subordinates

intend to promote the mutual interests of everyone when they follow false consciousness norms, false consciousness norms have a function that is both optimistic and impartial. Although dominants instill false consciousness in subordinates, such a feat requires the cooperation of subordinates themselves, who must internalize false consciousness and transmit it to others in their ranks.⁸ Crucially, we observed in the discussion of Gaventa's study that third dimensional power doesn't work by "programming in" entirely novel interests from scratch. Rather, false consciousness sets in when the *existing* interests of subordinates—interests in material wealth, social advancement, etc.—have been redirected to motivate compliance with norms that benefit the powerful. Just as the profit-seeking watchmaker won't realize her intention to make money off selling watches that nobody wants to buy, the powerful cannot realize their intentions to further their interests by peddling an ideology that subordinates won't accept. Watches that nobody wants will cease to be made, and norms that a substantial number of people are unwilling to follow will cease to exist, if they emerge at all.

8 Conclusion

A fundamental proposition of moral naturalism is the claim I've dubbed (MN3): moral properties either supervene upon, or are reducible to, the effects that actions, institutions, and character traits have on the interests of persons. I've suggested that functionalist moral naturalism offers the most plausible rationale for (MN3). According to functionalist naturalism,

⁸ The internalization of false consciousness is not a *fait accompli*. James Scott details a number of ways in which false consciousness can fail to take root. Subordinates can invent folksongs, rhymes, and myths that together constitute a "hidden transcript"—a counter-discourse that allows subordinates to imagine radical alterations to the *status quo*, and to articulate moral constraints on the legitimacy of rulers (Scott 1990: 80 – 82; 96 – 103).

moral properties are features of actions, institutions, and persons that have the function of impartially promoting the interests of all persons. But Thrasymachus, and later, Marx and Nietzsche, pose a serious challenge to this view. According to this challenge, morality is an ideology designed by the powerful to indoctrinate the rest of society into serving their interests. If Thrasymachus is correct, and the function of morality is that which it was designed to do, then morality does not have the function of impartially promoting people's interests, but of serving as an instrument of oppression. This essay attempted to turn the tables on Thrasymachus. Lukes's theory of third-dimensional power was studied in depth, as a way of understanding how moral norms could possibly be shaped by a dominant elite for their own benefit. The conclusion of this inquiry was that even if Lukes's theory is correct, and some moral norms are products of false consciousness, it can still be said of such norms that they have the function of impartially promoting the interests of all persons to whom they apply. However, this function of false consciousness norms turns out to be a phantom function, and thus no false consciousness norms perform their function successfully. Indeed, functionalist moral naturalists could emphasize the dysfunctionality of false consciousness norms in arguing that these norms are unjust.

The case for functionalist naturalism is far from complete. To continue developing it, we must assess whether all properties that could plausibly fall under the category of *the moral* have an optimific and impartial function. I have endeavored to show only that moral norms generated by false consciousness do not refute the functionalist naturalist picture. To date, the caliber of the arguments for functionalist moral naturalism has been encouragingly high. The view has also proven to be quite resilient in the face of objections. It's becoming increasingly

clear that this variant of moral naturalism deserves a place in the pantheon of “serious contenders” in meta-ethics.

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