
Review

Ideologies of experience: Trauma, failure, deprivation, and the abandonment of the self

Matthew H. Bowker,
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This important book aims to make sense of an eclectic set of discourses and attitudes that Matthew Bowker thinks work against the development of the self. These discourses, which he refers to collectively as “ideologies of experience,” emphasize the importance of trauma, failure, and deprivation, and, in doing so, promote the abandonment of the self. Ideologies of experience “endorse immediate identification with and incorporation of experience’s objects, the splitting of experience from thinking, the repetition and transmission of experience in unthought forms, and the over-reliance upon the psychic mechanisms of projection and introjection” (p. 2). To ideologies of experience, Bowker opposes an ideal of selfhood. The self is “an ideal, a potential and complex human achievement” (p. 153). A self thinks, analyzes, is a wishing and willing agent, acts creatively and not compliantly or compulsively, and is a subject and not an object. Unfortunately, according to Bowker, the “world is full of not-selves,” and, he thinks, “ideologies of experience are an important part of the reason why” (p. 17). The book presents diverse sources of ideologies of experience loosely structured around three main arguments.

First, we see that ideologies of experience impede the project of developing the self’s capacity to think and know itself and its own experience. Bowker explicates a joke by Lichtenberg that Freud relates: “experience means experiencing what one does not wish to experience” (p. 21). The message is the same as the platitude that “adversity and injury are good teachers.” Injury is a good teacher because it teaches us that injury is inevitable “and must be endured by ‘learning’ to see our ‘bad’ experience as ‘good’” (p. 23). We do so by understanding ourselves to be only passive recipients of good experiences that can only *happen* to us. “If we wish them, will them, design them, or create them, then we cannot ‘experience’ them fully, cannot profit from their wisdom...” (p. 24). Without these bad experiences, we are naive and empty (p. 23); therefore, bad experiences are really good. Bowker argues that this conversion from “bad” to “good” occurs not through thinking, but when “the experiencer identifies more fully with the perspective of the ‘teacher’



than with her original estimation of her own experience” (p. 22). He acknowledges that many worthwhile experiences do involve hardship; nonetheless, “it is fair to say that Lichtenberg’s is a cruel joke” whose “delight involves elements of violence, sadism, and masochism” (p. 23).

Bowker argues that contemporary trauma theory is also an ideology of experience because it discourages thinking. These discourses would have us believe that trauma grants privileged access to truth. In these discourses, the relationship between subject and object entails “fantasies of failure, deprivation, and self-abandonment, in which confirmations of the putative impossibility of realizing a self in the world is imagined to liberate human beings from thought and guilt” (p. 15). This attitude also endorses the transmission of trauma to others. Literatures of the Holocaust, for example, along with “insistences that we protect traumatic objects from corruption by thought” (p. 59) form the core of an ideology of trauma. Yet, I wonder what Bowker would make of Viktor Frankl’s (2004), *Man’s Search for Meaning*, which belongs to literature of the Holocaust. Rather than doing what Bowker claims this literature does, Frankl’s book does the opposite. It seeks, not to avoid thought, but to think about and analyze painful experiences in concentration camps in order precisely to transmit to readers, not trauma, but the hopeful idea that the self can be retained in even the most difficult situations. Over 9 million copies sold, the book is not culturally insignificant, thus challenging the impression we get from Bowker that all discourses of trauma promote abandonment of the self.

Bowker links discourses of trauma to a tradition of philosophical efforts to locate moral and epistemological authority in a “state of unthinking self-occlusion” (p. 50) where goodness lies in identification with objects of experience. The object of experience *par excellence* is nature (p. 109). Michel de Montaigne, well known for his attacks on human reason, tells us that nature will always reign superior. Bowker argues that Montaigne urges us to give ourselves up to the superiority of nature and thus forget the self and its capacities to reason. The capacity for “resisting reason,” Bowker writes, “becomes, for Montaigne, a central virtue” (p. 53). Here, it seems to me that one can go the other way and ask, “what if nature really is superior, and we *should* identify with it?” I think another interpretation may be that Montaigne simply asks us to use our reason, but to be humble about it and aware of its limits. He encourages us to improve our minds (Montaigne, 1965, pp. 103, 114) and argues that it is a “very laudable enterprise to accommodate also to the service of our faith the natural and human tools that God has given us” (Montaigne, 1965, p. 321). Therefore, if Montaigne’s message is to use reason humbly, rather than to abandon it, then Bowker is not justified in arguing that Montaigne promotes an ideology of experience.

Second, we see that ideologies of experience discourage creative and purposeful action and recommend, instead, compulsive and repetitive behaviors. In one chapter, Bowker considers the way the protagonist of Albert Camus’ well-known play *Le Malentendu* mistakes the repetition of traumatic loss for the discovery of a



home and an identity (p. 15). In another chapter, Bowker argues that pedagogies of experience, such as John Dewey's, suppress students' selves. These pedagogies seek to educate students in real-world settings but do so in order to produce economic and social benefits. Dewey's view thus essentially promotes the manipulation of students, while giving them the illusion of freedom, so as to fulfill demands of educators and society but preventing students from exploring their creative, authentic desires.

Throughout the book, "authentic desires" is a frequently deployed term, as in "authentic impulses, desires and estimations" (p. 22) or "authentic needs" (p. 81), as Bowker laments the way ideologies of experience seek to eclipse them. One chapter stresses the importance of affording young children the opportunity to explore their "authentic desires." Parents can do this through loving indulgence of their children. If not, the child may later be more at risk of undergoing some form of self-incarceration, exemplified in the Japanese phenomenon of *hikikomori*, which Bowker understands as a "desire to return to lost experiences of dependence and indulgence" (p. 122).

However, Bowker's book lacks an explanation of what 'authentic desires' are, or an account of how anyone can tell the difference between "authentic," "inauthentic," and "compulsive" desires. Providing love and care so that children may explore authentic desires sounds good, but what if, later, one's authentic desires and visions of selfhood are harmful to society? As a political incentive for self-development, Bowker emphasizes that "individuals who experience themselves as selves or subjects are likely to recognize others as selves or subjects deserving of respect" (p. 114). Yet surely it is also the case that, historically at least, individuals who have experienced themselves as selves have not only withheld from others selfhood but even their status as human beings.

Lastly, we see that ideologies of experience interfere with the self's capacity to be alone, which is a "complex capacity that involves feeling, acting, and thinking like a self" (p. 14). Bowker claims that the capacity to be alone, which means being able to control the degree of social contact one has (p. 105), may give rise to vital selfhood and authentic relationships. Bowker finds ideologies of experience in stoicism and even the vampire of American popular culture for their tendency to confuse false independence and self-repression with self-control and the capacity to be alone. Stoicism asks one to repress one's authentic desires while aligning one's desires to match up with the will of nature and actual events. Though this is true of stoics, I wonder what Bowker would make of Epictetus' advice for us to define who we want to be (Epictetus, 1994, p. 60), to be discriminating about the entertainment we allow in our minds (Epictetus, 1994, p. 64) and the people with whom we surround ourselves (Epictetus, 1994, p. 65), and not to neglect that which is in our control and worthy of desire, all of which appear to be activities of mature selves.

Another ideology of experience that interferes with self-development is the fantasy of the state-of-nature, found in works by Rousseau, Hobbes, Rawls, and



others. Common criticisms are that the state-of-nature assumes independent selves when humans are actually always socially embedded. Bowker argues that what is actually depicted in these state-of-nature fantasies are human beings without selves. They are “deprived children” who are in want of intimacy. This condition of deprivation is what state-of-nature theories regard as “natural.” If by “natural” we mean “that which has not known human interference,” then “there is some truth to the claim that *not* becoming a self is ‘natural’” (p. 153). Thus, if one believes being good means being natural or following nature, then, according to state-of-nature theories, one would believe that not becoming a self is good. The fiction of the state-of-nature has come to be accepted as reality and used to frame countless moral and political projects. Yet, this “infantile fantasy of a not-self” is unlikely to “be conducive to the development of mature selves and institutions that respect selves’ needs and capacities” (p. 157).

Despite some questionable claims, this book presents a powerful challenge to the ideologies of experience it examines and makes a convincing case for their ubiquity and damage to the self. Anyone who cares about the self should take this book seriously.

References

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