

SPECIAL SECTION

A Response to “Can We Leave Ideology Behind?”

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Volume XIX, Issue 4
December 2025

ISSN: 2334-3745
DOI: 10.19165/TMUQ3370

Abstract: This response engages Clark McCauley’s article on the analytic value of ideology in the study of radicalisation and deradicalisation. McCauley raises an important and constructive challenge: whether the broadened conception of ideology proposed in my earlier article—drawing on Michael Freeden’s morphological theory and the ideological triangle model—can maintain empirical precision, or whether the established diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames of social-movement theory offer a more tractable alternative. In this response, I argue that the ideological triangle is designed explicitly for the individual level of analysis, addressing the subjective configuration of beliefs, emotions, and motivations most relevant to deradicalisation practice. While the structure of the triangle parallels movement-level framing, its purpose is distinct: to model how individuals internalise, interpret, and personalise broader ideological signals, especially in an era of increasingly hybrid, unstable, and individualised extremism. I further contend that Freeden’s morphological approach, when translated to the micro level, provides a necessary account of the internal conceptual architecture that renders frames meaningful and motivational. Although the empirical operationalisation of morphological ideology remains in early stages, it is both feasible and essential for understanding cognitive rigidity, ideological narrowing, and the potential for “repluralisation” during disengagement.

Keywords: ideology, radicalisation, deradicalisation, P/CVE, social movement theory, framing theory

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Introduction

Scholarly debate is the engine of intellectual progress, and few experiences are more valuable than engaging in constructive exchange with colleagues whose work has defined an entire field. Clark McCauley's *Research Note*, "*Can We Leave Ideology Behind? Diagnostic, Prognostic, and Motivational Action Frames in Tracking Radicalisation and Deradicalisation*," exemplifies this process. McCauley's decades of research on political psychology and radicalisation have shaped the empirical and theoretical landscape in which all contemporary studies of violent extremism operate. It is therefore a privilege to respond to his thoughtful engagement with my article, "*What's in a Word? Revisiting the Role of Ideology in the Practice of and Scholarship on Countering Violent Extremism*."¹

McCauley's commentary raises an enduring and important question: whether the concept of *ideology*—when expanded beyond its narrow doctrinal sense—remains a scientifically useful construct for explaining radicalisation and guiding deradicalisation practice. He welcomes recent attempts, including my own, to move beyond binary debates about ideology's presence or absence in extremist motivation. Yet he cautions that a broadened, multi-layered definition risks diluting empirical precision unless it can be clearly operationalised and measured.

I share McCauley's commitment to clarity of measurement and methodological transparency, yet I continue to hold that *ideology* remains indispensable for both analytical and practical reasons. My original article sought less to supply a new metric than to provide a conceptual bridge between political philosophy, social psychology, and P/CVE practice. The ideological triangle, combined with Freeden's morphology, offers a framework for identifying where and how meaning, value, and identity become rigidified in *individual* violent worldviews, and how they might be *repluralised* through counselling and intervention. Whereas frame analysis captures the *content* of political communication, the morphology of ideology explains its *internal structure*—how concepts cluster, acquire moral charge, and sustain motivation even when factual beliefs change.

This response, therefore, aims not to defend terminology for its own sake but to clarify levels of analysis and explore complementarity between the two approaches. I argue that ideology and framing are analytically distinct yet mutually reinforcing: frames articulate ideology's surface expressions, especially on a collective level, while morphology illuminates the underlying cognitive architecture that gives those frames coherence and emotional force and can be applied on an individual level. Addressing McCauley's concerns about operationalisation, I outline ways in which this integrated model can yield measurable indicators without abandoning the conceptual richness necessary for understanding identity transformation and behavioural change.

McCauley's Critique

In his *Research Note*, Clark McCauley offers a careful and methodologically oriented critique of my article, focusing on the conceptual scope and empirical tractability of the term *ideology*. While he acknowledges the value of revisiting ideology's role in radicalisation and deradicalisation scholarship, McCauley raises concern that the broadened definition I propose risks sacrificing precision for inclusivity. In particular, he argues that my "ideological triangle"² (linking perceived problems, solutions, and future visions) closely parallels the well-established diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames of social-movement theory, and that my references to measurement do not yet translate Michael Freeden's notion of ideological *morphology*³ into empirically testable indicators. In his view, when ideology is expanded to encompass personality traits, emotions, social identities, and motivational factors, it becomes so encompassing that it

loses discriminant utility as an analytical construct. From this perspective, McCauley suggests that the field may gain more by adopting frame analysis and leaving “ideology” aside.

Because these frames already provide clear pathways for empirical measurement through survey items, discourse coding, and experimental manipulation, he questions whether ideology offers additional explanatory leverage beyond what frame analysis already provides.

A second major line of critique concerns operationalisation. McCauley notes that the empirical indicators I reference—such as scales of authoritarianism, identity fusion, or ideological passion—measure psychological dispositions rather than the structured conceptual relationships described in Freeden’s morphology. From this perspective, the article’s claim that ideology and its components can be measured is, in his estimation, not yet substantiated.

Taken together, McCauley’s observations invite a reconsideration of whether “ideology” as a construct can meet contemporary standards of empirical rigour. His note thus challenges scholars of radicalisation and deradicalisation to specify more precisely how ideology can be operationalised, measured, and distinguished from adjacent constructs such as identity, framing, and motivation.

Clarifying the Scope and Purpose of the Ideological Model

At the heart of McCauley’s critique lies an important question of analytical scope. His Research Note interprets the “ideological triangle” primarily as a rephrasing of the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames of social-movement theory. That observation is perceptive insofar as both approaches share a concern with how meaning structures mobilise behaviour. Yet the apparent overlap conceals a crucial distinction: *social-movement framing operates at the collective, meso-social level, whereas the ideological triangle is able to capture processes at the individual level as well*. The difference is not semantic but foundational, because the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) deals primarily with individuals—clients, participants, and subjects—whose belief structures and motivational orientations must be understood in their personal and psychological configurations.

Social-movement theory offers an indispensable account of how groups construct shared narratives and mobilise constituencies. However, in practical deradicalisation work, practitioners face a very different analytical task: to discern how a specific individual interprets, internalises, and adapts collective frames into a unique personal worldview. The ideological triangle was conceived precisely for that purpose. It provides a structured way to map how a person’s perceived *problems* (diagnostic), *solutions* (prognostic), and *visions of a better future* (motivational) interact within their subjective experience. The model thus translates the collective logic of movement framing into the *cognitive, affective, and motivational architecture of the individual*. From the perspective of exit counselling and rehabilitation, it is this personal configuration that determines what type of intervention will be perceived as meaningful, legitimate, or threatening.

This distinction becomes even more important in what many scholars describe as a post-organisational era of radicalisation.⁴ The contemporary extremist landscape is marked by fragmented, hybrid, and fluid ideological constellations. Many individuals no longer radicalise through membership in coherent movements with established doctrines, but through decentralised networks and online communities that enable a high degree of personal customisation of belief. In such cases, collective frames offer only a partial picture. The

practitioner or researcher must reconstruct the idiosyncratic ideological morphology—the specific combination of concepts, emotions, and moral evaluations—that gives coherence to an individual’s worldview. The ideological triangle, combined with Freeden’s morphology, is designed to make precisely this reconstruction possible. It operationalises ideology not as a fixed doctrinal system but as a living, individualised configuration of meaning through which a person interprets the world and guides their actions.

In this respect, ideology precedes and underlies framing. While social movements articulate collective frames that can be empirically coded and measured, these frames are themselves the crystallised products of earlier individual-level processes. Movements emerge when individuals with compatible ideological “recipes” converge and externalise their private meaning structures into shared narratives and repertoires. To study frames alone, therefore, is to begin the analysis at a later stage of the ideological life cycle. My argument is that understanding how those frames take shape—how subjective problems, solutions, and future visions become collectively communicable—requires a model of the individual ideological process. Seen from this temporal and analytical perspective, the ideological triangle looks not like a reformulation of framing theory, but like its necessary micro-foundation.

This focus on the individual level also explains why my article does not attempt to produce new survey measures or large-n operationalisations. Its primary aim was conceptual clarification and theoretical translation: to provide practitioners with a structured vocabulary for identifying where an individual’s ideological rigidity resides and how it might be constructively addressed. The ambition was to bridge the gap between abstract political theory and the practical realities of counselling and rehabilitation work. This does not mean that ideology cannot be measured; rather, it means that measurement must follow from conceptual precision. The model provides that precision by defining clear analytical components—problems, solutions, and visions—each composed of Freedenian “political concepts” that can be mapped and, eventually, empirically examined.

On the Question of Measurement and Operationalisation

McCauley is entirely right that empirical operationalisation remains a challenge. I did not claim that existing studies measure Freeden’s morphological concept directly—indeed, to my knowledge, such a task has not yet been undertaken empirically. My intention was to show that the building blocks of ideological morphology are, in principle, measurable through established tools in social psychology and computational linguistics. For example, linguistic and network analyses can identify the clustering of key political concepts and the emotional charge attached to them; measures of cognitive rigidity, value complexity, and tolerance for ambiguity can serve as indicators of ideological “depluralisation” or “repluralisation.” These are admittedly proxies, but they demonstrate that the theoretical architecture I propose can be translated into measurable constructs without losing its conceptual integrity.

Moreover, Freeden himself applied his morphological framework to mainstream political ideologies such as liberalism, conservatism, and socialism.⁵ Extending that same logic to the micro level—treating each individual’s ideological system as a morphology of core and adjacent concepts—is both consistent with Freeden’s approach and urgently needed for contemporary deradicalisation work. The next step for empirical research is to develop instruments that can capture how these concept clusters form, solidify, and potentially reopen during disengagement processes. My article should therefore be read as laying the conceptual groundwork for such empirical innovation, not as claiming to have already achieved it.

Why “Ideology” Remains Necessary

McCauley’s proposal to “leave ideology behind” in favour of frames is appealing in its empirical elegance, but it risks flattening the multi-layered nature of political meaning. Ideology and framing are not competing constructs but complementary perspectives operating at different levels of abstraction. Frames describe *how* messages are communicated and shared; ideology explains *why* those messages resonate, cohere, and motivate. Frames are the surface manifestations of deeper ideological structures. Without the concept of ideology, we lose sight of the underlying moral and cognitive architecture that renders frames persuasive and behaviourally consequential.

For practitioners and—as I argue—for terrorism scholars, this distinction is more than theoretical. Deradicalisation counselling requires an understanding of the *personal significance* of ideological content—the moral emotions, values, and identity investments that sustain extremist commitment. Such work cannot rely solely on external frame analysis; it demands insight into the internal organisation of belief and meaning. Ideology, in Freeden’s morphological sense, provides the necessary conceptual lens for this task. It allows practitioners to identify which political concepts—such as justice, honour, community, or purity—are central to an individual’s self-concept, and how these may be repluralised through targeted interventions that reduce rigidity without provoking psychological reactance. In this context, cultural products such as songs, clothing or literature, as well as factors such as personality and relationships, are not in themselves ideology but significant carriers, displays and influencers of it.

Integrating the Levels

Ultimately, I agree with McCauley that progress lies in integration rather than exclusion. The field will benefit most from models that connect the individual and collective levels of analysis, tracing how personal ideological morphologies aggregate into shared frames and, conversely, how collective narratives influence personal meaning-making. My framework was designed precisely to facilitate that dialogue: it starts from the micro-level realities of individuals in counselling but remains compatible with meso-level theories of mobilisation. In the current landscape—where individualised, mixed, and unstable ideologies often supplant formal movements—such integration is not optional but essential.

Conclusion

Engaging with Clark McCauley’s critique has been both an intellectual challenge and a professional privilege. Few scholars have contributed as much to the psychological study of political violence, intergroup conflict, and radicalisation as McCauley. His decades of rigorous research have shaped the conceptual vocabulary and methodological standards that define our field. To have one’s work examined critically by a scholar of such stature is, in itself, a mark of recognition and an opportunity for growth. It is with sincere admiration that I acknowledge his generosity in devoting attention to my article and for advancing a discussion that will, I hope, strengthen our collective understanding of ideology’s role in extremism and its prevention.

This exchange underscores precisely why critical dialogue remains indispensable to scholarly progress. McCauley’s questions push us to clarify the boundaries of our concepts, to specify our levels of analysis, and to seek ever greater empirical precision. At the same time, they remind us that conceptual innovation often precedes methodological consolidation—that new lenses must first be defined before they can be measured. In that sense, our perspectives are not in opposition but in productive tension: frame analysis and ideological morphology represent complementary tools for understanding how meaning systems motivate political behaviour, from the individual to the collective level.

If this dialogue contributes even modestly to refining those tools, then it has served its purpose. The field of terrorism and extremism studies has long advanced through the interplay of conceptual rigour and empirical ingenuity, often guided by the insight of those who have laid its foundations. To borrow a well-trodden but enduring phrase, we all stand on the shoulders of giants. Clark McCauley is unmistakably one of them, and it is an honour to have my work considered worthy of such engagement.

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Endnotes

- 1 Daniel Koehler, "What's in a Word? Revisiting the Role of Ideology in the Practice of and Scholarship on Countering Violent Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 37, no. 7 (2025).
- 2 Far from being "my" invention, I drew on the works of John Wilson, *Introduction to Social Movements* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) and Martin Seliger, *Ideology and Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), who have introduced these elements of ideologies.
- 3 Michael Freeden, "Political Concepts and Ideological Morphology," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (1994).
- 4 Jacob Astley, "Ideological Idiosyncrasies and Individual-Level Radicalisation Pathways: Unpacking the Mutating Dynamics of Contemporary Extremism," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 20, no. 3 (2025); Cécile Rousseau et al., "Hybrid Ideologies in Clinical Settings: Implications for Intervention of the Changing Landscape in Violent Extremism," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 18, no. 3 (2024); Cécile Rousseau et al., "Ideological and Nihilistic Violence in Adolescents Referred to a Specialized Clinic for Violent Extremism," *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* 67, no. 2 (2025); Lewys Brace, Stephane J. Baele, and Debbie Ging, "Where Do 'Mixed, Unclear, and Unstable' Ideologies Come From? A Data-Driven Answer Centred on the Incelosphere," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 19, no. 2 (2024).
- 5 Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

About

Perspectives on Terrorism

Established in 2007, *Perspectives on Terrorism* (PT) is a quarterly, peer-reviewed, and open-access academic journal. PT is a publication of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), in partnership with the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) at Leiden University, and the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at the University of St Andrews.

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