


Ideological Possession Is the Real Pandemic

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Recent years have been dominated by a deadly viral disease. Older forms of the disease have always been present in the population at lower levels, but about three years ago, the latest form rapidly took hold of our entire population, reaching pandemic levels and affecting people of all ages and backgrounds.

Its consequences included various degrees of incapacitation, extended periods of confinement, lost jobs, destroyed businesses, painful paresthesias, pericarditis, myocarditis and even death.

Unbeknownst to many, [a Canadian clinician](#) had been working hard to warn us of its dangers long before anyone noticed the pandemic.

I am referring to the highly contagious epistemic disease of ideological possession.

Any ideology has the potential to be deadly when advanced by those who are so sure of their own knowledge and moral outlook that they would impose it against the protestations of those affected by it. To the ideologically possessed, the imposition can always be justified, because “It’s the right thing to do;” “It will start working if we keep at it;” “The complaints are coming from bad people,” and so on.

As we have witnessed over the last couple of years, ideological possession can motivate the abrogation of basic rights, including the compulsion of uninformed medical consent, the shaming and shunning of those who wish to exercise those basic rights, refusal to acknowledge the experiences of those harmed by the disease, and so on.

Symptoms

The symptoms of ideological possession manifest differently according to the possessing ideology, and they are provided below for diagnostic purposes. Hopefully, the following list will help sufferers or their friends observe the onset before it becomes fatal.

Certainly, not *all* people who present with manifestations similar to those listed below are exhibiting symptoms of ideological possession. For instance, the fact that someone believes the world is out to get them doesn’t necessarily mean they are paranoid (B does not imply P). And more interestingly, just because you’re paranoid, that doesn’t mean the world isn’t out to get you (P does not imply B is false).

Nevertheless, believing the world is out to get you is a very good diagnostic marker for paranoia (B is highly causally correlated with P).

So with that caution, the list of symptoms is as follows.

Major Symptoms

- The possessed insists that anyone who disfavors a specific view or policy must also reject the basic moral value that, to the possessed individual, justifies that view or policy. This is the *fallacy of the assumed paradigm*. For example, “I care about saving lives. I believe everyone should be compelled to be immunized with a new vaccine that has not undergone long-term testing. You don’t think they should be compelled to take said vaccine. Therefore you don’t care about saving lives.”
- The possessed uses simplistic and unkind descriptors of people they’ve never met as a means of dismissing the value of all their beliefs or actions. For example, “He’s an anti-vaxxer” and “I represent science. If someone’s attacking me, they’re really attacking science.” – Anthony Fauci

- The possessed will take a single comment, decision or action of an individual as proof that she is morally or intellectually inferior without regard to context, divergent experience, the fact that people change over time, or other information about the individual that might provide evidence against such a view. For example, “Anyone who is not on board with that is not participating in the best citizenship.” – Dr. Aileen Marty, and “The primary freedom that they want is the freedom to be stupid.” – Joy Reid, MSNBC
- The possessed advocates that people within a specified group be treated worse than everyone else while believing they are the better person. For example, “The people who aren’t getting vaccines, it’s time to start shaming them.” – Don Lemon, CNN
- The possessed believes that complex problems have a simple solution, disregarding evidence or reasonable moral intuitions to the contrary (precisely *because* they are to the contrary) or any uncertainties around the implementation of the solution. For example, “You’re not going to get COVID if you get these vaccinations... We are in a pandemic of the unvaccinated. “ – Joe Biden
- When the results of an ideologically justified action are the opposite of those intended or those claimed to justify that action in the first place, the possessed is convinced that not only is the action not the cause of any resulting failure, but that more of the same action will eventually solve that problem. For example, “The vaccines are safe. I promise you...” – Joe Biden; “The vaccines are safe and effective.” – Anthony Fauci; “As for the non-vaccinated, I really want to piss them off. And we will continue to do this, to the end. This is the strategy.” – President Macron

Minor Symptoms

- The possessed enjoys opportunities to defend what he believes more than opportunities to make his beliefs more accurate.
- The possessed collects data that support her beliefs instead of seeking data that would help her correct false beliefs.
- The possessed offers unsolicited opinions without any empathic engagement with the recipient or any interest in whether she is in any state to be positively influenced by them.
- The possessed would rather reform society’s institutions to better serve his ideology than reform his ideology to better serve people.

Immunity, Pathology, and Cure

Fortunately, the epistemic immune system of most healthy people provides a decent degree of protection against ideological possession. The core of the immune response – and indeed an effective cure – is Love of Truth, and specifically the holding of Truth as the highest moral value.

Pathologically, ideological possession may even be understood as the substitution of that highest value by another, such as Self-Preservation. This often happens when Evidence receptors become overwhelmed by Fear (the most powerful epistemic pathogen) or deactivated to prevent Cognitive Dissonance.

Love of Truth in fact provides a near complete protection against ideological possession because the disease, while deadly, has a unique weakness: it is entirely curable by the honest admission by the afflicted of his or her symptoms.

Nevertheless, the most pernicious and tricky feature of the disease prevents the possessed from seeking treatment or treating himself: ideological possession can disguise itself in the mind of the afflicted as that very same Love of Truth that, in its authentic form, would cure it.

What conditions, then, enable those in the grip of ideological possession – whose love of Truth may have already been replaced by a counterfeit – to cure themselves?

To answer that, it is important to understand the symbiotic relationship of the disease with its host.

Although pandemics of ideological possession can be fatal to entire societies, the disease provides immediate benefits to each afflicted individual, such as intellectual certainty and stability, feelings of moral superiority, an apparent simplification of life's difficult decisions and questions, avoidance of true moral responsibility, and a sense of belonging among others similarly afflicted. All of these tend to prevent self-treatment.

Accordingly, the cures for ideological possession tend to be external and unsought. They nevertheless exist and fall into two broad categories – fast cures and slow cures.

Fast cures tend to be triggered by a catastrophic failure of one or more of the above benefits to the afflicted individual. This may occur when, despite the highly motivated perception and reasoning of the possessed individual, she experiences an unexpected, painful and shocking outcome of an ideologically motivated action. The painful shock activates the Love of Truth for long enough to locate the cause of the pain, forcing the afflicted to admit the symptoms, and therefore identify the disease for what it is, effecting the rapid cure.

Slow cures tend to involve a rising awareness by one afflicted individual of the same disease in friends or others with whom she identifies. This can be induced when the individual sees inconsistencies in those others' words and actions that cause direct harm to others *and* to the stated goals of the possessing ideology. (In principle, this slow cure could be induced by observations of one's own actions under ideological possession, but this is usually prevented by the self-righteousness that is one of the most common symptoms of the disease.)

Maintaining Good Epistemic Health

To protect oneself from the terrible epistemic disease of ideological possession, epistemic nutrition and exercise are extremely effective.

With respect to the former, people should avoid consuming too many highly processed claims, such as those that contain many additives that are manufactured by the media and politicians. They should, instead, balance their diet toward more raw information. Raw information (such as the actual data in an efficacy and safety study for a vaccine – to pick an example completely at random) provides immunity against the epistemic damage that can otherwise be done by processed claims (such as headlines about the efficacy and safety of a vaccine – to pick another example completely at random).

Epistemic nutrition should also include supplements in the form of the cognitive output of other epistemically healthy individuals. These include, for example, John Stuart Mill (“He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that”), George Orwell (“To see what is in front of one’s nose needs a constant struggle”), and Dostoevsky (“Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer. Nothing is more difficult than to understand him”). Add to these general supplements those from particular thinkers with whom you disagree on things that matter to you, and you’ll be in even better shape.

With respect to epistemic exercise, one approach is particularly effective and is immediately rewarding: nurture real friendships with people who have very different assumptions, experiences and declared moral and political priorities from your own.

The good news is, if you’re chasing Truth hard enough, it is very unlikely that the disease of ideological possession will ever catch up with you. The ultimate goal of herd (or population) immunity is harder to achieve, but there is every chance that, as all of the consequences of the most recent pandemic of ideological possession come to light, population resistance will be higher than it has been in a lifetime when the next one threatens to hit.

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