Balint, Peter, *Respecting Toleration. Traditional Liberalism and Contemporary Diversity.*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. viii + 167.

After decades of neglect, the concept of toleration has become a central concern for moral and political theory since the late eighties when the issues arising from contemporary pluralism and cultural differences became paramount. The renewed interest for toleration, for exploring the possibility of such a concept as a tool for civil coexistence of differences in liberal democracy, has been however surrounded by doubts about its limits. From a political point of view, toleration has long been denounced as the counterfeit of despotism,[1] or as a disguised form of state repression.[2] From a social point of view, already Goethe remarked that no one likes to be tolerated, for what we want is recognition.[3]

These issues give rise to the three challenges to toleration from which Peter Balint's argument moves: the multicultural, the despotism and the neutrality challenge. The *multicultural challenge* in a way rephrases Goethe's objection to toleration, namely that it is only a second best, and does not grant inclusion to members of minority groups on an equal basis as members of majority. The *despotism challenge* instead rephrases Paine's concerns with toleration as a discretionary practice in the hands of political authority. Lastly, the *neutrality challenge* can be seen as a mixture of the criticisms both by Paine and Marcuse, for, if the state is neutral as to religion and ways of life, then toleration is redundant, and works as a repressive form of homogenization of differences. Taken together, these challenges lead to two opposite claims in the current discussion on toleration: the first according to which toleration is redundant, given liberal neutrality, the second according to which, instead, it is insufficient for minority differences to be equally included.

Balint's work takes issue with these two claims and presents a thorough defense of liberal toleration, considered as a freedom maximizing practice in the context of contemporary diversity. Balint offers a revised conception of toleration focused on the outcome of enhancing individual liberty in the face of diversity and of promoting a society where people having different and often incompatible ways of life are free to live as they see fit with minimal social and political restrictions. The emphasis on outcomes rather than attitudes or reasons is the first point of departure of Balint's view from the current discussion; this leads him to understand toleration as comprising two complementary views, a general permissive view of toleration and a more traditional conception of forbearance tolerance. Taken together, and applied at the state as well as at the citizens' level, these two understandings show that traditional liberalism, focused on negative liberty, has resources both to critique existing institutions for failing to properly apply neutrality and to accommodate the widest range of diversity in the same society. This is the core of Balint's original argument on toleration which articulates in three different steps: first, a critical stand against the mainstream view of toleration; second, a purely descriptive understanding of the con-

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[1] Cf. Paine, T. 1989 [1791], "The Rights of Man"*,* in Kuklick, B. (ed.), *Political Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 83-332 (94).
[2] Cf. Marcuse, H. 1969, "Repressive Tolerance", in Wolff, R.P., Moore, B. and Marcuse, H. (eds.), *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Boston: Beacon Press.
[3] Goethe, J.W. 1998, *Maxims and Reflections*, Hutchison, P. (ed.), London: Penguin.

cept of toleration against the prevalent moralized conception; third, a rebuttal of the expansion of toleration towards recognition and respect for differences. All three steps are meant to enhance the practice of toleration where what counts is behavior and outcomes instead of the right attitudes and reasons, in a context of diversity understood as different preferences rather than different cultures, religions, views.

The first step proposes a view of tolerance in line with the commonsense understanding of the tolerant society as one where people can live freely despite their different views and preferences. Contrary to the standard concept of toleration, implying the three components of objection, power to interfere, and withholding of the interference in favor of toleration,[4] a society is defined tolerant as far as it is permissive, without requiring a corresponding amount of objection and disapproval. In other words, Balint affirms that "being tolerant" refers to the wide range of activities and differences permitted in that society and not to the level of forbearance, for usually in a tolerant society there are fewer reasons to forebear, given that there are less reasons to object in the first place. In this general sense, indifference rather than objection is a relevant condition of permissive tolerance. For toleration as a general practice to be the case, only the power condition is relevant, meaning that the tolerator must have the effective power to hinder the different behavior or practice under consideration and nevertheless refrain to use the power of negative interference. The general practice of toleration does not rule out toleration as forbearance which is still needed in many cases. In case of forbearance tolerance, the three conditions of the standards model apply: 1. objection to a certain behavior, 2. power to negatively interfering with that behavior, and 3. withholding with that power. This general model is interpreted by Balint as purely descriptive in contrast with the prevalent tendency of philosophers to moralize toleration, either specifying that the objection must be of moral character or sustained by moral reasons or that the reasons to withhold the power of negative interference be of moral nature.[5] Balint is right in judging the moralized conception of toleration as unduly narrow, and mostly inapplicable in all interesting cases of contemporary toleration. The moralized conception is favored for a rigorous definition of toleration as a virtue, and also because it poses interesting philosophical puzzles as the case of the tolerant racist. If the good of toleration consists in sacrificing one's moral convictions for the sake of higher moral principles such as individual autonomy, authenticity and respect, then the stronger the objection, the more valuable toleration is, with the paradoxical result that a racist not acting on his racist conviction turns out more virtuous of a non-racist who does not have to overcome any objection to racial coexistence. Instead of devising ways out of the paradox, Balint gives up the moralized conception, and presents his descriptive forbearance tolerance without restrictions on the nature of the objections or on the reasons for non-hindrance. The combined result of the two steps considered so far is an enlarged view of toleration, where any act or omission by agents endowed with the pow-

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[4] Cf. King, P. 1976, *Toleration*, New York: St. Martin's Press; Forst, R. 2003, "Toleration, Justice and Reason", in McKinnon, C. and Castiglioni, D. (eds.), *The Culture of Toleration in Diverse Society. Reasonable Tolerance*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 71-85; Galeotti, A.E. 2015, "The Range of Toleration: From Toleration as Recognition back to Disrespectful Tolerance", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 41, 2, 93-110.

[5] Cf. Forst, R. 2013, *Toleration in Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

er of negative interference, but refraining to use it, is comprised within the range of toleration, whether caused by forbearance, indifference, respect for difference. The final step of Balint's argument is to show that toleration in his liberal understanding is the best way to accommodate differences, without being too demanding on citizens as it were the case with the claim that differences ought to be respected, and producing better results, given that, in his view, respect for differences and difference accommodation are two distinct things not necessarily reconciled with each other.

Balint's defense of toleration is refreshing after so many attacks on either the insufficiency or the excess of toleration. I think he is right in considering toleration a crucial tool for dealing with contemporary diversity. I also agree on his view that neutrality is not alternative to toleration but rather is its embodiment within liberal state, though his argument is different from mine. On the whole, however, his work presents significant problematic aspects. A crucial general problem lies in Balint's outcome-oriented approach to toleration which, on the one hand, enlarges the scope of toleration but, on the other, flattens toleration on liberty, and actually makes it redundant. Toleration in fact *consists* in letting people free to pursue whatever ideals or way of life they prefer. Thus any toleration act is an omission of negative interference, and non-interference is precisely what negative liberty consists in. So what toleration adds to negative liberty and to the political and moral duty to respect others' liberty? The specific role of toleration lies precisely in both *accounting* and *providing reasons* for the acts of agents who are confronted with behavior or practice they dislike and have the power to hinder, but who decide not to use their power. Toleration, on the one hand, *explains why* agents refrain to use the power at their disposal to hinder behavior they dislike, and, at the same time, *provide reasons* for agent's self-restraint. The motivational component is in this sense crucial. From a purely behavioral point of view, the tolerant agent simply respects others' liberty. But the specificity of toleration lies in that the tolerant agent is confronting something that she does not like and that she has power to interfere negatively, but *choose* not to. So the point of toleration is precisely to understand how that is possible, and consequently to analyze the *attitudes and the reasons for self-restraint.* If there is *no need* to self-restraint, then toleration is utterly superfluous, and a purely behavioral account simply misses the original problem for which toleration has represented a solution, for the alternative of toleration is conflict. In this context, I wonder why if outcome and behavior are all that matters for Balint's toleration, he is insisting on the distinction between tolerance and endurance (116).

From this remark, it also follows that the purely descriptive view by Balint is unconvincing. Though I share his criticism towards moralized views of toleration, it does not follow that a non-moralized view of toleration should be purely descriptive. After all, toleration is a political ideal, is something that we consider on the whole good and definitely preferable to intolerance, as Balint concedes. A conception of toleration should obviously provide the conditions for toleration to be the case and these conditions are also descriptive. But the framework within which such conditions are placed is normative, even if leaving open the reasons why toleration is a good thing, be it of pragmatic, strategic or moral nature. The problem with a purely descriptive and behavioral conception of tolerance is that no boundary to toleration is considered central to the concept; boundaries in fact make sense only to circumscribe the area within which toleration is a good thing from the area where it turns into culpable indulgence. Yet

boundaries are crucial for toleration and for contemporary disputes around toleration. Even if we understand the expression "zero-tolerance of crime", it is deeply misleading to consider toleration of headscarf and tolerance of rape on a par. That toleration as a value has boundary is not a secondary feature of a moralized view, but inscribed in the traditional doctrine since Locke, and it comes down to the two principles of self-defense of the political order and harm to third party. Though their interpretation is controversial, nevertheless the two principles are pretty straightforward and generally accepted for setting apart a tolerant instance from complicity in crime. Thus Balint's example of the neighbor who becomes aware of domestic violence and does nothing, for whatever reasons, is not an example of tolerance, but of culpable indulgence. In order to set apart such culpable indulgence from tolerance of headscarf descriptively, we need to mark the scope of toleration normatively with the two principles setting limits to toleration as a value. Such limits correspond to the practice and the common usages of toleration, and divide what is tolerable from what is intolerable and must be prosecuted, such as rape, homicide, assault. If a too moralized conception of toleration unduly restricts its scope, a purely descriptive concept is too unrestricted and loses its specificity. Thus we do not need either for making sense of contemporary issues of toleration. Despite his intention, Balint himself cannot keep his presentation completely descriptive, for here and there he makes implicit reference to the harm principle, as when he says that toleration is simply "allowing people to do the *non-harming* thing they want to do/be" (88) and then he speaks of "acts of *unjustified* intolerance" (88), or "what matters is that if an individual finds himself in a situation where they could *unjustifiably* hinder another, they do not do so" (97).

A third point of Balint's argument which I find unclear is his reference to "political toleration", by which he does not mean only toleration by the state or public authorities or officials, but also toleration among citizens, yet considered not in their political dimension but as social agents. Basically he excludes from political toleration only "interpersonal toleration". In his view political does not coincides with vertical, while horizontal is not necessarily social. But in which sense social issues of toleration between groups are political is not clear to me, for he rules out that they are political because the political authority is ultimately the arbiter in cases of toleration conflicts which do not find spontaneous settlement. This I take is the typical circumstance of toleration issues in contemporary society where a horizontal dislike causes a conflict that requires a vertical decision. In sum, I think that by "political toleration" he means relevant cases of toleration which reach national media and public forum.

A final remark on the problem of respect which Balint takes up in Ch. 5 criticizing the thesis according to which respect for differences should replace toleration as the proper way of dealing with contemporary diversity. His argument is that respect for differences is too demanding on citizens while it is not necessarily conducive to difference accommodation. My criticism does not concern the thesis but the argument, which relies on a questionable interpretation of Darwall's recognition-respect.[6] In line with his general behavioral and anti-attitudinal approach, recognition-respect is seen as the outward behavior ac-

[6] Darwall, S. 1977, "Two Kinds of Respect", *Ethics*, 88, 39-49; 2006, *Respect and the Second-Person Standpoint: Respect, Morality and Accountability*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

knowledging a certain status, such as addressing the judge in court as "Your Honour". But conflating respect-recognition with behavior leads to conceive respect as forceable, though forced respect sounds contradictory, and certainly does not satisfy the claim to be respected. To my mind, that is the reason why respect for differences cannot be demanded. In conclusion, Balint's work, though prospecting an original reflection on toleration, completely overlooks the symbolic aspect which plays such an important role in the conflicts over diversity and in their proper resolution via principled accommodations.

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Cameron, Ross P., *The Moving Spotlight. An Essay on Time and Ontology.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. x + 219.

Time flows. Things change. What is now present was future and will be past. Notoriously, 'A-theorists' (who believe that the passage of time is a genuine feature of reality) have tried to characterise this idea in a rigorous way. One prominent group, the 'presentists', think of the flow of time as a relentless process of creation and annihilation of purely present things. Past and future entities are no part of the inventory of the world.[1] Non-presentist A-theories, by contrast, inflate their ontology with more than merely present things. Some, the 'growing block' theorists, allow for the existence of past things, such as dinosaurs and Roman Emperors. Their inventory of the world becomes bigger and bigger as time goes by, including a growing list of things that were present but are no longer.[2] There is also the "mirror image" of the growing block view, which holds that future things exist, in addition to present ones, but that there are no past things whatsoever. While Caesar is no longer part of the ontological inventory, future Martian outposts are included; the outposts are "out there" waiting to become present. In other words, the flow of time "shrinks" the edge of the block, making the inventory of the world smaller and smaller as time goes by.[3] The last non-presentist A-theory is the 'moving spotlight' view (hereafter, 'MSV'). MSV is a theory according to which 'presentness' is something that *moves*, "somewhat like the spot of light from a policeman's bull's-eye traversing the fronts of the houses in a street. What is illuminated is the present, what has been illuminated is the past, and what has not yet been illuminated is the future".[4] MSV is a version of 'eternalism', the view that past, present, and future

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[1] See, e.g., Hinchliff, M. 1996, "The Puzzle of Change", in Tomberlin, J.E. (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives*, 10, Cambridge (MA): Blackwell, 119-36; Markosian, N. 2004, "A Defense of Presentism", in Zimmerman, D. (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 47-82.

[2] See, e.g., Correia, F. and Rosenkranz, S., 2013, "Living on the Brink, or Welcome Back, Growing Block!", in Bennett, K. and Zimmerman, D. (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, 8, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 333-50; Forbes, G.A. 2015, "The Growing Block's Past Problems", *Philosophical Studies*, 173, 699-709.

[3] See, e.g., Casati, R. and Torrengo, G. 2011, "The not so Incredible Shrinking Future", *Analysis*, 71, 1-5; Hudson, H. and Wasserman, R. 2009, "Van Inwagen on Time Travel and Changing the Past", in Zimmerman, D. (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, 5, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 41-49.

[4] Broad, C.D. 1923, *Scientific Thought*, London: Kegan Paul, 59. See, e.g., Skow, B. 2009,

things all exist: Caesar, Lady Gaga, and the Mars outposts all exist, they are all equally real, and they are each located in different parts of the temporal dimension. The view that past and future are equally part of the realm of being is defended also by 'B-theorists'.[5] In contrast to an A-theorist's approach to time, a B-theorist does not take pastness, presentness, and futurity (the 'A qualities') to be part of the fundamental level of reality. No instant can be said to be past, present or future in an absolute sense. Instants of time would be tied together ('ordered') by a mere relation of temporal precedence or succession (the 'B relations'). According to many, the differences between A-theories and B-theories do not prevent philosophers from combining elements of the two approaches. MSV, in particular, is often thought of as exploiting a distinctively B-theoretic ontology (i.e., eternalism) plus the A-theoretic notion of absolute presentness.

Ross Cameron's latest book, *The Moving Spotlight*, takes a step in a different direction. His central, thought-provoking claim is that MSV should be understood as closer to presentism than to a refined version of B-theoretic eternalism. In a nutshell, his idea is that MSV should be conceived as an enriched A-theory, wherein the truth of tensed sentences (e.g., 'Alice is standing' and 'Martha was sitting') rests upon the way things are *now*. And, in accordance with presentism, Cameron's view maintains that there is no difference between how things are and how things are right *now* (162). Nevertheless, Cameron's MSV is genuinely distinct from presentism, since "non-present as well as present entities are some way *now*" (162). In other words,

> the moving spotlighter grants that one can speak from the present perspective *about* the non-present. That one can say how non-present things *now* are. Truth simpliciter is present truth, but amongst the way things are now—*contra* presentism—is that mere past and future entities are some way or other (258).

According to Cameron, this distinctive version of MSV is the best A-theoretic metaphysics on the market. Such a claim might sound puzzling. Famously, and importantly, there are at least *six* problems that a good A-theory should be able to address: (1) the so-called 'epistemological problem' ("How do you know that you are now *now*?"), (2) J.M.E. McTaggart's infamous paradox, (3) a problem of providing adequate truth-makers for past-tensed sentences, (4) a problem of accounting for relations to non-present things, (5) a problem of addressing our intuitions about the openness of the future, and (6) a problem of explaining in what sense the present is 'privileged'. Now, it is widely held that presentism and the growing block view perform better than MSV when dealing with these problems. Growing block theorists are able to deal with (3), (4), (5), and (6), although they struggle with (1) and (2). Presentists, on the other hand, offer an elegant solution to (1), (2), and (6), but face difficulties with the rest. But MSV is usually taken to be in the worst position, overall, since it offers a satisfactory answer to only two of them: (3) and (4).[6] Ross Cameron's aim in *The Moving Spot-*

"Relativity and the Moving Spotlight", *Journal of Philosophy*, 106, 666-78; Skow, B. 2012, "Why Does Time Pass?", *Noûs*, 46, 223-42; Deasy, D. 2015, "The Moving Spotlight Theory", *Philosophical Studies*, 172, 2073-89.

[5] See, e.g., Mellor, D.H. 1998, *Real Time II*, London & New York: Routledge; Oaklander, N.A. 2004, *The Ontology of Time*, Amherst (NY): Prometheus Book; Le Poidevin, R. 2007, *The Images of Time*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[6] The fact that presentism and the growing block view solve more problems than MSV is

*light* is to establish that his novel version of MSV successfully addresses all six important problems, in contrast to standard iterations of MSV.

The book is divided into five chapters. In Chapter 1, Cameron argues that, contrary to popular belief, presentism faces the epistemological problem as much as other A-theories. In Chapter 2, he deals with McTaggart's paradox. Cameron concludes that neither the regress nor the circularity identified by McTaggart's argument are vicious; they do not justify the denial of the A-theoretic approach. Chapter 3 explains why MSV is more attractive within an approach to truth-making according to which "giving an ontological underpinning of tense is to say what makes it the case that the tensed truths are true" (24). This approach is opposed to the so-called 'Quine-Lewis-Sider position', according to which "giving an ontological underpinning of tense is to say what it is in tenseless terms for a tensed claim to be true" (23-24). In Chapter 4, Cameron develops (or, at least, tries to develop) a view that, as we anticipated above, shares with presentism the thesis that how things are *now* is how they are *simpliciter*, while inflating the ontology with more than present things. Finally, Chapter 5 analyses how this version of MSV can account for our intuitions concerning the metaphysical difference between a 'fixed' past and an 'open' future.

Is this book worth the read? Yes. Absolutely. At the very least, it is a brilliant defence of MSV. Still, we think there is a crucial point in Cameron's approach that makes his theory obscure, to say the least. As we said above, according to Cameron, to exist simpliciter is to exist now. But, in contrast to the presentist, Cameron accepts that also non-present things are part of reality now, in some way or other. This allows Cameron to defend the claim that his MSV is not a sui generis B-theory, since he does *not* believe in the reality of past or future. What he believes in is the reality of past and future *things*, which can be truly described by saying how they are now, whereas the way they were or will be is not part of reality. Still, Cameron does not seem to offer any account of the way in which past and future things have *now* irreducible past- or future-tensed properties, such as "having been such-and-such". Of course, Cameron might describe the instantiation of a past- or future-tensed property in terms of a *present instantiation* of that same property. But what does it mean exactly? Why should we take an object instantiating a property *now* to be a past or future entity instead of a mere present object? In short, one might have the suspicion that Cameron's view could ultimately collapse into a version of presentism in disguise.[7]

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good evidence in favour of the first two theories only under the hypothesis that the problems are equally forceful; and this seems controversial. For example, one might be skeptical on whether, in developing a theory of time, the epistemological concerns raised by the first problem carry the same weight as the metaphysical concerns raised by the remaining ones.

[7] We would like to thank Dave Ingram and Giuliano Torrengo for helpful comments on a previous version of this review.

Dentith, Matthew R.X., *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*.
New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, pp. xiii + 190.

Conspiracy theories are an important, salient aspect of everyone's life, be it vehement rejection of them, passionate advocacy, dispassionate examination, or all three. Be it concerning our personal affairs, corporate activities or political affairs of state. For those who wish to gain the necessary conceptual understanding of the complexities involved in the nature, epistemology and social and political significance of conspiracy theories, philosopher Matthew R.X. Dentith's *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories* is a natural starting point. As the title promises, it is, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, not *Dentith's Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*. Yet it seems to me we get the best of both.[1] This is the challenge.

When we take hold of the book, a bright sun-yellow cover, festooned with 37 icons referencing diverse contemporary conspiracy theories greets us.[2] Each recognizable to most anyone, Dentith has perused every one of these families of suspicion. No surprise, the book is rich in real-world examples of conspiracy and conspiracy theorizing, present and past. I was startled one day while walking through a university department to see a poster-sized print of Dentith's book-cover hanging on a colleague's office wall. I should not have been. This colleague is a history professor. Historians know well the reality of ambitious political conspiracies within our collective past.

Dentith has been active in the field of epistemology of conspiracy theory for the last decade. He calls himself a "conspiracy theory theorist". Author of several important papers as well as the blog episto.org and podcast, "The Podcaster's Guide to the Conspiracy", Dentith brings together in this book a thorough research and analysis background. In a discussion as thorough as his, it would be easy, and enjoyable, to write a book about the book.[3]

It opens with a concise forward by New Zealand philosopher Charles Pigden. Pigden's 1995 "Popper Revisited: Or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?" anticipated much of the discussion in the epistemic literature in the years to come.[4] While its prescience was not recognized for a time, now it is considered something of a classic, being the first philosophical literature on the subject in decades. Concerning Dentith's text, Pigden concludes,

> There [is much] to be said on behalf of the great and good who routinely dismiss conspiracy theories as (in Christopher Hitchens' felicitous phrase) the 'exhaust fumes of democracy'. Yes, indeed there is. And that more *is* said—and is said at length—by Matthew Dentith, who patiently refutes it point by point. […] Now, read on (xi).

A forward like this by a major contributor to the literature encourages us to.

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[1] While there have been a few fireworks in the field since its publication, all fall easily within the text's categories and explanatory frameworks and appear best understood within these.
[2] Yes, I counted them.
[3] all-embracing.episto.org is a well organized, interesting, even-handed if sometimes intentionally humorous resource for those interested in the epistemology of conspiracy theory. One can also find an imagine of a bright yellow book there.
[4] Pigden, C. 1995, *The Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 25, 1, 3-34.

Dentith's introduction wastes no time. He immediately points to the "elephant in the room". What say we to conspiracy theories that are, oddly, official government explanations and animate major acts of state and global events? Some conspiracy theories appear ludicrous, some strange but interesting, and some received wisdom. For instance, the official explanation for the 9/11 attacks appears to be a conspiracy theory. After all, people conspired to high jack planes and kill thousands. Yet there is no sense this is suspect for relying on a conspiracy claim. Even if calling an explanation a "conspiracy theory" is, on what Pigden calls "the received wisdom", the kiss of death, a double standard appears to be in play.

We must sort out what is a "conspiracy theory". Then we must determine how we sort out the well evidenced from ludicrous conspiracy theories. This sets the stage for the epistemic adventure ahead. One need not be a specialist in this field of social epistemology—a field that straddles both epistemology and political philosophy—to find the topic every bit as intrinsically interesting as it is socially ubiquitous.

## 1. Definition and Dismissal

Our first meet and greet the elephant brings us to the second chapter, "Conspiracy Theory Theories" and then, like the blind men in the story of exploring the elephant's contours, on to the four chapters that follow. What is the proper definition of "conspiracy theory"? How do we best understand this powerful social practice? Is it mentally defective? Rationally or epistemically deranged? The tensions here seem to derive from the fact that while there are many accusations of conspiracy that are poorly evidenced and implausible, there appear to be a great many conspiracies, both small and extraordinary in their political ambitions, where our belief in them is well evidenced and commonplace. So at what point does belief in a conspiracy become belief in a *conspiracy theory*?

The definitional problem of what a "conspiracy theory" is looms large. It powerfully influences our discussion, as skeptics of "conspiracy theory" will wish to reserve the term to a pejorative, social "kiss of death", while those more epistemic-minded will wish to avoid *a prior* mal-biasing against explanations that cite a conspiracy as a significant cause of events, recognizing that in many cases such explanations turned out to be correct. Much has been written on the definitional issue in recent years, a fight largely over what the term "conspiracy theory" is a gateway to; delusion *or* intellectual honesty? Definitional issues may seem uninviting, but in Dentith's hands the survey he supplies proves to be an excellent teaser for anyone interested in the nature of different social explanations.

On the question of definition of "conspiracy theory", Dentith's solution is elegant: A conspiracy theory is any explanation that cites a conspiracy as a salient cause. Its inclusive nature opens up the great canyon-lands concerning our relationship to conspiracy and its theory as something ubiquitous. Epistemic and pragmatic questions follow about the proper strategies to distinguish which conspiracy theories to investigate. These questions would have been invisible under more constrained, politically distorted approaches to the issue. This is just what we would hope from good philosophical work; answers that give us better questions.

Next, Dentith outlines the basic fork in the adventure. The first tine: Is there something *mentally* or *socially* misguided about belief in conspiracy explanations? Pejorative definitions of conspiracy explanations portray them as somehow fundamentally flawed, and those who explore them, pathological; pejorative, pathologizing attitudes do the same. Consider the claim by social psychologists Brotherton and French that a conspiracy theory can be defined as *an unverified and relatively implausible allegation of conspiracy*. They use a variety of different definitions to try and capture what they are referring to with respect to conspiracy theories. Aside from the claim conspiracy theories are unverified and relatively implausible, they also classify them as "anomalistic beliefs", which they define as "[beliefs] that defy conventional understanding of reality, including (but not limited to) belief in the paranormal and conspiracy theories".[5]

The tactic of pejorative definitions and attitudes is to divert the discussion from epistemic issues to psychological critiques and sociological fears. Set against the background of our epistemic and political concerns, this diversion emerges as interesting but comparatively limited in importance. It is, however, easily abused. Dentith poses insightful and pressing questions for us to consider about any psychological, pathologizing, maneuver. He is not alone in this concern about how to frame our understanding of conspiracy theorizing. An establishmentarian assumption seems at work in pejorative glosses on "conspiracy theory"; one at odds with human history and normal human rationality. So Dentith's discussion is useful for social scientists not just interested in how to approach conspiracy *theories*, but conspiracy *theorists*.

To the second tine: Is there something intrinsically *epistemically* defective in conspiracy theories? Again, the discussion is interesting and informed. How we easily separate warranted conspiratorial explanations from warranted non-conspiratorial merely by pointing to the explanatory structure of either. The puzzle, if there is one, is that as explanations based on human intentions and subsequent actions, both appear the same. But are they?

## 2. Social Epistemology

All the proceeding leads us to the critical epistemic discussion. Beginning with chapter 6, and for six more chapters, the book turns to a detailed exploration of the epistemology of how and when we should, or should not, embrace a conspiracy theory. This discussion spans almost ninety pages of carefully delineated material and is an excellent introduction to the fascinating debates here: The crux of the epistemology of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing, really. I think it is safe to say: If we want to understand humans—a social and highly organized, hierarchical, cooperative and deceptive primate—we have to understand our practice of conspiracy. That inevitably makes us conspiracy theorists. Even theorists of conspiracy theory.

We operate on both the particular and the epistemic level. Establishing consistency here has proven difficult for many; especially when it troubles our current political pieties. Dentith's approaches to this include the problems with appeal-to-authority arguments against conspiracy theories, whether official stories have any privileged epistemic status (I agree, they often do not), and how

[5] Brotherton, R. and French, C. 2014, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Susceptibility to the Conjunction Fallacy", *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 28, 2, 238-48 (239).

evidence and inference functions in the evaluation of conspiracy theories. In short, a fore-taste of social epistemic heaven. Whatever we make of the critiques deployed by Dentith and the conclusions reached, the discussion is wide-ranging, informative and sometimes daring.

Once the way has been made for the rational legitimacy of conspiracy theories, we need to know how to judge them epistemically. The answer that emerges is: *Only on their evidential merits*. In the literature it has come to be known as "particularism" about conspiracy theories. They should be judged on the evidence particular to each. Two young philosophers, Taylor and Buenting, coined this term for "case by case" evaluation in 2010.[6] But the currency of this simple moniker is owed to Dentith. In sum, Dentith's view is that conspiracy theories turn out to be birds ordinary to the flock of social explanations, and there is no *general* reason to be skeptical about them. Particularism, while it may seem obvious enough, is revolutionary when placed in contrast to the long winter of automatic, if irresponsible, dismissal of conspiracy theories that characterized most of 20th century academia and mainstream social commentary.

When turning to the epistemic issues, the book shines brightest, rather like its cover. Dentith supplies his readers a God's eye view to the epistemic debate about conspiracy theories. The recent research discussed includes that of Charles Pigden, Brian Keeley, David Coady, Steve Clarke, myself and others. This research defines the field as we find it today. He covers the work of these social epistemologists with scrupulous attention to detail and an unswerving fidelity to their actual positions. Dentith's critiques in response to the diverse positions within this wide-ranging debate are original and important. The more one is familiar with this debate, the more one recognizes this. His responses should be of interest to philosophers wishing to join what proves to be an exciting and socially relevant discussion.

If we have some reservations about Dentith's approach to epistemic impasses, these are often evidence of his originality and caution. For instance, *attenuation strategies* are frequent in Dentith's work by "taking the next step" and arguing while the problems are real, they are not as bad as they might seem. This is the opposite of my typical concern, which is to directly critique the current information hierarchy's basic methods of information distribution. We ought to regard these as sometimes unreliable, and more likely to be unreliable when we most need them to be reliable. Dentith does a fairly good job of conceding the difficult epistemic problems we face, but is careful to not allow the spectacle to overwhelm. Or naiveté to seduce us. This is unusual in the literature. It is an interesting manoeuvre. Instances of this "taking the next step" in order to attenuate are found throughout the book.

Juha Räikkä has maintained that our use of "conspiracy theory" is dependent on its contrast to the established official narrative. Räikkä suggests conspiracy theories lose their property of being such when they gain sufficient acknowledgement, popular or at least, official. No contrast, no conspiracy theory.[7] David Coady takes a similar if more basic approach, requiring that a conspiracy

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[6] Buenting, J. and Taylor, J. 2010, "Conspiracy Theories and Fortuitous Data", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences,* 40, 4, 576-78.
[7] Räikkä, J. 2009, "The Ethics of Conspiracy Theorizing", *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 43, 457-468, 460.

theory by definition must be contrary to an official story (2006).[8] There are numerous counter-examples to this claim—for instance, when a government has no official story concerning x, yet people are promoting conspiracy theories concerning x. Both Coady and Räikkä's claims are at best statistical ones about linguistic usage, and therefore malleable and amenable to correction. Dentith comments,

> However, we should ask why we—particularly philosophers—would want to preserve common usage if it does not advance our analysis of these things called 'conspiracy theories'. We can add to this that Coady's defense of this particular common usage might also have the negative effect of enabling government conspiracies. If we preserve the notion that the terms 'conspiracy theories' and 'conspiracy theorists' are pejoratives, then that might shield conspirators from the accusation that they are conspiring (113).

Dentith gives ground, attenuating the problem, agreeing that "conspiracy theory" is understood as "contrary to the official narrative" but asks that (1) we change this understanding in the name of better analysis and (2) we presently ignore this purported common usage as it is dangerous in a democracy.

My approach to Coady's "contrary" addendum is direct. I suspect "contrary to official stories" is not common usage. The claim that it is contrary to common usage is contrary to my experience, except in certain academic parlors and within mainstream media. Research by social psychologist Michael Wood supports this. There is no popular correlation between "conspiracy theory" and "unlikely".[9] In Wood's study participants were presented the same official narrative, but in one version, "conspiracy theory" was the representation of political facts, in the other it was not. No differences in credibility occurred. We might conclude the pathologizing nature of the phrase "conspiracy theory" is an interesting figment of mainstream media, political orthodoxy and academia. By "official stories" we mean the accounts of mainstream media, government and orthodox academia. As a common user I doubt that in common usage "conspiracy theory" is necessarily contrary to official stories, or even ordinarily contrary to them. Further, factions within government, corporations or families can talk about other factions conspiring against them and hardly violate common usage. Others may then denounce these claims as "conspiracy theories"; but there is no official story to be contrary to.[10] Yet, popularly, we tend to discuss those that are

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[8] Coady, D. 2006, "Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories", in Coady, D. (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, Hampshire: Ashgate, 115-27 (117).

[9] See Wood, M.J., "Some Dare Call It Conspiracy: Labeling Something a Conspiracy Theory Does Not Reduce Belief in It": http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.12285/full. The upshot is "conspiracy theory" does not function as a term of popular dismissal or contrary to an "official story".

[10] In my "Conspiracy Theory and Rationality", in Jensen, C. and Harre, R. (eds.), *Beyond Rationality*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, I offer a more detailed counter-example to Coady's addendum involving a series of murders which someone comes to recognize as connected to a conspiracy, and thus forms a conspiracy theory; but there is no official story, just that this murder occurred, that murder occurred, and so on, and the conspiracy theory she forms is hardly contrary to *that*. It is consistent with that and relies on it. There is nothing that violates common usage here, so the best explanation appears to be that Coady is mistaking meaning, or if you like, common usage, with salience.

contrary to official accounts as these are more *salient* to us. Coady and Dentith miss this. Salience is what appears to be at work, not common usage or meaning. Coady is not respecting common usage; he is paying homage to a political doctrine about discourse in public venues: Do not violate the official narrative of Western democratic society. The story of the emperor's new clothes comes to mind. However, Dentith's attenuation technique is very useful in academia. The opposite of tone-deaf. In academia an overt anxiety exists concerning conspiracy theory, as it under-cuts the tacit assumption—a rather strange and suspect one, given well know history, distant and recent—that the established political and economic order is more or less proper, only conspiratorial when malfunctioning (or protecting the state against other states) and our proper analysis of it should never question this, but always presuppose it.

## 3. Conclusion

Anyone interested in the questions surrounding conspiracy theory and theorists will find Dentith's book a refreshingly clear, calm and thorough accounting and analysis of the issues concerning conspiracy theory and how we can approach these. It is an adventure. Again, the sign of an interesting book, one about an important social topic at a high level of analysis and honest manner of examination, is the way it provokes diverse questions and disagreements. Dentith's even-handed style while playing with fire does not disappoint on this score. His intellectual caution will appeal to those who are new to the field. His forthrightness will appeal to all of us. When you have gained far better questions and lost simplistic answers, Dentith knows he has done his job.

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