Toxic Conspiracy Theories as Epistemically Illuminating Falsehoods

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Abstract

This paper explores the epistemic implications of endorsing a specific category of conspiracy theories, which I term "toxic conspiracy theories" (following Basham, 2018). I contend that these theories exert a profound and distinctive impact on our belief system, not only shaping perspectives on the specific events they are purported to explain, but also influencing our broader understanding of sociopolitical reality. I delineate a surprising result of this doxastically encompassing nature of toxic conspiracy theories: if some toxic conspiracy theory is true, then a belief in a false one can be remarkably illuminating. Consequently, adherents of toxic conspiracy theories may, contrary to prevailing opinion, possess a more astute grasp of sociopolitical realities than their counterparts who eschew such conspiratorial narratives. I then move on to address an objection suggesting that toxic conspiracy theories are so overwhelmingly unlikely to render the central argument a mere academic exercise. In response I draw on various 'particularist' arguments to the contrary and further argue that the unlikelihood of toxic conspiracy theories cannot be determined without engagement with some foundational questions regarding the nature and integrity of our democratic institutions.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, Understanding, Toxic truths, Explanation, Mistrust.

1. Introduction

Scholars have charged conspiracy theories with many epistemic flaws: they are rarely warranted (Popper 1969), unnecessarily complex (Mandik 2007), overly intentional (Clarke 2002), and insulated from evidence (Sunstein &Vermeule 2009; Napolitano 2021). Theorists themselves are seen as gullible (Cassam 2016), paranoid (Hofstadter 1965; Lipton 2004), biased and prone to faulty reasoning (Harris 2018), and historically misinformed (Popper 1969; Fenster 1991).

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If this extensive indictment holds merit, then the growing prevalence of conspiracy theories in Western societies is a profound cause for concern.[1] At the very least, it suggests an epistemic degradation of public discourse and the standards of rationality underpinning it.[2]

I seek to modestly and partially challenge this bleak diagnosis. However, rather than contesting the alleged epistemic faults of conspiracy theories and theorists directly, I opt for a different avenue of inquiry. First, I defend the following conditional: if some 'toxic' conspiracy theory (a term I adopt from Lee Basham and clarify below) is true, then endorsing a distinct yet false toxic conspiracy theory can be highly illuminating. Secondly, I contend that, at the very least, the truth of some toxic conspiracy theory remains a live possibility—such a scenario is not farfetched and we cannot dismiss it out of hand. Consequently, widespread endorsement of toxic conspiracy theories, even when such theories are false, is potentially epistemically meritorious, contrary to prevailing opinion.

A roadmap of the paper: in the second section I introduce the notion of a toxic conspiracy theory. Following this introduction, the third section delves into the epistemic implications of endorsing a toxic conspiracy theory. Building on this exploration, the fourth section unfolds the main argument of this paper, positing that under certain conditions, toxic conspiracy theories possess inherent epistemic value. Turning to potential challenges, the fifth section addresses a noteworthy objection to my central argument. Concluding the paper, the sixth section offers brief closing remarks.

2. Toxic Conspiracy Theories

The entities tasked with investigating, prosecuting, and informing the public about vast conspiratorial crimes at the highest echelons of institutional power—namely, the mainstream media and law enforcement—are generally, albeit not invariably, trustworthy. Thus, if such conspiracies were occurring, the public would likely have been informed of them. Moreover, the greater the alleged conspiracy in terms of the number of individuals involved, its duration of secrecy, and the severity of the presumed crimes, the more probable a public revelation becomes. Consequently, the absence of such public disclosure provides compelling evidence against the existence of these vast and sinister conspiracies. This is the public trust argument against the existence of vast and protracted conspiracies within the upper tiers of institutional leadership (Keeley 1999). Lee Basham (2018) presents an alternative explanation for this absence of public disclosure, rooted in the idea of 'toxic truths'. A toxic truth is one that, if made public, would lead to pervasive mistrust by the public in governing institutions and elected officials. Such revelations might shatter the public's faith in the democratic ethos at the heart of civic society, and potentially lead to widespread unrest, revolt and revolution. Thus, deeply entrenched institutional powers (such as the corporations that own mainstream media outlets, and national law enforcement agencies), as well as ordinary citizens invested in the prevailing so-

[1] Contrary to prevailing public perception, empirical data suggests that the popularity of conspiracy theories may not be increasing (Uscinski et al. 2022). Nevertheless, I assume that at the very least conspiracy theories are gaining prominence in public discourse.

[2] I mostly sidestep the practical consequences of belief in conspiracy theories, as my primary focus is the epistemic implications of such beliefs.

cial order and the continued stability of the market-based economy, would likely be disinclined to vigorously investigate or unveil toxic truths.

Moreover, these entrenched institutions and the invested citizens operating within them are likely to downplay evidence supporting vast and sinister conspiracy theories, caricaturize their proponents, and largely push these ideas outside the Overton window. According to Basham, the issue with toxic truths does not lie in "descending control by a hypothetical cabal of conspirators". Instead, toxic truths instigate a kind of voluntary myopia, propelled by an aversion to commit cognitive and physical resources to uncover knowledge that could potentially unravel the social fabric. This isn't about a cover-up in the traditional sense—where there's knowledge of an event coupled with deliberate efforts to hide it due to its catastrophic implications. A toxic truth is one we are loath to earnestly seek out in the first place primarily because of the dire consequences its discovery might bring about. The result is an inversion of the public trust argument: the grander the conspiracy, the more influential the involved institutions and actors, and the darker the crimes committed, the more likely it is that its revelation will upheave the prevailing social order. Given the nature of toxic truths, one would predict that it is precisely these kinds of conspiracies that remain hidden.

I follow Basham's terminology, using 'toxic conspiracy theory' to refer to a theory positing a conspiracy whose public disclosure would likely massively and irreparably disrupt the social order. Note an important distinction between toxic conspiracy theories and toxic truths: while the latter implies truthfulness, the former can be either true or false. This paper's central interest lies in the doxastic commitments one assumes when endorsing such potent, potentially socially-disruptive theories. I will try to show that some of these doxastic commitments are of epistemic interest, irrespective of the veracity of the encompassing theories.

Toxic conspiracy theories can be further characterized as those suggesting that the conspirators occupy leading roles within governments, state agencies, regulatory bodies, major corporations, and other leading institutions. The crimes alleged by toxic conspiracies are of a very grave nature. These include the deceitful usurpation of basic rights and freedoms, as well as various types of attacks against the physical health and safety of unsuspecting civilians, including direct acts of unchecked violence and even large-scale massacres. Furthermore, the custodians of public discourse—ranging from elected officials and governmental agencies, to mainstream media and prominent experts within academia—uniformly and vigorously deny toxic conspiracy theories. Their rebuttals often take on a particularly strident and confrontational tone, framing the theory as outlandish and painting its advocates as not only misguided, but also radicalized (Cassam 2019), mentally unstable (Chen et al. 2020; Bowes et al. 2023), and lacking in intellectual rigor or downright irrational (Swami et al. 2011; Wood et al. 2012).

Lastly, to render the notion more concrete, a few examples of toxic conspiracy theories. The most prominent examples fall under the 'false flag' category, where an act, typically violent, is executed by one party but made to appear as if done by another. Among the most well-known of these false flag theories are those suggesting that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were orchestrated by the U.S. government, either directly or through deliberate inaction (Griffin 2012). Another noteworthy false flag toxic conspiracy theory suggests that the 2001 an-

thrax attacks were the work of influential factions within the U.S. government and security apparatus (MacQueen 2014). Moving away from false flag narratives, some toxic conspiracy theories allege that intelligence agencies have, for years, conducted political sexual blackmail operations, which purportedly involve heinous acts such as the exploitation and abuse of minors (Webb 2022). In a more contemporary context, a collection of interrelated toxic conspiracy theories revolves around the actions of public health officials, regulatory bodies, and pharmaceutical companies during the Covid-19 pandemic. Advocates of these theories argue that these groups exaggerated the disease's severity, concealed its true origins, denied access to effective treatments, and promoted potentially harmful vaccinations, all while cognizant of the potential risks surpassing the benefits (Kennedy 2021; Malone 2022; Kory 2023). Political assassinations, while distinct from mass harm events, also serve as a notable source of toxic conspiracy theories. While these assassinations may not directly involve large-scale harm to civilian populations, the conspiracy theories surrounding them have the potential to be highly toxic. If it were revealed that a political assassination had been orchestrated by influential figures within official institutional roles, it would effectively be an indictment of a dire crime against popular sovereignty. Such a revelation could spur widespread discontent and precipitate political upheaval.[3]

Of course, not all toxic conspiracy theories are created equal. Some are utterly implausible, incoherent, or detached from any identifiable political reality—such as claims that world leaders are shape-shifting reptilian aliens. These differ markedly from theories that, even if unproven or controversial, concern recognizable political and institutional actors, are motivated by ideological or material interests, and operate within a domain that leaves traces: witnesses, documents, inconsistencies, institutional silences. Admittedly, the form of conspiratorial belief—its recursive structure, suspicion of counterevidence, and self-insulating logic—also shapes its epistemic profile. These formal features can undermine rational evaluation, making a theory more resistant to revision or disconfirmation. Still, content matters: theories embedded in actual systems of power and directed at real institutions are categorically different from fantastical claims that are, in principle, closed to investigation. Even the former may be false—but they are the kinds of claims history has taught us not to dismiss too quickly. Finally, even within the more outlandish varieties, one may sometimes find embedded fragments of legitimate suspicion (e.g., about elite impunity or media deference), woven into otherwise distorted narratives.

Basham's primary focus is on the social and political ramifications of toxic truths: their capacity to spark unrest, conflict, and potentially upend the established social order. But there's a parallel epistemic facet to toxic truths: they cast governing bodies and their leadership in an unsettling light, raising questions

[3] The examples discussed here—such as 9/11, the anthrax conspiracy, and political assassinations—are drawn primarily from U.S. political life (though see also the Italian cases discussed below). The concept of a toxic conspiracy theory, however, is not meant to be geographically uniform. What counts as "toxic" will depend, in part, on the political culture and institutional arrangements of the society in question. A theory capable of destabilizing trust in American institutions might have more muted effects elsewhere—and vice versa.

about their fidelity to bedrock democratic ideals and essential human ethical standards.

Lastly, it should be emphasized that toxic conspiracy theories rarely mature into toxic truths. When they do, the process invariably involves a legitimating process of verification—typically through historical, journalistic, judicial, or forensic inquiry. Of the many theories that would destabilize the social order if accepted as true, only a small subset is in fact true, and an even smaller subset is ever verified. Such verification typically follows prolonged and difficult investigations. The Holocaust, for instance, though partially documented during the war, was only fully acknowledged in its tragic scope after the liberation of the camps and the postwar tribunals. Similarly, the CIA's role in foreign coups[4] and covert programs like MKUltra[5] transitioned from implausible-seeming allegations to documented historical realities. In Italy, the Piazza Fontana bombing of 1969 and the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro in 1978 were likewise surrounded by conspiracy allegations that, over time and through judicial and parliamentary inquiry, were partially substantiated (Philip 2002). These cases exemplify the retrospective logic by which toxic conspiracy theories can, on rare occasion, become toxic truths.

Let's now delve deeper into this aspect of toxic beliefs and explore the epistemic consequences of endorsing toxic conspiracy theories.

3. The World Through a Toxic Lens

John comes to believe that the U.S. government was directly responsible for the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. More specifically, John believes that a select group of high-ranking officials—spanning the White House, State Department, intelligence services, and other key governmental agencies—conspired with the explicit intent to execute these attacks. Furthermore, John believes they leveraged their institutional authority to aggressively disseminate a false narrative about the events. This group comprises a mix of elected representatives and appointed public servants, all holding pivotal roles within the nation's central governmental institutions.

This conspiracy theory also encompasses a myriad of more specific beliefs. For instance, John believes that the Twin Towers weren't brought down by planes but by a controlled demolition; that the hijacker's passport, found undamaged amid the rubble, was deliberately planted; and that the National Institute of Standards and Technology's explanation for the collapse of Tower 7 is unconvincing, etc.

In addition to these theory-specific beliefs, John's endorsement of the toxic 9/11 conspiracy theory leads him to adopt more general beliefs. These don't pertain directly to the specifics of the theory itself but extend to a broader range of sociopolitical issues.

Among John's newly acquired political beliefs, many reflect a profound disillusionment with the democratic process. He might come to believe that the government is deeply compromised, and for all he knows, it continuously pro-

[4] https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/ (last accessed 5 July 2025), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB4/ (last accessed 5 July 2025).

[5] https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/dnsa-intelligence/2024-12-23/cia-behavior-control-experiments-focus-new-scholarly (last accessed 5 July 2025).

motes harmful agendas and knowingly prioritizes interests that lead to severe harm or even loss of life for its citizens. The trust in the government's ability to act in the public's best interest is irrevocably damaged, leaving him uncertain and suspicious about its true motivations and actions. Furthermore, he may see foundational democratic values, such as adherence to the rule of law and respect for human rights, as mere facades cynically exploited by those in power. Consequently, John's enthusiasm for participating in democratic processes—be it voting in elections, attending demonstrations, or exercising other constitutionally guaranteed rights—wanes considerably.

In addition to his growing disillusionment, John begins to form more intricate views about the dynamics of state power. He starts to suspect that the state's authority, expertise, and resources could easily be misused, redirected to serve hidden, malevolent objectives. In John's eyes, state institutions now appear deceitful, orchestrating grand cover-ups and actively skewing public perceptions. His mistrust also spills over to the media. Contrary to its avowed role of scrutinizing the powerful and unveiling misconduct, he sees it as a mere parrot of the official state narrative, scoffing at dissenting voices. Broadening his perspective, John is disheartened by what he sees as the systemic failure of the mechanisms meant for checks, balances, and oversight, whether it be the media, law enforcement, or the courts.

This shift in perspective, however, is rarely sudden. Belief in a toxic conspiracy theory typically does not emerge in a single moment of wholesale conversion. More plausibly, individuals arrive at such beliefs gradually, often beginning with a diffuse sense of doubt or unease about official narratives. In democratic societies, such suspicions are neither rare nor inherently pathological; they may in fact reflect a healthy civic vigilance. Nonetheless, there is typically a threshold—however subtle or unnoticed—at which a person crosses from critical skepticism into endorsement of a toxic conspiracy theory. It is this moment of transition that the narrative seeks to highlight, without attempting to trace the full, often complex trajectory that precedes it.

If John's toxic conspiracy theory regarding the events of 9/11 were accurate, many of the general beliefs this theory engenders would also hold true. For instance, if top-ranking officials in the U.S. government indeed conspired to execute the 9/11 attacks, it would validate the belief that governmental institutions are deeply compromised. It would attest to a colossal failure of the checks-and-balances system, highlight an alarming deviation of the mainstream media from its foundational mission, and cement the idea that our leaders—both elected officials and high-ranking public servants—merit severe condemnation. Similarly, many of John's affective attitudes would be justified given the theory's truth. John, much like the wider American populace, would have been betrayed; his feelings of indignation, distrust, and deep-seated disempowerment would be entirely warranted, etc.

This characterization provides a rough and likely non-exhaustive outline of the doxastic states typically induced by toxic conspiracy theories. I'll term these clusters of beliefs and affective attitudes "General Toxic beliefs" (or GT beliefs). These stand in contrast to the specific beliefs associated with individual toxic conspiracy theories, such as the belief that Jeffrey Epstein was an intelligence asset or that the FDA intentionally overlooked evidence indicating the potential harm of the Covid-19 vaccines. It's crucial to highlight that GT beliefs can vary markedly among individual epistemic agents. This variation is anticipated when

individuals consider the same toxic conspiracy theory, and even more pronounced disparities are expected when comparing the GT beliefs evoked by different theories. For instance, the GT beliefs related to a 9/11 conspiracy theory might differ significantly from those arising from the theory that factions within the U.S. government orchestrated JFK's assassination. Nonetheless, certain foundational threads are anticipated to run through different sets of GT beliefs, especially those centered on a profound loss of trust in governing institutions and the media, as well as the perceived degradation of basic democratic values and the ripple effects of such sentiments.

One recent episode vividly illustrates the social and political potency of GT-beliefs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, significant portions of the public came to interpret the crisis through toxic conspiratorial lenses—involving suspicions about the motivations behind lockdowns, vaccine campaigns, and broader institutional responses. This episode demonstrated how such belief structures can meaningfully shape public behavior, contributing to declining vaccination rates and deepening distrust in official health authorities, and by extension the government and the media.[6]

In virtue of these GT-beliefs, toxic conspiracy theories are epistemically load-bearing:[7] they deeply shape their adherents' beliefs and attitudes, sculpting major facets of their social, political, and personal worldviews. To illustrate the transformative doxastic impact of toxic conspiracy theories, consider a spectrum of scenarios. At one end, a single corporation might manipulate its own food labels to make the product appear healthier, without involving any bribery or lobbying. Moving further along the spectrum, the corporation might bribe a low-level regulator to overlook the deceit, introducing a small degree of corruption. As we progress, the manipulation of health data becomes systemic, supported by extensive bribery of officials and politicians, indicating a significant compromise of governing systems. At the most toxic end, the corporation not only falsifies health information but also deliberately adds harmful substances to the food, in collusion with a pharmaceutical company that profits from treating the resulting illnesses. This extensive conspiracy is sustained by the systemic bribery of numerous officials and government agencies, involving multiple arms of the power structure.

As the conspiracy's scope and severity increase, it becomes clear that we cross a threshold where major governing institutions are irreparably compromised. This marks the point where a true toxic conspiracy emerges, justifying GT-beliefs. As the conspiracy's scope expands, it draws in more figures—both those knowingly involved and those unwittingly manipulated into participation[8]—whose roles become increasingly pivotal. The severity also escalates from minor deceit to deliberate harm, compounded by widespread institutional failures. While even milder conspiracies might lead to broader conclusions, such as corporations being capable of public deceit for profit or the need for more rigorous nutritional labeling regulation, the nature of the general deductions sanc-

[6] https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/wr/mm7338a3.htm (last accessed day Month year).

[7] See Roberts and Wood 2007: 156–157 for more on the notion of epistemically load-bearing beliefs.

[8] Toxic conspiracy theories do not necessarily require a vast number of knowingly involved participants. For further discussion see Dentith and Orr 2017.

tioned by truly toxic conspiracies is vastly more encompassing and damning. Non-toxic conspiracies remain relatively local and limited, while true toxic conspiracies reveal deep, systemic issues across multiple institutions, making GT-beliefs very likely to be true. While different people may deduce different things from these conspiracies as a matter of psychological idiosyncrasies, the key point is that toxic conspiracy theories both make GT-beliefs justifiably deducible and likely to be true. Furthermore, while the line between toxic and non-toxic conspiracies may be vague, with no sharp cut-off point, this does not negate its existence, as evidenced by the extreme ends of the continuum.

A similar distinction between minor and major conspiracy theories is implicit in the public trust argument. According to this argument, larger, more severe conspiracies would inevitably be revealed because the mainstream media, law enforcement and other key oversight institutions are generally trustworthy. Consequently, if a toxic conspiracy does occur, it signifies a major dysfunction within the system, eroding public trust and aligning with a GT-like view of politics. This is distinct from milder conspiracies, which can (and presumably do) occur undetected without undermining public trust due to their local nature.

In contrast, toxic conspiracy theories expose vulnerabilities that undermine the very foundations of democratic institutions and processes. These theories are paradigm-shifting because they suggest that the usual mechanisms of accountability and transparency have been compromised to such a fundamental extent, and influential figures are capable of committing such heinous, well-coordinated crimes, that they compel a wholesale perspectival shift in our understanding of politics and governing relations. Toxic conspiracy theories catalyze an Archimedean shift in our understanding of how power operates and how secure or vulnerable our societal structures truly are.

The substantial doxastic weight of these theories yields unexpected implications concerning the potential rationality of toxic conspiracy theories and theorists. I now move to explore these implications.

4. The Central Argument—Toxic Conspiracies as Epistemically Illuminating Falsehoods

Efrat becomes skeptical of the official 9/11 narrative. Initially trusting mainstream reports, she finds inconsistencies and begins exploring alternative accounts. She encounters experts—architects, engineers, and former officials—who suggest foul play by the U.S. government, presenting arguments that seem more coherent to her than the official story. Efrat diligently examines these claims, cross-referencing evidence and consulting what she considers credible sources. Over time, she concludes that the 9/11 attacks were orchestrated by elements within the U.S. government.

Efrat's belief in the 9/11 conspiracy can be seen as internally rational, as per Plantinga's notion of proper epistemic function "downstream from experience" (Plantinga 2000). She fulfills her epistemic duties to the best of her abilities, granting her what Plantinga calls "deontological justification".[9]

[9] It's important to note, as Linda Zagzebski (2004) and Plantinga (2000) acknowledge, that this form of rationality is relatively weak. Individuals with very unconventional or even bizarre beliefs can be internally rational in this sense. Accordingly, Efrat's internal

By endorsing the toxic 9/11 conspiracy theory, Efrat also comes to adopt her own set of GT-beliefs. These include a deep-seated distrust in the U.S. government, the conviction that powerful institutions are capable of heinous acts against their own citizens, and a skeptical view of the mainstream media as a mouthpiece for dominant powers rather than a vehicle for truth.

Let's now add three further assumptions for the sake of our discussion. First, the official narrative of the 9/11 events is accurate. Neither the U.S. government nor any elements within it had any complicity in the attacks. They were orchestrated and executed by Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda; the towers' collapse resulted directly from the airplane impacts, and so on. Secondly, the 2001 anthrax attacks were orchestrated by influential factions within the U.S. government and security apparatus, executed to further specific domestic and international agendas. In essence, this means that a toxic anthrax conspiracy theory holds true. Lastly, Efrat is unacquainted with the anthrax conspiracy and therefore does not hold any opinion regarding its veracity.

Now consider Reut, who, like Efrat, is dedicated to uncovering the truth about complex issues. As she investigates the 911 attacks, Reut carefully examines the evidence, evaluates alternative accounts, and consults credible experts. She concludes that the evidence for a conspiracy is, at best, inconclusive. Influenced by the public trust argument and other similar considerations, Reut ultimately determines that the official 9/11 narrative is accurate and that toxic conspiracy theories, in general, are unlikely. Reut's conclusion, reached through both thorough empirical investigation and philosophical reasoning, is perfectly internally rational. She fulfills her epistemic duties—ensuring coherence, seeking corroborating evidence, and consulting those she regards as the experts.[10] Lastly, since Reut rejects toxic conspiracy theories, she does not adopt GT-beliefs.

In light of these assumptions, an intriguing epistemic discrepancy between Efrat and Reut emerges. Reut acknowledges a significant cluster of true beliefs that Efrat dismisses—the official account of 9/11. Conversely, Efrat subscribes to a set of false beliefs, the toxic 9/11 conspiracy theory, which Reut repudiates. From this perspective, Reut's epistemic position appears notably superior to Efrat's. On the other hand, when we consider the doxastically load-bearing nature of GT beliefs, Efrat's mistaken belief in a toxic 9/11 conspiracy, turns out to be an illuminating falsehood. In virtue of that false theory, Efrat now believes that that the U.S. government purposefully violates basic human rights, undermines core democratic values and is capable of enacting heinous acts against its own citizens. She also harbors a bleak perspective on the mainstream media, viewing it as uncommitted to unveiling large-scale conspiracies and contesting prevailing narratives but rather as a mouthpiece for dominant powers. Additionally, Efrat has an intricate view of the inner-workings and potential abuses of governing institutions, complemented by strong affective reactions, primarily

rationality need not be considered an especially impressive epistemic achievement and is at most only mildly epistemically virtuous.

[10] To the extent that internal rationality varies in degree, it is possible that Reut might be more internally rational than Efrat (and vice versa), provided that both are sufficiently internally rational. Furthermore, they need not be equal in other aspects of epistemic competence: one might have more reliable cognitive faculties "upstream from experience," better exemplify epistemic virtues, and so on.

marked by deep-seated distrust, indignation, and skepticism toward conventional narratives and members of the ruling elite. Given that another toxic conspiracy theory is accurate—namely, the anthrax conspiracy—Efrat's set of GT-beliefs provides her with genuine insight into some fundamental aspects of sociopolitical realities. Meanwhile, since Reut do not adopt this set of GT-beliefs, she remains largely unaware of these undercurrents. She retains a relative trust in institutional entities and clings to the prevailing notion of her society being open and democratic. In Reut's worldview, such grand malevolent schemes against the public are not only implausible but also improbable to remain concealed.

Efrat therefore acquires a cluster of true beliefs about the inner workings of powerful institutions and the key figures within them. Even if not all true beliefs possess epistemic value (see for instance Zagzebski 2003), true GT-beliefs arguably do, because they pertain to realities that are of significant practical and intellectual interest to most people.

However, Efrat's GT-beliefs are not a mere inert list of true propositions. They also serve as a sort of explanatory and interpretative paradigm through which Efrat reorients her understanding of politics. For example, suppose a new law is enacted that broadens the state's authority and capability for the surveillance of private communications. Efrat, guided by her GT-beliefs, will view it as part of a larger, strategic agenda rather than a genuine safety measure. She will interpret the lack of critical media coverage through her view of the mainstream media as a mouthpiece for powerful interests. Efrat will predict that the law will enhance the state's capacity to monitor and suppress dissenting voices and will expect that the data collected will be misused due to ineffective safeguards and the state's tendency to exploit its resources unethically. She will see this law as fitting into a broader pattern of government overreach, perceiving it as part of a consistent modus operandi aimed at expanding state power. Thus, Efrat is now able to position this law within an interconnected sociopolitical framework, into which many other events might fit, such as a decision to invade a country, selective enforcement of the Freedom of Information Act, and even various fiscal policies.

According to Kvanvig (2003, 2018), understanding a field or a domain, also known as objectual or holistic understanding, "requires the grasping of explanatory and other coherence-making relationships in a large and comprehensive body of information".[11] Arguably, Efrat's GT-guided malleable explanatory framework exemplifies precisely such a coherence-making structure, thus endowing her with an objectual understanding of politics. Of course, if Efrat's GT-beliefs are not at least approximately true, then such an objectual understanding would be merely chimerical (Pritchard 2010). However, if a true toxic conspiracy theory makes Efrat's GT-beliefs at least approximately true, then she will gain a deeper objectual understanding of politics compared to what she had before adopting the false toxic conspiracy theory.[12] Even though some of her hy-

[11] Zagzebski 2001 also tends to view understanding as a grasping of structural relations. For more on objectual understanding see Carter and Gordon 2014 and Khalifa 201

[12] Efrat's GT-beliefs constitute a Gettier case, as she justifiably derives true beliefs (GT-beliefs) from a false premise (the 9/11 toxic conspiracy theory). To the extent that Gettier cases are considered incompatible with knowledge, Efrat does not know her GT-beliefs to be true. However, I follow Kvanvig (2009) in thinking that such lucky Gettier beliefs are compatible with objectual understanding, although some disagree (Prichard 2010).

potheses and predictions may be incorrect, her GT-inspired interpretative paradigm will significantly improve her understanding of political dynamics, offering a more insightful framework for grasping the complexities of the sociopolitical landscape.[13]

Thus, at the very least, Efrat's false belief in a toxic conspiracy theory grants her the epistemic benefit of adopting a body of true beliefs about important political issues (GT-beliefs). At best, these true beliefs can coalesce into a more insightful understanding of politics.

To frame this more broadly: if a particular toxic conspiracy theory proves accurate, then even a justifiably held, yet incorrect, toxic conspiracy theory can offer its believers profound insights into sociopolitical realities.[14] Conversely, a refusal to accept or engage with any toxic conspiracy theories (when one or more is true) might significantly limit one's understanding of these same realities.

This is not meant to imply that overall, Efrat is in a better epistemic position than Reut. In fact, Reut might have an edge given her rejection (and Efrat's acceptance) of the toxic 9/11 conspiracy theory. The very idea of an 'overall' epistemic comparison is quite nuanced. The emphasis here is merely that, in certain crucial respects, the false belief endows Efrat with significant epistemic advantages that the true belief withholds from Reut.

I want to reiterate that I am not suggesting that there's ever an epistemic duty to believe in something *known to be false*. From Efrat's perspective, she has strong evidence and valid reasons to accept the toxic conspiracy theory. Coincidentally, this theory, though objectively false, carries significant epistemic value.

Furthermore, embracing one or more toxic conspiracy theories without sufficient evidence is not only epistemically reckless but also damaging. Whether due to wishful thinking, intellectual laziness, or similar failings, this kind of epistemic carelessness violates internal rationality, neglecting one's epistemic duties "downstream from experience". This holds true even if some toxic conspiracy theories prove accurate. The epistemic downsides of such a careless practice likely overshadow any sociopolitical insights that a roughly accurate set of GT-beliefs might provide in such circumstances. It should be further noted that some believers of toxic conspiracy theories might be led by them to adopt deluded and malicious sociopolitical views and ideologies, such as anti-Semitism and various forms of racism. Such views will undoubtedly counterweigh any epistemic advantages gleaned by believing in such theories.

Yet, in specific instances, as vividly illustrated by Efrat's and Reut's case, and more generally in any case in which the believer in a toxic conspiracy acts with epistemic responsibility, embracing a false toxic conspiracy theory can

[13] To the extent that Efrat's understanding of politics enables her to make a wide range of new explanatory, causal, and predictive inferences, it comports with various views of understanding as involving an expansion of cognitive capabilities. For various developments of this view see Elgin 1996; de Regt 2004 and 2017; Wilkenfeld 2013; Hills 2016 and Grimm 2017.

[14] The epistemic benefits of falsehoods have long been recognized. As Mill famously argued, even false beliefs can serve a crucial epistemic function by forcing us to rearticulate and strengthen the justification for our true beliefs (Mill 1859). See also Elgin (2017) for a contemporary account of "felicitous falsehoods"—claims that, while strictly speaking false, can nonetheless advance understanding.

prove epistemically valuable. In some key aspects, this acceptance may even be more favorable than rejecting the erroneous theory

Some might argue that Efrat exhibits a conspiratorial mindset—marked by paranoia, confirmation bias, and resistance to counterevidence—that is fundamentally at odds with critical thinking. However, belief in a toxic conspiracy theory is not necessarily the product of such a mindset. One could just as easily make the (equally mistaken) claim that adherence to official narratives reflects a compliant or deferential mindset, also at odds with critical scrutiny. For the purposes of this paper, the crucial point is that a conspiratorial explanation can, and often does, emerge from responsible critical inquiry—just as a non-conspiratorial explanation can be accepted either critically or uncritically. History offers ample examples of individuals who, through sober investigation and epistemic diligence, uncovered real conspiracies. The key contrast, then, is not between conspiracy belief and critical thinking, but between responsible and irresponsible modes of belief formation, irrespective of the theory's content.

Lastly, it is worth acknowledging, as Ichino and Räikkä (2021) argue, the endorsement of toxic conspiracy theories does not always involve belief in the theory's truth. In some cases, such commitment may take the form of hope that the theory is true, or serve as an expressive vehicle for deeper, more general convictions about the untrustworthiness of institutional systems. Still, this need not always be the case. Many individuals come to believe a toxic conspiracy theory outright, often on the basis of what they perceive to be strong evidence—and, in some instances, based on evidence that is in fact strong. There are now well-documented cases of initially implausible-seeming conspiracy theories that later proved true, such as the CIA's covert MKUltra program, or the Italian state's collusion with far-right actors during the *strategy of tension* period. In such cases, belief in a conspiracy was not merely expressive or hopeful, but epistemically warranted. This possibility should temper the tendency to interpret conspiracy belief primarily through the lens of affect, dysfunction, or symbolic protest.

What does the main argument of this section imply? Significantly, it may reframe adherents of toxic conspiracy theories in a nuanced, more favorable light. *If* even a single toxic conspiracy theory proves accurate, then certain toxic conspiracy theorists might not be as irrational as popularly believed. In several pivotal respects, they could indeed be in better epistemic standing, demonstrating a richer comprehension of sociopolitical realities than those who reject these theories as a matter of principle. This perspective challenges prevailing viewpoints both within academia and beyond, particularly given the negative portrayal of conspiracy theorists, as highlighted in the opening section.

5. Are Toxic Conspiracy Theories Overwhelmingly Unlikely?

My central argument may seem unimpressive. While a true toxic conspiracy theory would have major epistemic implications, its perceived improbability renders the argument a technical curiosity for some. I counter that this dismissal overstates their implausibility—a stance rooted in *generalism*, which treats all conspiracy theories as inherently flawed (Keeley 1999; Levy 2017). I instead endorse *particularism*: some conspiracy theories offer the best explanations of

events (Dentith 2019).[15] These need not be vast, implausibly evil, or inevitably exposed (Hagen 2018b; Dentith & Orr 2018). Moreover, empirical and philosophical work shows their improbability is often exaggerated and that reflexive rejection carries serious moral and epistemic risks (Dentith 2018; Coady 2003; Pigden 2022; Mittendorf 2023).

From the particularist perspective, the explanatory and epistemic adequacy of a toxic conspiracy theory should be considered a 'live possibility'. This means it should not be hastily dismissed and requires thorough empirical and philosophical investigation. Thus, the generalist assumption of inherent implausibility is far from conclusively established.

Consequently, the argument presented in the previous section should not be hastily dismissed either. If the truth of some toxic conspiracy is indeed a 'live possibility', so are the potential epistemic advantages that come with endorsing a false toxic conspiracy theory and its associated set of GT-beliefs.

Expanding on the particularist arguments surveyed above, I wish to adduce an additional factor that supports the 'live possibility' status of some toxic conspiracy theories. Consider the impact of the prior probability of toxic conspiracy theories, on our assessment of the truth of some particular toxic conspiracy theory. In this context, Dentith offers the following analogy:

> in a world where 99% of people cheat on their partners, you only need a little evidence to justify your suspicions that your partner is cheating on you. After all, the prior probability they are being unfaithful is very high—it is just independently likely they are cheaters21—and so the evidence required to justify your suspicions is low. Conversely, in a world where 99% of people are faithful to their partners, the idea your partner is cheating on you would be so preposterous that you would require a lot of evidence to even suspect them of such a thing. There is, then, a tension between the independent likeliness of some explanatory hypothesis, and the evidence required to support it. A high prior probability reduces the evidential requirement associated with the posterior probability. After all, if some hypothesis is independently likely, then this reduces the evidential burden on showing that it is at least a contender for being in the set of credible explanatory hypotheses for some event (Dentith 2016: 585).

Accordingly, as the prior probability of toxic conspiracy theories rises, the evidential threshold required to consider some toxic conspiracy theory a plausible hypothesis is lowered, and vice versa.[16]

What is the prior probability of toxic conspiracy theories? Many tend to believe that, particularly in liberal democracies, the probability is exceedingly low. In such societies, a free press and a system of checks and balances are designed to restrain governmental power, ensuring that such vast conspiracies are highly improbable and would be difficult to conceal for extended periods if they were

[15] See Dentith 2023 for a brief historical overview of the debate between generalists and particularists.

[16] This claim concerns internal justification: we cannot set an evidential threshold for toxic conspiracy theories without sufficient insight into their prior probability. Our choice of evidential threshold depends on this knowledge rather than solely on external facts. I argue below that this task involves engaging with debates on pluralist versus elite theories of government.

to occur. Additionally, the principles of transparency and accountability are foundational in liberal democracies, making it less likely for government officials and agencies to engage in covert and malevolent activities without facing exposure and consequences. These values, intrinsic to democratic governance, create an environment that discourages the development and persistence of toxic conspiracy theories. None of this is meant to suggest that these various democratic mechanisms and principles are immune to corrupting influences and other forms of malfunction. However, in an open and free society, such malfunctions are likely to be confined in scope and duration, whereas toxic conspiracies require massive and prolonged failure of institutional integrity.

On the other hand, competing intellectual traditions challenge the idealized view of liberal democracies, portraying them instead as governed by covert, elite interests (see for instance Chomsky and Herman 2002; Drury 1999; Norton 2005; Schubert et al. 2015; Domhoff 2022; Gautney 2022). If such elite theories are even partially accurate, they significantly raise the prior probability of toxic conspiracy theories. If not, the probability is lower. The epistemic lesson is modest but crucial: our prior estimates about the plausibility of such conspiracies depend on contested empirical assumptions about how power works.

Thus, the overarching argument of this section is that both the multitude of particularist arguments and unresolved foundational issues concerning the distribution of power and the nature of governing institutions prevent us from dismissing toxic conspiracy theories as overwhelmingly unlikely or treating them cavalierly. This situation demands epistemic humility—recognizing that until these complex issues are settled, our evaluation of toxic conspiracy theories must remain tentative.

6. Conclusion

Some beliefs are doxastically inert—like remembering what we ate for breakfast. Others, like toxic conspiracy theories, reshape our worldview. I've argued that if one such theory is true, belief in a false one may still grant valuable insights into institutional power. Dismissing all such theories may thus deprive us of important sociopolitical understanding.

Many might be unimpressed by this argument, as they dismiss toxic conspiracy theories as highly improbable. I have briefly examined reasons to be at least tentatively skeptical of this assertion. Consequently, I have challenged the prevailing notion that toxic conspiracy theorists are plagued by deep misapprehensions of sociopolitical realities. If some toxic conspiracy theory proves true, then many such theorists (although certainly not all of them) may possess a more accurate understanding of sociopolitical realities than their anti-conspiracy counterparts.[17]

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[17] I am grateful to anonymous reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments.

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