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Argumenta is the official journal of the Italian Society for Analytic Philosophy (SIFA). It was founded in 2014 in response to a common demand for the creation of an Italian journal explicitly devoted to the publication of high quality research in analytic philosophy. From the beginning Argumenta was conceived as an international journal, and has benefitted from the cooperation of some of the most distinguished Italian and non-Italian scholars in all areas of analytic philosophy.
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**Book Reviews**
The second issue of the third volume of *Argumenta* opens with a Special Issue edited by Juha Räikkä and devoted to a topic whose importance it is difficult to exaggerate. The topic—and title—is *The Ethics and the Epistemology of Conspiracy Theories*, and its importance lies in the theme’s implications not only for philosophical theorizing, but also for the civil and moral temperature of our societies.

Given that, on the one hand, most conspiracy theorizing cannot be ruled out as simply irrational and, on the other, that it can be very harmful, it appears of the utmost urgency to get a grip on the nature of this kind of theorizing and find a way to orientate ourselves relative to the many conspiracy theories that crop up from time to time. To this end, the lines of thinking of the philosophers, social scientists and psychologists contributing to this Special Issue will surely help to arrive at a more balanced attitude toward this phenomenon.

After the Special Issue, we present three articles dedicated to Michael Dummett’s reconstruction of McTaggart’s proof of the unreality of time, the metaphysical possibility of existing without any physical support, and an evaluation of the bearing of Aquinas’ practical doctrine on Hume’s Is-ought thesis and Moore’s Open-question argument. It is our conviction that these articles will greatly contribute to foster the discussion of their respective topics.

The section of Book Reviews then rounds off the number once again. We are proud to offer readers three other thoughtful reviews of as many interesting books.
As always, all the articles appearing in *Argumenta* are freely accessible and freely downloadable. Heartily thanking all the colleagues who have acted as referees, we wish everybody:

*Buona lettura!*

Massimo Dell’Utri
Editor
The Ethics and the Epistemology of Conspiracy Theories

Edited by

Juha Räikkä

The Journal of the Italian Society for Analytic Philosophy
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Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction

Juha Räikkä

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1. Introduction

The philosophical interest in political conspiracy theories is a rather recent phenomenon. Although philosophers have always been interested in conspiracies—Niccolò Machiavelli and David Hume, for example, studied them—not much has been written about conspiracy theories. However, conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing have recently gathered a considerable amount of attention among a number of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, history, law, psychology and political science. This special issue of Argumenta delves into the ethical and epistemological questions of political conspiracy theories. The authors of the papers are philosophers, social scientists and psychologists. Some of the topics discussed are conceptual and theoretical while others are primarily normative and also empirical. This collection aims to further the recent debates concerning the rationality, ethical acceptability and nature of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing.

Conspiracy theories raise both ethical and epistemic questions. The correct understanding of the epistemic status of conspiracy theories is important not only for intellectual reasons but also for practical reasons. One can pass off fanciful explanations with a laugh but potentially correct explanations deserve serious attention, especially if failing to notice them may lead to grave social consequences. Conspiracy theories may have an important function in democratic societies, and conspiracy theorists or at least investigative journalists may help to maintain social openness and make potential conspirators think twice. However, it is important to notice that conspiracy theories may also have adverse effects when they are made public. Conspiracy theorizing can be harmful, given that a theory or theories (e.g. about vaccination or global warming) are accepted by many people and the acceptance influences their behavior. Many authors have followed Karl Popper’s famous criticism and pointed out that conspiracy theories tend to be unwarranted.\(^1\) No matter how convincingly

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\(^1\) Modern debate on conspiracy theories started when Karl Popper (1902-1994) criticized what he called the conspiracy theory of society, namely the claim that “all results, even those which at first sight do not seem to be intended by anybody, are the intended results of the actions of people who are interested in these results” (Popper 2013: 307). In 1999 Brian L. Keeley published a paper titled “Of Conspiracy Theories” in The Journal of Philosophy and, after that, the philosophical debate on conspiracy theories has largely
conspiracy theorists try to defend their cases, their theories are usually considered less plausible than the received explanations, supported by relevant epistemic authorities. As far as the epistemic authorities deserve their position, the burden of proof is on the side of conspiracy theorists.

This collection consists of seven papers dedicated to the study of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing. In the first paper Stephan Lewandowsky, Elisabeth A. Lloyd and Scott Prophy argue that non-conventional forms of cognition, such as conspiracist ideation and belief in the paranormal, are poor as truth-tracking devices. The point is that actual conspiracies are usually identified by conventional cognition, whereas non-existent conspiracies are the domain of conspiracist cognition. In the second paper Joseph Uscinski aims to show that conspiracy theories should be treated with skepticism but not as wrong or false per se, as conspiracy theories have unique epistemological properties which shield them from falsification. Still, conspiracy theories may be necessary to the healthy functioning of society. Marion Vorms and Philippe Huneman argue in the third paper that conspiracy theories are very heterogeneous and that the prospects of a unified account of conspiracy theories are very low. Lee Basham discusses the epistemic problem of toxic truths in the fourth paper. “Toxicity” is the likelihood that some conspiratorial scenarios are too “toxic” for our usual institutions of public information to disseminate to the public, or even pursue. Basham argues that cover-up via intentional neglect poses a significant threat to a functioning democracy. In the fifth paper David Coady compares conspiracy theories to scientific theories and argues that just as most of us regard bad scientific theories (i.e. the false, unjustified and harmful ones) as an acceptable price to pay for good scientific theories, we should regard bad conspiracy theories as an acceptable price to pay for the good ones. In the sixth paper, Kurtis Hagen deals with the question whether conspiracy theories operate within “monological belief systems”, in which conspiracy theorists find support for their conspiratorial beliefs in other conspiratorial beliefs, or in related generalizations, rather than in evidence directly relevant to the conspiracy in question. Hagen argues that such a claim is either wrong or misleading. In the final paper, Matthew Dentith’s contention is that we cannot use a sub-set of conspiracy theorists—the conspiracists—as a reason to be suspicious of conspiracy theorizing in general, and that the faults of the conspiracists are—should such theorists even exist—overrated.

As the guest editor of this special issue of Argumenta, I would like to thank all the authors for their valuable contributions. I am also grateful to the anonymous referees for their careful work. Special thanks are due to Massimo Dell’Utri, the editor of Argumenta, for his advice and support for this project.

I would like to start the discussion by considering briefly the question whether the state should have an active role in debates concerning political centered upon the question of whether the acceptance of particular conspiracy theories commits conspiracy theorists to a view that public institutions, companies and media are untrustworthy in general, and whether it is problematic if it does. Keeley (1999: 116-118) argued that it is usually irrational to believe in conspiracy theories, as they entail “an almost nihilistic degree of skepticism about the behavior and motivations of other people and the social institutions they constitute”. Critics have opposed the argument by denying that belief in a conspiracy theory entails “skepticism”, and by claiming that skepticism of “people and institutions” is actually unproblematic, as we have excellent historical reasons not to trust in public institutions and authorities.
conspiracy theories. While the recent discussion on conspiracy theories has been mainly theoretical and research oriented, some contributions have been rather practical in the sense that their aim has been to tell what kinds of actions the authorities should undertake in order to struggle against conspiracy theories, in particular, conspiracy theories that are considered to be potentially harmful. Some authors have defended the claim that, in certain circumstances, the dissemination of some conspiracy theories should be prohibited by law (Lavi k 2015). Others have claimed that the state should secretly intervene in groups that develop and disseminate those theories. Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009: 219), for instance, have defended “a cognitive infiltration of extremist groups”. Gérald Bronner (2016), Karen Douglas and others have argued that conspiracism “is indeed a problem that must be taken seriously, one which requires a proper response”. They do not mention legal prohibitions or secret action, but they share the idea that the state should actively struggle against conspiracy theories.

How we should deal with conspiracy theories? In what follows I will briefly evaluate the idea that the state should take an active role in debates concerning political conspiracy theories. I will argue that if we want to evaluate the demand that the state authorities should fight against political conspiracy theories, then it is important to know what exactly conspiracy theories are. As far as the demand for state action concerns claims that are ordinarily called conspiracy theories, then we need an understanding of what kinds of claims are normally called conspiracy theories. I will argue that if we adopt the ordinary understanding of the notion of conspiracy theory, then the idea that the state should prevent or influence open political debates does not sound desirable. According to ordinary language, conspiracy theories are implausible, but they can be true. Therefore the idea of preventing their public and open analysis sounds dangerous—even if we accept the fact that some conspiracy theories can be potentially harmful. Those who defend state action against conspiracy theorizing tend to claim that they are interested only in false conspiracy theories. However, in what follows, I will try to point out that it is often rather difficult to tell which claims about conspiracies are false, and not only believed to be false. People are not infallible, and history proves that some claims about conspiracies that were considered implausible have actually been true. Therefore, the idea that the state should actively intervene in public discussions seems problematic, although the authorities can ensure that the views of the scientific community receive enough publicity, and that people have sufficient skills to interpret media, and so on. The state need not be passive but it should not intervene in open political debates.

2. Characterizing Conspiracy Theories: Three Methods

Let us start with the issue of definition. Roughly speaking, there have been three different ways to define or characterize the notion of conspiracy theory. First, a definition can narrow the meaning of “conspiracy theory” and restrict it more than its ordinary usage suggests. Second, a definition can expand the meaning of the concept and make it refer to things that are not usually called conspiracy theories. Finally, a definition can try to catch the ordinary meaning of the concept, as accurately as possible. The third option is what we should try to do here, given that the demand for state action concerns theories that are ordinarily called conspiracy theories. But let us briefly consider each of these methods.
1. The idea of narrowing the meaning of “conspiracy theory” is commonly used among social psychologists. Viren Swami and his group, for instance, describe conspiracy theories as a “subset of false beliefs in which the ultimate cause of an event is believed to be due to a plot by multiple actors working together with a clear goal in mind, often unlawfully and in secret” (Swami et al. 2014: 572). Karen Douglas and Robbie Sutton have called conspiracy theories “fanciful alternatives to mainstream accounts” (Douglas and Sutton 2011: 544). These characterizations are understandable and useful in the sense that psychologists are often particularly interested in irrational beliefs and want to study their causes.

However, it is clear that many conspiracy theories are not fanciful. There is nothing irrational in believing in some fine-grained conspiracy theory that can be true, at least in principle. When asked whether we should fight against conspiracy theories, most people understand the issue as a question concerning explanations that are usually called conspiracy theories. Obviously, ordinary language allows that some conspiracy theories can be true.

2. Some philosophers have suggested that we should actually expand the meaning of “conspiracy theory” and reject its ordinary usage. Lee Basham, for instance, argues that “any explanation of events that includes a conspiracy as a salient cause” should be called “conspiracy theory”. The motivation for such a move is not completely clear but perhaps the defenders of the “analytic definition” suspect that ordinary people use the notion of conspiracy theory “wrongly” (whatever that could mean) or that the concept does not really have an “ordinary” meaning. Or perhaps they would like to redefine “conspiracy theory” in order to release the concept from its pejorative connotations (cf. Husting and Orr 2007; see also Wood 2016). Or maybe they want to expand the meaning of “conspiracy theory” to include all historical explanations that refer to conspiracies, as then the claim that “conspiracy theories are often warranted” would be true.

Basham’s and others’ approach is interesting. However, it is one thing to try to say something about explanations that are usually called conspiracy theories and another thing to say something about all explanations that refer to actual or alleged plots and conspiracies. History textbooks are full of stories that mention the term “conspiracy”. But the textbooks do not describe explanations that are usually called conspiracy theories. Obviously, in ordinary language “conspiracy theory” does not refer to all explanations that include term “conspiracy”. For instance, to say that the events of September 11th in 2001 were due to a conspiracy on the part of al-Qaeda is not to support a conspiracy theory. Similarly, to write a newspaper article saying that six security agents were arrested in Kabul in 2011 as they conspired to assassinate President Hamid Karzai is not to defend a conspiracy theory (as far as we follow the rules of ordinary language). Of course, the question of when it is appropriate to explain political events by referring to plots may be interesting in its own right—as argued for instance by Matthew Dentith (2016)—but not all explanations that refer to plots and conspiracies are normally called conspiracy theories. The question of whether the state should actively fight against conspiracy theories does not concern all explanations that include term “plot” or “conspiracy”. Nobody would say that the state should prevent publishing usual historical explanations that include term “conspiracy”.

2 Basham 2016: 6-7; see also Pigden 2007: 222; Dentith 2016.
And nobody would say that newspapers should not write about the Volkswagen emission scandal, even if the news may include the word “conspiracy”.  

3. The question how the concept of a “conspiracy theory” is commonly used is empirical, and the usage of the concept may vary in different times and cultures. It is unlikely that ordinary language analysis provides us with a universal definition of “conspiracy theory”. The gray area (where we are uncertain whether an explanation is a conspiracy theory or not) is large. Furthermore, the common usage of the concept is hardly completely coherent. Still, there are many clear cases in which we are confident that an explanation is a political conspiracy theory and, similarly, there are many clear cases in which we are confident that an explanation is not a political conspiracy theory, even though it may refer to a plot. By studying the clear cases we can try to say something general about the ordinary language meaning of the concept. When we have a picture of the ordinary language meaning of “conspiracy theory”, we are prepared to reply to a more substantial question of how to deal with them, that is, with theories that are commonly called conspiracy theories.

Of course, to tell how the notion of conspiracy theory is commonly used is not necessarily to tell what “conspiracy theory” really means. But as far as we are interested in the practical question of how the state should deal with theories that are commonly called conspiracy theories, it is more or less irrelevant what the concept really means—if the concept has a “true meaning” in the first place. Granted that we are indeed interested in how the state should deal with theories that are commonly called conspiracy theories, we should not narrow or expand the ordinary meaning of the notion of conspiracy, whether or not such solutions (or the other of them) would move us closer to the true meaning of “conspiracy theory”.

3. Taxonomy of Conspiracy Theories

It is useful to distinguish between (a) warranted conspiracy claims, (b) rejected conspiracy theories, (c) so-called deceptive conspiracy theories, and (d) open conspiracy theories. I will give an example of each of them. They are all explanations of political events and refer to (actual or alleged) secret intentional actions, in particular to plots, and are rather commonly called conspiracy theories, although not always.

(a) The Watergate theory is an example of a warranted conspiracy claim and an example of warranted conspiracy theory—if we count it as a conspiracy theory proper. The “theory” revealed that President Nixon was indirectly involved in the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate

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3 We should not try to define “pineapple” by defining first “pine” and then “apple”. Similarly, it is not advisable to try to define the notion of conspiracy theory by defining first “conspiracy” and then “theory”. That kind of method would lead to unsatisfactory results in all likelihood.

4 Cf. Marion Vorms' and Philippe Huneman's paper in this journal.

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein writes in his *Philosophical Investigations* (section 43) that for “a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language”.

complex. Nixon’s administration attempted to conceal its involvement, but failed.\(^6\)

(b) A theory that a group of conspirators sent Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin to the palace of Tsar Nikolai II in order to ruin the reputation of the Tsar and his family (cf. Burnett 2005: 44) is an example of a rejected conspiracy theory. The theory no longer has supporters, and its truth is politically more or less irrelevant. The received view among historians is that the Tsar’s enemies had nothing to do with the fact that Rasputin was able to reach a high position in the royal family. (Notice that rejected conspiracy theories are unlikely to be true, but it is not impossible that they are true.)

(c) The global warming conspiracy theory is an example of a deceptive conspiracy theory, at least when it is defended by the representatives of the oil industry or their allies. According to the theory, the scientists who study global warming have secretly agreed that they publish false results in order to get more funding for their research projects. As far as the defenders think that theory is unwarranted and propagate it only because of political and financial reasons, the theory is a usual deceptive conspiracy theory. (Of course, it is possible that a deceptive theory is true, although those who disseminate it believe that it is false.)

(d) The genetically modified food conspiracy theory is an example of an open conspiracy theory. According to the theory, agribusiness enterprises have concealed the data that prove that GM food causes serious health problems. Companies and health authorities have denied the claims. Many people think that “open” conspiracy theories are actually false theories—and in many cases they are probably right—but it is better to talk about open rather than false theories, as public opinion and epistemic authorities are not infallible. (Notice that deceptive conspiracy theories are usually open theories, but not all open conspiracy theories are deceptive. Open conspiracy theories are genuinely believed by at least some people, but are not strong enough to be considered warranted.)

The list of open political conspiracy theories is almost endless. Open theories include those that deal with 9/11, JFK, Olof Palme’s murder, Princess Diana’s death, vaccination, Jews, AIDS, black death, climate engineering, scientist David Kelly’s death, Pearl Harbor, and so on. But let us concentrate on the four examples mentioned above.

4. An Ordinary Language Meaning of “Conspiracy Theory”

There are two key features that seem to be common to most conspiracy theories (e.g. Rasputin, global warming and GM food). Call them (1) the conflict criterion and (2) the conspiracy criterion.

1. The Conflict Criterion. Usually an explanation is called a conspiracy theory only if it conflicts or has conflicted with a received explanation of the same political event (cf. Coady 2003: 199). As far as an explanation is a conspiracy theory, it does not completely track the (present, past, or future) claims of the relevant

\(^6\) When a conspiracy theory turns out to be true, some people cease to call it conspiracy theory. Watergate was revealed by journalists. Cf. Räikkä 2009; Räikkä 2014: 63.
Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories

epistemic authority (such as mainstream media, scientific community, state authorities, or professional historians). The Rasputin theory conflicted with the Russian explanation of the time and still conflicts with the received view among historians; the global warming conspiracy theory conflicts with the view of the relevant scientific community; and the GM food conspiracy theory conflicts with the view of health authorities. (The Watergate theory conflicted with the official story of Nixon’s administration, but it did not conflict with the story of the sharp journalists.) In most cases, conspiracy theorists suspect two separate groups. On the one hand, they suspect a group of people who are claimed to be conspirators. On the other hand, they suspect a group of people who form the relevant epistemic authority and deny the alleged conspiracy. (In certain specific cases, the epistemic authority is accused of a conspiracy.) To question the position of an epistemic authority in a special case does mean that its position is questioned in general.

We can distinguish between conspiracy theories and what can be called conspiracy explanations. Conspiracy explanations do not conflict and have not conflicted with the views of the relevant epistemic authorities, and they are not usually called conspiracy theories (I assume), although they do refer to (actual or alleged) conspiracies or plots. Consider the following examples:

Explosion. A bomb exploded in July 1944 in East Prussia, as a group of conspirators attempted to assassinate Hitler.

Attempted Coup. The armed conflict in Turkey in the summer of 2016 was due to an attempted military coup and a conspiracy against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his administration.

The claim that there was a conspiracy against Hitler has not been denied. The claim about the military coup has been denied, but this claim is the official version of the events in the summer of 2016 and is supported, for instance, by the international news media and independent political commentators. So the explanation does not conflict with the views of the relevant epistemic authorities.

The notion of conspiracy theory is a bit like the notion of “radical claim”. The contention that women should not have the vote in national elections was not considered to be a radical claim in 1890. The claim was rather commonly accepted, and hence it was not radical. However, now we can say that “the radical claim that women should not have the vote was very common in 1890”. We can meaningfully say this, as the claim is not commonly accepted today. The similar logic applies to the notion of conspiracy theory. The claim that there is a Jewish conspiracy against Christians was an official truth in Germany during the World War II, and those who supported the claim were not necessarily considered supporting a conspiracy theory. However, now we can say that many Germans supported a Jewish conspiracy theory during the war. The reason why we can say so is simple: today the claim conflicts with the received view of history. Therefore it is called a conspiracy theory.

7 The official explanation, supported by the administrative authorities, need not be supported by the relevant epistemic authorities. It is possible that state authorities support a conspiracy theory, i.e. an explanation which is not supported by the epistemic authority. Notice that new conspiracy theories need not literally conflict with the received views, but they are not supported by the received views.

8 For a discussion, see Levy 2007; Zagzebski 2012; Dentith 2016.
Notice that a feature that explanations which are usually counted as conspiracy theories would appear to share is that a conspiracy theory would get much media attention were it shown to be true and, in usual cases, the news would surprise most people, at least to some extent. Had the theory of Rasputin proved to be true, it would have led to shocking surprise among Russians. Suppose that someone shows that, actually, the global warming conspiracy theory or the GM food conspiracy theory is correct. That would cause massive media attention globally, and millions of people would be surprised—although some people would certainly say that they knew how things are.

There are many conspiracy explanations (as distinguished from conspiracy theories) that would not gather media attention and would not surprise relevant audiences even if they were shown to be true. They would hardly be called conspiracy theories. Again, let us consider some examples:

**Prison.** Three prisoners met a couple of times, as they had a secret plan to carry out a robbery immediately after their release from prison.

**University.** A person got a professorship because a group of people had secretly decided to fix the relevant processes so that she would get the position.

To claim that a group of prisoners is planning a new crime is not a defense of a conspiracy theory, however secret their plan is supposed to be. If the claim turned out to be true, it would not cause massive media attention. The claim about university corruption would probably go against the official story (of the Faculty), but it would not necessarily conflict with the view of the relevant epistemic authority or tacit knowledge of the scientific community. It is easy to imagine circumstances in which its truth would not surprise many of us. In certain circumstances, the claim would not get much attention, given that the person in question is not a public figure or a person of public interest. In the professorship example people do not really trust the official story. We could say that, in this case, the official side does not get (sufficient) support from the relevant epistemic authority. Therefore people are not surprised when the story turns out to be false.9

2. **The Conspiracy Criterion.** The second feature of the explanations which are usually counted as conspiracy theories would appear to share is that they refer to (actual or alleged) conspiracies or plots.10 In some cases it may be difficult to say whether an explanation refers to a “conspiracy” rather than to some other sort of confidential cooperation. However, secret cooperative activities whose aims and nature conflict with the so-called positive morality (that reflects our *de facto* moral commitments) or with specific *prima facie* duties are usually called “conspiracies”, especially if the members of the cooperation have a certain position, and if the goal of their activities differs from the goal they are authorized to pursue. Children may have morally questionable secret plans to influence events by secret means, even if they do not do so.

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9 The claim that the representatives of oil industry have secretly agreed to disseminate false information is not a conspiracy theory, as it is generally known that they (or their allies) disseminate it. (Cf. Lavik 2015.) Major news stories do get much media attention, but they do not usually conflict with the views of the relevant epistemic authorities, although the news may reform those views. A conspiracy theory may also reform the views of the epistemic authority, but this takes time.

10 I say “usually”, as many claims that concern alleged activities of UFOs are often counted as “conspiracy theories”, although they do not always refer to conspiracies or plots.
but these incidents are seldom called conspiracies. Small children are not considered to be in a position to conspire. Secret military operations may be morally rotten, but as far as they have authorized goals, they are not usually called conspiracies. The members of an “official” administrative meeting behind closed doors may secretly agree on issues they should not and start to pursue goals they should avoid. When this happens the participants can rightfully be accused of conspiracy, as they have unauthorized goals now. Conspiracies involve secret cooperation, but that does not mean that the conspirators must meet secretly, so that outsiders do not know that they meet in the first place.\footnote{Conspirators must act voluntarily. A person who is \textit{forced} to work in a secret group is not usually said to be involved in a conspiracy.}

To say that a group of people “conspired” is not to say that their secret cooperation was, all things considered, wrong. Operation Valkyrie was a conspiracy, as assassinations are \textit{prima facie} wrong. However, there are many who would say that the members of the plot that aimed to murder Hitler had an excellent moral justification for their plan. The Irangate conspiracy was a conspiracy and an illegal fraud, but some people think that what President Reagan did was, all things considered, morally acceptable. Possibly, they think that Reagan was a great patriot and republican who truly dedicated himself to his political ideals. Thus it is possible to believe in a conspiracy (such as the Irangate conspiracy) without thinking that the alleged conspirators’ (such as Reagan and his allies) actions were, all things considered, bad. It is clear that conspirators need not have “nefarious intentions” (\textit{pace} Keeley 1999: 117). In many cases, the members of the conspiring group think that their plan is morally acceptable—despite the fact that the plan clearly conflicts with the demands of the prevalent positive morality.\footnote{When a group of people conspire, they do not usually have an \textit{intention to conspire}, although some (or all) of the members of a conspiracy may realize that they have engaged in a conspiracy.}

Explanations that satisfy both the conflict criterion and the conspiracy criterion are usually called conspiracy theories, while the explanations that do not satisfy the criteria or satisfy only one of them are usually not called conspiracy theories.

5. Fight Against Conspiracy Theories?

I will finish my discussion by evaluating the claim that the state should have an active role in the debates concerning conspiracy theories. Given that the claim that the state should be active in conspiracy debates concerns theories that are ordinarily called conspiracy theories, and given that the ordinary language understanding of “conspiracy theory” allows that conspiracy theories can be true, the idea that the state should intervene in open democratic debates does not sound desirable. The critical question is whether it is more important to prevent harmful conspiracy theories than to prevent harmful conspiracies—\textit{if} we cannot prevent both. Arguably, the prevention of successful conspiracies is of crucial importance, as conspiracies may cause massive economic, political and personal harm. Of course, it is important to interfere in conspiracy theories if they include libels or hate speech (as the Holocaust denial probably does) but, in general, the free
discussion about possible plots should be allowed.\textsuperscript{13} Seeking the truth is permissible, and people should be free to express their doubts, however implausible they appear to the rest of us. Perhaps the prevalence of conspiracy theories helps to maintain openness in society (cf. Coady 2006: 170). Even if conspiracy theories do not prevent conspiracies, they may make potential conspirators think twice.\textsuperscript{14} Also, conspiracy theorists may force others to improve their explanations of political events (cf. Clarke 2002: 148). Occasionally, conspiracy theorists or at least investigative journalists reveal and unmask genuine conspiracies, either by themselves or by pushing authorities to launch further investigations. Allowing free conspiracy theorizing has some moral costs—global warming conspiracy theory is certainly potentially harmful—but that is the price we have to pay.

Unsurprisingly, those who defend state action against conspiracy theorizing tend to claim that they are interested only in \textit{false} conspiracy theories. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009: 206) write explicitly that they are interested only in “demonstrably false” (and harmful) conspiracy theories.\textsuperscript{15} However, to limit one’s discussion to “false” theories is not an easy task. In order to make such limitation one should know which claims about conspiracies are really false—and not only \textit{believed to be false}.\textsuperscript{16} Until 2013, the claim that the National Security Agency (NSA) was monitoring millions of people all over the world was rather commonly \textit{believed to be false} (among those who had heard about the claim), but it was not. The claims about NSA surveillance conspiracy turned out to be true. The epistemic authority—in this case the mainstream media—that let us believe that monitoring cannot be that large was simply negligent. \textit{If} we have strong and sufficient evidence that a particular conspiracy theory is obviously false and causes concrete, immediate and serious harm, then of course we have good grounds to defend state action against the dissemination of the theory. But these cases may be rare. Conspiracies are common, and most of us are familiar with the Pisonian conspiracy, Operation Valkyrie, MKultra conspiracy, Operation Northwoods, Volkswagen emission scandal, and so on.

Perhaps the state may have some role in conspiracy debates—the state authorities can try to ensure that the views of scientific communities get enough publicity, that people have sufficient skills to interpret the media, and so on—but generally speaking the idea that the state should actively intervene in public discussions seems quite problematic.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that if we accept the ordinary language meaning of the notion of conspiracy theory, then the idea that the state should actively fight against those

\textsuperscript{13} Whether socially harmful and false conspiracy theories ought to be prohibited by the government is of course a large question. People who support free-speech-at-any-cost ideology would reject the idea that they should be prohibited. On the other, “historical denialism” is already prohibited in some countries, including France.

\textsuperscript{14} However, if there are too many conspiracy theories around, then nobody is interested in checking them, and this can certainly help conspirators.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. David Coady’s paper in this journal.

\textsuperscript{16} The examples Sunstein and Vermeule use (JFK, 9/11) indicate that their discussion concerns theories that are quite commonly \textit{believed to be false}. In that respect the examples resemble NSA conspiracy claim that was also rather commonly believed to be false.
theories sounds mistaken. Conspiracy theories are implausible, but they can be true, and open public discussion about conspiracy theories should be allowed—with few exceptions. The idea that the state authorities should be active in debates concerning political conspiracy theories has been rather common in recent years. If we want to evaluate the demand that the state authorities should fight against claims that are usually called political conspiracy theories, then it is important to know which theories are usually called conspiracy theories. In ordinary language the notion of conspiracy theory usually means an explanation that refers to (actual or alleged) secret intentional action, in particular to a plot or a conspiracy. A conspiracy theory conflicts with the views supported by relevant epistemic authorities and would get much media attention were it shown to be true. An important feature of conspiracy theories is that, while they are implausible, they need not be false. Since conspiracy theories may turn out to be true, the idea of preventing their public and open analysis sounds dangerous—even if we accept the fact that some conspiracy theories can be potentially harmful. Those who defend state action against conspiracy theorizing tend to claim that they are interested only in false conspiracy theories. However, I argued that it is often rather difficult to tell which claims about conspiracies are false, and not only believed to be false. Therefore, the idea that the state should actively intervene in public discussions seems problematic, although the authorities could certainly have some role, say, in educating people.

Probably the best way to react to conspiracy theories is an open democratic discussion in which each theory is evaluated on a case-by-case basis instead of rejecting and opposing them merely because they refer to an alleged conspiracy (cf. Dentith 2016). The destiny of each theory should be determined by judging whether the overall evidence supports the theory or not. Perhaps I am overly optimistic, but when a conspiracy theory is false and rubbish, the public debate should eventually show that it is false and rubbish.  

References


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When THUNCing Trumps Thinking:  
What Distant Alternative Worlds Can Tell  
Us About the Real World  

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Abstract  

By and large, our cognition is a truth-tracking device. There is much evidence that  
people's cognition can be optimal in many circumstances. Non-conventional forms  
of cognition, such as conspiracist ideation and belief in the paranormal, are  
considered less suited as a reality-tracking device. We suggest that actual  
conspiracies are preferentially identified by conventional cognition, whereas non-  
existent conspiracies that are the objects of conspiracy theories fall within the  
domain of conspiracist cognition. We explore the implications of this suggestion  
through an analysis of President Donald Trump's Twitter discourse.  

Keywords: Conspiracist cognition, Trump's twitter irrationality, irrational cognition  
and conspiracies, counterfactual conspiracist claims, inconsistent beliefs  

1. Introduction  

By and large, our cognition is a truth-tracking device. There is now much  
evidence and theorizing that supports the notion that people's cognition can be  
considered "optimal" in many circumstances. That is, human performance has  
frequently been shown to conform to Bayes Theorem, the acknowledged  
normative gold standard for how to update prior beliefs in light of new evidence  
(Chater, Tenenbaum & Yuille 2006; Knill & Pouget 2004). Even in remarkably  
esoteric tasks, such as estimating the duration of the reign of Egyptian Pharaohs,  
people's performance has been found to be finely attuned to the actual statistical  
properties of the environment (Griffiths & Tenenbaum 2006; Lewandowsky,  
Griffiths & Kalish 2009). Even seemingly biased behaviors, such as the over-  
reliance on extreme events when judging probabilities (Lichtenstein, Slovic,  
Fishhoff, Layman & Combs 1978), reveal themselves to be arguably rational
when the constraints of cognitive resource limitations are considered (Lieder, Hsu & Griffiths 2014).

Likewise, when considered in the aggregate, the scientific enterprise has proven itself to be a useful truth-tracking device. Many of the defining features of science, such as updating hypotheses in light of new evidence, are explicitly compatible with normative optimality criteria for human cognition (Friedman 2002; Thagard 2004).

There are, however, exceptions to this general pattern of cognitive rationality and optimality. For example, explanations for why people hold certain delusional beliefs—for example, that their partner has been replaced by an imposter—have had to invoke non-Bayesian, irrational processes (McKay 2012; Parrott 2016). Specifically, a man who believes that his wife has been replaced by an imposter—the Capgras delusion—is thought to rely entirely on the Bayesian likelihood function, without any regard to the prior probability of the array of possible hypotheses (McKay 2012). It is only by ignoring the rather infinitesimal prior probability of a wife being replaced by an imposter that perceptual evidence can yield the delusion that this has actually happened. Likewise, paranormal and pseudoscientific claims are typically considered to be epistemically unwarranted (Lobato, Mendoza, Sims & Chin 2014).

In this article, we are concerned with a puzzle in philosophy; namely, the extent to which conspiracy theories are epistemically warranted (Keeley 1999). Any analysis of conspiracist discourse is immediately faced with a dilemma: Unlike beliefs in the supernatural or other cognitive delusions that have no discernible echo in reality, conspiracies sometimes do exist. Oliver North did sell weapons to Iran from the basement of the White House, and Richard Nixon’s White House was involved in the Watergate break-in, and so on. However, in other instances, conspiracy theories have been spun that—at least to date—have no echo in reality. For example, there is no credible evidence that AIDS was invented by the CIA or that climate change is a hoax, even though adherents of those theories are disseminating reams of “evidence” in their favor.

Given that some conspiracies exist, how can we determine whether a conspiracy theory refers to an actual, existing conspiracy or is a figment of the beholder’s imagination—as is tacitly implied by the dismissive connotations associated with calling someone a “conspiracy theorist”? We argue that an analysis of the cognition and argumentation involved in the theorizing can be a potential indicator of whether we are dealing with an epistemically defensible analysis of a potential conspiracy, or with conspiracist cognition that is a candidate for rejection.

2. In Defence of Discovering Conspiracies

Some philosophers have defended conspiratorial thinking from charges of irrationality, and argue instead that a valuable service is performed by theorizing about conspiracies. For example, Dentith argues that theories about conspiracies must be examined on a case-by-case basis, and that because not all conspiracies are prima facie unlikely, inferring a conspiracy can often be a viable explanation of events (Dentith 2016).

A particularly forceful variant of that argument was advanced by Coady, who suggested that “conspiracy theorists are performing an important task on behalf of the community” (Coady 2007: 196) because they exercise the vigilance
that is required to maintain our democracy by scanning the political horizon for potential conspiracies. Although Coady does not suggest that we should endorse all conspiracy theories by default, he argues that in terms of adverse impacts on democracy, we should often be more concerned with “official” epistemologies—such as the U.S. government’s claims about Weapons of Mass Destruction in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003—than with conspiracy theorists whose presumed epistemic independence renders them more resilient to becoming entrapped in false “official” narratives. Coady’s argument is based on the supposition that because some conspiracies exist, therefore the activities of conspiracy theorists—that is, people who are dedicated to examining potential conspiracies—must be of value to society because they might uncover conspiracies. The tacit underlying assumptions of this argument are that (a) conspiracy theorists sometimes uncover true conspiracies, and that (b) those true conspiracies would not have been uncovered without the vigilance of conspiracy theorists.

We agree that conspiracies can exist and that they may not be as unlikely as one might intuit—for example, who would have thought it a priori likely that Volkswagen would design engines that reprogram themselves to be less polluting whenever they sense that an emissions test is being conducted. However, we propose that it was conventional reasoning and cognition—rather than epistemically impoverished conspiracist cognition—that uncovered the Volkswagen conspiracy, or indeed any other now-acknowledged conspiracy, such as Watergate or the Iran-Contra affair. We can question the White House’s story or VW’s clean Diesel engines, or conversely, we can question mainstream journalists whom the White House has rejected as “among the worst people in the world”, without engaging in conspiracist patterns of thought. We thus agree with Dentith that there are occasions “when inferring to a conspiracy might be the best explanation” (Dentith 2016: 572). It does not follow, however, that conspiracy theorists and their discourse should be ascribed an equal epistemic status—on the contrary, we agree with Sunstein and Vermeule that conspiracy theorists typically suffer from a “crippled epistemology” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 204). This, of course, begs the question and introduces a risk of circularity unless conspiracist cognition, whatever that is, can be identified by independent means.

3. In Defense of Rejecting Conspiracist Cognition

How can we defend attempts to discover potential conspiracies while at the same time rejecting conspiracist cognition? Figure 1 summarizes our approach and resolves this apparent conundrum. The top layer in the figure refers to an actual state of the world, in which there either exists (on the left) or does not exist (on the right) a conspiracy. The next layer refers to the “epistemic object”; that is, the cognitive construct in people’s minds that pertains to the particular reality being examined. The final, bottom layer represents the cognitive attributes of that epistemic object, which are subject to examination by observation or psychological experimentation.

Our contention is twofold: first, we suggest that identification of the cognitive attributes—and hence inference of the epistemic object—is empirically possible. The identification may not be perfect and may involve some statistical error, but for present purposes we consider it to be sufficiently accurate. Indeed, we have
taken this approach in the past, by empirically investigating and describing the content of the beliefs and the reasoning put forth by a sub-group of conspiracy theorists (Lewandowsky et al. 2015; Lewandowsky, Cook & Lloyd 2016). Second, we suggest that actual conspiracies are preferentially identified by conventional cognition, whereas non-existent conspiracies are the domain of conspiracist cognition. We base this proposal on the demonstrably successful track record of conventional cognition (e.g., in the scientific domain, but also in discovering actual conspiracies), and the demonstrable lack of such success of conspiracist cognition, as we will highlight shortly.

Turning first to the involvement of conventional cognition in the discovery of actual conspiracies, a brief survey reveals that most were revealed by conventional means, such as government leaks that were then reported in the media. We list those true conspiracies and the means of how they were uncovered, in Table 1. Although our list is far from exhaustive, the table comprises several rather famous true conspiracies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conspiracy</th>
<th>Source of revelation</th>
<th>Type of source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran-Contra</td>
<td>Lebanese newspaper Al-Shira</td>
<td>Print media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulf of Tonkin</td>
<td>Letter to editor (John White)</td>
<td>Whistleblower, among others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSA PRISM</td>
<td>Leaktomedia (Edward Snowden)</td>
<td>Whistleblower, among others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuskegee Syphilis Study</td>
<td>Whistleblower (Peter Buxton)</td>
<td>Whistleblower, U.S. Senate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. A sample of true conspiracies and how they were uncovered.

In no case is there evidence that the “theory” was first postulated or revealed by conspiracy theorists. Instead, in all cases the revelation involved conventional means of discovery, such as media reports based on leaks or testimony by whistleblowers.

By contrast, conspiracist cognition is characterized by certain patterns of reasoning that are less truth-seeking or reliable than “standard cognition.” We summarize those cognitive patterns in Table 2, based on one of our earlier analyses (Lewandowsky et al. 2015).

Table 2. Summary of cognitive patterns observed in conspiracist ideation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionable motives</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persecution-victimization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overriding suspicion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing is an accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something must be wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sealing reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking in Unreflective Counterfactuals (THUNC)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first criterion is that the presumed motivations behind any assumed conspiracy are invariably assumed to be nefarious: We know of no conspiracy theory that would acknowledge the benign motivations of the presumed conspirators (Keeley 1999).

A corollary of the first criterion is that the person engaging in conspiracist ideation perceives and presents her- or himself as the victim of organized persecution, while at the same time, at least tacitly, also perceiving themselves as brave antagonists of the nefarious intentions of the conspiracy. Conspiracist cognition thus involves a self-perception of being a victim but also a hero.

Third, conspiracist ideation involves “an almost nihilistic degree of skepticism” towards the “official” account (Keeley 1999: 125). This extreme degree of suspicion prevents belief in anything that does not fit into the conspiracy theory. Accordingly, low trust (Goertzel 1994) and paranoid ideation (Darwin, Neave & Holmes 2011) feature prominently among personality and attitudinal variables known to be associated with conspiracist ideation.

Fourth, the overriding suspicion frequently entails the belief that nothing occurs by accident: Small random events are re-interpreted as evidence for the theory (Barkun 2003). For example, the conspiracy theory that blames the events of 9/11 on the Bush administration invokes “evidence” (e.g., intact windows at the Pentagon: Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham 2009) that is equally consistent with randomness.

Fifth, although conspiracist cognition may entail the abandonment of specific hypotheses when they become unsustainable, those “corrections” do not impinge on the overall abstraction that “something must be wrong” and the “official” account must be based on deception (Lewandowsky et al. 2016; Wood, Douglas & Sutton 2012). Thus, the specific claims and assumptions being invoked by conspiracist ideation may well be fluctuating, but they all revolve around the
fixed belief that an official version is wrong. In consequence, it may not even matter if hypotheses are mutually contradictory, and the simultaneous belief in mutually exclusive theories—e.g., that Princess Diana was murdered but also faked her own death—has been identified as an aspect of conspiracist ideation (Wood et al. 2012).

Sixth, conspiracist cognition is inherently self-sealing: that is, evidence that counters a theory is re-interpreted as evidence for a conspiracy (Bale 2007; Keeley 1999; Sunstein & Vermeule 2009). This reflects the ideation that the stronger the evidence against a conspiracy (e.g., the FBI exonerating a politician from allegations of having misused a personal email server), the more the conspirators must want people to believe their version of events (i.e., the FBI is part of the conspiracy to protect that politician).

Our final attribute of conspiracist cognition is a pattern we first identified and reported in 2015 (Lewandowsky et al. 2015). We initially termed this attribute “Unreflexive Counterfactual Thinking,” but we now prefer to call it “Thinking in Unreflective Counterfactuals”, or THUNC for short. From here on we are particularly—though not exclusively—concerned with THUNC.

4. The THUNC of Conspiracist Cognition

THUNC is characterized by two attributes: First, it involves hypotheses that are built on a non-existent, counterfactual state of the world, even though knowledge about the true state of the world is demonstrably available. Second, in the context we had initially investigated it, we proposed that THUNC additionally involved conclusions that are logically unwarranted even if the counterfactual state of the world were true.

To illustrate, consider first a counterfactual that might be true, such as “A would have replied, had B asked.” Based on our knowledge of A and B, we might assert that this counterfactual is true, and our assertion can be evaluated with some degree of confidence irrespective of whether or not B had actually posed a question. By contrast, the assertion that “π is a rational number because 4 is odd” involves a false and illogical conclusion because even if 4 were an odd number (which it is not), the status of π could not be logically derived from that premise. (For a related discussion, see Sorensen (2012)’s detailed analysis of how conditionals can enable lying.)

Our initial understanding of THUNC thus involved the chaining of an erroneous premise with a logically unwarranted inference (Lewandowsky et al. 2015). Those are, however, extreme cases. In our revised understanding of THUNC, the counterfactual has been imagined precisely to account for a conspiratorial thesis, so the second feature, the invalid inference, is not a necessary feature of this type of counterfactual. What is necessary is that THUNC is unreflective in the sense that its coherence with other, more ordinary, beliefs is sacrificed when asserting in ad hoc fashion that there is a reason for obvious contrary evidence to be inapplicable in this case. We now explore the implications of our approach to THUNC by using the discourse of Donald Trump as the target of analysis.

5. Donald Trump’s THUNC
Donald Trump’s discourse is particularly suitable for analysis because he has been in the public eye for a long time and his favorite medium, Twitter, provides a succinct and searchable archive. Twitter is also of particular relevance because it has been said to promote public discourse that is “simple, impetuous, and frequently denigrating and dehumanizing”, and that “fosters farce and fanaticism, and contributes to callousness and contempt” (Ott 2017: 60).

During the campaign and what had barely been a month in office, Donald Trump had proffered several conspiracy theories on Twitter with elements of THUNC: For example, when the mainstream media reported, based on the National Park Service’s photos and estimates, that the crowds attending his inauguration were modest compared to other inaugurations, President Trump dismissed this because the Park Service should not be trusted; they are part of the plot to make him look bad.1 Similarly, President Trump attributed his loss of the popular vote (by nearly 3,000,000) to the presumption that three to five million “illegal aliens” had voted fraudulently in the election.2 We next present a detailed analysis of two such claims that involved THUNC; namely, first, the accusation that President Obama had wiretapped Mr. Trump during the campaign, and second, that millions of illegal aliens voted for Hillary Clinton.

5.1 The Alleged Obama Wiretap

Early on a Saturday morning, after a week when his Attorney General, Jefferson Beauregard “Jeff” Sessions III, had recused himself from any future Justice Department investigations of possible connections between Russian officials and the Trump campaign and its surrogates (the Attorney General was one of them), the president of United States took to Twitter and unleashed the following, now-famous bombshell: Barack Obama, while president, had ordered the “wire tapping” of Trump during the campaign. The tweets compared this to the persecution of the McCarthy era and the abuse of executive power that took place during Watergate. Mr. Trump called the former president a “bad (or sick) guy.”

Released intermittently over less than 30 minutes, there were only 84 words in the president’s four early morning messages, and none of them were devoted to the evidence on which such a momentous accusation was based. There was no mention even of classified information that, as president, he might have access to but could not publicly share:

- Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my “wires tapped” in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism! 6:35 AM - 4 Mar 2017
- Is it legal for a sitting President to be “wire tapping” a race for president prior to an election? Turned down by court earlier. A NEW LOW! 6:49 AM - 4 Mar 2017
- I’d bet a good lawyer could make a great case out of the fact that President Obama was tapping my phones in October, just prior to Election! 6:52 AM - 4 Mar 2017
- How low has President Obama gone to tap [sic] my phones during the very sacred election process. This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy! 7:02 AM - 4 Mar 2017

Reports had circulated that the president and his advisors were aware of a story about the alleged wiretapping on the website Breitbart.com, which had been edited by Stephen Bannon until he became the president’s chief strategist and trusted aide. In its Thursday evening post, Breitbart cited no evidence, but mentioned that the claim had been made by radio talk show host Mark Levin, who offered the story to illustrate the “police state tactics of Obama”. Breitbart considered Levin a trustworthy source of information, and the president trusts Bannon and Breitbart. The New York Times and CNN, on the other hand, and others have repeatedly been called “fake news” by President Trump, who has also called the press pool “some of the most dishonest people and despicable human beings around.”

Cynics dismissed the president’s accusations as merely an attempted distraction from the Attorney General having recused himself the day before from any investigations of the Trump campaign’s ties to the Russian government. No doubt reflecting what a large number of skeptical viewers were wondering, even the Sunday morning news shows asked if this really happened, or whether, as Princeton historian Julian Zelizer put it on CNN, this was just another of President Trump’s many conspiracy theories.3

It may be true that Mr. Trump wished to divert attention from Jeff Sessions’s recusal, but the lengths to which he had gone this time were unprecedented: a sitting president of the United States was publicly accusing the former president of having committed a felony, or, at best, vastly overreaching his authority to order surveillance over United States citizens. A spokesman for Obama immediately denied the charges, and Obama spokesperson Kevin Lewis and others were quick to point out that President Obama’s office had instituted a firewall policy with regard to intelligence agency investigations.

A spokesman for former President Obama swiftly issued the following response: “A cardinal rule of the Obama Administration was that no White House official ever interfered with any independent investigation led by the Department of Justice. As part of that practice, neither President Obama nor any White House official ever ordered surveillance on any U.S. citizen. Any suggestion otherwise is simply false.”

As this essay goes to press, no evidence in support of the conspiracy cited by Donald Trump—that is, that the Obama White House conspired with others in government to wiretap Trump Towers—has been provided.5

The absence of evidence is notable in particular because the President could have hinted that there was secret evidence based on intelligence briefings that could not be made public.

It is worth pausing to consider the following simple question: What would have to be true for the Obama wiretapping conspiracy to be true? Indeed, what would have to be true for any of the conspiracies imagined by Donald Trump to be true? Attention to this question brings us into increasingly remote possible worlds, ones whose implications do not cohere with ordinary beliefs about the

3 http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2017/03/03/mark-levin-obama-used-police-state-tactics-undermine-trump/
5 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/03/05/trumps-evidence-for-obama-w
When THUNCing Trumps Thinking

world. The THUNCs that are proffered by Donald Trump explain these events, but they do so at a cost.

Take, for example, the accusation that President Obama had “wiretapped” Trump Tower. If true, then either it was done after obtaining a FISA (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978) warrant from a judge presiding over a United States Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court of Review, or else it was done without such a warrant. President Trump has not indicated which of these he believes, but each possibility stretches credulity in different ways.

Consider first the possibility that a FISA warrant had been granted to an agency such as the FBI. For this possible world to have existed, that agency would have had to have presented evidence of serious criminal activity. A federal judge would only have approved a warrant to wiretap Trump’s phones if he or she had found probable cause that Trump had committed a federal crime or was a foreign agent. Former Obama deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes echoed the point in a tweet responding to Trump on Saturday morning: “No president can order a wiretap. Those restrictions were put in place to protect citizens from people like you.”

On the other hand, consider the possibility that Obama “ordered” a wiretap without a warrant. This would mean that an agency with the technological capabilities had followed such an order and had therefore broken the law. How would President Trump have discovered such an unlikely series of events had taken place? Surely some indication of the reasons he believes this would be made available to, say, the Foreign Intelligence Committee of the Senate, whom Trump has asked to investigate this allegation. Senator John McCain, Chairman of the committee, has indicated that no evidence whatsoever has been provided, and that the president, a member of his own party, should either withdraw the accusation or provide some sort of evidence to support it.

It is not just that either of these scenarios is unlikely. Crucially, THUNC is implicated here because either scenario is so unlikely, that the possible world in which President Obama either received a warrant or wiretapped Trump Towers without a warrant flies in the face of what the current president himself believes about the Department of Justice or the federal courts. Our view rests on the notion that we have near and far possible worlds, and the metric is how much overlap there is with our own, real world (Lewis 1973). THUNC arises here because President Trump seems to have neglected considering what other beliefs would also need to be involved in the initial claim.

To see this, first examine the initial claim, that Obama ordered and was conducting a wiretap on Trump without court authorization. According to all the evidence available so far, not only is that contention unsupported, but the claim would also entail the existence of multiple other beliefs about worlds that are increasingly remote. For example, the claim would imply that the normal channels of national security are not trustworthy themselves because they are corrupt: There must be a technologically-capable agency willing to obey the president in defiance of the law; this agency must act in complete secrecy (to explain the absence of any evidence for the claim); there must be one or more individuals operating in complete secrecy from this agency who are nevertheless willing to break that secrecy to inform the current president about the surveillance, possibly getting their closest colleagues into trouble for breaking

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http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/04/politics/trump-obama-wiretap-tweet/
federal law, and so on. In other words, a substantial number of additional beliefs in alternative worlds are necessarily implied by Trump’s claim of wiretapping.

Conversely, suppose that President Trump instead believes in the warranted version of the claim. In that case, the agency involved would operate within the law, and for the wiretap to be reminiscent of “Nixon/Watergate”, it would have to be a judge who is a willing puppet of a “sick” or “bad” president, and so on. Again, a substantial number of additional beliefs are also entailed by the warranted version of the claim.

The criteria for THUNC emphasize a lack of reflection about the implications of counterfactual assumptions (thus, the “unreflective” part of the definition). We suggest that President Trump did not reflect about these other, additional facts that would have to be different from the way the world is believed to be, in order to enact the wiretapping and hence to legitimize his tweeted claims. That these other facts are different implies that we have to go to a possible world that is even further out; that is, one that involves many more differences with our presumptions about the actual world. The more different the possible world is, the more distant it is from our own actual world. For example, very distant possible worlds might have different presidents, different laws, and different political systems. The wiretapping claim thus sets in motion a cascade of further counterfactual claims that are necessary to buttress the allegation, but are not, seemingly, considered by President Trump.

Moreover, crucially, this distant possible world is not concordant with the president’s other beliefs about the Justice Department and security in general. The level of corruption and the threat to national security in either of the warranted or warrantless version of those other possible worlds would conflict with how the president and the Justice Department or intelligence agencies function on a daily basis. Thus, we have a case of President Trump thinking in unreflective counterfactuals; that is, failing to consider all of the violations of his accepted beliefs that would be necessary to make the allegation true, and ending up with an inconsistent belief set. Of course, incoherence is a known and pervasive attribute of conspiracist ideation (Lewandowsky et al. 2016; Wood et al. 2012).

In addition to creating incoherence, the cascade of necessary other-world beliefs also requires that any evaluation of the prior probabilities of those various beliefs is discarded: Given the flimsy nature of the evidence on which President Trump’s claim rests (apparently just the utterances of a “shock jock”), any consideration of prior beliefs that assigns a non-zero probability to the hypothesis that FISA courts or intelligence agencies may not have colluded with President Obama, would not have permitted the strong inferences made by Trump. We noted earlier that the Capgras delusion requires that the prior probabilities of the two possible states of the world—that is, how likely it is that an impostor has replaced one’s wife vs. the likelihood that one’s wife is one’s wife—be discarded (McKay 2012), Trump’s claim likewise cannot be sustained without a similar refusal to consider prior probabilities of various competing worlds.

5.2 The Alleged Millions of Illegal Voters

The claim that three to five million undocumented immigrants voted in the election would, perhaps, explain why Mr. Trump lost the popular vote by, coincidentally, three million votes. On this view, the illegal votes would have virtually all had to have gone to Hillary Clinton.
But this possibility is highly unlikely. When Mr. Trump mentioned those concerns about non-citizen voting, the context implied that he was particularly focused on Hispanic non-citizens voting (as opposed to, say, Canadian or Malaysian immigrants voting). It is therefore relevant to examine the voting pattern among legitimate Hispanic voters. The data suggest that a third of Hispanics seemed to have voted for Trump.\textsuperscript{7} In other words, even if there had been 3 million illegal Hispanic voters (there were not), Trump likely would have received a third of their vote.

If President Trump had reflected on that fact when presenting his claim, he would have recognized that for the numbers to work out in his favor would have required closer to 9 million illegal voters, in the actual world, for Hillary Clinton to have won the popular vote by the observed margin. More importantly, Trump’s claim involves millions of cases of voter fraud, when the accepted facts indicate that voter fraud happens in only approximately one out of a million votes.\textsuperscript{8}

Officials in charge of polling places vociferously objected to Trump’s implication of massive scale voter fraud, based on their current practices and all available empirical evidence, a view supported by political scientists (Ansolabehere, Luks, & Schaffner 2015).

This is a case of THUNC, again, because the possible worlds that are involved in President Trump’s simple claim of the three to five million illegal votes are distant from the world as we know it. It seems that Trump did not reflect on this distant set of possible worlds and just how far they are from either his usual beliefs or the empirically defensible facts before he made his claim. But the conspiracy necessary for his claim to be true would reach so far that the possible world in which it is true is, indeed, very remote. Again, it is not just the unlikeliness of such events, but what its truth would say about other beliefs about the legitimacy of the election, that are relevant.

In particular, President Trump seems to make inconsistent inferences about the voting system. It is significant that he does not reject the outcome of the electoral college win that he sustained, so he evidently believes that the electoral system and its polling are somewhat accurate, and in fact, represent his fair-and-square victory over Clinton. But this cannot be true on the same possible world in which massive voter fraud occurred, invalidating the results of the election.

Thus, this is a paradigm case of the kind of unreflective and logically inconsistent conspiratorial thinking that we are calling THUNC. The point of our analysis is that Trump’s postulated possible world, on which he won the popular vote, is further away from the real world than he expected or was intending to go, in that it conflicts with already held beliefs that were not examined when postulating the conspiracy.

THUNC is fairly labeled as irrational thinking, contrary to the claims of philosophers like Coady (2007), because the reality-denying or counterfactual parts of Trump’s belief system conflict with his other cherished beliefs, and are not coherent with them. This lack of coherence is not reflected on in any way, and the lack of actively pursuing coherence with other beliefs is what makes this counterfactual “unreflective” thinking. The cases of THUNC are more than


\textsuperscript{8} https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/10/19/trump-thinks-non-citizens-are-deciding-elections-we-debunked-the-research-hes-citing/?utm_term=.fefa9efb89f8f
violations of the factual world, making them counterfactual, which is easily seen and documented; in addition, the incoherence with accepted beliefs are also not reflected on, both for the originators and the followers of this brand of conspiratorial thinking. It is not just that they are wrong, it is that they do not make sense. Their beliefs are not compatible with one another in a way that is required for rationality.

Note that the irrationality of these beliefs is shared by any followers of Trump, who also apparently lack the drive to make the set of beliefs coherent with accepted beliefs. The followers are adopting the results of Trump’s incoherent thinking, but perhaps not necessarily his exact same reasoning processes. But they are also guilty of the lack of reflection concerning just how far out this possible world is required to be, to accommodate all the “facts” of the conspiracy. Thus, they also engage in reasoning of the THUNC variety.

It is far from clear what President Trump actually believes, and what is media manipulation for political purposes. Indeed, it has been argued that Twitter’s form as a medium promotes impulsivity, and conversely inhibits reflexivity, given the near-universal availability of an internet connection and the minimal effort involved in typing a maximum of 140 characters (Ott 2017). Perhaps, then, the unreflective attributes of Trump’s tweets represent the medium as well as the messenger.

However, even if President Trump does not really believe his own claims, or even if the Twitter form facilitates his THUNCs, it cannot be overlooked that the president of the United States is issuing tweets that are typical of conspiracy theories, and function in a way that is, because of their incoherence with other beliefs, the opposite of truth preserving, truth seeking, or reliable. Recent research suggests that for Donald Trump’s followers, those departures from conventional truth-oriented communication are of little consequence (Swire, Berinsky, Lewandowsky, & Ecker 2017).

6. Concluding Remarks

6.1 Limitations

At this stage of its development, our argument is subject to several obvious limitations. First, although we have shown that THUNC can be an element of conspiracist discourse, we are unsure whether it is a necessary, or even pervasive, attribute of conspiracist ideation. Further work can examine this issue, for example by analyzing discourse surrounding well-established conspiracy theories, such as the idea that NASA faked the moon landing or that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were an “inside job”.

Second, our analysis of Donald Trump’s tweets is far from exhaustive. There may be additional tweets that point to other attributes of conspiracist discourse, or there may be many more that repudiate conspiratorial hypotheses.

Our analysis was also one-sided. At the time of this writing, opponents of President Trump have repeatedly drawn attention to putative links between the government of the Russian Federation and members of the Trump campaign. Those connections have all the hallmarks of a conspiracy (theory) and deserve further journalistic and scholarly attention. At the time of this writing, the Russian

9 https://georgelakoff.com/2017/03/07/trumps-twitter-distraction/
connection is pursued or taken for granted by much of the world’s media, from TIME to the Guardian or New York Times and Washington Post. It remains to be seen whether those particular “conspiracy theorists are performing an important task on behalf of the community” (Coady 2007: 196), and whether the Russia connection will therefore eventually form another entry in our Table 1, or whether the associated cognition exhibits the features summarized in Table 2.

6.2 Outlook

We have shown that some of President Trump’s discourse fulfills various criteria for conspiracist cognition. Why would this matter?

There is some evidence that public dissemination of conspiracist claims has notable side effects. The mere exposure to conspiratorial discourse, even if the claims are disbelieved, makes people less likely to accept canonical, “official” information (Einstein & Glick 2015; Jolley & Douglas 2013; Raab, Auer, Ortlieb, & Carbon 2013). For example, in one study, the mere exposure to conspiracy theories has been found to decrease participants’ intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one’s carbon footprint (Jolley & Douglas 2013). In another study, exposure to a conspiracy claim was found to adversely affect trust in government services and institutions, including those unconnected to the allegations (Einstein & Glick 2015). The introduction of conspiracist discourse into the public sphere may therefore have adverse consequences for society overall.

Moreover, the implications of President Trump’s discourse cannot be evaluated without also considering his long record of stating overt falsehoods. During the election campaign, independent fact checkers Politifact evaluated around 70% of Trump’s statements to be at best “mostly false” (with more than 50% ranked “false” or “pants on fire”). Only 5% of his statements were rated “true.” It has now become common in the mainstream media to refer to President Trump’s “lies”. This practice deviates sharply from media behavior during previous administrations which has pervasively avoided referring to misstatements as “lies”.

A worrying implication of this situation arises when one analyzes the consequences of such pervasive falsehoods. Experts on authoritarianism postulate that the purpose of public lies is not (just) to mislead the public, but to erode the epistemic status of facts and evidence altogether in the interest of an authoritarian regime (cf. Schedler & Hoffmann 2016). As Roger Cohen put it, “Trump’s outrageous claims have a purpose: to destroy rational thought”. A population that no longer finds anything believable will end up believing anything. This dystopic potential future is reminiscent of the pre-enlightenment world in which whatever the people in power said was considered true.

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The Study of Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract

The study of conspiracy theories has undergone a drastic transformation in the last decade. While early scholarly treatments relied on historical cases and cultural analyses, more recent works focus on the individuals who subscribe either to specific conspiracy beliefs or to more generalized conspiratorial thinking. This shift in focus presents scholars with an opportunity to learn more about how and why conspiracy theories gain followers. But also, this new focus presents dangers which have yet to be fully considered by the psychologists, social-psychologists, and political scientists spearheading the research. In this essay, I highlight the potential benefits and pitfalls of the current scholarly agenda.

Keywords: Conspiracy Theories, Conspiracy, Paranoid Style, Public Opinion

The study of conspiracy theories and the people who believe them largely began with Richard Hofstadter’s look into the “paranoid style” in the 1950s and 1960s (Hofstadter 1964). In the decades that followed, the study of conspiracy theories remained largely a domain of historians (Davis 1972, Gribbin 1974, Hogue 1976, Wood 1982). The 1990s saw a shift towards cultural critiques (Knight 1997, 1999, Melley 2000, Markley 1997), and the turn towards the new century ushered in a flurry of work from philosophers and epistemologists (Basham 2003, Clarke 2002, Coady 2003, Dentith 2014, Heins 2007, Keeley 1999, 2003, Pigden 1995, Raikka 2009). During this time, a few social scientists studied conspiracy theories (McHoskey 1995, McClosky and Chong 1985, Goertzel 1994, McCauley and Jacques 1979), but these studies tended to be one-off treatments unconnected to a broader research trajectory. Both the historians and cultural scholars treated conspiracy theories in a qualitative way, looking at historical episodes and broad trends. Scholars made little effort to better understand—at the individual level—what factors drove people to believe in conspiracy theories, or conversely, what factors could “cure” people of their unwarranted conspiracy beliefs. This abruptly changed in 2008.

As the 1990s came to a close and the twenty-first century began, several events became the subject of much high-profile conspiracy theorizing. In the United Kingdom, the death of Princess Diana and the 7/7 attacks; in the United States, the contested election of George W. Bush, the 9/11 attacks, the global war
on terror, and the election of Barack Obama. The conspiracy theories that became attached to the aforementioned events appear to have motivated social scientists to invest a large amount of resources into studying conspiratorial theories at the individual level. I mention the UK and US specifically because the growing body of scholarship addressing conspiracy theories has largely, though not exclusively, emanated from British and American scholars.

Works by psychologists, social-psychologists, and political scientists have examined why people believe in conspiracy theories about Princess Diana’s death (Wood, Douglas and Sutton 2012), the 7/7 Tube bombings (Wood and Finlay 2008), the 9/11 attacks (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham 2010), and Barack Obama’s sudden rise to power (Pasek et al. 2014). Such works have motivated a larger number of social scientists to enter the field and to study beliefs in a wider range of conspiracy theories, as well as the behaviors that stem from such beliefs (Jolley and Douglas 2014, van der Linden 2015).

While most of the authors working on the topic do not directly refer to the conspiracy theories they study as pathologies, much of the work could be read that way. Many scholars refer to conspiracy theories as “myths,” “false beliefs,” “misinformation,” and “rumors” (i.e., Berinsky 2015, Nyhan, Reifler and Ubel 2013, Lewandowsky et al. 2012). This should come as no surprise, the term, “conspiracy theory” and its variants are loaded terms. Conspiracy theories and the people who espouse them are often considered irrational (Husting and Orr 2007, Coady 2006).

The current research agenda appears to be most interested in learning how to dissuade individuals of their conspiracy theories (Bode and Vraga 2015, Lewandowsky et al. 2012, Nyhan and Reifler 2010, Nyhan et al. 2013, Thorson 2015, Berinsky 2015). As a scholarly pursuit, it is certainly worthwhile to better understand why people hold certain opinions and what information might change those opinions. As a scholar of public opinion, I wholeheartedly applaud this work. As a practical matter, there are certainly times when we need to convince people of truth, and having the tools to do so can save lives. For example, if a category 5 hurricane was approaching, the government would require the tools necessary to convince naysayers to evacuate. Lives are at stake.

However, in discovering the tools for ridding people of conspiracy theories, social scientists are inadvertently and unintentionally providing the powerful with an increased ability to quash dissent. Social scientists often view conspiracy theories as misperceptions or incorrect beliefs; but they are much more than this. Conspiracy theories are tools for dissent used by the weak to balance against power (Uscinski and Parent 2014). To rid people of their conspiracy theories is to therefore rid them of a form of political dissent.

The purpose of this article is to assess both the promise and perils of the current scholarly trajectory and to urge social scientists to exercise great care when studying conspiracy theories. I begin first with a few definitions. Then I argue that conspiracy theories should be treated with skepticism but not as wrong or false per se. This is because conspiracy theories have unique epistemological properties which shield them from falsification. I then argue that conspiracy theories are necessary to the healthy functioning of society because they help balance against concentrations of power. This article then moves to highlight both the advances made by social scientists in recent years and the dangers that those advances pose. I conclude that in developing effective methods for countering
conspiracy theories, social scientists have unwittingly provided powerful interests with tools which can increase their power.

1. Definitions

For purposes of conceptual clarity, allow me to begin with a few definitions. By *conspiracy*, I refer to a secret arrangement by a group of powerful people to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 31). Conspiracies are real and happen with regularity; Watergate and Iran-Contra are examples.

By *conspiracy theory*, I mean an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good. This definition excludes theories positing benevolent actors toiling away in secret for the good of all mankind (i.e., doctors working in secret to save humanity from the scourge of cancer). Such theories seem to be the product of a very different set of factors and are rare compared to those positing an enemy.

One important facet of conspiracy theories that often goes without much notice is that conspiracy theories are notions about power: who has it and how are they using it? Conspiracy theories accuse an implicitly powerful group of conspiring. Usually that group is already powerful, i.e., the president, a legislative body, industries or corporations, foreign countries, multinational groups, etc. Powerless groups are rarely accused of conspiring. It is unusual to hear a conspiracy yarn about how the homeless are attempting a coup, or how transgendered people are plotting to take over society. The weak and marginalized are rarely seen as able to pull off a successful conspiracy. If they are, it is because they are assumed to have much more power than they actually have. This does seem odd when juxtaposed against classical political theory: Machiavelli for example argued that the weak are precisely the ones who should be conspiring; they do not have the power to use force to get what they want. The powerful on the other hand should not have to conspire—they can use force to get their way (Machiavelli 1996, see discussion in Uscinski and Parent 2014: 152). Nevertheless, conspiracy theories in the West tend to implicate the strong.

Put in the most neutral terms, a *conspiracy theorist* is anyone who believes conspiracy theories are notions about power: who has it and how are they using it? Conspiracy theories accuse an implicitly powerful group of conspiring. Usually that group is already powerful, i.e., the president, a legislative body, industries or corporations, foreign countries, multinational groups, etc. Powerless groups are rarely accused of conspiring. It is unusual to hear a conspiracy yarn about how the homeless are attempting a coup, or how transgendered people are plotting to take over society. The weak and marginalized are rarely seen as able to pull off a successful conspiracy. If they are, it is because they are assumed to have much more power than they actually have. This does seem odd when juxtaposed against classical political theory: Machiavelli for example argued that the weak are precisely the ones who should be conspiring; they do not have the power to use force to get what they want. The powerful on the other hand should not have to conspire—they can use force to get their way (Machiavelli 1996, see discussion in Uscinski and Parent 2014: 152). Nevertheless, conspiracy theories in the West tend to implicate the strong.

While *conspiracy* refers to a real, actual event, *conspiracy theory* refers to an accusatory perception which may or may not be true. The line separating conspiracy theory and conspiracy is unclear and has been hotly debated (Clarke 2006, Coady 2003, 2006, Keeley 1999, 2003). Everybody believes in at least one conspiracy theory, but rejects countless others. Therefore, people disagree on which theories constitute “could-be-true” conspiracy theories and which constitute “are-true” conspiracies. What is their decision rule for separating the wheat from the chafe? I submit that most people do not have a consistent rule for accepting some conspiracy theories as true or for rejecting others as false. People appear to pick and choose based on factors that have nothing to do with consistent standards of evidence. For example, people tend to believe conspiracy theories
that denigrate the opposing political party but rarely their own (Miller, Saunders and Farhart 2016, Oliver and Wood 2014, Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson 2016). Epistemologists have also struggled with separating the true conspiracy theories from the false ones—and some have moved away from providing a consistent rule that dichotomizes the true conspiracy theories from the false ones. Rather they provide guidelines that separate the warranted from the unwarranted (Keeley 1999).

For the purposes of this article, I demarcate between conspiracy theory and conspiracy using the simple and consistent standard put forth by Neil Levy (2007). His premise is that properly constituted epistemic authorities determine the existence of conspiracies. Levy defines properly constituted epistemic authorities as institutions in which knowledge claims are the result of a socially distributed network of inquirers trained in assessing knowledge claims, with methods and results made public and available for scrutiny (i.e., courts of law, scientific institutions). If the proper authorities say something is a conspiracy, then it is true; if they say it is a conspiracy theory, then it is likely false.

By conspiracy belief I refer to a person’s belief in a specific conspiracy theory, for example, Rosie O’Donnell’s belief that the Twin Towers fell on 9/11 due to a carefully timed demolition. Conspiratorial thinking on the other hand refers to an underlying worldview in which events and circumstances are more or less the product of conspiracy (e.g., Brotherton, French and Pickering 2013). The more a person thinks in conspiratorial terms, the more likely they will be to believe in specific conspiracy theories. For example, previous studies show that those with strong conspiratorial predispositions are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories about media bias (Uscinski et al. 2016), scientific findings (Lewandowsky, Gignac and Oberauer 2013), and downed airliners (Nyhan et al. 2016). This worldview can be thought of as a bias that leads a person to view authoritative accounts as fabricated and powerful actors as conspirators (Wood et al. 2012).

2. Conspiracy Theories Should not Be Treated as Wrong

While conspiracies happen and people should be vigilant, conspiracy theories do not represent the best judgment of the appropriate epistemological institutions (Levy 2007). Because conspiracy theories contradict official accounts, they are suspect and should be treated with skepticism. If we were to blur the difference between conspiracy theories and conspiracies (for example, see deHaven-Smith 2006), then we are in effect saying that the methods and institutions which generate knowledge claims are meaningless. We would be suggesting that anything goes when it comes to discovering truth.

This being said, the institutions which are best suited to determine the existence of conspiracies are also part of the entrenched elite establishment. Universities, peer-reviewed journals, elite journalists, government institutions, and the like are powerful, elite, and therefore exactly the kind of institutions which are themselves often accused of either being part of the alleged conspiracies

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1 There are of course instances when a conspiracy theory does not contradict the appropriate epistemological institutions, for example, when an event occurs people may immediately posit a conspiracy theory to explain it prior to appropriate epistemological institution passing judgment on the cause of that event (Dentith 2016).
or too close to the alleged conspirators to render a sound, impartial judgment. Even the best knowledge generating institutions err accidentally; sometimes they err because they are not impartial. This is where conspiracy theorizing comes in. In cases where there may be a perceived conflict of interest, conspiracy theorists will gather evidence to challenge the judgment of our prevailing institutions. I am not suggesting that there is always a conflict of interest or that our institutions for determining the existence of conspiracy theories are inherently biased or part of a scheme to cover-up nefarious activities. Rather I am suggesting that our knowledge generating institutions are not—nor should they be—above suspicion or reproach.

Conspiracy theories are unique epistemological creatures because they are non-falsifiable (Keeley 1999, Uscinski and Parent 2014 pg. 40). It is difficult to prove that a secret plot is not taking place behind the scenes. A dearth of positive proof and an abundance of falsifying evidence seem to count in their favor. This is not inappropriate: if powerful actors are trying to hide something it only stands to reason that confirming evidence will be hidden and red herrings will abound. There is an assumption in the study of non-human phenomena—for example, the study of atomic particles—that the objects under study will not alter their behavior or try to hide their activities from researchers. We expect the conspirators to react to investigators so as to hide their activities (Keeley 1999).

This does not mean that we should count every conspiracy theory as true simply because we cannot prove the negative, that a secret plot is not taking place. Nor does this imply that we cannot discount the evidentiary claims made by conspiracy theorists in support of their theories. For example, the Oliver Stone film, JFK, makes many supposedly factual claims about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. However, many of these claims are demonstrably false and Stone has attested to this himself. This does not mean that there was not conspiracy to kill Kennedy, it just means that the evidence presented by Stone does not make the conspiracy theory more likely to be true.

Given that conspiracy theories could be true, I warn against labeling conspiracy theories using a true/false dichotomy. I instead argue in favor of treating conspiracy theories as relatively more or less suspect based upon the amount of verifiable evidence in their favor. There are of course many legitimate ways of evaluating the veracity of conspiracy theories, for example Brian Keeley suggests that as more and more actors become involved in orchestrating or concealing the plot, the more likely detection becomes, meaning that if the plot has thousands of actors and they have yet to be detected, the plot probably does not exist (Keeley 1999, see also Grimes 2016). The prevailing point is that because they are non-falsifiable, conspiracy theories are different from the evidentiary claims used to support them which should be treated as true or false.

3. Conspiracy Theories are Necessary to the Healthy Functioning of Society

Conspiracy theorists are frequently insulted and treated with derision (Husting and Orr 2007): they are oft referred to as cranks, crackpots, kooks, paranoids, wingnuts, etc. Quite damning is that some of the most prominent and destructive conspiracy theorists include names such as Adolf Hitler, Timothy McVeigh, Anders Behring Breivik, Osama Bin Laden, and so on. Rarely are conspiracy theorists complimented or thanked for their service. Ask the average person to
name a beneficial conspiracy theorist and he or she will likely draw a blank. This is a gross injustice.

Like everyone, conspiracy theorists have their positive and negative sides, but yet as a society we tend to focus on the liability side of their ledger. To score cheap moral superiority people often disparage the outliers without examining the good in the group. Yes, the negative side of the ledger is visible and costly, and conspiracy theories are often likely false. However, the positive side of the ledger may very well outweigh the costs. Perhaps the most important positive role that conspiracy theories play is as a crucial part of the marketplace of ideas.

Conspiracy theorists can be likened to lots of things—gadflies, watchdogs, tripwires—but they are most similar to defense lawyers. They are opposing counsel in the war of political ideas, where the establishment is the prosecution, and they challenge prevailing wisdom. Like most defense attorneys, conspiracy theorists lose more than they win. This probability is worth keeping in mind next time you hear a conspiracy theory (it is probably not true). Fundamentally conspiracy theories are about the views of the strong versus the weak, the pros versus the amateurs, and the experts versus the novices. Over the long haul, the authorities tend to win more often.

That said, all courts err some of the time, and some decisions need reversing. This is where conspiracy theorists come in. The only way of ferreting out authorities’ mistakes and rectifying them is through advocacy and appeals. Over the long term, conspiracy theories incentivize good behavior by the powerful: if the powerful conspire, someone will be watching, investigating, and publicizing.

When conspiracy theorists are right for the right reasons, they can save the rule of law. Think of Woodward and Bernstein excavating the Watergate scandal. When they are right for the wrong reasons, they can build nations. Think of the American Founders in the Declaration of Independence. When they are wrong for the right reasons, they can unearth new information. Case in point: we know much more today about the Kennedy assassination because of the persistence of conspiracy theorists.

Still, sometimes conspiracy theorists are wrong for the wrong reasons and this is surely a loss. Yet that is only known in hindsight and is probably a price worth paying. We do not know the strength of ideas until they compete in an open playing field and if conspiracy theorists do not test political truths and speak for the underdog, who would do it?

The media in most Western states is independent enough to expose scandals, wrongdoing, and conspiracies. However, the mainstream media has its blind spots. For example, there was considerable trepidation at the Washington Post as Woodward and Bernstein moved forward with their investigation into the Watergate break-in. Sometimes, journalists have partisan biases and treat their favored party with kid gloves. And, investigating alleged conspiracies vigorously could cost journalists access or respect. Given this, conspiracy theorists must sometimes act where mainstream institutions may not, in the court of last resort.

Conspiracy theories can be thought of as alarm systems for weak groups. They help groups address threats emanating from stronger groups. In our “conspiracy theories are for losers” hypothesis, Joseph Parent and I begin with a theory of groups: groups vie against others to create or capture resources, and distribute those resources authoritatively. Because victories can be leveraged to capture further victories, defeated groups have strong incentives to be vigilant and vociferous. Conspiracy theorizing provides a way for out-of-power groups to
recoup from losses, close ranks, overcome collective action problems, and sensitize minds to vulnerabilities (Uscinski and Parent 2014). Emerging groups, minor groups, and social movements will engage in conspiracy theorizing for similar reasons; it allows them to challenge existing power structures and react to oncoming threats from the establishment. Being out of power or outnumbered, anxiety and a perceived lack of control will drive conspiracy theorizing. In both cases though, balancing against threats is the crux of conspiracy theorizing. Victory being a lax disciplinarian, large winning groups feel less anxiety, more in control, and less need for conspiracy theories.

Successful conspiracy theories provide a unifying narrative of a terrifying enemy; the tendency of conspiracy theorists to scapegoat, however reprehensible, serves a rational purpose and attempts to balance against existing power arrangements. For example, the much reported “Jade Helm” conspiracy theories and the 9/11 Truther theories have lost the many of the followers they once had because the observed threats dissipated (the military exercise at Jade Helm ended; Bush left office).

History suggests that power is best when it is limited, divided, and constrained. Because they can rally the weak to balance against power, conspiracy theories are set apart from simple forms of misinformation (myths, rumors, incorrect beliefs, etc.) which tend to have a much more accidental quality to them. This role played by conspiracy theories should not go underappreciated by social scientists who study them.

4. The Advances Made by Social Scientists and the Dangers that Those Advances Pose

A small number of papers examining conspiratorial beliefs and underlying conspiracy thinking were published between the 1970s and 1990s (Goertzel 1994, McHoskey 1995, McClosky and Chong 1985, McCauley and Jacques 1979, Crocker et al. 1999, Butler, Koopman and Zimbardo 1995, Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999). These papers were some of the first to use quantitative methods—surveys and experiments—to measure what individuals, rather than what groups or society believed. However, none of these papers were part of, or sparked a larger research trajectory within psychology, social-psychology, sociology, or political science.

In terms of quantitative research, it was not until the end of the first decade of the Twenty-first century that a more cohesive research agenda developed. Perhaps the watershed moment was the 2012 publication of “Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories” in the journal of Social Psychological and Personality Science by Michael Wood, Karen Douglas and Robbie Sutton. This study showed that many people who believed in a conspiracy theory also believed in other conspiracy theories which logically could not also be true. For example, those believing Osama bin Laden was dead before the Navy Seals entered his compound also believed he was still alive. This finding suggested that belief in conspiracy theories was not so much about the evidence or logic of any specific conspiratorial explanation, but rather about instinctively denying official stories and implicating powerful actors. The implications are that (1) evidence and logic do not drive belief in conspiracy theories as much as conspiracy theorists would argue, and (2) there is an underlying worldview in which official stories are fake,
powerful actors are conspirators, and events and circumstances are the product of vast conspiracies.

The findings by Wood, Douglas, and Sutton (2012) led researchers in several disciplines to begin treating conspiracy theories less as an individual or collective psychopathology (i.e., paranoia) and more as a set of opinions which conform to what researchers have found to be true of other political opinions, most notably that conspiracy theories are the product of information laid over a set of an individual’s predispositions (i.e., Zaller 1992). In the years since the Wood et al. 2012 paper, many scholars have examined what they refer to as an underlying worldview towards seeing conspiracies (Bruder et al. 2013, Imhoff and Bruder 2013, Brotherton et al. 2013, Lantian et al. 2016, Lewandowsky et al. 2013, Brotherton 2015, van der Tempel and Alcock 2015, Dagnall et al. 2015, Swami et al. 2011, Uscinski et al. 2016). The major take-away from these studies is that some people are more prone to believing in conspiracy theories than others. To consider this in a more neutral light, some people will believe in any conspiracy theory even on light evidence while others at the opposite end of the spectrum are naive and will deny the existence of conspiracies even on accumulating evidence. If we treat this worldview much the same way political scientists treat partisanship or political ideology, then this conspiracy worldview helps individuals interpret information, events, and circumstances around them. Political scientists have therefore begun treating conspiracy beliefs as the product of new information overlaid on top of a set of predispositions (Uscinski et al. 2016, Carey et al. 2016, for an example in psychology, see Newheiser, Farias and Tausch 2011).

The first journal articles on the topic published by political scientists showed that people tend to (1) believe in conspiracy theories which denigrated their political adversaries and (2) eschewed those conspiracy theories that accused their own side of conspiring (Miller et al. 2016, Oliver and Wood 2014). Such studies imply that people do not have an open mind when evaluating the evidence supporting conspiracy theories, but rather chose to believe in only those that fit their preconceived notions (whether the evidence is all that good or not). Miller et al. 2016 suggest that conspiracy theories were largely the product of motivated partisan reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006, see also Claassen and Ensley 2016).

Uscinski et al. 2016 melded the political aspects identified by both Miller et al. 2016 and Oliver and Wood 2014 with the findings of Wood et al. 2012 to suggest not only that conspiracy beliefs are the product of motivated partisan reasoning, but also that conspiracy beliefs are likely to occur when individuals have a worldview in which conspiracies dictate events. This explains why most partisan conspiracy theories in the United States do not convince more than 25% of the population (Birther and Truther theories, despite their ubiquity max out at about that). Only those with a sufficiently elevated conspiracy worldview and on the side of the political spectrum not implicated in the conspiracy will believe in a given partisan conspiracy theory.

Social scientists have begun to discover how to convince people of conspiracy theories. For example, Uscinski et al. (2016, see also Nyhan et al. 2016) show that giving informational cues suggesting a conspiracy theory—even cues lacking any supporting evidence—to those who have a set of predispositions congruent with the conspiracy theory can drive people to adopt that conspiracy belief. Knowing how this process works is not without its pitfalls. We should not want powerful groups to become more effective at convincing people of conspiracy theories in lieu of evidence. When conspiracy theories accuse the
powerful and well protected of conspiring, it is unlikely that the ability to convince people of conspiracy theories can do that much damage. When powerful people use conspiracy theories to scapegoat the weak, the ability to convince people of conspiracy theories becomes more lethal.

Working on the opposite end, several social scientists have invested greatly in understanding how to rid people of their conspiracy beliefs. There is a sizable upside to this line of research. Diseases that were once cured, like mumps and measles, have come back because some people believe in conspiracy theories about vaccine safety and choose to eschew vaccination. There are currently concerns that the Zika virus, now infecting people in south Florida, will be difficult to cure because of the conspiracy theories on social media. Beliefs in extreme conspiracy theories have led to violence, take Anders Breivik for example. Racist conspiracy beliefs had led to violence against Jews and others. Imagine the good that could be done if such conspiracy beliefs could be eliminated.

The major finding from this line of research is that it is very difficult to rid people of their conspiracy beliefs, and that just attempting to do so may lead to a “backfire effect” where individuals exposed to information disconfirming their conspiracy belief double-down on that belief (Nyhan and Reifler 2010, Nyhan et al. 2013). A more recent attempt at correcting conspiracy beliefs examines beliefs surrounding President Obama’s attempt at health care reform (Berinsky 2015). The corrections used in this study proved more effective, particularly when people received corrective information from a co-partisan. It is likely that further studies will build on this finding and discover more effective correctives. No doubt, this work is promising. Having the ability to present information in a way that corrects incorrect beliefs could solve many problems.

However, this line of research treats conspiracy beliefs as a problem of information: if people had better information they would have “correct” beliefs. Such works do not consider, that conspiracy beliefs might be more than a cognitive hiccup. Since conspiracy beliefs are protests against power, it may not be desirable to correct them. First, the ability to correct conspiracy beliefs gives those with the ability to deploy those corrections new powers of persuasion. Such people would have the ability to counteract beliefs which question their own behavior. Second, unlike misinformation per se, it is not clear that conspiracy beliefs are incorrect. They may be dubious, but since they are non-falsifiable, they may not by wrong. “Correcting” such beliefs run the risk of steering people away from, rather than to, truth.

5. Conclusion

Democracy works much like a market. In order for markets to function, there must be buyers and sellers on both sides of trades, and some of those people some of the time will guess wrong and lose money. But that is necessary for the system to work at all. Similarly, democracy needs people to poke and prod and vet the conventional wisdoms, if for no other reason than to keep the conventions from corruption. Conspiracy theorists, in this telling, are idea entrepreneurs. And typical of entrepreneurs, most of them will not make it.

Conspiracy theories continue to have a terrible reputation—most people treat them with overt skepticism or downright derision. This is not unreasonable, most are likely not true. But why would something with such a bad reputation be
so popular? If conspiracy theorists are crazy or stupid, why are they so numerous and stubborn? Perhaps the reason is that conspiracy theories are less about specific details and more about broader conceptions of power: who has it and what are they doing with it?

In this sense, conspiracy theories are alarm bells, trip wires, early warning systems. They alert the vulnerable to coming threats, violations of ground rules, and the abuse of power. The alarms sound even when the threat is not realized. The question is, would democracy be better off with more warning bells, or with less? This is a choice, and both paths present risks. The current scholarly trajectory should spend more time contemplating those risks. Not to do so could lead researchers to remove people’s fears of corruption, deceit, and abuse without removing the actual corruption, deceit, and abuse.

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Is a Unified Account of Conspiracy Theories Possible?

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Abstract

This paper proposes a critical assessment of the concept of “conspiracy theory” as a coherent object of investigation, and evaluates the prospects for an integration of various avenues of research—sociological, epistemological, psychological—that deal with it. Because of the threat posed by conspiracy theories to public health and political stability, academic efforts to understand the sociological and cognitive basis for the adoption of such views, as well as their epistemological flaws, are undoubtedly needed. But the preliminary question of the unity, and of the specificity of the class of things called “conspiracy theories”, is often overlooked. It is addressed in this paper.

Starting from a tentative classification of the various ideations labelled “conspiracy theories”, we then focus on a particularly important subclass thereof, namely those promoting anti-scientific views. From this, we draw a first, sceptical conclusion as to the existence of a clear-cut boundary between conspiracy thinking and healthy rational critique of science (both sociological and philosophical). This leads us to evaluate the attempt of analysing conspiracy theories’ epistemic flaws in the light of philosophical standards for scientific theories. Having shown that this route is a dead-end, we highlight what appears as a major divide among philosophical and psychological accounts of CTs, namely whether one should treat them as irrational, or as merely wrong (in the latter, rationalist approach, CTs would just be wrong statements resulting from rational operations). Focusing again on anti-science CTs, we finally argue in favour of a politically and socially contextualised approach to the growth and spread of conspiracy ideations, over a scheme considering CTs as abstract entities, independently from the socially situated agents who hold them.

Keywords: Rationality Cognitive biases, Theory, Scientific pluralism.

1. Introduction

With the rise of the Internet and the social media, and the subsequent information revolution, it seems that conspiracy theories have found a way to spread and develop more quickly and widely than ever before. Whether this observation is
true or not is an important empirical question. But whatever the answer, talking of conspiracy theories, especially in a pejorative manner, has become extremely widespread in the general public, much beyond academia. Not only are some particular conspiracy theories put under critical scrutiny, but also it is common parlance, nowadays, to denounce the pervasiveness of a ‘conspiracist’ worldview more generally, and to emphasise that such a thought tendency is at the root of many social diseases, such as religious radicalisation and terrorism, or many public health problems (like those caused by anti-vaccine movements). In many Western countries, there is a governmental effort, sometimes in collaboration with school teachers and social workers, to fight the development of conspiracy ideation among the youth.¹

In a lighter spirit, conspiracy theorists are often made fun of, and portrayed as simplistically minded people. See for instance the parodic Facebook reaction buttons (Fig. 1), which suggests how widespread the notion of conspiracy theory is among the public.²

![Nouveaux boutons Facebook Reaction pour complotistes](http://complots-faciles.com/blog/2016/09/18/facebook-introduit-de-nouveaux-boutons-pour-complotistes/)

*Figure 1. “New Facebook reaction buttons for conspiracists. Just click to assign blame to the responsible!” (http://complots-faciles.com/blog/2016/09/18/facebook-introduit-de-nouveaux-boutons-pour-complotistes/).*

Furthermore, a look at some social media like Facebook is enough to realise that sometimes, even people holding what is generally considered as conspiracist ideas, use the phrase “conspiracy theoriser” as an insult to mock others (who may believe in even crazier theories, as compared to the supposedly serious ones advocated by the former).³

On the other hand, rather than mocking the naive and unsophisticated aspect of conspiracy theorising, one can also be tempted to insist on the remarkable complexity of some of these constructs (e.g. Wood *et al.* 2012; Goertzel 1994)—thus suggesting that it is not so easy to debunk them, and that serious epistemological analysis has to be led. Such a move often goes hand in hand with an analysis of conspiracy theories as theories, taking the latter term seriously. This sort of non-pejorative—or at least partially admiring—approach to conspiracy

¹ For a critical appraisal of the implementation of such a policy in the French Éducation nationale, see (Dieguez *et al.* 2016).
² See also the Facebook page “Easy conspiracy to shine in society” (https://www.facebook.com/EasyConspiracies/)
³ But see Wood 2016, who shows that nowadays characterising a view as a CT is, on the average, not detrimental to its acceptance and diffusion.
theories may also lead to views that describe them as a sort of subjective narratives making sense of the world for particular agents, and therefore as complex intellectual productions that may be valuable for their supporters, and that call for further analysis (e.g. Raab et al. 2013).

The spread of some conspiracy theories, promoting anti-scientific views, as well as systematic mistrust towards any official or consensual information source, clearly is a societal and political problem, which needs to be fought (Douglas et al. 2015). Inversely, when the leaders or the government of a country endorse and promote one or several conspiracy theories, this clearly constitutes a problem for democracy and free speech. Academic efforts to understand conspiracy beliefs are thus undoubtedly needed. Some research is now developing, in various disciplines. There exists a sociology of the spread of conspiracist beliefs (e.g. Sunstein and Vermeule 2008), a psychology of the conspiracist believer (e.g. Brotherton et al. 2013), and an epistemology of those beliefs (e.g. Keeley 1999). However, those research programmes are still fragmented, and interdisciplinary dialogue, which seems particularly desirable for such a topic, is still rare.

Taking a step back, our overall goal in this paper is to clarify some preliminary conditions for a fruitful, integrated interdisciplinary study of conspiracy theories. We question the double assumption that the object ‘conspiracy theories’ is a clearly delineated one, and that academic discourse thereabout can be unified and coherent. At least two main questions need to be addressed: First, does conspiracy theorising constitute a specific object, or is it rather a particular aspect of a more general cognitive tendency? Second, does it correspond to a unified reality, or is it rather an umbrella term for different types of thought tendencies that have little, if anything, in common? After a route through several aspects of those questions, our conclusion will be rather sceptical regarding the philosophical consistency of the notion, and our main recommendation will be that any approach to what is usually labelled “conspiracy theorising” should pay much attention to the contexts in which such ideations emerge, either for studying the psychology of believers, or for assessing the epistemology of such theorising.

In section 2, we will address the problem of the remarkable diversity of what is labelled “conspiracy theories” (hereafter “CTs”): the 9/11 supposed Mossad-CIA conspiracy, the supposedly fake moon-landing, the recent mass shootings viewed as hoaxes, the autism-vaccine link theory, fake Paul or chemtrails theories, do not seem to share more than an explanatory appeal to a hidden group of conspirators. As a way to clarify the landscape of CTs, we will sketch five distinctions along which to classify them.

Section 3 will focus on a particularly important subclass of CTs, namely those of anti-scientific spirit, which promote mistrusting institutional science. Such focus is motivated by several (somewhat unrelated) reasons, the main of which being that, as philosophers of science, anti-science views are the ones to which we are the more acquainted, and sensitive; those views have also a

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4 Another notable reason is that, by taking scientists as their main targets, anti-science CTs raise in a particularly striking way the difficult problem of where to draw the boundary between healthy scepticism (which is supposed to be at the root of the scientific method) and social paranoia—unreasonable doubts. It is a hard task for scientists to defend scientific authority without exposing themselves to the criticism of betraying the scientific
significant detrimental impact on society (think e.g. of climate denial and vaccine-autism theories, see Douglas et al. 2015). This analysis will lead us to highlight that the boundary between social critique of science on the one hand, and conspiracy theorising on the other hand, as easy to draw as it may seem, is rather fuzzy.

Section 4 will then focus on the very appellation of “conspiracy theories”, and emphasise that this label should not be taken too seriously by epistemologists, especially not as a tool to demarcate CTs as bad theories. Section 5 will then analyse a crucial divide regarding rationality in conspiracist thinking, which concerns both psychology and philosophy. Finally section 6 considers again science-focused CTs, and argues in favour of a politically and socially contextualised approach to rationality over a scheme focused on abstract individual believers.

2. Mapping Conspiracy Theories—A Tentative Typology

Many different discourses are called “conspiracy theories”. It is not clear whether this apparently heterogeneous class of things actually constitutes one kind of object. If not, this would be problematic for any attempt at providing an account of conspiracy theories as such. Even though the focus of any study is generally a set of objects, there exists an overarching principle to justify the grouping; and reciprocally, this plurality is generally dividable along some axes.

Some CTs appeal to evil groups of people (e.g. the Illuminati, chemtrails or Reptilians theories), some CTs intend to show that established truths (e.g. the benefits of vaccines, genocides, anthropogenic climate change) are based on a hidden lie, while others are just claiming that the world as it appears is partly a hoax (e.g. fake Paul, fake moon-landing theories). Quite often, those CTs are grouped within the same kind of thought tendencies that underlie creationism, climate change denial, or science denial in general, as well as Holocaust denial. Some sociologists and psychologists have studied the odds that believers in those views would also hold conspiracy theories or score high in what they measure as the intensity of their “conspiracies ideation” (Brotherton and French 2015), or on the scale of conspiracist mentality that they designed (Brotherton et al. 2013, Bruder et al. 2013)—and the scores are quite high indeed.

However, what justifies calling “CTs” hypotheses as diverse as those about who killed Lady Di, the negation of the Connecticut massacre, or the Reptilians fantasy (according to which important characters of History are secretly dinosaurs), is less clear. If CTs constitute a ‘natural kind’, then it should be proven. Granted, those views could be just a gerrymandering assemblage of fantasies; but then, what sense would a study (whether psychological, philosophical, or sociological) of such views make? If the main motivation for such a study consists of pragmatic reasons (e.g., those views are dangerous for democracy), then it should be made explicit, and a justification of the assemblage (why this one rather than another one?) should be given from this pragmatic perspective. On the other hand, if the objects of the collection are supposed to belong to distinct natural kinds or species, possibly falling under a natural kind of ideal of critical thinking and rational doubt. But those questions are beyond the scope of this paper, and are one object of a research programme on ‘reasonable doubt’ led by one of us; see http://readoubtproject.wixsite.com/conference.
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A higher level, then, no species or natural kinds in the collection should be omitted. We will argue that this is not easy to show in the case of CTs. But to start with, let us try to bring some order into the diversity of the CTs studied in the literature, hoping that this might contribute to finding either unifying criteria or overarching concepts.

A first way to navigate this galaxy is to sketch a typology. We propose five distinctions:

**General vs specific.** Some CTs have a very wide scope, and are likely to explain everything (the theory according to which Illuminati rule the world exemplifies this). Others are concerned only with one specific event (e.g. Kennedy’s assassination, 9/11)—even though as a consequence of the former, some “local” CTs can be deduced from more encompassing ones (i.e. the Illuminati killed lady Di).5

**Scientific vs non-scientific.** Some CTs are relative to science (e.g. vaccination creates autism but we are kept ignorant of the research about that; climate change is an invention of ecologists who want to deprive us from the pleasure of driving cars, etc.). Others are unrelated to science (e.g. Fake Paul, fake moon-landing, 9/11 as a “false flag” operation).

**Ideological vs neutral.** Some CTs are ideologically strong—for instance, the various supposed Jewish plots (Jewish Bolshevism, Judeo-Masonry) or the fear of a communist conspiracy that pervaded McCarthyist America, as famously analysed by Hofstadter (1964). Others are not (e.g. the Illuminati are not described as a specific racial or political human group; neither is Fake Paul).

**Official vs anti-institutional.** Some CTs are official ones (e.g. McCarthyism anti-communist paranoia, or the propaganda about capitalist spies in Soviet Union). Others are explicitly denying the facts that are hold true by the regime (e.g. theories about the supposedly fake bombings in the US, 9/11 “truthers” allegations, theories about lady Di’s death).

**Alternative explanations vs denials.** Some CTs claim that those responsible of some events or human history are not the ones we usually think (9/11 “truthers” theories, Illuminati theory), without denying that the events in question took place. Others more radically claim that those events (e.g. the 2015 terrorist killings in France, the Boston marathon killing) never happened.

This classification, which is probably not exhaustive, tries to bring some order into the patent diversity of CTs. However, beyond this diversity, all those views seem to have something in common, which could be captured by Aaronovitch’s (2009) characterisation of CTs. According to him, a CT is an explanation of an event or of an event type that unnecessarily appeals to the hypothesis of a group of malevolent agents that remains hidden.

The last specification (about the conspirators’ remaining hidden) acknowledges the crucial fact that CTs do not concern conspirators who expose themselves when their operation is achieved, like terrorists.6 Based on

5 Such theory is exposed on https://www.davidicke.com/

6 The specification about the agents’ “malevolence” does not imply, of course, that there exists no conspiracies where conspirators have good intentions (such as freedom fighters conspiring to assassinate the dictator). But one would not call a “conspiracy theorist” someone suspecting (and maybe hoping!) that there is such a secret plot going on, even though his suspicions are mistaken (unless he is the dictator himself, in which case the
Aaronovitch’s characterisation, which we may take as a provisory account of what unifies all those discourses, we can suppose that CTs can be partitioned into our 5-fold distinction above, according to what the *explanandum* is (its generality; its relation to science), who the alleged conspirators are (whether their identity is ideologically laden or not), and who *spreads the belief* (government vs people).

However, the following questions remain to be addressed: according to what criteria, and from what perspective, can one judge that such an appeal is “unnecessary”? (is it empirically false? is there a better explanation?—is it just wrong, or irrational?) In the next section, we will address some of these questions by focusing on one kind of CTs identified above, namely the ones that concern science.

3. Where Is the Boundary Between Undue Scepticism toward Science and Rational Social Critique of Science?

There is a special kind of CTs that are rooted on a mistrust of institutional science, and may therefore evolve into (institutional) science denialism (Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013). Some social psychologists have shown that believers of CTs are more likely than others to be attracted to alternative medicines, vaccination rejection, and other discourses or attitudes that are averse to current science and scientific institutions, for different reasons. Sometimes, what is at stake is not a very elaborated CT, but just a distrust regarding authorities in general (governments and the media), and especially scientific authorities. In this section, we will focus on these views, as a particularly important kind of CTs (both quantitatively, and as a threat to democracy). Our main point will be to highlight how difficult it can be to draw a clear-cut boundary between such an undue scepticism towards science and other, rationally grounded, critical views about science.

3.1 Alternative Science and Anti-Science Views

A first thing to note is that many elaborated CTs are not distrusting science in general, but rather target current “official” scientists and intend to replace them by their own, alternative “experts”. This is quite different from a general anti-scientific, anti-rationalist, 'sentimentalist' attitude, which is less closely tied to conspiracist worldviews. Consider climate change denial. It often goes hand in hand with embracing rather technophile and science-friendly views (especially regarding nuclear energy and fracking). Climate change denial, in its most general form, includes a CT, namely the fact that scientists consciously lie about global warming and the perils of industry, for example in order to please environmentalists.

Thus, one could easily argue that a more detailed analysis of (anti-science) CTs should partition their set into two groups. The first one consists of environmentalism-friendly populations, which for instance would be more attracted to anti-vaccines CTs, or to alternative medicine, and despise modern science on the grounds of its supposed lack of human values. Such CTs mostly consider that official science is being pervaded by capitalistic forces and interests. They therefore aspire to a different kind of science, possibly more holistic and imaginary conspirators are indeed, from his point of view, malevolent!). Thanks to Juha Räikkä for urging us to clarify this point.
anti-Western. Alternatively, they may support other, non-institutional experts, who appeal to the same standards of scientific method as official science, but have supposedly been marginalised and deprived from any funding and institutional position because of their anti-conformist views.

The second group consists of more right-wing (or, in the US, Republican) populations, who do not share those critical views of modern science as inhuman, but rather fear the anti-growth consequences of the findings about climate science and ecology, and therefore design or believe CTs about institutional science in order to rationalise those fears.

Having highlighted that, the main point we want to make is that it is a hard task to tell exactly where the domain of CTs start within the set of critical views about science. One of the major arguments given by people who support anti-vaccination theories, for instance, is that scientific information available to the public is ultimately driven by labs that are themselves funded by firms. Big Pharma has a major interest in selling us drugs, especially vaccines, which prompts them to lie about the risks of their products—first of all vaccines. The point here is not to show that such argument is misguided; our concern is rather that the relations between scientific activity and money funding is something not easy to disparage. We will show this first by successively considering four examples.

3.2. CT and Social Critique of Science: a Continuum?

**Fat and sugar.** Consider a recent controversy: fat and sugars are bad for health if consumed in small excess. We have known for a long time that fat should be avoided, and some policies have been implemented to prevent populations from over-consuming it. However, it recently turned out that sugar is bad too, and might even be worse, but that scientists from physiology or molecular biology labs in the 60s and 70s had been encouraged to underestimate the negative impacts of sugars, therefore overemphasising the compared dangers of fat (Taubes 2016). Fast food or soda companies, which sell products that are highly loaded in sugar, were first among the funders of this kind of research.

Is this a conspiracy? The *Guardian* article (by Ian Leslie) that extensively reviewed the case is entitled ‘The sugar conspiracy’. To some extent, it may not be irrational, indeed, to speak of a conspiracy—at least a conspiracy of silence. Indeed, a group of hidden agents deliberately increased their benefits by means detrimental to the population. And, like in many conspiracies, a lie about the real or the most important culprit (here, sugar rather than fat) has been instilled into the public.

When we now consider science in general, past this specific example, and more particularly sciences whose findings have some indirect impinging upon social issues (e.g. geosciences, chemistry, genetics), we witness analogous features regarding funding. “Merchants of doubts”, as portrayed by Oreskes and Conway (2010), were deliberately harmful, but they rightly established some facts about industrial pollution; the problem is that they willingly misrepresented the ratio between the damages pollution creates, and the ones caused by tobacco. What invalidates their research as science worthy of the name is the frame in which it was elaborated, and the way it was presented—namely, confronting research on

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7 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/apr/07/the-sugar-conspiracy-robert-lustig-john-yudkin
air pollution to findings about passive tobacco consumption, while the question of the relative causal weight of each was not satisfactorily addressed.

**Climate science.** Most of the scientists who deny either climate change, or, mostly, the anthropic cause of climate change, are not themselves climate scientists (i.e., experts in the sciences directly involved in the study of climate change, such as ecology, geochemistry, or palaeoclimatology). Rather, they often are geologists. But geology, as a science, is massively funded by firms linked to the oil economy, because oil exploitation obviously requires some geological knowledge.

Of course, it is a far cry between such statement and claiming that there is a conspiracy of oil companies to counter climate science and diffuse a pro-fossil energies discourse into the public. However, let us now look at another quite controversial issue, namely the one concerning GMOs and their various risks.

**GMOs.** Here, things are interestingly differing across countries. In the US, for instance, distrust regarding GMOs is considered as an instance of irrational, anti-science, stance, and Rational Wiki lists it along with anti-vaccination creeds and creationism (http://rationalwiki.org/wiki). In France, GMOs are not uncontroversially a scientific achievement, and many scientists doubt the virtues of GMOs.

Considering who those scientists are, they appear as partitioned into two distinct groups. Most molecular biologists are in favour of GMOs, and deny that there is any substantial risk, pointing to a mass of studies that never detected risks for human health above the threshold required for food products in general (Key et al. 2008, American Medical Association 2012). They often make the well warranted claim that many non GMO-foods are problematic (e.g. regarding the excessive pesticides used for crops), hence that GMOs are not by themselves risky foods.

Inversely, many ecologists are cautious with regards to GMOs, some of them leading huge contestations regarding their extensive use (Bonneuil 2006). They often highlight ecological risks (i.e. pervasiveness, diffusion over large landscapes, high competitive power that may turn GMO seeds into invasive species, and subsequent loss of biodiversity). Once biodiversity decreases, seeds are so to say less evolvable and more vulnerable to environmental change (which is indeed occurring quickly because of climate change). That creates uncertainty regarding future crops, leading to possible famines, drops in stocks and market values, and finally risks for terms of population health.

This situation is interesting because private R&D that funds some research in molecular biology comes from firms that indeed develop biotechnologies, hence often GMOs (Guillemaud et al. 2016, about Bt crops, namely, maize or

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8 The case of Claude Allègre, a major geologist and former French minister of Education turned into the most famous climate denier in France, provides an excellent illustration of this point (Allègre 2012—which includes a nice conspiracy theory about how two NASA researchers invented the ‘myth’ of climate change, by tweaking their data, in order not to lose their funding).

9 An important *PlosOne* study showing that about 40% of publications concerning GMOs are affected by conflicts of interest, and vindicate position generally favourable to the modified seeds’ industries, is due to ecologists working at the French institute of Agronomy (INRA) (Guillemaud et al. 2016).
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other plants modified by *Bacilla thuringiensis* as a protection against herbivore insects. In turn, such funding are not the ones supporting ecologists (who may themselves have contracts with agronomy firms). Hence, the sources of funding seem to some extent to be predictive of the positions of the scientists regarding the ecological or health risks of GMOs.

To be clear, we are not advocating a conspiracist view of science. But what we have just highlighted raises a problem for the clearest available defence of science against science denialism and expert distrust, namely, an appeal to the Mertonian view of science. According to it, science as a social system is oriented towards the production of truth, even in the absence of good will or probity of its agents (in particular because claims, in order to be validated, have to undergo a harsh process of testing via criticism by others whose interest is precisely the demolition of such claims, see Bouchard 2016). Yet witnessing systematic biases due to research funding, irrespective of what in fine is the “objective truth” about GMOs, makes it harder to say that the result of science is reliable because of the orientation of the whole system towards producing objective claims about the world.

Note that the Mertonian defence is very good at stating that biased research works are not the norm in such a system. But this holds for specific programmes on one topic: if one designs the probability distribution of biases among particular research programmes, the highly biased results will be the tail of the distribution, and there will be a peak on lightly biased results. However, the GMO issue is not about how much one specific research programme is biased, but about a bias pattern across a lot of different research programmes (in ecology, biology, etc.), and this may be compatible with the Mertonian defence. Such defence indeed leaves a room for the idea that various goals and values are involved within scientific research programmes, and in our case one might argue that the two stances regarding GMOs are correlated to two distinct sets of values: ecological conservation concerns on the one hand, agricultural productivity in the face of current human overpopulation on the other. But our critique here highlights the fact that those values and goals align with funding biases, whatever the validity and reliability of each scientific judgement per se.

The issue with science-focused CTs is thus the following. One can never, or hardly, know whether molecular biologists advocating GMOs have been bought by Monsanto & Co. But it is not even necessary to assume so in order to highlight the effects of funding on the distribution of scientists’ commitments regarding social issues connected to their work. For this reason, we claim, it is still rational not to think that scientists have been corrupted. After all, the subjective attitudes of scientists are not really at stake here, provided that in the end the results of the ‘conspiracy’ are the same, namely, a bias in the claims that they support.

10 Another interesting result of the study is that at the scale of an individual researcher, the publications tend to be more favourable to the GMOs when there is some funding from such a firm.

11 The situation here somehow parallels the status of the press in democracies: freedom of expression creates a world where one could rationally expect that all information is available, and all claims and political propositions openly criticised. However, other mechanisms due to the capitalist economy of information and infotainment favour oligopolies which undoubtedly threatens the plurality and openness of the press, as well as the freedom-of-speech of journalists (this is the case in many Europeans countries and the US).
Referring to the characterisation of a CT as an unnecessary appeal to a hidden group of malevolent agents, it turns out that it is not clear here who the group of malevolent agents would be. Are the conspirators the scientists themselves, or the people funding them and orienting research? And should the subtle social criticism pointing out the gradient in funding biases be lumped with crude CTs like the ones that see climate science as the emanation of a specific plot against humanity? More seriously, all this does not lead to the idea that science is a conspiracy driven by capitalists. But it shows that the boundary between a conspiracist view of science and a critical view of what science says regarding many hot topics is not as sharp as we would expect or hope.

This actually mirrors the relation between conspiracy theory and sociology, and the fact that they may seem very close to each other—a historical and conceptual stricture analysed in Boltanski’s *Enigmes et complots* (Boltanski 2012). This consideration may provide some criteria to sort out CTs from (sound) critics of science: there are bad and sound theories, and sociology is a good theory, while CT is its spurious shadow.

So apparently the option left here in order to draw a boundary between social critique (of science) and CT, and then between CT in general and rational critique, is to epistemologically assess the value of the ‘theory’ in both cases. However, the following section will criticise this approach.

4. Conspiracy Theories Are (Generally) not Theories

The previous section, focusing on CTs that are concerned with science, has shed some doubt not only on the unicity of the class of things usually called ‘CTs’, but also on the very existence of a clear-cut boundary between CTs and rational critique. We have just suggested that there may be a way to clarify this boundary, which would consist in treating the problem as what philosophers of science since Popper call a “demarcation problem”. Here the idea would be that there exists a demarcation criterion that divides the sets of theories appealing to a conspiracy between proper ones and ill-formed ones, and all so-called ‘CTs’ fall into the second category. We could demarcate them on a case by case basis, by assessing the epistemological value of the theories at stake: in this perspective, conspiracy theories, as opposed to good rational critique, would just be bad theories. This section criticises such strategy.

4.1. An Epistemological Approach: CTs are Bad Theories

From a critical point of view, one way to approach the issue of CTs is to assess their epistemological value in the light of the standards of scientific theories. From this perspective, it should be easy to show that, most of the time, CTs do not satisfy the several criteria that a proper scientific theory should meet: empirical confirmation, predictive fruitfulness, unification, simplicity, explanatory power, among others. CTs appeal to *ad hoc* hypotheses that often make them unfalsifiable for whoever endorses these hypotheses. In fact, those various failures to meet the standards for scientific theories can be thought of as alternative exemplifications of the “unnecessary” character of their appeal to a group of hidden agents—to a
conspiracy—as highlighted by Aaronovitch’s characterisation. This might mean that what differentiates a good explanation appealing to a hidden plot from a proper conspiracy theory is that the latter is on the wrong side of the demarcation criterion, whatever its definition. Just like metaphysical theories according to Duhem (1906), CTs appeal to unobservable entities whose role is unnecessary. And just like pseudoscientific theories according to Popper (1962), such appeal and its unlimited explanatory power make them unfalsifiable.

Hence, one way to debunk CTs would be to consider them seriously, and to carefully analyse them, case by case, in order to exhibit their shortcomings. However, for several reasons, this stance is not very fruitful, we believe.

4.2. Non-specificity

First of all, this type of criticism can be made to many theories that are by no way CTs. As philosophers of science have long acknowledged, theories are, most often, underdetermined by the data (Duhem, 1906, Kuhn, 1962, Quine 1975). That implies that it is always possible, at least in principle, to come up with an alternative explanation of a domain of phenomena that is already covered by a given theory. That also implies that whether, and to what extent, a given set of empirical data confirms a given hypothesis, is open to debate. Scientific controversies among advocates of rival theories appeal to various criteria, beside empirical confirmation (Kuhn 1977, 1983, Hempel 1983, Thagard 1978, Van Fraassen 1980).

Taking seriously conspiracy theories, one can certainly enter into a debate with their advocates, in terms of theoretical values (such as simplicity, explanatory power, unification power, or aesthetic appeal). But this is by no way specific to conspiracy theories. That would probably enable us to make explicit to which regard they are bad theories—but just like other bad theories. So this does not allow us to solve our problem of drawing a clear-cut line between conspiracy theories and rational critique, which appeared acute when considering science-focused CTs.

We are left with no clear definition of conspiracy theories still, and no clear epistemological criteria to classify a given set of hypotheses as a conspiracy theory. The appeal to a hidden group of malevolent agents seems to be, as we have already emphasised, the only feature the variety of objects called CTs have in common. However, just highlighting the fact that the appeal to a group of malevolent agents is “unnecessary” (in the case of conspiracy theories as opposed to cases of real conspiracy unveiling) is not enough: what seems unnecessary to us might well be considered as fundamental for someone else, so one will need another criterion to demarcate unnecessary hypotheses, which leads to infinite regress. What common parlance seems ultimately to refer to by “conspiracy theorising” is rather the assumption that things are not what they appear to be, and that they appear so in virtue of some powerful group of people’s bad intentions. This highly unwarranted speculation is exactly what the term “theory”

12 In a Popperian manner, falsifiability has been indeed proposed as a criterion for good theories, which is violated by such appeals to hidden groups of agents (Bronner 2013).
13 Moreover, virtues such as explanatory power or simplicity are arguably contextual and perspective-dependent, as they depend, among other things, on what one’s fundamental hypotheses are (see section 6).
in the phrase “conspiracy theory” refers to, as we will now see.

4.3. Confusion Due to a Flaw in our Lexicon

As philosophers of science and scientists know too well, the word “theory” suffers from strong ambiguity. While theories are considered the most remarkable achievements of scientific thinking, the phrase “it’s just a theory” rather means the exact opposite to what scientists—and philosophers of science—mean when they use the term “theory” to name a set of hypotheses. Scientific theories do not deserve this name until they have passed strict tests of empirical confirmation, of logical consistency, and of conceptual significance. Their core concepts must at the same time have a clear and operational definition, and be rich and complex enough to allow for conceptual development and predictive fruitfulness.

To be sure, most conspiracy theories would not pass this test. But why would they? And why should we bother showing that they do not? Following such a path—in addition to not allowing us to clearly distinguish conspiracy theories from bad theories—would just be taking much too seriously the word “theory”. The phrase “conspiracy theory” by no way suggests that the ideations so designated are theories in any scientific and philosophical sense. It is not the advocates of CTs who call their ideations “theories”, but rather their detractors. Hence, the word “theory”, here, is clearly used in its pejorative sense: it means that these are highly unwarranted, and speculative constructs. All we can do is regret that this use of the term “theory” is becoming so widespread—and maybe stop using it, because it somehow gives credit to this anti-scientific use of the word.

Let us take a few steps back. As we have emphasized from the beginning, talking of conspiracy theories is extremely widespread. Everyone talks of conspiracy theories, makes fun of them, etc. In other words, this is a ‘trendy’ topic. This is a good thing in a way, because this makes research about them easy to communicate to the public—at least easier than research on scientific theories. It is rather an easy task to explain to the non-specialists why CTs call for an epistemological, psychological, and sociological study.

Although it might be a good thing to call our object by the same name as it is called in everyday language—just not to withdraw in our academic ivory tower—we should also beware of not being victim of a naïve (double) illusion, namely that 1. There exists a class of things corresponding to what common parlance calls “conspiracy theories”, and that 2. Conspiracy theories are theories, and should be analysed as such, in order to be shown to be bad theories. And, if we want to be consistent, we should probably give up this phrase.

Furthermore, although it might be true that some of them (e.g. some versions of the 9/11 conspiracy) are rather sophisticated constructs (see Raab et al. 2013, which addresses them as narratives, conducting to some interesting self-knowledge), in many cases, they just consist in formulating a simplistic hypothesis that is taken as a universal explanation. For instance, the hypothesis that pharmaceutical laboratories have financial interests that lead them to fund research only if it supports their interest, and that they have influential relations with political decision-makers is, to say the least, a quite easy to come with (and simple) hypothesis. Nothing here is akin to the conceptual richness and logical complexity of the genuine scientific theories philosophers of science have been dealing with, and elaborated their tools of analysis for.

In this respect, knowing what people mean by “theory” is indeed relevant to the issue of the unity of CTs (thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point).
altogether, just not to contribute to the use of the word ‘theory’ in its pejorative sense.

Psychologists who argue that we should talk in terms of “conspiracist worldview” or “conspiracy mentality” might thus be better inspired (e.g. Dagnall et al. 2015; Leman and Cinnirella 2013). Their major argument is the well documented fact that believers in one CT are highly likely to believe in many others independent CTs. However, this does not mean that looking at conspiracy theories on a case by case basis—rather than considering the conspiracy worldview tendency as a whole—is uninteresting. What we want to argue for is that this should be done by taking the believers’ perspective, rather than focusing on the theoretical construct per se independently from the reasons agents may have to hold it.

We should study beliefs in conspiracist constructs, rather than study these constructs in abstracto. From this perspective, epistemology and psychology should go hand in hand. Yet if we consider extant approaches, it is not obvious that such integration can be easy. Considering such possible unity is the object of the next section, where we will show that a principled divide affects psychological and epistemological approaches to CTs.

5. Are Conspiracist Beliefs Wrong, or Irrational? A Crucial Divide

Even though we contest their use of the label “theory”, many approaches to conspiracist beliefs have been elaborated, whose lessons are still worthy of consideration. Sociological or political ones consider the reasons of the spreading of those theories, their recent flourishing or the causes of their social distributions (Hofstadter 1964; Sunstein and Vermeule 2008; Billig 1987; Wood 2013; Byford 2014; Van Prooijen et al. 2015). Psychological ones study the causes why some individuals are believing in one or many of those theories (Brotherton and French 2015; Bruder et al. 2013; Dagnall et al. 2015; Bilewicz et al. 2015; Goertzel 1994). And finally, epistemological ones attempt to characterise what is utterly flawed in those theories (Keeley 1999, Cassam 2015).

Those enquiries—whose number increased noticeably after 2001—gathered an interesting body of knowledge about the causes of the spread of conspiracy ideations, the personalities of whoever believes in them, as well as the correlation between social (political attitudes, mistrust towards authorities) or psychological features (paranoid tendencies, Darwin et al. 2011; need for cognitive closures, Leman and Cinnirella 2013) on the one hand, and the probability of believing in CTs on the other. The ties between CTs and political extremism (Van Prooijen et al. 2015) or mistrust (Hofstadter 1964) as well as the role played by agents’ need for cognitive closure are indeed well established now. The role of the structure of available information has been pointed out, together with the way it is amplified by the easily achieved polarisation of opinions on the Internet. Sunstein and Vermeule (2008) speak of a “crippled epistemology”, which supposedly increases the chance that people will adopt a CT, especially by providing easy affordances for a confirmation bias to select information and process it in a way that more and more moves away from reality. More generally, psychological research has

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16 Hereafter, we will be using the label “CT” to refer to any conspiracist hypothesis or ideation.
unravelled the role played by in-built cognitive biases and heuristics in agents' acceptance of CTs: intentionalist bias (disposition to causally ascribe effects to human agents, Brotherton et al. 2013), assumption that large-sized effects require important causes (Leman and Cinnirella 2007), biases about the assessment of randomness, among other things.

However, those avenues of research, when better examined, do not pertain all to the same approaches and may ultimately conflict. Indeed, they essentially disagree on whether one should assume the irrationality of conspiracist views or rather consider that CTs are just wrong statements resulting from rational operations.

Some of those approaches, indeed, track the failures of reasoning involved in adopting a conspiracy theory. Those failures may express a systematic disposition to fail—such as cognitive biases—and in this case CTs are interesting pathological examples that display in a sort of magnified way the structure of our cognitive system. That is somehow what psychologists like Goertzel (1994) and Leman and Cinnirella (2007, 2013), or philosophers like Quassim Cassam (2015), have in common. Their approaches ultimately assume that there is something irreducibly irrational in adopting, believing in, or construing a CT. Then, analysing specific CTs and the sociological and psychological structures that favour their elaboration or adoption sheds light on specific psychological or cognitive structures that either impede, or bias, the proper deployment of rational faculties.

Yet there exists another approach, in the psychology of reasoning, that tends to disavow the appeal to the notions of epistemic or cognitive bias (see Hahn and Harris 2014). It rather consists in assuming that rationality, as a specific way to forge and adopt belief, and make decisions on the basis of available information (such information being acquired in a specific social context that may also contribute to the adoption of a set of preferences), is at work even in the case of people choosing what appears to us as utterly irrational views. As illustrates a Bayesian approach (see Olsson 2013, Cook and Lewandowsky 2016), we can make sense of belief polarisation—and other apparently irrational tendencies that are usually accounted for in terms of systematic biases—by granting that agents are Bayesian reasoners and decision-makers. Considering their priors (as inputs to the Bayesian computation of a decision regarding adoption or not a specific stance), as well as the characteristics of the social environment in which they live, which will dictate the available information and the routines to assess evidence, one could thus account for the adoption of a given CT as the result of a purely rational process (Koed Madsen et al., under review, have recently designed an agent-based model showing that large networks increase the potential for conspiratorial thinking, even amongst Bayesian agents).

This approach contrasts with the former, not only because of the Bayesian methodology, but more generally, because on a disagreement regarding the general idea of CT that is at stake—a situated rational production versus a failure of rationality. Of course the approach here is not proper to CT, it allows a general theory of the distribution of false beliefs and their spreading in specific areas of societies—as well as possibly, tips for making them less socially salient. Because the CTs believers are still rational, changing their priors as well as the way
information is distributed to them might change their assessments and then the prevalence of CTs in general.17

None here would vindicate CTs. But whereas the second approach sees them as false beliefs or systems rationally produced, the former would rather treat them as irrational, not considering them along the true/false dichotomy. This distinction between “being false” and “being irrational” is therefore not just a semantic detail, it dictates various methodologies to explain the phenomenon of CTs.

Actually, one consequence of the second option, namely, viewing CTs as wrong outcomes of some rational decision-making process, is that there might be some epistemic interest in CTs, as a sort of approximation to the truth (see for instance Raab et al. 2013, which is interestingly entitled “Thirty nuances of truth”). Some claim that, most often, those who adopt a given CT intend to capture a situation of political domination, but wrongly identify the culprits (e.g. Goertzel 2004). Such a CT—for instance, that the white power in the US deliberately waited for installing protections after the Katrina hurricane in New Orleans, which led to the deaths of many poor black families—may be, even if this is a false explanation, one of the best available explanations, to the extent that it correctly captures something of the state of exploitation of a part of the population. When Spike Lee shot Katrina (When theLeeves broke), his documentary movie about Katrina, a priest talked about this idea that the ravages due to Katrina resulted from a deliberate attempt by the Whites to get rid of much of the black population: as he said, this may be untrue, but there is something true about the state of those black people.18 In this case indeed, the believers in this CT are not so irrational: they lack some relevant information, so that they cannot really grasp what is going on, but their rational capacities still allow them to formulate an explanation that is party true because it correctly captures something of the domination of the Blacks by the Whites (the counterfactual “if those people had been White they wouldn’t had been so neglected, and then died” does not seem intuitively to be fully wrong…). The fact that even people with low access to many facts (and poor education, often) are likely to capture, even in a deformed manner, something of their true social situation, should be explained by the fact that they are rational beings. Given their prior about their state of exploitation, as well as the limited information they have, the best explanation from their perspective might indeed be the abovementioned hypothesis—even if we know it is factually wrong.

So even though at first stake all the studies on CTs from epistemology, social psychology and sociology may seem to be integrable, there is a deep theoretical divide between appeal to epistemic vices or cognitive biases on the one hand, and

17 To some extent this divide echoes the debates generated 20 years ago by the reception of the results by Kahneman and Tversky (1974) about generalised flaws in probability reasoning or basic deductions. Whereas some, like Stich (1990), wanted to give up the characterisation of human mind as a rational system, others would modify the very notion of rationality, arguing that in the ecological or evolutionary contexts in which this human reason lives and evolves, its prestations can be considered as quite rational strategies (Gigerenzer et al. 1999).

18 “The fact that so many Black residents believe that the leaves have been deliberately destroyed is a result of their historical experience and of their constant feeling that their safety and well-being are sacrificed” (quoted in Aaronovitch 2009).
assumption of rationality in poorly truth-conductive contexts on the other hand. The last section will tackle the issue of the proper role of the assumption of rationality in CT studies by considering once again science-focused CTs, in which the despise of rationality seems at first stake the highest because science itself is a paradigm of rational thinking.

6. What Is Problematic With an Appeal to Standards of Rationality—the Case of Science-Focused CTs (again)

The problem for who philosophises about CTs is therefore the following: we start by taking a set of views that we characterise as conspiracy theories because of their unnecessary explanatory appeal to a group of malevolent agents. However, the subset of CTs that are related to science does not seem to be sharply distinguished from critical views about science that sociologically-oriented critiques may develop (section 3). Then, we may want to capture the reason why they are either irrational or wrong, by specifying a proper epistemic flaw that those theories display. Yet it turned out that those are not exactly theories (section 4). To say the least, the conspirationism / rational-criticism boundary is vague; there is rather a continuum from the realisation that science is partly value-driven to the idea of a fully intentional conspiracy involving scientists’ collective and conscious lies (a continuum which of course allows for cases that are clearly different, on each side of the very vague boundary). And the psychology and sociology of CT is not of much help here, because it is divided between approaches starting from the idea that CTs have a specific rationality (and trying to uncovering it), thus assuming that their irrational appearance stems from the conditions in which rationality is enacted—and approaches that describe them as irrational and ask why people believe irrational things, or irrationally believe things. Is this a fatal blow against any attempt to philosophically define and understand science-focused CTs and CTs in general? Below, we develop two arguments to assess the prospects for a philosophical critique of CTs. We consider once again science-focused CTs, because they may be the type of CTs where those problems are the most acute.

6.1. A Question of Grain

Some of our difficulties here can be traced back to a grain issue; namely, when tackled with enough generality, many social phenomena can appear as conspiracies. Consider a recent poll, run in France: when asked the question “do you feel that someone unknown pulls the strings?”, 71% of the people answer “yes”. This has been interpreted as, ‘two thirds of the population are conspiracist’ (Gombin 2013). But such analysis must be dismissed, for the following obvious reasons.

Basic social facts can indeed be formulated in this very vague way: some people—e.g. rich people, the media, celebrities or politicians—have more power than others to influence others’ lives; they may often act in a secret way in order to ensure the efficiency of what they do, especially where their interests do not align with those of a group of people. So the feeling that, as an ordinary citizen, I am not aware of who impacts on my existence and why, even though I feel that some people do, is not irrational; this is just the opaque perception of some basic social mechanisms. If this is a conspiracist ideation, then basic awareness of social
structures is a CT, and the whole notion of CT becomes trivialised—therefore the label is not useful at all, and studies of CTs should be dissolved into general studies about social self-perception.

Thus, before calling some view ‘conspiracist’, one should be sure that it has been defined at the proper grain level. And this is what happens with science itself: a criticism based on awareness of social production of science may be seen as CT just because at a certain grain level, CTs and science-criticism similarly insist on the hidden mechanisms that yield the production of science in the scientific regime of “big science” and data driven science (Nowotny 2004; Schatz 2014), namely a regime where facts are numerous and the responsibility for their production relies on huge sets of individuals and require massive funding, hence political commitments to fund differentially A rather than B. But this identification is not useful, exactly like the conspiracist interpretation of the poll above mentioned, because it blurs the real content of what makes a view into a CT, namely, the fine-grained characterization of the conspirators and their motives. Saying that someone “pulls the strings” is not advocating a CT; saying that Jews or Masons secretly conspire to diffuse AIDS is so. Similarly, pointing out funding biases in political stances taken by scientists is not conspiracy theorising, whereas it is so to claim that scientists support vaccines because they are paid to do so by Big Pharma in order to sell us poison. Fine-graining the proposition here makes it shift from a true and vague view to a precise and wrong one.

The hope now is that the continuum of views (between conspiracy and sociology of science, so to say) we were describing may sharpen once addressed at the proper grain level.

6.2. Contextualising Rationality

However, we fear that this is not enough to solve the problem. There is an empirical aspect of the continuum thesis, which should be addressed now.

From an epistemological viewpoint, once considered as a style of hypothesis-formulating—so, as a production process, not as a result (namely a set of propositions or a theory), the major flaw of CTs can be characterised in the following way. Where rational enquiry assumes at least implicitly a null hypothesis, which is the absence of conspiracy and an ordinary mix of chance, intentional actions, alignment of interests and unintended consequences, conspiracy theorists invert this methodology. Assessing the conspiracy hypothesis is analogous to assessing an alternative hypothesis with respect to a null hypothesis in science (e.g. Gotelli and Graves 1996), which often corresponds to “what would have been the case just by chance”. This methodology avoids ascribing to the alternative hypothesis what indeed is due to chance, and then violating Occam’s Razor. But CTs start by assuming the conspiracy, and then look for evidence of it everywhere (which will be easily found). Only such a position of null hypothesis indeed explains why advocates of CTs start by

19 Of course, there are many ways to understand what a “null hypothesis”, is, and many debates among scientists on this issue—theoretical ecology is hugely concerned by this kind of questions. See e.g. Connor and Simberloff 1979, and later on the controversies around the “neutral model” elaborated by Hubbell 2001, see Munoz and Huneman 2016. However, solving those issues is not crucial for our argument here.
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dismissing large sets of evidence supporting the “received view” (as they call it), and continue by overemphasising light evidence in favour of their preferred stance (namely, “nothing happens by chance”). This difference in the choice of a null hypothesis, or in more general terms a default hypothesis, distinguishes what we could call a “conspiracist epistemology” from a scientific epistemology.

However, why should one choose the scientific, non-conspiracist epistemology? Why is it rational not to assume from the start that conspiracies are going on, so that no evidence should be taken at face value? It seems that we face here the limits of any a priori approach focusing on the individual process of belief justifications. To make it clear, let us consider for instance what living in former USSR implied: reading the press and listening to politicians should have been done with a complete lack of trust, because indeed all those discourses were lies—and malevolent lies because they were used to deprive people from their political freedom (among other niceties). The same thing could be said, plausibly, about contemporary North Korea.

For someone living in those regimes, it is not so irrational to start with the implicit assumption that conspiracy is all over the place. In other words, the decision over the null hypothesis, which seems to be an a priori issue, is indeed massively influenced by the empirical conditions of the context in which one lives.

Let’s unpack this point. It is not a fact of very sophisticated social science that human beings sometimes conspire together to get some benefits. After all, it is often easier to get what one wants by having allies. Moreover, reaching one’s goals, when this conflicts with some others’ interests, is facilitated by acting secretly. Therefore, in human societies some conditions are indeed in general met for favouring conspiracies. Stock exchange is the purest example of this state of affair: huge benefits can be made by secretly dealing in advance to influence market prices and values, and as a consequence people are inclined to do this.

What opposes this tendency is, first, the unreliability of interest alignments, which means that people often betray co-conspirators and reveal conspiracy—and second, the existence of socially institutionalised counterpowers or systems of sanction. For instance, conspiring behaviour at stock markets has a very high cost when it gets uncovered. In the political field, the press and the medias have an incentive in uncovering that politicians do conspire and cheat (such uncovering leading to extraordinary sales of newspapers), which of course counters the tendency for politicians to conspire; and so on. So even though there is an in-built tendency for conspiracy in societies, there is also an in-built system to counter it, which robustly impeaches the pro-conspiracy trends to pervade society. But we are talking here of democracies, understood at least as systems where there is a separation between powers. (This is what Montesquieu saw as the main condition for political freedom; we are talking of “democracy” in the sense of what Kant called “Republic”, not democracy understood first of all as a kind of regime.)

Huneman (2015) argued that parsimony, or more specifically minimised epistemic costs, ultimately justifies the preference for a scientific over a conspiracist epistemology. Although the present arguments, mitigating this preference in some empirical cases, supplement those ideas, it does not contradict them.
Thus, what justified the USSR citizen in privileging the conspiracist epistemology over the “scientific” epistemology\textsuperscript{21} is ultimately the lack of those counter-powers and institutions in her own society; such a lack could be empirically documented, provided that she employed the method of rational enquiry.\textsuperscript{22}

This last point obviously raises a threat of circularity. What if, could one object, the agent denies that, in France or the UK, we live in a democracy? After all, some very rational people think that way—for instance, appealing to the Marxist distinction between formal liberties and actual liberties, or other leftist critiques of domination. Therefore, for those people, the conspiracist epistemology would be perfectly justified; meaning that we have no way to rule out the conspiracist epistemology with those arguments.

The answer, here, consists in distinguishing a sort of meta-level within the analysis. Granted, once the political regime—France, or North Korea—has been diagnosed as democratic or non-democratic, then it is rational to adopt, or not, a scientific epistemology. But assessing \textit{that a context is a democratic one}, i.e., that the external conditions for the scientific epistemology to be the right epistemology are met, should be done according to the scientific epistemology. In other words, \textit{if} assessing evidence in the classical scientific way, taking as a null hypothesis the fact that things are what they claim to be, and that events mostly result from chance actions and public projects of people with un-aligned interests, the state of the world appears to be non-democratic (lacking counter powers and so on)—something like “I think I am living in North Korea!”—\textit{then} adopting the conspiracist epistemology becomes rational for further enquiries.

Of course, an infinite regress is lurking under those arguments. The person in North Korea, given the information she has, might not find out that the country is non-democratic. Hence she would be justified in (wrongly) adopting the scientific epistemology. And inversely, why should I think that the information I have—in virtue of which I find out that counter-powers exist which reduce the incentives for conspiracy, and therefore adopt the scientific non-conspiracist epistemology—is satisfying and reliable? At this point it is rational, we assume, to rely on some proxies for democracy: pluralism in information, political pluralism, open controversies, etc. This is wholly empirical, and if someone really thinks that all those facts are just fake facts, a bit like in SciFi movies or Dick’s novels where the reality itself is entirely made up (Dick 1973), then our arguments about scientific epistemology would not hold. Although that may seem a weak conclusion, we believe that one cannot go further than that.

At this point, either we face the basic question of epistemic scepticism—which has been massively addressed by philosophers—or we turn to an argument sketched by Huneman (2015) about CTs that appeals to their increased epistemic

\textsuperscript{21}The label “scientific epistemology”, as it should be clear from the context, does not refer to the epistemology of institutional science, but to a specific way of gathering and assessing evidence and building beliefs—which is actually mostly realised by science. We could have called it “rational epistemology”, but then we would have faced other ambiguity issues. Of course those remarks concern all putative CTs, and not just the science-focused or anti-science CTs.

\textsuperscript{22}Quassim Cassam (2015) centres his conception of CTs on the notion of “enquiry”, rather than beliefs. We think that his approach is ultimately compatible with the views expressed in this paper.
costs. But this is not the topic of our paper, and should be developed independently.

6.3. Science and Conspiracies
Now, back to science and science-focused CTs. What would justify someone in preferring a “scientific epistemology” and considering that turning to a conspiracist view of scientists’ behaviour should be done in the last instance and with parsimony? Exactly the same confidence that even though trends to conspiracy exist among scientists, the system is such that they are robustly countered, especially, as we said, via the disproportionate cost superimposed to any kind of lack of probity (including conspiracy, for example in the form of overt service to funding sources’ interests). Scientists have absolutely no incentives to conspire on fraud, because the cost of fraud is extremely high, as exemplified by the scientists caught doing minor fraud and expelled from their lab, such as Mark Hauser (Carpenter 2012). Scientists in general are encouraged to criticise others’ work—successful criticism or debunking being a proof of their own skills—which may easily lead to unravel fraud. The Mertonian defence of the reliability of institutionalised science, recalled above, emphasises the fact that the social organisation of science provides those counter-incentives (or negative weight) for conspiracies (in the sense of scientists agreeing to fraud, hide facts, forge data). So here again, there is an empirical element that justifies the choice of a “scientific” epistemology over a conspiracist epistemology. One cannot make it into a purely a priori affair.

7. Conclusive Remarks: Some Consequences
The arguments developed in this paper lead to a reasonably sceptical assessment of the prospects of a general account of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are not theories, they are not an epistemologically coherent and unique set of views, they are not likely to fall together under the same criteria of irrationality, and they might be wrong or irrational in their own way, on a case by case basis. The divide between rationality-based approaches and critique of irrationality as mirrored by conspiracy theorists, seems here to stay. But to conclude, we will highlight here two kinds of consequences of those considerations.

First, let us consider the following list of current issues with scientific production: the replication crisis in psychology and the neurosciences (Makel et al. 2012), which led to the finding that possibly half of the research in those fields is flawed (Munafò et al. 2017); p-hacking practices (Head et al. 2015); h-index and impact factor systems which contribute to a scientific policy affected by an in-built preference for poorly designed science (Smaldino and McElreath 2016); increasing role of media coverage in the evaluation of researchers, and establishment of a research bias through this filter (Scheiber 2015); general increase in scientific fraud (Chevassus-au-Louis 2016); explosion of predator journals that publish purely ungrounded results and are often non-discriminated by lay people and even journalists. All those facts concur in showing that the guarantees against a science taken over by hidden social, financial or political interests are very weak. But this ultimately means that in the context of scientifically-based claims, adopting the “scientific epistemology”, namely, the choice of chance, randomness, non-conspiracy as a null or default hypothesis
when addressing putative conspiracies in and about science, is not obviously justified. Severe sceptics, who would see current science in a way analogous to, in the political domain, what Soviet Union was to democracy, may not be trivially crazy. Or at least, they may become non-irrational in a close future, if the state of affairs regarding scientific production persists and gets worst.

Thus the defence against the continuum view that we sketched before, and which says that at the proper grain a non-vague, or at least sharp enough, difference between CTs and rational criticism of science emerges, seems now much more fragile. And its fragility is strictly correlated to the empirical state of science and scientific production.

The second consequence concerns the dominant approach to conspiracy theories in psychology and social psychology, or epistemology. Researchers often ask questions about who believes CTs, and why this is so, or why CTs spread among people. Philosophers in turn discuss whether it is irrational for someone to be a CT believer. The whole research, especially done since the 9/11, commits to this ‘individualist’ paradigm (or ‘individual belief’ paradigm). However, as we have shown, assessing the rationality of conspiracist epistemology, and even reconstructing reasons for beliefs, cannot be done independently of a specific social structure empirically assessed.

Thus, the last conclusion of this rather sceptic paper is that, not only is it misleading to view CTs as theories, and to search for an in principle, overarching argument against conspiracy theories—their rational assessment can only be done on a case by case basis, assessing the CT as something that is the object of situated agents’ epistemic attitudes, rather than as an abstract representation of the world—but so is it to consider them in an individualist perspective, namely, by taking them as individual beliefs hold by individuals. Believing in CTs more generally pertains to having a conspiracist worldview, as psychologists say; and this worldview in turn relies upon a conspiracist epistemology, to which one must prefer a scientific epistemology, as philosophers would argue. However, this cannot be argued in general, and the beliefs and epistemology cannot be considered in abstraction from the social concepts of the agent (e.g. Brotherton et al. 2013; Dagnall et al. 2015 for psychology; Cassam 2015; Keeley 1999 for epistemology)—not only the information available to her, but also the kind of political and economical regime she lives in (including the structure of scientific research policy). This last point may sound common-sensical but it appeared to us that much of the very sophisticated, rich and deep research that has been elaborated since the 9/11 often forgets it, while it used to be something sociologists from the 70s or 80s would take for granted (e.g. Billig 1987).²³

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Joining the Conspiracy

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Abstract

Accompanying the accusation of malevolent political conspiracy is the accusation of cover-up of these conspiracies by leading institutions of public information; mass media and national law enforcement. A common response to this accusation is that these institutions of public information will reliably reveal such political conspiracies, not cover them up. Unfortunately, the best arguments for this hope are now widely recognized to fail. Further, cover-up does not require descending control of the media by conspirators. The problem is much more complex, one endemic to our information hierarchies. This includes the mechanisms generating the epistemic problem of toxic truths. “Toxicity” is the likelihood that some conspiratorial scenarios, even if well evidenced, are too “toxic” for our usual institutions of public information to disseminate to the public, or even investigate. Cover-up by intentional neglect, not descending control, is the easily predictable consequence. The threat this poses to a functioning democracy is significant.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, media, cover up, toxic truths, unaccountability

“Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain”.
L. Frank Baum, 1900

1. Introduction

What if our institutions of public information do not always have the ability to expose malevolent conspiracies, worming their way through our society with vast consequences? What if, worse, even given this ability, these institutions often have compelling, society-regarding reasons not to publicly reveal these conspiracies? The epistemology of these two problems is distinct but closely related: The first concerns certain common arguments for the claim we should be confident that institutions of public information can and will reliably reveal

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1 Juha Räikkä points out that this title might be construed as an intentional act. It is not meant to be. As we will see, we can join conspiratorial scenarios intentionally or inadvertently.
ambitious or “momentous” conspiracies; the public trust approach (PTA) and its supporting claims. The PTA asserts that in Western style democracies, for institutional motives of revelation, conspiracies seriously subversive of our democratic institutions will be reliably (not inevitably) exposed by the mainstream media and national law enforcement. The second concerns the unwillingness of these institutions to do so in certain society-destabilizing scenarios or worse, establish society-destabilizing patterns of revelation. In what follows, we will epistemically examine and relate both.

Toxicity is a set of truths (or at least well justified or warranted assertions), or a temporal pattern of such, that if convincingly revealed by mainstream news outlets and national law enforcement within a certain, relatively proximate time frame to the events in question (a) would with some significant probability (not restricted to 50% or more but often higher) be extremely socially and/or politically disrupting and (b) in many cases this consequence is easily foreseeable by any reasonable person conversant with the current civilization (the “person on the street” criterion).

We will explore and defend the following thesis: Contrary to the PTA, toxicity predictably and in crisis scenarios powerfully constrains publicized mainstream media investigations as well as those of National law enforcement when (b) is also met, for instance in the hypothetical case of a “false-flag”, massive attack on civilians. This is the inversion of the public trust approach. This is clearly an important thesis for social epistemology, and for further research, both analytical and empirical.

Questions like “Who is responsible for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq?” immediately invoke epistemology: How do we tell who is responsible? In the case of the Iraq war, this question is especially difficult. Not just because fully grasping the complex moral controversy between the United States’ system of global power and hostile groups is difficult, but because ascertaining the critical but merely descriptive facts is also an intricate epistemic challenge. Mechanisms of unaccountability emerge quickly in our society, one so hierarchical. This conundrum is not unique to the Iraq war. America’s previous major war suffered the same. Historians now deny the reality of the official precipitating event of the Vietnam conflict, the March 4th, 1964 gulf of Tonkin attack on US Naval forces. In a now declassified report, National Security Agency analyst Robert Hanyok writes,

As much as anything else, it was that people knew President Johnson would brook no uncertainty that could undermine his position […] despite doubts [about the reality of the attack], people in the defense and intelligence communities kept their silence […]. The over-whelming body of reports, if used [by the government], would have told the story that no attack had happened. So a conscious [governmental] effort ensued to demonstrate that the [Tonkin] attack occurred (Hanyok 1998: 39).

This is an institutional conspiracy theory, and apparently a true one.\textsuperscript{2} We must ask: How much unrecognized and so, unchecked, power derives from the very

\textsuperscript{2} Hanyok’s NSA analysis of signal intelligence decisively points to a conspiracy in the US military and intelligence communities to hide the facts of Tonkin on August 4th, 1964. Many other academic historians independently reached the same conclusion prior to
existence of such institutions? And even if recognized, how are our institutions of public information, media and law enforcement, likely to respond? Let us focus on the latter question, though the former will, like dogs driving sheep, impel us throughout.

The truth of what did not happen in the Tonkin gulf is what I term “toxic”, undermining the plans of the Johnson administration and Nixon’s to follow, the international and domestic credibility of the United States Federal government and therefore the righteousness—if such is possible—of a brutal war with northern Vietnam, in which more than one million humans eventually died. So it was suppressed in a conspiracy involving dozens if not hundreds of high-placed, high-powered, patriotic, well-educated public professionals. A conspiracy never exposed in the mass-media during the events, and only surfacing in a weak and parenthetical way more than 30 years later to little or no public interest; it was “ancient history”. All somewhat unsettling. What does this mean for the needs of democracy?

2. The Public Trust Approach

Conspiracy is dangerous to democracy. David Coady reminds,

Democracy requires that voting be conducted freely, and freedom requires a degree of accurate information about one’s choices; political conspiracy, which inevitably reduces or distorts such information, is therefore in conflict with the ideals of democracy (Coady 2007: 195).

The danger is real. This lies at the heart of anxiety over one form of conspiracy most everyone acknowledges, election fraud. Mainstream accounts of recent history reveal that high-level conspiracies happen with disquieting frequency—Watergate and the Pentagon’s deceitful conduct of the Vietnam war are obvious, well-researched examples—and that similar conspiracies may even be

NSA declassification in 2005. Hanyok’s account is, by our best current analysis, a conspiracy theory. I define “conspiracy theory” as a causal explanation of events that appeals to the intentional attempt or success at deception by a group of individuals cooperating for the creation or perpetuation of this deception (Basham 2011: 52-53). Dentith offers effectively the same definition. See his careful analysis (2014: 23-38). This includes active or passive deceit; “say nothing”, for instance. Other definitions prominent in the philosophical literature are similar and for our purposes interchangeable. Any pejorative or pathologizing connotation some still attach to “conspiracy theory” is logically subsequent to what they are directing this connotation to; a non-pejorative definition of conspiracy theory itself. One cannot define a “Dalmatian” without first having a dog to put the spots on. So what is a “dog”? The pejorative/pathologizing approach to defining “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist” is no longer well regarded. For instance, see Keeley 1999, Basham 2001, Husting and Orr 2007, Bratich 2008, Hagen 2010, 2011, Dentith 2014, 2016, our 2016a, 2016b and our forthcoming. Empirical research suggests “conspiracy theory” is not a term that motivates public rejection. See Wood 2016. The pathologizing prejudice appears limited to professional media, politicians and a subset of academics.

3 An interesting question is how many levels of authority and in what overlapping ways this group deception endured. Motivated by differing or the same interests, an institutional system like national military/intelligence can easily and in a stable way replicate deception up and down its hierarchy of information.
the basis of more recent policy—the launching of the West’s recent wars in the Middle East is a plausible example; a compelling case can be made that the Bush administration and the Pentagon knowingly provided the public with many misleading and false claims about the terrorist threats involved in Afghanistan and Iraq. Not a mere guess, the evidence was before the public long before the invasions, particularly in Iraq’s case. With near unanimity, experts both American and international, including leaders of the US intelligence community, publicly rejected the key justifying claims of the Bush administration prior to the invasion. These criticisms received little media attention and the administration dismissed or ignored any that were contrary to their aims, instead orchestrating a sophisticated and successful media campaign with the cooperation of leading journalists and dominant media corporations, launching the “war on terror” as a televised spectacle, “shock and awe” to unprecedented global viewer ratings and thousands of civilian fatalities. This is also a conspiracy theory. Again, apparently a true one.

Far more ambitious versions of events exist, notoriously, that the US federal government either willfully allowed or actually conducted the attacks of September, 2001. Many have considered the possibility that the attacks were foreseen by American, Israeli and other Western intelligence services but nevertheless allowed for the massive political capital they would accrue to pursue a variety of projects desired by the United States and others. But probably most popular with the global public is that a missile was used to attack the Pentagon (the “Hunt the Boeing” theory) and that the World Trade Centers were destroyed by a controlled demolition (the “Thermate” theory), all the work of U.S. military intelligence operatives, what has come to be called “9/11 conspiracy theory”.

A standard reply: Mainstream media would have launched riveting, withering coverage of the nightmare in its many dimensions, law enforcement would have conducted investigations leading to public arrests, trials and convictions (Keeley, 1999: 109-26). President Bush would have been “perp-walked” to a waiting police van. But none of this happened. Or likely ever will.

So these accusations are almost certainly false.

This is the public trust approach. Its “absence of evidence is evidence of absence” inference is key to the PTA critique of ambitious conspiracy theories in academia and frequenting popular media, too (Kelley, 1999, 2003). “Almost” because even those who are most confident in the inference admit that sometimes “cover ups” do happen and successfully. And it is exactly this possibility that our most ambitious contemporary conspiracy theories invoke.

We should recognize that Keeley is not making the implausible claim that if an ambitious political or economic conspiracy is real then the media, government officials, or other sources will inevitably successfully report it, and so we should infer since it was not reported, it did not occur. He recognizes that sometimes, dramatic conspiratorial secrets will be successfully kept from sufficient numbers of people, or the right kind of people, for a period sufficient for the success of these conspiracies, and even indefinitely, for good reasons—

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4 Keeley’s 1999 is an excellent introduction to some of the basic epistemic, psychological and metaphysical issues surrounding conspiracy theories.

5 One is unlikely to be concerned about, or wish to vote in response to, something that happened 70 years ago.
“national security”, for instance—and, on occasion, for bad reasons.⁶ This natural concession will become critical in what follows. The issue that animates Keeley’s public trust approach is allegations of morally corrupt conspiratorial deception by national governments in Western style democracies, and when we should disbelieve these; when these are “unwarranted”.⁷ Eventually, if there is no compelling revelation of such a conspiracy, belief in that conspiracy becomes increasingly implausible, and soon, unwarranted. It is unlikely to exist. But like many, he is confident that in the vast majority of instances ambitious political and economic conspiracies involving an “explosive secret” will be revealed. For this confidence to be well placed, it requires that it is very likely that such vast conspiracies will be revealed to the public by the very institutions conspiracy theorists question.⁸

The issue becomes: How likely is it that a complicated crime, one beyond the reach of ordinary minds, could be covered up indefinitely, or for a sufficient amount of time from a sufficient amount or kind of people? Is anything approaching the conclusion “almost certainly not”, justified? An honest inventory of both the sources of resilience and weakness in our hierarchical system of information transfer is required. Indeed, because of the existential stakes it is hard to imagine a more relevant and pressing task for epistemologists.

It is important to understand that our discussion is not primarily about Keeley’s arguments for the PTA. Instead, Keeley’s defense of the PTA appears both the most natural and best one in the literature⁹ and exploring its problems leads us, as naturally, to our primary concern: What happens when we recognize certain weaknesses with this defense and subsequently explore what patterns of investigation and revelation, or neglect, are more plausible in our information hierarchy? When we evaluate an information hierarchy in terms of its motives or goals, all motives and goals must be taken into account, not just those we find laudable or part of the official account of these institutions goals and so, action (or in action). Here we meet the real force of the problem of toxic truths: The problem of toxic truths can threaten to invert our apparently warranted

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⁶ The distinction between “amount” and “kind” is important in a variety of cases. For instance, imagine that a politically disenfranchised minority population is aware of a long, multi-faceted government conspiracy of degradation and elimination of potential revolutionaries within it, in order to perpetuate their oppression. But the enfranchised ruling class, who could end this conspiracy and would do so if made aware, is kept unaware of it. The right placed people, not amount, are excluded from the truth and from properly responding to it, so the conspiracy continues to prosper.

⁷ As Keeley deploys the concept of “warrant”, warrant is metaphysically "agnostic". For instance, we cannot infer from "p is warranted" to "p is probably true", “warranted” is conceptually unrelated to whether p is even likely to be true. The same applies to the negation of warrant. That p is unwarranted does not allow us to infer p is probably not true. Here, I am assuming the correspondence theory of truth, but need not to secure the conclusions in this paper.

⁸ Keeley endorses this summary and understanding of his argument in personal correspondence and in his 2003.

⁹ Rääkkä (2014) disputes that Keeley’s are the “best and most natural” objections to ambitious conspiracy theory in Western democracies. I think it is an empirical fact they are the most natural. They also appear to me to be the best we have. The interesting and creative semantic manoeuvre that Rääkkä explores (2009, 2014) as an alternative does not appear to me to suffice (see my 2011).
expectations of public institutions of information, our public trust; critically examining public trust helps us see how these expectations might predictably, even reliably flip. This inversion thesis is the ultimate thesis of the paper.10

The role of hierarchy looms large. Fully grasping the implications of public trust’s failure inverts, in critical cases, the thesis that our current information hierarchy reliably truthfully generates almost all of what civilizational humans believe about local, national and global events. An alternative analysis of the probable impacts of hierarchy and basic interests, economic and political, on our information hierarchy is required. Where formally word of mouth among intimates and personal verification played the central role in our beliefs, in the vast informational systems of today we live in a sea of well-managed hearsay. Sometimes the spell-binding violence of our times. Such hierarchies have a very limited number of persons in the role of control. So it is the probable relevance judgments and potential intentional neglect by such leadership that are critical for estimating the prospect of undirected cover-up.

The role of democracy as a source of governance can be radically reduced and dramatically subverted at exactly this point. This is an anti-democratic Achilles’ heel of the entire system. Stalin remarked, “It is not how people vote but who counts the votes.” The deeper truth is it is what we vote for or against that counts. And this is a matter of what we have been told and not told. Pynchon’s famous line in Gravity’s Rainbow comes to mind, “If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they do not have to worry about the answers” (Pynchon, 1973: 251). Control the questions and all else follows.

Keeley’s critique of ambitious conspiracy theory and defense of public trust rests on his paradigm of ideal social epistemology, empirical science. Keeley explains,

[It is important] just how large a role trust in both institutions and individuals plays in the justification of our beliefs. The problem is this: most of us including those of us who are scientists and who work in scientific laboratories full of expensive equipment have never carried out the experiments or made the empirical observations that support most contemporary scientific theories. Unless we want to conclude that the vast majority of us are not warranted in believing that the platypus is a mammal and that gold is an atomic element, we need some procedure by which the epistemic warrant obtained by those who do make the appropriate observations can be transferred to the rest of us. In modern science, this procedure involves the elaborate mechanisms of publication, peer review, professional reputation, university accreditation, and so on (Keeley 1999: 121-22).

Keeley then draws an analogy to the information we receive about the actions and motives of our political-economic hierarchy,

In the public sphere where conspiracy theories dwell, there are related mechanisms for generating warranted beliefs. There is the free press, made up of reporters, editors, and owners who compete to publish “the scoop” before others do. There are governmental agencies charged with investigating incidents, producing data, and publishing findings (Keeley 1999: 122).

10 The problem of toxic truths might be christened, the “public distrust approach”.
So like in science, we can trust mass corporate media and national law enforcement with the truthful transfer of information. Keeley infers that our warranted confidence in these institutions is almost always greater than any evidence we might have for a conspiracy theory that casts doubt on their reliability. Again, if the conspiracy theory is true, the conspiracy would very likely be quickly revealed to the public in a timely fashion. If it has not been, it is very likely to be false; belief is unwarranted.

But is there really sufficient parallel between the reliable regulation of information in the sciences and the political and economic realm to justify such a sweeping, hopeful conclusion? While initially appealing, the analogy becomes unconvincing—there are both problematic disanalogies as well as stunning failings even within scientific peer review, which given Keeley’s analogy, predict at least as stunning failures within public institutions of information.

Nature, unlike people, presumably does not aim to deceive us. She tells no lies. Experimental replication is an important tool of good science, the transmission of multiple results to the public, be they successful replications or disconfirmations, appears reliable, at least when the results are far removed from any practical considerations; various motives for distortion or suppression. But unlike carefully described and perfectly general scientific experiments, that can be reenacted anywhere the expertise and apparatus are available, the public cannot replicate much of media or law enforcement investigations, or ascertain with any certainty how these were actually conducted, or not, nor can they have direct access to much of the evidence collected, or ignored. They cannot observe or replicate the actions, motives, reasoning and direct communications of key players in these information hierarchies, be it mass media or law enforcement, that play a controlling role in investigations, or the neglect of such.

It is also important to recall that science is conducted, funded and disseminated (or not) by human beings, not gods of truth, and that a successful act of conspiracy, like other acts, merely requires the “triangle of crime”; ability, opportunity and motive. Where significant motive is lacking there is little reason to doubt the veracity of science or its reliable transmission. But where significant motive exists, and ability and opportunity, the accusation of conspiracies to distort or sequester scientific truth cannot, unfortunately, be simply dismissed. Especially when there is significant motive. We might worry opportunity and ability find a way.

Keeley’s appeal to the purity of science begs the question against many conspiracy theories that impugn its invocation: Wherever humans are involved conspiracy is sometimes a significant possibility. Science can fail for these same reasons, a legacy involving diverse motives, internal and external to science, examples going all the way back to Lysenko and the paleontological charade of Piltdown. Confirmed conspiracies and cover-ups attend these failings. The controversy over the anthropogenic origin of global warming and its degree includes the accusation that for various reasons, some noble and ideological, others malevolent or self-serving, a group of scientists and politicians have

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11 Nature, that is, as revealed in well-conducted empirical studies. As Keeley also puts it, “Unlike the case of science, where nature is construed as a passive and uninterested party with respect to human-knowledge gathering activities, the conspiracy theorist is working in a domain where the investigated actively seeks to hamper the investigation” (Keeley 1999: 120).
organized themselves to perpetrate a highly profitable fraud upon the public; the “science of global warming” is a itself conspiracy, if not utterly then of intentional exaggeration, one with profound implications for political and economic policies affecting our entire population.\(^{12}\) The profit lies in the political influence, research funding and personal financial consideration, as well as the public veneration of these planetary savior-scientists, scientists until now, who were relegated to the understandably maligned role of “weather forecasters”. We need not endorse any of these accusations to concede they represent an epistemic challenge not well met by peer review, and by extension, the PTA.

Nevertheless, Keeley champions public trust as a sweeping antidote to the significant possibility of momentous but unrevealed conspiracies,

It is [a] pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions [of information transmission] entailed by some mature conspiracy theories which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted. It is not their lack of falsifiability per se, but the increasing amount of skepticism required to maintain faith in a conspiracy theory as time passes and the conspiracy is not uncovered in a convincing fashion. As this skepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes (Keeley 1999: 123).\(^{13}\)

We should question this inference. The pattern described is precisely what we should expect from a competent conspiracy.\(^{14}\) “As time passes” those outside the conspiracy will fail to accumulate damning evidence—tantalizing evidence, perhaps, but not damning—because the conspiracy was conducted competently. But the damning evidence remains, albeit unknown, and may remain unearthed for many decades—recall Hanyok’s long over-due revelations—or even forever. “As time passes” is as easily a misleadingly brief period of failed popular revelation. It also appears to be an increasingly short one in our society, so one increasingly easily met. The older the event, the less most people care about the facts and the less likely these will be revealed in a way salient to the public or of any political significance. This cycle has consistently accelerated. Call it the United States of Amnesia: Conspiracy theories about society-wide political and economic manipulation, abuse and mass murder are rarely refuted and laid to rest.\(^{15}\) They are forgotten or become museum relics emptied of significance: Kennedy. In the rush of contemporary civilization, memories are short, attention fractured and concentration quickly perishes. We just move on. The case goes “cold”, like so many deaths that are also suspected murders. But we would not infer from this there was no murder. We would infer we do not

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\(^{13}\) In a follow-up Keeley (2003: 109) notes, “It is generally true that ‘absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,’ but this maxim is misapplied in cases in which evidence is actively sought and is not discovered in spite of its discovery in other parallel situations [as in proper science]”.

\(^{14}\) Or simply a lucky one.

\(^{15}\) Even centuries later they often develop supporting evidence and examples of the general conspiratorial vulnerabilities of our civilizations very well. There are numerous examples in historiography.
Joining the Conspiracy

know; agnosticism concerning the murder. The same goes for theories of well-executed conspiracies. Regrettably, the rational response is agnosticism.16

Instead let us focus on Keeley’s other claims, ordinary to the public trust approach: (1) the successful, long-term cover-up of momentous political and economic crimes in societies like our own is extraordinarily unlikely due to our warranted trust in primary sources of public information, media and law enforcement, to transmit to us reliable beliefs revealing these complots, and (2) this warranted trust is further supported by the skeptical expedients involving other secondary sources eventually required by such conspiracy theorists in order to save their theories from falsification.

This reasoning leads to a regress of question-begging responses. Keeley argues that we can trust our primary sources of public information because their motives are most always success at the task of reliable transmission of critical information to the public, especially in the case of momentous events. Empirically, it is a curious position, as this is the very opposite of the fact that they have deceived the public for many reasons at many points in recent history, especially in the case of momentous events. When we recall the findings of numerous historians surveying recent Western history his argument betrays a striking but familiar amnesia concerning these institutions. But logical problems will be the focus of our concerns.

Keeley’s confidence in primary institutions of information begs the question against the conspiracy theorist. A central contention of popular conspiracy theorizing is that primary sources of public information, media, law enforcement, routinely ignore, or when actively pressed, obscure the reality of certain nefarious acts of powerful institutions with which they are part of, connected to or have an interest in protecting. Keeley attempts to escape this by offering we must posit a great many further people and institutions, secondary sources (and so on), are all intentionally involved in a conspiracy to hide the truth. Because the dominant motives of at least many of these secondary institutions and persons are success at reliable transmission of information to the public, we can be confident that critical information will in most all cases, no matter how dangerous, be successfully transmitted by them—presumably via the active cooperation and support of the primary ones, the public pronouncements of the national media and of law enforcement—perhaps by that icon of our public trust narrative; the secondary sources call a “press conference”, supportively attended by government prosecutors and earnestly disseminated by national and international press.

One might think this a remarkable fantasy, or not. Either way, this is the same question begging argument, circling the prior question begging one; we can trust other powerful institutions privy to the facts because they are trustworthy, even when the powerful institutions of corporate media and law enforcement are not. We might think it more likely that when secondary sources witness primary sources’ manifest disinterest or even hostility to certain claims, they will take this as a cue to exhibit a similar attitude; no directed conspiracy required.17 But Keeley again argues that we can trust these other public sources of information because their motives are almost entirely limited to the task of

17 With the failure of the PTA, concerns about governing by manufactured crisis gain plausibility.
Lee Basham

reliable transmission of critical information to the public. With endless layers of numerous bureaucracies, this maneuver can go on just as endlessly. But reality halts this epistemic regress: If you approached American conspiracy theorists of the 1950s who claim mass media and law enforcement are purposely ignoring the real dangers of radioactive fall-out to the down-wind public caused by the Atomic Energy Commission’s nuclear bomb testing—including a mass die-off of live-stock—with the reply that all can rest assured, the Department of Agriculture will no doubt hold a press conference to correct the deception, they would not be impressed. Nor should they be. It never happened.18

In the end the PTA tries to ground the trustworthiness of public institutions, be they governmental or corporate media, in the uncontrollability of their vast bureaucracy of employees in possession of a significant conspiratorial secret, which will rebound upon any leadership that tries to keep it, exploding it into public view.

[An ambitious or momentous conspiracy] cannot be [conspiratorially] controlled because the world as we understand it today is made up of an extremely large number of interacting agents, each with its own imperfect view of the world and its own set of goals [...]. To propose that an explosive secret could be closeted for any length of time simply reveals a lack of understanding of modern bureaucracies (Keeley 1999: 124).

How could so many keep such a terrible truth for any time?

A good question, and perhaps the root source of public trust’s psychological appeal: We need to believe in the honesty of other human beings. Maybe this is “the world as we understand it today” but it is also a poor caricature of life within our information hierarchy. The competent conspiracy theorist can argue that (1) the overwhelming majority of employees in these bureaucracies are excluded from critical information and (2) the high-placed remainder effectively controlled via a variety of means both advantageous and punitive; “carrots and sticks”. True, a vast diversity of values and goals exists, there are two almost all of us have at the top of the list, the quality and existence of our lives and the lives of our loved ones. (3) It is also circular, presupposing honest and supportive cooperation of mass media and law enforcement with these persons, when securing the reliability of these primary sources of information is the ultimate conclusion of the argument. Even when underlings encounter these difficult and seemingly anomalous facts, their well-inculcated “the leaders know best” response, augmented by intimations of “national security” cannot be blithely dismissed. There are also well-known, proven coercive methods to

18 The opposite occurred. US Federal government denials remain orthodoxy to this day and are supported by seemingly fallacious studies, for instance the South/North partition cancer-rate study in Utah; fallout was evenly distributed in both the South and North of Utah, and well over thresholds that produce mass-cancer. The government study subsequently infers fallout has no role in cancer rates, as both are equal. Among many other works largely neglected by the media, see Carole Gallagher’s 1993. There is no longer doubt that down-winders were lied to by the US Federal government and their protests and evidence discarded or ignored by national media and law enforcement. Of course, that was a time of crisis, as we are often told, is also ours. See Charles Pigden (2007) for an insightful historical review and analysis of past and recent political conspiracy.
maintain discipline among both leadership and lower echelons in these hierarchical organizations.

Finally, public trust’s regress to secondary sources and then a herd of lower-level rogue bureaucrats appears to contradict its initial premise; the regress assumes the mainstream media and law enforcement can easily deny critical facts to the public, and subsequently must be challenged by secondary institutions. But if cover-up at the primary level is a significant possibility, one that must be defended against, why is it not an equally significant possibility with secondary institutions? Why are they even less likely to?\(^{19}\) It is not that, “attempt after attempt to falsify a conspiracy theory appears to succeed, and this apparent success must be explained as the nefarious work of the conspirators” (Keeley 1999: 122). The worry is that attempt after attempt are never attempted.

In conclusion, contra arguments for public trust, an examination of the evidence specific to particular conspiracy explanations, instead of an examination of our televisions, appears a more reliable and convincing method of epistemic evaluation. Next we will consider how much more.

### 3. The Problem of Toxic Truths: Significant Grounds for Public Distrust

Conspiracy is dangerous to democracy. Our epistemic predicament grows worse because hopeful claims about the reliability of our institutions of information transmission are not merely question begging, but on reflection, historically contradicted; not merely a failure to demonstrate, but a demonstration of failure. Keeley's are, after all, the most natural and ordinary ones to offer and in the task he has set for himself it is difficult to see how anyone could have done better; more persuasively or with greater clarity. Indeed, Keeley’s conclusion, a high confidence in the reliability of pronouncements of mass media and national governments concerning momentous events like 9-11, is the norm in Western style civilizations and elsewhere. But both public trust and its related uncontrollability ignore a vast number of real-world institutional motives for cover-up and how these can exploit the public’s many, mutually reinforcing epistemic vulnerabilities. Even in a democracy that recognizes itself as primarily valuable for being a democracy. Especially in one.

#### 3.1 Beyond Begging the Question: The Problems of Toxicity

A sober reflection on the realities of human affairs forces us to examine the problems of toxic truths. Toxicity does not require intentional descending control of media and law enforcement. For the present we can set aside the haunting spectre of direct control. The problem of toxic truths is not descending

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\(^{19}\) Secondary institutions are probably more likely to, as in issues of official public information they are subject to the more powerful elements of their government and they do not routinely report to the public except in comparatively superficial ways.

\(^{20}\) Keeley appears, in the main, to have abandoned his arguments in response to a number of criticisms. But several years later in a bizarre policy paper by Adrian Vermeule and former Federal public information officer Cass Sunstein, “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures”, we see Keeley's arguments re-deployed as justification for a systematic covert government project to undermine theories that are contrary to official narratives. See Sunstein and Vermeule 2009. Also see Hagen’s insightful critiques (2010, 2011).
control by a hypothetical cabal of conspirators. Instead, it is the fact that the
responses of mass media and law enforcement to toxic truths are predictable
from the perspective of a momentous, reasonably competent conspiracy. This
alone generates a complex set of considerations supporting the accusation of
successful cover-up, all consistent with descending control and easily augmented
by it, but entirely independent of it. The distinction here is between active cover-
up and cover-up by neglect. We will explore the latter. Ironically, in our current
economic and political system, a mature system of capitalist representational
democracy, one can argue that the more brutal the conspiracy and high-placed
the conspirators, the more likely it is to not be revealed or even explored; what I
term the “why look?” response to toxicity. The irony doubles; the ultimate
motive for this pattern of avoidance can be a fundamental commitment to the
preservation of our current system of markets and our representational
democracy. This involves nothing more than the motives and goals normal to
our society. Toxicity presents us with the likelihood, the warranted belief, that
the information hierarchy will intentionally ignore democratically critical,
significant possibilities and so realities. They are just too toxic. This is not a
criticism of public trust, it is an inversion of it. Were there never a mind
possessed by public trust, there would still be the problem of toxic truths. In
certain scenarios, the very scenarios public trust attempts to address, toxicity
predicts that these institutions will reliably obscure democratically critical truths
by ignoring socially toxic but epistemically significant possibilities. The more
appalling and disruptive the truth, the less likely it will be revealed. Toxicity is
the inverse relationship between democratically critical information and the
likelihood of revelation by the normal institutions of its information hierarchy.
In what follows we will defend the inversion thesis.

A simple example: Consider corporate mainstream or mass media in the
context of 9/11 or anything like it. We cannot ignore that communication
corporations have profound interests in supporting the stability of the present
political and economic hierarchy. Their existence and extraordinary profits rest
on it. These successful corporations rely on and are also part of vast retail
establishments. Would a mass-media investigation aimed at convincing the
population that the highest elements of national government are involved in the
mass-murder of thousands of civilians be the story of the century, or corporate
suicide? Probably both. Promulgating such conspiracy theories with the full
force of mass media, theories that undermine the very legitimacy of national
government and can create mass disillusionment, violent unrest, even wide-
spread revolt and revolution, is entirely contrary to their fundamental interest in
a stable political and economic order. Particularly when that government is the
dominant (or among the dominant) one on earth. Whatever the ultimate
motives of corporate leadership, there is likely at some basic level also a moral
dimension, sensitive to at least utilitarian moral considerations: Would it be
ethical, even if true, to persuade hundreds of millions of citizens their national
governments are directed by or in collusion with domestic terrorists? And
national or international law enforcement does nothing? Predictable chaos and
rebellion might easily create a death toll greater than the attacks themselves and
the riots and wars to follow. Should we unleash a society-shattering truth simply

21 “Mainstream” or “Mass media” in the current, ordinary sense; news corporations like
ABC, BBC, CNN, FOX, Reuters, Associated Press and so on.
because it is the truth? It would be surprising if this would not compel silence on
the part of chief editors and corporate boards.\footnote{The argument isn't that these are
the correct utilitarian considerations, but that these
are likely among leadership.} Any corporate media organization
will quickly recognize all of this before they look. The story is toxic. A non-starter.
So why look?

National law enforcement faces the same. Is it credible that investigators or
their supervisors would conduct a thorough investigation and reveal to the
public that high-placed elements of the very government they represent and
enforce the will of murdered thousands of American citizens? We might think
damage control is more likely the order of the day. There is little doubt an
overwhelming priority of the US federal government and its bureaucracy is the
continuity of this government. Such is the nature of established national
governments everywhere. Is there anything the federal government would not
stoop to in order to stay in power? We cannot say, but it should not surprise us
if the answer is, “no, nothing.” Any high-level law enforcement officer knows
all this. The situation is quite clear. So why look?\footnote{Both the enforcement agencies of other
countries and international law agencies face
related constraints. In a world integrated economically and politically, particularly in the
West where popular credibility for Westerners' lies, the diplomatic consequences are
clear. Were The EU to put the US presidency on trial for mass murder of Americans, the
disruption of political, economic and power-actualities would be immense from all
quarters. It's unthinkable from a real-politic perspective. This is also epistemically
relevant.}

This is intuitive. Imagine your much-loved sister is killed in a car wreck.
Then, at the funeral, surrounded by your supportive and loving family,
mourning this senseless tragedy, a seemingly sincere but distant relative
approaches you. She says she has compelling evidence that your loving father
murdered your sister, and your favorite uncle and aunt are in on it. It is true dad
was once involved in shady dealings, but such a disgusting allegation, if openly
entertained at a time like this, could tear your family apart, undermining all it
has accomplished together: No, it was just a car wreck. Call security.

Whatever else, that is the problem of toxic truths.

The value of a general symmetry between the pronouncements of law
enforcement and media is also relevant. In a public crisis and subsequent acts of
state—conspiratorial or not—public support and an enduring, justifying
narrative are critical to long-term and ultimately successful projects. “United
We Stand”, as silencing, democracy-defying as a motto can be, is not surprising.
All things remaining equal, in a contest between societies, those that do not
unite and so act will not prevail against those that do. Leadership in mass media
and national law enforcement no doubt recognizes this, as an institutional,
largely unquestioned norm and among the more reflective, as a personal
commitment. In an established stable state, their role in traumatic
circumstances—internally manufactured or not—has long been to maintain
public confidence and compliance, the continuity of governance. A shared
stabilizing narrative, whatever its truth, is often beneficial and often necessary.
Any significantly divisive acrimony and mutual accusations of incompetence
or even cover-up is the last thing the public should expect to experience from them.
Both mass media and law enforcement will, at least in the short term, quickly
harmonize. Responses to toxic truths will not only be similar in many cases, law enforcement and media will be prone to fine-tune their responses to each other in order to create a sufficiently coherent, mutually consistent narrative for the public, the best in the flow of events, that they can. Presenting and closely exploring a pattern of evidence for toxic truths that fundamentally disrupts this goal could be disastrous, not merely for the task at hand, but more importantly, for the credibility of the very system of public trust that these institutions survive upon. Again, why look?

Next, imagine mass media and law enforcement leadership do look. While surveying initial evidence of a truly momentous government conspiracy, or even a convincing dossier, there lurks a paralyzing but tempting line of thought, a surrender before what is, for most of us, the many unknowable considerations that animate both publically known, elected global leaders and their more clandestine partners. However deceptive and seemingly vicious the acts of our present hierarchy, the powers that be must have their reasons. These perhaps sincere partisans of democracy—one beset by so many threats—are defending it. These are necessary expedients and when they involve violent acts on a global scale, this is the surest sign of their severe necessity. They are, in ways sometimes unclear to us, ultimately attempts at fine works for a better world. Consider the alternative and its fullest implications for the wars fought, lives lost, the nature of our nations, the meaning of the flags at the top of their poles. We should trust in the conspiracy the way some trust in God. To do otherwise would be reckless. So why are we looking?

The alleged conflict between knowing leadership and an unknowing, incompetent public is manifest in each of these avoidant responses to toxic truths, a tension we witness all the way back to Plato’s Republic, where democracy is explicitly rejected and the entire ideal society is a perpetual conspiracy, a “myth of the metals”. For a neo-Platonist a similar but superior method might be democracy’s public embrace but covert rejection. Today we find this style of reasoning among media pundits defending ever-growing surveillance states and both their covert, extrajudicial actions, and open large-scale, violent interventions into world affairs. Democracy is a fine thing to allow the citizenry to pursue when they largely understand the stakes and the stakes are not too high, but some things cannot be trusted to the popular judgment; they are too important. Only an enlightened and if need be ruthless leadership can rise to these tasks, the burden of the able and willing. Perhaps these persons may be forced at times on their own initiative to sacrifice many for the security of many more, and for the future we have collectively accomplished. This is a relevant hypothesis here.

24 Such a line of reasoning forces to ask why we believe current national governments are not simply the dominant crime syndicate in any particular territory. In what ways do we distinguish them from a protection racket with the predictable elements of the benevolent patron? Is this a “gangster” planet?
25 Orwell (Eric Blair) is said to have remarked, “The people sleep peacefully in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready in the dark.”
26 These consequentialist projections of governmental or mass media reasoning appear an echo of the general objections to any simple consequentialist moral theory. Again, the contention is not that these reasonings are correct, or even the correct consequentialist ones, but that it is plausible they reflect the level of moral insight to be expected of leadership within officialdom, political and economic.
The question then becomes, “How confident, given our limited evidence, can we be that the brutalities we might uncover are not vital to the security of the state?” Such questions are especially halting in times of global transformation. The project of an enduring global civilization is immensely challenging. A responsible agent of the public trust may easily conclude the truth may be too toxic for the public to absorb, too complex for them to grasp the imperatives at work behind it. This is also foreseeable. So why look? And if you do, any farther?

Finally, if a mass media outlet did publically endorse something like alternative 9/11 conspiracy theory, it is hard to imagine they would long continue to do so. In any context like the attacks of 2001, it is much more likely they would be quickly flayed as unpatriotic, terrorist-supporting and “conspiracy theorists”, both by Federal authorities, politicians and competing mass media, “moving in for the kill”. The evidence presented would be largely ignored, dismissed by “experts” and reduced to straw-man characterizations. Retraction would quickly follow. The tragic fate of professional journalist Gary Webb well illustrates this. The same can be expected for National law enforcement officials that publically support such theories. Their silencing and dismissal, perhaps prosecution for such a treasonous act or other offenses, seems almost inevitable in the heady years following such attacks or similar debacles. After all, “United We Stand”. This pattern appears far more plausible than the expectation such law enforcement officials or mainstream outlets would be lauded for heroic actions, supported by government authorities, praised and happily joined by competing mass media. This is clear before looking. So why look?

It is critical to recognize the motivating concern in all of these mutually reinforcing scenarios is not that widespread disaster will inevitably result, but that the multitude of both short and long term, nonlinear repercussions are unpredictable and potentially quite dangerous, and among these is the stark danger of rapid political catastrophe. The sum risks, recognized and unrecognized, not just inevitabilities, can be sufficient. Toxicity extends to inevitability, probability and possibility. In various crisis scenarios, the worse the worst case consequences of investigation and revelation are, the greater the probable caution. Risks vary in scope, temporal proximity and the details relevant to diverse parties. Sometimes toxicity will be ignored, revelations made public. But the greater the obvious toxicity and complexity of its effects, the less likely it will be. Events perceived as existential threats will almost inevitably, at least at first, when it most matters, be deferred to official explanation. And whatever the immediate consequences of the revelation of particular events, there is the growing danger of demonstrating to the public a destabilizing cumulative pattern:

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27 As Jack Bratich insightfully defines “terrorist” as used in political narratives, “the whatever enemy”.

28 In 1996 Webb broke a front-page story in the *San Jose Mercury News* that the CIA was using its air assets to transport large quantities of cocaine into the US, proceeds returned to the anti-communist Contras of Nicaragua, an accusation that eventually emerged as well-evidenced and accurate. Major news outlets destroyed Webb’s career and he eventually committed suicide by two revolver shots to the head. See journalist Nick Schou’s (Charles Bowden, contributor) 2006/2014 and a subsequent movie, *Kill the Messenger*, 2014. Academic historians have chronicled a number of similar examples; a pattern we might call “the United States of Amnesia”.

If we have a fundamental stake in the continuity of our current political and economic hierarchy, the corrosive effects of repeatedly revealing a *chronic pattern* of intrigue, including mass murder, must not be long nurtured. Agents of the government must not be endlessly portrayed as gangsters, working for worse. Repeatedly, the image of a benevolent patron must instead step forward, protecting the people, fighting for justice and human rights, securing a better tomorrow. Like a good father. This is the essential stabilizing task, minimizing the popular perception of the *prior probability* of conspiracy in our society, whatever its true measure.  

A simple diagram of the cumulative result of the multi-dimensional problem of toxicity in contrast to the PTA.

The “?” points to the empirical question of *thresholds* where toxicity becomes powerfully dissuasive of investigation (“why look?”), let alone revelation, “irrelevance zone” marks events of so little perceived public interest that they are not, or scarcely, attended to, and the terminus of the downward toxicity line represents a very low, but not literally zero, probability of revelation.  

Toxicity concerns momentous public revelations, where “momentous” includes “fundamentally disruptive” in a social and subsequent physical sense, physically disruptive in the same sense that hurricanes can be; riots and other

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29 Keeley offers a supporting analogy (and an old adage) to illustrate the general problem of toxic truths. Suppose a bank kept loaning money, vast amounts, and it reached a point where if the bank were to demand repayment, it would bankrupt the bank and everyone else. Leave that debt alone. It is “toxic”. I appreciate this analogy (discussion, 2015, University of Miami, Coral Gables).

30 Space limitations prevent the including a discussion of the threshold issue. See my forthcoming, “Conspiracy, Toxicity and Thresholds of Media/Governmental Neglect of Investigation”. 
violent, social disorders, including wars, immediately come to mind.\textsuperscript{31} History is littered with such events, and more cumulative ones. An illustration of what toxicity does not mean in the development of recent Western political history is the dramatic contrast between the time worn trope of Watergate and the accusation that the US Federal government destroyed the citizen-filled World Trade Centers and launched a missile into the Pentagon. Watergate enjoys a singular status as the paradigm and even outer limits of “believable” conspiracy in Western high placed politics. This status is strange in light of far more momentous Western political conspiracies that have come to light. It might not be particularly surprising that a national-level politician in the US, who eventually became a US president, would be aware of and take advantage of covert surveillance of the opposition party in an up-coming presidential election. When Richard Nixon did both this revelation did not imprison him or in any significant way even briefly derail his party, and, except for brief outrage that quickly dissipated, it led to no significant social disruption.\textsuperscript{32} Nixon was pardoned and a Vietnam war-weary nation moved on. The lion’s share of the immediate commentary on the event focused on how inept Nixon was to get caught as directly connected, particularly his creation and release of the damning evidence of his Oval office tape recordings (worse, redacted).

Spying on opposition parties is commonplace and even expected. Competent organizations carefully and thoroughly insulate leadership, though. Unlike Nixon, “rogue elements” are successfully blamed if spying is revealed. But even if we find all this surprising, what is even more surprising is that we might equate the toxicity of a revelation like Watergate to the toxicity of revealing an alleged conspiracy as proposed by alternative 9/11 conspiracy theory.\textsuperscript{33} Spying on an opposition party is trivial in comparison to the revelation that the US federal government murdered almost 4,000 of its own citizens to create public support for two foreign wars and a domestic and global police-state, pursuing this project to the point where more than 100,000 people in Afghanistan and Iraq were killed with two years and untold others later.\textsuperscript{34} Comparison of alternative 9/11 conspiracy theory and its consequences to Watergate trivializes the issues here and is hardly applicable to the real concern, potential and foreseeable forces of toxicity. Watergate’s ubiquity in popular and academic discussion, in contrast to now well-established, humanly catastrophic conspiracies like the Tonkin Gulf deception, which eventually killed at least 1.5 million humans by official accounts, is curious, even stunning. We might be concerned that mainstream media, academia and subsequently the public are embracing an exemplar that is misleading, one minimizing the catastrophic

\textsuperscript{31} A helpful anonymous reviewer for this journal notes that toxicity will vary, among other factors, with how happy a population is with its government. This is an important factor. People will trade truth for happiness.

\textsuperscript{32} Republican icon Ronald Regan was elected to consecutive terms as US president within a decade.

\textsuperscript{33} I would include the multiple shooter Kennedy assassination theories. To equate a single killing of this kind with the mass murder is either to radically inflate the value, symbolic or otherwise, of a single politician, over the murder of thousands, or radically deflate the status of those who are not in any way known to us, “ordinary citizens”.

\textsuperscript{34} A brief review shows this is now considered a conservative number, while protracted, often contentious controversies surround the proper demographical methods. See, for instance, the \textit{New England Journal of Medicine} (2008).
effects of high placed conspiracy in very recent history, the history of a
representational democracy.  

3.2 Silencing Individuals

But what of the lone investigator, the rogue agent who populates Hollywood
movies, unveiling the conspiracy to the world? This trope is basic to our political
mythos; the “deep throat” informant of Watergate lore, the generic, shocking,
all-revealing “press conference”, and print media/internet doppelgangers. On
the public trust approach we need mainstream media and law enforcement to
transmit truth. In the context of sufficiently toxic truths, if such agents go rogue
and conduct personal investigations they face a media and law enforcement
establishment that has already wisely walked away. Their efforts are futile and
easily foreseen as so. Word of mouth can accomplish little in our vast
civilization, the internet notwithstanding. Where virtually every view of events
is passionately championed, without official recognition the truth is lost in a sea
of alternatives. Add to this the reality of devastating punitive measures to self
and loved ones and our iconic rogue agent will not only be a failure, but
probably rare. This is ancient. The advent of “democracy” and the “free press”
has not vanquished it. In our daily media it remains in operation every minute
of every day. From this perspective, the fact most of us do not directly encounter
it is simply a testament to our personal political insignificance.

4. Conclusion: Social Epistemology and Catastrophe Theory

The perspective of conspiracy theorists that assert cover-up has some epistemic
merit. In our present Western style information hierarchies, undirected cover-up
appears probable when critical interests are at stake, and can be encouraged and
re-established when deviated from. Unlike millennia old, reality-detached,
abstraction-driven narratives of global skepticism, here only the intersection of
familiar history with well-known motives for intentional neglect is at work. If

35 While more aggressive critics of the US war in Vietnam would put the number of dead
much higher, and understandably so, even official US accounts place the number at
almost 1.5 million dead: 1,353,000. To comment further involves us in the moral
absurdity and obscenity of such detailed numerical debates (“body counts”), reducing us
to minds of the calibre that caused this catastrophe. However, see Lewy 1980 for a
careful if conservative historical analysis.
36 Again, the severity of the allegations effects appears relevant. What is the level of
toxicity? Discrediting an official, or an established government? This matters to the toxic
truth problem. But the felling of a mere president or prime minister encourages the belief
that contemporary mass media is boundless in its bid for the truth, but attacking the
fundamental legitimacy of the central government of its own world power would be a
surprising scenario, whatever the truth, whatever the epoch. I suspect this only occurs in
incredibly rare political and economic circumstances, for instance, the American
revolution against Great Britain.
37 To advocates of the current system of information and subsequent governance, this is a
serious concern. To advocates of a new pattern, this appears an opportunity.
38 It is remarkable what pictures of one’s children playing in the park, or of a significant
other at the local market, sent from an untraceable source, without a word of
explanation, can do in the imaginations of otherwise courageous women and men.
39 The hyperbole of Robert Anton Wilson notwithstanding: Wilson claims that if we
reduce the death toll of the NAZI massacre of Jews by significant percentages, say 70
we restrict ourselves to established hierarchies of information, this can be an epistemic catastrophe. Alternatively, in our increasingly distributed networks of information, there are options to our information hierarchies.

Commitment to the success of our system of representational democracy can easily, even predictably, be twisted into a betrayal of that very system. So how can we, as a self-governing people, defend against our epistemic vulnerabilities? In the end, we may be recognizing our hierarchical information societies may inevitably be at critical instances, for the vast majority, epistemically opaque. Unlike ancient, small tribal groups where close mutual surveillance and long familiarity give us considerable access to social realities, in societies as vast and hierarchical as our own may be no adequate mechanism for the majority to reliably ascertain the facts in certain extreme, and extremely important, events. A visual image: The typical pyramid of information, with few at the top, knowing much, and sometimes struggling to prevent information’s natural, gravitational flow of descent, is really upside down. Invert the triangle, and dangerous information wells at the narrow bottom point, and only through intentional efforts, will it ever be pumped upward and spread to the wider, public expanses. No intention, no effort; none needed beyond a studied silence, in agreement (conspire) and in preparation should there be a few who present what they fail to realize are still-born questions. And conspiracy theory? A nascent but not yet blooming prison riot that never dies? What would a civilization that we have compelling reason to believe is relatively conspiracy-free, particularly in times of crisis, look like? Whatever the answer, it would not look like ours. Curative and creative work lies ahead.

References


percent, we can no longer make a reliable inference to the very occurrence of WWII. There are social and ubiquitous personal evidences at work in this confidence in the existence of WWII, none of which have any connection to the holocaust. Uncharacteristically, Keeley (1999) endorses Wilson’s surprising inference.

For an alternative social epistemic information system, consider a distributed, horizontal network of information sourcing and analysis, one epistemically responsible, with shared, reliable standards. This could be a subset of the internet, a distributed information transmission system without a hierarchical, effective monopoly. Another subset of the internet, one without serious epistemic standards or rational communicative dispositions, is easy to endure. What is not so easy to endure is a hierarchical system of information rather like our current one.

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Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule on Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract

I criticise Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule's influential critique of conspiracy theories in “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures”. I argue that their position depends on an equivocation over the meaning of the term 'conspiracy theory'. This equivocation reflects a widespread assumption that conspiracy theories tend to be false, unjustified and harmful, and that, as a result, we can speak as if all conspiracy theories are objectionable in each of these three ways. I argue that this assumption is itself false, unjustified, and harmful. There are many true, justified, and/or beneficial conspiracy theories. This is because people often conspire, we often have good reason to believe that people are conspiring, and there is often a significant public benefit in exposing their conspiracies. I compare conspiracy theories to scientific theories, arguing that just as most of us regard bad scientific theories (i.e. false, unjustified and harmful ones) as an acceptable price to pay for good scientific theories, we should regard bad conspiracy theories as an acceptable price to pay for good conspiracy theories. I go on to argue that Sunstein and Vermeule's proposed 'cure' for conspiracy theories is unlikely to work and is inconsistent with the values of liberal democracy.

Keywords: Cass Sunstein, Adrian Vermeule, conspiracy theories, conspiracies.

1. Introduction

In this paper I will criticise Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule's work on conspiracy theories. There are several reasons I think such a critique is worthwhile. First, their original essay on the subject appeared in a highly prestigious philosophy journal, The Journal of Political Philosophy. Second, Sunstein is not merely another academic contributing his two cents worth to philosophical debate. He was until recently a senior government official of the most powerful country in the world. He was a close friend and advisor to a

1 I think their work on this subject would, to borrow a phrase from Hume, be "little worthy of serious refutation" (Hume, 1967/1748: Sec. 10) in a rational political culture. Because our political culture is not entirely rational I think it is worthy of serious refutation.
president of the United States and Head of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, where his responsibilities included overseeing policies relating to “information quality”. His philosophical mistakes have the potential to cause very serious harm. Not only is he in an unusually good position to propagate errors and confusions, he is, as we shall see, in a position to influence some really terrible public policy as a result of those errors and confusions. This will not be the first work of philosophy to critique Sunstein and Vermeule on this subject, but it will be the first to do so in the kind of depth which, given the above points, it seems to merit.

I will not be presenting my own definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ or any related terms. I will consider only Sunstein and Vermuele’s definition(s). The reason for this is simply that I do not believe there is such a thing as the right definition of ‘conspiracy theory’, or even that there are any good definitions. I am committed to the normative, indeed the ethical thesis, that we should refrain from using the term ‘conspiracy theory’ or any of the terms associated with it (such as ‘conspiracy theorist’, ‘conspiracist’, ‘conspiracism’, and so on), and that we should discourage others from doing so as well. Why? The fact that these terms are multiply ambiguous has been well documented. This fact is not on its own, however, an adequate reason for not using them. Many, arguably most, of the words and phrases we use are ambiguous. The words ‘conspiracy’ and ‘theory’, for example, are both somewhat ambiguous, but I certainly wouldn’t argue that they should not be used. In most contexts it is clear, or at any rate clear enough, what they mean. By contrast, the terms ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ are routinely used equivocally, and arguments that these theories and/or theorists are a problem that need addressing are routinely guilty of the fallacy of equivocation. Of course, I cannot hope to make a particularly convincing case for this in this article; I will be content to alert the reader to the fallacious equivocations of Sunstein and Vermeule, and allow him or her to find similar equivocations in the writings of other authors.

2. Sunstein and Vermeule’s Argument

In their original paper Sunstein and Vermeule (rather tentatively) define a conspiracy theory as “an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)” (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 205). I will not be discussing here the pros and/or cons of this particular definition, since as I noted before, I do not believe there is such a thing as a correct (or even a good) definition of this term. Rather, I will accept their definition for the sake of argument and I will even lapse into the practice I criticised earlier of using (rather than merely mentioning) the term ‘conspiracy theory’. When I do so, I simply mean ‘the things which fit Sunstein and Vermeule’s definition of a conspiracy theory’.

2 See, for example, Coady 2012 Chapter Five, and Pigden 2016.
3 Sunstein 2014 offers a slightly different definition of conspiracy theory in his later version of the paper. The difference appears to be purely verbal.
4 For this reason this article can be understood as a contribution to the growing field of applied philosophy of language.
5 See, for example, Coady 2006 and Coady 2012: Chapter 5.
It should be clear that, on Sunstein and Vermeule’s definition, conspiracy theories are not necessarily, or even typically, bad things. They are simply a form of explanation, a form that is often essential to understanding a wide variety of political and social phenomena, from the assassination of Julius Caesar to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. We all believe many conspiracy theories (in that sense are all conspiracy theorists) and there is nothing wrong with that, because many conspiracy theories are true. Sunstein and Vermeule appear to concede much of this. More specifically, they concede that some conspiracy theories are true (2009: 206). They also acknowledge that they can be justified (i.e. people can be justified in believing them) (2009: 207). Finally, they acknowledge that conspiracy theories are not necessarily harmful (2009: 206).

Despite their admission that not all conspiracy theories are objectionable in any of these three ways, they brush these points aside, and say that they will “narrow their focus” to conspiracy theories that have each of these objectionable characteristics; that is, they say they will concentrate on “false, harmful, and unjustified” conspiracy theories (2009: 206). Why do they focus just on such objectionable conspiracy theories? They do not say. Not only do they not say, they repeatedly refer to conspiracy theories as if they are all false, harmful and/or unjustified. For example, they say that “conspiracy theories [not merely the false, harmful, and unjustified ones] are a subset of the larger category of false beliefs” (2009: 206). Now, obviously they cannot form a subset of the category of false beliefs if some of them true. Similarly, they say that “conspiracy theories [not just the false, harmful and unjustified ones] are the product of crippled epistemologies” (2009: 224). Now it seems pretty clear that this generalisation cannot be true if we are justified in believing some of them.

The error of Sunstein and Vermeule’s approach can perhaps most clearly be seen if we imagine someone writing in a similar way about another group of theories which has a better reputation than conspiracy theories, namely scientific theories. Sunstein and Vermeule’s original article is called “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures”, so imagine, if you will, that someone had written an academic paper called “Scientific Theories: Causes and Cures”. Before even reading the paper a good referee would object that in seeking the causes of scientific theories the authors appear to be assuming absurdly that scientific theories are all false and unjustified. This is because we do not normally refer to the cause of a true theory (or true belief), not because true theories (or beliefs) do not have causes but because their cause is usually too obvious to mention. The cause is the fact believed. For example, the Copernican theory that the earth revolves the sun was caused by the fact that the earth does indeed revolve around the sun. It is clear that no adequate causal explanation of the theory (or of its eventual acceptance) can leave this fact out. The same goes for justification. We do not normally refer to the cause of a justified theory (or belief). Again, this is not because they do not have causes, but because the cause in such cases is obvious. The cause is the available evidence, along with the people in question’s capacities for evaluating that evidence. The reference to

6 This is a condition they define as “suffering from a sharply limited number of relevant information sources” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 204).

7 Of course there are some other ways in which we talk about the causes of people’s true theories (or beliefs). We sometimes talk about the sociological or historical causes of true or justified beliefs. For example, Louis Pasteur’s discovery of the principles of microbial
‘cures’ in Sunstein and Vermeule’s title is at least as problematic, suggesting as it does that the theories in question (whether they are conspiracy theories or scientific theories) are actually diseases.

I submit that our imaginary article would most likely be immediately dismissed as unscientific (indeed anti-scientific). If our imaginary referees got far enough into the paper to read the part where the authors say they are going to focus on bad scientific theories, i.e. the ones that are false, unjustified, and harmful, they would presumably insist that the authors stop referring to ‘scientific theories’ when they really mean ‘bad scientific theories’. That, for example, they make it explicit that their portentous sounding claim that scientific theories are a subset of the set of false beliefs really amounts to nothing more than the tautology that false scientific theories are a subset of the set of false beliefs.

Our imaginary referees would also presumably insist that the authors provide some justification for focusing on bad scientific theories, rather than scientific theories in general. It is possible that the authors could meet this challenge. They might argue, with some plausibility, for example, that scientific theories are treated with undue respect (indeed awe), and that there is a tendency in our culture (sometimes called ‘scientism’) to ignore the fact that quite a lot of scientific theories turned out to be false and unjustified (for example phlogiston theory) and quite a lot turned out to be very harmful as well (for example the theory of phrenology).

Could Sunstein and Vermeule offer a similar justification for focusing exclusively on bad conspiracy theories? It is clear that they could not, since conspiracy theories are not usually treated with undue respect. They are not treated with any respect at all. People disagree in fundamental ways about exactly what conspiracy theories are, but there is widespread agreement that, whatever they are, they are bad things. To call something ‘a conspiracy theory’ is standardly to label it (amongst other things) as ‘false’ and ‘unjustified’ (in fact more than unjustified, it usually implies that the theory in question is crazy). It is true that people do not necessarily think of conspiracy theories as harmful. Indeed Sunstein and Vermeule are trying to convince readers who just assume that conspiracy theories have the first two bad characteristics, that they also have the third of them. They are warning those who think of conspiracy theories as merely silly, that they are in fact sinister and, as Sunstein puts it in a recent book, “dangerous”.

There is another way in which Sunstein and Vermeule might justify focusing on bad conspiracy theories. Perhaps non-bad conspiracy theories are rare and unimportant, so rare and unimportant that we can ignore them. In fact, they do seem to think this. The examples of paradigmatic conspiracy theories they give at the beginning of their article are all false and unjustified, or at any rate they clearly believe that they are false and unjustified and they clearly expect their readers to agree.

Sunstein and Vermeule do not explicitly say it, but they strongly imply that conspiracies by powerful people, and hence true conspiracy theories on their
definition, are rare and unimportant. Insofar as they present an argument for this view, however, it applies, not to conspiracy theories in general, but to a particular subset of conspiracy theories: those which involve governments of so-called “open societies”. Such conspiracy theories, they assert, typically fail to consider “the abundant evidence that in open societies government action does not usually remain secret for very long” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 208-9). Sunstein and Vermeule do not define “open society”, but they do give three examples of allegedly open societies: the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. They claim that the free press and the diversity of institutional checks that characterise such societies are such that “conspiracy theories will usually be unjustified” (2009: 210). They do not explicitly say so, but presumably they are also committed to the view that in open societies, like the US, the UK, and France, conspiracy theories are usually false. After all, if there really is abundant evidence that most conspiracy theories (of the type in question) are unjustified, that must be because there is abundant evidence that most of them are false. So Sunstein and Vermeule’s position appears to be that conspiracy theories about the US government (almost all the conspiracy theories they mention are about the US government and none are about the governments of the UK or France, so I will put them aside) are usually unjustified and false, and that we know this because of the abundant evidence that actions by the US government do not usually remain secret very long.

There remains some unclarity about the way the argument is supposed to work. After all, Sunstein and Vermeule’s definition of a conspiracy theory does not say anything about the powerful people in question keeping their role secret “very long”. It only says they must “attempt to keep it secret … at least until their aims are accomplished”. It seems best, therefore, to interpret “very long” as meaning “until the aims of the conspirators are achieved”. So their position seems to be that conspiracies by the US government usually fail to remain secret long enough for the conspirators to fulfil their aims. Why should this mean that most conspiracy theories involving the US government are unjustified? The idea seems to be that we can be confident that the US government rarely conspires because (a) government agents are unlikely to fulfil their aims because they have good reason to believe that they will be exposed by the institutions of their free society before those aims are achieved, and (b) they are aware that if any conspiracies they took part in were exposed, they are likely to be punished.

With that in mind let us consider whether there really is abundant evidence for the claim that US government action does not usually remain secret very long. Sunstein and Vermeule cite two examples of such evidence: first that the Bush administration illegally spied on American citizens without court orders⁹, and second that, since September 11, the CIA has been torturing prisoners in secret “black sites”. ¹⁰ These do not constitute good evidence that US government actions do not remain secret for long, since in both cases they remained secret for many years, long enough to cause a lot of harm, and, at least arguably, for as long as the government wanted them to remain secret.

Furthermore none of the conspirators involved have been punished in any way, and, at least in the case of the CIA’s torture programme, the only person who was punished was a CIA whistleblower who was jailed for exposing the conspiracy.\textsuperscript{11}

At this point Sunstein and Vermeule could retreat to the more modest claim (often made by conspiracy baiters) that examples of this kind at least give us some assurance that conspiracies will eventually be exposed. But their examples do not support even this much more limited claim. There is a clear selection effect operating on the available data. The only conspiracies we can cite as examples (unless we are in on them) are ones that have already been exposed. To the extent that long-term secrecy is essential to the success of conspiracies, the ones we know about will be the unsuccessful ones. There is no reason to believe these are representative of conspiracies in general or of conspiracies by the US government in particular.

As noted, Sunstein and Vermeule concede the truth of some conspiracy theories (i.e. they concede that powerful people sometimes conspire), including some involving the US government. This is the passage in which they make this concession:

> The Watergate hotel room used by Democratic National Committee was, in fact, bugged by Republican officials, operating at the behest of the White House. In the 1950s, the Central Intelligence Agency did, in fact, administer LSD and related drugs under Project MKULTRA, in an effort to investigate the possibility of “mind control.” Operation Northwoods, a rumored plan by the Department of Defense to simulate acts of terrorism and to blame them on Cuba, really was proposed by high-level officials (though the plan never went into effect) (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 206).

Somewhat to their credit, Sunstein and Vermeule’s list of real conspiracies (i.e. true conspiracy theories) is longer than that of most conspiracy baiters, who, if they acknowledge the reality of conspiracy at all, typically use Watergate as their one and only example. Even with this example, however, Sunstein and Vermeule understate both the number and the significance of the conspiracies involved. The Watergate Hotel was not merely bugged by Republican officials; it was burgled on more than one occasion, and that was only a small part of the conspiracy. Nixon’s downfall was brought about, not so much by the burglaries themselves, but by the conspiracy to cover-up the burglaries, and by numerous domestic and foreign conspiracies which the investigation into the cover-up brought to light.

Sunstein and Vermeule’s second example suffers from similar problems. The CIA did not merely administer LSD and other drugs to people (which sounds like it might have all been in good fun), they administered them forcibly to a wide variety of vulnerable people, including mental patients, prisoners, drug addicts, and prostitutes, and anyone else who, in the words of one of one agency officer, “could not fight back”.\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, the primary goal of MKUltra was not, as Sunstein and Vermeule would have us believe, to “investigate the

\textsuperscript{11} See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/10/cia-torture-prosecution_n_6298646.html (accessed on October 12, 2016).

possibility of mind-control” (which makes it all sound as though it was motivated by far-fetched, indeed kooky, goals); rather it was to research ways to “interrogate resistant sources” (Klein 2006: 47) or, in plainer language, “torture”. There is much that we do not know about MKUltra, due to a large scale conspiracy to cover it up led by former CIA Director Richard Helms who ordered that all MKUltra files be destroyed. We do not know, for example, how many people were experimented on and we do not know how many people died as a result of it, but we do know that there were deaths; the most infamous of which was the death of the biological warfare scientist Frank Olsen, who, after telling colleagues that he did not want to be involved in the US government’s germ warfare programme anymore, was given LSD by CIA agents without his knowledge and fell to his death from a New York City hotel room. This was officially designated suicide, but a subsequent autopsy found that the blunt force trauma to his head and chest had most likely been caused in his room before the fall, and described the evidence as “rankly and starkly suggestive of homicide”. No one involved in MKUltra has ever been brought to justice.

Sunstein and Vermeule’s third example of a true conspiracy theory, Operation Northwoods, is equally filled with evasions and half-truths. To start with, they are wrong to describe it as a “rumored plan”, since, as they concede, it was not merely rumoured, but actually proposed by high level officials, in fact it was endorsed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Moreover, the plan was not merely to “simulate” acts of terrorism (whatever that might involve), but also to actually carry out acts of terrorism, though it should be noted that the Joint Chiefs of Staff did express a desire to minimise civilian casualties wherever possible.

I could go on at length about other long-running US government conspiracies. In many cases, they remained secret for as long as the conspirators wanted, and in most cases the conspirators have escaped all punishment. Here I will confine myself to one such conspiracy, the FBI programme known as COINTELPRO, which was authorised by every American president from Eisenhower to Nixon. This programme aimed at infiltrating, disrupting and discrediting a variety of political organisations on the political left, including the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and a wide variety of feminist, and anti-colonial organisations. Most infamously it led to the FBI’s murder of Fred Hampton and, not only the illegal surveillance of Martin Luther King, but also a well-documented attempt to drive him to suicide. This particular plot did not succeed, but COINTELPRO appears to have been more successful with another of its targets, the actress Jean Seberg, who appears to have committed suicide as the result of an elaborate plot to discredit her. Sunstein and Vermeule do not mention COINTELPRO, perhaps because it does not fit well with their narrative, because it was eventually exposed, not by the fearless

13 Alfred McCoy (2006: 21-59) has argued, quite convincingly, that the CIA conspired to focus media attention on the ridiculous side of the programme to make it appear less sinister.
17 For details of the COINTELPRO programme see Blackstone 1988.
investigative reporters of the free press or any other institution of the open society, but by a group of leftist “conspiracy theorists” called the “Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI”, which burgled the offices of the FBI and stole documents relating to the programme.

We have seen that Sunstein and Vermeule’s implicit assumption that conspiracy theories are false and unjustified is itself false and unjustified. We have also seen that their argument that conspiracy theories are unlikely to be justified when they posit conspiracies on the part of the governments of so-called “open societies” is unsound. What about the alleged harmfulness of conspiracy theories, the third of the trifecta of objectionable qualities of conspiracy theories? Most conspiracy baiters are content to dismiss the theories they call “conspiracy theories” as false and the people they call “conspiracy theorists” as irrational. Sunstein and Vermeule go further, portraying both the people and the theories as positively harmful, so harmful that they require a public policy response. Sunstein and Vermeule cite some examples of false conspiracy theories that have done harm. But anyone can play this game with any category of theory (or for that matter with any category of person). I could give you plenty of examples of false scientific theories that have caused considerable harm. Both phrenology and scientific race theory caused great harm to people whom they wrongly categorised as inferior. Trofim Lysenko’s theories of environmentally acquired inheritance held back Soviet science and agriculture for decades, which caused real harms to every citizen of the Soviet Union. But no one would claim that there is some general problem with false (or unjustified) scientific theories. Rather we recognise that false, unjustified, and positively harmful scientific theories are the price we pay for true, justified, and beneficial scientific theories, and this seems, all things considered, to be a price worth paying. I submit that this is equally true of conspiracy theories. In both cases you cannot have the wheat without the chaff.

Sunstein and Vermeule, however, claim that conspiracy theories are special, because there are certain features of “false and harmful conspiracy theories that make them distinct from, and sometimes more damaging than, other false and harmful beliefs” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 203-204). What are these features? Sunstein and Vermeule’s answer seems to be that conspiracy theories (again they do not specify just the false and/or unjustified ones) can have “pernicious effects from the government’s point of view, either by inducing unjustifiably widespread public scepticism about the government’s assertions, or by dampening public mobilization and participation in government led efforts” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 220). Now, there is no doubt that conspiracy theories (and not just the false and unjustified ones), on their definition, will tend to harm governments in these ways, by making people less likely to believe what they say, or do what they tell them to do. It is striking, however, that Sunstein and Vermeule appear to be exclusively concerned with things that may be harmful from the government’s point of view, rather than with things that may be harmful from the citizen’s point of view. Nowhere do they consider the possibility that widespread public scepticism about government assertions might be epistemically and morally justified or that dampening public mobilization and participation in government led efforts might be a good thing. At one point Sunstein and Vermeule make their assumption that the state will always act benevolently (where benevolence is understood in broadly utilitarian terms) explicit:
Throughout we assume a well-motivated government that aims to eliminate conspiracy theories, or draw their poison if and only if social welfare is improved by doing so (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 219).

In fact, they appear to be assuming, not only that governments are well-motivated (in this sense), but also that they are virtually omniscient and perfect calculators of social welfare. Let us put the latter point aside and just focus on the assumption that government is well-motivated. Of course, if we could make this assumption we could also assume that all conspiracy theories (or at least those which portray the government as up to no good) are false and unjustified. Indeed we could dispense with Sunstein and Vermeule’s argument about the value of an open society as well. We value an open society precisely because we know that governments are not always well-motivated, especially when it comes to acts carried out in secrecy, but as Sunstein and Vermeule’s own examples (and an awful lot more beside) show, we cannot make that assumption. So why do they make it? All they say by way of defence of it is that “it is a standard assumption of policy analysis” (2009: 219). Well, it depends on the kind of policy analysis we are talking about. Policy analysis in the liberal tradition is premised on the observation that a government cannot be trusted to act in the public interest, rather than in its own interest, especially when it comes to actions that are carried out in secret.

Things get worse when we turn to Sunstein and Vermeule’s concrete policy proposals for “curing” conspiracy theories. They describe their “main policy claim” as follows:

Governments should engage in cognitive infiltration of the groups that produce conspiracy theories (2009: 218).

In this way, they say, governments will be able to “undermine the crippled epistemology of believers by planting doubts about the theories” (2009: 219). For obvious reasons, government officials cannot be entirely open or honest about their participation in such programs; hence Sunstein and Vermeule recommend that “government officials should participate anonymously or even with false identities” (2009: 225). In short, Sunstein and Vermeule recommend that government officials engage in secretive and deceptive (i.e. conspiratorial) behaviour in order to stop people from believing that government officials engage in secretive or deceptive (i.e. conspiratorial) behaviour. Now there is something very odd about this recommendation. Suppose the targets of this cognitive infiltration were to find out that they had been cognitively infiltrated. Sunstein and Vermeule cannot dismiss this possibility, since, as we saw, they claim that “government action does not usually remain secret very long” in open societies like the US. If the targets of the proposed cognitive infiltration were to find out about it, they would then believe even more conspiracy theories (albeit true ones). 18 This would of course be counterproductive from the government’s point of view (i.e. Sunstein and Vermeule’s point of view). The whole point of the exercise remember is to undermine belief in conspiracy

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18 To believe in the conspiracies Sunstein and Vermeule recommend would be to believe a conspiracy theory, at least on their definition of ‘conspiracy theory’.
theories. It is not absolutely clear what Sunstein and Vermeule would recommend in these circumstances. They do say that “as a general rule, true accounts should not be undermined” (2009: 206). Nonetheless, they regard it as an “interesting question” whether it is ever appropriate to undermine true conspiracy theories (2009: fn. 17).

There is a glaring pragmatic inconsistency between Sunstein and Vermeule’s assurances that governments rarely get away with secrecy in open societies like ours and their advocacy of government secrecy (and indeed deception). Their own reasoning entails that the cognitive infiltration they recommend is unlikely to succeed because the institutions of the free society will bring it to light before it has achieved its goals. But this pragmatic inconsistency is the least of the worries raised by their paper. We should all be worried when someone recommends that government officials secretly and deceptively manipulate public opinion. We should be especially worried when someone like Sunstein, who was until recently himself a powerful government official, recommends that government officials behave that way. It is worth noting that the cognitive infiltration Sunstein and Vermeule recommend is not only immoral, it also appears to be illegal, under statutes which prohibit the government from engaging in “covert propaganda” which is defined as “information which originates from the government but is unattributed and made to appear as though it came from a third party”. 19

To summarise, on the one hand, Sunstein and Vermeule reassure us that we do not have to worry about government conspiracy because we live in an open society. On the other hand, they recommend policies which could never be successful in a truly open society, and which, to the extent that they are successful, would make our society less open.

3. Conclusion

I said at the beginning that we should not use the terms ‘conspiracy theory’, ‘conspiracy theorist’ or any of the language associated with these terms. Each time we do so, we are implying, even if we do not mean to, that there is something wrong with believing, wanting to investigate, or giving any credence at all, to the possibility that powerful people (and especially governments or government agencies of Western countries) are engaged in secretive or deceptive behaviour. The net effect of the use of these terms is to silence people who are suspicious of or would like to investigate the behaviour of powerful people. These terms serve to herd opinion, or at any rate respectable opinion, in ways that suit the interests of the powerful, and make it more likely that they will be able to get away with secretive and deceptive behaviour. The use of these terms creates an environment in which people like Sunstein and Vermeule can offer us assurances that the government cannot be up to no good, because the institutions of our open society would prevent them from getting away with it, and that, at any rate, we can assume that the government is well-motivated, so that it would never engage in any nefarious deeds even if it could get away with them.

So one bad effect of these terms is that they contribute to a political environment in which it is easier for conspiracy to thrive at the expense of

openness. Another bad effect of them is that their use is an injustice to the individuals who are characterised as conspiracy theorists or whose beliefs are characterised as conspiracy theories. Borrowing Miranda Fricker’s terminology, we may call this form of injustice a ‘testimonial injustice’ (see Fricker 2009). When someone asserts that a conspiracy has taken place (especially when it is a conspiracy by a Western government) that person’s word is automatically given less credence than it should because of an irrational prejudice associated with the pejorative connotations of these terms. In fact, the use of these terms is sometimes a form of gaslighting; that is, an attempt to manipulate people into doubting their own sanity. I hope and believe that in the future these terms will be widely recognised for what they are, the products of an irrational and authoritarian outlook.

I originally intended to write about Sunstein’s latest book Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas, but only one chapter of that book is on conspiracy theories (or rather the things he calls ‘conspiracy theories’), and that is virtually identical with the article he co-authored with Vermeule. All the quotes I have used for this paper are still there, except for the quote in which they say their main policy proposal involves “cognitive infiltration”. They have clearly (quite rightly) received some negative feedback for that proposal and Sunstein has now demoted it to one possible policy response amongst others (along with banning conspiracy theories and imposing a tax on them), and he is anxious to assure the reader that he is not advocating “1960s-style infiltration with a view to surveillance and collecting information, possibly for use in future prosecutions” and further that the cognitive infiltration he favours “must be consistent with domestic law” (Sunstein 2014: 28). But he gives us no reason for believing that things would be different from the 1960s in those ways and no reason for believing that his recommendations would be legal either. Once again Sunstein’s message is that you can trust the government because it means well. In this respect, he is like other government propagandists. He is distinctive in that he has a further, rather more sinister, message: if you do not think the government means well, you are a problem and we are going to have to do something about it.  

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Conspiracy Theorists and Monological Belief Systems

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has claimed to show that conspiracy theorists are prone to simultaneously believe mutually contradictory conspiracy theories, as well as believe entirely made up conspiracy theories. The authors of those studies suggest that this supports the notion that conspiracy theories operate within “monological belief systems”, in which conspiracy theorists find support for conspiratorial beliefs in other conspiratorial beliefs, or in related generalizations, rather than in evidence directly relevant to the conspiracy in question. In this article, I argue that all of that is either wrong or at least misleading.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, psychology, epistemology, monological belief systems

1. Introduction

Focusing primarily on three articles (Wood et al. 2012, Swami et al. 2011, and Goertzel 1994), but addressing others as well, I argue that there is a trend in the social science literature on conspiracy theories that is significantly misleading (presumably due to bias against conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists). Specifically, I show the following: (1) The often cited claim that conspiracy

1 When a field of scholarship contains a number of authors (and, apparently, referees and editors as well) who reason in a rather obviously fallacious manner (or fail not notice these obvious fallacies) so as to unfairly malign a class of people, and there does not seem to be an analogous situation with opposite implications, it is reasonable to suspect bias may be involved. Of course, this does not by itself conclusively establish that there is bias (a very difficult thing to do in any circumstance), but the more obvious, egregious, widespread, and unidirectional the phenomenon is the more likely there is bias. Readers can make their own judgments regarding degrees, but I hope to have provided some good reasons to think that this phenomenon is rather obvious, egregious and widespread. That it is unidirectional I have taken for granted; I await citation of any examples of peer-reviewed published scholarship that unfairly stigmatizes those who accept “conventional wisdom” or official accounts regarding conspiracy theories.
theorists tend to simultaneously believe contradictory conspiracy theories (based on Wood et al. 2012) is unfounded. (2) A study that purports to show that conspiracy theorists are more prone than others to believe entirely fictitious conspiracy theories (Swami et al. 2011) is one-sided and misleading. In addition, the authors make an error about belief that is analogous to the one made by Wood et al. Further, there is nothing unusual or problematic about the reasoning process that presumably underlies the phenomenon they document. (3) Both of the above studies claim to provide evidence that conspiracy theorists tend to operate within a “monological belief system”, an idea first put forward by Ted Goertzel (1994). This label, as described by Goertzel, implies that there is something epistemically problematic about the reasoning of conspiracy theorists. However, in all three studies, the evidence produced supports only a connection with its unproblematic aspects. There is no documented evidence that the problematic aspects actually apply to conspiracy theorists.

And yet these articles, along with similar others, have been used to imply that something epistemically problematic has been discovered about the reasoning of conspiracy theorists in particular. For example, Martin Bruder and his co-authors write:

There is increasing evidence that there are stable individual differences in people’s tendency to believe in [both new and ‘classic’] conspiracy theories; if a person believes in one conspiracy theory, he or she will also be more likely to believe in other conspiracy theories. In fact, this tendency even extends to beliefs in mutually contradictory conspiracy theories, and to beliefs in fully fictitious conspiracy theories. Thus, those who believe that Princess Diana faked her own death are also more likely to believe that she was murdered; those who believe in “real-world conspiracy theories” (i.e., that John F. Kennedy fell victim to an organized conspiracy) are more likely to believe that there was a conspiracy behind the success of the Red Bull energy drink—a conspiracy theory that was purposely developed for a social psychology study (Bruder et al. 2013: 1).

A large chunk of the above is quoted by Cass Sunstein in his most recent revision of his article, “Conspiracy Theories”, in Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas. And the claims included in it are repeated, citing largely the same evidence, by a number of scholars as well as journalists. My central thesis is that all of these assertions, both separately, and especially when taken together to insinuate that there is something wrong with “conspiracist ideation”, are either wrong or at least misleading.

In the above quotation, Bruder et al. make three related claims about conspiracy theories. Claim 1: “[I]f a person believes in one conspiracy theory, he or she will also be more likely to believe in other conspiracy theories”. Here these authors cite Swami et al. (2010), and could have cited others as well. I do not contest the truth of this point, but maintain that the probable underlying thought process is normal and reasonable, not distinctive or problematic. Claim 2: “[T]his tendency [to be more likely to believe in other conspiracy theories] even extends to beliefs in mutually contradictory conspiracy theories”. This claim is supported by Wood et al. (2012). However, as I will argue below, the authors have not provided any evidence for this, though they do mistakenly assert that they have. Thus, the claim is unsubstantiated and presumably false as a generalization, being implausible as well as unsupported. Claim 3: “[This
tendency even extends] to beliefs in fully fictitious conspiracy theories”. This claim is misleading. Bruder seems to imply that there is something epistemically problematic, or at least unusual, going on. But a close examination of the relevant study (Swami et al. 2011) reveals that that is not the case.

Each of the following three sections addresses one of the above claims. I start with Claim 2 in section 2, followed by Claim 3 in section 3. In section 4 I address claim 1 in the context of a larger discussion of so-called “monological belief systems”, as described by Goertzel (1994). Then, in sections 5, I discuss some critical points made in an article by two co-authors of Wood et al. 2012 (namely, Sutton and Douglas 2014). They too have come to recognize problems with Goertzel’s attempt to attribute “monological belief systems” to conspiracy theorists, though they do not acknowledge the problem with their own earlier study (i.e. Wood et al. 2012).

2. Conspiracy Theorists Believe Contradictory Conspiracy Theories!

In a recent review of the literature, Jan-Willem van Prooijan and Paul A.M. van Lange write:

One of the main research findings on this phenomenon [i.e. in belief in conspiracy theories] is that conspiracy beliefs are monological in nature: one conspiracy theory reinforces other conspirational ideas, making individuals who believe in one conspiracy theory more likely to also believe in other conspiracy theories (van Prooijan and van Lange 2014: 237).

This finding, as described here, is neither surprising nor epistemically problematic (for reasons to be elaborated below). Indeed, the idea that this is “the main research finding” regarding belief in conspiracy theories may cause one to wonder, “Why is such a commonsensical and innocuous finding even regarded as interesting?” The answer is that the idea of being “monological” is thought to have other, more problematic, implications. Conspiracy theorists are thought to take this normal and unproblematic reasoning process—using one belief as evidence for another—to the point of self-contradiction. Continuing, van Prooijan and van Lange write, "A recent study reveals that this monological belief system even applies to conspiracy theories that are mutually exclusive" (van Prooijan and van Lange 2014: 237, citing Wood et al. 2012).

Postponing the discussion of “monological belief systems”, let us here focus on the claim, based on a recent study (Wood et al. 2012), that conspiracy theorists have a tendency to simultaneously believe two mutually inconsistent conspiracy theories. This finding is also cited prominently by other scholars writing on this topic, including Cass Sunstein, Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent, Viren Swami, and Christopher French. It is a powerful meme for anyone who one wants to encourage a dismissive attitude toward conspiracy theories, because it suggests that the fantastical thinking of conspiracy theorists is not even held in check by the most obvious of contradictions. Below are a just few examples of depictions of this finding that reveal the flavor it is given.

In their recent book, American Conspiracy Theories, political scientists Uscinski and Parent write:
A predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking... explains why people believe theories that are logically contradictory (e.g., many of the people believing Osama Bin Laden is still alive also believe he was dead long before the raid on his compound) (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 14).

Professor of Psychology, and head of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths College, University of London, Christopher French writes in *Scientific American*:

People who are strongly inclined toward conspiratorial thinking will be more likely to endorse mutually contradictory theories. For example, if you believe that Osama bin Laden was killed many years before the American government officially announced his death, you are also more likely to believe that he is still alive (French 2015).

In an article titled, “Analytic Thinking Reduces Belief in Conspiracy Theories”, Swami et al. write:

[A] growing body of evidence suggests that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with ... belief in contradictory statements (Swami et al. 2014: 573, citing Wood et al. 2012).

The science news website, *Live Science*, under the headline “Contradictions Don’t Deter Conspiracy Theorists”, also makes the same claim:

Did Princess Diana fake her own death to escape the public eye? Or was she killed by a rogue element of the British secret service? If you agree with one of these theories, there’s a good chance you’ll subscribe to both even though one suggests Princess Diana is alive, the other dead, a new study indicates.... [And] people who believed bin Laden was already dead before the raid were more likely to believe he is still alive (Wynne Parry, January 27, 2012).

In an Op-ed for Newsday, Cass Sunstein writes:

Remarkably, people who accept one conspiracy theory tend to accept another conspiracy theory that is logically inconsistent with it. People who believe that Princess Diana faked her own death are more likely to think that she was murdered. People who believe that Osama bin Laden was already dead when U.S. forces invaded his compound are more likely to believe that he is still alive (Sunstein 2014b).

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2 This is not an isolated slip, or a one-time remark. Sunstein has asserted this repeatedly. For example, in the *New York Times* he writes, “In fact, people who embrace one conspiracy theory are also inclined to embrace another conspiracy theory that cannot simultaneously be true. In one study, people who said they believed that Osama bin Laden is alive and well were more likely to believe that he was dead before U.S. forces invaded his compound” (Sunstein 2015). Likewise, in an interview that can be viewed on YouTube under the title “Why conspiracy theories are rational to believe”, Sunstein again makes the same claim. He says, “[A] good predictor of whether people will believe in conspiracy theories is whether they believe in other conspiracy theories”. That much is true. Sunstein continues, “And that effect is so intense that people will believe in logically incompatible conspiracy theories. So if you think princess Diana
Sunstein is suggesting that such people are reasoning in a “remarkably” irrational way. Skepticism toward “authorities”, Sunstein elsewhere writes, “even lead[s] suspicious individuals to disregard contradictions between them [i.e. between alternative conspiracy theories]” (Sunstein 2015). Sunstein suggests that conspiracy theorists are so “suspicious” that they are driven to “embrace” mutually contradictory positions.

However, there is a serious problem with all this: the research referred to does not actually show the self-contradictory thinking that is alleged. This misreading of the study is not entirely the fault of Sunstein and these others (although they do share in the responsibility), for the authors of the study themselves suggested the same interpretation of their findings. The very title of the article in question, “Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories”, suggests the above interpretation. And, so there can be no misunderstanding, the article concludes by clearly stating that, “Believing that Osama bin Laden is still alive is apparently no obstacle to believing that he has been dead for years” (Wood et al. 2012: 772). Yet this is all unfounded. The article did not document individuals who simultaneously believed two mutually exclusive scenarios (though it would not be too surprising to find some isolated occurrences). The authors of the article in question, Michael Wood, Karen Douglas, and Robbie Sutton, describes two studies, which will be examined in turn.

Study 1 tells us that there is a correlation between the degree of “agreement” with several statements about the death of Princess Diana. What is regarded as interesting in this study is that some positively correlated statements about the death of Princess Diana seem to be contradictory. The authors write, “Either she was killed by a rogue cell of British secret service (#1) or by business rivals of the Fayeds (#4), or she faked her own death (#3)” (Wood et al. 2012: 769).

was murdered, you are more likely to think she is still alive, and these can’t simultaneously be true” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnYT5Fp6w_M, at 1:15 – 1:45). The advantage of actually watching such an interview, rather than merely reading the words, is that Sunstein’s successful conveyance of ridicule, which can be read clearly on his interlocutor’s smirking face, cannot plausibly be denied. The irony is that this ridicule is based on misinterpretation of the study, and a failure to make a critical and rather obvious distinction.

3 Sunstein and his co-author Adrian Vermeule take a more nuanced position in their 2009 paper on this subject (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009), arguing that conspiracy theorists are not irrational per se, but merely are hampered by a “crippled epistemology”. That thesis, and Sunstein and Vermeule’s paper more generally, has been shown to be highly problematic for a variety of reasons. See Hagen 2010, 2011, and Griffin 2011.

4 Wynne Parry, writing for Live Science, got the message. Quoting the study’s conclusion, Parry writes, “The central idea—that authorities are engaged in massive deceptions intended to further their malevolent goals—supports any individual theory, to the point that theorists can endorse contradictory ones, according to the team. ‘Believing that Osama bin Laden is still alive is apparently no obstacle to believing that he has been dead for years,' they write in a study published online Wednesday (Jan. 25 [2012]) in the journal Social Psychological and Personality Science” (Parry 2012, referring to Wood et al. 2012).

5 Other combinations could have been taken as equally contradictory, but for some reason were not indicated as such in Table 1 in Wood et al. 2012 (769). But it does not matter. If they had been, the same critique would apply.
These are described as “mutually incompatible” and “unambiguous contradictions”. Clearly, the first two (#1 and #4) are not “unambiguous contradictions”. British Intelligence and the Fayeds’ business enemies could have colluded, as many people believe about the mob and the CIA with regard to the JFK assassination. However, both propositions #1 and #4 really do (nearly enough) contradict the notion that Diana faked her own death (#3). Now, what does a correlation of this kind really mean, anyway? It means that if subjects rated their level of “agreement” to one of these statements as relatively high, on a scale of 1 to 7, they were likely to rate the other relatively high too, as compared to those who rated the first relatively low. It is important to notice that nobody would have to believe any of these statements to produce this result.

And it is also worth noting that “endorsement of the faked-own-death theory was extremely low… with a mean of only 1.52 on a 7-point scale” (Wood et al. 2012: 770). So, in this context, even a rating of “2” is relatively high! Can that be reasonably interpreted as “belief”? More generally, what does it mean to “agree” to a statement at a level of, say 2, 3, 4, or even 5 or 6 on a scale of 1 to 7? It is not clear what it means. But the obviousness of the incongruence of the genuinely incompatible statements suggests that it does not amount to belief. It is more plausibly interpreted as something resembling what is more explicitly measured in Study 2, to which we now turn.

In the abstract to their paper, the authors write, “In Study 2 (n = 102), the more participants believed that Osama bin Laden was already dead when U.S. special forces raided his compound in Pakistan, the more they believed he is still alive” (Wood et al. 2012: 767). But that is not quite accurate. Again, the researchers did not measure “belief”. What they measured in this study can more accurately be characterized as the degree of credence given to mutually contradictory conspiracy theories. In their own words, they found “significant positive correlation between composite endorsement ratings” (Wood et al. 2012: 767). If person A found the theory that Osama bin Laden is still alive relatively more “plausible, convincing, worth considering, and coherent” (Wood et al. 2012: 771) than person B did, then person A was likely to also find the theory that Osama was already dead at the time of the raid more plausible (etc.) than person B did. And this is actually perfectly reasonable; there is no contradiction here. As the researchers quite reasonably suggest, what seems to be at work here is a mediating belief that authorities are untrustworthy. Indeed, that is not merely

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6 Elsewhere two of the authors of the study write, “If indeed Princess Diana was assassinated, the royal family and Al-Fayed’s business partners could not both have been independently responsible for her death” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 258). This is a little misleading. The study in question does not require that the various hypothetical culprits had to act independently. (It also does not include “the royal family did it” as an option, though one could imagine that MI6 did it on behalf of the royal family.)

It is curious what these authors regard as incompatible. They write, “Consider, for example, the left-leaning theory that oil companies plot to discredit evidence that use of their product is warming the planet, and the right-leaning theory that governments and scientists deliberately exaggerate the risk of anthropogenic climate change. With such different and often mutually incompatible content, it is by no means obvious why these theories tend to come together in the minds of some people” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 256). These examples, though contrasting, are clearly not mutually incompatible.
an obvious and plausible idea; it is also supported by their statistical analysis.\(^7\) If a particular individual is less trusting of the government than someone else (regardless of what level of trust is warranted), he or she is more likely to give greater credence to alternative accounts of contested events. There is simply nothing epistemically dubious about, say, rating both the notion that Osama was already dead and that he is still alive as more “plausible, convincing, worth considering and coherent” than someone else with more faith in official stories rated both theories.

Lee Basham puts the same objection this way, “[T]he researchers conflate participants’ reports of strong suspicions with settled beliefs” (Basham 2017: 64). He provides the following illustration.

Imagine you have misplaced your key ring. You suspect you left it in the front door lock. You also suspect you left it in the kitchen. Given your previous behavior, you rate as quite probable, “agree” that it is in the front door and equally as probable, “agree”, the keys are in the kitchen. This is an entirely rational cognitive practice. But according to the interpretation of Wood et al., you believe your keys are located, at the very same moment, in both your front door and in your kitchen. For those with lost-key beliefs, believing one has left the keys in the front door is apparently no obstacle to believing the keys are simultaneously in the kitchen (Basham 2017: 64-65).\(^8\)

The authors should have noticed this,\(^9\) since they did notice an analogous issue regarding “interestingness”, which they decided to exclude it in their analysis because “there is no contradiction in finding two rival theories equally interesting” (Wood et al. 2012: 771). Yet they failed to recognize that there is also no contradiction in finding two rival theories equally plausible, convincing, worth considering, and coherent.

Elsewhere, Robbie Sutton and Karen Douglas (2014), the other two authors of “Dead and Alive”, consider several possible theories that could potentially explain how contradictory beliefs could be “held together”. They write, for example, “Beliefs may not support each other, but instead may be held together by believers’ perception of their own moral tendencies” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 262). Alternatively, along with other views,\(^10\) they consider that,

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\(^7\) Their analysis reveals that “the correlation in endorsement of the two contradictory theories is explainable entirely by their connection with belief in a deceptive cover-up by authority” (Wood et al. 2012: 771).

\(^8\) Basham and I independently noticed this flaw in Wood’s paper. That should not be surprising; the problem is rather obvious. What is surprising, at least to me, is that so many others failed to notice.

\(^9\) The authors come close when they noted, “[H]igher-order beliefs may be so strongly held that any conspiracy theory that stands in opposition to the official narrative will gain some degree of endorsement from someone who holds a conspiracist worldview, even if it directly contradicts other conspiracy theories that they also find credible” (Wood et al., 2012: 768, emphasis added).

\(^10\) Here is another proposed explanation for what “holds beliefs in various conspiracy theories together”. Sutton and Douglas explain, “[C]onspiracy theories imply that powerful elites are willing and able to conspire. This central belief in the existence of conspiracies may be the essential glue that holds beliefs in various conspiracy theories together” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 264). Does any serious person actually question
“[I]ncompatible conspiracy beliefs may be held concurrently because they are explained by their coherence with ‘nuclear ideas’ that pull ideas together to form an ideological system” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 259). The problem is that, because there are no simultaneously believed contradictory beliefs documented, there is nothing here that needs explaining—nothing, at least, that is peculiar to conspiracy theorists. So, while the general question of how beliefs and attitudes hold together is an interesting one, the premise that conspiracy theorists in particular tend to hold incompatible beliefs, which would make them especially in need of explanation, is unfounded.

As far as one can tell from Wood et al. 2012, “suspicious” people reason normally and properly. And so the fact that this paper has been used to disparage and even ridicule conspiracy theorists is unfortunate and inappropriate. And the authors are partially responsible for this. But what is significant here is not that an isolated paper happens to have been flawed. It is that this flaw, which should not have been difficult to recognize, not only escaped the notice of multiple authors, and passed peer review, but appears to have been universally accepted in the psychological research community and widely repeated in both academic and wider venues. Further, as we will see, this is not an isolated error. There is an almost systemic distortion in the psychological literature, and to some degree the social science literature more generally, regarding which the problems with “Dead and Alive” are symptomatic. (To some extent this may be in the process of self-correction. Surprisingly, it is the authors of “Dead and Alive” themselves who have begun this process, as we will see.)

3. Conspiracy Theorists Even Believe Conspiracy Theories that are Completely Made Up!

In a study led by Viren Swami (Swami et al. 2011), subjects were asked to rate “the extent to which they agreed” with various statements about a fictitious conspiracy theory. Let us pause and think for a moment. To what extent should someone agree with a statement they know nothing directly about, have never heard of, and so could not have had any opinion about prior to being asked? It seems they should have responded, “I don’t know. I have no opinion.” (For all they know about it, which is nothing, the theories could be true.) But “I don’t know” was not an option. They had to pick a number between one (completely false) and nine (completely true). The sensible thing to do, it seems, is to answer according to how likely to be true they judged the statement to be, or how plausible it seemed to them. And if they do this, the subjects can be expected to make their judgments based on their views regarding analogous cases about “the existence of conspiracies” or that “powerful elites are willing and able to conspire”? I should think that the only real questions are questions of extent: How prevalent are conspiracies? How willing and how able to conspire are powerful elites?

11 Like “Dead and Alive”, this study does not clearly measure belief per se. Ostensibly, it measures the degree of truth or falsity. But this seems to be an inappropriate measure in this context. How can one assess the degree of accuracy (which is what degree of truth or falsity means, if taken literally) in a case about which one knows nothing? Thus, the subjects have little choice but to interpret and answer in terms of the degree of plausibility or likelihood, rather than degree of truth or falsity.
which they do already have opinions, presumably based on something. And so, it seems, they did. Based on this, Swami concludes, as if it tells us something interesting (and unflattering) about conspiracy theorists, “[B]elieving in real-world conspiracy theories appears to make it more likely that an individual will also be more accepting of fictitious conspiracy theories” (Swami et al. 2011: 460).

Yes, indeed. So it should. The subject does not know that the theory is fictitious, and presumably makes her assessment of the probability/plausibility of the fictitious theory based on the only evidence available to her—her other beliefs. These beliefs, presumably, are in turn supported by other beliefs, which may or may not ultimately have reasonably solid grounding. A person who has beliefs that suggest that “such things” do occur would normally rank the fictitious story as more plausible than people who have beliefs that suggests “such things” do not occur, or occur only very rarely. And so, of course, those who believe in real-world conspiracy are “more accepting of fictitious conspiracy theories”, that is, they find them more plausible or more likely to be true than do those who do not believe in real-world conspiracy theories.

Here is the trick. The experimenters pick fictitious conspiracy theories making the conspiracy believer end up looking a little silly for giving some degree of credence to a theory that is made up from nothing. In comparison, the “conventionalist”,12 seems like the better thinker.13 But that is an illusion. The conspiracy theorist and the conventionalist, as far as we can tell, are both reasoning the same. If the researchers had picked a true but little known conspiracy theory as the test, the conspiracy theorist would have come out looking better. Indeed, that is not just speculation; such an experiment has now been done. As described by Rob Brotherton (of all people):14

A recent study... found that people who reject speculative conspiracy theories (such as “evidence of alien contact is being concealed from the public”) are also more likely to reject documented conspiracies (such as “How likely is the idea that the government has performed mind-control experiments on its own citizens

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12 I am following Wood and Douglass 2013 in adopting the word “conventionalist” for those who stick with conventional, orthodox interpretations, rejecting alternative “conspiracy theories”.

13 The authors never explicitly say that their result reflects poorly on conspiracy theorists. If challenged, they may even deny that they intended such an inference. Uscinski and Parent, for example, have strenuously insisted that they do not mean to be judgmental (Uscinski and Parent 2014). But it is one thing to claim to mean no offence, it is another to actually conduct evenhanded research—“By their fruits ye shall know them”. Despite the problems of “Dead and Alive” outlined above, Michael Wood’s more recent work has been more evenhanded (see Wood et al. 2013 and Wood 2016). More will be said below about the mixed but improving record of Sutton and Douglas, Wood’s co-authors for “Dead and Alive”. Goertzel’s intent, on the other hand, is clear. This is also discussed below.

14 Rob Brotherton favorably cites the studies that I have criticized in this article, and he himself conducts similar psychological studies, sometimes in collaboration with Christopher French. He is generally dismissive regarding controversial conspiracy theories, though he does claim no intention to be insulting. After all, he is just trying to find the psychological peculiarities that drive people to beliefs that he dismissively rejects. Why should anyone be offended by that?
without their consent?—a coy reference to the CIA’s very real MKUltra program) (Brotherton 2016).

Brotherton is referring to a study lead by none other than Michael Wood (namely, Wood 2016), which is, to Wood’s credit, more balanced than his “Dead and Alive” paper, discussed above. Here Wood offers a couple plausible explanations.

[People who are aware of past malfeasance by powerful actors in society might extrapolate from known abuses of power to more speculative ones. Alternatively, people with more conspiracist world views might be more likely to seek out information on criminal acts carried out by officials in the past, while those with less conspiracist world views might ignore or reject such information (Wood 2015: 698).

The first “alternative” is perfectly reasonable, awareness of known abuses of power should incline a reasonable person to “rate the likelihood” of speculative cases higher than she otherwise would. The second “alternative” points to confirmation bias at work in seeking out the information. Nevertheless, evidence is still evidence, even if one finds it as a result of bias.

It is important to keep in mind that neither conspiracy theorists nor the conventionalists can make an a priori claim that their inference was the better one. Which group is more likely to be right in real cases depends upon how common the conspiratorial behaviors of the types in question really are. And, to have a sense of that, one has to do an empirical study, not of conspiracy theorists, but of the history of conspiracies, both of the officially acknowledged and of the controversial varieties.

Another point that needs to be emphasized is that neither side is reasoning badly, given their beliefs about conspiracy theories in general. It is entirely reasonable for those who believe in conspiracy theories to be more inclined to believe theories that are relevantly similar to other theories that they think they have reason to believe, especially if those theories imply that authorities cannot be trusted. And, likewise, it is entirely reasonable for people who do not believe in conspiracy theories in general to be less inclined to believe in any particular one. This is because the (perceived) prior probability of a given type of explanation influences, and ought to influence, one’s assessment of plausibility of a particular hypothesis of that type. The interesting question in this context is not whether one’s perception of the prior probability involved influences one’s judgment about the plausibility of a specific case. (In general, it clearly does and should.) Rather, the interesting question is whether the degree of prior probability is accurately perceived in the first place.15 In other words, if we want to make a judgment about who has the most appropriate perspective on the issue we would have to study whether or not belief in conspiracy theories in general is warranted. And to do this, we would have to study the relevant history, and the empirical evidence surrounding controversial cases. And this is something that these social scientists do not typically want to bother with very

15 See Basham 2011: 64-68 for a useful analogy (involving a “good family” and a “bad [Mafia] family”) illustrating how considerations of prior probability influence, and ought to influence, the evaluation of conspiracy theories.
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Just as “people with more conspiracist world views” people might be inclined to “seek out information on criminal acts carried out by officials in the past”, as Wood has suggested, people with conventionalist world views may be inclined not to. Both are forms of confirmation bias. As for academics who shy away from such studies, one can hardly blame them. After all, the evidence supporting conspiracy theories involving the most paradigmatic conspiracy theories, the JFK assassination and 9/11, is mountainous.16

Along with the alleged tendency to believe contradictory theories, the supposed inclination to be “more accepting” of entirely fictitious conspiracy theories is cited as evidence that conspiracy theorists operate within a “monological belief system”. For example, Swami writes:

Evidence of an association between belief in this entirely fictitious conspiracy theory and real-world conspiracy theories would provide strong evidence for a monological belief system in relation to conspiracist ideation (Swami et al. 2011: 453, citing Goertzel 1994).

It is this notion of “monological belief systems” to which we now turn.

4. Conspiracy Theorists are Monological Thinkers—They Talk Only to Themselves!

The idea that so-called “conspiracy ideation” is indicative of a “monological belief system” was first suggested by political scientist Ted Goertzel (1994) and now enjoys experimental support (supposedly) from the work of various psychologists, including Michael Wood and Viren Swami. Swami regards Goertzel’s claim that, in Swami’s words, “conspiracy beliefs form part of a ‘monological belief system’” as “[p]erhaps one of the most important conclusions” of studies addressing influences on belief in conspiracy theories (Swami and Coles 2010: 562).17 Elsewhere, Swami et al. elaborate:

In a seminal study, Goertzel (1994) argued that conspiracy beliefs form part of a ‘monological belief system’ in which a conspiratorial idea serves as evidence for other conspiracist ideation. Thus, for example, recent work [Swami et al. 2010]

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16 To say that it is mountainous is not to say that is of good quality (though I happen to think much of it is good). The claim that it is mountainous can be established by pointing to a large pile of books; whether on the whole it is of good or poor quality can only be established by reading and critically evaluating those books.

17 Similarly, Swami et al. write, “This provides additional support for Goertzel’s (1994) argument that a person who believes in one conspiracy theory is more likely to believe in others, including entirely fictitious ones perceived as real” (Swami et al. 2011: 459).

18 What follows is the complete context, which also includes claims similar to those quoted from Swami et al. 2011. “Perhaps one of the most important conclusions to emerge from the handful of studies to focus explicitly on the individual antecedents of belief in conspiracy theories was Goertzel’s (1994) assertion that conspiracy beliefs form part of a ‘monological belief system’. This allows conspiracy theorists to easily assimilate explanations for new phenomena that would otherwise be difficult to understand or would threaten their existing beliefs. Recent work supports this, showing that those who more strongly endorsed 9/11 conspiracy theories were also more likely to believe in other, seemingly unrelated conspiracy theories” (Swami and Coles 2010: 562).
Kurtis Hagen

has shown that respondents who more strongly endorsed conspiracy theories about the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks were more likely to believe in other, unrelated conspiracy theories (Swami et al. 2011: 444-45). They also tie in the results of their 2011 study:

[W]e showed that the strongest predictor of belief in 7/7 conspiracy theories was belief in other, general conspiracy theories. This is consistent with the suggestion that conspiracist ideation forms part of a monological belief system (Goertzel, 1994), where one conspiratorial idea serves as evidence for other conspiracist ideation. In the case of the present study, it might be suggested that belief in a range of conspiracy theories provides a basis for comprehending and accepting 7/7 conspiracy theories (Swami et al. 2011: 452).

There is something strangely asymmetrical about this study. It purports to tell us something about “conspiracist ideation”, presumably as opposed to non-conspiracist, or “conventional” ideation. Namely, “conspiracy beliefs” in particular “form part of a ‘monological belief system’ in which a conspiratorial idea serves as evidence for other conspiracist ideation” (Swami et al. 2011: 445). But is there really anything here that applies uniquely to conspiracy ideation, or that, in any case, is epistemically problematic or noteworthy? I do not think so. What Swami et al. describe is a characteristic of all sensible people, including believers in conventional interpretations of events. What follows is Swami’s summary of his results modified by simply crossing out and replacing individual words so that it applies to conventionalist ideation instead of conspiracist ideation. The quotation starts with a speculative claim that seems to apply equally in both cases. (Note that the first paragraph just sets the context by stating the findings of other studies. It is interesting here because it invites the reader to view conspiracy ideation as associated with mostly negatively framed qualities—the exception being support for democratic principles, which the authors have camouflaged under the acronym “SDP”. I have also adjusted these qualities to neutralize, or even reverse, the emotive feel while trying not to express more bias than the original.)

[C]onspiracist [Conventionalist] ideation may initially begin as an individual process, in which a person tries to make sense of some event perceived as threatening or calamitous. In such a scenario, a tendency towards conspiracist [conventionalist] ideation may tend to be more prevalent among individuals who are politically cynical [trustful/naive], show stronger [weaker] SDP [support for democratic principles], have lower self-esteem [higher self-admiration], are more disagreeable [agreeable/acquiescent], and possibly have lower [higher] crystallised intelligence. Systemic factors, such as discrepancies or ambiguities in mainstream explanations for an event, may also play a role in initially shaping conspiracist ideation.19 [On the other hand, mainstream criticisms of conspiracy theories, and constant repetition of conventional accounts, perhaps even demeaning insinuations regarding “conspiracy theories” emanating from the academy, may play a role in initially shaping conventional ideation.]

Once this process has been initiated, a confirmation bias and avoidance of cognitive dissonance may further the drive towards conspiracist [conventionalist]

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ideation. However, our results also suggest that the strongest predictor of whether or not an individual will ultimately accept a conspiracy [conventionalist] theory is the presence of earlier conspiracist [conventionalist] ideation. This is entirely consistent with Goertzel’s (1994) suggestion that conspiracy [conventionalist] theories form part of a monological belief system, where conspiracist [conventionalist] ideation increases the chances that an individual will accept evidence of novel conspiracy theories [conventional explanations]. Such a system may allow individuals to easily comprehend new phenomena within existing belief systems, but communal reinforcement may also play a role in embedding conspiracy theories [conventional accounts] within particular social groups (Swami et al. 2011: 459-60, amended).

Now, what exactly is a monological belief system? So far I have only mentioned, quoting Swami, that it involves “a conspiratorial idea serving as evidence for other conspiracist ideation”. Let us look more closely. Ted Goertzel, the originator of the idea that conspiracy theorists are monological thinkers, puts this in more general terms, “In a monological belief system, each of the beliefs serves as evidence for each of the other beliefs” (Goertzel 1994: 740). Goertzel’s study provides evidence that this manner of reasoning applies to conspiracy theorists, a finding that is later supported by other studies (Wood et al. 2012; Swami et al. 2011). However, there is something strange about pointing out this fact. For the reasoning it describes is both ubiquitous and epistemically unproblematic. Of course one belief serves as evidence for another, and so it should. There is hardly an alternative.

If one is convinced that al Qaeda was behind the embassy bombings in Africa, as well as the attack on the U.S.S. Cole, should that be taken as evidence, as is often suggested, that al Qaeda was behind the September 11 attacks? The answer, clearly, is yes. It is evidence (though, of course, not proof). And because it is evidence, a rational person should, based on this consideration, increase his or her assessment of likelihood that that event was carried out by al Qaeda. In general, the degree of credence one gives to one event is, and should be, influenced by one’s beliefs about other events.

In this case, of course, the September 11 attacks and the embassy bombings are thought to be related, both perpetrated al Qaeda. What is supposed to be interesting about the reasoning of conspiracy theorists is that they make inferences about particular conspiracy theories from other unrelated conspiracy theories. As Sutton and Douglas explain,

[T]he most consistent finding on the psychology of conspiracy theories, often used as an explanation for their popularity and persistence, is that belief in one particular conspiracy theory is predicted by belief in other theories—even when they refer to completely unrelated events and protagonists (Sutton and Douglas

Swami cites Douglas and Sutton 2008, though its relevance does not seem particularly strong.

This seems to be an unstated corollary of their study. The study suggests that a given conspiracy theory is more likely to be accepted by those who already accept other conspiracy theories, than by conventionalists. So, conventionalists are less likely to accept the conspiracy theory, and thus more likely to stick with the conventional account. And thus, it would seem, a prior predominance of conventionalist ideation would be predictive of acceptance of future conventional accounts.
For example, Swami et al. cite evidence that people who “more strongly endorsed conspiracy theories about the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks were more likely to believe in other, unrelated conspiracy theories” (Swami et al. 2011: 445, citing Swami et al. 2010). But are the conspiracy theories in question really unrelated in the relevant sense? That is, are they epistemically unrelated? That is what matters. After all, of what significance is being unrelated in some other sense? So long as belief in one theory gives one a good reason to give increased credence to another, there is nothing distinctive or problematic about doing so. Wood, Douglass, and Sutton themselves provide reasonable considerations. In “Dead and Alive”, they mention several plausible mediating beliefs, including “belief in deception by authority” and “belief in the effectiveness of intimidation and bribery” (Wood et al. 2012: 772). A person who believes that authorities are more deceptive than does someone else, perhaps based on their knowledge of a particular case, has reason to regard conspiracy theories as more plausible than does the other person. (Which person has more accurately assessed the degrees in question is another matter entirely.) This need not be a complete explanation, but it is enough to conclude that there is no mystery here. To be clear, I do not have a strong objection to social scientists proving the obvious. What I do find objectionable is framing it in a way that suggests that there is something distinctive going on that reflects poorly on conspiracy theorists when, in fact, there is not.

A related notion, also supported by empirical studies, is this: “The more conspiracies a monological thinker believes in, the more likely he or she is to believe in any new conspiracy theory that is proposed” (Goertzel 1994: 740). As Sutton and Douglas put it, “[P]eople who already believe in existing conspiracy theories will tend to be receptive to new conspiracy theories, exactly as Goertzel (1994) suggested”. This effect may seem epistemically problematic, as Goertzel way of putting it seems to imply. But that is a mistake. Nothing has gone wrong here.

As an analogy, the more a person believes that scientific discoveries have solved social problems (whether or not they have good reasons for believing

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22 Elsewhere, Swami and Coles characterize the theories in question as “seemingly unrelated”. They write, “[T]hose who more strongly endorsed 9/11 conspiracy theories were also more likely to believe in other, seemingly unrelated conspiracy theories” (Swami and Coles 2010: 562, citing then-forthcoming Swami et al. 2011). This qualification, of course, makes a big difference.

23 Clearly these beliefs must be about the degree of deception, and degree of effectiveness, since no serious person could deny that authorities sometimes deceive and that intimidation and bribery have some degree of effectiveness.

24 Sutton and Douglas continue, “This is an important finding even if it does not show that conspiracy theorists have a monological mind-set” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 266-67). Why exactly is this thought to be an important finding? After all, people who already believe in existing conspiracy theories should tend to be receptive to new conspiracy theories, precisely because one belief should serve as evidence for another. So it is hard to understand why that finding is thought to be significant. Perhaps other psychologists should study why some psychologists think that ordinary reasoning is particularly interesting when it happens to be employed by conspiracy theorists.
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This (the more likely he or she is to believe that a scientific discovery will solve other problems. It is not just “monological” thinkers who think this way. Everyone does. And everyone should. There is nothing wrong with the inference, so long as it is not conceived of as proof, but only a matter of increasing likelihood. If one’s reasons for one’s more primary beliefs, on which other beliefs are based, are not good ones, then that is a problem. (The problem is that they are reasoning based on shaky premises, not that the inference itself is problematic.) But the fact that a person is more likely to accept a new conspiracy theory because they already accept other conspiracy theories in no way implies that the more primary beliefs were not well grounded empirically.

Goertzel himself provides the following example: “African-Americans, who are more likely to be aware of the Tuskegee syphilis conspiracy, are predisposed to believe that AIDS may also be a conspiracy, while this idea may seem absurd to people who are unfamiliar with past medical abuses” (Goertzel 1994: 740). This much is presumably true: People who are aware of the Tuskegee experiment, and are motivated to consider it, would likely be more disposed, in some degree, to have unconventional beliefs about AIDS than those who are unaware of such historical outrages. And so they should be. It is not that they should believe that AIDS is a conspiracy of some sort. But they should more inclined to think that it might be than they otherwise would have been.

Still, there is something about monological belief systems that is epistemically problematic. Goertzel describes it this way, “[B]elief systems can be characterized as dialogical or monological. Dialogical belief systems engage in a dialogue with their context, while monological systems speak only to themselves, ignoring their context in all but the shallowest respects” (Goertzel 1994: 740). Sutton and Douglas characterizes this as a “key feature” of monological belief systems, writing, “[F]or Goertzel (1994), a key feature of monological belief systems is what we might call a closed epistemology. Beliefs are evaluated according to their coherence with other beliefs in the system, rather than external data” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 256, emphasis in original). Clearly, this “closed epistemology”, in which context is ignored, is epistemically problematic. Sutton and Douglas see the problem as involving two features. They explain:

Goertzel (1994) identifies two key features of the monological conspiracist mindset: [1] a closed epistemology in which adherents are indifferent to evidence, preferring to rely on their previous beliefs, and [2] a nomothetic explanatory style in which each event is explained in terms of general patterns in the world rather than the unique, proximal conditions that might have brought it about (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 257).

These two ideas are clearly related. Conspiracy theorists are charged with disregarding evidence, or, in other words, disregarding the relevant “unique, proximal conditions”, and instead reason primarily by analogy to beliefs they have about other cases, and thus tend to focus on “general patterns”. However,

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25 I have had encounters with other (white) academics who are perfectly aware of the Tuskegee Experiment (and similar cases), but until I remind them of it (or of similar cases) they seem to reason as though they did not know.
as Sutton and Douglas recognize, there is no evidence for this—indeed, it seems to be false (see section 5 below).

Goertzel has, in effect, equivocated between two ideas. (1) People who believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe (or give more credence to) another—because one belief serves as evidence for another. And, (2) conspiracy theorists ignore empirical evidence—and other people too. They “speak only to themselves” (Goertzel 1994: 740). They are closed-minded. The first claim is supported by scientific research, but is not epistemically problematic. The second claim is epistemically problematic, but is unsupported. Indeed, there is some evidence that the opposite is true—conspiracy theorists tend to be more open minded (Swami et al. 2010, 2013). Goertzel has tried to pin the problematic aspect of his pejorative-sounding “monological belief systems” on conspiracy theorists, while only actually providing evidence regarding the unproblematic aspects. The further evidence that later accumulated likewise only supported the unproblematic aspects.

In sum, the charge (and it does have a ring of indictment\(^\text{26}\)) that conspiracy theorists operate within a “monological belief system” suggests that (1) they attempt to maintain an internal coherence among their beliefs, such that hypotheses that cohere well with settled beliefs are regarded as relatively more plausible, for which studies like Swami et al. (2011) provide support, but which is in no way unusual or problematic. It also suggests that (2) conspiracy theorists live in a particularly “closed-off” world.\(^\text{27}\) We can divide the latter into two claims: (2a) they do not engage with contrary viewpoints, and (2b) they make little effort to ground their beliefs in empirical evidence. However, the evidence provided by various studies purporting to link conspiracist ideation with monological belief systems actually only support the former aspect of monological belief systems, the normal and unproblematic aspect. That is, conspiracy theorists form beliefs based in part on their other beliefs, as we all inevitably do. However, neither of the latter aspects (2a and 2b) has been established. Indeed, 2a is false, at least as it applies to a large segment of conspiracy theorists, who clearly do engage with conventionalists, and often seek out opportunities for debate. The same is true of 2b. Indeed, it is almost ironic. Many conspiracy theorists are, as Sunstein admits, “spectacularly well-informed”

\(^{26}\) The pejorative ring seems to have been intentional. Goertzel reportedly declared the pejorative use of the term “conspiracy theory” to be “one of our accomplishments” (Walker 2015). Also, consider the following characterization of conspiracy theorists as monological thinkers: “Monological conspiracy thinkers do not search for factual evidence to test their theories. Instead, they offer the same hackneyed explanation for every problem—it’s the conspiracy of the Jews, the capitalists, the patriarchy, the communists, the medical establishment, or whatever. In these cases, the proof which is offered is not evidence about the specific incident or issue, but the general pattern; for example, the X conspiracy has been responsible for all our other problems, so it is obvious that X must be responsible for this one as well” (Goertzel 1994: 741). That is quite a caricature.

(Sunstein 2015) about the pertinent empirical details, and they are constantly calling for further empirical studies, and demanding the release of relevant records.

5. Sutton and Douglass to the Rescue—Sort of

Sutton and Douglas do make a number of valid points that militate against making any negative inferences about the merit of conspiracy theories based on research linking conspiracy theorists with monological belief systems. They point out that, “[T]here is no empirical evidence for key tenets of the monological position” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 259). More specifically, they write:

[1] [T]here is no evidence that these people explain events in more abstract, general, less case-specific terms. Indeed, even a cursory examination of websites devoted to conspiracies, such as that of the 9/11 Truth Movement, appears to reveal a deep rhetorical attachment to case-specific facts, true or not, regarding the melting point of steel, the burning temperature of aviation fuel, the way the buildings collapsed, and the collapse of neighboring buildings, *inter alia* (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 259).

Similarly, philosophers Lee Basham and Matthew Dentith remark: “[A] quick review of popular conspiracy theory websites, as well as dozens of interviews conducted over the last decade with self-identified conspiracy theorists reveals the evidence attentive adherents of popular conspiracy theories amassed is impressive” (Basham and Dentith 2015).

[2] [T]here is little evidence that conspiracy theorists have a generally closed epistemology. Indeed, some findings suggest that such individuals may tend to be somewhat more open to experience (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 259, citing Swami *et al.* 2010, 2013).

[3] The correlations among various conspiracy beliefs can be explained in other, simpler ways, without invoking a closed epistemology or a nomothetic explanatory style (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 260).

Sutton and Douglass conclude:

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28 I am not aware of a good reason to think that Joe Conventionalist knows any more or less than Joe Conspiracist regarding the empirical facts surrounding the conspiracy theories about which they both have firm, if ungrounded, convictions. But it is rather clear that serious conspiracy theorists (like most of those who give talks at JFK assassination conferences, for example) know a lot more about the relevant empirical evidence than do the academics who study conspiracy theorists, who largely try to stay above the fray.

29 Regarding the push to address the pertinent empirical facts regarding 9/11, see David Ray Griffin’s, “9/11: Let’s Get Empirical”, which can be found at http://www.brianwright.com/Griffin.pdf, or watch his corresponding lecture, which can be found in various places online, including YouTube.

30 Referring to the 9/11 Truth Movement’s apparent attachment to case-specific facts as “rhetorical” seems to be itself rhetorical.
In sum, we think it is premature, and unfairly pejorative, to portray conspiracy beliefs as a manifestation of monological thinking. Closed-mindedness and willful ignorance of facts are stigmatized characteristics. It is sobering to reflect that scales measuring agreement with conspiracy theories also, by definition, measure disagreement with them. So we might equally say that correlations between conspiracy items show that rejection of conspiracy theories comprises part of a monological worldview, in which alternatives to official accounts are dismissed in a closed-minded and irrational fashion! (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268, emphasis added).

Sutton and Douglas are to be commended for their attempt at evenhandedness, and for urging other scientists to be non-judgmental. They write, “We would advocate a dispassionate mode of scientific inquiry which is open to the possibility that these theories have conventionally desirable and undesirable consequences, and which is not unduly influenced by the cultural impulse to label them as simply ‘good’ or ‘bad’” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268). But their attempt at evenhandedness is spotty. In addition to continuing to maintain that conspiracy theorists tend to simultaneously believe contradictory theories, they also seem to accept some baseless stereotypes, such as the view that conspiracy theorists base their ideas on “limited information”. They also state, “[The] majority of conspiracy theories lack evidential support and are resistant to falsification” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 254). They cite a 2002 article by Steve Clarke. Although often cited by psychologists working on conspiracy theories, that paper has serious problems pointed out by David Coady (2006a). In any case, Clarke does not exactly assert (much less prove) that conspiracy theories lack evidential support. In fact, though Clarke does seem to take a dim view of conspiracy theories, it is not because they simply “lack evidential support”. Indeed, Clarke writes, “[Conspiracy theorists] are typically quite dedicated in their search for evidence relevant to their favorite conspiracy theory and are usually able to overwhelm you with a deluge of evidence in favor of that theory” (Clarke 2002). So, as it turns out, not only does the claim that “the majority of conspiracy theories lack evidential support” itself lack evidential support, its falsity is admitted by critics of conspiracy theories. Of course, those critics do not believe the evidence as a whole best supports conspiracy theories, but

31 The suggestion that conspiracy theorists operate from a position of “limited information” was made intellectually respectable by the assertions of Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009), who did not actually support it with any evidence. Sutton and Douglas seem to subtly endorse this view when, having just alluded to Sunstein and Vermeule, they write, “[It may be necessary to address not only the limited information available to the disaffected but also the socio-structural bases of the disaffection itself” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 264). To what end these interventions are necessary is not explicitly stated, but since the context of the statement links disaffection with inclination toward conspiracy theories, it seems that there is an assumption that conspiracy theorists have limited information, and that that is partially responsible for their presumed errors. Although Sutton and Douglas’s implied “cure” is less problematic than Sunstein and Vermeule’s proposed “cognitive infiltration”, they nevertheless seem to have adopted the view, explicit proclamations to the contrary notwithstanding, that conspiracy theories represent a problem needing to be “addressed”.

32 There is probably a way of interpreting “conspiracy theories”, and of setting the bar for what counts as “lacking” evidential support, according to which this claim would be true. But this would probably either necessitate caricaturing conspiracy theories or employing an unusual and unfair sense of “lacking”.

making an empirical case against these conspiracy theories would require actually dealing with the “deluge of evidence”.

Sutton and Douglas do attribute some (weakly) positive aspects to conspiracy theories. They point out that conspiracy theories “can be seen as creative, almost heroic efforts by ordinary people to question and to create alternatives to political orthodoxy” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268). If that does not strike you as a little patronizing, try this one: “They can be seen as products, and affirmations, of the democratic right to entertain minority views, no matter how absurd or unsettling they seem to the majority” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268). More significantly, Sutton and Douglas do admit that conspiracy theories “may allow people to question social hierarchies, causing governments to be more transparent and democratic” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268). But they cannot seem to quite acknowledge the most significant potential positive value—that controversial conspiracy theories might sometimes be on to something, and thus help reveal important truths, thwart pernicious conspiracies, and serve as a deterrent to other would-be conspiracies.

6. Some Final Considerations

Many scholars writing on conspiracy theories, such as most of those mentioned above, seem to assume that conspiracy theories are neither true nor warranted. Consider Cass Sunstein’s rhetorical question: “Why, then, do they ["spectacularly well-informed" conspiracy theorists] accept theories that are patently inconsistent with reality?” (Sunstein 2015) Elsewhere, Sunstein insinuates that conspiracy theorist’s “information” is wrong. But he does not effectively justify that assertion (see Sunstein 2014a). In general, when conspiracy theories are construed as false or “relatively implausible” in the social science literature, no serious argument about the relative plausibility of conspiracy theories is made, it is merely assumed without argument, or with the briefest of dismissive remarks, that any theory that the researchers regard as a “conspiracy theory” is implausible. This begs a rather important question.

33 Ironically, it is Sunstein himself who seems to be peddling “information” that is wrong. He claims that video frames released by the Department of Defense show Flight 77 approaching the Pentagon (see Sunstein 2014a: 27). But the frames in question do not clearly show what is approaching the pentagon. So, to be clear, although the footage might have captured Flight 77, or part of it, approaching the Pentagon, it is wrong to say these frames show that happening. Since Sunstein does not provide much evidence about the events of 9/11, it is particularly significant that what he does provide is wrong and misleading. It misleads by giving the impression that this was clear and incontrovertible evidence of Flight 77 approaching the building, when it is not.

34 Rob Brotherton defines a conspiracy as, among other characteristics, “an unverified claim of conspiracy which is not the most plausible account of an event or situation... based on weak kinds of evidence” (Brotherton 2013: 9). Citing this, Brotherton and Chris French write, “A conspiracy theory can be defined as an unverified and relatively implausible allegation of conspiracy” (Brotherton and French 2014: 238).

35 With the exception of the above-mentioned appeal to flagrantly mischaracterized photographs (see footnote 33, above), Sunstein gives almost no argument at all against 9/11 conspiracy theories, which are nevertheless used as a “running example” of a “demonstrably false” conspiracy theory.
Still, the desire to avoid this question is understandable. After all, what would it take to prove that controversial conspiracy theories are implausible? Nothing less than addressing the relevant particulars directly—as well as sizing up all the prior probability factors. For the most part, academics shy away from this. Is it not conventionalist social scientists, then, who exhibit to a greater degree a problematic aspect of monological belief systems, in their relative unwillingness to engage in debate, and to investigate the factual details?

But perhaps that does not matter. Let us look at the issue once again, this time framed by Sutton and Douglas: “One of the predictions of the monological position is that adherents (vs. skeptics) of conspiracy theories will invoke fewer concrete facts and more general patterns when explaining major events” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268). Even if they did, so what? This is not really a problem, so long as there is at least some attention to facts of the case in question. After all, if we are only talking about a difference in degree, not about abandoning all consideration of proximate data altogether, would it be better to rely more on proximate evidence or more on analogy to other cases and other general considerations (i.e. prior probability considerations)? We cannot render a general verdict. It depends on the all sorts of factors. What can be generally said is that to some degree both background considerations relevant to prior probability and direct evidence pertinent to the particular case should be considered. Showing that conspiracy theorists tend to rely more prior probability than forensic evidence, dubious though that proposition is, would imply nothing interesting about the psychology or the quality of the reasoning of those conspiracy theorists.

Consider a similar issue, for which there is some evidence. Compared to conventionalists, “conspiracist commenters were more likely to argue against the opposing interpretation and less likely to argue in favor of their own interpretation” (Wood 2013). This and other tactical differences in argument style (such as greater focus on issues of prior probability, if that can be shown to apply) can plausibly be attributed situational differences. As an analogy, a defense attorney, in any particular case, may stress the character of his client, calling witness after witness attesting to his integrity, while the prosecution appeals to forensic evidence. We cannot prejudge the verdict based on the difference in strategy, nor should we attribute the strategy to psychological differences between defense attorneys and prosecutors. Most plausibly, they have each simply selected the evidence that is best suited to their case. If the facts of the case were different, they may reverse strategies. If such strategy reversals occur only occasionally, so that we find a statistically significant tendency, we still should not infer anything about the psychological dispositions of defense attorneys. More likely, there is something about these kinds of cases by virtue of which one strategy tends to serve the defense better than the prosecution. In the case of conspiracy theories, one situational consideration in

As another example, this time regarding surveys that document increasing belief in conspiracy theories regarding the assassination of JFK, Goertzel remarks, “This increase in the belief in conspiracy has taken place despite the fact that the accumulation of evidence has increasing supported the lone-assassin theory” (Goertzel 1994: 731). Goertzel cites one source (Moore 1990). Well, I guess that settles it then! There have been attempts to find short cuts, such as Clarke 2002 and Keeley 1999. But these have been effectively refuted. See especially Coady 2006a.
particular stands out. Namely, conspiracy theorists have neither the resources nor legal powers available to the government. Conspiracy theorists are therefore more limited in their ability to acquire information and cannot ordinarily force testimony. Though they do their best to wrest information from the government, through freedom of information requests, and through the courts, they are nevertheless forced, to a large degree, to deal with the evidence that is put forward by and through official sources. Is it any wonder, under these circumstances, that they would tend to focus on the problems with the official account more than on developing a detailed positive account?

Now, academics, for the most part, are convinced that controversial conspiracy theories are not true. Even when trying to be polite, “open-minded”, and exhibit proper scientific neutrality, they signal in subtle ways that they regard conspiracy theorists as nutty—even if they cannot seem to prove it. The focus on conspiracy theorists itself, without equal attention to conventionalists, signals that one ought to think something strange is going on with conspiracy theorists in particular. Driving the point home, some researchers, such as Brotherton and French, classify the study of conspiracy theorists under the heading of “anomalistic psychology” (Brotherton and French 2014: 246).

In alliance with other social scientists, it seems that psychologists have invented a problem so as to posit a psychological explanation for it, and do so in a way that seems to reflect poorly on conspiracy theories. But there is nothing here that needs any kind of special explanation, or that should be understood as problematic. The most straightforward view is that different people come to different conclusions about conspiracy theories for the same kinds of reasons that they come to different conclusions about other matters. They weigh up the evidence they are aware of, factoring in some sense of prior probability. Neither the psychological research by Wood and Swami, nor the arguments of Goertzel, indicate that the explanation for conspiracy theorizing resides in anything more interesting than that.

Rather than focusing on conspiracy theorists, many of these lines of investigation could be turned on people who believe official stories. It would be interesting, and arguably at least as important, and would go some way toward bringing balance to this area of research, if some effort was made to explore why it is that so many people believe false or dubious official stories, or ideas that certain elites clearly try to promote even if they do not explicitly state them. For example, why did so many Americans believe that Saddam Hussein was in cahoots with al Qaeda? (We know that part of the reason is that officials actively encouraged this belief. The question is: Why did people buy it?) Relatedly, why did soldiers in Iraq believe they were avenging the victims of 9/11? Why did people believe the baby incubator story that was used to market the first Gulf War? Why do some people believe that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would be so irrational as to use chemical weapons right after Obama declared that to do such a thing would be crossing a line that would ensure US military action against him (and almost did)—especially when the evidence presented was weak? This could be framed as an inquiry into the “good German” syndrome.37

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37 Expressing frustration with the cluelessness and gullibility of most Germans while the Nazi’s perpetrated outrages, a leaflet from the White Rose Society reads, “The German people are again sleeping on in obtuse, stupid sleep, giving these fascist criminals the temerity and opportunity to continue to rage” (cited in Hoffmann 2014). The title of the
But those are just suggestions for others; I am not a psychologist. For me, further work will involve considering whether the definition of conspiracy theory is being used inconsistently in a way that is unfair to serious conspiracy theorists, or whether the implied image of a conspiracy theorist that is found in much academic work amounts to a crude caricature.

7. Conclusion

This article has shown, in a narrow sense, that several social science papers focusing on conspiracy theories have published very flawed findings, and that these flawed findings were accepted uncritically and repeated by other scholars, and more broadly as well. Indeed, these findings were used to disparage conspiracy theorists unfairly, making them appear intellectually unhinged, while it was these scholars themselves, ironically, who were failing to reason clearly. Further, this article has suggested that the flaws in question ought to have been noticed (though exactly how obvious these flaws are is a matter of subjective interpretation). One implication is that scholars, and social scientists in particular, ought to be much more careful in their treatment of conspiracy theorists. Unfairly disparaging a large class of people is no small matter.

I will end with a more general worry. Many philosophers, including David Coady and Steve Clarke, have commented that academics have a “low opinion” of conspiracy theorists (Coady 2006b: 1), or that conspiracy theorists are “unpopular amongst intellectuals” (Clarke 2002: 131). Indeed, it hardly takes a philosopher to notice that. But it is troubling to consider this in connection with the lopsided and unfair treatment of conspiracy theorists in the social science literature, for it suggests that these are not just “innocent mistakes” that could have gone either way. Rather, one must worry that bias against conspiracy theories is influencing the results of social science scholarship, with one biased finding building upon another. And while this article has been narrowly focused on the treatment of conspiracy theories in particular, it raises the question of the degree to which the social science literature more generally may be influenced by other widely shared biases.

References


article from which this is quoted, “The Good Germans: Inside the Resistance to the Nazis”, turns the ordinary use of the phrase “good Germans” on its head. Regardless, I mean it in the sense expressed in the quotation—referring to the people who went along with the program, even to the point of believing the propaganda.

38 I would like to thank Lee Basham for his suggestions and encouragement when we found that we were working on substantially overlapping projects.
Conspiracy Theorists and Monological Belief Systems


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The Problem of Conspiracism

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Abstract
Belief in conspiracy theories is typically considered irrational, and as a consequence of this, conspiracy theorists—those who dare believe some conspiracy theory—have been charged with a variety of epistemic or psychological failings. Yet recent philosophical work has challenged the view that belief in conspiracy theories should be considered as typically irrational. By performing an intra-group analysis of those people we call “conspiracy theorists”, we find that the problematic traits commonly ascribed to the general group of conspiracy theorists turn out to be merely a set of stereotypical behaviours and thought patterns associated with a purported subset of that group. If we understand that the supposed problem of belief in conspiracy theories is centred on the beliefs of this purported subset—the conspiracists—then we can reconcile the recent philosophical contributions to the wider academic debate on the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories.

Keywords: conspiracy, conspiracies, conspiracy theory, conspiracy theories, conspiracism, conspiracist, epistemology

1. Introduction
When is a conspiracy theorist not a conspiracy theorist? When she is a government minister! Or, if that punchline does not work for you, how about: When she is a respected member of the press! Or: When she is an academic who writes on conspiracy theories! Typically, when we think of conspiracy theorists we do not think of people who theorised about the existence of some particular conspiracy—and went on to support that theory with evidence—like John Dewey (who helped expose the conspiracy behind the Moscow Trials of the 1930s), or Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (who uncovered the conspiracy behind who broke in to the Democratic National Committee Headquarters at the Watergate office complex in the 1970s). Instead, we think of the advocates and proponents of weird and wacky conspiracy theories like David Icke (who believes that shape-shifting alien reptiles control the world), or Alex Jones (who believes—among many things—that FEMA is setting up death camps all over America in preparation for a socialist takeover). As their particular views are considered—at the very least—strange, and—at worst—irrational, people often
come to the conclusion that conspiracy theories are the kind of thing deeply-weird people believe.

Associating conspiracy theories with the noteworthy advocates or proponents of such theories is understandable. Many of these proponents came up, or—at the very least—popularised the theories in question. However, it does not follow that our views about people like David Icke or Alex Jones tells us much, if anything, about the merit of their theories. This approach of characterising belief in conspiracy theories generally because of the faults of certain conspiracy theorists, I argue, gets the matter of analysing belief in conspiracy theories back-to-front. To show this, we will first look at the works of Karl Popper and Richard Hofstadter, which set the stage for this analysis. The work of these elder statesmen will then be contrasted with recent work on the issue in Philosophy, which is more sympathetic towards conspiracy theorising. We will then compare the current philosophical project examining belief in conspiracy theories with the work coming out from the social sciences, which centres discussion of belief in conspiracy theories in terms of conspiracy theorists suffering from a variety of epistemic or psychological vices, which is often put under the label of “conspiracist ideation”, or “Conspiracism”. My contention is that we cannot use the class of conspiracists as a general reason to be suspicious of conspiracy theorising in particular, and that the faults of the conspiracist are—should such theorists even exist—overrated.

2. Back to the Beginning: Popper and Hofstadter

Much of the contemporary discussion of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists comes out of replies to—or extensions of—the seminal works of Karl Popper or Richard Hofstadter. For example, Popper’s (albeit brief) discussion in “The open society and its enemies” frames talk of conspiracy theories with respect to the thesis of the “conspiracy theory of society”: conspiracy theorists believe that history can be explained as the result of successive and successful conspiracies. Popper’s argument against the conspiracy theory of society is that as it is obvious history is not the result of a succession of conspiracies, conspiracy theorists must be wrong. Belief in conspiracy theories turns out to be, by extension, irrational.¹

Richard Hofstadter—some twenty years later—characterised belief in conspiracy theories as being similar to paranoid ideation.² The “paranoid style”, as Hofstadter dubbed it, is an analogy between belief in conspiracy theories—characterised as the belief that sinister conspiracies are behind everything—and classical paranoia. Hofstadter was not making a clinical diagnosis that conspiracy theorists are paranoiacs. Rather, our suspicion of conspiracy theories generally is justified because of how closely such conspiratorial claims resemble paranoid ideation. If paranoiac ideation is irrational, then belief in conspiracy theories will, by analogy, be irrational too.

Both Hofstadter and Popper agree that conspiracies occur. Whenever two or more people plot (a conspiracy requires more than just a lone wolf), typically in secret towards some end, then we have a prima facie example of conspiratorial behaviour. For Popper, then, the issue was one of justification: conspiracy

¹ Popper 1972: 341-42.
² Hofstadter 1965.
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Theorists simply ascribe too much causal power to conspirators and their conspiracies, and thus do not have good reason to believe conspiracies are the motive force in history. Hofstadter’s critique was phrased along folk-psychological lines: paranoiacs have a predisposition to think they are being persecuted when they are not, and conspiracy theorists see powerful conspiracies against them where none exist.

The central worry captured by Popper and Hofstadter, then—a concern which continues to resonate throughout the literature as we will see—is that while conspiracies may very well occur, the kind of people who believe in theories about conspiracies—conspiracy theorists—do not form these beliefs in the right way, or for the right reasons. That is to say, the problem with conspiracy theories is typically taken to be something to do with the character of the conspiracy theorist. But can we really explain away what, if anything, is wrong with belief in conspiracy theories simply by appealing to the character flaws of conspiracy theorists?

3. Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorists

The term “conspiracy theory”, at least in academic circles, is often used as a pejorative. Yet when broken down into its constituent parts, the term “conspiracy theory” merely suggests some theory about a conspiracy, one which attempts to explain the occurrence of some event with reference to a conspiracy as a salient cause. This is certainly the position of much recent philosophical work on the subject. Philosophers such as Brian L. Keeley, Charles Pigden, David Coady, Lee Basham, and myself have all argued for some variation of the following definition:

Conspiracy theory: any explanation of an event which cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause.

According to views which fit this definition, belief in a particular conspiracy theory will be rational when the conspiracy theory ends up being in the pool of the best, or most plausible, explanatory hypotheses for some event. Views which fall under the rubric of this kind of definition tend to share the following two features:

1. They allow us to analyse the different kinds of conspiratorial activity covered by the term “conspiracy theory”, and
2. The analysis of this broader class of conspiratorial explanations shows that belief in conspiracy theories is explicable—if not outright rational—in a range of cases.

Such a definition also allows ordinary users to escape the linguistic trap of saying say “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but...” since—by this definition—we all turn out to be conspiracy theorists of some stripe. As Charles Pigden has written (and reiterated in a number of papers):

3 Keeley 2007.
4 Pigden in press.
5 Coady 2012.
6 Basham 2011.
7 Dentith 2016.
Every historically and politically literate person believes and is prepared to believe some conspiracy theories, since both history and the nightly news present many conspiracy theories as facts and others as reasonable hypotheses. You can’t be a politically or historically literate person unless you think that although history and the nightly news may have been distorted, they have not been systematically faked, that is, that they are reasonably reliable. So every historically and politically literate person believes that some of the conspiracies reported by history and the nightly news are real, and thus that the corresponding conspiracy theories are true. It is therefore a condition of being a politically and historically literate person that you accept some conspiracy theories.8

3.1 Particularism About Conspiracy Theories

The aforementioned philosophers are—in the parlance of Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor—“Particularists”, whose works on these things we call “conspiracy theories” critique endemic generalising strategies in the wider academic literature. According to Buenting and Taylor, we can contrast the particularist position with what they call “Generalism”.9 According to the Generalist, conspiracy theories can be assessed as a class without needing to first consider the merits of particular conspiracy theories. Generalists—by-and-large—take it that conspiracy theories are typically examples of irrational beliefs, pointing towards specific, and problematic examples of belief in conspiracy theories as emblematic of belief in conspiracy theories as a whole. For example, they claim conspiracy theorists commit basic errors in probabilistic reasoning,10 suffer from crippled epistemologies,11 or that there are serious negative social consequences to belief in conspiracy theories.12 From this they derive their justification for a prima facie suspicion that belief in conspiracy theories is generally irrational.

Particularists, however, argue that the rationality of any given conspiracy theory can only be assessed by considering the evidence for and against particular conspiracy theories. That is to say, we need to take each and every conspiracy theory and judge it on its respective merits. We cannot simply treat it as “another of those weird conspiracy theories”. Particularists will point to a litany of recent, and proven conspiratorial activities which had previously been pejoratively labelled as “conspiracy theories”: the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964; the Ford Pinto Scandal of 1977; the Snowden revelations of 2013; and the Volkswagen Emissions Scandal of 2015. Not just that; they will also point towards work by historians which shows that sometimes acting conspiratorially—but claiming suspicions about said activity are just vapid conspiracy theories—is part-and-parcel of our recent history.13

8 Pigden in press. See also David Coady’s concise summation of Pigden’s argument in Coady 2012.
9 Buenting and Taylor 2010.
10 Brotherton and French 2014.
11 Sunstein 2009.
12 Douglas and Jolley 2014.
13 For example, Kathryn S. Olmsted’s book Real enemies, which covers the secrecy behind the US’s entry into the First World War, the ills of the McCarthy Era, and the misrepresentations by authorities in the wake of 9/11 for political point-scoring (Olmsted 2009).
For the Particularist, then, there is no principled distinction between a conspiracy theory and the explanation of a historical event which cites a known conspiracy (such as the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44BCE), since they are all examples of explanatory hypotheses which cite conspiracy theories as salient causes of some event. The worry that the Particularist is attuned to is that we tend to express worries about conspiracy theories generally before we begin to even analyse them. That is, the generalist view that conspiracy theories are typically bunk trumps the realisation we should be assessing such theories—as we should any theory—on their evidential merits.

Particularists do not think that belief in all conspiracy theories is quintessentially rational. Rather, they argue that we cannot dismiss belief in conspiracy theories generally just because of the perceived faults of a few conspiracy theories, or theorists. As David Coady argues, it is a standard tactic to deride specific conspiracy theorists, and thus conspiracy theories in general. However, we cannot claim such theories or theorists are undesirable merely because they are conspiracy theories or theorists. Rather, we would need to establish a connection between being a conspiracy theory or theorist and said undesirable characteristics. As such, adopting a prima facie suspicion of conspiracy theories generally before assessing the particulars of a given conspiracy theory gets things back-to-front, which is to say that fronting “theory” with “conspiracy” should not make a difference as to how we go about assessing claims about the world.

Assessing particular conspiracy theories on their merits is no arduous duty, and Particularists argue not just that their position is epistemically defensible, but the generalist strategy—when considered carefully—is both inconsistent, and has a number of unfortunate consequences. For a start, Generalism relies upon a naïve understanding of the appeal to authority, as well as the role of officialness and endorsements in the rival theories to conspiracy theories, a point David Coady has stressed. For another, Generalists end up looking confused; they fail to principally accommodate both the conspiracy theories they take to be irrational, and theories which cite conspiracies as salient causes that they happen to endorse as warranted; Lee Basham has taken such confusions to task in his work. There is also the social cost of Generalism, a point Charles Pigden has pressed. Pigden argues that we can—and indeed should—expect certain segments of the population—such as investigative journalists, public prosecutors, and other officials who deal with the detection of corruption and malfeasance—to treat conspiracy theories seriously so we do not (necessarily) have to. There is, after all, an ethical case for Particularism, given that if conspiracies are occurring, we ought to be investigating them. The fact, then, that journalists, et al., typically treat claims of conspiracy with disdain has the unfortunate consequence of making it all the easier for conspirators to get away with their work, the consequence of which sometimes is literally getting away with murder.

14 Coady 2012.
15 Coady 2007.
16 Basham 2011.
17 Basham argues that there are certain stories which are “too toxic” to be reported by the media or public officials, which is to say that generalism about conspiracy theories has
Still, it is easy to understand what motivates the various pejorative connotations of both “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist”. Nearly all of us have, at some point, said “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but…” whilst advancing what is clearly a theory about some conspiracy. When we say “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but…” we are, typically, asserting some theory about a conspiracy which we happen to think is justified by the available evidence, whilst trying to avoid being lumped in with the weird and wacky conspiracy theorists of this world. Yet a careful consideration of the term “conspiracy theory” shows that this piece of linguistic gymnastics is unnecessary.

At issue, then, is a distinction between the merits of particular conspiracy theories, and the views of particular conspiracy theorists. We worry about being compared to certain conspiracy theorists, and so avoid talk of anything that could be construed as one of those “perfidious conspiracy theories”. Yet this is obviously a problem, because if belief in a particular conspiracy theory is rational according to the evidence, it should not matter who else happens to believe it.

The problem, then, is one of perception. It is not obvious that belief in particular conspiracy theories is irrational. Rather, the issue is being considered a particular kind of conspiracy theorist, one who seemingly believes in the existence of conspiracies sans evidence, good reason, or just happens to believe such theories as a matter of course.

3.2 Particular Problems with Generalist Positions

This distinction between talk of the peculiarities of certain conspiracy theorists, and the merit of particular conspiracy theories is curiously lacking in much recent work outside of Philosophy. For example, Karen M. Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton claim “[I]n the main conspiracy theories are unproven, often rather fanciful alternatives to mainstream accounts”, and argue that conspiracy theorists are likely to believe conspiracy theories because they are more likely to sympathise with conspirators. In a more recent paper, Douglas and Michael J. Wood write: “[T]he specifics of a conspiracy theory are less important than its identity as a conspiracy and its opposition to the official explanation”.20 Alessandro Bessi, Mauro Coletto, George Alexandru Davidescu, Antonio Scala, Guido Caldarelli and Walter Quattrociocchi characterise conspiracy theories as “Narratives [which] tend to reduce the complexity of reality and are able to contain the uncertainty they generate”.21 These are all examples of generalist positions, which take the beliefs or behaviours of some conspiracy theorists as being indicative of what belief in conspiracy theories generally entails.

There are also conspiracy theory theorists who take it that the beliefs or behaviours of some conspiracy theorists naturally lead to negative social consequences, and this, then, is a reason to dismiss conspiracy theories generally.

produced a reticence to talk about real conspiracies by the very people we should expect to expose them (Basham 2017).

18 Pidgen 2016. See also his earlier piece, “Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom Revisited” (Pidgen in press).
21 Bessi et al. 2015: 2.
The Problem of Conspiracism

For example, Stephan Lewandowsky, Klaus Oberauer and Gilles E. Gignac claim their “results identify conspiracist ideation as a personality factor or cognitive style[,]” which is immune to evidence-based thinking.22 Karen M. Douglas and Daniel Jolley define conspiracy theories as “[A]ttempts to explain the ultimate causes of events as secret plots by powerful forces rather than as overt activities or accidents”.23 Whilst they admit that there might be positive social consequences to belief in such theories (questioning who the appropriate authorities are for, what counts as evidence, et cetera) they choose to focus their attention on the negative social consequences of belief in conspiracy theories; they effectively analyse conspiracy theories through the lens of pathological belief in conspiracy theories, ignoring that this talk about the special character of some conspiracy theorists tells us nothing about the merit of their respective conspiracy theories. Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French have sought to explain why people believe such theories in terms of the perceived faults of some conspiracy theorists, investigating particular biases towards preferring conspiratorial explanations.24 Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Michele Acker claim “accumulating research findings reveal a range of detrimental perceptions and behaviors that are associated with conspiracy beliefs, including health problems, decreased civic virtue, hostility, and radicalization”.25

All these analyses of belief in conspiracy theories share the same underlying critique that belief in such theories is caused by factors other than arguments and evidence. Yet the arguments are presented as a generalist stratagem: if we can show that some conspiracy theorists believe in conspiracy theories for factors other than arguments and evidence, then that somehow shows that conspiracy theories—as a class—are suspect as well. These arguments, then, assume we have grounds to be suspicious of the broad class of conspiracy theories before analysing whether the grounds for such a suspicion is itself warranted.

4. A Problem with Some Conspiracy Theorists

The most charitable reading of the social science literature is something like this: “Even if we admit belief in particular conspiracy theories can be warranted, we need to respect the notion there exists some kind of pathological belief in such theories”. We can call this notion—which describes the supposed pathological belief in conspiracy theories—Conspiracism.

Conspiracism: The view that belief in conspiracy theories is typically due to, or caused by, factors other than there being good arguments or evidence in favour of such theories.

22 Lewandowsky, Oberauer, and Gignac 2013: 630. In a follow up paper (notably retracted (Retraction Watch 2014)), Stephan Lewandowsky, John Cook, Klaus Oberauer and Michael Marriott—‘Recursive fury: conspiracist ideation in the blogosphere in response to research on conspiracist ideation’—talk about belief in conspiracy theories as a ‘propensity to explain a significant political or social event as a secret plot by powerful individuals or organizations’ (Lewandowsky et al. 2013).
23 Douglas and Jolley 2014: 35.
The thesis of Conspiracism is at the heart of the aforementioned critiques of belief in conspiracy theories by social scientists. It is the thesis that we can explain away belief in conspiracy theories with respect to factors not to do with whether the conspiracy theory is warranted or unwarranted but, rather, an attitude of believing conspiracy theories without respect to the evidence.

People who suffer from Conspiracism are, then, “conspiracists”, and are the kind of people we typically think believe conspiracy theories for factors other than there being good arguments or evidence in favour of them. A conspiracist will always be a conspiracy theorist (since being a conspiracist requires believing some conspiracy theory), but not all conspiracy theorists will turn out to be conspiracists. Calling someone a “conspiracist” is to add a value judgement to the claim they are a conspiracy theorist by also claiming that they have no epistemic reason to believe said theory.

The terms “conspiracism” and “conspiracist”, then, reflect the common, pejorative labelling typically associated with conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists, which typically marks out that both the theory and the theorist are problematic. Perhaps helpfully (although maybe not) the terms “conspiracist” and “conspiracism” are recurrent in the academic literature, which we might be able to exploit to make sense of “We are all conspiracy theorists!” and the notion that “But I’m not one of those conspiracy theorists (aka a conspiracist)”

Yet, if we are to take the thesis of Conspiracism seriously (which is up for debate, as we will see), we must realise that the issue concerns the putative existence of a certain kind of conspiracy theorists, and not necessarily the theories they believe. This is important, because the existing academic literature is largely insensitive to the distinction between the claims of some presumably wacky conspiracy theorists, and the larger, more general class of conspiracy theorists (a class Pigden rightly points out we all belong to). Let us then explore, then, the apparent distinction between conspiracy theorists and conspiracists.

5. Gullible Conspiracist Theorists

As we saw earlier, critiques of belief in conspiracy theories in conspiracist terms can be motivated by the thought such belief has negative social consequences—loss of trust in authority, potential apathy with respect to contemporary political arrangements, and the like—but these consequences may well be rational responses to evidence that the world is more conspired than some would either have us believe or like to think. More troublingly, some of these conspiracist-style analyses resurrect elements of both Hofstadter’s paranoid style and Popper’s conspiracy theory of society, whether or not the authors intend, or are aware of, it.

Conspiracism might be more charitably captured by talk of certain conspiracy theorists mistakenly weighing, or taking as salient irrelevant evidence with respect to some conspiracy theory. However, the worry expressed by a great many social scientists when they engage in conspiracist-like critiques of belief in conspiracy theories is not so charitable. The aforementioned critiques typically claim that we can explain away belief in conspiracy theories generally with attitudes or predispositions, rather than an analysis of whether the conspiracy theory is warranted or unwarranted.

According to Jack Z. Bratich the term “Conspiracism” became popular in the 1990s, and was a response to the folk-psychology of Hofstadter’s paranoid style. Conspiracist-styled critiques centered discussion about conspiracy theories with respect to political ideologies, and what might be considered “dangerous” sentiments (Bratich 2008).
However, if we take seriously the work of Particularists like Coady, Basham, and Pigden (to name but a few), then such generalist critiques of belief in conspiracy theories, especially critiques that posit there are negative consequences to such belief, need to be analysed again.

For example, Jovan Byford presents a Popperian gloss on belief in conspiracy theories, arguing that conspiracists wrongly assume that conspiracies are the motive force in history. Bradley Franks, Adrian Bangerter and Martin W. Bauer characterise belief in conspiracy theories as a “quasi-religious mentality”, claiming that belief in conspiracy theories is akin to magical thinking and that such “thinking engenders uncompromising fundamentalism that decrease the prospects of fruitful inter-group dialog”, which has shades of Popper’s analogy between belief in conspiracy theories and theistic belief.

However, it is the presence of Hofstadter’s thesis of the “paranoid style” that continues to rear its head in the dissection of belief in conspiracy theories. For example, Daniel Pipes characterises people who believe in conspiracy theories as being paranoiac in nature, and suffering from some “fear of imaginary conspiracies”. Joseph Roisman claims that “conspiratorial allegations filled a psychological need by helping the Athenians to understand and deal with discrepancies between expectations and reality”. Michael Barkun argues there is a similarity between paranoia and the plots imagined by conspiracy theorists—echoing Hofstadter—and claims that no matter how evidence-based a conspiracy theory might appear to be, “belief in a conspiracy theory ultimately becomes a matter of faith rather than proof”. Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule claim that conspiracy theorists suffer from what they call a “crippled epistemology”, which causes such theorists to question what should be considered basic sources of knowledge about the world.

Sunstein and Vermeule’s idea that conspiracy theorists are somehow crippled in their thinking has been echoed in two pieces by Quassim Cassam, “Bad thinkers” and “Vice Epistemology”. Cassam argues that our suspicion of conspiracy theories is justified because conspiracy theorists suffer from epistemic vices: intellectual character traits that impede effective and responsible inquiry. As Cassam puts it: “Intellectual virtues are cognitive excellences, intellectual vices are cognitive defects”. Conspiracy theorists—in Cassam’s view—suffer at the very least from the epistemic vice of gullibility, and possibly are also cynical and prejudiced to boot.

Cassam’s argument about the gullibility of conspiracy theorists relies on us getting to know Oliver, his fictional conspiracy theorist. Oliver just happens to

28 Byford 2011.
29 Franks, Bangerter and Bauer 2013: 10.
31 Roisman 2006: 160.
33 Sunstein and Vermeule 2009. Sunstein and Vermeule want to cure conspiracy theorists via “[C]ognitive infiltration designed to break up the crippled epistemology of conspiracy-minded groups and informationally isolated social networks” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 227). For a lengthy reply to Sunstein and Vermeule’s prescription, see Kurtis Hagen’s “Is Infiltration of “Extremist Groups” Justified?” (Hagen 2010).
34 Cassam 2015.
35 Cassam 2016.
36 Cassam 2016: 160.
be an adherent of the “Inside Job” set of conspiracy theories about the events of 9/11, and he:

spends much of his spare time reading about what he calls the “9/11 conspiracy” and he regards himself as something of an expert in the field of 9/11 studies. He believes that [P] the 9/11 attacks were not carried out by al-Qaeda and the collapse of the World Trade Center towers on 11 September 2001 was caused by explosives planted in the buildings in advance by government agents rather than by aircraft impacts and the resulting fires. As far as Oliver is concerned, the collapse of the twin towers was an inside job and specifically the result of a controlled demolition (Cassam 2016: 162).

The way Cassam portrays Oliver is interesting: his fictional conspiracy theorist’s belief is not based on arguments or evidence, but merely an insistence that “it had to be an inside job ... because aircraft impacts couldn’t have brought down the towers”. Oliver is one of these perfidious conspiracists!

Now, Cassam claims his interest is chiefly concerned with conspiracy theories that are baseless and false, yet he picks as Oliver’s chosen topic a conspiracy theory which is not, at first glance, either baseless or false. No matter what we believe about the plausibility or warrant of the various Inside Job hypotheses, even the most cursory examination of 9/11 conspiracy theories will provide you with numerous examples of conspiracy theorists who use sophisticated arguments, and interesting pieces of evidence to show up the official theory.

The problem is this: it is just not obvious that proponents of such views are gullible in the sense Cassam would have us believe. While people like Oliver may well exist in the community of people who treat claims about 9/11 being an inside job seriously, it is more accurate to say they are—first and foremost—people who are gullible who—secondly—just happen to be conspiracy theorists. It is not clear that Oliver is gullible simply because he is a conspiracy theorist; it is just as likely he is a conspiracy theorist who just happens to be gullible. This is a problem because Cassam’s argument relies on characterising the adherents of such theories—the general class of 9/11 inside job conspiracy theorists—as being all like his fictional, deliberately conspiracist creation.

It is not clear, then, that Cassam’s Oliver is a typical 9/11 Inside Job conspiracy theorist, let alone a typical conspiracy theorist in general. Then again, 

37 The various “Inside Job” hypotheses claim the U.S. either made it happen on purpose (MIHOP), or they let it happen on purpose (LIHOP). Either way, the responsible party was the U.S. Government, and the official theory—that Al-Qaeda were behind it—is false.

38 Cassam 2015.

39 Indeed, as Simon Locke has argued, even experts disagree on what counts as clearly plausible, implausible, baseless, or false when it comes to particular conspiracy theories (Locke 2009).

40 The official theory of the events of 9/11 is also a conspiracy theory, at least with respect to the definition of such theories defended in this paper. It was the result of secretive activity undertaken by a group of plotters, to wit the Al-Qaeda terrorists.

41 Cassam’s view is a notably retrograde version of Hofstadter “paranoid style”. As Jack Z. Bratich has argued, Hofstadter talks about the paranoid style as mimicking rational thought (Bratich 2008: 32). However, Cassam presents people like Oliver as not even advancing arguments for their conspiracy theories, which makes Cassam’s conclusion terribly trivial.
Oliver is not a real person; Cassam has created him in order to prove a point, going to no lengths whatsoever to show that Oliver is a typical of his kind. Whilst Cassam cites Oliver as a “concrete example”, he later admits his position can be criticised on the grounds that Oliver is “a fictional case and that while it is open to me to stipulate that Oliver believes what he believes about 9/11 because of his traits of character, nothing follows about the viability of such explanations in the real world.” Cassam argues his construal of Oliver fits with the research on belief in conspiracy theories coming out of social psychology, yet one cannot help but think Cassam is constructing a psychological portrait of Oliver to fit that work, all in order to bolster his own case. Certainly, claiming “My fictional creation resembles work in another field” does not, in turn, tell us that his construal of an archetypal conspiracy theorist is the best. Indeed, it suggests Cassam simply shares with the aforementioned social psychologists the same views on those “pernicious” conspiracy theorists.

Indeed, throughout both papers Cassam uses the existence of the fictional Oliver to charge conspiracy theorists as gullible. Of Oliver he says that:

- “He thinks that 9/11 was an inside job because he is gullible in a certain way”.
- “[H]e is the last person to recognise that he believes what he believes about 9/11 because he is gullible”.
- “To describe Oliver as gullible or careless is to say something about his intellectual style or mind-set—for example, about how he goes about trying to find out things about events such as 9/11”.
- “Oliver is gullible because he believes things for which he has no good evidence, and he is closed-minded because he dismisses claims for which there is excellent evidence”.

Cassam repeatedly characterises Oliver as gullible in order to appeal to our intellectual vanity. We do not believe such theories, so those who do—like Oliver—must suffer from epistemic vices. Yet Cassam’s argument suffers from two, obvious faults.

1. The idea conspiracy theorists are, generally, gullible is the product of Cassam’s prejudices about certain conspiracy theorists, rather than something which follows from his arguments about belief in conspiracy theories, and
2. People are just as likely to be sceptical towards conspiracy theories because conspiracy theory theorists—like Cassam—keep telling them they are unwarranted as they are to have investigated said theories for themselves (and, presumably, found them generally wanting).

Cassam ends up using what is, in essence, a rhetorical move in order to get to a pre-ordained conclusion. By defining Oliver as a being a particular kind of...
problematic conspiracy theorist—the putative “conspiracist”—Cassam attempts to derive the more general claim that belief in conspiracy theories is predicated by intellectual vice. However, if this is a vice associated with belief in conspiracy theories, it is a vice suffered only by some conspiracy theorists. We are the ones who would be gullible—indeed, very gullible—if we believed conspiracy theorists generally suffer from epistemic vices. Cassam’s argument would only stand if he restricted his talk of epistemic vices to the set of problematic conspiracy theorists. However, if Cassam were only to focus on these putative conspiracists, his general argument about the dangers of belief in conspiracy theories would be seen for what it is, an overstatement. Indeed, Cassam’s strident insistence about the necessity that the only proper explanation of Oliver’s belief in some conspiracy theory about 9/11 is gullibility seems itself to be the product of the intellectual character trait of dogmatism, an epistemic vice.

6. The Problem of Conspiracism

Recall Pigden’s adage: if we are politically or historically literate, then we are all conspiracy theorists of some stripe. So, why then are we so sceptical of conspiracy theorists and the theories they believe? Is the generalist position that informs arguments for scepticism of conspiracy theories merely motivated by the suspicion that some conspiracy theorists are weird? Are we just mistaking Conspiracism—a thesis that describes a potentially problematic kind of belief in conspiracy theories expressed by some conspiracy theorists—with belief in conspiracy theories generally? If that is the case, surely such conspiracy theory theorists should restrict their talk to this subset of conspiracy theorists—the putative conspiracists—who typically believe conspiracy theories for reasons other than arguments and evidence? That is to say, they should adopt a particularist position, and talk about the problems of belief for particular conspiracy theorists, rather than turning said worries into a scepticism of conspiracy theories generally.

The problem is that what constitutes talk of conspiracist ideation in the academic literature is much too broad; belief in conspiracy theories gets characterised by what we have called here “conspiracism”, and so conspiracy theorists are taken to be de facto examples of conspiracists. Now, while we might be able to single out a sub-set of conspiracy theorists who believe conspiracy theories for reasons other than arguments and evidence, the existence of such conspiracy theorists—the class of conspiracists—tells us nothing particularly interesting about belief in conspiracy theories generally. It is not obvious all conspiracy theorists are conspiracists, let alone that there really are many, if any, conspiracists.

If we end up assuming belief in conspiracy theories is irrational or pathological because particular conspiracy theorists appear to be irrational, or have some psychological predisposition to believe conspiracy theories, then we are performing our analysis back-to-front. We should not associate belief in

46 Cassam—like Sunstein and Vermeule—advocates a cure for belief in conspiracy theories; his prescription is to encourage virtue epistemology in the education system, and teaching students that political piety (a term I borrow from Basham 2011: 55) is an epistemic good (Cassam 2015).
47 For another critique of Cassam, see Pigden 2016.
conspiracy theories generally with a mere subset of believers in conspiracy theories, the putative conspiracists. While there is room for discussion about, say, the psychology of certain kinds of conspiracy theorists, we should not let theses about a subset of conspiracy theorists intrude on a discussion of conspiracy theories generally.  

The problem here is this: if we talk about the general class of conspiracy theorists as being merely conspiracists, then we end up mistaking potential problems with belief in particular conspiracy theories by certain conspiracy theorists with talk of problems with belief in conspiracy theories generally. As such, worries about examples of seemingly weird conspiracy theorists—alleged conspiracists like Icke and Jones (or even Cassam’s fictional “Oliver”)—tell us little about the merits, or lack thereof, of their conspiracy theories.

There are two issues at stake here, and unrestricted talk about belief in conspiracy theories as conspiracist in nature confuses the matter. The first issue is the question of when is belief in a particular conspiracy theory warranted or unwarranted? The second issue is whether some conspiracy theorists believe conspiracy theories regardless of the evidence? Focusing solely on the second issue without considering the first is—it seems—a curious fault of many a conspiracy theory theorist.

This, then, is evidence of a curious double-standard in the literature when it comes to talk about conspiracy theories. For example, it would be silly to tar the thesis of atheism with the facile arguments of certain atheists, who might have been merely socially conditioned to be atheists, or turn out to have certain psychological attitudes which makes them think that god (or the gods) do not exist. After all, the truth or falsity of the thesis of atheism is a fact independent of what we believe about the world. Either there are gods, or there are not. What makes atheism a rational or reasonable belief for individuals to hold depends on both the available evidence and arguments, rather than the views of actual atheists. Yes, there are what we might call “unreflective atheists”—whose atheism is, say, political rather than epistemic—yet this should not count against the thesis of atheism. In the same way, what makes a conspiracy theory a reasonable belief for someone to hold depends on the arguments and evidence the conspiracy theorist is able to produce. We should not just dismiss questions about the merit of some conspiracy theory merely because of the existence of conspiracists.

7. Stipulating Conspiracism

So, how seriously should we take the thesis of Conspiracism? Certainly, it describes a potential kind of pathological belief in conspiracy theories, but “potential” is the operative term here. It would be a mistake to assume there is something special about the possibility that some belief in conspiracy theories is predicated on factors other than arguments and evidence. As we saw with the example of the unreflective atheist, people sometimes just believe things without adequate justification. The question, surely, is why would we hold people to a

48 Peter Knight argues that critiques of belief in conspiracy theories in conspiracist terms seem to suffer from the faults of Conspiracism itself, as Conspiracism ends up not just being an ideology conspiracists suffer from, but a “mysterious force with a hidden agenda that takes over individual minds and even whole societies” (Knight 2000: 7).
higher standard when it comes to belief in conspiracy theories than we do the
holders of other views, or theories?

For example, it is possible to be a conspiracist about perfectly legitimate,
and warranted conspiracy theories. Perhaps you irrationally hate Messrs. Blair
and Bush, and thus adopt the view that the stated reason for the invasion of Iraq
in 2003—to stop the manufacture of Weapons of Mass Destruction—was the
product of a disinformation campaign. You would be right, but if your only
reason to endorse this particular conspiracy theory was irrational hatred (and
not actual evidence) your belief looks conspiracist in nature, rather than the
product of healthy conspiracy theorising.

As such, one potential objection to this talk of Conspiracism is that most of
us turn out to be conspiracists of some sort. We might think there are two
problems here:

Problem one: If we define a conspiracist as “someone who believes a
conspiracy theory for factors other than there being good
arguments or evidence”, then it might turn out we are all
conspiracists.

Most psychologists and philosophers are happy to endorse some version of
the following proposition: a great many (if not all) of us hold one belief that we
think is true, but for which we lack justification. Justifying our beliefs can be
difficult, and many of us believe a number of things that, if challenged, turn out
to be unjustified.

For example, a friend keeps telling me that the Gulf of Tonkin incident is a
real example of a false flag operation (and thus a conspiracy). I trust them,
because they seem like an authoritative source. However, it is quite possible I do
not have sufficient justification to trust my friend on this; maybe he has a long
history of lying, and even goes so far to create or edit web pages to provide
“evidence” for his theories. My belief that the Gulf of Tonkin incident is a false
flag may well be one that makes me a conspiracist because I believe the
conspiracy theory despite a lack of adequate justification.

Note that this particular problem has an interesting corollary: I can be a
conspiracist with respect to one conspiracy theory, and be a perfectly normal
conspiracy theorist with respect to some other. If we add to this analysis the idea
we are all conspiracy theorists of some stripe (à la Pigden), then it seems
probable (but not necessary) many of us are also conspiracists about at least one
conspiracy theory that we believe.

Problem two: If we define a conspiracist as “someone who believes a conspiracy
theory for factors other than there being good arguments or
evidence”, then it might turn out there aren’t many conspiracists.

A common refrain when discussing conspiracy theories is the claim people
believe them for any old reason. However, even a cursory analysis of what
conspiracy theorists actually say in support of their theories indicates that they
often have quite well-developed arguments for their theories. Richard Gage—a
prominent advocate of one of the 9/11 Inside Job hypotheses—has detailed,
even sophisticated arguments pertaining to the hypothesis that the Twin Towers
were destroyed by a controlled demolition. We might, on close inspection, find
fault in his reasoning, but his arguments are not baseless or false in any obvious
sense.
As such, one worry about how talk of Conspiracism is being framed here is that many of the conspiracy theorists people might take to be quintessential conspiracists just turn out, on closer inspection, to be normal conspiracy theorists. If their theories are unwarranted, then it is because the arguments in favour of them suffer from problems of validity or soundness in a non-trivial (i.e. not immediately obvious) sense.

Problem one describes what we might deem a specific problem: depending on the conspiracy theory I might turn out to be a conspiracist in one case, and a conspiracy theorist in another. Problem two describes a general problem: as defined, there might not be many, if any, conspiracists. Yet both are bullets we need to bite; it may turn out that there are not that many conspiracists, or if conspiracists exist, most of us will turn out to be one. As long as we are aware of these issues, we can proceed to analyse belief in conspiracy theories, and ask whether Conspiracism is something we need to take into account when analysing the beliefs of individual conspiracy theorists and their particular conspiracy theories.

After all, despite what doubts we might have about construing belief in conspiracy theories generally in conspiracist terms, it may still be useful to study Conspiracism and putative conspiracists, given that such a study may well explain particular cases of weird belief in conspiracy theories. Working out why some conspiracy theorists—the putative conspiracists—might believe conspiracy theories for factors other than evidence and arguments could be informative. This would especially be the case if we could then link the explanation of conspiracist beliefs to cases where people also believe other theories for factors other than evidence and arguments.

It might also be the case that once we investigate Conspiracism, it will turn out to be a fairly useless thesis, especially if there are not many (if any) actual conspiracists. However, if we are going to treat the thesis of Conspiracism seriously—and investigate it—we need to keep in mind that conspiracists are simply one kind of conspiracy theorist. The putative existence of such conspiracists does not tell us that belief in conspiracy theories generally is problematic. The question should be “When, if ever, is a conspiracy theorist a conspiracist?” rather than presupposing that conspiracy theorists suffer from conspiracist ideation.

8. Conclusion

Conspiracy theorists—like most people—typically form their beliefs on the basis of the arguments and evidence available to them. Whilst there are some cases of seemingly irrational, or even pathological belief in conspiracy theories, the existing academic literature is often insensitive to the distinction between claims about the problems of certain conspiracy theorists, and claims about the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories generally. This has resulted in the masking of a sly shift of the burden of proof from conspiracy theory theorists on to the pejoratively labelled “conspiracy theorists”: rather than requiring conspiracy theory theorists to support their assertion that belief in conspiracy theories is—in fact—suspicious, talk of Conspiracism effectively requires conspiracy theorists to say “But, I’m not a conspiracy theorist!” in order to avoid being charged with acting irrationally, or suffering from some psychological defect.
We can avoid this unfortunate situation if we recognise that the problem—if indeed it is a problem—is merely found in a subset of conspiracy theorists, the so-called “conspiracists”. We would then be able to accommodate the conspiracist-style literature of much of the social sciences, without automatically buying into a pejorative gloss on belief in conspiracy theories generally.

My argument, then, provides additional support for Particularism with respect to conspiracy theories. By diagnosing what is really happening with much work in the social sciences, which mistakes Conspiracism—a thesis about some conspiracy theorists—for belief in conspiracy theories generally, we can show why Particularism about conspiracy theories is preferable. So, if someone alleges a conspiracy has occurred, we should examine the evidence for that conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are not the problem; conspiracism might be, especially if we end up construing belief in conspiracy theories solely in terms of the conspiracists.  

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Dummett on McTaggart’s Proof of the Unreality of Time

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Abstract

Michael Dummett’s paper “A Defence of McTaggart’s Proof of the Unreality of Time” put forward an ingenious interpretation of McTaggart’s famous proof. My aim in this discussion is not to assess the cogency of McTaggart’s reasoning, but to criticise Dummett’s interpretation of McTaggart.

Keywords: McTaggart, Dummett, Time, Space, A-series.

1. Introduction

The reasoning of McTaggart’s 1908 article “The Unreality of Time” runs as follows. We distinguish positions in time in two ways: a permanent B-series (in which events and facts are distinguished using the relations of earlier than and later than) and a dynamic A-series (in which events and facts are future, then present, then past). Both series are essential to time, yet the A-series is more fundamental since only it allows for change (McTaggart 1908: 458). This concludes the first part of McTaggart’s reasoning: his argument for the fundamentality of the A-series.

Having established this conclusion, McTaggart then claims that the A-series “involves a contradiction” (McTaggart 1908: 466). His argument for the contradiction is seemingly straightforward: past, present and future are “incompatible determinations” yet “every event has them all” (McTaggart 1908: 469). This argument is typically known as McTaggart’s Paradox. McTaggart is aware of a natural rejoinder to his argument. No event, it will be urged, is simultaneously past, present and future, only successively, and from this no contradiction follows. But, claims McTaggart, this rejoinder entails either a vicious circle or a vicious infinite regress, and so the contradiction is not removed.

In sum, McTaggart’s first argument establishes that the A-series is fundamental to time. His paradox then establishes that the A-series is contradictory. From these conclusions it follows that time is unreal. My aim here is not to assess McTaggart’s reasoning, but to call into question Michael
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Dummett’s well-known interpretation of McTaggart’s proof of the unreality of time (Dummett 1960).

In his paper Dummett does not use the terms “A-series” and “B-series”. Instead, he talks of “facts of kind (a)” viz., facts into the statement of which tensed expressions enter essentially (Dummett 1960: 500). Presumably, facts of kind (b) would be facts into the statement of which no tensed expressions enter (or do so inessentially). Clearly, facts of kind (a)—tensed facts—are meant to correspond to A-series facts (e.g., the fact that Hitler’s death is past), and facts of kind (b)—tenseless facts—are meant to correspond to B-series facts (e.g., the fact that Hitler’s death is later than Caesar’s death).

2. The Tensed Thesis

Having thus set things up, Dummett begins by making the following claim. With regard to McTaggart’s arguments, “[p]art two depends upon part one” (Dummett 1960: 500). That is, the success of McTaggart’s Paradox, a plausible rendering of which Dummett sketches in his opening pages, depends upon the success of McTaggart’s argument for the fundamentality of the A-series. This might seem a puzzling claim. Could not one hold that the A-series is contradictory even if it is not fundamental?

However, I take it that Dummett’s point is that McTaggart’s Paradox (part two) is directed against the A-series as understood by the A-theorist. That is, McTaggart’s Paradox is intended to show that the A-series is contradictory on the assumption that tensed facts are fundamental and (hence) irreducible. No one thinks that the A-series is contradictory if tensed facts are taken to be reducible to B-theoretic facts (e.g., it is not contradictory for X to be earlier than t2 but later than t1). McTaggart’s Paradox is directed against the A-theory of time, i.e., the theory according to which the A-series is fundamental and consistent. So understood, Dummett’s claim is correct: McTaggart’s proof of the inconsistency of the A-series presupposes the fundamentality of that series. This explains why Dummett continues as follows:

it is because the analogue of part one does not hold for space or for personality that the analogue of part two for space or for personality has no force (Dummett 1960: 500).

The analogue of part one does indeed fail for space and personality. Spatially and personally token-reflexive expressions (“here”, “there”, “I”, “you”, etc.) need not feature in a full description of reality. A description using only spatial co-ordinates and personal proper names would suffice.

The conclusion of McTaggart’s first argument—that the A-series is fundamental to time—implies the tensed thesis (as we can call it) that what is in time cannot be fully described without the use of tensed expressions. Dummett is sympathetic to this A-theoretic thesis and offers his own argument for it. Consider any description of events containing no tensed expressions. We can, he says, always ask the question “And which of these events is happening now?” This question, Dummett thinks, deserves an answer, yet can be given only if tensed expressions are added to the description. Hence, the tensed thesis is true (Dummett 1960: 591).
This argument is unconvincing. Unlike the A theorist, the B-theorist rejects the tensed thesis and accepts instead the tenseless thesis that what is in time can be fully described without the use of tensed expressions. According to the B-theorist, Dummett’s question is either illegitimate or else can be answered in tenseless terms. If Dummett’s question is asked from “outside time”, it makes no sense, just as the question “What is happening here?”, asked from “outside space”, makes no sense. For the B-theorist, a question containing a temporal indexical can only be asked and answered from a position in time. In that case, the answer to Dummett’s question (“And which of these events is happening now?”) is straightforward: those events whose occurrence is simultaneous with the posing of that very question.

3. Temporal and Spatial Immersion Theses

Dummett takes the tensed thesis to be equivalent to the temporal immersion thesis that a description of events in time can only be “given by someone who is himself in that time” (Dummett 1960: 501). Dummett is well-disposed towards this thesis, but unhesitatingly rejects the spatial immersion thesis that a description of objects in space can only be given by someone who is himself in that space. He writes:

the use of spatially token-reflexive expressions is not essential to the description of objects as being in a space. That is, I can describe an arrangement of objects in space although I do not myself have any position in that space. An example would be the space of my visual field. In that space there is no here or there, no near or far: I am not in that space. We can, I think, conceive, on the strength of this analogy, of a being who could perceive objects in our three-dimensional physical space although he occupied no position in that space. He would have no use for any spatially token-reflexive expressions in giving a description of the physical universe, and yet that description might be a perfectly correct description of the objects of the universe as arranged in space (Dummett 1960: 500-501).

Dummett’s reasoning in this passage is somewhat convoluted. He cites the space of one’s visual field as a counterexample to the spatial immersion thesis. On the basis of the analogy with the space of one’s visual field, we can imagine a being who could perceive objects in our three-dimensional physical space without occupying any position in that space. Such a being could give a full description of objects in physical space without occupying any position in that space, thus yielding another counterexample to the spatial immersion thesis.

The spatial immersion thesis may well be implausible, but the analogy with the space of the visual field does not help Dummett’s case. If the objects of my visual field are non-physical sense-data, they occupy no space. In that case, the “space” of my visual field is irrelevant to the spatial immersion thesis. If, instead, the objects of my visual field are those objects in my immediate physical environment, then I am in the same space as them. Again, we have no counterexample to the spatial immersion thesis (Thomson 2001: 243-47).

4. Dummett’s Interpretation of McTaggart

With regard to part two of McTaggart’s argument, Dummett asks
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does not the objection we considered—that McTaggart’s attempt to uncover a contradiction rested on a neglect of the obvious properties of token-reflexive expressions—at least invalidate part two of the argument? (Dummett 1960: 501).\(^1\)

The objection Dummett is alluding to holds that, if McTaggart’s argument for a contradiction in the A-series were sound, we could equally well argue for the inconsistency of space and personality by showing that every place can be both “here” and “there”, and every person can be both “I” and “you”. Since the latter arguments are confused, so is McTaggart’s.

It is odd that Dummett asks this question at this point since he already has the means to answer it, viz., by appeal to the falsity of the analogue of part one for space and personality. However, instead of giving this answer, Dummett takes a new tack and ascribes to McTaggart the assumption that:

\[\text{reality must be something of which there exists in principle a complete description.} \]

I can make drawings of a rock from various angles, but if I am asked to say what the real shape of the rock is, I can give a description of it as in three-dimensional space which is independent of the angle from which it is looked at. The description of what is really there, as it really is, must be independent of any particular point of view. Now if time were real, then since what is temporal cannot be completely described without the use of token-reflexive expressions, there would be no such thing as the complete description of reality (Dummett 1960: 503).

According to Dummett’s use of “complete”, a complete description is “independent of any particular point of view”, i.e., observer-independent. Dummett thus ascribes to McTaggart the observer-independence thesis that there can be an observer-independent description of temporal reality.

As the above quote makes clear, Dummett takes the tensed thesis to imply the falsity of the observer-independence thesis. If what is temporal cannot be completely described without the use of perspectival terms such as “past”, “present” and “future”, then what is temporal can only be fully described from the perspective of a being in time. This seems correct. Dummett takes McTaggart to endorse both the tensed and observer-independence theses, and hence to be (knowingly) in the grip of a contradiction which can be avoided only by declaring time to be unreal. Hence, McTaggart is forced to his infamous conclusion that time is unreal.

However, Dummett offers no textual support for his interpretation of McTaggart. No passage is cited in which McTaggart endorses the observer-independence thesis. It is, in addition, a strange and self-stultifying argument. Any supporter of the tensed thesis will automatically reject the observer-independence thesis, and vice-versa. Moreover, the observer-independence thesis has no independent plausibility. Its acceptance could only be motivated by a belief in the tenseless thesis (i.e., the denial of the tensed thesis). For these reasons, then, Dummett has given us no reason to revise the standard, and textually-grounded, interpretation of McTaggart’s argument which emphasises the role played by McTaggart’s well-known (if ill-understood) proof of the self-contradictory nature of the A-series, as that series is understood by the A-theorist.

\(^1\) Rightly or wrongly, Dummett uses “token-reflexive” interchangeably with “indexical”.

Furthermore, the argument which Dummett himself endorses—(contra McTaggart) time is real; the tensed thesis is true; so observer-independence is false—is the argument that any A-theorist should endorse. Evidence that this is Dummett’s argument can be seen from the following remark:

If this last piece of reasoning, to the effect that the belief that time is unreal is self-refuting, is correct, then McTaggart’s argument shows that we must abandon our prejudice that there must be a complete [observer-independent] description of reality (Dummett 1960: 504).

Note that rejection of the “prejudice” that there must be an observer-independent description of reality sits comfortably with the central idea of Dummett’s anti-realist programme in semantics and epistemology (the idea that reality cannot outrun what we can, in principle, know). Finally, we can now see that the title of Dummett’s article is something of a misnomer. Dummett is not defending McTaggart’s proof of the unreality of time, but arguing that it can be transformed into a (quite different) proof of the falsity of the observer-independence thesis.2

References


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There Could Be a Light that Never Goes Out: The Metaphysical Possibility of Disembodied Existence

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Abstract

According to many philosophers, even if it is metaphysically possible that I exist without my present body or without my present brain, it is not metaphysically possible that I exist without any physical support. Thus, it is not metaphysically possible that I exist in some afterlife world, where I do not have any physical support. I shall argue against such a thesis by distinguishing two different notions of physical and by examining two strategies used by those who defend the thesis. No strategy will turn out to be conclusive. Thus, it seems that nothing excludes the metaphysical possibility of disembodied existence. Moreover, I shall illustrate two ways (respectively based on modal realism and on modal actualism) in which one might conclude that my disembodied existence is something more than a mere possibility.

Keywords: Afterlife Existence, Disembodied Existence, Physicalism, Immortality

Most versions of non-reductive physicalism (the contemporary received view in ontology of mind) seemingly imply the following: even if it is metaphysically possible that I exist without my present body or without my present brain, it is not metaphysically possible that I exist without any physical support at all. Namely, it is not metaphysically possible that I have disembodied existence. Consider the metaphysical possibility of our friend Anthony’s disembodied existence. We can interpret this suggestion as follows:

(no-dis.) it is not metaphysically possible that Anthony exists and that there is no object such that that object is a physical object and it stands in the relation of embodying with Anthony (i.e., it is Anthony’s physical support).

Is (no-dis.) true? How can one justify its truth? The truth or falsity of (no-dis.) is relevant in many metaphysical and theological debates. For example, if (no-dis.) is true, then there is no room for Anthony’s afterlife existence in some non-
physical world (e.g., some non-physical Heaven). In this article, I shall question the truth of (no-dis.). More precisely, I shall argue against two strategies to justify (no-dis.).

In section 1, I shall distinguish between two different ways of interpreting physically possible worlds, as well as the concept of the physical itself. I shall also provide different ways of justifying (no-dis.) and I shall introduce two strategies to argue for it. In section 2, I shall put in question the first strategy and, in section 3, I shall put in question the second strategy. Finally, in section 4, I shall suggest how Anthony’s disembodied existence in some afterlife world could be more than a mere possibility.

1. Physical Possible Worlds and the Physical

In this section, I shall distinguish between two different ways of interpreting physically possible worlds (i.e., physically-1 and physically-2 possible worlds) and between two different ways of considering the physical (i.e., physical-a and physical-b). Afterwards, I shall consider two strategies to argue for (no-dis.). This will ground the subsequent distinction between eight different ways of justifying (no-dis.).

At first, using possible worlds in order to interpret (no-dis.), it is legitimate to distinguish between three different kinds of possible worlds: metaphysically possible worlds, physically-1 possible worlds and physically-2 possible worlds. As a working definition of possible worlds, I claim that possible worlds are maximal and consistent states of affairs: for every possible state of affairs, each possible world is such that it either includes that state of affairs or it precludes it and it is not the case that it both includes and precludes it.

Of course, other definitions of possible worlds will be acceptable for our discussion: ways the world might be, maximal and consistent sets of propositions, and so on.

The actual world is the possible world in which we live or—if we accept modal actualism (i.e., the view that there is only one absolutely actual possible world)—it is the only obtaining possible world (at least if possible worlds are maximal and consistent states of affairs).

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1 Many so-called Christian materialists, such as van Inwagen (1995), Corcoran (2001) and Merricks (2007), would accept (no-dis.) even though, according to them, the resurrection of his body will guarantee Anthony’s eternal life. However, given that Anthony’s resurrected body will somehow be qualitatively different from an actual physical body (and the physical laws of the post-resurrectionem world will seemingly be different from the laws of our world), they could accept a relatively weaker version of (no-dis.) that I shall introduce in a few pages. Following it, roughly, Anthony’s disembodied existence relative to physical-b or actual physical-a supports (see below for this distinction) is metaphysically possible. See also Rudder Baker (2011).

2 Concerning the philosophical reflection on different definitions of the physical and of physicalism, see, for example, Crane and Mellor 1990, Melnyk 1997, Ney 2008, Stoljar 2010.

3 This is roughly the definition of possible worlds introduced by Plantinga (1974: 44-45). A state of affairs S includes another state of affairs S' if it is not possible that S obtains and S' fails to obtain. On the contrary, S precludes S' if it is not possible that both S and S' obtain. It is clear from these definitions that, within Plantinga’s theory, possible worlds do not ground the possibility of something.
Physically-1 possible worlds are those worlds that share the same (fundamental) physical laws of the actual world. On the other hand, physically-2 possible worlds are those worlds that are governed by (fundamental) physical laws. Physically-1 possible worlds constitute a proper subset of physically-2 possible worlds. A physically-1 possible world having the same (fundamental) physical laws of the actual world is also a physically-2 possible world—since it is governed by (fundamental) physical laws. Yet, it could be the case that not all the possible worlds that are governed by (fundamental) physical laws are governed by all and the same (fundamental) physical laws of the actual world. Other possible worlds could be governed by different (fundamental) physical laws. Thus, not all the physically-2 possible worlds are also physically-1 possible worlds.

Finally, I assume that metaphysically possible worlds are those possible worlds in which no (openly or covertly) contradictory proposition is true. An open contradiction is one of the form: something is P and non-P (e.g., water is not water). Not all the contradictions are open. For example, if Putnam (1973) is right, the proposition [water is not H$_2$O]$^5$ is covertly contradictory: given the chemical nature of water, it is necessary that water is H$_2$O and it is impossible that water is not H$_2$O. Yet, there is no open contradiction in asserting that water is not H$_2$O—while it would be openly contradictory to assert that water is not water. Thus, there is no metaphysically possible world in which the proposition [water is not H$_2$O] is true, since that proposition is covertly contradictory—even if it is not openly contradictory.

This somehow unorthodox definition of metaphysical possibility is motivated as follows. The metaphysically possible states of affairs involving an entity are all and only those states of affairs whose obtaining would not be in contrast with the nature of that entity. Whatever is compatible with the nature of a certain entity is metaphysically possible for that entity. On the contrary, whatever is not compatible with the nature of a certain entity is either expressed by openly contradictory propositions (such as [water is not water]) or by covertly contradictory ones (such as [water is not H$_2$O]—at least if being H$_2$O is part of the nature of water). It is (openly or covertly) contradictory to attribute to a certain entity some feature that is incompatible with the nature of that entity or to deny the attribution of some feature that is part of its nature.

Let me now turn back to Anthony. To argue that there is no metaphysically possible world in which Anthony exists without any physical support, there are two main strategies. It is either possible to show that (1) every metaphysically possible world is a physically-2 possible world, or that (2), even if there is at least one metaphysically possible world that is not a physically-2 possible world, Anthony does not exist (and he cannot exist) in that world, since he has no

$^4$ Fundamental physical laws are all and only those laws that govern the behaviour of the fundamental physical entities of a world. By a ‘physical law’, I mean here a law that can be (in principle) studied by physics. It is also worth pointing out that I remain neutral on whether such laws are fundamental entities or not. Namely, physical laws could either be fundamental entities, or they could emerge from something else, e.g., from the behaviour or the features of the fundamental physical particles. Finally, I assume that the only physical laws of a world are the ones that govern something in the world. Namely, I deny that a possible world $w$ can include some physical law of another world $w'$ which does not govern anything in $w$.

$^5$ I use here square brackets in order to distinguish propositions from statements.
identity conditions there. These strategies also involve physically-1 possible worlds (i.e., worlds governed by the same fundamental physical laws of the actual world), insofar as the latter constitute a proper subset of physically-2 possible worlds (i.e., worlds governed by fundamental physical laws).

Dealing with (1), it is worth asking what is meant by ‘physically-2’. At least from the perspective of non-reductive physicalism, one could claim that a physically-2 possible world is a possible world in which every object is physical-a. An object is physical-a if it is part of the ontology of the fundamental physical theory of that world or it is completely constituted (or it bears some other relation, such as the one of depending on) by objects that are part of the ontology of the fundamental physical theory of that world. Within a possible world, physics is the science concerned with all and only the relatively fundamental constituents of that world, with their properties and laws. The best fundamental physical theory of a possible world is the theory that provides the best representation—at least in principle—of what is studied by physics in that world. It is also the theory from which one can ideally deduce all the features (e.g., laws) of what is studied by physics in that world, even those features that are not explicitly included in the theory—in this sense, it is fundamental. By talking of the ‘fundamental physical theory’ of a world, I obviously assume that that theory is true and complete.\(^7\)

Alternatively, one could state that a physically-2 possible world is a possible world in which every object is physical-b and it is a physical-b object iff it has some paradigmatic feature(s) F traditionally attributed to all and only material objects (e.g., it has a spatio-temporal or a temporal location, it is impenetrable, etc.).\(^8\)

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\(^6\) I use ‘relatively fundamental constituents’ for two reasons. First, I wish to distinguish the constituents of the world studied by physics from the less fundamental constituents studied by other, so-called ‘special sciences’ (e.g., chemistry and biology). Secondly, I also wish to include in the entities studied by physics both the absolutely fundamental constituents of the world (if the world has this sort of constituents, e.g., quarks) and the entities that are composed of them and that are studied by no special science (e.g., atoms). Note also that by ‘constituents’ I mean the components of complex entities—not just what is relatively fundamental and is part of a world.

\(^7\) I also wish to point out that physical-a objects necessarily come together with some (fundamental) physical law or another, i.e., that there cannot be physical-a objects without (fundamental) physical laws. For physical-a objects are the ones that are invoked within fundamental physical theories (or entirely depend on objects invoked within fundamental physical theories) and I cannot think of a fundamental physical theory that is not (also or only) concerned with (fundamental) physical laws. Otherwise, what would such a theory be about? Therefore, I cannot think of a physical-a object that does not come together with some (fundamental) physical law or another.

\(^8\) The distinction between a theory-based and a (material) feature-based conception of the physical is justified within many current taxonomies of the formulations of physicalism, i.e., of the theory according to which everything is physical—or at least depends on the physical. Within certain formulations, in order to grasp the meaning of ‘physical’, we must only pay attention to what physical theories claim about their objects of inquiry. Following other formulations, we must impose \textit{a priori} restrictions on what counts as physical—roughly in line with the features traditionally attributed by materialists to all and only material objects. See also Ney 2008 and Stoljar 2015. It goes without saying that both physical-a and physical-b objects can be studied by physics and be governed by physical laws.
Following the first interpretation of the physical with respect to the first strategy, it turns out that

(1a) there is no metaphysically possible world in which there is at least one object that is not part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of that world or that is not completely constituted by (or does not depend on) objects that are part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of that world.

Following the second interpretation, it turns out that

(1b) there is no metaphysically possible world in which there is at least one object that does not have F or that is not completely constituted by (or depends on) objects that have F.

Consider now strategy (2), i.e., the idea that, even if there is at least one metaphysically possible world that is not a physically-2 possible world, Anthony does not exist (and he cannot exist) in that world, since he has no identity conditions there. Using (2), there is at least one metaphysically possible world that is not a physically-2 possible world, but Anthony does not exist in that world. In fact, given that Anthony exists in the actual world (i.e., a physically-1 and a physically-2 possible world), he is identity-dependent on (or identical with) some physical object.\(^9\)

However, if we choose the first interpretation of ‘physical’ (i.e., physical-a),

(2aa) Anthony is identity-dependent on (or identical with) some object(s) that is/are part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of the actual world (and of every physically-1 possible world) or some object(s) completely constituted by objects that are part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of the actual world (and of every physically-1 possible world), so that he has no identity conditions in (metaphysically and physically-2) possible worlds in which that physical object (or those physical objects) does (do) not exist.

Furthermore, there are two other plausible readings of (2) based on this interpretation:

(2ab) Anthony is identity-dependent on (or identical with) some object(s) that is/are part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of some physically-2 possible world or some object(s) completely constituted by objects that are part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of some physically-2 possible world, so that he has no identity conditions in (metaphysically and non-physically-2) possible worlds in which that physical object (or those physical objects) does (do) not exist;

(2ac) no object that exists in some (metaphysically and non-physically-2) possible world and that is not physical (according to the physical-a interpretation of ‘physical’) grounds Anthony’s identity conditions.

On the other hand, if we choose the second interpretation of ‘physical’ (i.e., physical-b), it turns out that

\(^9\) I use identity-dependence here as the strongest form of ontological dependence, aiming at justifying the idea that it is not metaphysically possible for Anthony to exist without some physical object.
Anthony is identity-dependent on (or identical with) some object(s) that exists in the actual world and that has (have) F, so that Anthony has no identity conditions in (metaphysically and physically-2) possible worlds in which that physical object (or those physical objects) does (do) not exist.

Furthermore, it is possible to give two further readings of (2):

(2bb) Anthony is identity-dependent on (or identical with) some object(s) that has (have) F and that exists in some physically-2 possible world, so that Anthony has no identity conditions in (metaphysically and non-physically-2) possible worlds in which there exist(s) no object(s) that has (have) F;

(2bc) no object that exists in some (metaphysically and non-physically-2) possible world and that is not physical (according to the physical-b interpretation of ‘physical’) grounds Anthony’s identity conditions.

We are now left with eight possible ways of justifying (no-dis.). Before dealing with each way, it is worth remarking that the metaphysical possibility of Anthony’s disembodied existence does not entail that Anthony can exist without his body (or without any other physical support) in the actual world. One could reasonably deny the truth of (no-dis.) and nevertheless accept that Anthony must be embodied in the actual world. Thus, the falsity of (no-dis.) does not imply the acceptance of any form of Cartesian Dualism, nor of any doctrine according to which selves and bodies live (or can live) apart from one another in the actual world too. However, as we shall notice at the end of this article, there are at least two ways to make it the case that Anthony’s disembodied existence is not a mere possibility, i.e., something unreal and/or non-actual, even if possible.

2. The First Strategy

In this section, I shall argue against the first strategy, i.e., the one aiming at showing that every metaphysically possible world is a physically-2 possible world.

Consider the solutions based on this strategy:

(1a) there is no metaphysically possible world in which there is at least one object that is not part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of that world or that is not completely constituted by (or does not depend on) objects that are part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of that world;

(1b) there is no metaphysically possible world in which there is at least one object that does not have F or that is not completely constituted by (or depends on) objects that have F.

Both solutions do not seem to imply the truth of (no-dis.). Remember that (no-dis.) requires that there be an object embodying Anthony. (1a) is compatible with that object’s being rather dissimilar from what typically counts as a body—or what counts as a body in the actual world. That object (i.e., Anthony’s support) could have strange and exotic features in other worlds.

With regard to (1a), nothing excludes that there is a metaphysically possible world which has its own physical laws (maybe very strange laws), in which Anthony exists even without having an actual world’s body or something
qualitatively similar to it. More precisely, nothing excludes that there is a metaphysically possible world in which Anthony has a physical-a support, even without having a physical-b support (some physical support that has some features traditionally associated with the features of bodies) or a physical-a support based on the physical laws of the actual world. The laws of that metaphysically possible world would still be physical laws, i.e., laws studied by the physics of that world, given my characterization of physics as the science concerned with the relatively fundamental constituents of a world, their properties and laws.

For example: in line with the physical laws of that world, increase of entropy might not characterize Anthony’s physical-a support in that world whereas, in line with the physical laws of the actual world, increase of entropy obviously characterizes Anthony’s actual physical-a support.

In addition, in some other world, at least some physical-a objects (including Anthony’s support) might not be physical-b objects. For example: if physical-b objects are the ones that are impenetrable, at least some physical-a objects in that world (including Anthony’s support) might nevertheless be penetrable.

I do not see any sound reason for denying such possibilities, thus making it the case that the actual physical laws are metaphysically necessary and/or that, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, every possible physical-a entity is also a physical-b entity. It is up to the opponents to argue for such necessities, which are far from being self-evident.\(^\text{10}\)

If (1a) were true, Anthony would not have an absolutely disembodied existence. He would still have physical-a supports in other worlds. Yet, he would have disembodied existence relative to the definitions of bodies that are grounded on the notion of physical-b object or on the notion of physical-a object in the actual world.\(^\text{11}\)

On the other hand, (1b) is hardly defensible. Nothing seemingly excludes that there are metaphysically possible worlds in which not every object has some feature F (e.g., impenetrability) and/or not every object is completely constituted by (or depends on) some F-object(s). If the opposite were true, then all the objects would necessarily be F-objects. All the objects would necessarily be impenetrable, or spatio-temporally, or temporally located. Being F would be included in the nature of objects, i.e., it would somehow be part of or follow from being an object. Again: I do not see how to justify such a move. It must be

\(^{10}\) It might be objected that, if in the other world the physical laws emerge from the behaviour and the features of objects, then Anthony would not have the physical-a support that he has in the actual world, nor any other support qualitatively analogous to it. For the behaviour and the features of physical-a objects in the other world would be too dissimilar from the behaviour and the features of actual physical-a objects, in order for the former to give rise to strange and exotic laws of nature. I concede this point, but I do not see how it can affect my argument. Indeed, (1a) only implies that Anthony has some physical-a support in the other world. It does not imply that he possesses the same support that he has in the actual world or something qualitatively analogous to the latter.

\(^{11}\) This prima facie amounts to accepting (no-dis.), insofar as (no-dis.) invokes physical supports in general—as it does—rather than actual physical-a or physical-b supports. Yet, accepting strange and exotic physical supports does not seem to be in line with the physicalist’s traditional desiderata. For the acceptance of strange and exotic physical supports allows for Anthony’s existence with strange bodies or with somehow immortal supports.
demonstrated that, in order for something to be an object (e.g., in order for it to instantiate properties without being instantiated by them), it must have F. Metaphysical reflection does not help here: there are no cogent arguments for this conclusion. Nor can one appeal to a posteriori necessities, such as the ones discovered by sciences (e.g., that water is H$_2$O). Unlike being water, being an object is not a concept to be defined on scientific grounds. Thus, scientific research cannot discover if being F is entailed by being an object.

3. The Second Strategy

Let me now examine the second strategy, i.e., the one aiming at showing what follows: even if there is at least one metaphysically possible world that is not a physically-2 possible world, Anthony does not exist (and he cannot exist) in that world, since he has no identity conditions there. I shall now consider the ways of justifying (no-dis.) that are based on this strategy.

I shall first examine the issue of identity-dependence and I shall set aside Anthony’s identity with physical-a or physical-b objects. Moreover, I shall focus on identity-dependence for one reason: it is the strongest form of ontological dependence, so that it adequately justifies the idea that it is not metaphysically possible for Anthony to exist without some physical object. However, I shall also consider in a few pages one different view of this topic.

Take

(2aa) Anthony is identity-dependent on (or identical with) some object(s) that is/are part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of the actual world (and of every physically-1 possible world) or some object(s) completely constituted by objects that are part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of the actual world (and of every physically-1 possible world), so that he has no identity conditions in (metaphysically and physically-2) possible worlds in which that physical object (or those physical objects) does (do) not exist.

It seems to me that those who deny (no-dis.) could invoke criteria of identity for Anthony that are not grounded on physical-a actual objects. For example: consider an object a having all and only Anthony’s memories. The object a identity-depends on Anthony’s memories and memories as such (for what we know) are not physical-a actual objects. Is Anthony identical with a? I

12 Of course, scientists can discover that all the objects studied by them have certain relevant material features. Yet, they need a preliminary (and at least intuitive) understanding of what is for something to be an object in order to pursue this project. An understanding that precedes their research. Moreover, they cannot demonstrate that all the objects simpliciter (besides the ones studied by them) have those relevant features. Thus, they cannot demonstrate that having those features is necessary for being an object.

13 I do not rule out that, if Anthony’s physical-a support in the actual world is F, then that support necessarily is F. Namely, I do not claim here that what is (for example) impenetrable in one world can be penetrable in another world. What I do rule out here is that all the objects in all the metaphysically possible worlds are F—or completely constituted by (or dependent on) F-objects. Therefore, it is possible that Anthony has in some other metaphysically possible world some support that is not F and that is not completely constituted by (nor dependent on) F-objects.
am not inclined to claim that \(a\) is identical with Anthony. Yet, the identity between Anthony and \(a\) is no less plausible than the identity between Anthony and some other object \(b\) that is part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of the actual world or completely constituted by objects that are part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of the actual world (or no less plausible than Anthony’s identity-dependence on \(b\)). Thus, criteria of identity for Anthony grounded on physical-a actual objects are far from being compelling—at least if one considers the possibility of reidentifying Anthony across different metaphysically possible worlds.

The dialectic is as follows: those who affirm (2aa) must accept that there is a clear-cut answer to the question of whether Anthony is identical with \(b\). Their answer is that Anthony is identical with \(b\) (i.e., some object that is part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of the actual world or completely constituted by objects that are part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of the actual world)—even if and when there is some further object \(a\) that has all and only Anthony’s memories. I reply that this is far from being self-evident. Therefore, (2aa) is far from being compelling.

Here are some interesting examples to be assessed. If \(a\) existed in a metaphysically possible world with different physical laws from the ones that govern the actual world, would \(a\) be identical with Anthony or not? There is no clear-cut negative answer to this question. Yet, following (2aa), there should be a clear-cut negative answer: \(b\) does not exist in that world, nor do relevantly similar physical-a (and physical-1) objects exist there.

Let me consider another example: if \(b\) did not exist in some physically-1 possible world (i.e., some metaphysically and physically-2 possible world having the same physical laws of the actual world) and if \(a\) existed there with a different physical-a (and physical-1) support, would \(a\) be identical with Anthony or not? Again: there is no clear-cut negative answer to this question. Yet, a clear-cut negative answer would be required for the truth of (2aa): Anthony should not exist there.

Furthermore, if \(b\) existed in some other physically-1 possible world and the object supported by \(b\) (or identical with \(b\)) had different memories from the ones had by Anthony, would \(b\) be identical with Anthony or not? Again: there is no clear-cut negative answer.

Finally, consider a metaphysically (and physically-1) possible world where \(a\) exists with another physical-a (and physical-1) support and \(b\) exists supporting (or being identical with) an object having different memories. Is Anthony identical with \(a\) or \(b\)? No clear-cut negative answer. Moreover, if Anthony is

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14 Memories are mostly invoked with respect to conscious objects’ persistence conditions or reidentification conditions across possible worlds—rather than with respect to their existence/identity conditions. However, I assume here that, in order for something to ground the persistence or the reidentification of a conscious object across possible worlds, that thing must ground its identity and existence too. An object persists at a certain time only if it still exists at that time: what grounds its persistence also grounds its existence at that time—and the fact that there is still something identical with that object at that time. Moreover, an object can be reidentified in a possible world only if it exists in that world: what grounds its reidentification conditions across possible worlds also grounds its existence in those worlds—and the fact that there is something identical with that object in that world.

15 Remember that a physical-1 object is an object governed by the fundamental physical laws of the actual world.
different from both \(a\) and \(b\), then (2aa) is still in trouble. Indeed, (2aa) implies that, in that world, Anthony is identical with \(b\) or he is identical with the object supported by \(b\).

The idea behind my criticism is that there are criteria of identity for conscious objects (i.e., objects having thoughts and memories) that are not based on physical-a objects. \textit{Prima facie}, such criteria do not fare worse than the criteria based on actual physical-a objects. Thus, (2aa) is highly suspicious, insofar as it requires that the latter criteria fare better than the former. Of course, one might go on asserting the truth of (2aa) while denying our evaluations of the aforementioned examples. Yet, s/he should provide some strong reason for such a move—indeed, her/his acceptance of the truth of (2aa).\footnote{For a critical overview of theories of personal identity, see, for example, Olson 2007. For criteria of personal identity and survival, see Zimmerman 2012.}

One might weaken (2aa) by asserting that

(2ab) Anthony is identity-dependent on (or identical with) some object(s) that is part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of \textit{some physically-2 possible world} or some object(s) completely constituted by objects that are part of the ontology of the best fundamental physical theory of \textit{some physically-2 possible world}, so that he has no identity conditions in (metaphysically and non-physically-2) possible worlds in which that physical object (or those physical objects) does (do) not exist.

So far, so good. Yet, \textit{what} physically-2 possible worlds? Or: \textit{what kinds} of physically-2 possible worlds? (2ab) is far from being clear. For example, (2ab) is compatible with Anthony's being identity-dependent on some actual physical-a object \(c\) that could also live in some worlds where fundamental physical laws are radically different. In that world, the object \(c\) might turn out to become a somehow immortal composite object, given certain relevant differences in the laws (e.g., given the absence of entropy increase).\footnote{For example, in a \textit{post-resurrectionem} world, \(c\) could be Anthony's actual and resurrected body, which could become capable of enjoying immortal life—given the radically different laws and conditions of that \textit{post-resurrectionem} world.}

What about

(2ac) no object that exists in some (metaphysically and non-physically-2) possible world and that is not physical (according to the physical-a interpretation of 'physical') grounds Anthony's identity conditions?

Take Anthony's memories again. It is at least metaphysically possible that his memories live without any physical-a support at all. Thus, would our object \(a\) (having all and only Anthony's memories and identity-depending on those memories) be identical with Anthony in some metaphysical and non-physically-2 possible world where \(a\) exists? Given (2ac), there should be a clear-cut negative answer to this question and it should be negative. Yet, it is far from being self-evident (or at least it is metaphysically controversial) that we should accept such a negative answer.

Solutions such as

(2ba) Anthony is identity-dependent on (or identical with) some object(s) that exists \textit{in the actual world} and that has (have) \(F\), so that Anthony has no identity conditions in (metaphysically and physically-2)
possible worlds in which that physical object (or those physical objects) does (do) not exist,
are too restrictive, at least in light of our previous discussion of criteria of identity for conscious objects. Perhaps, there is a metaphysically possible world in which nothing has F and in which Anthony exists: how can we exclude such a possibility—and why should we exclude it?
This seems to rule out the two remaining solutions, i.e.,
(2bb) Anthony is identity-dependent on (or identical with) some object(s) that has (have) F and that exists in some physically-2 possible world, so that Anthony has no identity conditions in (metaphysically and non-
physically-2) possible worlds in which there exist(s) no object(s) that has (have) F,
and
(2bc) no object that exists in some (metaphysically and non-physically-2) possible world and that is not physical (according to the physical-b interpretation of ‘physical’) grounds Anthony’s identity conditions.

Yet, it is now worth adding a caveat: such criticisms do not hold for those who accept the identity between Anthony and some actual physical-a or physical-b object(s)—given the necessity of identity. If Anthony is identical with some actual physical-a or some physical-b object(s), then Anthony is embodied in all the possible worlds in which he exists. However, our previous criticisms of criteria of identity based on actual physical-a/b objects and the thesis that not every metaphysically possible world is also a physically-1 possible world seem to put such identity claims in a bad light. Moreover, an actual physical-a object identical with Anthony could also exist in worlds with radically different laws—allowing for its immortal existence (as it would happen with object c if it were identical with Anthony).

Here is another, interesting move. Maybe Anthony does not identity-
depend on his physical support—nor is he identical with it. Yet, Anthony cannot exist without his physical support—or without something qualitatively similar to it. For example: Anthony may be such as not to be able to exist without having an impenetrable (i.e., physical-b) support. For it is part of what Anthony essentially is that Anthony needs that sort of support in order to exercise the powers he essentially has. Without an impenetrable body, Anthony cannot move—and being able to move is one of the powers Anthony essentially has (Anthony could not exist without being able to move). Or Anthony may be analogous to a piece of software. A piece of software cannot exist without a physical support—without a piece of “hardware”, so to say. Thus, again, Anthony cannot exist without a physical support.

There are three different ways to rebut this argument. First, one could insist that Anthony’s essence must be characterized in a different way. For example: it is not part of Anthony’s essence that he is able to move, so that he does not need a physical-b support in order to exist. Secondly, one could deny the relevant sort of dependence on physical supports. For example: she could deny that being able to move implies depending on some physical-b support. Thirdly and finally, she could claim that the relevant sort of dependence can also involve exotic and non-actual physical-a objects, such as an immortal body. What matters here is that we are not forced to accept our opponent’s conclusion, i.e., that Anthony cannot exist disembodied.
In sum, it seems to me that, if we accept the solutions grounded on the physical-a conception of the physical, then nothing seems to guarantee the truth of (no-dis.) or the truth of (no-dis.) relative to physical-b or to actual physical-a supports. On the other hand, if we accept the solutions grounded on the physical-b conceptions of the physical, they seem to impose unjustified restrictions on metaphysical possibility.

4. The Afterlife World

The aforementioned conclusion might nevertheless seem too weak—at least from the perspective of those who believe in disembodied existence in some afterlife world. In fact, if the afterlife world is real, it should be part of the actual world (it should be a region of the actual world). Yet, if the actual world is such that Anthony must have a physical support, Anthony cannot actually go on existing in the afterlife world. Roughly, Anthony’s having no physical support and his having no actual physical support in other possible worlds are nothing but mere possibilities that cannot affect the way in which things (actually) go.

I see at least two ways in which the previous discussion can constitute the basis for a more general defense of the thesis that Anthony’s disembodied existence is something more than a mere possibility. Such a defense should be set up at different stages. First, one needs to show that (no-dis.) is false. Secondly, she needs to show that, in addition, Anthony’s disembodied existence is something more than a mere possibility. Thirdly, she should cope with some additional problems: what actually makes it the case that Anthony has disembodied existence in the afterlife world? Must there be any correspondence between the time at which Anthony ceases to exist in our world and the time at which he “starts” to exist (or he somehow appears) in the afterlife world? As I have already declared, I shall briefly perform the second task—even if my hypotheses should be supplemented with additional arguments, as I shall notice.

First, one could just reject the idea that the actual world is the only real world. Accepting some, but not all the theses characterizing D. K. Lewis (1986)’s modal realism, it can be argued that both the actual world and the afterlife world in which Anthony has disembodied existence (or no actual physical-a support) are equally real and that each world is actual at itself. What happens after Anthony’s death is just his “moving to” the afterlife world. I know that this hypothesis is at odds with other features of Lewis’ modal realism: the idea that individuals are world-bound, so that they cannot literally exist in more than one possible world (at best, they can have counterparts in other worlds); the thesis that there can be no connection between different possible worlds, given their spatio-temporal isolation; the materialist framework within which Lewis develops his own theory (possible worlds have a wholly material nature).

18 Of course, if the actual world and that afterlife world are different possible worlds, it is reasonable to maintain that they are spatio-temporally disconnected and that it is not properly true that Anthony starts to exist in a world when he ceases to exist in another world. However, there is still a way in which it is legitimate to talk—at least metaphorically—of Anthony’s “starting” and “ceasing” to exist. For example, there might be a correspondence law between the times of both worlds or, if the afterlife world is atemporal, Anthony atemporally exists in that world without starting to exist there and he simply ceases to exist in the actual world. This problem also concerns the metaphysics of time and it cannot be tackled here.
Yet, an alternative version of modal realism might be developed in order to find room for Anthony’s disembodied existence.

However, if one aimed at maintaining that only the actual world is real, she could nevertheless get through the second stage. Here is a possibility. We assumed right at the outset that the actual world is a physically-1 possible world. I shall dub ‘Earth’ the actual world-qua-physically-1 possible world. However, it might be the case that Earth is not the entire actual world, namely—and more properly—that it is not a possible world at all, but only a proper part (a region) of the actual world. In other terms, Earth is a region whose physical laws do not allow for Anthony’s disembodied existence. Yet, outside that region—and still within the actual world, within some other region (i.e., Heaven)—it can be the case that Anthony exists disembodied (or that he has some non-actual-a physical support).19

This move can be done after having redefined our view of Earth. For example, Earth would not be maximal: the possible states of affairs included or precluded in it would not be all the possible states of affairs—but all the possible states of affairs (implicitly) relative to a certain region (the region “occupied” by Earth). The state of affairs of Anthony’s disembodied existence would not be properly precluded in the actual world: it would only be precluded in Earth. The actual world would only preclude Anthony’s disembodied existence in Earth, but not in the region outside Earth. In addition, physical laws would not turn out to be ubiquitous in the actual world: there would be regions of the actual world (regions outside Earth, such as Heaven) with different physical laws—or no physical law at all.

I cannot explore here these hypotheses and the plausibility of the theses that—as a matter of metaphysical necessity—seemingly come together with them. I only wished to illustrate two ways to conduct further research on the topic. What I can conclude here is that there truly could be a light (my own light, my own consciousness, or Anthony’s consciousness, if you prefer) that never goes out—and that this possibility could be more than mere. Why not?

References


19 An objection suddenly arises: if Earth is a proper part (a region) of the actual world, then the actual world is spatial and the complement of Earth (i.e., Heaven) is spatial too. This implies, in turn, that both the actual world and Heaven are physical and that Anthony cannot have disembodied existence. However, in response to this objection, one can either reject the latter inference (from being spatial to being physical) or still allow for Anthony’s existence in Heaven with a non-earthly physical support. Intuitively, I would be inclined to choose the former option—but I cannot defend this option here. One more radical option consists in denying the spatiality of Heaven, i.e., in admitting that, even if Earth is spatial, there is a part of the actual world (i.e., Heaven) that is not spatial. This hinges on the possibility of something’s (i.e., Heaven) being part of something else (i.e., the actual world), even without being a spatial part of it. Since I do not see any sound reason for affirming that all genuine parts must be spatial parts, I do not see any sound reason for rejecting the latter possibility either.


Hume’s Law, Moore’s Open Question and Aquinas’ Human Intellect

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Abstract

This article concerns Aquinas’ practical doctrine on two philosophical difficulties underlying much contemporary ethical debate. One is Hume’s *Is-ought thesis* and the other is its radical consequence, Moore’s *Open-question argument*. These ethical paradoxes appear to have their roots in epistemological scepticism and in a deficient anthropology. A possible response to them can be found in that a) Aquinas defends the substantial unity and rationality of the human being; b) Thomistic natural law is a natural consequence of the rational being; c) Thomistic human intellect is essentially theoretical and practical at the same time; d) Aquinas’ human reason naturally performs three main operations. First, to apprehend the *intellecta* and universal notions *evn, verum* and *bonum*. Second, to formulate the first theoretical and practical principles. Third, to order that the *intellectum* and universal good be done and the opposite avoided. For these reasons, Thomistic philosophical response to both predicaments will not be exclusively ethical, but will embrace ontology, anthropology and epistemology. Aquinas’ moral philosophy is fundamentally different from ethics that qualifies actions as good either by mere social consensus (*contractualism*) or just by calculating its consequences (*consequentialism*).

*Keywords*: ontology, anthropology, epistemology, ethics.

1. Hume’s Law and Moore’s Open Question

The first part of this article will study Aquinas’ possible response to *Hume’s law*. According to shared interpretation, David Hume sought to reform philosophy (Mackie 1980) and this paper will focus on his moral philosophy, by arguing against his famous *Is-ought thesis* or *Hume’s Law*. It may be briefly defined as being unlawful to derive *ought* (what ought to be) from *is* (what is). That means, between *is* and *ought* there is such a dichotomy and separation that it is impossible to derive (*ought*) values from (*is*) facts, (*ought*) norms from (*is*) beings (Hudson 1969). In

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1 Cf. Hume 1739-40: Vol. 3, Part 1, Sect. 1: “In every system of morality […] I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not”.
particular, this article will dispute the illegacy of deriving (ought) universal rules from (is) persons.

The second part of this article will examine Aquinas’ possible riposte to Moore’s open-question argument. George Edward Moore sharpened Hume’s law taking it to its final consequences with his Open-question argument (Baldwin 1990). Moore already supported in his youth work The Metaphysical Basis of Ethics (Moore 1897) the argument that any attempt to define good is a naturalistic fallacy, hence it is recognized as a precursor to Principia Ethica (Moore 1903). This book is considered as a revolutionary ethical work (Hutchinson 2001). Fundamentally, his thesis maintains that the possibility of defining good must be denied, since it is indefinable (Butchvarov 1982); to confuse good with something temporary or with any natural property would result in a naturalistic fallacy. If you want to avoid this fallacy, you cannot identify or confuse good or evil with anything (Moore 1903: Preface: 3).

2. Hume’s Law and Aquinas’ Human Intellect

This section will analyze Thomas Aquinas’ possible solution to Hume’s law. It seems that Thomistic moral philosophy, based on ontology and anthropology, could have already satisfactorily addressed the Is-ought thesis; since in his doctrine it is possible (using Humean language) to derive ought (universal norms) from is (person), without falling into Hume’s law (Lichacz 2008).

The argument must begin with two small though fundamental premises. Firstly, in Aquinas’ ethical doctrine good per se is good, not because it is a result of mere social consensus, or just a calculus of consequences (Chalmeta 2002). The good is good because the human intellect— in its practical aspect— apprehends and understands it as an ontological and intellectum good; analogously to how the human intellect— in its theoretical aspect— apprehends and understands the intellectum being (ens) and the ontological truth. As a consequence, the human intellect naturally understands and formulates the first theoretical principles and the first practical principles or natural law (Dewan 1990). Secondly, Aquinas defends the substantial unity and rationality of the human being; hence, the natural law (ethics) is a natural consequence of the rational being (anthropology) (Gilson 2002). Thomistic natural law does not refer to the countless number of inclinations that each person could feel toward particular and concrete goods. It exclusively refers to the natural universal inclinations, of man as man, towards the ontological and intellecta goods per se (Brock 2015).

The human intellect apprehends the ontological and intellecta notions of being (ens), good and truth; and their respective opposites, non-being (non ens), non-truth (false, illogical) and non-good (evil). As a consequence, the human intellect naturally understands and formulates the first theoretical principles (the principle of non-contradiction, of identity, etc.); and the first practical principles or natural law (the natural universal inclinations to seek the universal goods

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2 Cf. Moore 1903: Ch. I, §10. “Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not other, but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the naturalistic fallacy”.
avoiding the contraries).3 In the human intellect or reason (Anscombe 1973) there is a full analogy between its two speculative and practical aspects, one focused more on truth the other focused more on good and operation (Vanni 2007). In consequence, the human reason naturally understands and formulates \textit{per se et quoad nos} the first universal theoretical and practical principles. The universal precepts refer to seek the ontological and \textit{intellec}ta goods and to avoid the contrary. All \textit{intellec}ta and ontological concepts are abstracted by the reason from the senses and the sensible experience; because in Aquinas' doctrine, there is nothing in the intellect that has not been in the senses before.4 The abstraction occurs in two phases. Firstly, the cogitative prepares the phantasm (from the impressions of the senses) for the active intellect. Secondly, the active intellect abstracts from the phantasm the intelligible species, which presents it to the passive intellect that finally, expresses the \textit{intellec}tum notion. The passive intellect makes explicit the ontological and \textit{intellec}tum good, which is good \textit{per se}; thus, the will (\textit{voluntas ut natura}) desires it. For that reason, the impressions of the senses and the sensible experiences pass to another ontological level, from the sensible one to the intellectual one (Lobato 1991).

The universal norms are naturally understood and formulated by the intellect and desired by the will; as a consequence, these superior faculties naturally order that the person inclines towards the \textit{intellec}ta and universal goods seeking them and avoiding the contrary, evil (Stump 2008) or defect of good.5 That is to say, the whole person naturally seeks and persecutes the \textit{intellec}ta goods \textit{per se} avoiding the opposite. For instance, to preserve your life, to raise your children, to avoid killing yourself, to avoid killing your children (filicide),6 etc.7 Therefore, the order essentially is a rational act; it is the superior faculty (intellect and will) (Dewan 2008) which orders the natural universal inclination towards the \textit{intellec}tum good.

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3 Cf. \textit{Summa theol.} I-II, q. 94, a. 2, co. "Illud quod primo cadit in apprehensione, est ens, cuius intellectus includitur in omnibus quaecumque quis apprehendit. Et ideo primum principium indemonstrabile est quod non est simul affirmare et negare, quod \textit{fundatur supra rationem entis et non entis}, et super hoc principio omnia alia fundantur, ut dicitur in IV \textit{Metaphys.} Sicut autem ens est primum quod cadit in apprehensione simpliciter, ita bonum est primum quod cadit in apprehensione practicae rationis, quae ordinatur ad opus, omne enim agens agit propter finem, qui habet rationem boni. Et ideo primum principium in ratione practica est \textit{quod fundatur supra rationem boni}, quae est […] bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum. Et super hoc fundantur omnia alia praecepta legis naturae". My italics.

4 Cf. \textit{De veritate} q. 18, a. 7, co. "Intellectus humanus in sui principio est sicut tabula in qua nihil est scriptum, sed postmodum in eo scientia per sensus acquiritur virtute intellectus agentis". My italics.

5 Cf. \textit{Summa theol.} I, q. 49 a. 1 co. "Malum enim est defectus boni".

6 Aquinas talk about filicide that is, killing the son or daughter already born; not about aborting the fetus before birth, inside the womb. His teachings about abortion, fetus and human being are controversial. Cf. \textit{Summa theol.} I, q. 76, a. 3, ad 3; \textit{Summa theol.} I, q.118 a.2 ad 2; \textit{Summa theol.} II-II, q. 64, a. 8, ad 2.

7 Cf. \textit{Summa theol.} I-II, q. 94, a. 2, co. "Omnia alia praecepta legis naturae […] . Vita hominis conservatur, et contrarium impeditur […]. Coniunctio maris et feminae, et educatio liberorum, et similia […]. Naturalem inclinationem ad hoc quod veritatem cognoscat […], et ad hoc quod in societate vivat. Et secundum hoc, ad legem naturalem pertinent ea quae ad huissmodi inclinationem spectant, utpote quod homo ignorantium vitet, quod alias non offendat cum quibus debet conversari, et cetera huissmodi quae ad hoc spectant".
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*per se*, not in the opposite way. The sensible experience does not make the practical intellect apprehends the object as ontological good *per se*; therefore the intellect and will (*voluntas ut natura*) do not command the universal inclination to seek the object avoiding the contrary (Pizzorni 2000). The universal inclinations exclusively occur as a consequence of an intellectual process which orders that persons incline towards the universal goods. It can happen that a particular man chooses to act against an ontological good, this is because persons are naturally free and responsible for their actions (McCluskey 2017). Even so, human beings always have to seek good under any aspect, *sub specie boni* (Henle 2012); because if not, they would not prosecute it neither voluntarily nor guiltily. For example, someone who commits suicide to stop suffering or a particular man who kills his own daughter (filicide)⁹ to satisfy his hatred against her mother.

Just as the practical intellect and the will (*voluntas ut natura*) the first thing that respectively apprehend and desire is the ontological and *intellectum* good, (abstracted from the sensible experience) and with it the human reason formulates the first practical principle; analogously, it occurs with the rest of the *intellecta* goods of natural law. The practical intellect intentionally apprehends that the object is good *per se*, thus it presents it to the will (*voluntas ut natura*) that desires it *simpliciter*; in consequence, the practical reason naturally formulates the universal precept of preserving your own life. As a result, the reason and the will naturally order that the whole person inclines towards the *intellectum* and universal good *per se* by pursuing it and avoiding the opposite. The same happens with the good of natural law of caring for and raising your own children. The intellect apprehends the notion as ontological and *intellectum* good *per se*, thus, the intellect presents it to the will that naturally desires it (*voluntas ut natura*); in consequence, the reason naturally formulates the universal precept of caring and raising your own children. As a result, the reason and the will naturally order that the whole person inclines towards the *intellectum* and ontological good by seeking it and avoiding the opposite. Aquinas’ natural law (ethics) is a natural consequence of the rational being (anthropology) (Henle 2012).

In order to understand and formulate the universal precept of raising your own children avoiding the contrary, or preserving your life avoiding the contrary; the boy or girl must have felt some experiences; therefore he or she must have lived some years of life (Artigas 2003). Aquinas does not enter into details of age, nevertheless it is clearly stated in his texts that it is only from a certain period of life that you can properly speak of use of reason. The use of reason properly means having the capability to intellectualize (intellect) and to will (will) in act (Tonello 2009). Although the intellect *per se* does not use any corporeal organ, nevertheless, it receives the sensible species from the sensible faculties that do use corporeal organs. According to Aquinas, it is impossible for our intellect, which is united to a body, to understand in act anything without using the images received by the bodily organs. Therefore, the person cannot intellectualize, nor formulate

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⁸ Cf. *Summa theol.* I-II, q. 10, a. 1, co “Similiter etiam principium motuum voluntarium oportet esse aliquid naturaliter volitum [*voluntas ut natura*]. Hoc autem est bonum *in communi* [ontological good *per se*], in quod voluntas naturaliter tendit”. My italics and brackets.

judgments, nor will in act because of defect in the corporeal organs.\textsuperscript{10} If children’s organs (particularly the brain) are still evolving, the use of reason (intellect and will) will be hindered, too. The internal senses, because of the malfunction of the bodily organs, are not able to provide any sensible species to the active intellect. Consequently, it cannot present any intelligible species to the passive intellect, which as a result cannot express any intellectum and ontological concept, with which the reason formulates the first theoretical and practical judgments (Vanni 2007). Therefore, to use the reason (use of reason) properly means to intellectualize and to will in act, which implies, being morally free and responsible of own actions (free will).\textsuperscript{11}

The natural inclinations that conform to natural law, tending to the ontological and universal goods and avoiding the opposite are exclusively the universal natural inclinations proper to man as man. Not the particular natural inclinations, that someone could feel, even if the inclinations subjetively look more or less good to us. The nature of each thing is primarily the form, according to which each being (ens) belongs to a species (Pincemin 1997); thus, persons are constituted in their species by their form, a rational form.\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, the human nature impels persons to act rationally, that is, to act according to the natural law; consequently, what is against the order of reason is against the nature of man as man. Aquinas’ natural law presupposes rationality;\textsuperscript{13} hence, non-rational animals cannot follow the natural law; they are just following their non-rational needs toward or against objects (Artigas 2003). The natural universal inclinations towards the intellecta, ontological and universal goods are a result of the judgment of the practical intellect, desired by the will (voluntas ut natura) and rationally ordered; as a result persons naturally tend to seek the intellectum good avoiding the contrary (Cunningham 2013). For instance, the natural universal inclination to preserve your life, to raise your children, to know the truth; as well as the natural universal inclination to avoid the opposite, like committing suicide, committing filicide or living in ignorance.\textsuperscript{14}

Thomas Aquinas sometimes uses the expression natural inclination (inclinatio naturalis) to refer to non-universal or particular natural inclinations. The natural non-universal inclinations are countless and may tend towards particular good goods (such as caring for sick people), towards particular less good goods (such as drinking alcohol), or towards particular bad goods\textsuperscript{15} (like raping). Therefore, in Aquinas’ texts, there are two completely different senses of natural inclinations.

\textsuperscript{10} Cf. \textit{De Veritate}, q. 18, a. 8, ad 2. “Quamvis intellectus non utatur organo, tamen accipit a potentis quae organo utuntur”.


\textsuperscript{12} Cf. \textit{Summa theol.} I-II q.71 a.2, co. “Natura uniuscuiusque rei potissime est forma secundum quam res speciem sortitur. Homo autem in specie constituitur per animam rationalem”.

\textsuperscript{13} Cf. \textit{Summa theol.} I-II, q. 94, a. 3, co. “Ad legem naturae pertinet omne illud ad quod homo inclinatur secundum suam naturam. Inclinatur autem unumquodque naturaliter ad operationem sibi convenientem secundum suam formam”.

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. \textit{De veritate}, q. 22, a. 5, co. “Homini convenit non solum ratione uti, quod ei competet secundum propriam differentiam, quae est rationale, sed etiam uti sensu vel alimento, quod etiam ei competet secundum genus suum, quod est animal vel vivum”.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. \textit{De veritate}, q. 24 a. 8 co. “Voluntas enim naturaliter tendit in bonum sicut in suum obiectum […]; quando in malum tendat, […] sub specie boni proponitur”. My italics.
However, some famous Thomistic scholars (Finnis and Grisez 1981) confuse the two senses. They consider the universal natural inclinations of man as man toward *intellecta* goods *per se*, or natural law; just like non-universal inclinations or instincts toward non-universal or particular objects (Finnis 1980; 1988; 2011). Nevertheless, according to Aquinas, the particular natural inclinations are neither universal nor of man as man, hence do not conform to natural law (McInerny 1997).

Following this introduction, it is argued that Aquinas, with his vision of moral philosophy, which harmonically embraces ontology and anthropology, seems to have satisfactorily addressed the *Is-ought problem*. This is because in his integral ethics it is possible (using Humean language) to derive universal norms (*ought, what ought to be*) from persons (*is, what is*) without falling into Hume's law, using two arguments.

Firstly, the human intellect, in its theoretical aspect, apprehends the notion of ontological being (*ens*) and formulates the first theoretical principles (founded on *ens* and *non ens*). Analogously, the human intellect, in its practical aspect, apprehends the notion of ontological and *intellectum* good and formulates the natural universal inclinations of man as man toward the *intellecta* and universal goods *per se*, or natural law (founded on *bonum* and *non bonum*). Aquinas' natural law does not start from the sensible experiences, and as a result, persons pursue or avoid the sensible objects. The process is radically the opposite; we could represent it (although in Aquinas' doctrine the person with all his faculties is substantially one being) (Goyette 2009) from top to bottom not from bottom to top. This means, the natural universal inclinations of man as man, or natural law, have been formulated and ordered after a judgment, from above, from the rational faculty; as a consequence the person with his faculties naturally inclines towards the goods *per se* avoiding the contrary (Brock 1988). Aquinas maintains the substantial unity and rationality of the human being (McInerny 1997), this is why persons are free and responsible for their actions; and this is why persons are praiseworthy or guilty for their actions (Pizzorni 2000). If the process were from bottom to up, meaning, if actions were directed by sensibility; persons would not be praiseworthy or guilty for their actions, since these actions would not be human as human, they would be like actions of non-rational animals\(^{16}\) (Dewan 1990).

Secondly, the ontological and *intellectum* being (*ens*) and the ontological and *intellectum* good are real and ethically one in human beings. The ontological and *intellectum* good is totally real and normative; although, as so many things in philosophy are real while abstract. In Aquinas' doctrine, there is no dichotomical derivation from *is to ought* in the human being, because being (*ens*) and *ought to be* (*ought*) are harmonically apprehended and understood by the human intellect, both theoretical and practical at the same time. That means, any person for being human, naturally inclines to the ontological and *intellectum* good. There is no dichotomy, but harmony, between *is*(*what is*) and *ought* (*what ought to be*); because every human being who understands that he is a person naturally understands

\[^{16}\text{Cf. Summa theol. I-II, q. 1, a. 1, co. “Actionum quae ab homine aguntur, illae solae proprie dicuntur humanae, quae sunt propriae hominis inquantum est homo. Differt autem homo ab aliis irrationalius creaturis in hoc, quod est suorum actuum dominus. Unde illae solae actiones vocantur proprie humanae, quaram homo est dominus. Est autem homo dominus suorum actuum per rationem et voluntatem, unde et liberum arbitrium esse dicitur facultas voluntatis et rationis”. My italics.}\]
that he must be, behave and act as a rational being. Hence, the natural law (ethics) is a natural consequence of the rational being (anthropology); this is because Aquinas defends the substantial unity and rationality of the human being (Mondin 1992). In Thomistic ethics ought (what ought to be) that are derived from is (what is) are only and exclusively the universal natural inclinations of man as man or the natural law. Any rational being (anthropology) naturally inclines to seek the ontological and universal goods avoiding the contrary (ethics). However, there are some individuals who choose not to obey this rational mandate or natural law. This is because, as said before, persons are essentially rational beings free and responsible for their actions (Palma 2009).

The natural particular inclinations towards particular goods are countless, such as taking care of old people, drinking alcohol, raping, and so on. Hence, as said before, they will never conform to natural law, since they are mere natural particular inclinations towards non-ontological goods. Namely, the human reason apprehends these goods as what they are; particular, non-ontological and non-universal goods. Therefore, neither the intellect naturally apprehends these goods as goods per se, nor the will naturally desires (voluntas ut natura) these goods as goods per se (Dewan 2008). The first practical precept is to seek the intellectum and ontological good avoiding the opposite, evil or defect of good; all other universal precepts are based on this first. The other precepts of natural law refer to pursue the other intellecta and ontological goods; such as preserving your own life, caring for your own child or knowing the truth; avoiding the opposite, such as killing yourself, committing filicide or living in ignorance. Essentially, what Aquinas maintains is that our intellect apprehends the ontological and intellecta goods intentionally, in an intentional way; therefore, not as a concrete concept but as an intellectum one (Rojo 2005). Aquinas’ natural law exclusively refers to the universal natural inclinations of man as man to seek the intellecta and ontological goods avoiding the contrary. All intellecta concepts are abstracted from the senses and the sensible experience by the reason; since there is nothing in the intellect that has not been in the senses before. Therefore, it can be said that according to Aquinas’ ethics, from is (what is, man) derives ought (what ought to be, natural law) without falling into Hume’s law (Brock 2005).

3. Moore’s Open Question and Aquinas’ Human Intellect

This section will study Aquinas’ possible response to Moore’s open-question argument, which is a radical consequence of Hume’s law (Baldwin 1990). Aquinas seems to have satisfactorily addressed this ethical problem, since in his doctrine the intellecta and ontological notions being (ens), truth and good are intentionally apprehended by the human intellect both theoretical and practical. In consequence, the first theoretical and practical principles are naturally understood and formulated by the human intellect, as said before, theoretical and practical at the same time.

17 Cf. Contra Gentiles, 3, Ch. 71 “Defectus boni malum est”.
Moore’s open question sagaciously questions the ultimate foundations of ethics.\footnote{Cf. \textit{Moore 1903}: Ch. I, § 10-11. “Let us consider what it is such philosophers say. And first it is to be noticed that they do not agree among themselves. They not only say that they are right as to what good is, but they endeavour to prove that other people who say that it is something else, are wrong”. My italics.} Why is good good? Why is evil evil?\footnote{Cf. \textit{Moore 1903}, Preface: 4 “What is good in itself? […] good and evil in themselves”.} Why is suicide bad \textit{per se}, or bad? Why is preserving one’s life good \textit{per se}, or good? Why is raising your own child good \textit{per se}, or good? Why is killing your own child (filicide) bad \textit{per se}, or bad? Is good good? Is evil evil?\footnote{Cf. \textit{Moore 1993}: Ch. I, § 13. “When we think that A is good […] The original question [should be,] ‘Is A good?’”. My brackets.} Although Moore admits that, he does not know how to answer why some realities are good and others the opposite, evil; he maintains that this is still an open question for moral philosophy.\footnote{Cf. \textit{Moore 1993}: Ch. II, § 27. “I myself am not prepared to dispute that health [either to preserve the own life, or not to commit filicide] is good. What I contend is that this must not be taken to be obvious; that it must be regarded as an open question”. My brackets.} Moreover, anyone who tries to define good would fall into his naturalistic fallacy.\footnote{Cf. \textit{Moore 1903}: Ch. I, § 10.} However, the answer may be that Thomistic ethics is fundamentally different from ethics that qualify an action as good by mere social consensus (\textit{contractualism}) or just calculating its consequences (\textit{consequentialism}). Good is both abstract, because it includes all the problematics about the foundations of moral philosophy, and at the same time it is real, as real as being (\textit{ens}). Good \textit{per se} is good because the human intellect apprehends it as ontological good: as such. The human reason apprehends also being (\textit{ens}) as being (\textit{ens}) and truth as truth; because of that, these concepts are called \textit{intellecta} and ontological notions. As a consequence, from the \textit{intellecta} and ontological notions and their opposites, non-being (\textit{non ens}), non-true or false, non-good or evil, the human intellect naturally formulates the first theoretical and practical principles.

The answer has been simplified as a syllogism.

Just as being (\textit{ens}) is being because it is, and the human intellect apprehends the ontological being (\textit{ens}) as what it is: real; and the human intellect apprehends the contrary as what it is: non-being (lack of being or \textit{non ens}). Just as truth is truth because it is, and the human intellect understands the ontological truth as what it is: true; and the human intellect apprehends the contrary as what it is: false (defect of truth or non-true). Just as logic is logical because it is, and the human intellect apprehends logic as what it is: logical; and the human intellect apprehends the contrary as what it is: illogical (lack of logic or non-logical). Thus, good is good because it is, and the human intellect apprehends the ontological good as what it is: good; and the human intellect apprehends the contrary as what it is: evil (defect of good or non-good). For this reason, the first theoretical and practical principles are first principles; because the human intellect apprehends and understands the first theoretical principles (principle of non-contradiction, of identity, of excluded middle) and practical ones (to seek the ontological and \textit{intellecta} goods avoiding the contraries, or natural law) as real, true, logical and good. Similarly, the human intellect understands the opposite of these principles as lack of reality, truth, logic and good. The first theoretical and practical principles cannot be demonstrated,
Hume's Law, Moore's Open Question and Aquinas' Human Intellect

because they are first principles of human knowledge.\(^{23}\) Therefore, the answer will always be the same, the first principles are true because they are first principles of any knowledge\(^ {24}\) and deny or questioning them is an \textit{petitio principii}.\(^ {25}\)

Thomas Aquinas affirms that the first thing that apprehends the intellect, abstracting from the sensible experience, is being (\textit{ens}) as being (\textit{ens}), not as a concrete notion but as an intentional one. The second thing that it understands is itself understanding being (\textit{ens}) as theoretical truth, not as a particular but as an intentional concept. The third thing that it wants is being (\textit{ens}) as practical truth, not as a particular but as an intentional notion. For that reason, firstly the intellect apprehends the notion of \textit{intellectum} being; then that of ontological truth; finally, that of \textit{intellectum} good (Dewan 2008). Therefore, when Moore is questioning whether good is good, he is also questioning if being is being and if truth is truth.\(^ {26}\)

Because, it is the human intellect (theoretical and practical at the same time) that apprehends, in an intentional way, the \textit{intellecta} and ontological notions. Subsequently, the human intellect formulates the first theoretical and practical principles. Aquinas' natural law (ethics) is a natural consequence of the rational being (anthropology); for the reason that, he defends the substantial unity and rationality of the human being. Hence, in Thomistic ethics good is definable without falling into Moore’s open-question argument (Henle 2012).

Aquinas response to Moore’s naturalistic fallacy is similar to Hume’s Is-ought thesis. When the human reason apprehends the ontological and \textit{intellectum} good \textit{per se}, the intellect presents it to the will (\textit{voluntas ut natura}), which desires it \textit{simpliciter}. As a result, the intellect naturally formulates the practical principle and orders the whole person to seek the ontological and \textit{intellectum} good avoiding the opposite. Therefore, the natural universal inclinations or precepts of the natural law are naturally formulated and ordered from top to bottom, not from bottom to top. This is because; Aquinas maintains the substantial unity and rationality of the human being (Pizzorni 1962). In addition, when Aquinas writes about the natural law does not refer to the multitude of non-universal and particular natural inclinations toward the countless number of particular and concrete goods. For example, the natural inclination to take care of old or ill people, the natural inclination to drink alcohol or the natural inclination to rape. Thomistic natural law exclusively refers to the universal natural inclinations of man as man toward the ontological and \textit{intellecta} goods \textit{per se}; such as preserving one’s life, not suicide, caring for your children, not committing filicide. The innumerable particular goods (taking care of old or ill people, drinking alcohol or raping) are not

\(^{23}\) Cf. Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics}, 4, c. 4. “Some indeed demand that even this shall be demonstrated, but this they do through want of education, for not to know of what things one should demand demonstration, and of what one should not, argues want of education. For it is impossible that there should be demonstration of absolutely everything (there would be an infinite regress, so that there would still be no demonstration)”.

\(^{24}\) Cf. Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics}, 11, c. 6. “For those […] is not easy to solve the difficulties to their satisfaction, unless they will posit something and no longer demand a reason for it; for it is only thus that all reasoning and all proof is accomplished; if they posit nothing, they destroy discussion and all reasoning. Therefore with such men there is no reasoning”.

\(^{25}\) Cf. Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics}, 4, c. 4. “Begging the question”.

\(^{26}\) Cf. Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics}, 11, c. 6. “Protagoras […] said that man is the measure of all things, meaning simply that that which seems to each man also assuredly is. If this is so, \textit{it follows that the same thing both is and is not, and is bad and good, and that the contents of all other opposite statements are true}”. My italics.
apprehended by the reason as *intellecta* and ontological goods; consequently, they will never conform to natural law. They are apprehended by the intellect as what they are; particular and non-ontological goods. Therefore, Aquinas’ ethics does not fall into Moore’s naturalistic fallacy (Pizzorni 2000).

The human intellect, theoretical and practical at the same time, apprehends *ens, verum* and *bonum* not as mere concrete notions, but instead apprehends being, truth, good and its contraries intentionally, in an intentional way. As a consequence, the human intellect intentionally formulates the first theoretical and practical principles (Llano 2003). That means, for a person to understand that murder is evil; he does not need to have assisted one or committed it. Simply the human intellect intentionally understanding what “person” and “own child” means, naturally knows what that entails: human nature, life, love, family, and so on. In the same way, the reason intentionally knowing what “murder” means, naturally understands what it entails. In consequence, the human intellect naturally formulates that to murder a person is evil and that it must be avoided; and that even worse would be to kill your son. According to Aquinas, for the intellect to formulate the first theoretical and practical principles, the person should have lived a certain period (some years of life) of sensible and intellectual experience. For the reason that, the human intellect cannot understand, nor formulate judgments, nor reasoning in act without the body (Bergamino 2002). Although the intellect *per se* does not use any bodily organ, it receives the sensible species from the sensible faculties that do use a corporal organ. Therefore, Thomistic ethics does not fall into Moore’s naturalistic fallacy (Lichacz 2008).

Regarding Moore radical scepticism, it can be said that ultimately, all knowledge and science relies on infallibility of human intellect in understanding the ontological and *intellecta* concepts being, truth, and good, and in formulating the first theoretical and practical principles formed by the *intellecta* concepts and their contraries. This truth has been blurred over the centuries due to a misunderstanding scepticism and relativism (Llano 2003). May be because the human intellect exclusively is infallible with respect to the ontological and *intellecta* concepts and the first universal principles. However, with respect to the reasonings from the first principles and, especially, with respect to all other reasoning, the human intellect is fallible (Hoffmann and Michon 2017), very fallible.

Professor Moore questions if the human intellect could apprehend (know) being (ens) and its contrary (non ens), or the capability to apprehend truth and its contrary (false), or the capability to apprehend good and its contrary (evil). Therefore, he is not only questioning the capability to apprehend (know) the *intellecta* and ontological notions, ultimately, he is questioning the capability of the human intellect to apprehend (know) anything. (Regarding his radical

27 Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4, c. 7. “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true”. My italics.

28 Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4, c. 4. “Why does he not walk […] over a precipice [committing suicide]? […] Evidently because he does not think that falling in is alike good and not good? Evidently, then, he judges one thing to be better and another worse”. My italics and brackets.

29 Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4, c. 4. “If all are alike both wrong and right, one who is in this condition will not be able either to speak or to say anything intelligible; for he says at the same
scepticism, I recommend his articles: *Proof of an external world; Being certain that one is in pain* and *Sense-data.* Moore seems to doubt about the principle of the principle, that is, the capability of the human intellect of understanding. (Regarding his epistemological *Open question*, I recommend his articles: *A defence of common sense* and *Certainty.* In fact, he has doubts about everything because he wants to demonstrate everything by building an universe of absolute certainties. This radical scepticism is not an intellectual virtue but an intellectual defect; that if carried to the end, would finish in an absolute subjectivism, falling in chaos and mental confusion.

4. Conclusion

In Aquinas’ doctrine, the human intellect, which is at once theoretical and practical, apprehends the ontological and *intelleetcb* notions of being (*ens*), good and truth; and their respective opposites, non-being (*non ens*), non-truth (false, illogical) and non-good (evil), in an intentional way. As a consequence, the human intellect naturally understands and formulates the first theoretical principles (the principle of non-contradiction, of identity, etc.); and the first practical principles or natural law (the natural universal inclinations to seek the universal goods avoiding the opposite). Persons naturally tend to behave as human beings, because of that; rational beings (anthropology) naturally follow natural law’s precepts (ethics). Thomistic moral philosophy is a natural value of ontology and anthropology not a result of mere social consensus (*contractualism*) or mere calculus of consequences (*consequentialism*).

This article tried to argue that Aquinas’ ethical doctrine could have already satisfactorily addressed both *Hume’s law* and its radical consequent *Moore’s open-question argument*, since Aquinas’ natural law refers exclusively to the natural universal inclinations of man as man, to seek the ontological and *intelleetcb* goods and to avoid the contrary. All the *intelleetcb* and ontological concepts are abstracted by the reason from the sensible experience, since there is nothing in the intellect that has not been in the senses before. Regarding *Hume’s law* Aquinas would argue that human beings (anthropology) naturally tend to seek the *intelleetcb* goods per se (ethics); therefore in Thomistic ethics (using Humean language) from *is* (*what is, man*) derives *ought* (*what ought to be, natural law*) without falling into *Hume’s law*. Regarding *Moore’s open question* and his natural fallacy. Aquinas would similarly argue that the natural law is a natural consequence of the rational being; this is because Aquinas defends the substantial unity and rationality of the human being. The natural law does not refer to the multitude of non-universal and particular natural inclinations toward particular and concrete goods. Nonetheless, the

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32 Cf. *Sent. metaphysicae*, lib. 4 l. 15. “Sed istae dubitationes stultae sunt”.
33 Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4, c. 4. “It is impossible that there should be demonstration of absolutely everything [there would be an infinite regress, so that there would still be no demonstration] […] It is absurd to seek to give an account of our views to one who cannot give an account of anything, in so far as he cannot do so. For such a man, as such, is from the start no better than a vegetable […] will not be capable of reasoning, either with himself or with another”. My italics.
natural law refers solely and exclusively to the natural universal inclinations towards the intellecta and universal and goods, which are intentionally abstracted by the intellect from the senses and the sensible experience. Therefore, in Thomistic ethics good is definable without falling into Moore's open question or in his naturalistic fallacy.

References


Wasserman’s book is a comprehensive overview and survey of the literature on time travel. Most of, if not all, the different models of time travel are carefully introduced and discussed to assess their pros and cons. Moreover, the philosophical tools needed to understand the debate are introduced before the problems are addressed. Thus, the book will prove to be useful both for people willing to approach this topic for the first time and for more advanced scholars that already work on specific subtopics of time travel but maybe lack the general picture or the (recent) history of the problem. The book offers expansions on the existing literature as well. For instance, the hyper-time model of time travel, which Wasserman seems to favour, is here better developed than it was in his previous work with Hudson (2010). Throughout all the book, the arguments are always well laid out, and each assumption is clearly highlighted. Moreover, the book comes with a lot of figures that help the reader understand what is going on with the example discussed.

The book’s main question is whether or not time travel is possible. As it is well known, there are several different kinds of possibilities. For instance, something can be logically possible (in accordance with the laws of logic), physically possible (in accordance with the laws of nature of a given world), technologically possible (permitted by the current level of technology), and many more. The kind of possibility Wasserman is interested in is the metaphysical one. He adopts a straightforward account of metaphysical possibility, according to which something is metaphysically possible only if it is permitted by the laws of metaphysics. What is a law of metaphysics is then something that needs clarification. According to Wasserman, a law of metaphysics is a suitably general generalization about what grounds what. The “what” ranges over everything, and the relevant relation at play is the non-causal grounding relation, which imposes a hierarchical structure on reality. Typically, a law of metaphysics will provide a universal generalization in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, specifying also the direction of the grounding relation. An example of a law of metaphysics candidate might help here. For instance, one might believe that an event C causes an event E if and only if, and in that case because, events similar to C are always followed in time by events similar to E. If so, that person would believe in a metaphysical law about causation. The law says something general about causation, and it explains why something causes something else; causal relations are grounded on the relation of precedence of events of similar kind. This account of metaphysical possibility gives Wasserman a way to homogeneously treat the several paradoxes time travel raises. That is, typically the arguments discussed in the book are those against the possibility of time travel, whose form is the following. If time travel were metaphysically possible, then something else would be possible. But that something else is metaphysically impossible (forbidden by the laws of metaphysics), hence time travel is metaphysically impossible. For instance, backward time travel would make backward causation possible, i.e. an effect

preceding its cause in time. The time traveller pushes her time machine’s button, and earlier in time the machine appears out of thin air at the time traveller’s desired destination. Pushing the button clearly causes the event of the machine appearing out of thin air in the past, and the latter event comes earlier in time than the former one. But one might think that backward causation is metaphysically impossible. For instance, the law of metaphysics about causation mentioned above rules out backward causation because according to it, causes always come earlier than their effects. If we had conclusive reasons to think that that law of metaphysics is correct, then backward time travel would also be ruled out by the realm of metaphysical possibilities. Of course, arguments of this form can be resisted in at least two ways. One might adopt different laws of metaphysics, such that they allow for what comes together with time travel, and independently motivate them. Or it can be said that what is allowed by time travel is not, even if it might seem so, in contradiction with the laws of metaphysics. Refuting these arguments in ways such as these against the metaphysical possibility of time travel is what Wasserman does for most of the book, drawing from the existing literature and expanding on it, eventually concluding that time travel is metaphysically possible.

Into the book structure: Chapter 1 provides some examples of time travel and a definition of it. Chapter 2 offers a brief overview of the main metaphysical theories of time and shows how they behave when it comes to time travel. Chapter 3 mostly has to do with the paradoxes of past-alterations. In short, what is paradoxical is that it seems possible for time travellers to perform actions such that, if performed, would bring about changes in the past, whereas there are strong reasons to think that changing the past is impossible. Wasserman thinks that two-dimensional models of time travel, models that feature hyper-time as a second dimension of time, offer the means to coherently overcome this difficulty. In such models, it is argued, time travellers can change the past by making the same past-time feature different events relative to different hyper-times. Chapter 4 digs more into the paradoxes raised by the time traveller’s abilities with respect to possible changes in the past. Traditionally, this debate had a lot to do with issues related to free will because if the past cannot be changed, then the only things time travellers can do are the ones they have already done, leaving no room for the power to do otherwise. However, the same paradoxes can be raised through thought experiments involving machines instead of human time travellers. Wasserman’s position on this is that both the case involving humans and the cases involving objects should receive the same treatment. Chapter 5 deals with causal paradoxes that pose a threat to the possibility of time travel. Some are: the causal loop paradox (where a causal loop is a series of events $e_1, e_2, \ldots, e_n$ such that each event causes the next one, and $e_n$ causes $e_1$), the *ex nihilo* paradox (an object involved in a causal loop may lack an origin), and the restoration paradox (an object in a causal loop has to be somehow restored to its initial condition before it gets to the beginning of the causal loop). The last chapter deals with the Paradoxes of Identity and Self-Visitation.

Overall, Wasserman’s book on the paradoxes of time travel makes an excellent read, mostly for how it carefully goes through the literature and thoroughly addresses the arguments in favour and against the metaphysical possibility of time travel. On a final remark, I want to highlight two possible worries about the book content. The first worry has to do with the definition of
time travel Wasserman adopts (Chapter 1). The traditional definition of time travel comes from Lewis (1976). The Lewisian definition says that we have time travel whenever there is a discrepancy between external time, i.e. time itself, and the time traveller’s personal time. Personal time is what orders the time-travellers stages that are scattered throughout external time. This ordering is made on the basis of the regularities which normally hold in the world the time-traveller inhabits. It is a regularity in our world that, say, we first eat pizza and then digest it. Consider a time-traveller in our world who has a slice of pizza for lunch, time travels 40 years back, and then digest that slice 1 hour later. Given the regularity just mentioned, the time-traveller eating-stage is earlier than the digesting-stage according to her personal time, even though the latter is earlier than the former according to external time. This discrepancy is what qualifies this case as a time travel case. However, Wasserman observes, this definition is wanting when we try to apply it to objects. Wasserman makes us consider an electron that never changes its intrinsic properties. Given that we have a bunch of stages of the electron always intrinsically identical, we are free to assign to those stages several personal times to the electron that preserve the regularities we normally observe, namely the electron never changing its intrinsic properties. Some of those personal times, actually all but one, would generate a mismatch with external time and hence the definition would (wrongly) predict that the electron travels in time. Wasserman tries to overcome this problem by arguing that the correct account of personal time that must enter the Lewisian definition in terms of discrepancy has to be causal. Causal dependence, Wasserman argues, seems to be the relation that correctly orders the stages of a time traveller, whether it be a person, a particle, or everything else (8). However, this proposed definition can be challenged by considering a little variation of the electron case. Say that the intrinsically unchanging electron does time travel. At some point, it enters a wormhole and it appears back in the past. No doubt that in such case the electron time travels. Yet, Wasserman’s causal definition does not predict so. In fact, it is plausible to think that causal relations among the stages of an object necessarily bring about some kind of intrinsic change in that object. But the electron never undergoes any kind of intrinsic change, and hence there isn’t any causal relation among its stages. Therefore, if the personal time of an object is the ordering provided by the causal relation among its stages, we don’t even have personal time for the electron here, and hence no mismatch between its personal time and external time. Notice that we cannot appeal to causes external to the electron to fix this problem, for when we are looking for discrepancies between external time and personal time of an object, what happens externally to that object contributes to making up the ordering of external time.

The second worry has to do with the hyper-time models of time travel Wasserman discusses. I will here focus on the A-theoretical hyper-time model coupled with eternalism (presented in Chapter 3, Section 4.3). According to this model, Reality comprises an eternalist block that stretches out across time. The further temporal dimension, hyper-time, is the temporal dimension across which an objective passage of the Now over the temporal slices of the block takes place. Wasserman argues that this model can provide genuine cases of past

alterations by means of time travel. Here is how. Say that at the moment of hyper-time ht1 the eternalist block features Tim, a would-be time traveller pressing the button of his time machine at t100. At ht1, Tim is unsuccessful because the block does not feature his desired appearance out of thin air at t50. But when the Now shines over t100, say that it happens at ht100, the block changes and it hyper-now features Tim’s relocation in the past. The past year t50 changes from not containing Tim relative to ht99 to containing him relative to ht100. Given that in hyper-time models time has hyper-temporal parts, Wasserman argues that this is a genuine case of past-alteration because Tim really arrives to the past time t50, a time at which he has never been around before. However, there is still room for arguing that this is not a case of past alteration. For once hyper-time enters the picture, a location in time is no longer individuated by a single time-coordinate. Rather, it is individuated by a pair of time/hyper-time coordinates. And if so, no time-location so construed can ever change because a pair time/hyper-time can never change from containing an event to not containing it, or else we would have a contradiction. What happens is that the time-location t50/ht99 eternally does not feature Tim, whereas the time-location t50/ht100 eternally features him.  

3 See Baron, S. 2015, “Back to the Unchanging Past”, Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, 98, 1, 129-47 for considerations along these lines.

4 I would like to thank Samuele Iaquinto, Giuliano Torrengo and an anonymous referee for comments on an earlier version of this review.


Inferentialism is a house with many mansions, and usually the books devoted to it just try to sketch the landscape in order to focus on more specific subjects. Turbanti’s book defines a different, more ambitious, project: the author attempts a wide reconstruction of Robert Brandom’s inferentialism that takes advantage of a more mature phase of reception and discussion. In particular, Turbanti tried to figure out how the main Brandomian commitments hang together, something scholars in the field judged premature until now, and for a time to come. This means that Brandom’s inferentialism is here understood in its wider connection with the recent project called ‘analytic pragmatism’ (hereafter AP), developed in the book Between Saying and Doing (thereafter BSD), and also with Brandom’s still unpublished work on Hegel.  

Even though Turbanti, in his introduction, describes the scope of his book as ‘narrow’ and low profile—because of its focus just on inferentialism—as a matter of fact, it is not a narrow scope at all. So, this is not the typical book about inferentialism for many reasons. In particular, it is noteworthy and important for a number of rather unique features. But let us first

1 Brandom, R.B. 2008, Between Saying and Doing, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Brandom’s reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit can be found in A Spirit of Trust, online: http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/spirit_of_trust_2014.html
take a look at the structure of the book where such features emerge as properly put in context.

Chapter 1 introduces in general the main themes presented, the claims advanced, and the challenges undertaken by this book. A first important feature comes from the recent work by Jaroslav Peregrin—with its distinction of inferentialism, as a fundamentally ‘normative’ approach to conceptual content and discursive practice—from the views that come under the heading inferential role semantics, understood as rather ‘causal’ accounts. Inferentialism, according to this distinction, is an account that focuses on which inferences a speaker ought to draw to participate in a discursive practice where the performances of speakers are liable to be assessed by other speakers; according to (causal) inferential role semantics, the inferences that determine the content of a linguistic expression (or of a thought) are those that speakers are disposed/caused to draw (6). From this point of view, the distinction is fundamental in clarifying how deeply Brandom’s project differs from a number of accounts proposing explanatory views based on inferential role. This is particularly useful when it comes to reconstructing the historical and argumentative genealogy of normative inferentialism. This presentation sharply distinguishes an argumentative path towards normative inferentialism that goes from Frege to Brandom, and rules out those figures which are fundamental in shaping the causal accounts, but whose contribution is not directly significant for the Brandomian project. It helps also to distinguish and isolate the problems which are genuine for normative inferentialism from those that, coming from the causal field, can make the dialectics spurious and lead to certain confusions. In this very context, a similar point is made to better distinguish normative inferentialism from its relatives in the field of proof-theoretic semantics (7).

Chapter 2 introduces Brandom’s normative pragmatics, the conception of discursive practice as governed by “the game of giving and asking for reasons”. Turbanti here starts with an explicit account of what Brandom calls sapience: the idea that human cognition and intentionality depend essentially on the use of concepts and on the participation in normative practices. This account of sapience is also a nice introduction to Sellars’ criticism to the Myth of the Given: accordingly, perceptual episodes alone are not sufficient to ground perceptual knowledge, thus acknowledging a crucial difference between ‘responsiveness’ (that characterizes such episodes) and ‘contentfulness’ (characterizing knowledge). Furthermore, the chapter explores the main pillars of Brandom’s pragmatics: the normative notions of ‘commitment’ and ‘entitlement’, and the basic understanding of discursive practitioners as deontic scorekeepers. Moreover, the chapter deals with ‘normative phenomenalism’—the idea that normative statuses of speakers depend on their normative attitudes—here introduced in great depth, and this presentation, that introduces and faces the main challenges in the debate, is arguably the best in the literature. Again, another aspect of interest is the pragmatics-semantics interface, that is presented with a detailed analysis. Here, the reader can also appreciate the direct contrast between Brandom’s pragmatics and mainstream literature in cognitive pragmatics. In particular, Turbanti does a good job in emphasizing how

Brandom’s perspective is capable of putting serious pressure to the very foundations of the cognitive approach. For example, Brandom’s insights here are relevant in questioning the explanatory role that the notion of ‘speaker’s intention’ plays in theories like Grice’s and its developments: namely, these accounts just presuppose the contentfulness of intentional states (48). Finally, the chapter presents and discusses the challenge of the so-called ‘declarative fallacy’ with which Rebecca Kukla and Mark Lance, although from a rather sympathetic perspective, addressed Brandom’s pragmatics: the idea of an unjustified prominence of assertive speech acts over other types (49-59).

Chapter 3 deals with the inferentialist account of conceptual content, a “semantic theory that represents linguistic contents in terms of inferences” (61). Here the reconstruction is wide, and the contributions of the ‘founding fathers’ of inferentialism (Frege, Sellars, Dummett) are presented with great detail. A noteworthy feature is the negative narrative that Turbanti employs in order to present and discuss the typical lessons of inferentialism. The author skilfully introduces inferentialist insights and solutions in the philosophy of language by presenting in detail the problems of alternative accounts as the basic motivations for introducing typical Brandomian (and Sellarsian) points. These narratives often make Turbanti’s presentations and discussions of these insights wider and more complex than those proposed by Brandom himself; they not only deal with theoretical details and dialectics, but are often enriched with historical perspective. For example, the book presents inferentialism by starting with a taxonomy of the problems of the nominalist conceptions of meaning—the idea that all linguistic expressions work like names. In this context, Turbanti’s negative narrative is at its best, especially presenting Gilbert Ryle’s ‘Fido’-Fido objection against Millian nominalism (62), and Dummett’s criticism of Frege’s assimilation of sentences to complex names (63). This extension of the dialectics, as readers may easily appreciate, is particularly interesting not only for the contribution of Frege and Sellars, but also of Carnap, as for example the first source, even without a personal endorsement, of the very idea of ‘material inferences’: “if ever Carnap was close to inferentialism, the idea that good inferences go before logical forms is where he certainly gets off the train” (71).

The chapter smoothly goes on to present the well-known characteristics of Brandom’s semantics: its holistic shape; the putative difficulties in explaining the compositionality of meaning; the substitutional account of sub-sentential expressions; and the anaphoric conception of semantic vocabulary. Here, Turbanti adds to this reconstruction a final section (3.2) devoted to introducing Brandom’s expressivism, and the ‘meaning-use analysis’ taken from BSD, in order to complement inferentialism with a preliminary grip on the conceptual toolbox of AP. In particular, Turbanti’s presentation of logical expressivism—the idea that logical vocabulary plays the fundamental expressive role of ‘elucidating’, or ‘making explicit’, conceptual contents and relations—is the most complete and exhaustive in the literature (with an interesting reconstruction of its Fregean roots).

Chapter 4 presents ‘incompatibility semantics’ (thereafter IS), the formal semantics developed in BSD as a pragmatic meta-vocabulary for logical and modal vocabularies. This enterprise depends on the general possibility of using such meta-vocabulary to make explicit “the relations between practices and vocabularies” (97). In this sense, it is both a pragmatist and expressivist attempt. The chapter begins with a fruitful exploration of the reasons that may lead to develop a formal semantics in a general context influenced by Sellars’ distinction between formal and philosophical semantics: a framework that recommends the latter view as the default option. Turbanti clarifies how such misunderstandings rest on dubious representationalist conceptions of formal semantics; it is a tool for representing meanings, not a representational account of meanings (110-11). The presentation goes on to explore both the formal aspects and the underlying theoretical motivations of this apparatus, contributing to a more robust understanding of Brandom’s overall expressivism. Of particular interest is the semantic interpretation of IS (118-25), then the way in which logical vocabulary is defined (126-40), and the highlighting of some of its problems. Furthermore, the chapter introduces some noteworthy formal properties of the system, especially conservativity, as warranting the semantic recursiveness of IS (140-43) instead of the usual accounts based on compositionality. Conservativity permits the meanings expressed within the system to be fully recursive, even though these are holistic, and therefore non-compositional. And this property is of special importance for a holistic semantics like inferentialism, that prima facie would entail serious difficulties in explaining compositionality. As the last point shows, one master feature of this chapter (and of this book) is the use of the technical apparatus of AP, developed by Brandom in BSD, as a main tool in order to better clarify the wide project of inferentialism put forward with the monumental Making it Explicit (thereafter MIE). More generally, Turbanti manages to use effectively AP to provide a global account of the rational expressivism of which MIE is species of a genus.

Chapter 5 explores the possibility of extending the expressive power of IS in other directions and with slightly different philosophical motivations. These explorations provide interesting philosophical insights, especially dealing with open problems for both IS and its connection with inferentialism. Turbanti extends the formal framework in order to further develop the expressive power of this language. This chapter presents the most original sections of the book, and since Turbanti is a logician—like others who devoted special attention to this framework—the main results are formal in character. He first uses IS to frame a Kripkean ‘possible worlds semantics’ with the effect of vindicating “incompatibility as a serious ground for modal vocabulary” (145). Then, he tries to use IS to develop a non-monotonic type of logical entailment (purported to

5 According to BSD, pragmatic meta-vocabularies are those sufficient in specifying the practices required to count as using certain target vocabularies: e.g., one may use “non-indexical vocabulary” as “sufficient to specify the practice required to count as using indexical vocabulary” (99).


match the defeasible character of material inference). Both exercises are revealing: first Turbanti shows that certain fundamental results proved by Brandom about IS, e.g., the fact that it is a holistic semantics which is fully recursive without being compositional, can be proved as well in the modified Kripkean framework (152); second, after a nice summary of the connection between modality and defeasibility of material inferences, Turbanti explores the chances of developing a tenable notion of non-monotonic entailment suitable for Brandom’s purposes, by developing IS in the direction of Preferential Calculus, even though this attempt still presents some open problems (172).

Chapter 6 relocates inferentialism in the wider context of two great philosophical traditions: its connections with the legacy of American Pragmatism and with German Idealism (especially the dialectics that goes from Kant to Hegel). Such relocation deals with the main open problems for normative inferentialism, that is, realism and the objectivity of conceptual norms in a context of subjective/perspectival discursive commitments. After summarizing Brandom’s main views on inferentialism and realism, section 6.2 tries to identify Brandom’s debts and connections—together with a number of divergencies—with the pragmatist tradition. Then Turbanti tackles Kant and Hegel: first, with the problems of Kant’s normative theory of judgment; and then with conceptual realism, the ‘Hegelian’ solution to the problem dealing with the objectivity of conceptual norms. In particular, Turbanti explores Brandom’s ‘semantic’ reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, dealing with conceptual realism. This is the idea that reality is conceptually structured. Turbanti devotes some efforts to clarify how this Hegelian route is in line with Brandom’s overall pragmatism, and also tries to present the main challenges for conceptual realism, such as the sharp remarks advanced by Jürgen Habermas. In 6.4, another important aspect deals with the Brandomian reading of Hegel’s notion of ‘determinate negation’ in terms of material incompatibilities between commitments undertaken by means of assertoric judgments. Since conceptual contents become ‘progressively determined’ by ruling out other contents that show up as incompatible with them, this very practice amounts to a progressive updating of commitments and beliefs undertaken by speakers. This suggests a parallel with theories of belief-revision. The chapter ends with an attempt to emphasize the open problems of this Hegelian enterprise, well summarized also in the conclusion.

Despite original and innovative ways to introduce and discuss normative inferentialism, this book is more in line with other works in identifying the main axes of Brandom’s theory: a normative pragmatics that understands the game of giving and asking for reasons as the core of discursive practice; an inferential account of the conceptual contents mongered by discursive practitioners; and an expressivist conception of logic, language, and rationality. But this presentation offers some interesting and original features. In particular, this reconstruction presents a sophisticated understanding of Brandom’s expressivism, and rightly stresses the centrality of it for the overall inferentialist enterprise:

9 Being committed to a certain content \( C \) precludes entitlement to the contents that are incompatible with \( C \).
Brandom’s rational expressivism is the thesis that the application of concepts is essentially a process of expression, consisting in making explicit what is implicit, in the sense of turning something that can only be done into something that can also be said (8).

Furthermore, this understanding greatly profits from the vantage point provided by Brandom in BSD, where meta-vocabularies and vocabularies are analysed with a special focus on their expressive power and in connection with social practices. The way in which expressivism is worked out here provides more refined tools, also in order to look back at MIE. Turbanti claims that the two books are connected in a tighter way than Brandom himself believes. He claims that AP is “necessarily required in order to appreciate Brandom’s later work in the philosophy of language” (10). From this point of view, Turbanti’s combined presentation is a substantial improvement. In fact, according to this reading expressivism can be seen as a “unitary perspective” from which BSD and MIE “can be seen as part of the very same philosophical enterprise” (10). This focus on expressivism is also very important since it is in general, and despite its relevance, the less understood and appreciated part of Brandom’s proposal, and this nice presentation may surely be of help to the reader.

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Tim Button’s *The Limits of Realism* offers an in-depth discussion of Hilary Putnam’s internal realism. The centrepiece of the book is a discussion of the model theoretic argument and the vat argument against external realism, the position that Putnam saw as diametrically opposed to internal realism. Button gives a compelling defence of both arguments, and takes them to refute external realism. However, he does not endorse internal realism, concluding instead that we must be ‘something vaguely in-between’ the two poles of external and internal realism (3). Hence the title of the book: we are to be realists within limits. Vague limits, but limits nonetheless.

The book deserves recognition for its spirited defence of the model theoretic argument and the vat argument. The vast majority of the literature on these arguments is negative, and this is a shame because, as Button shows, both arguments are far richer and more compelling than they are usually taken to be. Hopefully his book will help to rectify this situation. Certainly, it does a good job of presenting the arguments and their implications in a clear style, working through the details where necessary, whilst always keeping the broader picture in view.

In particular, I am sympathetic to Button’s defence of the vat argument. However, even if Button succeeds in showing that the vat argument is sound and cogent, I do not think that it can move us away from metaphysical realism as he claims. Thus, I do not agree with Button that the vat argument shows that we must be ‘something vaguely in-between’ the two poles of external and internal realism. (I do not have space here to consider the model-theoretic argument. However, I think that similar considerations apply to it.)
Button starts out by considering the three claims that Putnam attributes to the external realist. The first is:

**The Independence Principle**: The world is (largely) made up of objects that are mind-, language-, and theory-independent (8).

The second is:

**The Correspondence Principle**: ‘Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things’ (8).

Taken together, these two claims might be thought to entail:

**The Cartesian Principle**: Even an ideal theory might be radically false (10).

An ‘ideal’ theory is one that fits all of the data we can gather, is simple, elegant, etc.

Without getting into details, one can appreciate the intuitive line of thought. The first principle says that the world is independent of the mind, and the second principle says that truth is a matter of producing representations that correspond with that world. So it would seem to be possible that even an ideal theory might be false due to a non-cooperative world, as the Cartesian Principle says.

Button points out that there are ways of reading the Independence Principle and the Correspondence Principle on which they present obviously true claims which, moreover, an internal realist would not deny. It is the Cartesian Principle that seems straightforwardly particular to external realism. The Independence Principle and the Correspondence Principle are only distinctive of external realism insofar as they are understood in such a way that they entail the Cartesian Principle. It is not obvious exactly how the Independence Principle and the Correspondence Principle are to be read so that they imply the Cartesian Principle, but Button does not press the external realist on this issue. Rather, his strategy is to wage a ‘war by proxy’ on the external realist versions of the Independence Principle and the Correspondence Principle by showing that the Cartesian Principle that they entail is false (71).

Now the issue arises: how are we to read the Cartesian Principle? Specifically, how are we to read ‘might’ in the claim that an ideal theory might be radically false? The claim that the Cartesian Principle is entailed by external realist versions of the Correspondence Principle and the Independence Principle suggests that it is to be read as an expression of a metaphysical or conceptual possibility. That is the sort of consequence that one would expect a metaphysical claim such as the Independence Principle and a semantic claim such as the Correspondence Principle to have, if any.

There is another reading, suggested by the label ‘Cartesian Principle’. This is to read the principle as a statement of epistemic possibility. The claim would then be that for all we know (and, presumably, ever could know) even an ideal theory could be false. Of course, a natural thought is that the metaphysical version of the Cartesian Principle could play a key role in an argument for the

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epistemic version of the Cartesian Principle. Many sceptical arguments start out with the claim that a sceptical scenario is a metaphysical possibility, and then move to the claim that it is also a for-all-we-know possibility. Perhaps this is why Button does not sharply distinguish the two readings of the principle, taking it that both versions of the principle stand or fall together. However, we should recognise the possibility that the Cartesian Principle will turn out to be false on an epistemic reading, despite being true on a metaphysical reading. If this should happen, it would not seem to be problematic for an external realist who endorses versions of the Independence Principle and the Correspondence Principle that jointly entail the metaphysical version of the Cartesian Principle.

In fact, I think that if Button's defence of the vat argument succeeds then this is exactly the situation in which we find ourselves. The Cartesian Principle, on both its metaphysical and its epistemic reading, seems to be true because we might be in a sceptical scenario. For example, we might (metaphysically, epistemically) all be brains in vats, fed sensory experiences by a supercomputer. If this were the case, then it seems that even the best theory we could ever come up with would be false. It would say, for example, that I have hands, that I live on Earth, that it is sunny. However, I would not have hands, would not live on Earth, and it would not be sunny. So to establish that the Cartesian Principle is false we need an argument that shows that we are not all permanently envatted brains (and, ultimately, that we are not in any sort of radical sceptical scenario, but we will not be concerned with this further step here; let us grant Button's convincingly argued claim that if the vat argument works on one radical sceptical scenario it works on them all).

The vat argument looks like it might do the job. Button puts it like this. Let us write ‘x is a BIV’ as shorthand for ‘x is an eternally envatted brain and so is everyone else’. We can then argue as follows:

1. A BIV's word ‘brain’ does not refer to brains.
2. My word ‘brain’ refers to brains.
3. So: I am not a BIV.

Premise (1) is defended by an appeal to semantic externalism. A BIV would not have had the kind of causal contact with brains necessary in order to refer to them. After all, it would never have had perceptual contact with a brain, and it cannot have talked to anyone who has, for, by hypothesis, if something is a BIV then everyone else is also an eternally envatted brain. Premise (2) is defended by appeal to the claim that I can disquote to specify the referents of words in my own language. Thus, when I say ‘brains’ I refer to brains. Moreover, if I am to take myself to be entertaining the sceptical worry in the first place I am committed to the claim that I can refer to brains: if I am to worry that I am a brain in a vat I must be able to refer to brains.

Button concludes that the vat argument shows that I am not a BIV, and so the Cartesian Principle is false (remember that we are granting that if the vat argument succeeds in showing that I am not a BIV, it succeeds in showing that I am not in any radical sceptical scenario). However, he notes that the vat argument cannot be used to rule out some less radical sceptical scenarios, that is, scenarios that falsify fewer of our beliefs about the external world. For example, suppose we read ‘x is a BIV’ as shorthand for ‘x was envatted via some undetectable process yesterday, although up to that point x lived a normal life of
the sort that I normally take myself to be living’. In that case, the hypothesis that I am a BIV will falsify many of my beliefs, but fewer than the hypothesis that I am eternally envatted would falsify. If we read ‘I am a BIV’ in this way then premise (1) will be false. No plausible semantic externalism will entail that a subject who has spent most of its life interacting with brains in the way I ordinarily take myself to cannot refer to brains. So the vat argument cannot be used to rule out the possibility that I am in this less radical sceptical scenario.

Because it does not rule out the possibility that I am in some less radical sceptical scenarios, Button concludes that the vat argument does not support internal realism, which does not countenance the possibility that we might be in any sceptical scenario, even of a less radical sort. Rather, Button argues that as we increase the radicalness of sceptical scenarios there is no precise point at which vat style arguments kick in. However, they undoubtedly do kick in, and they certainly rule out radical sceptical scenarios. Thus, there is a limit, albeit a vague one, to how radical a sceptical scenario we can worry about. Since the point at which we position ourselves between the poles of external and internal realism is intended to be tied to how radical a sceptical scenario we can worry about, this conclusion leaves us ‘vaguely in-between’ external realism and internal realism.

I agree with Button that I can use the vat argument to show that I am not in any radical sceptical scenario. I also agree with him that as sceptical scenarios become less radical the point at which vat style arguments stop working is vague. However, I do not think that any of this pushes us away from external realism.

I can use the vat argument to rule out the possibility that I am a BIV (on the original reading: ‘x is an eternally envatted brain, and so is everyone else’). That is, the argument shows that it is not an epistemic possibility that I am a BIV, and so (on the assumption that I can also use it to show that I am not in any other sort of radical sceptical scenario) it shows that the epistemic version of the Cartesian Principle is false. However, it does not show that it is not metaphysically possible for me to be a BIV. For all that the vat argument says, BIVs are metaphysically possible, and there is a possible world where I am a BIV. So it is unclear why an external realist who endorses versions of the Correspondence Principle and the Independence Principle that entail the metaphysical version of the Cartesian Principle should be bothered by any of this.

It is true that the vat argument does entail a metaphysical impossibility. Although the vat argument does not entail that there is no possible world in which I am a BIV, it does entail that there is no possible world in which a BIV can refer to brains. However, that there are possible worlds in which BIVs can refer to brains was not the claim that the external realist versions of the Correspondence Principle and the Independence Principle were said to entail. Nor, intuitively, does it seem that they would be expected to entail it, no matter how robustly we read these claims. The idea that truth is a matter of producing representations that corresponded with a world that is independent of our minds does not seem to carry any implications regarding who can produce certain representations. It takes nothing away from whatever robustness these ideas might be thought to have if we say that a BIV would not be able to refer to brains, and thus would not be able to describe its predicament. If anything, the fact that the BIV cannot describe its predicament only makes that predicament
more terrible. Another reason for the external realist to be relieved that we are not in it.

So I do not think that the external realist need be worried that the vat argument shows that the epistemic version of the Cartesian Principle is false, since it does so in a way that is compatible with the metaphysical version of the Cartesian Principle. Indeed, the external realist may welcome this result, for without it she might have been stuck with an insoluble epistemic problem, namely, the truth of the epistemic version of the Cartesian Principle, which looks more or less like scepticism. Now she can be rid of such scepticism, whilst continuing to claim that the world is in some very strong sense mind independent, and that truth consists of us producing a representation that corresponds with that world. The external realist has a metaphysical and semantic outlook on which it is deeply contingent—lucky even—if we are not in a sceptical scenario in which even our best theory would be false. But the vat argument shows that, luckily, we happen not to be in such a sceptical scenario. The external realist will breathe a sigh of relief, for she endorses a picture of the world on which we easily might have been. Nonetheless, she will do so while continuing to endorse that picture.

So, in conclusion, I do not think that the vat argument can push us away from external realism. This is because, if it succeeds, it shows that the epistemic version of the Cartesian Principle is false, but it does not show that the metaphysical version of the Cartesian Principle is false. However, the external realist is only committed to the metaphysical version of the Cartesian Principle, so this will not bother her. Indeed, she may welcome it as the solution to a sceptical problem that her commitment to the metaphysical version of the Cartesian Principle may seem to give rise to.

A more speculative conclusion suggested by these considerations is that the relevance of the vat argument to the realism debate is limited. If the vat argument has consequences, they would seem to be epistemological, allowing us to rule out at least some radical sceptical scenarios. Exactly how far this gets us as a response to scepticism remains an open question, however.2

2 Thanks to Massimo Dell’Utri for helpful comments.
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