SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

http://social-epistemology.com
ISSN: 2471-9560

Reconciling Conceptual Confusions in the *Le Monde* Debate on Conspiracy Theories

J.C.M. Duetz, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, j.c.m.duetz2@vu.l; M R.X. Dentith, Beijing Normal University, m.dentith@episto.org.

Duetz, J.C.M. and M R.X. Dentith. 2022. "Reconciling Conceptual Confusions in the *Le Monde* Debate on Conspiracy Theories." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (10): 40-50. https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7il.

SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective
11 (10): 40-50. 2022.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7il

Section 1

As philosophers in the business of a very multifaceted research domain—i.e., Conspiracy Theory Theory—we believe that the interdisciplinarity of our research is not just important, but can promote and advance the fruitfulness of integrative (and thereby more resourceful) research endeavors more generally. As such, we find the resurrection of the *Le Monde* debate in these pages disheartening. We believe that, as our societies develop and become increasingly complex, so do our academic objects, and these modern complexities often entail a requirement for various disciplines to come and work together to obtain a comprehensive and fruitful academic result.

Take, for example, global heating, which is studied by (amongst others) geologists, physicists, chemists, meteorologists, statisticians, computer scientists, biologists, glaciologists, and hydrologists, ensuring that the topic at hand is studied thoroughly, and from multiple angles. Each discipline has its own tools and asks different research questions, eventually hoping to culminate in a coherent theory that provides us with as complete an understanding of the phenomenon as possible.

Now, if *that* many scientists from *that* many disciplines can work together by respecting the many specific insights each of them brings to the table, then surely we relatively few Conspiracy Theory Theorists can do so as well. Of course, it is not as straightforward to integrate one's research with the insights provided by other disciplines as it is to unite your research with the literature produced in your own field, but doing so, nonetheless, is important: it contributes to a grander research objective than any one field could attain. That is, to produce an as complete as possible understanding of conspiracy theories and the people who believe them.

In the *Le Monde* debate, it seems we, Conspiracy Theory Theorists, lost track of this grander research objective. Instead, we resorted to blatant trash-talking, denigrating other fields' methods, and belittling other scholars' grasp of the phenomenon (which will not be included in the analysis of the dispute below). This unproductive and spiteful feature of the interdisciplinarity of Conspiracy Theory Theory should have ended there. Instead, we face it again when, really, we should be in the business of reconciliation.

Section 2: The Dispute, Part One

There seemed to be two 'camps' in the *Le Monde* debate. The first camp consisted of Sebastian Dieguez, Gérald Bronner, Véronique Campion-Vincent, Sylvain Delouvée, Nicolas Gauvrit, Anthony Lantian, and Pascal Wagner-Egger. Let's call this company of Conspiracy Theory Theorists the *Instigators* (for the sole reason that the members of this group co-authored the initial article (Bronner et al. 2016) that gave rise to the debate).

The second camp consisted of Lee Basham, M Dentith, David Coady, Ginna Husting, Martin Orr, Kurtis Hagen, and Marius Raab. Let's call this company of Conspiracy Theory Theorists the *Commentators* (for the sole reason that this group commented (Basham and

Dentith 2016) on the initial article or subsequent articles by the Instigators).

In the original *Le Monde* piece (Bronner et al. 2016), 8 Conspiracy Theory Theorists argued that, to know which means or policy (if any) is best to fight conspiracy theories, we first need to 'make progress in our understanding of [the] belief mechanisms, social exchanges, and ideological creativity' foundational of belief in conspiracy theories (29).

In the first piece written by the Commentators (Basham and Dentith 2016), 7 Conspiracy Theory Theorists took issue with the derogative understanding of conspiracy theories they believed underlies the Instigators' arguments for fighting conspiracy theories in the first place. Conspiracy theories, they claim, have important functions in open societies (e.g., questioning polity decisions, detecting power abuse), which are nullified if we believe all conspiracy theories to be as problematic as they take the Instigators to regard them.

Not long after, the Instigators replied (Dieguez et al. 2016) to the Commentators' response, and concurred that not *all* conspiracy theories warrant epistemic suspicion, just that some do, and those that do ought to be the objects of interesting empirical research. Why? Because these theories are likely to be produced, developed, or held, by people with a conspiracy mindset. The Instigators, after all, are primarily interested in questions pertaining to the 'cognitive biases, personality features, and ideological worldviews […] correlated with belief in conspiracy theories' in explaining why (some) conspiracy theories are deserving of a *prima facie* suspicion (27). As psychologists and sociologists, it follows that the Instigators would focus on the psychological and sociological research questions that we may ask about belief in conspiracy theories and the kind of people who hold such beliefs (the conspiracy theorists). However, we might wonder, in which sense specifically, are conspiracy *theories* the targets of their research endeavors? And is their interest in conspiracy theories similar to the interests of conspiracy theory theorists in other domains?

Section 3: Are We Talking about the Same Thing?

Sociology, psychology, philosophy, political science; they all have their own specific toolsets that determine how a problem is approached and which research questions are addressed. With regards to Conspiracy Theory Theory, it seems that it is not just conspiracy theories that researchers are interested in. It is rather a range of concepts in the domain of Conspiracy Theory Theory that they seem concerned with. These concepts include, amongst others: conspiracy, conspiracy (or conspiracist) mindset, conspirator, conspiracy theorist,[1] and—for our purposes in this piece—conspiracy theory and conspiracy belief. It is our contention that what is at stake in this debate is an unrecognized conflation of conspiracy *theories* with conspiracy *beliefs*. To show this, let us consider what the camps on either side of the debate are talking about/primarily concerned with in their research end

3.1 What are the Commentators Talking About?

The Commentators (Basham and Dentith 2016) point out that, first, some 'conspiracy theories might be well-evidenced' and, second, that 'exposing conspiracies is a critical

[1] Discussion of these concept scan be found here: for conspiracy and conspiracy theory see Pigden (1995), Keeley (1999), and Dentith (2018a). For conspiracy mindset (AKA conspiracism) see Dentith (2018b).

11 (10): 40-50. 2022.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7il

practice in a well-functioning democracy' (13). Let's take a closer look at these two arguments, starting with the second.

Exposing conspiracies—i.e., plots committed by multiple people to further their own interests by deceiving others—is an important practice because 'in an environment in which people take a dim view of conspiracy theories, conspiracies may multiply and prosper' (13). The underlying argument here is that exposing conspiracies requires conspiracy theorizing—i.e., advancing explanations that cite a conspiracy as a salient cause for some event(s)—and thereby the development of conspiracy theories. As the *Le Monde* article proposes to 'fight conspiracy theories effectively,' it thereby condemns and stigmatizes conspiracy theories, which, in turn, frustrates and abashes the exposing of conspiracies.

As to the first argument, the Commentators argue that '[a]ny pejorative use of "conspiracy theory" is intellectually suspect' as '[t]here is nothing unusual or inherently defective about conspiracy explanations' (15). Whether or not a conspiracy theory deserves to be 'fought' (to stick with the *Le Monde* terms), should be determined on the basis of an evidential evaluation of the theory.

It must be clear that, of the concepts mentioned in §3, the Commentators are concerned with *conspiracy theories* and *conspiracy theorizing*.

3.2 What are the Instigators Talking About?

In finding ways to effectively fight conspiracy theories, the Instigators propose to focus on the mechanisms underlying belief in such theories. It is not really the theories themselves that the authors wish to fight more effectively, but, rather, people's conspiracy beliefs—i.e., belief that certain conspiracy theories are true.

The Instigators (Dieguez et al. 2016) agree that 'simply claiming that "conspiracy theories" only refer to those conspiracies that are "unwarranted" will not do' (22). As an alternative to the distinctively neutral route suggested by the Commentators, the Instigators approach is primarily concerned with what they call a 'conspiracist mindset'—i.e., being significantly disposed to adopt conspiracy beliefs. The evidential merits of conspiracy theories are not of great concern to the Instigators, who are 'merely interested in the psychology of all this' (*fn.* 4). This interest furnishes the psychological research agendas of the authors, who link conspiracy theories to 'cognitive biases, personality features, and ideological worldviews […] correlated with belief in conspiracy theories' (27). Accordingly, the Instigators state that any working definition of 'conspiracy theory' should:

> Entail a clear understanding of why some people are prone, quick, and enthusiastic when it comes to endorsing, producing, or spreading ideas about conspiracies, while others are not. [That is,] a conspiracist mindset that is quite unrelated to the available (or unavailable) "evidence" pertaining to specific claims of conspiracy (29).

In other words, conspiracy theories are interesting research objects with respect to how such

theories are being believed, or developed by conspiracy theorists—i.e., people who develop conspiracy theories, or are actively engaged with the further elaboration of existing conspiracy theories. Those 'cursed' with a conspiracist mindset are 'cursed' with a cognitive attraction to things like 'errant data, unfalsifiability, disregarded for and asymmetrical care in the evaluation of counter-evidence, the perception of malevolent intentions,' and so on (29). The Instigators note that these features may be more or less normal if considered separately, but their combination surely seems to manifest a disposition to specific types of beliefs—i.e., conspiracy beliefs.

In sum, it must be clear that, of the concepts in the Conspiracy Theory Theory domain listed in section §3, the Instigators are concerned with *conspiracy belief*, *conspiracy (or conspiracist) mindset*, and *conspiracy theorists*.

Section 4: The Dispute, Part Two

Several years later, Scott Hill (2022a) aimed to defend the *Le Monde* group by arguing that:

> However we define 'conspiracy theory', whatever the correct definition turns out to be, the [Instigators] can be worried about those stereotypes, and they can make recommendations about how to address what they see as the growing influence of those stereotypes without in any way committing themselves to a total rejection of any belief in any proposition with a conspiracy as part of its content. They can say "There is something bad about *this* class of beliefs" (19).

In other words, the Commentators are mistaken to infer 'all conspiracy theories are suspect' from the Instigators' claim that 'some conspiracy theories ought to be fought'. According to Hill, one can be interested (as are the Instigators) in a subset of (belief in) conspiracy theories—i.e., the stereotypical ones correlated to the pejorative definition of 'conspiracy theory' in ordinary language contexts—of which can be said that they are problematic, or *prima facie* epistemically suspicious.

One of us (Dentith 2022), in turn, responded to Hill's defense of the *Le Monde* article and pointed out that demarcating a subset of conspiracy theories by reference to stereotypes, or the pejorative connotation of 'conspiracy theory' is problematic because the use of that label 'is conceptually confused' (43). In other words, there is no way to determine (*a priori*) which conspiracy theories are, in Hill's (2022a) words, 'stereotypical', 'stupid', and 'obviously false' (20).[2]

[2] In Hill's 2022a he takes the philosophical work to task for being overly fixated on definitional questions. However, this is not a fair representation of that work (see Dentith 2022; Hagen 2022). Hill, in his 2022b, admits that '[e]ven though I exaggerated things in the previous paper (apologies!), am I wrong in thinking that this is at least one major thread of the relevant literature? Insofar as I am correct about the presence of this move in the literature, am I wrong in thinking that it is mistaken?' (95) In response, all we can say is that, yes, definitional debates still abound in the literature, but there is no more nor less talk of definitions in the conspiracy theory theory literature than there is around, say, the epistemology of fake news, or the epistemology of testimony. It turns out that philosophers like getting clear on what we are talking about, and thus what counts as proper examples, and so these kinds of debate are standard in (at least relatively new domains in) the epistemological and social epistemological literature.

11 (10): 40-50. 2022.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7il

While we do believe that Hill (2022a; 2022b) is confused about the possibility to distinguish a subset of conspiracy theories that warrant *prima facie* epistemic suspicion—i.e., the stereotypical ones—we believe that there is a more profound confusion to the debate as a whole that we will focus on here. This more profound confusion concerns the concepts in the Conspiracy Theory Theory domain discussed in §3, namely conspiracy *beliefs* are conflated or confused with conspiracy *theories*. This leads to two cases of conceptual confusion: in the first case, the conceptual confusion is that Hill talks about problematic conspiracy *belief* (i.e., conspiracism)—which gets to the gist of what the Instigators seek to study—but then he improperly frames his arguments in terms of conspiracy *theories*.[3]

In the second case, Hill is conceptually confused because he takes on board a definition of conspiracy theory that the Instigators (who he is defending against the Commentors) do not agree to (because they agree with the Commentators that you can't just define a set of stereotypical conspiracy theories based on ordinary language connotations), and so his argument misfires.

In the next section we address these options in more detail.

Section 5: Towards Reconciliation

One of the main tools used in the empirical research of conspiracy theories is polling.[4] Often, such research comprises questions on different conspiracy theories and other features of (for example) people's social cognition to find out whether there is a link between the two.[5] What is problematic, from a theoretical perspective, is that the conspiracy theories appealed to in such polls are almost invariably 'unwarranted' or 'obviously false' conspiracy theories—i.e., those bad, mad, and wacky speculations lacking appropriate evidential support (Hill's stereotypical conspiracy theories)—whilst the conclusions being drawn are presented in terms of conspiracy theories *generally* (i.e. seemingly applying to conspiracy theories both stereotypical and non-stereotypical).

Importantly, research into the belief mechanisms underlying unwarranted conspiracy theories does not (necessarily) carry over to the belief mechanisms underlying conspiracy theories that are not 'obviously false'. The Commentators' arguments, then, do not merely concern a conceptual matter; they also entail a rejection of the inflated (or generalized) conclusions drawn from research that only concerns, not a certain kind, but a certain set of conspiracy theories. For, there is no 'unwarranted'-*kind* of conspiracy theories because there is no way to define that 'kind', as the Instigator's concur (Dieguez et al. 2016, 22). In other words, there is no way to distinguish, *a priori*, which conspiracy theories are unwarranted, and which are not. (Furthermore, a conspiracy theory's evidential support may change over time; a theory's warrantedness at time *t* depends on the available evidence at *t*.) There is only a *set*

[3] Hill's confusion most likely stems from the Instigators' (Bronner et al. 2016; Dieguez et al. 2016) conflation of their arguments about problematic conspiracy beliefs with talk about conspiracy theories.
[4] The arguments to follow we suspect similarly to hold for other methodologies (e.g., interviews) employed in empirical research of conspiracy theories.
[5] For some meta-work on this, see, for example, Goreis and Voracek (2019) and Biddlestone et al. (2022).

of 'unwarranted' conspiracy theories; namely those we already know exist and that are, for various reasons, found evidentially wanting.[6]

This means that, *for all conspiracy theories that are not (yet found) evidentially wanting, and for all conspiracy theories yet to be developed (and as long as the jury is still out about their (lack of) evidential merits), the conclusions of such polling studies do not hold*. Framing these conclusions in terms of conspiracy theories generally is thus overreaching, misleading and is unwarranted. Furthermore, as the Commentators argue, these over-generalized conclusions are not just academically problematic because they are inflated and unjustified, they are also socially/politically problematic because of the stigmatizing effects such conclusions entail for all conspiracy explanations (warranted ones included).[7]

Does this mean that empirical researchers (like the Instigators) have no means of addressing the objects they are actually concerned with? Or which actually underlie their research interests? We would like to answer these questions in the negative. For, as we have seen in §3.2, it is not conspiracy *theories* the Instigators are primarily concerned with, but conspiracy *belief*.[8] The question we should answer is whether for those who, like the Instigators, accept that conspiracy theories, in general, are not deserving of outright suspicion or dismissal, there is still a way to address problematic kinds of conspiracy beliefs. In other words, can we retain a neutral definition of 'conspiracy theory' while justifiably treating a certain kind of conspiracy belief—i.e., those beliefs spawned from a conspiracy mindset—as epistemically problematic? We believe that there is.

The Instigators (in Dieguez et al. 2016) note that the most robust finding attesting the existence of a conspiracy mindset is that 'people who believe in one conspiracy theory tend to believe in other, unrelated conspiracy theories' (24). This is the idea that conspiracy beliefs are monological in nature: believers in conspiracy theories find support for their conspiratorial beliefs in other conspiratorial beliefs rather than with regards to non-conspiratorial evidence. The belief system of such conspiracy theorists is enclosed, as opposed to being open to other types of evidence.[9]

Now, if we reformulate this conclusion to account for the framing-objection above—so, 'people who believe in one [we take to be unwarranted] conspiracy theory are inclined to believe in other [we take to be unwarranted], unrelated conspiracy theories'—then this finding remains interesting. As Charles Pigden (2007) has argued, every historically and politically literate person believes conspiracy theories. What we should focus on is the fact that some people really do seem to believe more conspiracy theories than others.

Now, some differences in the number of conspiracy beliefs people hold can be explained geographically. For example, someone currently living in Russia probably has more

[6] As one of us argues in a forthcoming paper, part of the problem here is that the Commentators' argument here pre-figures the Instigators' argument; we only know about the set of unwarranted conspiracy theories because someone spent time investigating them to check that they really were false after all (Dentith forthcoming)

[7] For example, stigmatizing conspiracy beliefs could foster polarization and ideological segregation (Duetz forthcoming).

[8] To be sure, conspiracy theories are not conspiracy beliefs. See Duetz (2022).

[9] For a good overview of monological belief systems, see Hagen (2018).

11 (10): 40-50. 2022.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7il

conspiracy beliefs than both of us do, because their administration is (and has been for a long time) more likely to conspire than ours (whether it be in the Netherlands or Aotearoa New Zealand). Other differences in the number of conspiracy beliefs people hold can be explained temporally. For example, someone living in the Roman Empire probably had more conspiracy beliefs than do we, because their society's structure was more likely to foster conspiracies than our own. Further still, differences in the number of conspiracy beliefs a person holds may also be explained based on one's profession. For example, an investigative political journalist probably has more conspiracy beliefs than most readers of this article, or at least has spent considerably more time thinking about conspiracy theories than most of us, just for the sheer reason that entertaining conspiracy theories is part of their profession, and not (typically) ours. Some differences in numbers of conspiracy beliefs, however, remain, and are not explained by such situational factors like geography, time, or the demands of your workplace.

How could we explain these differences—i.e., of some people having significantly more conspiracy beliefs than others in similar social/political situations? Suppose, in some country, there is an average of an x number of conspiracy beliefs (and that most people center around that average). To give you an idea of what x might encompass, let's consider a couple of examples possibly included in x. So, for example, it turns out that a great number of Americans believe that their government is hiding contact with extraterrestrials, as well as some conspiracy theory about the assassination of JFK that goes against the official theory that he was killed by a lone gunman. Yet a lot of Americans also believe that regardless of who is officially in charge, there are people running things behind the scenes (Uscinski et al. 2022). Anyone who lives in a Western-style democracy with a civil service should surely agree. Add to this that most Americans believe that the tobacco industry conspired to keep the dangers of smoking a secret, that the 9/11 events were brought about by a conspiracy of members of Al Qaeda, and oil companies have been paying researchers to downplay the serious dangers of global heating, and it turns out that there are a lot of conspiracy beliefs out there.

Some people, however, have significantly more conspiracy beliefs than those expressed by x (let's say they have around x^{++} number of conspiracy beliefs). In some of these cases we can explain away the differences in number of conspiracy beliefs by pointing towards such situational factors as mentioned above. For the remaining number of people with x^{++} conspiracy beliefs, however, we may not yet have an explanation for why they have so many more conspiracy beliefs than most others (on average).

It seems plausible that, of those who have x^{++} conspiracy beliefs without an explanation based on situational factors, most also have conspiracy beliefs that are not shared by most others in that country who have (around) x number of conspiracy beliefs. That is, there seems to be a certain similarity of which beliefs are held by people who have x conspiracy beliefs (e.g., those conspiracy beliefs that are adopted over the course of the national (historical) education programme, or which are widely shared and well-known in that country). People with x^{++} conspiracy beliefs may share those believed by the people with x conspiracy beliefs, but will also hold additional ones that are not commonly held by people with x conspiracy beliefs.

There are many possible explanations for these additional conspiracy beliefs. For one, it might be the case that the conspiracy theory that is believed is just not salient enough to be relevant for a lot of people to consider (like the claim the world is secretly run according to maritime law). Perhaps the conspiracy theory that is believed is only recently developed, and so has not gotten the chance to become mainstream yet (like the conspiracy theory that posits that Queen Elizabeth's brain was preserved and implanted into Charles upon his coronation). Alternatively, it may be the case that the conspiracy theory that is believed is well-known, but found implausible by most others, and so is not amongst the conspiracy theories believed by the majority (like the claim that Osama bin Laden is still alive).

This last category seems like the kind of conspiracy belief that is of special interest for Conspiracy Theory Theorists like the Instigators: what reasons do people with such x^{++} conspiracy beliefs have for adopting these beliefs if they are found to be implausible by most others? This question is especially salient if adopting these additional conspiracy beliefs bring with them significant social costs (which we know some do). We could also ask whether people with x^{++} beliefs share the conspiracy beliefs that are most commonly shared among people with x conspiracy beliefs? Do people with x^{++} conspiracy beliefs share certain cognitive features that explain their deviating beliefs such that it tells us something about them having a disposition to adopt such (deviant) beliefs? And what does that disposition look like? It is these questions about conspiracy *beliefs* (rather than theories) that some Conspiracy Theory Theorists (like the Instigators) are interested in, and rightly so. Framing such research appropriately in terms of beliefs or dispositions, whilst also acknowledging that it is not conspiracy *explanations* (AKA the conspiracy *theories*) that are problematic *per se*. It might mean moving away from the monological belief model, and admitting that there are situational factors at play as well when it comes to gaining and sustaining conspiracy beliefs, but such a move would surely contribute to a more fruitful basis for integrative research with other disciplines.

After all, it seems we can grant that there is a class of beliefs (not theories) which might be epistemically suspect: if most others have considered such conspiracy explanations and found them wanting, and belief in these explanations is not the result of situational factors (whether they be temporal, geographical, or professional), or a matter of relevance, or novelty, then there is reason to be suspect of said explanation. Indeed, in social epistemic networks, this is part of the story we tell as to how we distribute epistemic labor: we first examine what others take seriously, and hope doing so provides us with a useful guide to furnish our own epistemic lives. We hope people, prompted by such factors as profession, or leisure interests, who come to discover the general relevance of a theory notify us of this salience, and either await the majority jury's verdict, or consider the theory on our own.

Either way, adoption or rejection of the conspiracy belief is not an individualistic endeavor, and is, in turn, affected by other situational (e.g., experiencing a political/social crisis like the COVID lockdowns) and dispositional factors (e.g., being (surrounded by people who are) inclined to 'fall in line' or to 'fall out of line'). It is these and the factors mentioned above that are appropriately subjected to empirical research in the realm of Conspiracy Theory Theory, and, if framed properly, we see no reason for such research to be controversial for Conspiracy Theory Theorists in other disciplines. Which brings us back to Hill. Hill's (2022a; 2022b) defense of the Instigators arguments is conceptually confused as it pertains to

SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective
11 (10): 40-50. 2022.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7il

a certain set of conspiracy *theories* rather than a certain set of conspiracy *beliefs*. One possible explanation for this confusion is that, like most empirical research on conspiracy theories, Hill's arguments are framed improperly—i.e., in terms of *theories* rather than *beliefs*. Although Hill (2022a) does address conspiracy beliefs in several parts of his arguments,[10] the main thrust of his arguments (specifically in Hill 2022b) is supposed to follow from the claim that some *theories*—i.e., the stereotypical conspiracy theories—are false or very unlikely. Yet, as has been argued here and elsewhere there is, to quote Brian L. Keeley (2007), no 'mark of the incredible' which allows us to detect which conspiracy theories are stereotypically false or unlikely *without investigating them first* (137).

Another possible explanation is that Hill's view of 'stereotypical' conspiracy theories is not meant to account for the Instigator's concern of conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mindset at all: while the Instigators are talking about possibly problematic conspiracy beliefs—i.e., prompted by a conspiracist mindset—Hill is talking about conspiracy theories that are problematic (or 'stereotypical', 'stupid', or 'obviously false'). Hill's take, however, misfires because it entails a rejection of the claim made in (both the Commentators and) the Instigators' response to the Commentators (Dieguez et al. 2016).

As one of us pointed out, along with sociologist Martin Orr (Dentith and Orr 2017), back when the *Le Monde* debate was first in full swing:

> As W. V. Quine argued persuasively, evidence does not determine the truth of theories, because there are a potentially infinite number of theories consistent with a limited set of data points. Rather, our pre-existing theories (whether held explicitly or implicitly) end up being part of what determines what gets counted as evidence for said theories (Quine 1951). As social scientists, they are likely more familiar with the work of C. Wright Mills, who might suggest that "only within the curiously self-imposed limitations of their arbitrary epistemology have they stated their questions and answers.... [They] are possessed by ... methodological inhibition" (Mills 1959, 55) (12).

That is, you cannot engage in fruitful theoretical work if you haven't examined (or defined) what it is you are trying to investigate. For the experimental designs or research by social or empirical scientists to be productive and fruitful, such scientists should either be more willing to do rigorous conceptual work themselves or be willing to listen to those who do such work (i.e., people like the Commentators).

Indeed, in their response to the Commentators, the Instigators agreed that: '[adjusting] the concept of conspiracy theory to its use in common parlance, whatever it is, is not convenient and somewhat tautological' (22). What are stereotypical conspiracy theories if not those explanations that make up the meaning of our (pejorative) ordinary language concept? By implicitly taking ordinary language intuitions to demarcate which conspiracy theories are 'typical', Hill's attempt to defend the Instigators' account ends up exceeding claims the

[10] For example, Hill (2022a) argues that the Instigators can 'point to those beliefs, say they are bad, and speculate about how to address them' (19).

Instigators eventually signaled agreement with. Hill's contribution to this debate should, then, be seen as a step back in the advancement of interdisciplinary fruitfulness in Conspiracy Theory Theory.

Section 6

We have proposed in this paper that there is conceptual confusion in the *Le Monde* debate. This confusion centers on the underlying arguments on whether the proper objects of certain research projects are conspiracy *theories* or conspiracy *beliefs*. To a degree Hill's resurrection of this debate has been useful; it has helped clarify what, exactly, is at stake with respect to both the underlying arguments of both the Instigators and the Commentators.

The goal of this response has been to untangle this conceptual confusion, and through that reconcile parts of the *Le Monde* debate to a point where interdisciplinary research projects in Conspiracy Theory Theory are stimulated, rather than obstructed. Our goal has been to promote theoretical fruitfulness (in part driven by our own efforts to integrate our work with the insights provided by other disciplines). We have argued that Conspiracy Theory Theorists can retain a neutral definition of 'conspiracy theory' whilst, at the same time, justifiably treat a certain kind of conspiracy belief—i.e., those beliefs spawned from a conspiracy mindset—as epistemically interesting or even peculiar.

Research in the nascent domain of Conspiracy Theory Theory should, we believe, realize the differences between studying conspiracy *theories* and conspiracy *beliefs*. These are two related but separate concepts (see Duetz 2022), and if we want to engage in theoretical fruitful work across the many disciplines in Conspiracy Theory Theory then—like the scholars who study global heating—we should endeavor to make clear which concept—conspiracy *theories* or conspiracy *beliefs*—we are focusing on.

In memory of Ton Wijkhuizen.

References

Basham, Lee and M R. X Dentith. 2016. "Social Science's Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5 (10): 12–19.

Biddlestone, Mikey, Ricky Green, Aleksandra Cichocka, Karen Douglas, Robbie M Sutton 2022. A Systematic Review and Meta-Analytic Synthesis of the Motives Associated with Conspiracy Beliefs." April. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/rxjqc.

Bronner, Gerald, Véronique Campion-Vincent, Sylvain Delouvée, Sebastian Dieguez, Karen Douglas, Nicolas Gauvrit, Anthony Lantian, Pascal Wagner-Egger. 2016. "Luttons Efficacement Contre les Théories du Complot." *Le Monde* 29. June 6.

Dentith, M R. X. forthcoming. "Some Conspiracy Theories." *Social Epistemology*.

Dentith, M R. X. 2022. "Avoiding the Stereotyping of the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories: A Reply to Hill." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (8): 41–49.

Dentith, M R. X. 2018a. "The Problem of Conspiracism." *Argumenta* 3 (2): 327–343.

Dentith, M R. X. 2018b. "Conspiracy Theories and Philosophy: Bringing the Epistemology of a Freighted Term into the Social Sciences." In *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who*

11 (10): 40-50. 2022.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7il

Believe Them edited by Joe E. Uscinski, 94–108. Oxford University Press.

Dentith, M R. X., and Martin Orr. 2017. "Clearing Up Some Conceptual Confusions About Conspiracy Theory Theorising." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6 (1): 9–16.

Dieguez, Sebastian, Gérald Bronner, Veronique Campion-Vincent, Sylvain Delouvée, Nicolas Gauvrit, Anthony Lantian, Pascal Wagner-Egger. 2016. "'They"'Respond: Comments on Basham et al.'s 'Social Science's Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone'." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5 (12): 20–39.

Duetz, J. C. M. forthcoming. What Does It Mean for A Conspiracy Theory to Be A 'Theory'? *Social Epistemology*.

Duetz, J. C. M. 2022. "Conspiracy Theories are Not Beliefs." *Erkenntnis* 20 September. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-022-00620-z

Goreis, Andreas and Martin Voracek. 2019. "A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Psychological Research on Conspiracy Beliefs: Field Characteristics, Measurement Instruments, and Associations With Personality Traits." *Frontiers in Psychology* 10: 205. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00205.

Hagen, Kurtis. 2022. "A Bibliography and Brief History of the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (8): 27–37.

Hagen, Kurtis. 2018. "Conspiracy Theorists and Monological Belief Systems." *Argumenta* 3 (2): 303–326.

Hill, Scott. 2022a. "A Revised Defense of the *Le Monde* Group." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (8): 18–26.

Hill, Scott. 2022b. "The Role of Stereotypes in Theorizing about Conspiracy Theories: A Reply to Dentith." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (8): 93–99.

Keeley, Brian L. 2007. "God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory." *Episteme* 4 (2): 135–149.

Keeley, Brian L. 1999. "Of Conspiracy Theories." *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (3): 109–126.

Pigden, Charles. 2007. "Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom." *Episteme* 4 (2): 219–232.

Pigden, Charles. 1995. "Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories? *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 25 (1); 3–34.

Uscinski, Joseph , Adam Enders, Casey Klofstad, Michelle Seelig, Hugo Drochon, Kamal Premaratne, Manohar Murthi. 2022. "Have Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Increased Over Time? *PLOS ONE* 17 (7): e0270429. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0270429.