

On the Origin of Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories are rather a popular topic these days, and a lot has been written on things like the meaning of *conspiracy theory*, whether it's ever rational to believe conspiracy theories, and on the psychology and demographics of people who believe conspiracy theories. But very little has been said about why people might be led to posit conspiracy theories in the first place. This paper aims to fill this lacuna. In particular, I shall argue that, in open democratic societies, citizens justifiably presuppose that the epistemic authorities—journalists, academics, scientists, and so on—are engaged in a good faith pursuit of the truth. This presupposition generates certain normative expectations on the behaviors of the epistemic authorities—they ought to be open to new evidence, possess a healthy degree of skepticism, be willing to engage with opponents, and so on. So, when an epistemic authority is presented with some putatively anomalous data or an alternative hypothesis for some event or phenomena, people expect the epistemic authority to respond in a way that is consonant with these norms. In some instances, however, the epistemic authorities do not respond in this way and instead are dogmatic, dismissive, and engage in *ad hominem*. From the point of view of the citizen, there's a tension here between how the epistemic authorities ought to behave and how they have, in fact, behaved which is best resolved either by taking the epistemic authorities less seriously or by positing a conspiracy theory. Put another way, the failure of the epistemic authorities to adhere to the norms by which we take them to be governed when presented with apparent anomalies or alternative hypotheses is one reason for which one might initially posit a conspiracy theory.

1 Introduction

Over the past decade or so, a lot has been written about the meaning of *conspiracy theory* (Dentith 2016, Cassam 2019, Napolitano and Reuter 2021), whether belief in conspiracy theories is ever warranted or rational (Pigden 1995, Keeley 1999, Cassam 2016), the psychology and demographic information of conspiracy theorists (Uscinski and Parent 2014, Uscinski 2019), and so on. Comparatively little has been said, however, about the reasons for which one might initially

posit a conspiracy theory.¹ This lacuna is somewhat puzzling. It is not, after all, a brute fact about the world that there be conspiracy theories, and so it seems like there should be some way of explaining how we go from a situation in which there are no conspiracy theories to a situation in which there are conspiracy theories. If this is right, and we're interested in minimizing conspiracy theorizing, then determining the reasons for which individuals initially posit conspiracy theories is a pressing concern indeed.

There are a couple of ways one might go about this. Undoubtedly, some researchers would suggest that people initially posit conspiracy theories for the same sorts of reasons that they suppose that people believe them—namely, because of some psychological feature, usually a pathology. For example, they are prone to “magical thinking” (Wood and Douglas 2018), have a “crippled epistemology” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009), or like feeling as though they're in possession of arcane knowledge (Munro, forthcoming). It is not obvious, however, that such explanations will do here for, intuitively, it is quite possible to posit a hypothesis without believing it. Indeed, in the sciences, we often posit hypotheses of which we're doubtful just so that we can definitively rule them out. Moreover, “Why have you put that hypothesis forward?” and “Why do you believe that hypothesis?” are different kinds of questions that will, at first blush, require different kinds of answers. On the other hand, we might suppose that people initially posit conspiracy theories for the same sorts of reasons that people initially posit non-conspiracy theories—namely, because there is (or at least seems to be) something that requires an explanation. I take the second option in this paper. In particular, I shall argue that one reason—but not the only one—for which people initially posit conspiracy theories is to account for the discordant ways in which the expert or authoritative proponents of an official or standard explanation of an event behave when presented with putatively relevant anomalous data or alternative explanations for the event under discussion.

Here's a quick preview of the argument. Those living in broadly democratic, open societies have an antecedent belief that the epistemic authorities—e.g., scientists, academics, and prominent journalists—are engaged in a good faith pursuit of the truth. This antecedent belief generates certain normative expectations. We expect, for example, that the epistemic authorities will be open to new evidence, willing to engage fairly with opponents, possess a healthy degree of skepticism, and employ rigorous investigative methods (Merton 1942, Mitroff 1974, Lakatos 1973). So, when someone—e.g., an insider with an alternative view, a savvy outsider with a seemingly legitimate critique, or even a high-profile podcaster or YouTuber—highlights some apparent anomalies or offers an alternative explanation for some event or other, we expect that the epistemic authorities will respond in a way that satisfies the norms governing those engaged in a good faith pursuit of the truth. They might, for instance, modify their explanation, attempt to show that the anomalies are merely ap-

¹Here, I follow Dentith (2014) and take a conspiracy theory to be an explanation of an event which cites a clandestine plan enacted by a set of agents in order to bring about some end to be a salient cause of the event.

parent, or acknowledge that their preferred explanation cannot currently handle the anomalies while remaining hopeful that it will at some point. But the epistemic authorities sometimes fail to respond in these sorts of ways and are instead dismissive of new evidence, quick to resort to *ad hominem* attacks, or overly dogmatic. These sorts of behaviors are in tension with our antecedent belief that the epistemic authorities are engaged in the good faith pursuit of the truth. We should like to resolve this tension, and, as we shall see, on any way of doing so, we are either forced to downgrade the epistemic status of the epistemic authorities or, in some cases, licensed to posit a conspiracy theory. Put another way, the failure of the epistemic authorities to adhere to the norms by which we take them to be governed when presented with apparent anomalies or alternative hypotheses is one reason for which one might initially posit a conspiracy theory.

In what follows, I further precisify the ways in which I'll be using terms like *conspiracy theory*, *epistemic authority*, and so on (§2). Then, I will present a thoroughgoing explication of the argument sketched above (§3). After this, I propose a first-pass solution by suggesting some ways in which the epistemic authorities might better adhere to our normative expectations, thus (1) minimizing the instances in which individuals might initially posit conspiracy theories, and (2) reclaiming their epistemic status *qua* epistemic authority. I also anticipate and respond to various objections to my positive proposal (§4). I conclude with some remarks about the predictions made by the view on offer here and consider some directions for further research (§5).

2 Some Preliminaries

To begin, we should clarify some terminology. First, I'm going to use a minimal, neutral definition of *conspiracy theory* according to which a conspiracy theory is an explanation of an event which takes a clandestine plan enacted by a set of agents in order to bring about some end to be a salient cause of the event (Dentith 2014).² So, suppose, for example, we want to explain why so many people are being prescribed opioids even though this seems to be leading to all sorts of bad outcomes. On this definition, a claim like "opioids are addictive" is not a conspiracy theory, whereas something like "The Sackler family are suppressing the fact that opioids are addictive in order to continue profiting from their sale" is a conspiracy theory. We're explaining a phenomenon (that a lot of people are being prescribed opioids) by referencing a clandestine plan (intentionally suppressing how addictive opioids are) by a group of people (the Sackler family) to bring about some end (making obscene amounts of money).

Second, for the purpose of this paper, I'm going to focus on conspiracy theories that call into question the veracity of the "official" story or the standard/dominant view of some event; call these "contrarian" conspiracy theories (Levy 2022). It is worth noting, however, that this is not a necessary feature

²Any particularist definition will do here, really. I do not discuss generalist definitions of conspiracy theories because I think generalism is false.

of conspiracy theories (*pace* Coady 2003). Indeed, the sources of official stories, e.g., governments, institutions or the individuals that comprise them, and other epistemic authorities have trafficked in conspiracy theory with some frequency. The Wilson administration's official justification for US involvement in the Great War, for example, involved a conspiracy theory according to which the US simply had to join the War because the German government was in the midst of enacting a clandestine military plan the aim of which was to bring all of Europe, the Mediterranean, Asia—and, perhaps, even the US—under the heel of the German boot (Olmstead 2009). These sorts of conspiracy theories are beyond the purview of this essay. Although, contrarian conspiracy theories about official conspiracy theories are still in bounds here.

So, I'm talking in particular about the origin of contrarian conspiracy theories, but there's a bit more to say about the scope of the account. I'm concerned with explaining the emergence of conspiracy theories in relatively open and broadly democratic societies. This is because the functioning of open, democratic societies seems to depend upon arriving at the right answers with respect to various questions in science, academics, journalism, and so on in a way that other systems of government need not. For example, the proper functioning of an authoritarian regime does not, I would think, depend upon journalists, say, getting to the truth. In fact, that could very well be antithetical to the proper functioning of an authoritarian regime. That such institutions in democratic societies are—or at least ought to be—aimed at getting the right answers generates certain normative expectations on how things like dissent, apparent counter-evidence, and so on are to be handled. As we shall see, the violation of these norms may lead people to posit conspiracy theories. This is not to say that non-democratic societies cannot give rise to contrarian conspiracy theories. It is, however, to say that, insofar as the normative expectations differ from those governing democratic societies, such conspiracy theories will not, or at least not obviously, be generated by the pattern of reasoning described in this essay.

Finally, we should talk about how I'll be using expressions like *epistemic authority*, *official story*, and so on. When I talk about experts, epistemic authorities, or authoritative proponents of some explanation, I mean people like scientists or academics working in a relevant field, and prominent journalists who report on that field. Presumably, people of this sort have (or are thought to have) a level of expertise on the relevant subject(s) sufficient to make a determination about the cause(s) of the event in question. When I say that the explanation of some event or phenomenon is the official explanation, I mean that it is the explanation endorsed by suitably positioned officials within the relevant institution, e.g., the state or a corporation, acting in their capacity as officials. For example, that Oswald acted alone and free of outside influence is the official account of the JFK assassination because it was endorsed by the officials comprising the Warren Commission. It remains the official account because no suitably positioned officials have amended or replaced it. If, at some point, some suitably positioned government officials acting in their official capacity were to endorse some other account, then that account would become the official story. When I say that some view is the standard or dominant view, I mean that it is

held by—or at least is represented as being held by—an overwhelming majority of experts or epistemic authorities.³ The findings of the Warren Commission are the standard or dominant view of the JFK assassination because, e.g., ballistics experts, historians, investigative journalists, and so on overwhelmingly hold that view. If it were that the majority of the epistemic authorities held some other view about the JFK assassination, then that would be the standard or dominant view.⁴

3 The Theory

To get ourselves in the mood to talk about my view on how conspiracy theories are generated, let's consider the following situation. Jones and Smith are a happily married couple. Smith's 40th birthday is fast approaching. So, Jones decides to throw Smith a surprise birthday party. The usual sort of planning begins—finding a venue, getting food and drinks, wrangling friends and acquaintances, and so on—and Smith notices that Jones is, all of a sudden, receiving significantly more text notifications and phone calls than he normally does. This goes on for a couple of weeks, at which point Smith asks Jones about the sudden uptick in phone usage. In an effort to maintain the surprise, Jones denies outright that there has been any such increase in phone usage, going so far as to suggest that Smith might be imagining things. Smith knows, however, that Jones has been receiving more phone calls and texts than usual. In addition to this, Smith reckons that the way in which Jones responded to her question was also out of character. On the basis of these things, it is clear to Smith that *something* is going on; Jones is hiding *something*. So, she begins to wonder whether Jones is having an illicit affair.⁵

Let's take a quick pass at analyzing what's gone on here. First, there is an established or standard way that things are: Smith and Jones's daily life is such that Jones doesn't receive a lot of texts and phone calls. Given the status

³Intuitively, we could also use “standard view” to mean something like “the majority opinion of ordinary people (or a subset of ordinary people).” For example, the standard view among Cleveland Browns fans might be that the Browns will win the Super Bowl next season, while the standard view among the epistemic authorities in football might be that the Browns will never win a Super Bowl, especially not next season. I mention this sense of “standard view” only to set it to one side.

⁴Given how I've set things up here, the official explanation of an event need not be identical to or even consistent with the standard or dominant explanation. In general, however, it seems that the official and dominant explanations hang together. If the two do diverge, they seem not to stay apart for long. This apparent interplay between the state and the epistemic authorities is worth investigating, but I will not take up the question in this essay.

⁵It's worth noting that the the same pattern of tensions could arise between two perfect strangers. Suppose, for example, that I ask someone for directions to a local restaurant and they tell me to take some bizarre route. Even if I don't know anything at all about whatever city I'm in, I know enough about cities in general that this will strike me as odd enough to generate an apparent factual tension. Suppose further that I express some incredulity at these directions. If my would-be guide responds by, say, assuring me that he's a very, very honest person who would never in a million years lead a traveller astray, I will almost certainly take his protesting too much to be evidence that he's up to something.

quo, the surge in phone traffic is, by Smith's lights, an anomaly worthy of further consideration. Nevertheless, Jones refuses to acknowledge that anything out of the ordinary has occurred. Moreover, the response he offers, such as it is, constitutes something of an *ad hominem* against Smith—he has, after all, accused her of fabricating things. But such behavior is anomalous, too: Jones simply isn't the kind of person to gaslight his wife, and Smith knows this. So, there are two tensions at play here. First, there's a tension between the standard way things are and the sudden uptick in texts and calls. Call this a *factual tension*. Second, there's a tension between how Smith would expect Jones to respond to her inquiry and how he actually responds. Call this a *behavioral tension*. It's the behavioral tension that leads Smith to wonder whether Jones is having an affair. Indeed, there are any number of ways in which Jones could have resolved the factual tension. That he fails to do so—and, importantly, the way in which he fails to do so—is what motivates Smith's to attempt to explain his behavior. Here, she resolves the behavioral tension by supposing that Jones is hiding something or other—namely, an illicit affair.⁶

On my view, conspiracy theories are generated by more or less the same pattern of reasoning: what appears—by our lights—to be a genuine factual tension warrants an explanation, an explanation is sought or proposed, the proponents of the official or standard explanation respond to this in a way that—again, by our lights—generates a behavioral tension, and, in some instances the behavioral tension is best resolved by proposing a contrarian conspiracy theory. It is, of course, important that these are tensions *by our lights* because I do not want to suggest what we're always right about whether something is anomalous or some behavior violates a norm. Sometimes, what we take to be evidence for something turns out not to be, and sometimes behaviors that we think are impermissible are wholly in bounds.

Sovereign citizens, for example, believe that, at some point in US history, the actual rule of law was supplanted by maritime law (there are important differences between the two which need not detain us here). So, for these people, there's an apparent factual tension between what we think the law is and what it actually is (and they think they have good evidence for this). When sovereign citizens press this line in legal proceedings, they're not taken at all seriously by various legal experts, e.g., judges and attorneys, and this generates a behavioral tension which is then resolved by positing a conspiracy theory. Now, the sovereign citizen is, in fact, mistaken: there's not good evidence that we're actually living under maritime law (so there's no genuine factual tension), and the norms governing legal experts do not require them to engage with the

⁶On my view, Smith is justified in concluding that Jones is hiding something or other. Potentially, however, her secondary conclusion that Jones is having an illicit affair might not be justified. Whether it is will depend upon a number of background factors, e.g., whether Jones has a history of infidelity. In any case, Smith's assumption that Jones is having an affair is a very standard human reaction to this sort of situation (it's a frequent plot device in works of fiction, after all). Indeed, it seems as though humans are compelled, for whatever reason, to construct explanations—usually negatively valenced—when given reason to think someone is hiding something. See, for example: Simmel 1906, Hofstadter 1964, Walmsley and O'Madagain 2020.

sovereign citizen in the way that he or she expects (so there's no genuine behavioral tension). But the genuineness doesn't matter. What matters is that, by the sovereign citizen's lights, there's a factual tension leading to a behavioral tension which is best explained by a conspiracy theory. Let's go through the process in a bit more detail.

The first steps are pretty straightforward. Some event occurs (or has occurred) such that warrants an explanation. After some consideration, an explanation is proffered by some epistemic authority, and, after some amount of time, this explanation becomes the dominant or standard view (it may but need not be the official story as well). Suppose, however, that there is some set of (putatively) relevant anomalies which are not accounted for by the dominant view. In light of these, some alternative explanation is put forward such that accounts for the event together with these apparent anomalies. Alternatively, individuals—insiders in the relevant field, savvy outsiders, etc.,—might simply draw attention to the apparent anomalies with the expectation that the proponents of the standard view will have something illuminating to say. Here, of course, we are in the realm of factual tensions, and there's nothing going on that's unique to conspiracy theories.⁷ Rather, we can imagine something like this unfolding in the lecture hall or the lab or what have you. Indeed, it is precisely these sorts of tensions that motivate philosophers, journalists, scientists, and so on, to continue inquiring into whatever question is under discussion.

Sometimes, the epistemic authorities take these putative anomalies seriously by, e.g., modifying their explanation, attempting to show that the anomalies are merely apparent, or acknowledging that their preferred explanation cannot currently handle the anomalies while remaining hopeful that it will at some point. And, really, these are the sorts of behaviors we expect from experts. This is because the general presumption is that such people are engaged in, or at least *represent* themselves as being engaged in, a good faith pursuit of the truth, and we have a normative expectation that those engaged in such a pursuit should do precisely these sorts of things—that is, be responsive to evidence, be at least initially open to counter proposals, exhibit a willingness to engage in critical yet amicable dialogue with opponents, and so on. Indeed, we're taught from a very young age that scientific and general reasoning follows a process of seeing some phenomenon, coming up with an explanation, checking it against other available evidence, and updating or modifying the explanation in light of new or conflicting evidence.

Unfortunately, however, this is not always how the experts respond when faced with apparent anomalies or alternative hypotheses. Instead of having a closer look at the supposed anomalous data and engaging with their interlocutors in a calm and civil manner, they too often respond by dismissing their opponents—whether laypeople, experts in a relevant field, or experts in a somewhat distant field—as kooks, cranks, or comen. And these reactions—all of which constitute a violation of our normative expectations—generate what I

⁷Of course, if the supposed anomalies are merely apparent, then the factual tension will be merely apparent, too.

have called a behavioral tension. Importantly, these sorts of violations must be epistemic in nature, e.g., the epistemic authority fails to consider or address counter evidence, is generally close-minded, resorts to *ad hominem* or merely reiterates that they are a credentialed expert. It is not enough that some epistemic authority is aloof, crotchety, or an otherwise unpleasant person; this may be a failing, but it is not, on its own, the kind of failing that is sufficient to generate behavioral tensions. Nevertheless, history, and the history of science in particular, is replete with examples of the sort of behavior that generates the kind of tension I'm talking about. Let's briefly recount a few.

1. In 1915, Alfred Wegener published *The Origins of Continents and Oceans* in which he argued for a then novel theory according to which all the continents on Earth once comprised a singular landmass which, over time, via a process of continental drift, separated into distinct continents. Today, of course, this is the standard view in geology. But this was not the case in the early twentieth century, at which point the consensus was that the positions of the continents were fixed. Wegener's opponents called him crazy, insisted that he, as a meteorologist, should not have anything to say about geology, and dismissed his theory as pseudoscience (Oreskes 1999).
2. The debate over the cause of the end of the Cretaceous period and the extinction of the dinosaurs—the so-called “dinosaur wars”—was famously acrimonious. It was so rancorous, in fact, that scientists worried that it was obstructing rational discourse about the topic. Briefly: in the 1980s, Dr. Luis Alvarez, the main proponent of the impact hypothesis (which is today the standard view), took to labeling his opponents as “bad scientists” who were “publishing scientific nonsense” (Browne 19 January 1988, C1). He, and scientists in his camp, even went so far as to attempt to block the promotion of one notable detractor who Alvarez described as a “weak sister.” (Ibid.). The acrimony is, to some extent, ongoing. Dr. Gerta Keller, a proponent of the Deccan Traps hypothesis—according to which millennia of volcanic activity led to a slow demise of the dinosaurs and many other species—has endured four decades of ridicule for her opposition to the impact hypothesis. According to Keller, she has, during this time, “been called a 'bitch' and 'the most dangerous woman in the world,' who 'should be stoned and burned at the stake,'” by her colleagues either publicly or privately (Bosker September 2018).
3. The debate over the origin of SARS-CoV-2 was, in its early stages, very contentious. The initial, zoonotic hypothesis—according to which the virus originated in bats and then spread to humans—quickly became, and remains, the standard view. Some scientists (and even journalist and savvy lay people), however, argued for the alternative lab-leak hypothesis. On this view, the virus was result of research conducted in the nearby Wuhan Institute of Virology from which it had unintentionally leaked. The epistemic authorities responded by labeling their opponents “racist,”

“xenophobic,” “dangerous,” “conspiracy theorists” (in the pejorative sense), and so on (Chait 24 May 2021, Fink 11 January 2022).

These examples are, I think, more than sufficient to show that experts sometimes do not engage with alternative hypotheses or putatively anomalous evidence in the sort of dispassionate, clear-headed way that we expect. Indeed, there’s no real *argumentation* in these examples, no attempt to *respond* to the evidence, just a lot of name-calling and condescension. If you are still skeptical that this sort of thing is a frequent occurrence, however, I’d encourage you to consult with some of your colleagues in STEM; each of them will have a personal anecdote about such behaviors, perhaps even within their own research area.

So, norm violations, and thus behavioral tensions, abound, and, much like Jones in the case of apparent infidelity mentioned above, we should like to come up with an explanation such that resolves these tensions. Put another way, we should like to account for violations of our normative expectations. There are a number of ways we can go about doing this. Unfortunately, as we shall see, none of them are sufficient to mollify these norm violations. At best, they require us to downgrade the epistemic status of the experts in question, i.e., take them less seriously in their capacity as experts and so discount their testimony (*cf.* Kelly 2005). At worst, they license us to posit a conspiracy theory. Let’s consider the ways in which people respond to the sorts of norm violations we see in (1)–(3). These fall into two categories: explanations that appeal to ignorance or stupidity and explanations that appeal to epistemic arrogance, capture, ideological bias, and the like. Let’s start with stupidity and ignorance.

Suppose that we—or, more likely, someone with a view towards which we might be sympathetic or someone merely talking critically about some topic in which we’re interested—have advanced some alternative hypothesis or raised some putatively relevant anomalies to some epistemic authority and that the expert has responded in a way that constitutes a norm violation, e.g., he or she has been dismissive, condescending, resistant to evidence, etc. One obvious explanation for this is that we—or the contrarian interlocutor with whom we are sympathetic—are either stupid or ignorant. Perhaps we have overestimated the significance of the apparent anomalies, the anomalies are wholly unrelated to the official story, or the alternative hypothesis has already been considered and rejected. Of course, it is possible these sorts of explanations may, in fact, account for their behavior. But they do not, by our lights, do anything to mollify the norm violation. After all, we do not tend to respond to being dismissed or ridiculed after asking what we take to be a legitimate question by sincerely thinking “Oh, right. I’m stupid. My mistake.” In fact, there are good reasons for thinking that it would be irrational for us to respond in this way (Egan and

Elga 2005).⁸ So thinking that we're stupid is out.⁹

But what if the reason for the behavior of the epistemic authorities is that we're ignorant? It's still not obvious that this sufficiently explains their behavior. Indeed, we might reasonably say: "Look, if I'm so confused and my views are so wrong, it should be really easy to demonstrate the ways in which I've missed the mark. After all, in the time it took to my interlocutor to condescend to me, he or she probably could have gotten me on (or at least headed towards) the right track. It's concerning that they didn't even try." Now, it could be that we're wrong about this—that is, we might be so far off the the mark that, by the epistemic authority's lights, nothing he or she could say would be enough to get us on the right track. But this still does not explain the norm violation. Surely, we've all had a student or colleague say something so wrongheaded and off base that it was best to just move on rather than spend the time it would take to straighten them out. But we do not, I hope, condescend, ridicule, and dismiss our confused interlocutors. Instead, we say things like "I'm not sure, I'll have to think about it" or "That's interesting, let's talk more about it during office hours." The same sorts of responses are available to the experts or other epistemic authorities. The question is why they seem to have intentionally violated a norm when plenty of permissible responses were available. So we cannot, it seems, resolve behavioral tensions by assuming that we are ignorant.

While we might not be able to resolve behavioral tensions by supposing the we are stupid or ignorant, perhaps we can do so by supposing that the epistemic authorities are. We might reason as follows: someone *truly* authoritative would see the ways in which the anomalies might affect their theory and have *something* to say about it—even if what they say is just to explain why the anomalies are only apparent or why the alternative hypothesis won't work. They've failed to do this. So, the epistemic authorities don't know what they're talking about. They're either ignorant or stupid, and they're trying make up for this by being dismissive and condescending—they are merely *acting as if* they are authorities

⁸It's important to note that, from an outside perspective, one can explain an expert's condescending behavior by supposing that his or her interlocutor is stupid. For example, if *A* proposes an alternative hypothesis or says "what about such and such anomalies" to some expert *B* and *B* then responds in a condescending and dismissive way, I might suppose that *B* responded in such a way because *A* is stupid. When *A* = me or someone suggesting alternatives or raising concerns with which I'm sympathetic, however, this explanation is simply not available.

⁹It may be urged that I'm leaving out a live option here: the epistemic authorities are dismissive of anomalies or alternative hypotheses because those hypotheses are "racist," "sexist," or otherwise "dangerous." But I think these explanations are off the table for reasons similar (but not identical) to why believing that we're stupid is off the table. Namely, most people do not believe of themselves that they're racist, sexist, or deliberately putting people in harm's way—it's not merely that they wouldn't admit this to others; it's that they actively disbelieve that they're racist, sexist, etc. So, it simply would not occur to them to explain the behavior of the epistemic authorities by thinking "Fair enough. I'm racist/sexist/endangering people, after all." Of course, there are some people for whom this may not be the case, but it's just not something that would initially occur to the overwhelming majority of people. In the event that this is actually the reason for not engaging, the thing to do seems to be show people why the line they're treading is, in fact, racist, sexist, or otherwise dangerous.

in the relevant domain. Now, as it happens, I think we antecedently rule out that the epistemic authorities are stupid. Instead, I think we reason as follows: So and so seems like a really smart person who knows a lot about this topic, and, probably, they *are* a really smart person who knows a lot about this topic. Moreover, I have no reason to doubt that so and so is engaged in a good faith pursuit of the truth. But they're damn sure not acting like it. I wonder why that is? That this line is available (and, I think, pretty sensible) suggests that we pass over the supposition that the epistemic authorities are stupid and continue our search for a way in which to resolve the tension. And this may lead us to suppose that the epistemic authorities are simply ignorant. There are a couple of ways to cash this out.

On the one hand, it could be that the “authority” here is an epistemic trespasser, i.e., they're a legitimate expert in some domain and they mistakenly think that their expertise in that domain maps one-to-one onto the domain under discussion (Ballantyne 2019). They are ignorant about things in the domain under discussion, but they are unaware of their ignorance (Dunning and Krueger 1999). So, when asked about some putatively relevant anomalies or confronted with an alternative hypothesis, they're simply not in a position to offer a serious answer. Moreover, they don't realize that this is the position they're in. Nevertheless, they still respond with the dismissiveness and condescension they would bring to bear in a domain in which they are an expert—which they also should avoid doing! This is a serious worry with, e.g., so-called public intellectuals who often have an expertise in some narrow domain yet bring an unearned bravado to a range of topics that far outstrips their expertise. So, when someone with an expertise in some field or other takes it upon themselves to either argue for an official story or standard view or “debunk” an alternative one about events beyond the scope of their expertise, they often wind up looking rather silly.¹⁰ The problem is that people often associate this kind of authority with a broader class of “establishment” authorities, i.e., ivory tower, coastal elites who stump for the dominant narrative, whatever it happens to be. When these public intellectuals trespass in a condescending, belittling way it not only lowers our view of the trespasser *qua* expert, but it also lowers our view establishment authorities on the whole. And this is amplified when these sorts of trespassing experts are wrong in addition to being condescending and overly dismissive.¹¹ So, we re-

¹⁰Think Linus Pauling on vitamin C, Richard Dawkins on philosophy of religion, Sam Harris or Noam Chomsky on foreign policy, and so on.

¹¹We might wonder, also, how this will go in a situation where what's being evaluated is itself a conspiracy theory, as in Dentith (2018) and Dentith and Keeley (2018). Briefly, conspiracy theories often span across multiple domains of expertise. So, the evaluation of, say, some conspiracies about the events of 9/11 will require expertise in demolition, structural engineering, thermodynamics, air traffic control, and military operations (to name just a handful). When someone asserts such a conspiracy theory (or even highlights putatively relevant anomalies), it's quite possible that the epistemic authority with whom they've engaged will be unable to resolve all the factual tensions because there's no single epistemic authority who's competent to speak on all of these things. Their unwillingness to engage on things outside their expertise (or their willingness to do so and make mistakes) will then appear to generate a behavioral tension which is best resolved by downgrading their epistemic status or positing a conspiracy theory. In some cases, this might even lead people to expand the

solve the tension, but such resolution issues in an unfavorable outcome—namely, a downgrading of our view of the epistemic status of the epistemic authorities.

On the other hand, it could be that the “authority” here is a shill put forward by someone or other to parrot the official story or the standard view. They’re not merely trespassing since they do not have any expertise at all. Rather, they’re a “stuffed shirt” similar to the fake doctors one might see on a commercial, i.e., they’re not actually an epistemic authority, they just play one on TV.¹² It would be no surprise, then, that they could only dismiss and condescend (or just repeat the prepared talking points) when presented with apparent anomalies or alternative hypotheses. Again, this resolves the tension, but it also suggests that someone behind the scenes thought it necessary or beneficial to hire someone to pose as an expert. But now we’re firmly in the realm of conspiracy theorizing, and it’s easy to see how such a theory might go: some group have secretly put forward some non-expert to play the part of an expert so that we would simply defer to his or her “expertise” in order to bring about some end or other.

There are a few more related ways in which we might resolve behavioral tensions. First, we might suppose that the epistemic authority is just an arrogant bully who shouts down and belittles anyone who dares to push back against his or her preferred explanation. Their behavior in this case has nothing to do with the content of the alternative or the relevance of the anomalies. Nor does it matter who proposed the alternative or highlighted the apparent inconsistencies. They are, you might say, an intellectual tyrant, and they brook no disagreement. Second, we might suppose that the epistemic authorities have an ideological bias on which only some hypotheses are acceptable, and so any hypothesis falling outside the bounds of acceptability is dismissed without further ado. I have in mind here things like political and social ideologies, or even indoctrination into a Kuhnian paradigm. The details are unimportant. All that matters for our purposes is that there’s some set of background conditions such that restricts the range of hypotheses one is willing to consider and increases the range of anomalies one is willing to ignore. Finally, we might suppose that the epistemic authorities are captured, i.e., their sources of funding are dictating the kinds of hypotheses they put forward as well as the sorts of alternatives they entertain. Any of these explanations is, I think, sufficient to resolve behavioral tensions, but each does so in rather a troubling way. The tension, recall, is between how we expect someone engaged in a good faith pursuit of the truth to respond when confronted with an alternative hypothesis or some putatively relevant anomalies and how they actually respond. But it seems like an epistemic authority who is arrogant, ideologically biased, or captured is either (1) engaged in this pursuit but not in good faith, or (2) engaged in some other pursuit. Neither option is particularly palatable.

Suppose (1) is true. In this case, we can at least suppose that the epistemic

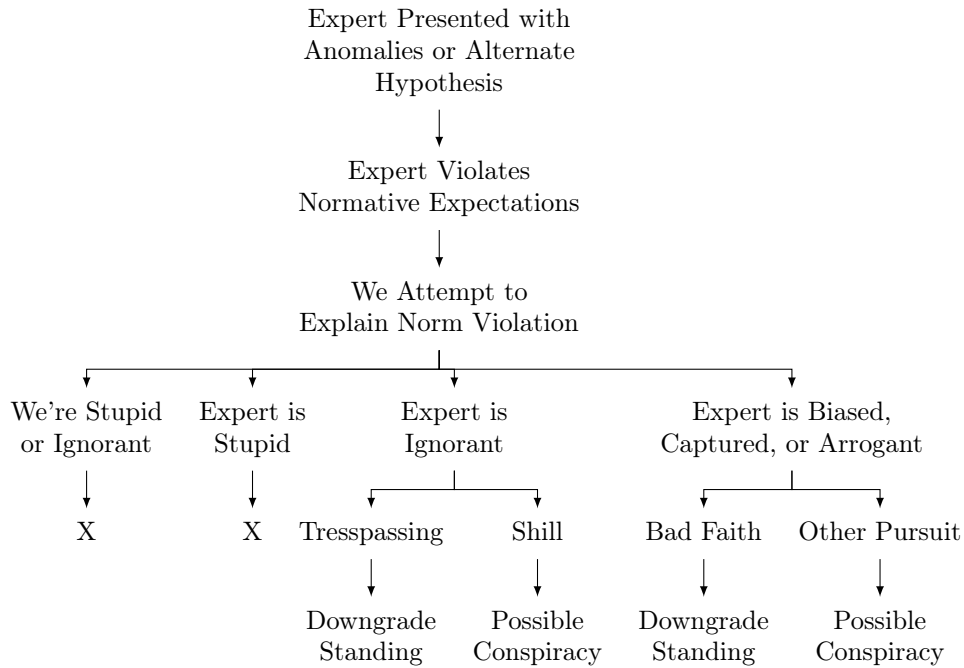
scope of their initial conspiracy theory to include those epistemic authorities who have either refused to engage or engaged and gotten it wrong.

¹²This is different, I think, from believing that an expert is stupid, which I’ve said we seem not to do. That would require believing that someone is actually an epistemic authority *and* stupid. If one is a shill, then one simply isn’t an expert.

authorities defend their preferred theory with such zeal because they believe it's true. But their willingness to flout the normative constraints of good faith inquiry in favor of rabid dogmatism should give us pause. At the very least, we should worry that the epistemic authorities' being arrogant, ideological, or captured will make arriving at the truth more rather than less difficult. And this seems to suggest that we should take them less seriously *qua* epistemic authority. In fact, Goldman has suggested as much in his (2001). Briefly, the idea is that, when confronted with two experts who disagree, a lay person can reasonably side with one over the other if he or she can determine whether one of the experts is unduly biased or self-interested. The norm violations under discussion give us reason to believe that the epistemic authorities are biased, captured, or arrogant. So, if Goldman is right, then we can reasonably downgrade the epistemic status of epistemic authorities who seem to us to be overly dogmatic.

If (2) is true, then all bets are off. After all, if the epistemic authorities are engaged in some other pursuit with different or no normative constraints, then we have no way of knowing in what pursuit they might be engaged or what the constraints might be. It will be unclear, therefore, whether the epistemic authorities defend their preferred theories with such zeal because they believe those theories are true or if they defend them for some other, perhaps less savory, reason. An analogy to Grice (1989) is instructive here. In most conversational contexts, we assume that our conversational partner is observing at least the Cooperative Principle (and probably the maxims, e.g., say true things, say relevant things, etc.). So, if our interlocutor says "It's raining," and we believe that they're observing the CP and maxims, then we'll conclude that our interlocutor has said something they believe is true, relevant, informative, and so on. If we trust them, then we'll conclude that they have, indeed, said something true, relevant, informative, and so on. If, on the other hand, we do not believe that our interlocutor is observing the CP—because, for example, we're in an antagonistic context (Camp 2018)—then it's just not at all clear what we should make of their utterance of "It's raining." It may be that they've said something true, relevant, etc., but we simply have no way of knowing that. Given this, it would be bizarre for us to pick up an umbrella in response to their having uttered "It's raining." The situation in (2) is similar. If we have good reason believe that the epistemic authorities are not abiding by the rules governing the good faith pursuit of the truth, then we may be led to wonder just what game they're *actually* playing. And it is a short trip from here to conspiracy land.

The following chart is a helpful representation of what we've just discussed.



With this diagram in mind, let's consider the examples from the beginning of the section again. In both the Wegener and the Alvarez cases, we seem to be in a situation where the epistemic authorities are captured, biased, or arrogant. We do not, after all, have any good reason to suppose that Wegener's opponents were trespassing or shilling, and the same goes for Alvarez. In both cases, the problem is that the epistemic authorities are making scientific progress more rather than less difficult. The picture on offer suggests that we respond to this by downgrading the epistemic status of the authorities, and that seems to be exactly what we do in these cases (I, at least, have a diminished view of Alvarez's epistemic status after learning about his treatment of his opponents). But what about the debate surrounding the origins of SARS-CoV-2? This, I think, is a prime example of a way in which the behavior of the epistemic authorities can lead people to posit conspiracy theories. Regardless what view one has on the origins of the virus, there are a couple of things that are true. First, the response from the epistemic authorities at the mere mention of a lab leak was swift, univocal, and consisted almost entirely in minimizing, dismissing, *ad hominem*, and so on. Second, there are a number of conspiracy theories about why the epistemic authorities, e.g., Dr. Fauci, the CDC, and prominent journalists, responded to the lab leak hypothesis in the way that they did. The standard conspiracy theory here seems to be that the epistemic authorities deliberately misled the public about the origins of the virus in order to cover up their having funded the research that led to the pandemic (presumably, to avoid any culpability). So, there's a conspiracy theory where there was none before, and it arose in an attempt to explain the behavior of the epistemic

authorities when faced with an alternative hypothesis. On my view, if the epistemic authorities hadn't reacted in this kind of way to the mere mention of the possibility of a laboratory leak, then no one would have felt the need to posit a conspiracy theory explaining why the epistemic authorities had acted that way.

Let's briefly consider another example in which the behavior of the epistemic authorities has led people to posit a conspiracy theory where there was none before. In 1947, something crash landed on Mac Brazel's ranch in Roswell, NM. The Roswell Army Air Field initially said that they had recovered a "flying disc" at the site of the crash. This is the story that ran in the Roswell Daily Record. It was later retracted by the Army in favor of a story according to which the object in question was a conventional weather balloon. Decades later, in the 1970s, retired Major Jesse Marcel (who was known to be at the site of the Roswell crash) admitted in an interview that the weather balloon story was false. A couple more decades later, the US Air Force concluded—as the result of an internal investigation—that the debris had likely come from a military surveillance program called Project Mogul, which employed high-altitude balloons to detect whether the USSR had conducted any atomic testing. All of this is to say that we now know that there was, in fact, a cover up. Nevertheless, anyone who questioned the ever changing official story by suggesting alternative hypotheses (e.g., that it couldn't have been a weather balloon because the debris found was inconsistent with other weather balloon crashes) or by highlighting putative anomalies (e.g., eyewitness reports that there were bodies found at the crash site) were dismissed as kooks and cranks obsessed with "little green men" by government officials, academics, and prominent journalists. This led, or so I claim, to a lot of conspiracy theorizing where there was none before. Interestingly, this pattern repeats whenever some apparent UFO-type phenomenon becomes suitably well-known: someone (or some group of people) observe some seemingly strange aerial phenomenon, the epistemic authorities offer an explanation (e.g., weather balloons or swamp gas), people point out some potential worries with that explanation, the epistemic authorities make fun of those people for believing in aliens, and so those people come up with their own (often conspiratorial) explanations for why the epistemic authorities are behaving in the way that they are rather than like people who are engaged in a good faith pursuit of the truth.¹³

¹³It is important to note that the generative mechanism outlined here is only meant to explain why people initially posit *some conspiracy theory or other*. It is not meant to explain why one might posit some *particular* conspiracy theory. Much like non-conspiracy theories, different conspiracy theories have different contents, and there can be any number of conspiracy theories that purport to explain the same event. Whether a particular conspiracy theory is any good is a separate question from whether positing some conspiracy or other is warranted. It's plausible under the account on offer that one could be justified in resolving a behavioral tension by positing a conspiracy theory and then go on to posit one that isn't any good. Again, this is very like non-conspiracy theories: we can be justified in thinking that something needs an explanation and then, for whatever reason, put forth a bad one. To a good first approximation, I think this is what's going on with certain "deep-state" conspiracies: they (perhaps rightly) see something that needs explaining and then, for whatever reason—it's fun to tell stories, conspiracy theories are entertaining, and so on—put forth an outlandish

Summing up. We begin with a set of apparent anomalies or an alternative hypothesis. The epistemic authorities violate our normative expectations by condescending, ridiculing, dismissing out of hand, etc., the apparent anomalies or alternative hypothesis to which we've drawn attention. So, we look for a way to explain the norm violation. One way to do this is by supposing that we're ignorant or stupid. I have argued here that such a move isn't really available to us. I have also argued that we cannot resolve the tension here by supposing that the epistemic authorities are stupid. If, however, we suppose that the epistemic authorities are ignorant, then we can explain the norm violation in a couple of ways: either the epistemic authorities are epistemic trespassers or they're shills. This leads us to either downgrade the epistemic status of the epistemic authorities or to, I think justifiably, posit a conspiracy theory. Finally, I have argued that, if we suppose the epistemic authorities are captured, biased, or arrogant, then it seems that we're justified in concluding that the epistemic authorities are either engaging in bad faith or not engaged in the pursuit of truth at all; they're either playing the game poorly or playing a different game altogether. Again, this leads us either to downgrade the epistemic status of the epistemic authorities or posit a conspiracy theory. These are all bad results.

4 Implications of the Theory

There's a lot of concern about both our diminishing trust in experts and expertise and the extent to which people engage in conspiracy theorizing.¹⁴ These are problems, to be sure, but, if what I've said in the preceding section is correct, they are, at least in part, problems of our own making. And if the locus of at least some of the problem lies with academics like us, then it is within our power to affect change in a profound and meaningful way. Given what we've said so far, it's pretty clear what we can do to shore up trust in experts and stem the spread of conspiracy theories—namely, we can cleave to the normative expectations put upon those engaged in a good faith pursuit of the truth—this is, after all, the pursuit in which we take ourselves to be engaged. So, when we're confronted with some set of putatively relevant anomalies or an alternative hypothesis, we've got to *engage* seriously and charitably with at least some degree of epistemic humility. We should not, instead, belittle or condescend to our interlocutors. If we do not know how to respond to something, we've got to be willing to admit that we don't know. We should not, instead, give some hand-wavy response and hope for the best; and if it becomes clear, after some

conspiracy theory. For more on evaluating conspiracy theories, see: Dentith and Keeley 2018 and Dentith 2018.

¹⁴Typically, the thought is that this is very bad because people's diminishing trust in experts and propensity to engage in conspiracy theorizing is unjustified and likely to have a destabilizing effect on society. Put another way, the thought is that people posit conspiracy theories because there is something wrong *with them*. Here, I'm arguing that people posit conspiracy theories because there is something wrong *with society*, e.g., institutions, scientists, journalist, and academics. So, we should care about minimizing conspiracy theories insofar as doing so is tantamount to fixing what is wrong with society.

amount of time, that our preferred theory can't offer a compelling response to some objection(s), we've got to be willing to abandon that theory. If we're invited on a TV program, podcast, or to a lecture where some alternative hypothesis is under discussion, we've got to *argue* for the merits of the standard view and *demonstrate* its superiority at explaining the relevant phenomena. We must not, instead, go off on a minutes-long rant that culminates in a mic drop or its equivalent. If we get something wrong, we've got to admit it. We must not, instead, bury some half-hearted correction at the bottom of what we've written weeks or months after we've written it or try to explain away our mistake. And we certainly mustn't try and silence those who disagree with us. We all know what we ought to be doing here. We engage with our colleagues in the way I'm describing all of the time, and we expect (or perhaps even demand) that our colleagues treat us with the same respect. So, too, we demand this sort of behavior from our students in their interactions both with us and with one another. We know very well what the norms are. Now we know the repercussions of failing to adhere to them.

This is not, of course, a panacea. Even if we engage our interlocutors in the way just discussed, there will still be people who are overly skeptical of the epistemic authorities or too quick to posit conspiracy theories. This is, in part, because we've been doing such a bad job at this for such a long time.¹⁵ But it's also because there will always be some legitimate paranoids out there. So, this won't get us to a situation in which everyone trusts the experts and no one ever posits any conspiracy theories.¹⁶ What this will get us, however, is a situation in which the vast majority of people do not, instinctively and with good reason, doubt that the experts are engaged in a good faith pursuit of the truth. And this is exactly the kind of situation we should like to be in. There are a few ways in which one might object to this proposal.

First, one might suggest that the public is just wrong about what the norms governing the epistemic authorities are. It could be, after all, that the norms actually observed by the epistemic authorities are different from what the public thinks or, perhaps, that there are no hard-and-fast norms at all. If this is the case, it suggests a different strategy for dealing with conspiracy theorizing—namely, that we bring the public's expectations for expert behavior in line with the actual norms observed by the experts, if there be such. Presumably, this would prevent behavioral tensions—and thus any need to initially posit a conspiracy theory—from arising in the first place.

One could say this, but doing so would mean that conspiracy theorizing is far less criticizable on epistemic grounds than such an interlocutor might have hoped. One reason that theorists take conspiracy theorizing to be epistemically vicious is that it often consists in questioning or challenging the epistemic authorities. It's epistemically vicious because, insofar as we are concerned with maximizing true beliefs, the rational thing to do is to defer to the experts. After

¹⁵And, presumably, our having done such a bad job at this combined with the fact that institutions like media, government, big business, and so on have been deceptive in the past might justify one's being seemingly too quick to posit a conspiracy theory.

¹⁶And it's not clear that such a situation is desirable. See: Basham 2006.

all, they're far more likely to get the right answers than non-experts, and so it's rational, given our aims, to defer. Notice, however, that this line of reasoning goes through only if the epistemic authorities are in the business of getting the right answers. If the experts are primarily pursuing something else—fame, money, tenure, and so on—then it's not at all clear that it's rational to defer because there's no guarantee that doing so will be a reliable way of forming true beliefs. So, if one wants to criticize conspiracy theorizing on the grounds that it is irrational not to defer to the epistemic authorities, then the epistemic authorities have got to be in the business of getting the right answers. But, if the epistemic authorities are in the business of getting the right answers, then the norms by which they're governed cannot, it seems, be anything other than what the public thinks they are, e.g., that the epistemic authorities be open to new evidence, willing to engage fairly with opponents, possess a healthy degree of skepticism, and employ rigorous investigative methods.

Second, one might argue that it just can't be the case that we owe it to these people to take seriously what are, by our lights, false/dangerous/idiotic ideas brought on by too much "independent research" and too little formal education. We should instead acknowledge that these people *are* silly, and understand that to seriously engage with them is to tacitly endorse bad epistemic practices, legitimize people and ideas we shouldn't be legitimizing, and so on.¹⁷ So, in fact, we must not do the things I've recommended. We should instead, as at least one colleague has suggested, shame them into compliance or, at the very least, silence.

Whether this objection is any good really depends upon the enterprise in which we take ourselves to be engaged. If we want to alienate and ostracize people, to push them further from the mainstream and even deeper into echo chambers, epistemic bubbles, and so on (Nguyen 2020), then shaming them into silence or compliance is the way to go. If, on the other hand, we should like to bring these people into the fold—and why shouldn't we? They seem to have very many of the traits that we value, e.g., they're skeptical, keen, inquisitive, creative, and unafraid of running afoul of the powers that be—then the *only* thing to do is engage. Again, I'm not saying we'll win over everyone, that would be far too strong. But, over time, as we continually demonstrate that we're genuinely engaged in the good faith pursuit of the truth, we will not only win over some people but also prevent people from ever being in a position where positing a conspiracy theory or downgrading the epistemic status of the experts is the thing to do. Put another way, the strategy for which I'm advocating is both ameliorative and preventative: we can, perhaps, get some people out of

¹⁷It's also worth noting that there are, in some instances, trade-offs to consider. To take one example, suppose that an epistemic authority asserts that P even though P is false because he or she has good reason to believe that asserting Q (even though Q is true) will lead to bad outcomes. Here, the expert has to weigh the deleterious consequences of being caught out saying something false (and, perhaps, vilifying those who disagree) with those of saying something true. Cases like these are admittedly tough, but I think the result of either choice will be better understood and more readily forgiven by the public if there is more rather than less good will towards the epistemic authorities. The best way to achieve the requisite levels of good will, on my view, is to make norm violations the exception rather than the rule.

the rabbit hole and, at the same time, prevent others from falling in. Both of these are good outcomes.

Third, one might argue that the sort of high level people propagating alternative hypotheses—e.g., Alex Jones, Ken Hamm, any number of popular YouTubers, and so on—only *pretend to be* engaging in a good faith pursuit of the truth. Really, they’re in the business of enriching themselves. They just want to sell books or merch or vitamin supplements, and they’re doing so by preying upon the uneducated. Surely, we do not owe it to these sorts of people to critically engage. And, probably, we should silence them outright.

This is not a great plan. If these people and their ilk really are hucksters (and, probably, some of them are), then the thing to do is expose this fact. But, in order to do this successfully—by which I mean to have people take us seriously when we say “Don’t listen to so and so, he’s a huckster”—people need to believe that we wouldn’t say of someone that they’re a huckster if it weren’t true. But, if people believe that we say of anyone who highlights putatively relevant anomalies or raises alternative hypotheses that he or she is a huckster or a kook or whatever, then our saying of any particular person that he or she is a huckster or kook is meaningless. It’s certainly not going to get anyone to think twice about listening to people like Alex Jones. In fact, it might even *encourage* people to seek out such people. And it’s easy to see why: people will see that we’re merely silencing people rather than responding to them, but we only silence people when we don’t like what they have to say, and so maybe what so and so has to say is worth hearing. This is the opposite of what we’re going for, I think. So, if we want our ascriptions of “huckster” and “kook” and the like to carry any weight, then we have to stop throwing these terms around so willy-nilly. And this result just falls out of the recommendation I’ve outlined above. Indeed, if we’re cleaving to the requisite normative expectations, ascriptions of “huckster” and “kook” should be rare enough that, when made, they’re taken seriously. Again, this is a good outcome.

Finally, one might say that I’m asking too much of experts who are already overworked and exasperated. These people simply do not have the time to calmly and carefully walk everyone who’s watched a few YouTube videos through the ins and outs of some complicated topic. Moreover, it may be that they’ve tried things my way and still found themselves having to answer the same (by their lights) ridiculous questions over and over again. It’s simply unfair to require that they persist in this seemingly Sisyphean task when they could be spending their time doing other, more meaningful things. It’s understandable that their adherence to the norms we’ve been discussing breaks down under this sort of strain.

While I do think that we all ought to adhere to the sorts of norms about which we’ve been talking, we might be able to get the results my hypothesis predicts if just the more public-facing experts were to strictly adhere to these norms (and we have examples of people who’ve done this rather well, e.g., Carl Sagan). If the sorts of experts of whom people are aware, i.e., those who regularly appear in debates, on panels, news programs, late night shows, popular podcasts and radio shows, etc., were to take those opportunities to demonstrate their

commitment to the good faith pursuit of the truth rather than using that time to mock and belittle those who disagree with them, we would, over time, make significant progress in shoring up trust in experts and minimizing the extent to which people feel inclined to posit conspiracy theories (or so I claim). Moreover, on my view, public-facing experts simply do not get to be exasperated. Engaging with the public is not something taking them away from other, more meaningful work. Rather, *it is* the meaningful work in which they've chosen to engage. If they're going to be so-engaged, then they've got to be ready and willing to engage in a way that is consonant with the norms governing the good faith pursuit of the truth. To do anything less is to be a part of the problem.

5 Conclusion

The view on offer predicts that if experts were to change the ways in which they engage with their opponents and the laity, we would see an increase in the perceived epistemic status of the experts and a decrease in conspiracy theorizing. The contrastive is also true: if the experts should fail to change the ways in which they engage with their opponents and the laity, then we will see a decrease in the perceived epistemic status of the experts and an increase in conspiracy theorizing. But what does this really tell us? To a good first approximation, our view of one's epistemic status is a measure of our confidence that what they've said is true—or, put another way, it's a measure of their perceived trustworthiness. This suggests that trust in experts and expertise is inversely correlated with conspiracy theorizing. It suggests, moreover, that we should expect to see a similar correlation with, e.g., trust in government officials and conspiracy theorizing. Now, to this point, I have, quite purposely, avoided talking about why people *believe* conspiracy theories. But I suspect that this apparent inverse correlation between trust and conspiracy theorizing provides a direction for future research with respect to this question. My suspicion is that, as trust in experts, officials, and so on deteriorates—given a history of norm violations, and amplified by the apparent inaccuracy of the violators—people's willingness to entertain and onboard conspiracy theories increases. If this is right, then we should expect to see high concentrations of conspiracy beliefs in places where trust is very low and low concentrations of conspiracy beliefs in places where trust is very high. This is, of course, an empirical question, and one to which I will turn in subsequent research.

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