

Within the Bottle: Thinking Through Ideology and Self

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Abstract

This reflection looks at how ideology shapes what we take to be true and how we come to understand ourselves. It draws on the work of theorists like Žižek and Noë to explore how resistance can sometimes end up reinforcing the very systems it hopes to challenge, and how consciousness is shaped through everyday interactions with the world around us, including physical, cultural, and digital spaces. Metaphors like Wittgenstein's fly bottle help illustrate how unseen boundaries often shape our beliefs and limit our perspectives. Through a combination of theory and personal reflection, this reflective narrative highlights how critical thinking can help expose inherited assumptions and deepen awareness of the structures that shape how we live.

Keywords: Ideology, Consciousness, Žižek, Ideology, Fly Bottle, Norms, Self, Noë, Self-Awareness, Identity, Truth, Belief, Boundaries, Perception

Introduction

Critical analysis allows us to confront and unpack ideologies that often feel essential and core to our identities but, on closer examination, reveal themselves to be shaped by social, cultural, and familial forces (Sisco King, 2016). My initial engagement with critical theory was largely superficial. I thought of it as abstract concepts disconnected from practical life. Engaging with thinkers like Žižek and Noë helped me view theory as a crucial way to explore the complexities of the world and I came to realize that theory is not a static set of ideas but an ever-changing way of questioning assumptions and examining ideologies. This perspective has significantly influenced

how I navigate challenges, both personally and professionally. For example, I might have dismissed Žižek's (2021) claim that resistance can reinforce ideology as overly skeptical, especially since I had always correlated resistance with progress. I still struggle with the idea that efforts to push back against dominant systems can sometimes end up reinforcing them. Even when the intent is to challenge, those efforts often take place within the same language, values, or institutional structures they aim to resist, which can limit their transformative potential.

Žižek's (2021) perspective has helped me understand how systems can continue to operate beneath the surface, even when efforts appear progressive on the outside. This has made me think more carefully about certain practices in my own workplace, especially around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). I am not questioning the value of DEI work; I'm trying to emphasize the importance of critical thinking so that these efforts lead to meaningful change, rather than simply conforming to existing structures. In a time when DEI is often blamed for falling short of expectations, it feels even more important to make space for thoughtful reflection. Seeing how equity work can sometimes be absorbed into the systems it hopes to challenge has made me rethink how change happens in institutions.

Engaging with complex theories can feel like trying on clothes that do not quite fit. At first, they feel awkward or unfamiliar, not because they are wrong but because they challenge the way I usually think. Just as we sometimes need time to feel comfortable in new clothing, we often need time to settle into new ideas before they make sense. The discomfort is part of the process of stretching beyond familiar frameworks. This way of thinking has turned difficult concepts into chances for growth, expanding how I understand ideas like ideology, truth, and consciousness. Through reading and reflection, I have started to adopt a more reflective mindset, which has helped me stay open to different viewpoints and take small but impactful steps toward rethinking the beliefs I hold about identity, power, and how social systems shape what we take to be true.

This reflective process has increased my awareness of Wittgenstein's metaphor of being trapped within a *fly bottle* (Horwich, 2013). In this metaphor, a fly is stuck inside a glass bottle, not because the exit is sealed, but because it cannot perceive the way out. It lacks the perspective to recognize the opening, circling within invisible boundaries, much like how our thinking can be constrained

by mental habits we do not even realize are there. This captures how our perceptions and beliefs are confined by frameworks inherited from family, society, gender, race, and culture. These internalized norms often feel like common sense, when in fact they limit how we interpret and navigate the world.

While the awareness is valuable, it does not grant freedom from the *bottle*. It simply brings the invisible boundaries I live within into sharper focus. These boundaries, deeply engrained, become more visible as I question my beliefs about identity, knowledge and the systems that shape what I take to be true. Even as I explore new perspectives and question established norms, I remain within the *bottle* of my own cultural and personal influences. The more I reflect on these ideas, the clearer it becomes how these boundaries influence how I see myself and what freedom can mean within a given social context.

Acknowledging that my sense of self and freedom is shaped by external structures, although limited in its ability to offer a way out, connects to Lacan's concept of the symbolic order (Felluga, 2011), which describes the system of language, symbols, and social roles that define the boundaries of what we perceive as meaningful. These perspectives provide a powerful lens for understanding how society shapes us through symbolic structures like language, norms, and roles. While these structures can be limiting, the process of becoming aware of them through critical reflection can encourage personal growth. They push us to examine the beliefs we have taken for granted and to start imagining other ways of living that are not set by those systems.

Building on these reflections, this analysis explores two primary themes-truth and consciousness-to examine how ideology influences perception and decision-making. First, I analyze truth through Žižek's (2021) work, which sheds light on how deeply ideology shapes our perceptions in ways we may not realize or fully understand. Second, Noë's (2010) perspective presents consciousness as an active, embodied process that arises through interactions with the world rather than solely a mental or internal state. These themes provide a basis for critical reflection on how ideology and lived experience shape, and could possibly reshape, our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Truth and Ideology

Žižek's (1994) insights on truth challenge the belief that freedom comes from merely seeing through ideology. He argues that even when we think we have escaped ideological influence, we often remain bound by its inherent structure (Žižek, 1994). This view aligns with Marxist and Lacanian perspectives, where ideology serves as an invisible framework shaping beliefs, even for those who consider themselves liberated from it (Jameson, 1977). Žižek (2021) refers to these individuals as *non-dupes*, who, despite believing they see through ideology, remain bound by its structures. From the moment we are born, we are immersed in a social order that exists beyond our control, with no choice but to operate within its structures. These systems shape our perceptions of truth, success, and belonging, setting the limits of what is considered possible or desirable.

For example, in neoliberal Canada, people are often raised to believe that success means finding a steady, well-paying job, buying a house, and starting a family. Few stop to ask who decided that was the ideal or whether it truly fits their own values. Other ways of living can be imagined, but they are often hard to follow. It is not just that society disapproves, but that the systems in place make those paths harder to reach or maintain.

Lacan's concept of the symbolic order expands on this idea by showing how social roles and language define the frameworks we use to understand truth, confining us to choices within those structures (Felluga, 2011). Ideology does not just shape what we believe, it also defines the limits of what we recognize as freedom or rebellion. For example, counterculture movements like punk rock aimed to reject mainstream values through rebellious music and fashion (Guerra & Figueredo, 2019). However, by the 1970s, these anti-establishment symbols such as spiked hairstyles and leather jackets were absorbed into mainstream consumer culture, where they became marketable trends within neoliberalism rather than acts of resistance (Guerra & Figueredo, 2019). Guerra and Figueredo (2019) explain that fashion brands marketed punk-inspired clothing, and music labels commercialized the genre, transforming its rebellious spirit into a mere stylized trend. This commercialization reflects how acts of defiance can be turned into tools that reinforce the very systems they aim to oppose.

How Systems Absorb Resistance

As Žižek (2021) suggests, ideology is not only present within resistance but often works by absorbing and neutralizing it, allowing dominant systems to appear flexible or progressive while remaining fundamentally unchanged. This dynamic of transformation reaches beyond counterculture movements to personal practices like self-care, which have been widely critiqued for being repackaged as consumer-driven habits that align with neoliberal ideals rather than resist them. Initially a strategy to combat stress and burnout, self-care has also been turned into a marketable trend. Industries now promote luxury products such as skincare routines, wellness retreats, and mindfulness apps under the banner of self-care, shifting the focus away from systemic causes of stress and placing the burden on individuals to fix themselves through consumption (Pantalone, 2020).

Whether it is punk rock becoming a fashion trend or self-care being packaged and sold, practices that once symbolized resistance or personal well-being are often absorbed by dominant ideology. In doing so, ideology does not merely coexist with acts of resistance, it absorbs them, repurposing these practices in ways that ultimately reinforce the very systems they once sought to challenge. Looking at these examples, I realized how deeply ideology shapes not only our beliefs but also how we attempt to resist or rethink them. Whether through counterculture or personal practices, resistance often becomes entangled in the very systems it aims to oppose (Zmigrod, 2022). Even ideas meant to challenge structures like neoliberalism are often repackaged, diluted, and made easier for the mainstream to accept. What once aimed to disrupt the neoliberal logic of market expansion and individualism ends up reinforcing it by being commodified and absorbed into the same systems it sought to resist.

Beyond commercialization, ideology also embeds itself in social norms and cultural constructs that shape perceptions of truth, success, and belonging. For instance, corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives often appear progressive but can amount to tokenism, showcasing diversity without addressing structural inequalities (Ahmed, 2012). Ahmed (2012) highlights this superficial inclusivity, noting that institutions champion diversity with words but fall short in

making real change. This lets organizations appear progressive without challenging existing power dynamics.

Ideology in Everyday Norms

Societal expectations around family structures in Western contexts, particularly in North America, provide a clear example of how ideology shapes norms. The nuclear family is often portrayed as a universal ideal and the perfect model, but this portrayal hides the historical and cultural forces that made it dominant. As Satz (2013) explains, traditional family structures are often accepted without question, allowing them to remain dominant while excluding or marginalizing other family types, such as single-parent households, extended families, and LGBTQ2+ families. By presenting the nuclear family as the standard, dominant institutions pressure individuals to conform, limiting the recognition of diverse family forms and reinforcing inequality in how families are supported and understood (Satz, 2013).

Education systems similarly reinforce ideology by encouraging students to equate success with measurable outcomes like grades and academic achievements (Rickey et al., 2023). This narrow definition of success overlooks alternative priorities such as creativity, community, or personal fulfillment (Briton, 2017). When students fail, the response often shifts to blaming flawed teaching methods or lesson plans, rather than questioning the ideals driving educational goals or the system itself (Briton, 2017). This reflects the rigid framework of modern education, where knowledge is treated as measurable and standardized, and learning is reduced to the passing of information (Meylani, 2024). Within this model, both teachers and students are constrained, as the curriculum is treated as fixed and beyond critique. Instead of recognizing that people learn in different ways, the blame falls on the student for not fitting the mold, instead of asking whether the mold itself needs to change.

By reflecting on this, I began to see education not just as a structure, but as a space where ideology, truth, and consciousness intersect. If consciousness is shaped by interaction with the world, then education becomes one of the primary environments where that shaping happens (Noë, 2010). The version of truth often upheld in education is narrow and standardized, leaving little room for critical

questioning or lived experience. This makes me ask not only how students are evaluated, but what counts as knowledge in the first place. My goal is not simply to critique the education system, but to show how these institutional truths become internalized, shaping how people understand themselves and their place in the world. As I think about this, I keep coming back to the idea that learning could look different, with less focus on measuring and controlling and more emphasis on connection, reflection, and personal growth.

Questioning Assumptions

Reflecting on these examples, I have begun questioning the assumptions I have held about what defines success and stability in my life. How does success feel? Does stability mean certainty? Understanding the foundations of these beliefs inspires me to consider different perspectives and question the push to adhere to conventional expectations. Through critical reflection, I have come to realize that freedom is not found in rejecting or accepting any single ideology. Instead, it begins with understanding the systems that shape how we live, while also recognizing that true freedom may depend on our ability to act differently within those systems. Knowing how these systems work is important, but it is only the beginning. That understanding can make change possible, but it does not mean change will happen on its own.

This recognition has motivated me to adopt a more reflective and nuanced approach to my beliefs and actions. I now see that social order profoundly influences our values, perceptions, and interpretations of truth. When I think about things like how self-care has been turned into a market, how the nuclear family is held up as the ideal, or how education is made to fit one standard, it becomes clear how these systems shape what we see as normal. But more than that, they keep certain power structures in place, such as those tied to class and institutional authority. Real human needs, such as care, connection, and growth, get filtered through institutions that care more about control, sameness, and efficiency than they do about meaningful change (Ahmed, 2009).

I have come to understand that escaping ideology is not the goal, nor is it truly possible. Instead, I now focus on questioning how ideology shapes my perspective and assumptions. This ongoing reflection where I am observing my own assumptions in real-time, encourages me to challenge

accepted norms and explore alternative perspectives, fostering a deeper understanding of the systems that influence our lives (Brookfield, 2009). Learning from diverse perspectives and engaging in critical reflection allows me to face these challenges with a sense of openness. This process not only deepens my awareness but also helps create a more connected worldview.

Consciousness: An Experience

Noë's (2010) work presents a thought-provoking understanding of consciousness, challenging traditional views that frame it as a purely mental or internal phenomenon. This perspective redefines self-awareness, framing identity as shaped through ongoing interactions with the environment (Clayton, 2003). To illustrate this, Noë (2010) uses the analogy of dance, where a dancer's movements respond to music and surroundings, demonstrating how awareness is intertwined with external factors. Similarly, our thoughts, emotions, and responses are shaped by the cultural, social, and physical environments we navigate daily (Ford & Mauss, 2015). This challenges the idea of a fixed self, instead suggesting that identity is fluid and shaped by our engagements with the world (Noë, 2010).

For example, cultural norms influence behaviours, such as social cues like eye contact (Uono & Hietanen, 2015). In Western cultures, direct eye contact might signify respect and attentiveness, while in many East Asian cultures, it may be seen as confrontational or disrespectful (Uono & Hietanen, 2015). While these are behavioural differences, they reflect deeper cultural understandings of presence and respect. Noë (2010) argues that consciousness is not fixed or contained solely within the brain, but is shaped through our embodied interactions with the world. From this perspective, how we learn to act, interpret, and respond within a culture is also part of how we come to understand ourselves. Like a dancer responding to the rhythm of their surroundings, people adjust their behaviours within specific cultural contexts, and in doing so, their sense of self is shaped in relation to those norms.

Shaping Self-Awareness

Reflecting on this idea, I realize how much of my actions and interpretation of social interactions are influenced by the cultural and social environments I have been a part of. For example, I

perceive eye contact as a sign of respect, believing it to be natural or instinctive. In reality, this response is likely a reflection of the cultural norms I have internalized. While behaviours like eye contact are surface-level expressions, they point to deeper structures such as frameworks of meaning and interpretation that guide how we relate to others. Noë (2010) argues that consciousness is not isolated within the individual but emerges through ongoing interaction with the world. From this perspective, the way we act is not just influenced by culture, but part of how consciousness itself is formed. Recognizing this helps me see that even subtle habits are not merely behavioural, but are connected to larger systems that shape how we come to know and experience the world (Uono & Hietanen, 2015).

Wittgenstein's *fly bottle* metaphor complements Noë's (2010) perspective by illustrating how our awareness is constrained by unseen boundaries shaped by our surroundings (Horwich, 2013). It is easy to move through life without noticing the hidden structures that shape how we think and act, like *flies in a bottle*, limited by boundaries we have not yet recognized. One of those hidden forces is the place you live. Whether you grow up in a big city or a small rural town, your surroundings influence what you notice, what you value, and how you see the world. McLuhan (2003) describes the relationship between the centre and the margins.

Building on that, cities often become the cultural and economic centre, shaping what is seen as normal or important. Rural communities sit at the margins, with their own ways of thinking and doing (McLuhan, 2003). These ways are often overlooked or pushed aside by the louder voices coming from the centre. For instance, someone raised in a fast-paced city like Toronto, Ontario, might become more sensitive to issues like personal space and security, shaped by the constant motion and crowded environment (Kielek, 2022). Daily life, in this setting, may revolve around managing time and dodging crowded spaces. In contrast, someone raised in a rural area like my hometown, Timmins, Ontario, tends to focus on strong community connections and a slower, more relaxed lifestyle. In this environment, interpersonal connections and collaboration are often prioritized, as rural living frequently involves familiarity with neighbours and reliance on local support systems (Parker et al., 2018). These differing environments not only shape how individuals

perceive and interact with the world but also influence their values, habits, and understanding of what is normal or ideal.

This understanding leads to a more thoughtful engagement with our environment, encouraging us to question the *bottles* (or confines) we find ourselves navigating and explore the potential for broader, more varied perspectives. Noë's (2010) ideas also reveal the adaptability of human consciousness as it continuously evolves through interaction with changing environments. This adaptability is noticeable in the example of musical performance, where action and interaction play a key role in shaping understanding.

A musician's engagement with an instrument transforms abstract concepts, such as a musical composition, into a tangible, lived experience (Bishop, 2024). The physical act of playing, feeling the instrument, hearing the sound, demonstrates how knowledge and consciousness emerge through active participation with the world. This engagement reflects Noë's (2010) argument that consciousness is not something that happens in the brain alone, but something we enact through our interaction with our environment (Noë, 2010). This example highlights Noë's (2010) broader argument that our awareness is tied to the physical and social tools we use to navigate our environment, challenging the notion of a static self.

Digital Environment and Identity

Similarly, in today's digital age, platforms like social media provide an example of how engagement shapes consciousness. Social media has completely changed collective consciousness by altering the ways we communicate, build relationships, and perceive ourselves (Zsila & Reyes, 2023). It promotes high levels of interconnectedness, allowing individuals to collaborate and communicate across distances. This interconnectedness can empower people to feel part of a global community (Mak et al., 2022). However, this shift creates new norms around self-presentation, often promoting idealized portrayals of life. This can foster harmful comparisons, tying self-image to external validation (Merino et al., 2024). Consciousness is influenced not only by physical environments but also by digital spaces that encourage certain behaviours (Brady et al., 2021). For

instance, the pressure to follow popular trends or opinions can weaken authentic self-expression, as people unknowingly align and adapt to the norms and expectations of their online platforms.

Thinking about this, I realize how social media has impacted my sense of identity. It has influenced how I present myself in both digital and real-world interactions, as I balance staying true to myself with wanting to be seen in a positive light. This realization echoes Noë's (2010) perspective that consciousness is not isolated but actively shaped by our interactions with the external world. Social media, as part of our social world, shows how much our identity is shaped by the culture and technology around us. The way I construct posts, choose photos, or respond to feedback is not just a reflection of who I am, it also shapes how I come to see myself. Reflecting on my use of these platforms like Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn, I realize that my self-image is influenced by a mix of genuine self-reflection and the carefully crafted narratives and pictures that I share. These platforms do not just allow expression, they shape it. Noë's (2010) view helps me see that my identity is not fixed or entirely internal. It is something that emerges in relation to the world around me, including the digital spaces I interact with.

Noë's (2010) theory emphasizes the importance of being open and adaptable, recognizing that our awareness is not solely an internal process but is deeply shaped by the environments we live in and the interactions we encounter. Adopting this perspective promotes personal growth by fostering active engagement with the world around me (Noë, 2010). By acknowledging that external factors shape consciousness, I can better appreciate the importance of critical reflection and openness to change, allowing my beliefs to evolve over time.

Final Reflection

In exploring truth and consciousness, I have gained a deeper understanding of how ideologies and social structures shape our beliefs and perceptions. Žižek's (2021) insights reveal that even those who think they have escaped ideology are still shaped by its underlying structures. Similarly, Noë's (2010) perspective on consciousness emphasizes its active, embodied nature, illustrating how our experiences and interactions profoundly shape our perception of the world. What links these two perspectives is the idea that neither belief nor perception exists in isolation. Whether through

language, symbols, or lived experience, we are always situated within structures that shape how we know and who we can become.

This has prompted me to question the ideologies I once viewed as foundational, using the *fly bottle* metaphor to highlight how truth can function as a boundary rather than a source of freedom (Horwich, 2013). This boundary, as I see it, exists between the world we assume to be fixed and the possibilities that lie beyond it. If truth is always shaped by ideology, then the goal may not be to uncover some pure, objective truth, but to notice the limits that influence what we accept without question. In this sense, Žižek (2021) and Noë (2010) together help reveal how deeply embedded we are in systems of meaning, while also pointing to the possibility of change through critical reflection and lived experience.

By examining social norms and the symbolic order, I have come to see truth as a fluid concept, influenced by changing cultural and personal contexts. This new perspective has encouraged me to critically question the norms I once took for granted and to embrace personal growth as an ongoing, reflective process. I have come to appreciate that meaningful growth often involves stepping into the discomfort of unfamiliar ideas, much like trying on clothes that initially feel unfamiliar. Through this process of adjustment and reflection, fresh insights arise, reshaping the way we understand ourselves and the world around us. By moving beyond our comfort zones, we engage with ideas that not only challenge us but also enrich our understanding, creating a more thoughtful and layered perspective.

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