Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness in Ontological Security: Understanding Information Warfare's Fundamental Principles

*Sens et absence de sens dans la sécurité ontologique : comprendre les principes
fondamentaux de la guerre de l'Information*

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Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness in Ontological Security: Understanding Information Warfare's Fundamental Principles

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This article establishes a theoretical foundation to information warfare (IW). Ontological security (OS) is identified as the target of IW. The transition between ontological security and ontological insecurity is done, in both ways, through losing and finding meaning (meaningfulness and meaninglessness). In its essence, information warfare seeks to destroy an adversary detrimental meaning and substitute its own favourable meaning through deceptive means. It does so by convincing social actors of an illusory narrative sending them on a quest for meaning potentially leading to subversive actions. This theoretical approach is applied to disinformation and conspiracy theories in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cet article établit des fondements théoriques à la guerre de l'information (GI). La sécurité ontologique (OS) est identifiée comme la cible d'une GI. La transition entre la sécurité ontologique et l'insécurité ontologique se fait, dans les deux sens, en perdant et en découvrant du sens (vide et plénitude de sens). Dans son essence, la guerre de l'information cherche à détruire un sens nuisible de l'adversaire et à lui substituer un sens favorable à nos intérêts par des moyens trompeurs. Ceci est fait en convainquant des acteurs sociaux d'un récit illusoire les envoyant vers une quête de sens menant potentiellement à des actions subversives. Cette approche théorique est appliquée à la désinformation et aux théories du complot au Canada durant la pandémie de COVID-19.

This article will present and develop the concept of ontological security in the context of information warfare. Ontological security distinguishes itself from physical security. It was Brent J. Steele who notably introduced this concept to the realm of international relations. The thesis he defended posits that "states pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence." (STEELE 2008, 2) The corollary thesis we will explore is that the physical security of states can be compromised by negatively influencing the self-identity needs state pursue. We will start by exploring how the literature has considered that self-identity of states can be negatively influenced. Following this, meaningfulness and meaninglessness will be shown to be the influential pivot that information warfare can manipulate to affect ontological security and self-identity. The premise stating that policy is driven by the interests of changing domestic coalitions is here assumed. It is from those coalitions' varying conception of the self-identity of states that a significant part of foreign policy is derived. The action of these coalitions of individuals are in turn affected by the nature and degree of their ontological security/insecurity.

Following a development of this theoretical approach, those concepts will be applied to further our understanding of disinformation and conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. It will suggest that public

messaging should include a component of meaningfulness generation. This would help to reach out a segment of the population whose mind spiralled from feelings of ontological insecurity into a disinformed or conspiratorial worldview.

1) The Concept of Ontological Security in the Context of Information Warfare

1.1 What is Ontological Security (OS)?

Anthony Giddens, who brought the concept of OS from the psychological to the social sciences, defines it as the possession, “on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, [of] ‘answers’ to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses.” (GIDDENS 1991, 47) Those existential questions concern the foundational structure of the beingness of humans. They relate to the nature of existence, the identity of objects, the finitude of human life and our separation from the non-self, the presence of others, and the continuity of self-identity (GIDDENS 1991, 55). Those questions usually stay at the unconscious level of the mind, but their assumed answers are nonetheless necessary for the continuity of practical consciousness. Indeed, daily functional operations presuppose the acceptance of the persistence of the identity of objects. Yet, the only proof of the persistence of the identity of the object is by inference (so far, the objects have never been radically altered without a stable physical cause). Therefore, the unconscious assumes the stability and continuity of external reality to conduct daily practical actions. This is the utility of habits; they lead us into stable patterns of behaviour based on the presupposition of persistent identities.

The critical element to consider is that a short or prolonged *crisis* can trigger a change in our regime of habits that leads to reconsidering our ontological assumptions. Those are moments when self-identity and worldviews are challenged and deep transformational changes are possible. A crisis at the level of society can trigger self-identity changes in a sufficient percentage of the population to restructure the self-identity of a domestic coalition. Importantly, this crisis can be either objectively real or only perceived as real. In both cases, the self can restructure his ontological assumptions around a new set of fundamental beliefs. Yet, most existential questions are so essential to a functional interaction with ourselves and the world that problems in this realm usually leads us to the field of psychiatry. Laing, the psychiatrist who coined the term ontological security, explained that “if a position of primary ontological security has been reached, the ordinary circumstances of life do not afford a perpetual threat to one’s own existence. If such a basis for living has not been reached, the ordinary circumstances of everyday life constitute a continual and

deadly threat" (LAING 1960, 42). It is this psychological feeling of continual deadly threats that, according to Laing, can lead to various forms of madness.

The most superficial of those existential questions, that of self-identity, is the one that has the most relevance to international relations because it brews in socially functional but ontologically questioning individuals that can have the power to affect socio-political activities. Still, threats to self-identity affect the OS of individuals who will act to keep at bay this feeling of "everyday life continual and deadly threat". The direction of those actions varies depending on the perceived nature of the threat. In this lies the power to influence socio-political actions by controlling the narrative about the nature and strength of the ontological threat.

1.2 Ontological Security as the Target of Information Warfare (IW)

Derek Bolton explicated the link between OS and IW by showing how IW targeted the underlying anxiety of social groups. For Bolton, IW aim is "to radicalize internal debates to erode the Self, generating a sense of existential crisis and anxiety – ontological insecurity." (BOLTON 2020, 6) In a nation's ontological engagement with its own Self, the nation develops a sense of identity that is *strengthened* through positive symbolic and experiential affirmation. Conversely, a nation sense of Self can also be *weakened* by the internal erosion emerging from the fragmentation of identities, affirmation of intergroup hostilities and a radicalization of differences and disagreements. IW is one of those below-the-threshold activities to which retired General Vance referred to as a death by a thousand cuts (VANCE 2020). The Self deconstructs itself by questioning its own values and more importantly its own narrative. The nation story is invaded by a distorted narrative with a malignant purpose. As a caveat, a nation's self-narrative is always evolving. Internal changes and disagreements are normal. But when a foreign power or an internal subversive group clandestinely attempts to negatively influence a nation's narrative through lies and deception, then the evolution of the nation's story becomes a case of national security.

While information warfare has many precedents in human history, the rise of the digital age and the networked society increased its potential reach and influence. Russia was certainly the most prominent actor to adapt subversion tactics to the modern internet, but this playbook has been used and adapted by a variety of other actors, both domestic and foreign, state and non-state. In this networked social environment, the international discourse has changed in a way where the natural evolution of socio-political thought is hard to distinguish from an intentional forced influence. Canada has found itself in a reactive position

following the unexpected transformation of the multilateral international environment which had delivered great prosperity and security to the country in the previous decades. One key characteristic of ontological self-identity transformation is that once it becomes deeply rooted, it generates new stable habits (of body and mind) which are difficult to change. The state of ontological insecurity being untenable over the long term for psychological beings, a new sense of stability and security must emerge around a new narrative. Given that such a narrative provides a feeling of return to ontological security, the mind would need to undergo anew a moment of ontological insecurity in which its newly acquired narrative is questioned at its root before an again renewed sense of self-identity is acquired. The mind is averse to this painful psychological process and therefore creates resistance when facing an attempt to change the narrative providing feelings of ontological security. Indeed, “while the individual Self may be in flux, it is comforted by the perceived continuity of the nation¹ it is embedded within.” (BOLTON 2020, 5)

What we can vaguely referred to as populism is one such ontological transformation rooted in a new sense of ontological security. Canada must then become adept at navigating this new identity narrative environment to strengthen its own multilateralism narrative without inadvertently feeding the ontological insecurity of domestic and foreign social groups through bad policies and wrong messaging.

Much could be said about the practical mechanisms of IW, but they are better understood when the underlying conceptual understanding of IW principles are established. This is the task we set forth in this article. As an introduction, we summarized how OS has been conceptualized and why IW targeted OS. We now turn to a deeper exploration of ontological security with the goal of understanding its fundamental principles. Those principles are the ontological levers that can be manipulated by IW when targeting a nation and its society. They can then provide helpful insights when developing national security principles to prevent interference to the legitimate evolution of national self-identity narratives.

1.3 Deeper Dive into Ontological Security

Much of the work on OS has been derived from Steele’s characterization of the subject, which was itself directly influenced by Giddens. Steele strongly emphasizes the self-identity of states in his approach to OS². Giddens also gave self-identity the central role by making it the question of most relevance to

¹ Or its private perception of the nation’s narrative.

² The subtitle of Steele’s 2008 book is “Self-identity and the IR State”.

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modernity³. His concept of self-identity is “the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography.” (GIDDEN 1991, 53) This definition was borrowed by Bolton to explain that “OS is intimately entwined with one’s community” (BOLTON 2020, 5) since one’s community is the ever-present context of a person’s biography. Therefore, when conceptualizing IW as targeting OS, we should focus on the purposeful manipulation of the relationship between a person and his community (BOLTON 2020, 5).

Yet, approaching ontological security strictly from the perspective of self-identity leaves out a unique feature of OS which should be included: the meaningfulness of existence. A nation’s narrative defines a nation’s values, as correctly identified by both Bolton and Steele. Bolton went as far as saying that IW undermined “the stability of established belief systems (meaninglessness)” (BOLTON 2020, 8). IW indeed “subverts existing frameworks for managing anxiety around existential questions” (Bolton 2020, 8). But it is not simply through “undermining a stable metanarrative [...] [that] IW destabilizes individuals’ biographical narratives” (BOLTON 2020, 8). Giddens, Steele and Bolton, by focusing on the importance of maintaining the stability of the self’s narrative for preserving ontological security, left aside the empowering feeling of illusory meaning. In other words, the destabilization of biographical narratives is a consequence and not a cause. It is because IW provides an alternative empowering narrative that self-identity is challenged. IW does not directly breakdown communities, split families and divide countries, it creates alternative illusory narratives with the specific aim of empowering individuals within new communities of meaning. It is only as a consequence that previous social boundaries are disrupted. As an information operation distorts meaning within a pre-existing narrative, IW simultaneously generates both ontological security and insecurity. IW empowers imaginary heroes trapped in an illusory quest:

Ontological security scholarship in IR has been criticized for being excessively concerned with continuity and focusing mostly on how states or other agents seek to protect their identity, while largely ignoring change, or seeing it as a negative force to be avoided. (GUSTAFSSON and KRICKEL-CHOI 2020, 876).

IW narrative can offer a desired change to individuals experiencing existential anxiety within their current national narrative. Simultaneously, IW reinforces the anxiety around this dominant narrative. IW is, and has always been, a revolutionary playbook against an evil force. The irony always being that

³ Giddens’s 1991 book title is: *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

someone's tyrant is someone else's king. As an example, the Islamic State was particularly effective at recruiting online. Their propaganda focused on personal glory and empowerment to present a heroic martyr narrative, alongside the traditional duty to kindred and religion (YODER et al. 2020, 1). This appeal to heroism does not seek to trigger ontological insecurity, but to empower individuals into a narrative of the narrator's choosing. The strength of the meaning attributed to one's national narrative is a determining factor to countering subversive information. If someone is not the hero of his own nation's story, he might become the hero of someone else's story.

1.4 Widening the Understanding of Ontological Insecurity

Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi argue that OS studies have not fully recognized the importance and usefulness of the precursor existentialist anxiety literature for understanding the concept of OS (GUSTAFSSON and KRICKEL-CHOI 2020, 876). In particular, their article accounts for the creative power of anxiety. When an alternative narrative is presented in contradiction with the dominant narrative, anxiety can be used as a means of creatively transforming reality. Relations are reimagined and gradually altered to bring the expectations from the new narrative closer to reality (GUSTAFSSON and KRICKEL-CHOI 2020, 889-890).

While Bolton and others partly define ontological insecurity through anxiety, anxiety is here distinguished from ontological insecurity. "While fear is seen as linked to a specific object or threat, anxiety is understood as involving a more diffuse or general feeling of insecurity"; in contrast ontological insecurity is "a deep incapacitating state of not knowing which danger to confront and which to ignore" (GUSTAFSSON and KRICKEL-CHOI 2020, 878). But as the authors recognize themselves, this distinction is a matter of degree. Anxiety can lead to ontological insecurity, while easing ontological insecurity can be resorbed in a more manageable form of anxiety. For the sake of understanding the psychological aim and impact of IW, the key aspect of both states is that the confusion around threats and danger leaves a pervasive feeling of insecurity. Ontological insecurity is more incapacitating and anxiety allows for a greater functionality in everyday habits, but they are both a slippery slope toward confusion and a questioning of the meaning of one's threat environment.

The path out of this confusion is a clarification of the identity of surrounding dangers. To emerge from this confusion, an individual needs to redefine meaning in its environment, which implies injecting meaningfulness into his confused world. Ontological insecurity and anxiety will naturally drive an individual into the rabbit hole of seeking meaning. This is the creative power of

anxiety, which drives individuals to seek meaning and transform reality accordingly.

1.5 Bridging Ontological Security and Insecurity

This leads us to present the key contribution this article makes. The transition between ontological security and ontological insecurity is done both through losing and finding meaning (meaninglessness and meaningfulness). This implies that IW operates based on two fundamental principles: destroying meaning in someone's reality and creating meaning in someone's reality.

In an experiment, Tilburg and Igou assessed whether participants' sense of a meaningful existence would increase adherence to worldviews. They concluded that if "life is generally appraised as meaningful, then personal and cultural worldviews, central components of one's overall meaning system, are strengthened. If life is not generally appraised as meaningful, then worldview adherence is less pronounced." (TILBURG and IGOU 2011, 30) In a subsequent paper, the same authors studied boredom, a sentiment generally characterized by an activity or situation being devoid of purpose and that makes people attempt to re-establish a sense of meaningfulness. Given that political ideologies can aid in the quest for meaningfulness, their study suggested that boredom could lead to the endorsement of extreme political orientations and that the search for meaning played a mediating role (TILBURG and IGOU 2017, 1-22). Other belief systems, like religions, also have a similar role in reducing boredom and quenching the thirst for meaning (TILBURG et al. 2019). IW attempts to devoid the world of meaning to restructure reality around an interpretation in support of the interests of the IW agent. This is done by deconstructing a social group's worldview around which OS is built (triggering anxiety or ontological insecurity) to facilitate the imbuelement of reality with a new order of meaning.

When exploring the bridge that the sense of meaning represents for feelings of ontological security and insecurity, it presents us with the question of: how do people experience the presence or absence of meaning? And how can that sense of meaning be manipulated to reflect someone else's interest? Meaning is generated by valuing beliefs. These determine what is important for a person. Individuals act on the basis of what they believe is important in life. IW is intertwined with disinformation and conspiracy theories. This false information entangled with illusory conspiracies serve to undermine the OS of individuals by generating that diffuse feeling of insecurity through a threat that is as elusive as permeating the whole fabric of society.

The key here is that fear and uncertainty lead to conspiracy theories, but only if these theories involve powerful groups or institutions that people distrusted to begin with. Fear and uncertainty may actually increase support for powerful groups or institutions that people do trust. (VAN PROOIJEN 2018, 30)

Trust is what gives value to a specific belief and generate meaning. Beliefs are by definition not grounded on logical proof but on trust, faith or confidence in something or someone. As we give value to a belief, we invest our trust in it and transform this belief into a guiding force of our existence; basically, we generate existential meaning. This is why in the process of meaninglessness that leads individuals believing in conspiracy theories to feelings of anxiety and ontological insecurity, central mottos are 'Trust no one' and 'Nothing is what it seems'. As trust erodes, the meaning attributed to our beliefs is weakened and leaves us confused and in search of another meaning.

The rise of conspiracy culture is part and parcel of the project of modernity and that progressive modernization in fact motivates the appeal and popularity of paranoid narratives. Typically, modern sentiments of epistemological, ontological and existential insecurity [...] have proven to be formative in the cultural production of contemporary conspiracy culture. (AUPERS 2012, 31)

Aupers' thought shows that certain individuals perceive modernity's scientific project as offering a world of causal processes devoid of meaning. Scientific culture explains how the world functions, but not what the world means. Consequently, modern social organizations formed around the rationalization of society have tended to generate a sense of alienation from certain segments of the population, as bureaucracy and large organizations feel external and alien to their daily life. This is typified by the anxiety generated by the conspiracy belief in evil forces within the so-called deep state. This alienation from one's own national organization and associated identity is what Aupers refers to when saying that the project of modernity is formative of the contemporary conspiracy culture. The alienation of feeling your own interests estranged from those of your national group within a broken social trust opens vulnerabilities for the manipulation of a belief system's meaningfulness.

1.6 IW as the Exploitation of Vulnerabilities in a Society's Sense of Meaning

In contrast to traditional warfare, whose doctrine has focused on material targets and physical destruction, "Information warfare is directly concerned with the will of the adversary, their way of life and their beliefs about themselves and

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the world around them.” (MUNRO 2010, 12) IW aims to manipulate its target's will to reorient it toward conceptions beneficial to the manipulator and deleterious to the manipulated nation. As it starts by breaking down the assumed beliefs of a target, information operations must convince that assumed meanings are bathed in lies and untruths. Those who are vulnerable to IW influence are the individuals already susceptible to feelings of alienation from the rational scientific culture of modernity. This anxiety towards modern society and state is a contributing factor to their quest for a different sense of meaning. It follows that their central epistemological view of the world is not an empiricist epistemology seeking proof in experimental repeatability. Their epistemological approach is moulded by a quest for coherency based on a few key unproven certainties. Implanting those key certainties is the foundational task of IW. If one central aspect of reality is turned upside down, then it opens the mind to considering whether the whole world might be upside down. As a former QAnon believer explained:

When you start getting information from these groups... It starts with something small. [...] Child trafficking is real. Sex trafficking is real. It's a real problem ... It piques your interest because as a mom, I want to protect my kid. I want to know everything. [...] They would send me more information and it snowballed to just build bigger and bigger. Eventually, you get that huge crazy theory and you believe it, but it didn't start that way. (ROSA 2021)

Notably, she added that when President Biden was sworn in, given the conspiracy theory of a wide blackout on the day of inauguration, she felt “so much anxiety and fear”. If her fear of a blackout had been confirmed by a corresponding external event, it would have reinforced her belief in the conspiracy, even if there was no link between the two events. Therefore, a follow-up step of IW is to reinforce a set of false beliefs by a corresponding partial truth confirmed in the external reality. The Russian information operation conducted in the United States in preparation for the 2016 presidential elections started with a wide dissemination of false or divisive online socio-political content (DIRESTA et al. 2018, 76-82). This online information was mired with false conspiratorial information such as that a child sex ring was operated for Democratic party officials out of a pizzeria basement in Washington, D.C.⁴ Russian hacking and dumping of Podesta emails, which incriminated him in a secret intimate relationship with a minor, was a kernel of truth that led greater credence to the child sex ring conspiracy theory. This conspiracy gave even more attention to the Podesta emails and, in a vicious circle, those revelations strengthened the belief

⁴ This is the Pizzagate conspiracy theory.

in this conspiracy theory. Similarly, a public figure of authority known to have access to secret information repeating conspiratorial beliefs lends great credence to such beliefs. This is again an external confirmation of a, up to this point, virtual belief system. Once the seed of doubt has been implemented in a previous belief system and a new belief system is emerging from it, it is reinforced by a *community* of believers seeking clues to its confirmation. Belief then becomes a *social* activity from which an additional sense of purpose is derived.

When the meaning of a national story is fading, it opens vulnerabilities for seeds of lies to turn worldviews upside down. Individuals' sense of meaning can become threatened by a flow of information contradicting the appearance of reality. As the sense of meaning upon which their ontological security was built is shattered, individuals become vulnerable to the false promise of a renewed feeling of ontological security. As the world is being covered by an illusion of darkness, a flickering promise of light needs not be encumbered by the truth.

1.7 Philosophical Foundation of Ontological Insecurity

Feelings of ontological security and insecurity are rooted in a fundamental way of being in the world. The ontological nature of our being is concerned with feelings of security and insecurity. Threats can be geared toward our physical embodiment, leading to injury and ultimately death. But the death of our body is not the essential worry of the mind. The mind's concern is that physical death implies the disappearance of our presence in the world. This distinction can be part of religious manipulation that sacrifices physical security in promise of a continuity of presence in a world beyond death. Indeed, terror management theory studies how people use cultural worldviews and religious beliefs to maintain the fear of death at the fringe of their awareness (AYARS et al. 2015). Therefore, the desire for physical security is founded in a desire to maintain our presence in the world. Beside physical death, there are other ways to feel as if our presence in the world is fading, maybe to the point of disappearance. This was Laing's original point in his existential study in sanity and madness:

The child who cries when its mother disappears from the room is threatened with the disappearance of his own being, since for him also *percipi = esse*⁵. It is only in the mother's presence that he is able fully to live and move and have his being. (LAING 1960, 118)

⁵ To be perceived = to be

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Our natural state of being in the world as children is of ontological insecurity, as if our being was fading away unless a parent, especially the mother, confirms the reality of our own existence with its presence. As we grow, we build our ontological security by integrating a system of belief that confirms to ourselves the reality of our presence in the world. This is what is called the Self. Self-consciousness is the constructive reflection of our own identity as it confirms the reality of the existence of our being. When we encounter another being, an information flow is manifested and data on all levels is exchanged between that pair of beings. The reason we are not engulfed by the information we receive is that our sense of identity is strong enough to filter what is ontologically coherent with our Self and what is not. Without such a sense of self-identity, "every relationship threatens the individual with loss of identity" (LAING 1960, 44). In such an encounter, the ontologically insecure individual is notably vulnerable to engulfment in the world of this other being through the information flow between them.

This state of ontological insecurity is not only of a psychological nature, but also fundamentally part of the essence of being human. It is because humans are beings oriented toward death that their essence is of ontological insecurity. As Heidegger explained, even from an unauthentic posture, "in the entangled flight from death, the everydayness of Dasein⁶ bears witness to the fact that they itself is always already determined as being-toward-death, even when it is not explicitly engaged in 'thinking about death'" (HEIDEGGER 2010, 244). He also exposed that the path toward an authentic engagement with the human Self (Dasein) is through "an understanding of death in the sense of being toward this possibility without fleeing it or covering it over" (HEIDEGGER 2010, 250). This consciousness of "being-toward-death is essentially anxiety [...] [where] Dasein finds itself faced with the nothingness of the possible impossibility of its existence" (HEIDEGGER 2010, 254). The path toward authenticity that Heidegger describes in "Being and Time" is not one amongst many paths, it is part of the essence of being human (Dasein). It can be experienced through a variety of life circumstances, but it is ever present to that being who is *in* the world. It is as ontologically fundamental as his thrownness toward death.

Information operations, in their goal of triggering ontological insecurity, are pushing individuals on the path toward an illusion of authenticity. In everyone's deepest recess of the mind, there is a feeling that something is not quite right, that the world is more than it seems, that appearances cannot be only what are, that there is a thing-in-itself or a world behind the matrix. IW taps into

⁶ The concept of Dasein is Heidegger's conceptual approach to the being of humans.

this ontological path toward authenticity by triggering the anxiety concomitant to ontological insecurity through the deceptive exposition of ever-present but veiled threats. In the form of amplifying, twisting, or demonizing various issues such as corruption, racism, immigration, fascism, pedophilia, secret society, genocide, mass manipulation, etc., IW is triggering that sense of being toward death, of being headed toward impending doom. Those illusory systemic, often secretive and hidden, pervasive forces at work are indicative not only of the inescapability of our individual death, but of an imminent tragedy for the social group within which we draw part of our ontological security. The agents of IW simultaneously incite to stop running away or covering from this false truth that has now been revealed. In doing so, they send individuals on a false path of authenticity from which life shines of a deeper, although deceptive, meaning.

1.8 The Quest for Meaningfulness of Being

Being toward death reveals the ontological ground from which existence springs: Time. As a being oriented toward non-being, humans are essentially determined by the passage of time. "Death is the never-reached horizon of experience" (BAUGH 2000, 73) from which primordial temporality is established. Heidegger's philosophical inquiry was to understand the meaning of being in general and at the end of his opus he is left wondering if "there [is] a way leading from primordial time to the meaning of being?" (HEIDEGGER 2010, 415). We present the argument that Heidegger found himself in this dead end because of the paradoxical approach of seeking the meaning of being in general from the phenomenological experience of a being who stands at the source of all meaning. Through his analysis of the death of God, Nietzsche exposed the fundamental absence of inherent purpose in the world. He then posited that the *Übermensch* is one who creates his own value and purpose (NIETZSCHE 2005, 21-27). By doing so, Nietzsche presented an understanding of *Dasein* where the creation of meaning is part of its ontological structure. Being temporally exposed to the horizon of death is being condemned to the meaninglessness of all attempts to avoid the inevitable disappearance of all meaning for a conscience. Simultaneously, the unveiled authenticity of being is to find itself with time. This primordial time that the *Dasein* is left with opens an existential desire for this time to be meaningful. Only through the acceptance of ontological insecurity can humans truly value meaningful time. Making time meaningful is a call to action into finding the truth of Being. It plunges an authentic self to unveil the truthful ontological meaning it brought forth into existence. To paraphrase Plato, only an examined life is worth living. Unfortunately, under conditions of a false authenticity of being, the meaningfulness of existence is a deception. Once the lies at the origin of the sense of authenticity are revealed, the feeling of meaningfulness is deprived of meaning since it held no truth. This is the

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treacherous effect of IW to manipulate victims with a false sense of meaningfulness that can only reveal itself as empty. But in the process, domestic subversive actions are taken based on this treacherous sense of meaningfulness.

1.9 The Dynamic of Information Warfare's Fundamental Principles

The dynamic between ontological security and ontological insecurity is connected by the existential movement of meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Under conditions of an honest questioning consciousness grounded in the horizon of truth, this movement can lead one's self to live an authentic existence. Conversely, the deception of manipulatory information leads into illusory authenticity. Information warfare is the art of illusory authenticity for the sake of manipulatory meaningfulness. It makes use of the same conceptual horizon that underpins the ontological essence of being, but toward the revelation of an illusory meaningful existence benefiting an external actor. To better understand the fundamental principles of information warfare, the states of ontological security and insecurity as well as the existential processes of meaningfulness and meaninglessness need careful and attentive study. In its essence, information warfare seeks to destroy an adversary detrimental meaning and substitute its own favourable meaning through deceptive means. It does so by exploiting vulnerabilities in human beings' ontological insecurities and subsequent need for meaningfulness.

2) Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories in Canada during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2020 and 2021, multiple publications in the field of public health have shown the adverse effect of disinformation and conspiracy theories on vaccination and public health measures and restrictions (GRIMES 2021, MARCO-FRANCO et al. 2021, SONG et al. 2021, DIB et al. 2021, BASCH et al. 2021, TAGLIABUE et al. 2020, GOTTLIEB et al. 2020, ROMER et al. 2020, and many others). The COVID-19 pandemic is the type of crisis that can trigger feelings of ontological insecurity. Many of the regime of habits upon which our ontological assumptions were built have been shattered; the patterns of life which infused a sense of meaningfulness into our existence have withered. Most authors approach the issue of disinformation and conspiracy theories from the perspective of presenting a solution born of rational discourse. For example, Grimes suggests that:

A more Socratic approach might be more effective at disabusing people of such misconceptions. Instead of dismissing concerns, we can ask questions

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of adherents which stimulates critical thinking, giving scope for the changing of views. (GRIMES 2021, 4)

This highlights the rational approach of knowledge-based discourse, which opposes truth against false information. Similarly, Marco-Franco “suggests an approach based on education and truthful information, persuading the population of the benefits of a vaccine on a voluntary basis” (MARCO-FRANCO et al. 2021, 1). This approach is valuable and important, yet we suggest complementing it with a discourse centred around transferring meaningfulness from the disinformed worldview toward the rational worldview. This would be done not through a struggle between truth and false, but through empowering a sense of meaningfulness in the rational worldview. To understand the value of such an approach, we will look at the type of discourse being produced by the disinformed and conspiracy-inspired worldview about the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. We will see how this discourse infuses meaningfulness into an ontologically insecure existential posture.

2.1 How many Canadians Hold Disinformed or Conspiratorial Beliefs?

To have an idea of the scale of disinformation, in the first few months of the pandemic, “96% of Canadians who used the Internet to find information saw COVID-19 information that they suspected was misleading, false or inaccurate”. During the same period, 53% of all Canadians “had shared COVID-19 information they found online without knowing if it was accurate” (GARNEAU and ZOSSOU 2021, 3-4). This is an indicator that sharing information might often not be an initial reflex based on the truthfulness or falseness of the information. To verify the accuracy of the information, “the two most commonly used methods were consulting other sources (69%) and clicking on the link to read the full article (53%)”, while only 27% “researched the authors or source to see credibility” (GARNEAU and ZOSSOU 2021, 5-6). This suggests that content and comparative analysis have more value for those readers than the authoritative weight of scientific or state authorities. We tend to believe what makes sense to us, more than what is considered to be true by an authority in possession of the skills and knowledge to correctly assess the veracity of an information.

In April 2021, a poll showed that:

37% of Canadians believe COVID-19 was created in a lab and released by mistake, 31% that COVID-19 was created as a biological weapon in a lab, 15% that big pharma helped spread the virus, 9% that the vaccine includes

a chip that will track people and 6% there is a link between COVID-19 and 5G (INSIGHTS WEST 2021).

Interestingly, the number of believers had increased or remained similar compared to another Canadian survey on the same subject from one year earlier (STECULA et al. 2020). A November 2020 survey in Quebec showed that about 20% of the respondents believed without hesitation a series of disinforming or conspiracy statements around downplaying COVID-19, its real origin and the government manipulatory role in the pandemic (LANGLOIS and SAUVAGEAU 2021, 37-38). The important aspect is that a significant minority of Canadians believe one conspiracy or another regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. It follows that there is an associated minority ready to act on those beliefs through protests, civil disobedience, acts of vandalism or simply non-compliance with public health directives. Indeed, those beliefs do lead to national security concerns. In August 2021, on the campaign trail, Justin Trudeau cancelled a public appearance near Toronto because of security reasons when anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown protesters were threatening him with violence (MAJOR 2021). There are many reasons why protesters trailed Mr. Trudeau campaign speeches for the following weeks, including political rivalry, the impact public health measures have had on the economy and libertarian beliefs opposing lockdowns. Yet, declarations from certain protesters indicate that conspiracy theories were at least a motivating factor to the radicalization of their public actions, which included renewed threats of violence and the throwing of objects.

2.2 What is the Content of Conspiratorial and Disinforming Beliefs about COVID-19?

COVID-19 conspiracies include a wide range of beliefs. While some people believe that the COVID-19 is simply not more dangerous than the common flu, others believe that an elite of satanic pedophile pull the strings of governments and invented the pandemic to control the global population (LANGLOIS and SAUVAGEAU 2021, 37-38). Along the path of doubting some commonly held beliefs to thinking that everything is a lie concocted by a perverted elite, individuals develop an alternative worldview that renew their connections to themselves, people around them and the world. Therefore, we suggest that the relevant content is not so much the precise beliefs themselves but the world of meaning they generate. In what appeared to be a resignation post, Ron Watkins⁷, following President Biden sworn-in ceremony, posted on Telegram: "As we enter

⁷ Ron Watkins is believed to be behind the online persona of Q, or at least the second person behind it (HOBACK 2021).

into the next administration please remember all the friends and happy memories we made together over the past few years” (MERLAN 2021). As he seemed to abandon the shadow leadership role of the QAnon community, Ron Watkins conveyed that what really mattered were the friendships and happy memories made along the way.

The anti-vaccine conspiracy movement already had ground in the population before the pandemic. Anti-mask groups were the logical continuity of this belief movement. For example, the Ontario-based group “Hugs Over Masks” partnered with “Vaccine Choice Canada”, an anti-vaccination organization (IRELAND 2020). Hugs Over Masks Instagram slogan is “WE CHOOSE LOVE & HUGS OVER FEAR & MASKS”. This is meant to send a positive, reassuring message to diminish fear with the emotion of love. This presents the group as an entity where love and community play a meaning-building role in the life of participants. As an event triggers fear and anxiety that bring about a state of ontological insecurity, such a movement actually pretends to empower individuals with “love and light” in order to make people feel safe and secure. This new community of believers become a meaning-building force in an individual’s path of return toward ontological security. Hugs Over Masks protesters claim that it is the COVID-19 measures that are “unnecessarily harming Ontarians’ health and rights” (MITCHELL 2021). The pattern is of displacing the source of the threat from the virus toward the government. As the pandemic appears to offer no path toward a return to ontological security (in particular in terms of returning to our comforting regime of habits), the displacement of the source of the threat at least offers potential actions that can lead us back to ontological security (by removing governmental measures that trigger OS).

Then one thing may lead to another, a disbelief in public health measures can lead down the rabbit hole toward believing the government to be the actual source of the virus. Alexis Cossette-Trudel, a conspiracy theorist leader based in Quebec, spreads the belief that the Trudeau government is involved or complicit in the release of the COVID-19 virus from a Wuhan laboratory in China (COSSETTE-TRUDEL 2021, 14 min.). For his viewers, it gives a sense that someone is finally able to explain the origin of the virus and bring clarity to what is otherwise an extremely confusing situation; in other words, it reduces fear and uncertainty. Using the previously defined concepts in the present article, the effect is actually to move someone’s emotional state from a general feeling of anxiety⁸ toward a feeling of targeted fear⁹. Since the official discourse is unable to provide a conclusive and simple explanation of an anxiety-triggering phenomenon,

⁸ A more diffuse or general feeling of insecurity.

⁹ Contrary to anxiety, fear is linked to a specific object or threat.

individuals take the opportunity to offer an explanation (even if wacky) that involve a well-known familiar target: Trudeau and the government. The general sense of anxiety can resolve itself into a more directed feeling of fear. This is a process by which anxiety has been given meaning so it can resolve itself into a meaningful fear. One's suffering is therefore not meaningless; there is a defined reason for it and thus, it has meaning. If at least there is a clear source to the insecurity, there are steps that can be taken toward eliminating the perceived threat.

Since the virus is itself seldom experienced in personal life, the source of OS appears to actually be the governmental restrictions. Obviously, once the virus strikes in one's personal life, beliefs can change. This is the case of Gwendoline Rodriguez, a Quebec resident, who "was one of the people who thought it was a bad cold". She posted on Facebook that "having had it [COVID-19] and having currently 60 per cent of my lungs affected, well, I have totally changed my mind" (LAPIERRE 2021). The same was experienced by another Quebec resident, Giselle Beaudoin, who succumbed to the virus. Giselle's sister posted on Facebook: "She [Giselle] asked me to tell you to make sure you all get vaccinated because she did not believe. Like some of you, she was a complotiste and anti-masker" (LAPIERRE 2021). Faced with real death, true authenticity can better reveal itself, such as in the care for others to not fall prey to the same lies that befell us.

2.3 Why do Canadians Believe in Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories?

Why did people like Gwendoline or Giselle chose to believe disinformation or conspiracy theories on COVID-19 instead of the official information from scientific and state authorities? They were presented both sets of information, but in the end chose to believe one over the other. Why?

One possible answer (and the most common in the public health academic literature) is that they made errors in their logical reasoning processes that led them to lend more credence to the false belief system over the true one. While that is partly a valid answer, this article presents the complementary explanation that the false belief system has the advantage of offering a higher sense of *origin*, *mission* and *agency* that better trigger feelings of meaningfulness and therefore create an easier path of return to ontological security. Those three components offer a temporal horizon for creating meaningfulness of being. The *origin* of a story presents the past of being, the *mission* its future and the *agency* offers freedom of being and power to act within this exposed horizon.

Disinformation about COVID-19 being a Chinese virus or being intentionally spread by governments contributes to establishing a narrative of the origin which plays into a sense of familiarity with an enemy¹⁰. The mission then becomes a struggle against the government or secret elites. This can express itself in voting choices, demonstrations or even insurgent-style actions. The ability to undertake a mission gives agency to individuals and empowers their sense of freedom, their power to act against the source of their ontological insecurity. Having a clear temporal horizon of being is what generates meaningfulness. Understanding our place in our temporal horizon answers the fundamental question from which ontological security flows.

“The persistence of feelings of personhood in a continuous self and body” happens from the reification of history into a narrative which allows “the continuity of self-identity” (GIDDENS 1991, 55). Yet that self-identity can only give value to life by virtue of a sense of meaningful existence. Not all narratives are equal in their capability to breathe meaningfulness into existence. A temporal narrative only offers a horizon for being. It is having a personal meaning of being that projects an individual to step into his horizon of meaningful time. From there, his being can be ontologically secure from knowing that he has stability of meaning within the finite flow of time. Individuals particularly susceptible to ontological insecurity are the easiest to sweep into a narrative of ontological security reconstruction such as those offered by leaders of disinformation and conspiracy theories. They offer the sense of meaningfulness these individuals desperately thirst for, such as when Vladimir Sobolev (the British Columbia-based co-founder of “Hugs over Masks”) affirms that his movement is in a “spiritual war above all” and that they are “fighting for humanity”. In his vision, he is offering people a chance of “fighting for everyone who doesn’t have a voice” (SHEPERT 2020). This discourse connects with people like Jean-François Fortin who expressed that:

When we feel that the truth is hidden from us, we are frustrated. Emotion sets in and fear sets in. And when you see several people [demonstrating], when

¹⁰ Other forms of narratives also contribute to defining adversaries and provide a sense of mission. For example, the explanation of the zoonotic source of the virus has been integrated to the story of the negative impact human actions have on the environment and animal habitats. Yet, throughout history, certain tropes have tended to recur and be more compelling than others. Secretive elites and corrupted governments have often proved very compelling rhetorical devices, partly because they have historically sometime played out to be true and are familiar yet elusive themes. They have also been able to provide a strong “rally around the flag” effect.

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you see that you are not alone, it helps to [alleviate] a little our emotion, our fear¹¹ (BALTHAZARD 2021).

Ontological insecurity creates, by the simple structure of being, a need for meaningfulness. An empowering narrative is necessary to find anew a sense of stability and security in their being. By bringing people honest and truthful meaningfulness of existence, a conspiratorial drift can be avoided during anxiety generating crisis. This implies that public discourse around the COVID-19 pandemic should take into consideration, alongside rationality, the importance of meaningfulness.

Figure 1: Schematic Presentation of Information Warfare Fundamental Principles

¹¹ Original French version: « Lorsqu'on sent que la vérité nous est cachée, on est frustré. L'émotion embarque et la peur embarque. Et lorsqu'on voit plusieurs gens [manifester], lorsqu'on voit qu'on n'est pas seul, ça aide à [atténuer] un peu notre émotion, notre peur. »

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