Review of: "Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Ethics as a Prophylactic for Ideology Obsession and Ideology Addiction: An Uplifting Philosophy for Philosophical Practice"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

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In this article Guy Du Plessis focuses on ideological obsession and addiction. His concern is with people who have subscribed to a particular ideology or belief system with little to no demonstrable willingness to subject their views to critical thinking. Calling their subscription an addiction or obsession is Du Plessis's way of underlining that this irrational subscription serves deep psychological needs.

In a world rife with believers in conspiracy theories, many of whom are passionate political tribalists, Du Plessis's focus is timely and important. I welcome his perspective because of its relevancy but also because by looking at the issue through a philosophical lens he enriches the language that researchers and clinical theorists can apply to the issue. Joseph Uscinski (2019), for instance, has relatively recently published a compendium about conspiracy belief and conspiracy believers, and none of the authors have considered Simone de Beauvoir as an anchoring point for understanding.

Du Plessis offers us de Beauvoir's ideas about ambiguity (1948). He argues that the ideologically addicted or obsessed are likely persons who for deep psychological reasons employ "reasoning that underlies the cardinal fallacy of existential perfectionism" (Cohen, 2013), a viewpoint that essentially falls prey to a binary where the world is either all good or all bad. By contrast, the world of those who embrace "ambiguity" is more complexly constituted with room for paradox, doubt, uncertainty, and the self-deception that can befall us because we are all beings with a dynamic unconscious.

While I welcome the philosophical pivot and enrichment that Du Plessis offers, I think in his application of this philosophy he leans too far towards a position that the ideologically fixated are worthily diagnosed in DSMV terms, that they suffer from a psychiatric condition or malady. Hence his words, "addiction" or "obsession." Du Plessis offers speculative scaffolding from a psychoanalytic self-psychological viewpoint for explanation of why these believers cannot critically think through their addiction, and he sensitively understands that the complexity of their psychological state disallows rational bullying as a way to get them to see things more clearly and fluidly. In accordance with David Hume he rightly understands that reason is "the slave of passions" (1739/2020).

Alas, in taking this position Du Plessis overlooks both what empirical evidence thus far suggests and also what common observation affords us. Here's what we know, for instance, about believers in conspiracy theories, an excerpt I take from my paper (in press) with Philip Rosenbaum:

1. It is an "incorrect assumption that conspiracy theories are trivial notions believed only by disenfranchised, paranoid, or distrustful people" (Wood & Douglas, 2019, p. 253). From the empirical front, Adam Enders and his colleagues (2021) find that "While some conspiracy beliefs.... are related to violent orientations and dark personality characteristics, many are more the product of partisan and ideological motivations and perhaps even elite rhetoric" (p. 268). And from the logical front, this finding accords with common sense. There are simply too many persons who function in society adaptively to dismiss them all as "crazy." As Cass Sustein and Adrian Vermeule say: "[T]he metaphor of mental illness itself obscures more than it clarifies" (2009, p. 211).
2. Education does not inoculate us against subscription to conspiracy theories. Although Hugo Druchon writes that "within individual countries those with higher education are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories than those with lower educational achievements" (2019, p. 345), this finding challenges our common experience that intelligent and articulate people, many with notable academic credentials, subscribe to outlandish theories and promulgate them. An unflinching fair conclusion seems to be what teacher Bart Milar (2015, minute: 0:43) succinctly says in a TED talk, "Formal education is no shield against shoddy thinking."
3. … We must bear in mind…that conspiracy theories arise for a purpose. At the most manifest level, we might assert that they arise to explain complex events in our world which destabilize our sense of safety. In this regard, as Bradley Franks and his colleagues (2017) say, conspiracy theories offer a "symbolic coping which transmutes the diffuse anxiety arising from such events into specific threats caused by the purportedly malevolent action of powerful actors" (unnumbered). Accordingly, in Uscinski's book (2019), in a chapter titled, *The Truth is Around Here Somewhere,*Preston Bost writes: "The deeper we look, the more difficult it becomes to treat conspiracy thinking as alien to rationality, or even alien to ourselves" (p. 278). We are all passionate beings who are subject to events which stirs our deep anxieties, and our anxieties are central to our cognitive processes. Thus, while it may be easy or preferable to treat those who believe in conspiracy theories as "other," "less than," or simply "crazy," this belies an important aspect of the research into conspiracy theories that suggests we all can be susceptible to circumstance and a mindset by which we could believe in similar ideas.

With the above in mind what I think Du Plessis fails to consider is that the issue of ideological rigidity is better served not by looking so much at who the believers are as why they are believers. Doing so does not take us away from in depth psychoanalytic thinking but refocuses more on the developmental issues that pertain to how we position ourselves in the world as regards to agency and to the otherness of others and the otherness we have even to our own selves, both key factors in how we epistemologically interact with the world. For instance, do we have a collapsed epistemology? This would be what seems to be evident in Du Plessis's addicted or obsessed ideologist. Or do we function primarily with a delimited epistemology or one of wondering? Philip Rosenbaum and I argue (Webb & Rosenbaum, 2021; Webb &Rosenbaum, in press) that the epistemological strategy we employ is a reflection of the existential-relational position in which we are functioning. Drawing on the clinical theory long developed by British object relations and interpersonal

psychoanalytic colleagues (e.g., Klein, 1975a, b; Winnicott, 1935, 1975/1955; Ogden, 1986, 1989; Grotstein, 2007), we note (1) that four positions are evident: contiguous, paranoid-schizoid, depressive, and transcendent (2) that these positions linearly evolve but are not wholistically emergent and (3) that therefore, while we as persons might function primarily in one versus another, we all are susceptible within the various thrills and stresses of daily life to engaging in one position or another. Hence, we are all capable of functioning or falling into the paranoid-schizoid binary world of thinking where our epistemology is collapsed and we then embody an ideological rigidity. And, yes, this position might be characteristically occupied by the persons as diagnosed by Du Plessis, but these persons, nonetheless, hold no exclusivity in its exercise.

Rounding out the picture, I want to propose that the depressive position entails a delimited epistemology where truth is viewed as more uncertainly but where our loyalty to certain truths is still highly dependent on personal loyalties. The transcendent entails an epistemology of wondering where de Beauvoir's ambiguity is most at play, because in this position we do not experience Truth as proprietary, and we embrace not only the otherness of other people but also the fundamental otherness we have to our own selves. In this position no one is heralded as the voice of Truth. Wilfred Bion, points to this aspect of Truth when he says that it is always a "dark spot" of which we can only gain some illumination through "blindness" (1988, p. 88).

In short, when it comes to treatment of the ideologically fixated, it serves us well to lean less towards pathologizing and more to the ubiquity of our human vulnerability to it.

One last comment I wish to make that doesn't flow easily from the above. I appreciate that Du Plessis takes pains to decenter us from Freud when considering the historical roots that are foundational to a notion of a dynamic unconscious. For example, he mentions Von Hartman (1869), Schopenhauer (1819/1969), and Nietzsche (1881/1982). I would like to put in a word for the Iroquois (Wallace, 1958).

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