

## Absurd Stories, Ideologies, and Motivated Cognition

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**ABSTRACT.** At times, weird stories such as the Pizzagate spread surprisingly quickly and widely. In this paper I analyze the mental attitudes of those who seem to take those absurdities seriously: I argue that those stories are often imagined rather than genuinely believed. Then I make room for the claim that often these imaginings are used to support group ideologies. My main contribution is to explain how that support actually happens by showing that motivated cognition can employ imagination as a seemingly rational tool to reinforce and protect beliefs.

In this paper, I analyze the mental attitudes of those who take absurdly fake stories seriously. Researchers often assume that people usually *believe* those stories to be true. Contrary to that, I argue that these stories are often imagined rather than genuinely believed. To build my argument, I refer to the widespread human tendency to seriously engage with overtly false narratives. I make the case that absurd fake stories are part of fictional narratives. Then, I show that *qua* fictional narratives, fake absurdities are prop that elicit in us arguments to reinforce and protect ideological truths that are key to groups' identities. Here is how this happens. Imagining a fictional story elicits in some of

us intuitions about the credibility of that story: though plainly fictional the story rings true to some and so they seriously entertain it. Having that intuition allows them to make an argument as well: the credibility of a story is evidence of the reliability of its broad generalizations (which usually fit within one's ideology). These generalizations are the moral of the story, and its larger meaning, which can also apply to the real world.

To be sure, I am not claiming that *all* absurdities we see (online and offline) are part of not-believed, fictional narratives. What I am doing here is bringing to the surface an overlooked aspect of our motivated reasoning that will *partly* explain people's serious engagement with patently fake stories. The inspiration for the paper comes from noticing that there is now a burgeoning field, crossing philosophy, psychology, literature, and science communication, that studies the role of narratives in various aspects of our cognition: from building models to informing medical or public policy decisions. Narratives are said to have cognitive value in illuminating important truths and situating our scientific knowledge within specific contexts (Dillon and Craig 2021). Similarly, imagination has been understood as a political concept by a number of authors (Browne and Diehl 2019; Castoriadis 1987).

It is surprising then that when it comes to explaining the spread of misinformation, we tend to forget that humans also think in terms of fictional narratives and use imagination to make arguments. Analyzing misinformation, we often simply focus on what people rationally or irrationally believe. This results from an impoverished view that tends to cast all human mental attitudes within a purely doxastic framework. A lot of

work has already been done to shatter this reductionist approach, especially by showing the role of imagination in reasoning and discovery (Byrne 2005; Kind and Badura 2021). This more nuanced approach, however, has rarely been applied to the issue of misinformation and fake stories. Here I will pursue this lead. In particular, I will support the idea that some absurd fake stories are narratives that are not literally believed (neither by those who share them nor by those who listen to them). Yet they still have an important psychological role, i.e. reinforcing and protecting ideological truths that are believed (either individually or by the group at large).<sup>1</sup> The bottom line here is that we should try to recognize these absurdities for what they are. That is, in sharing absurdly fake stories, people are at times doing what they have done for a long time: using imagination and fiction as tools to support their subscribing to a specific group's ideology.

A final set of clarifications. First, my view concerns epistemically absurd fake stories (on social and traditional media). Thus, this is not a paper about misinformation or about conspiracy theories in general: I only care for stories that defy basic rationality and common sense. If some fake story is not epistemically absurd (and can be somehow reasonably entertained), then this paper is not about that.

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<sup>1</sup> Ichino and Rääkkä (2020) propose a similar view called the communication model of conspiracy theories. They argue some conspiracy theories are not actually believed, but shared to express support for group ideology. In sociology Polletta and Callahan (2017, 392) similarly argue that the fact that "people often share stories as a way of building collective identity, for its part, helps to explain why stories' plausibility may be relatively unimportant to those people." Here I am taking the lead directly from these and similar sources and expand on their views.

Two, here I am adopting a theoretical notion of belief that should inform any mature psychology and cognitive science. I am not interested in a folk-psychological understanding of belief. On the view endorsed here, belief is defined in terms of its functional role. Belief's function is to be responsive to the evidence and have a direct impact on actions. Not all beliefs fulfill their function; that's obvious. However, a mental attitude that stubbornly and overtly violates belief's core function is likely not a belief (Bergamaschi Ganapini 2023; Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Van Leeuwen, 2009).

Finally, people may be wrong about the beliefs they have or do not have (Carruthers 2011). They may sincerely assert they believe something when they do not actually believe it. This can happen for various reasons: they may be trapped in some sort of self-deception or have a naïve conception of belief for which believing that  $p$  just means feeling that  $p$  is true. Either way, we should be careful in taking self-reports at face value if we are interested in understanding what people believe.

## 1. ABSURDLY FAKE STORIES: EXAMPLES FROM POLITICS

Some of the stories that circulate online and offline defy common sense. The epistemic oddity of these claims is so easily detectable that anyone would, given what they already know and believe, at least suspect these stories can't be strictly true (Räikkä and Basham 2018, 180). In this section I will focus on a few examples of political, odd claims spread and repeated online and offline:

*QAnon conspiracies:* adherents of QAnon claim to believe that Joe Biden is a malfunctioning robot wearing human-like skin. Many also shared the #Pizzagate story: the Dems were running a pedophilia ring in the back of a pizzeria in DC.

*Voter Fraud & the big lie:* "It has become blatantly obvious the voter fraud that was committed during the 2012 Presidential elections. In one county alone in Ohio, which was a battleground state, President Obama received 106,258 votes ... but there were only 98,213 eligible voters. It's not humanly possible to get 108% of the vote! [...] Recount NOW!" This is the text of a petition that has received 63,000 signatures.<sup>3</sup>

*Biblical Trump:* during the Trump presidency, stories started to circulate that compared him to some biblical figures. After a visit to Israel, former secretary of state Pompeo was asked by a Christian news-channel interviewer: "Could it be that President Trump right now has been sort of raised for such a time as this, just like Queen Esther, to help save the Jewish people from an Iranian menace?" "As a Christian, I certainly believe that's possible," Pompeo answered.<sup>4</sup>

Some of these stories are spread by trolls or just as a way to have fun. But how should we interpret what is happening when people seriously entertain this news? The received view is that many people in fact believe this kind of absurdity. In contrast, here I make room for the idea that these are fictions people imagine. Oftentimes, people may think they believe these stories to be true, but in fact, some of these stories are similar to the ancient myths, Greek tragedies, and religious parables people have imagined and

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/robert-schlesinger/2012/11/20/the-108-ohio-obama-voter-fraud-myth-and-the-recount-petition>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/israel/2019/march/exclusive-secretary-of-state-pompeo-to-news-god-raised-up-trump-like-he-raised-up-queen-esther>.

shared for centuries. Besides being entertaining, many of these narratives make (or invite the audience to make) arguments. When used in political contexts, this argumentative function may become a tool to advance group ideologies.

Here's my plan for the paper. I first focus on fiction and indicate how fiction can be used (as a prop that leads) to make arguments. Then I show that some recent fake absurdities could be a type of fictional narrative. Finally, I claim those fake absurdities are produced to make fiction-based arguments as one of the strategies we use in motivated reasoning. I finish by tackling some possible objections.

## 2. FICTIONAL NARRATIVES THAT PROMPT ARGUMENTS

A narrative is usually a story with 'victims', 'perpetrators', 'good people', 'bad characters' in it. In a story, we find events that are causally related and stories usually enjoy a certain degree of coherence. Fictional narratives are overtly false stories: many of the details of those stories are muddy, unclear, or intentionally left vague. We often encounter multiple (at times contradictory) versions of the same fictional story, and that is totally unsurprising to us. As kids, we might hear different versions of the *Big Black Wolf*, but as long as the main idea stays the same, we do not care all that much.

Not all fictional stories are created equal, though. There is a group of narratives that are highly allusive: they hint at a deeper point which gives the narrative sense and purpose (Davies 2007; Labov and Waletzky 1967; McGregor 2016; Mikkonen 2013;

Plumer 2015; Polletta 2006). The myth of Icarus, for instance, is a tale about the dangers of disobedience and hubris.

These are the stories I am interested to look at here because they have a cognitive impact (Dillon and Craig 2021; Nussbaum 2001): as they try to deliver specific truths, usually about particularly important topics, these stories produce beliefs that are consistent with or related to the fictional narrative itself.<sup>5</sup> Experimental work has suggested that the truth of a story is relatively unimportant to its ability to impact our belief-system: even stories that were labeled as false produced story-consistent beliefs (Marsh and Fazio 2006). In particular, people who are immersed and transported by the story usually experience the same level of persuasion as those who are told that a story is true (Green et al. 2004).

Now the question is: how are we psychologically affected by fiction? There are various possible explanations for how fiction shapes our thoughts. Some of these explanations highlight the irrationality of forming beliefs based on fiction: fictional stories are able to impact our beliefs bypassing our reasoning.<sup>6</sup> Other researchers have focused on the ways in which fiction offers arguments and serves as evidence (Balcerak Jackson 2016; Kind 2016; Kind and Badura 2021; Langland-Hassan, Peter. 2016;

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<sup>5</sup> For a defense of the claim that these are really beliefs, see Buckwalter and Tullmann (2017). For an analysis of how soap operas can impact beliefs, see Singhal et al. 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Narratives can persuade us by bypassing our rational abilities: “we fail to scrutinize information when we are engaged with stories, making it more likely that we will accept and eventually believe what we read regardless of its veracity” (Friend 2014, 234). There is now substantial evidence that imagination subliminally influences our beliefs through undetected cognitive contagion (Brodie et al. 2001; Gendler 2006) and other forms of persuasions (Green and Brock 2000).

Williamson 2016). Following this second trend, here I will look at how imagination may prompt us to make arguments.

Some philosophers have argued that we learn and acquire new (or reinforce our old) beliefs from fiction based on the arguments these stories make or prompt us to make. These arguments start with the story depicting what *might* have happened. The events in the story are recognizably false; yet they could have been true. Here is Aristotle's understanding of poetry in the *Poetics*:

it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen,—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. [...] The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. (1448a)

Aristotle seems to think that “what might have happened” is the topic of fiction: this is not simply what is possible but what might be reasonably expected to happen. On his view, this is potentially more important than what actually happened. As Aristotle puts it, in fiction “[w]hat is impossible but plausible must be preferred to what is possible but not credible” (Poet. 1460a 27). Therefore, what is plausible (or credible/believable, a term I will use later) is the key element of poetry. Arguably, there is something about enacting credible events that has value for Aristotle (Olmos 2014).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This may connect with his remark that “[...] poetry is a more serious and philosophical business than history; for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars” (Poet. 1451b 6–8). Understanding what Aristotle meant by this is a subject of great controversy and of course I won't try to enter that debate here.

In this paper, following Aristotle, I agree that fictional narration talks about things that, even if false, are still plausible (or believable). Plumer (2015, 498) makes a similar point as he argues that novels often offer arguments structured as follows:<sup>8</sup>

- (1) This story (complex) is believable.
- (2) This story is believable only if such and such principles operate in the real world.
- (3) Therefore, such and such principles operate in the real world.

(1-3) is an argument prompted by the fiction itself in the sense that it represents the message the fiction is trying to convey. Hence, some fictions are *prop* that induce the audience to make arguments of this kind.

In the argument, the first step is a judgment about plausibility or believability. By telling the story, the narration thereby conveys the idea that the story depicts what might have happened, what is credible. The plausibility or credibility of narratives depends on both internal and external factors (Plumer 2015, 499). For starters, the narrative needs to be (seen as) internally coherent to be believable or plausible. In addition, imagined events in the narrative need to be coherent with other things we know. In Connell and Keane's (2006, 117) own words: "a highly plausible scenario is one that fits prior knowledge well: with many different sources of corroboration, without complexity of explanation, and

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<sup>8</sup> Hunt (2009) has argued that fictions and novels produce arguments based on analogies (also de Bustos 2017). See Swirski (2007), Arcangeli (2017), and Olmos (2017) for ways in which fiction can deliver scientific arguments.

with minimal conjecture.” De Brigard et al. (2021) suggest that, when judging the plausibility of an imagined possible world, we look for “perceived similarities”; namely, we try to figure out how and whether the imagined world is similar to the actual world. In their studies, they show that plausibility judgments are variable depending on whether subjects are focusing on the perceived differences vs. similarities between the actual and the imagined worlds. Hence, if someone is reading a story and judges it to be credible, they are likely focusing on the perceived similarity between the story-world and the actual world. That is, they are making a judgment about the coherence between fiction and reality.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, assessment about plausibility are usually made through intuition. When perceived as coherent with the actual world, a narrative will be easier to imagine: the easier it is to imagine it, the more plausible it is deemed to be (according to the “simulation heuristics”; Kahneman and Tversky 1998)<sup>10</sup>. Hence, we deem to be plausible those narratives that are easy to imagine for us.

Once an imagined situation is considered to be credible, then it is reasonable to expect this may tell us something about the actual world as well (as the second premise of the *modus ponens* above; see also Elgin 2014). If in a credible scenario the newly crowned national champion team failed to win the championship, then this may reveal

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<sup>9</sup> As Plumer (2015, 500) puts it: “A novel does not have to be realistic in order to be believable. The events of a novel can be far-fetched or remote, as in a science fiction, fantasy, or allegorical novel. Extremism of this sort seems to have little effect on believability so long as the events related are reasonably well-connected, and our fundamental shared assumptions about human nature, and about physical nature of course, are generally respected.” Therefore, a story can be implausible in many ways but still credible.

<sup>10</sup> To be clear, I am not concerned here about what makes a story believable: I care about what makes people take a story to be believable.

something about how things are in the actual world. It may reveal that that team's abilities are accidental, unstable properties that do not translate into other worlds (Byrne 2005).

Put it differently, if a story could have been true, then there is an element of similarity between the story's world and the real world. This element of similarity cannot be about the specific details of the story (as we know, they are fictional). Therefore, it seems that the element of similarity lies in the underlying principles/truths the story depicts. That is, the plausibility or believability of a story indicates that some of the principles and generalizations contained in it are true (cf. Green 2017).

To make this more vivid let us consider the following example. In the TV drama *House of Cards*, the audience learns about the nefarious actions and shameful scheming of some (fictional) prominent politicians in DC. For some of these characters, this scheming actually goes a long way in assuring them some prominent political roles and they really never seem to have to pay for their terrible deeds.

If we apply the argument structure mentioned above this is what we get: though recognizably fictional, many agree that *House of Cards* is scarily believable and its narrative could easily have been true. If the story could have been true, then that means that there is an element of similarity between the story's world and the real world: the story is 'imitating' some aspects of the real world, while others are obviously fictional (e.g., many of the characters and the specific events). If the story in *House of Cards* is believable, but the events and characters are false, then what is true must be the

underlying principles the story depicts. That is, if the story is believable it is because of its larger point about corruption and politics. Therefore, given its believability (premise 1), we should conclude that the story's underlying generalizations about corruption and politics do in fact operate in the real world as well.

More schematically:

(1) *House of Cards* is believable, the story could have been true.

(2) *House of Cards* is believable only if its underlying generalizations and descriptions about corruption and politics operate in the real world too.

(3) Therefore, those underlying generalizations about corruption and politics the story describes, operate in the real world.

Hence, by using *modus ponens*, a story, narrative, or fiction can lead to produce an argument based on the idea that the story is believable and would not have been believable had its underlying generalizations not been true.

### 3. ABSURD FAKE STORIES: NARRATIVES AND IDEOLOGIES

What reasons do we have to think that many of the fake stories and odd conspiracy theories we see on social and traditional media are similar to the narratives that humans have imagined, engaged in, and spread for centuries? The next two sections are devoted

to answering that very question.<sup>11</sup> To start, let's notice that many fake absurd stories are about 'victims', 'perpetrators', 'good people', 'bad characters'. As more traditional narratives, they are immune to any counterevidence and we often find multiple (at times contradictory) versions of the same story. The details of those stories are muddy, unclear, or intentionally left vague.

These stories also have an entertainment function. Indeed we find a lot of weird fake stories online that are shared for fun. Jokes and memes are widespread on the internet, and the most absurd stories are shared to captivate and entertain one's audience (Acerbi 2019). For instance, let's take QAnon. QAnon is the far-right narrative that a deep state is conspiring against former president Trump and that its members are involved in a cabal of child pedophiles.<sup>12</sup> Similarly to other narrated stories, QAnon conspiracy theories are explicitly meant to produce some enjoyment (van Prooijen et al. 2022). QAnon has a game-like structure: mysterious clues are dropped and people are encouraged to solve the puzzle and figure things out by themselves.<sup>13</sup> The narrative may not be believed to be literally true but it is still fun to try to solve mysteries by figuring things out. Also that this is parallel to what happens with movie fandom where fans try to solve mysteries by analyzing the cues they find in the narration (Jenkins et al. 2006;

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<sup>11</sup> Though rarely in philosophy, the claim that conspiracy theories are narrative fictions has been put forward by a number of authors in media studies and sociology (e.g. Polletta 2006, 2015; Seargeant 2020). To my knowledge, however, nobody has linked the narrative aspect of fake, absurd theories to their ability to convey arguments to safeguard ideologies.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www-washingtonpost-com.libproxy.union.edu/outlook/qanon-game-plays-believers/2021/05/10/31d8ea46-928b-11eb-a74e-1f4cf89fd948\\_story.html](https://www-washingtonpost-com.libproxy.union.edu/outlook/qanon-game-plays-believers/2021/05/10/31d8ea46-928b-11eb-a74e-1f4cf89fd948_story.html).

Marwick and Partin 2022, 5). This parallel strongly suggests that at least some conspiracy theory provides a fictional type of enjoyment.

Besides being entertaining, the weird stories we mentioned above are similar to some run-of-the-mill narratives. To see this it is useful to first focus on the distinction between narratives and Narratives. QAnon is a broad Narrative made up of many narratives: stories that compose the larger Narrative and that gain different traction and enjoy different levels of "plausibility."<sup>14</sup> This trait is common across established systems of conspiracy theories (Goertzel 1994; Miller 2020; Wood et al. 2012): the single stories keep changing, they might even be in contradiction but they are all repeating the theme of the Narrative. Also these absurdities are really never entertained by themselves or piecemeal, but they come in a bunch: entertaining one of these stories makes you more likely to entertain a similar story too, a story that belongs to the same Narrative. In the case of QAnon aficionados, their passion for doing "research" and making "discoveries" is said to be akin to "a collective, knowledge-making activity built on the affordances of social media designed to construct specific facts and theories that maintain QAnon's cohesion over time" (Marwick and Partin 2022, 1). That is, this "research" done around these stories allows QAnon to exist and evolve as a larger Narrative over time.

Finally, as with traditional stories and tales, there is evidence that many of the odd stories and conspiracy theories hint at a large point (Norton 2011). Cassam explains that

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<sup>14</sup> Here I took inspiration from Phoenix and Sparkes's (2009) distinction between one's life-long "big story" and the "small stories" we tell in everyday interactions.

conspiracy theories focus on the idea that “people in authority are hiding things from the rest of us” (Cassam 2019, 36, 46, 59–60). And he adds that obviously false conspiracy theories are often just political propaganda. This is particularly true for extremist positions as a conspiratorial mentality is intrinsically linked to their ideology (Cassam 2019, 52). For example, QAnon tells stories about pedophilia, but its agenda has to do with race and anti-Semitism more than anything else.

In what follows I will advance a hypothesis concerning how conspiracy theories and the like defend ideologies by showing the link between narratives’ arguments and group ideologies. To explain this, I will first focus on the notions of identity belief and motivated cognition.

#### 4. NARRATIVES, IDENTITY BELIEFS, AND MOTIVATED COGNITION

Some of our beliefs are key to our identity. I’m good, smart, reliable, consistent, and strong ... these are all things I believe and I am not willing to stop believing them (Mandelbaum 2019; Thibodeau and Aronson 1992). Groups have identity-key beliefs as well, and being part of a group often requires assenting to and defending those beliefs that are key to groups’ ideologies. Yet I might face evidence that undermines my key beliefs: to my horror, I might discover evidence that I am not as smart or as good as I thought I was. Similarly, I might find evidence that my group’s key belief or core ideology is false. The realization is problematic because of the phenomenon called

“cognitive dissonance.” As research on dissonance indicates, when we discover that our attitudes are in conflict, we feel discomfort (Festinger 1957, 3). In particular, when holding key-identity beliefs, “encountering disconfirming evidence hurts (and encountering confirmatory information feels good)” (Mandelbaum 2019, 13). As with individual beliefs, group beliefs can face cognitive dissonance. And yet it might be very difficult to be part of a group whose key-identity belief is constantly threatened by counterevidence.

Motivated cognition is a form of reasoning that is guided by our desires and goals (Kunda 1990). If we are part of a group with a specific ideology we are motivated to subscribe to that ideology ourselves (for an analysis of this phenomenon, see Williams 2021). When our belief in it is under threat, we must find a way to ease the pressure. Some have argued that to protect some of our key beliefs, we have a “psychological immune system” (Bendaña and Mandelbaum 2021), namely a set of unconscious strategies for safeguarding the beliefs we care about while also alleviating dissonance. And this set is part of our motivated cognition. That is, when they engage with counterevidence (especially in the context of group beliefs), humans adopt “identity-protective” cognitive processes: some of these processes seek to defend certain core beliefs from outside influence by undermining the counterevidence encountered or changing their value (see the “Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm,” Kahan 2017;

Van Bavel and Pereira 2018).<sup>15</sup> Other defensive strategies create fragmentation in the mind or divert our attention to ease the pressure of counterevidence.

Here is where narratives come in. My hypothesis is that fictional narratives can be used as part of the above-mentioned identity-protective cognitive processes: motivated reasoning uses fiction and imagination to elicit certain types of reasoning to defend core ideological beliefs, ease cognitive dissonance, and diminish the force of counterevidence. Imagining narratives to confirm and sustain core ideologies is thus one of the strategies of our “psychological immune system.” If confirmed this would be an unexplored strategy, given that usually identity-protective cognition is said to use and be only about beliefs.

According to my hypothesis, this is how it may work: as we saw, some fictions make and prompt listeners to make arguments. These arguments start with an assesement about the credibility of a story. This intuition opens the door to the following bit of reasoning: the credibility of a story is evidence of the truth of its broad generalizations. That is, the story would not sound credible were those generalizations false. Conveniently, these generalizations also fit within ideologies that we need to confirm and defend. Thus the story, though fictional, reassures us of the truth of our worldview.

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<sup>15</sup> Pennycook and Rand (2019a, 2019b) are skeptical that these processes are at work with fake stories and conspiracy theories.

The first bit of reasoning that I have to back up my hypothesis is that there is some evidence that narratives build and protect identities (Schechtman 1996). To see this, it is useful to look at these passages from Sedikides (2021, 206):

Global narratives include autobiographical stories such as having surmounted major life obstacles or having mended one's ways, as well as cultural clichés such as that "the world is unfair" or "the economy is declining." Such narratives can be effective in palliating or dismissing imminent threats. [...] Stereotypes, and racist and sexist narratives, attribute personal failures and disappointments to the alleged advantages that minorities enjoy.

That is, as we are endowed with a system that aims at protecting our cognition, Sedikides (2021) explicitly states that narratives may serve as a way to alleviate the suffering derived from having to face counterevidence to our core beliefs.

Second, narratives play an important role in group formation and in protecting group identities (Polletta and Callahan 2017). This point can be hardly overstated. Political myths are often said to be sense-making tales that created group identities (Bottici 2019; Polletta et al. 2011). As Taylor puts it, in the political realm, imaginations generate the "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor 2004, 23). It is thus hardly surprising to see that group tales and imagination have a key political function. In fact, there is strong evidence that fake stories proliferate mostly in highly polarized contexts and among extremist groups. Given the political role of imagination, it would not be surprising to see it used predominantly in these groups as a way to create a common narrative.

Third, as we saw above, there are two ways in which fictional stories can impact our cognition. One is by bypassing reasoning and simply influencing our cognition by brute force.<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, these narratives can appeal to our reasoning abilities by inviting us to make arguments. Given the role of fiction in protecting identities and forming groups in general, it would be surprising if the ability of fiction to elicit arguments would not be adopted for the same purposes.

I think that is what is happening with the absurdities we mentioned above. It might be odd to say that QAnon conspiracy theories and the like are producing actual arguments but if we look at them closely, we see that they might be doing exactly that at times.

To get a taste of this let's take a look at one of the examples above: biblical Trump. When the interviewer asks Pompeo about comparing Trump to Queen Esther, he invites Pompeo to agree to a mere possibility. I doubt any of them, or their audience, in fact believed that that possibility could even remotely be an actuality. It is also interesting to observe that Pompeo considers this possibility from "the point of view of a Christian."<sup>17</sup> What is happening in this interview then is that they are both referring to a fictional

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, Levy pointed out even if at the beginning fake news simply promotes imagining in some people, it may be very persuasive and end up becoming an integral part of their cognitive systems strengthening already held beliefs and potentially producing new ones (Levy 2017).

<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of other biblical associations of Trump, see <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/3/5/16796892/trump-cyrus-christian-right-bible-cbn-evangelical-propaganda>.

event (on the biblical figure Queen Esther) to make a claim about Trump being part of that fiction. That fiction is taken very seriously.

Here's a schematic version of the argument implicitly put forward in telling the story:

- (1) The story about Trump being the new Queen Esther is strictly false but still rings true: it could have been true.
- (2) If the story about Trump being the new Queen Esther is credible, then it means that its core message is true: Trump is the right person to defend Israel and the US from the Muslims' threat.
- (3) Therefore, it is actually true that Trump is the right person to defend Israel and the US from the Muslims' threat.

The type of ideological thinking unfolded in this argument is arguably the anti-Muslim sentiment shared in the conclusion. Subscribing to the narrative of Trump being the new Queen Esther simply shows one is willing to go through with the reasoning sketched above. It does not mean one actually believes the story itself to be true.

Let's look at another example: the Pizzagate. There are a lot of QAnon stories around the same themes (e.g., child-abuse, reality is not what it seems) so it is useful to analyze them and see how they might be used to defend ideological beliefs. Here's again a rough schema of the argument these stories implicitly put forward:

- (1) The story that the Dems are running a child-sex ring in the back of a pizzeria is probably false but still credible.
- (2) If the story that the Dems are running a child-sex ring is credible, then its core message is true: they are not to be trusted

(3) Therefore, it is actually true that the Dems are not to be trusted

Those who seriously engage with this story are convinced that it has an element of truth in it. And if the story rings true, it must be because its core message is true. Hence the perceived credibility of the fictional story teaches something, i.e. that we need to be careful and defend ourselves from the the Dems. Given that this thought is part of a right-wing, anti-Semitic ideology, the fiction's credibility supposedly gives a reason to strengthen the belief in that ideology as well. In conclusion, even if one doesn't believe the Pizzagate story to be true, one could still believe that this fiction is credible enough to say something important about the world.

#### 4.1 FICTION AND COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

There is a final aspect of the role of fiction in motivated cognition that I'd like to highlight, namely the role of those types of argument in easing the grip of cognitive dissonance when one's ideology is threatened by counterevidence. We saw that certain stories use *modus ponens* arguments to advance specific principles or generalizations about the world. Similarly, that same argument structure could be used to show the weakness of possible exceptions to those generalizations and principles. Generalizations and principles depict what would happen in a world in which things are 'normal' (Pelletier and Asher 1997). That means that if in the real world we encounter a

counterexample of a generalization, we can safely say that its significance is limited: it does not disprove the generalization.<sup>19</sup>

That is, if fiction can support generalizations (by depicting plausible situations in which those generalizations hold), then it can also be used to undermine counterexamples to that very generalization by showing that they are not “normal” cases. If these principles can be easily placed in believable narrations, this might be considered to be evidence of their truth. In turn, this phenomenon might also ease the cognitive dissonance produced by possible counterevidence to ideologies because the story’s believability would ease the (epistemic) pressure of what I see in the real world.

An example will help us here. Imagine a white nationalist endorsing the belief—key to his group ideology—that people of color are less smart than whites. At some point, our white nationalist is also forced to confront some counterevidence, e.g. the fact that Obama won the US presidential elections twice. This fact seems to contradict his white nationalist belief. How will he react? Assume here that at some point he hears the story that Obama won because of non-citizens voting illegally.<sup>20</sup> What role will this have in his cognition? Here is my proposal: he will not bother to actually believe it to be true. He can simply use imagination to ease his cognitive dissonance. Imagining the story

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<sup>19</sup> Alternative explanations are possible: focusing on narratives may be a way to protect one’s key beliefs and ease anxiety from dissonance because entertaining these stories may induce a form of compartmentalization (Mandelbaum 2019): it might be a way to divert our attention, so we do not notice the force of the counterevidence we encounter.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2016/oct/19/donald-trump/trump-wrongfully-says-immigrants-voting-illegally/>.

(‘Obama won just because of voter fraud’) will ignite the process of believability-assessment: the story will be imagined and then judged to be credible. That’s the premise of the argument. Assessing the believability of the story allows him to produce an argument to downplay the importance of Obama’s election and thus calm his cognitive dissonance. He will conclude that Obama is an outlier at best, and retain his white-nationalist generalization about people of color being less capable than whites: if things had been normal, Obama could have won the election only by cheating.

So here is the argument the fictional, conspiratorial narrative allows him to produce:

- (1) The story that Obama won just because of voter fraud is believable, it could have been true.
- (2) This story is believable only if the following principle operates in this world: “people of color can only win by cheating.”
- (3) Therefore, the principle “people of color can only win by cheating” operates in this world: if Obama did not cheat, he is just the exception that confirms the rule.

Hence, a racist could invoke the believability of the election fraud story to undermine counterevidence to his racist ideology: he can tell to himself that the story would not have been believable, it would not ring true, had those racist generalizations not been true.<sup>21</sup> Now, the reason why a racist may find the election fraud conspiracy theory believable is because of the other things he believes about the world.<sup>22</sup> Many of us

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<sup>21</sup> Somewhat similarly D’Cruz (2014) talks about rationalizations as having the aim of plausibility rather than the aim of truth. As a result, on his view, rationalization is a form of pretense.

<sup>22</sup> There is an obvious element of circularity in the argument but the idea is that the argument helps unfold intuitions that are only implicit in the story and in the first premise (see Plumer 2015).

would *not* share his intuitions. As mentioned above, judgments about believability mostly depend on other things we take to be true and on how easily we imagine the story in question. Those kinds of judgments are thus elicited by a mixture of imagination and intuition but if I am right, they have a role in strengthening and securing more important beliefs.

## 5. QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIONS

- I. I argued for the fact that absurd fake stories are imagined narratives. Yet why can't they be things people actually believe?

I do not deny that, in some limited cases, these stories are genuinely believed. Yet I reject the idea that those theories are mostly believed and that their spread is a sign we are in a post-truth era where people commonly believe in absurdities. My analysis of these absurdities is akin to Van Leeuwen's (2014) account of religious credences. Van Leeuwen argues that religious attitudes don't belong to the same category of attitudes as factual beliefs (see also Luhrmann 2018). What's more, on his view religious credence lies closer to secondary cognitive attitudes such as imagining and acceptance than it does to primary cognitive attitudes such as belief. His argument draws from anthropological sources that indicate that, at least for some groups, religious credences have a limited functional role, limited, that is, to contexts and situations that can be broadly described as 'religious' (706). Outside those contexts, their capacity to guide

action fades away and actions are guided by factual beliefs with opposite content. The latter, but not the former, are operative across contexts. Similarly, contrary to what happens to belief, “much evidence suggests religious credences don’t have evidential vulnerability” (708). Van Leeuwen also offers some indication that people’s religious attitudes are more sensitive to special authority than evidential authority.

Something similar can be said for the fake absurdities mentioned in this paper. As with religious credences, the behavioral impact of entertaining these absurdities is very limited. The claim that misinformation has a strong causal impact is surely overstated (Enders et al. 2022; Haidt and Bail ongoing; Mercier 2020). And those absurd stories are blatantly epistemically irrational: they repeatedly fail to be extinguished by contrary evidence. The details of those stories are often muddy and unclear. There is little interest in defending the truth of the single stories which are often only transitorily held. The impression is that no amount of counterevidence can be provided to defeat them. As a result, I don’t think we have any special reason for thinking that these fake stories online are often genuinely believed: they do not seem to have the functions that paradigmatically characterize believing.

There is another point to take into account. As I mentioned in this paper I explicitly focus only on epistemically absurd stories. Though I agree that people can be motivated by practical reasons to form certain beliefs, I am skeptical that humans can be so epistemically irrational to full-heartedly believe claims that are obviously ludicrous. There may be exceptions to this generalization, such as people who are trapped in cults

and completely brainwashed. Yet, in general, humans are at least minimally epistemically rational (I defended this claim in Bergamaschi Ganapini 2020). Therefore, we really should find a different explanation for why some people are taking absurdities seriously, and I believe this paper offers a way to do that.

- II. Since they are rarely genuinely believed, is sharing these stories a form of lying?

The answer is no: often these stories are not shared to deceive or lie to anyone. Liars normally do not want to be caught. So, they tend to craft their lies carefully and along various lines of truth. For instance, in 1937 the Axis powers bombed the city of Gernica to support Franco's attempt to take hold of Spain. They destroyed the city and killed many civilians. Then they lied about it: Franco's propaganda apparatus explicitly denied any involvement and accused the communist fighters of having killed the civilians and burned the city on purpose. Lies like this one are very common, especially in times of war. Lacking any direct evidence, they might be difficult to debunk, at least at first. In contrast, this does not seem to be the case for the absurd narratives we are concerned with here (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 68). Oftentimes people make no mystery of the fact that they have no evidence for them and seem content to share them regardless of their truth (Bergamaschi Ganapini 2023). Hence, I do not think they are lying in most cases.

- III. The paper argues that the fake stories we witness in political discourse are similar to other, run-of-the-mill narratives such as novels and TV shows. And yet when it comes to myths, novels and shows we are fully aware those are works of fiction: why don't we do the same for conspiracy theories and political absurdities? Why are people mistaken about the nature of their attitudes in some cases but not others?<sup>23</sup>

People's metacognitive skills are often lacking (Carruthers 2011). Minds are messy and even with respect to traditional fiction people are often confused about what they do or do not believe.<sup>24</sup> People may be mistaken about their attitudes for various reasons: they may use the word 'belief' differently than cognitive scientists do (Van Leeuwen et al. 2021), and they may be self-deceived or unable to use the right sort of evidence for self-knowledge. As I argued above some narratives are used to build arguments. And some of these arguments are deployed by motivated reasoning to defend and sustain beliefs that belong to group ideologies. It is not surprising to see that when imagination is coopted by motivated reasoning, people may fail to understand what they believe versus imagine. Motivated reasoning and the psychological immune system do not work through conscious mechanisms (Mandelbaum 2019). That does not happen as often when we read 'normal' fiction, for which the stakes are generally low and no motivated cognition is in place. Hence in those cases I easily separate the fictional from the real:

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<sup>23</sup> Thank you to Dan Williams for pressing me to consider this objection. It is worth pointing out here that it is still a matter of debate whether the Greeks believed in their myths (Veyne 1988) or whether political myths are imagined or believed (Bottici 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Psychologists indicate that people are actually not that good at discriminating reality vs. fiction when reading a story; however, this effect seems to be only temporary (Wheeler et al. 1999) indicating that they may be metacognitive confused about what they do and do not believe.

when more controversial topics are at the center of the narrative, we may fail to recognize that we believe and what we take to be part of a fiction

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this paper I drew both from the literature on motivated cognition and the philosophical reflection on fiction to put forward the hypothesis that fiction and imagination's ability to set up arguments is coopted by motivated reasoning and our psychological immune system to defend some core ideological beliefs. I argued for this by looking at the many fake absurdities that circulate online and offline. Only deeply epistemically irrational people would genuinely believe those stories to be true, and I am skeptical that many people are *that* irrational. Hence my preferred hypothesis is that those stories are in fact imagined rather than believed. Imagination is a potent tool: it can be used as a prop to elicit intuitions about the plausibility of a story and the knowledge we can gain from it. It can entrance pre-seeded beliefs that animate group ideologies. Hence, understanding the use of imagination in the political context is key to figuring out why people seriously entertain some utterly bizarre stories.

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