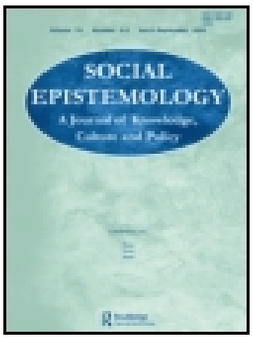

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What Does It Mean for a Conspiracy Theory to Be a 'Theory'?

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ABSTRACT

The pejorative connotation often associated with the ordinary language meaning of "conspiracy theory" does not only stem from a conspiracy theory's being about a *conspiracy*, but also from a conspiracy theory's being regarded as a particular kind of *theory*. I propose to understand conspiracy theory-induced polarization in terms of disagreement about the correct epistemic evaluation of 'theory' in 'conspiracy theory'. By framing the positions typical in conspiracy theory-induced polarization in this way, I aim to show that pejorative conceptions of 'conspiracy theory' are problematic for research open to the possibility of finding depolarization strategies. That is, because they preclude constructive engagement with the epistemic norms governing (the rationales foundational of) belief in conspiracy theories.

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Conspiracy theory; generalism and particularism; epistemic evaluations; depolarization

1. Introduction

In philosophy, conceptual analyses of 'conspiracy theory'[1] have focused on the question: 'What does it mean for a conspiracy theory to be about a *conspiracy*?' Answers to this question vary greatly; there exists profound controversy on what it means for a conspiracy theory to be about a conspiracy. For example, various theorists have disagreed on whether or not a conspiracy necessarily entails a nefarious purpose, multiple conspirators, secrecy, powerful architects, a cover-up (e.g. in the form of an official story), and success in influencing (salient) events.[2]

The fact that this definitional debate has not been resolved is important, because how one defines 'conspiracy' has an influence on the probability of conspiracy *theories* being true.[3] For example, if conspiracy theories are theories about grand and evil plots by powerful conspirators who have succeeded in bringing about important events that oppose the official theories of such events, it is easy to see how believing such theories is unwarranted—e.g. because keeping such a conspiracy a secret is highly improbable in open, democratic societies, or because a *successful* conspiracy is one that is yet to be discovered, implying that the theory postulating said successful conspiracy is false.[4]

Although these 'conspiracy'-based discussions lead to interesting insights into the nature of conspiracy theories, I believe that they do not fully capture the nature of and reasons for derogatory attitudes towards conspiracy theories. For example, no one will deny that, as Charles Pigden puts it, '[h]istory is littered with conspiracies successful and otherwise' (1995, 3). But why is it, then, that we find explanations advancing conspiracies as salient causes of events so suspicious? Surely there is more to be said here than 'because they are about conspiracies' if we know that conspiracies are part and parcel of our social lives.[5]

Hence, I propose to broaden the scope of philosophical inquiry into conspiracy theories by putting forward a new question. Namely: 'What does it mean for a conspiracy theory to be

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a *theory*?' I argue that one answer to this question is that the pejorative connotation accompanying "conspiracy theory" in ordinary language contexts does not only stem from the improbability of a *conspiracy* having taken place, but also from the assumed speculative nature of the *theory* advancing the conspiracy.

In section §2, I revisit the controversies that exist in the (philosophical) conspiracy theory theory debate in terms of the generalism/particularism distinction and their respective takes on the epistemic merit of conspiracy theories. I argue that different accounts of the alleged (lack of) epistemic merit of conspiracy theories can be seen to imply different epistemic evaluations of 'theory' in addressing conspiracy theories.

In section §3, I show how 'theory' in 'conspiracy theory' can be understood along the lines of three possible epistemic evaluations and illustrate this using two examples. Next, in section §4, I propose two views based on the three senses of 'theory' from the previous section that help frame the positions typical in conspiracy theory-induced polarization. That is, I will look at two incompatible positions on the epistemic status of conspiracy theories. The first is the *Friends' View*, which maintains that conspiracy theories are true, warranted, and important for us to consider as social and political beings. The second is the *Critics' View*, which maintains that conspiracy theories are always unwarranted (and false). I argue that we cannot explain such diametrically opposed positions about the epistemic status of conspiracy theories by simply referring to their being about conspiracies. To further expound on the nature and structure of conspiracy theory-induced polarization, we must move beyond the narrow focus on 'conspiracy' and find out what it means for conspiracy theories to be considered, specifically, as 'theories'.

Finally, in section §5, I outline some theoretical and practical implications of my proposal for future work in conspiracy theory theory.

2. Conspiracy Theories and Their (Lack of) Epistemic Merit

Definitional accounts of 'conspiracy theory' have stirred up many disputes about the correct conceptualization of both 'conspiracy' and 'conspiracy theory'. These controversies (and others) have yielded a dichotomy in the field of conspiracy theory theory between *generalists*—i.e. those who hold that conspiracy theories are prima facie epistemically problematic—and *particularists*—i.e. those who deny that conspiracy theories are prima facie epistemically problematic.[6]

Generalists often start off from ordinary language usage of "conspiracy theory" and its commonly associated pejorative connotation (e.g. see Levy 2007, 185; Cassam 2019, 5; and Napolitano 2021, 85). Next, they hope to find necessary and sufficient conditions for the class of explanations denoted by "conspiracy theory" that ascribe to the legitimacy of treating such explanations in a derogatory way. Sir Karl Popper, for one, found that we are right to think of conspiracy theorists[7] as irrationally superstitious individuals because 'conspirators rarely consummate their conspiracy' (1945, 95). The generalist's claim is that successful conspiracies are improbable or unlikely—e.g. keeping their nefarious undertakings secret requires too much planning and power on the part of the conspirators—so theories positing conspiracies are similarly unlikely to be true.

Furthermore, as the subject of such theories is a conspiracy, we should expect the evidential basis for the theories to be seriously wanting; nothing is stopping the concocters of such mad, bad, and crazy theories to include infinitely more evidence. After all, conspiracies are secretive plots where the conspirators are actively hiding their tracks, implying that the theories about such plots are going to be evidentially sparse.[8] Furthermore, Brian L. Keeley points to conspiracy theorists' ability to incorporate seemingly falsifying evidence as supporting evidence for their conspiracy theories—e.g. as being part of the cover-up—leading him to conclude that 'unfalsifiability is only a reasonable criterion in cases where we do not have reason to believe that there are powerful agents seeking to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter' (1999, 121).

These generalist[9] arguments focus on the *conspiracy*-aspect of conspiracy theories in determining the epistemic warrant one might have for belief in such theories. In other words, what makes

conspiracy theories prima facie epistemically wanting, as a class, is their being about conspiracies, which are:

(1) Unlikely to be successfully kept secret, and
(2) Evidentially suspect because of the conspirators' efforts to keep their conspiracy a secret.

Moreover, generalists contend that the conception of 'conspiracy theory' should reflect such theories' lack of epistemic quality since (i) and (ii) above hold (prima facie) for all conspiracy theories and could therefore be seen as defining conditions.[10] For example, M. Giulia Napolitano proposes the following definition that clearly accommodates (ii): 'a conspiracy theory is the belief in the existence of a conspiracy, where the existence of the conspiracy is taken to justify the dismissal of any seemingly disconfirming evidence that one could encounter under normal circumstances' (2021, 88).

In response, particularists point out that conspiracies do occur; so, explanations citing conspiracies as causal factors—i.e. conspiracy theories—cannot be prima facie unwarranted (by definition) as we know that conspiracy theories about well-known conspiracies are true.[11] For example, we know that tobacco companies conspired to produce misleading evidence about the health risks of smoking, and so an explanation citing that conspiracy as a causal factor—i.e. a conspiracy theory—is true. Therefore, most particularists have objected to the derogatory conception of 'conspiracy theory' put forth by generalists and, instead, ascribe to a more minimal definition that leaves open the question of such theories' epistemic status. For example, M R. X. Dentith defines 'conspiracy theory' as: 'any explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause' (2014, 30).[12]

Generalists, in turn, respond that the occurrence of conspiracies does not lend credence to conspiracy theories generally because such occurrences are not tokens of the 'conspiracy theory' type. Rather, 'conspiracy theories' are those explanations citing conspiracies as causal factors that have *not* occurred, and so are prima facie false. As Quassim Cassam puts it: 'Conspiracy Theories are implausible by design' (2019, 7).

This claim can similarly be found in other disciplines. For example, Joseph E. Uscinski, a political scientist, notes that 'if conspiracy theorists investigate a theory that eventually turns out to be true, that theory stops being labeled conspiracy theory' (2018, 20). American studies scholar Peter Knight similarly holds that the label "conspiracy theory" does not apply to explanations about conspiracies that are true. Instead, the label 'usually carries an implicit accusation: there are undoubtedly conspiracy facts (the suggestion is), but in this case your view is just a conspiracy theory, a misleading speculation' (2003, 16). Likewise, psychologist Michael J. Wood agrees there is a difference between "conspiracy theories" and true conspiracy explanations: '[r]ather than speculative conspiracy theories, these [true conspiracy explanations] referred to confirmed episodes in American history in which the government or other powerful actors engaged in conspiratorial conduct' (2016, 697).

The generalist claim that conspiracy theories are not theories about real conspiracies concurs with the impression that, for most people, it would be counter-intuitive to consider, for example, the mainstream 9/11 account a conspiracy theory. Even though it is agreed that a conspiracy was *the* causal factor to bring about the September 11th, 2001 attacks, most would not consider the mainstream account, which cites the conspiracy as a salient cause of the event, to be one of those 'conspiracy theories'. But why is that? Why is the label "conspiracy theory" an inappropriate attribution to a mainstream explanation of an event citing a conspiracy? As was already apparent in the quotes above, for generalists the label is only deemed appropriate for certain kinds of explanations—i.e. speculative (and likely unwarranted or false) theories.[13] The origin or purpose of the pejorative connotation common in ordinary language usage of "conspiracy theory" thus lies in subjective[14] epistemic evaluations of theories as being speculative, conjectural, or in another way epistemically wanting. It is the 'theory'-aspect that is doing most of the work in derogatory

"conspiracy theory"-talk, not, as was previously the focus of most Conspiracy Theory Theorists, the 'conspiracy' aspect.

Of course, this is not to say that the fact that conspiracy theories are about conspiracies does not figure in with the evaluation of the 'theory'-aspect. Nonetheless, prioritizing our focus on the 'theory' aspect in researching conspiracy theories may prove fruitful as it allows us to draw comparisons with other types of theories—and to appeal to a broader tradition of developed standards for epistemically sound theories. These approaches to analyzing conspiracy theories are not as evidently fruitful to pursue in conspiracy theory-research if we were to limit our discussion of conspiracy theories as being unique solely because they posit conspiracies—i.e. rather than also addressing the question whether conspiracy theories posit conspiracies in an epistemically commendable way or not.

So, the *theory*-aspect is important in explaining the pejorative connotation of "conspiracy theory". This explains why generalists can be seen to have made assumptions on this part of the concept (i.e. the *theories* are assumed to be unwarranted, false, baseless, speculative, etc.). The inclination to feel 'ill at ease' in ascribing the label "conspiracy theory" to mainstream accounts citing conspiracies seems to suggest that it is the speculative nature of those theories that we think is particularly epistemically problematic, and not the fact that they posit conspiracies. For, we do not find it similarly uncomfortable to consider conspiracies as figuring in explanations of events more generally.

Therefore, I suggest that the pejorative connotation often accompanying conspiracy theory-talk originates (at least in part) from the fact that conspiracy theories (understood in a derogatory way) are thought of as specific kinds of theories—i.e. those one may find epistemically problematic. Importantly, however, this is only one side of the debate—the generalist side—and other evaluations of the epistemic merit of (particular) conspiracy theories are not yet off the table. What's needed to buttress the generalist side, here, is (again) a justification for incorporating what turns out to be the implicit basis for the pejorative connotation. That is, a justification for something like the condition that 'all conspiracy theories are theories that are epistemically impaired and/or conjectural' that is not question-begging. I return to this issue in section §5, after having fleshed out the possible epistemic evaluations of 'theory' in section §3 and having showed how these senses figure in conspiracy theory-induced polarization in section §4.

3. Possible Epistemic Evaluations of 'Theory'

In this section, I propose three senses of 'theory' that signal out differences in epistemic status. I give some indications of what features characterize these respective senses. Next, I show how disagreements may arise from people's misapplying a sense of 'theory' by addressing two cases in which labelling some explanation as a 'theory' is indicative of the warrant one has to believe said theory.

3.1. Three Senses of 'Theory'

Here are three different senses of 'theory'[15]:

(1) **Established account**
A widely accepted explanation that survived rigorous scrutiny and is considered true by most (experts).
(2) **Hypothesis**
An educated speculation that is developed in an informed attempt to discover the truth.
(3) **Hunch**
An uninformed conjecture that has not been subjected to careful reflection and which is not necessarily maintained for its relation to the truth.

Two preliminary remarks: first, one need not have reflected on the epistemic status of their pet theory in order for us to discuss what kind of status they would ascribe to this theory. Second, these three senses are not precisely demarcated. On my account, the boundaries between the different senses may be fuzzy, so I do not propose general conditions for distinguishing between, say, hypotheses and hunches, but rather represent them on a spectrum, with established accounts on one end, and hunches on the other (see section §4). I assume here that theories focusing on (a) consistent (set of) proposition(s)—i.e. for the theory to remain the same theory—are 'theories' in either one of the three senses to a certain degree. That is, some theory is an established account (or hypothesis or hunch) to a certain degree, depending on how strongly it resembles various established account-making properties. Some theory may exhibit features of both hypotheses and hunches, and, depending on the importance we ascribe to these features, we may argue that it is to be understood as either a hypothesis or a hunch. The importance one ascribes to different features of the epistemic status of a theory, and thereby the evaluation they see fit for a particular theory, may vary for different individuals.

Some properties that may be found plausible for some theory to be an established account are:[16]

- Consistently making accurate and falsifiable predictions.
- Being supported by evidence from various (credible) sources.
- Consistently having withstood rigorous scrutiny and being accepted by most experts.

One example of a theory in the sense of an 'established account' is the heliocentric theory.[17] Most would agree that it displays all of the characteristics above and can therefore be considered an exemplar of an established account that is proven beyond doubt. This is not to say that the heliocentric theory is necessarily true; established account-making characteristics are not necessarily truth-conducive. However, although established accounts may turn out to be false, their epistemic status is, for those who accept this epistemic evaluation, indicative of how warranted belief in such theories is.

Similarly, some properties that could plausibly be seen as 'hypothesis-making' are:

- Being proposed for the sake of argument: as a starting point for research
- Being informed by existing facts and hence described as 'educated'
- Making predictions that can be tested and by which the hypothesis can be falsified

One possible example of a theory that most would agree meets these 'hypothesis'-characteristics is string theory. In searching for solutions to the problem of quantum gravity, physicists proposed string theory as a starting point for research based on evidence, which has since developed into an explanation making predictions that can (at least in theory) be tested.

Finally, some suggestions of 'hunch-making' properties are:

- Being proposed in a casual context where no prior scrutinization into alternative explanations for the phenomenon is required for you or others to consider the theory as a viable explanation.
- Serving social, or pragmatic, rather than necessarily intellectual, goals.
- Resulting from subjectively motivated rather than factual reasons.

For example, suppose Sem is saying the following to Quinn: 'Although Mo cannot really explain why or what supports their theory that Dominik is responsible for the mess in the communal library, the feeling of unease as Dominik entered and saw the clutter was quite telling'. In this example, the sense of 'theory' that Sem would ascribe to Mo's explanation is plausibly that of a hunch. Although, of course, theories may develop and become more hypothesis-like, it seems right that, unless Sem or Quinn have any further information about

the epistemic merit of Mo's theory, the theory exhibits enough hunch-making properties to be qualified as such.

3.2. Misapplications of Senses of 'Theory'

In this section, I illustrate how the three senses of 'theory' above are normative in the sense that people believe that there is a way in which one *ought* to apply them to specific explanations. As the three senses entail differences in the epistemic status we ascribe to a theory, there can be clear instances in which one may believe that one of the senses is misapplied. There are two clear cases of misapplication: positive misapplication—i.e. where A's evaluation of the epistemic status of theory X is higher than most others' evaluation of X—and negative misapplication—i.e. where B's evaluation of the epistemic status of theory Y is lower than most others' evaluation of Y. Here are two examples.

3.2.1. Positive Misapplication

Suppose Xiao believes that the Sun Language theory is true—i.e. believes that all languages are derived from Turkish. Xiao believes that there is enough evidence for the theory and therefore has justification for believing the theory to be true. Xiao thinks: if other people would only take the time to read up on the Sun Language theory, they too would find that they are justified in believing it. Now suppose that Xiao wants to convince a friend, Robin, to also believe the Sun Language theory. Robin is a linguist and familiar with the pseudoscientific label associated with Xiao's pet theory. Will Robin think of the Sun Language theory in the same sense of 'theory' as Xiao? I believe the answer here is negative. While Xiao thinks of the theory as either well-evidenced, true, and factual (i.e. as an established account), or as a credible hypothesis that has a lot going for it, Robin (and most others) will not agree. Robin thinks of the theory as baseless, one that is believed for other reasons than because of facts or relevant evidence. Robin will deny the so-called 'Sun Language theory' can even be classified as a working hypothesis because linguists consider it to be disproven, and thus false. According to Robin (and most others), then, Xiao's epistemic evaluation of the Sun Language theory as in the sense of a 'hypothesis', or even an 'established account', is overly optimistic.[18] In this sense, Xiao ascribes a higher epistemic status to the Sun Language theory than most others.

3.2.2. Negative Misapplication

Suppose that Otis, an evolutionary biologist, tunes in on a forum for Young Earth Creationists, and joins a discussion board on the development of animal species. Otis comes across arguments from a leading figure in the Young Earth Creationists Society, Bobby, who at some point argues that 'evolutionary theory is also just a theory, and even some biologists say that alternatives are not off the table'. Evolutionary theory contradicts Bobby's belief in Young Earth Creationism. Bobby therefore has a stake in evolutionary theory's being false. More specifically, in (un)consciously undercutting the warrant people propose to have for believing evolutionary theory and demoting the theory from an established account to a hypothesis, Bobby has created room for alternative explanations. These alternative hypotheses may be assigned some credibility on their own and could even merit a similar epistemic evaluation. If evolutionary theory was not 'just a theory', then this would obstruct alternatives meriting credibility because evolutionary theory would be the only credible explanation in accounting for the development of animal species. So, the epistemic evaluation of evolutionary theory as 'just a theory'—that is, as just a hypothesis—allows for wiggle room in determining the truth about the development of animal species. According to Otis (and most others), however, this epistemic evaluation of evolution theory is underestimating the evidence for said theory, and therefore too pessimistic. Otis thinks evolution theory is not 'just a theory', but rather believes that it meets the standards of an established, scientific account. In this sense, Bobby ascribes a lower epistemic status to evolution theory than most others.

These two cases exhibit differences in the subjective epistemic evaluations of what senses of 'theory' are appropriate to apply to specific explanations, but also that there is something, in a more general way, to say about the epistemic evaluations of theories. If most people side with one of the epistemic evaluations of a theory, any deviating evaluations seem unwarranted, or at least bear the burden of proof.[19]

Ascribing to an epistemic evaluation that has the minority voice, however, in and of itself, does not mean that the evaluation is unwarranted. What it means is that most other people believe they have reasons for the warrant of their evaluation, whether or not those reasons are justified. Dissenting from the majority evaluation may be the result of assigning less weight to some credibility features (e.g. being advanced by relevant authorities), and more weight to other features (e.g. having greater explanatory power). Furthermore, which epistemic evaluation one considers justified for a theory may be based on one's political ideology, social factors, situational considerations, and may be (practically) rational. For example, as we saw with Bobby, ascribing some epistemic status to a given theory might be motivated by one's religious beliefs, which presumably raises the stakes for them to deviate from the majority view of the 'correct' or 'best' epistemic evaluation of that (or some rival) theory.

4. Two Views on Conspiracy 'Theory' in Conspiracy Theory-Induced Polarization

The three senses in which we can evaluate the epistemic status of a theory comprise a framework in which we can explain some aspects of conspiracy theory-induced polarization. That is, of (i) people believing that *some* conspiracy theories are true, warranted and important for us to consider as social and political beings (the Friends' View), while (ii) others believe that *all* conspiracy theories are false, unwarranted, and ought to be met with outright condemnation (the Critics' View).[20]

4.1. Conspiracy Theory-Induced Polarization

These diametrically opposed positions about the epistemic status of conspiracy theories cannot be resolved by the Critics presenting reasons that would count, on their view, as defeaters for the Friends' belief, or vice versa. For example, suppose Jessie believes the conspiracy theory that the increasing population of wolves in Germany is the result of a secret plot by powerful government officials to depopulate rural areas for purposes of enhanced population control and mass surveillance. Kai, on the other hand, believes that all conspiracy theories are false and unwarranted, and this conspiracy theory is no exception. Generally, disagreement could be resolved by both positions' presenting (factual) reasons to either justify their own belief or defeat the other's, presuming the other party is reason-responsive. This strategy appears futile, however, for the disagreements between Friends and Critics of conspiracy theories: Kai would not persuade Jessie to give up their belief by arguing that the conspiracy theory is refuted by government officials, nor would Jessie persuade Kai by arguing that wolves do not simply come falling out of the sky. It seems that disputes between Friends and Critics of conspiracy theories resemble *deep* disagreements—i.e. disagreements over epistemic principles[21]—which Jeroen de Ridder argues:

> [U]ndermine a crucial presupposition of epistemic democracy, to wit the availability of common ground for reasonable debate and deliberation. Moreover, they lead citizens to see each other as less than fully rational, as morally subpar, or worse. This, in turn, feeds into polarization, which makes reasonable debate harder still. (2021, 226–7)

Reasonable debate between Friends and Critics is off the table because there is no common ground to start from if we only focus on the arguments (mentioned above) for their respective beliefs.[22] Rather, the disagreement between Friends and Critics hinges on different epistemic evaluations of the theories at hand, and the different epistemic strategies that follow from those evaluations.

4.2. Two Views on Conspiracy 'Theories'

What follows is a rough proposal of two different evaluations of 'theory' that are typical of the positions in conspiracy theory-induced polarization. The motivation for this proposal is to acquire a better understanding of the kind of depolarizing resolutions that the nature of the disagreement still allows by considering the ways in which Friends and Critics, respectively, evaluate the epistemic status of conspiracy theories and rival official theories.

Consider the following figure:

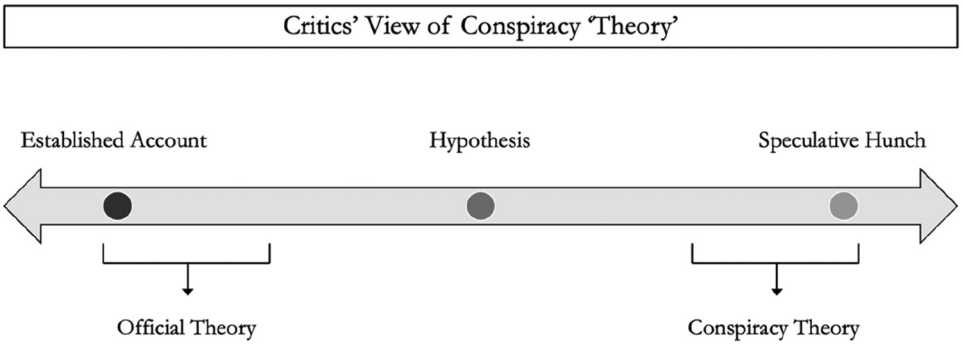

Figure 1. Scalar representation of senses of 'theory': the Critics' View.

The Critics' View illustrates the perspective of those who do not believe conspiracy theories and do, typically, believe the dominant alternative (i.e. official theories). (For example, Robin from the Sun Language theory case above.) On this view, the official theory resembles an *established account* in that it, for example, is the result of expert investigation, widely endorsed, supported by evidence from multiple sources, subjected to objections from experts, et cetera.[23]

In contrast, under this view the conspiracy theory is most often associated with a *hunch* in that it, for example, is not the result of expert investigation, is likely believed for pragmatic reasons more than it is believed for necessarily intellectual reasons, is merely speculation or conjecture[24], or is neither sufficiently supported by evidence, nor systematically delineated.

On this view, it is difficult to empathize with those who believe in conspiracy theories because they seem to take an unjustified leap from one end of the spectrum—i.e. where theories merit the consent of epistemic experts, widespread endorsement, and sufficient evidential support—to the other—i.e. where theories lack these epistemic qualities altogether. For those who sympathize with the Critics' View, it is too epistemically risky to believe a conspiracy theory and those who do believe a conspiracy theory, a conjectural hunch, are irrational in doing so. Furthermore, people who believe conspiracy theories are deserving of outright condemnation because they are guilty of asserting the truth of theories that are mere conjectures, and thereby clearly exhibiting epistemic misconduct.

Those who do believe conspiracy theories will disagree with the Critics' View. (For example, Bobby from the evolution theory case above.) Their view looks something like this:

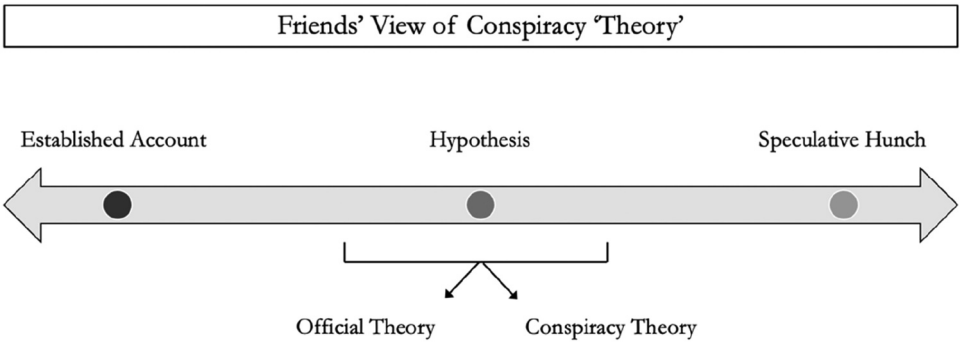

Figure 2. Scalar representation of senses of 'theory': the Friends' View.

The Friends' View[25] illustrates the perspective of those who disbelieve official accounts, and do, typically, believe conspiracy theories. On this view, the official theory no longer resembles an established account. Rather, the official theory is seen as a *hypothesis* as it, for example, is not supported by impartial evidence, is the result of biased investigations, and, although it is systematically delineated, it is the work of (or endorsed by) agents powerful enough to cover up the truth. So, relative to the Critics' View, the Friends' View can be seen to downgrade the official theory from resembling an established theory to a hypothesis.

In contrast, the conspiracy theory is not considered a hunch, but also as resembling (at least) a *hypothesis*. The conspiracy theory is purported to be, for example, an educated, possible explanation, one which is attentive to the evidence, the result of investigation by people experienced in attempting to uncover conspiracies, and a manifestation of truly open-minded research.[26]

On this view, an official theory and conspiracy theory about the same event are (at least) on a par; both have their merits and neither has the sole claim to the truth. The difference between the two theories is that the former was orchestrated by agents who are possibly powerful enough to consider or undertake mass-manipulation and deception, and who may very well have a lot to gain from fooling the *hoi polloi*, while the latter was not. One alleged feature of belief in conspiracy theories is the idea that the masses (or 'sheeple') are gullible for believing the official theory to be an established account without any critical reflection (Nattrass 2012; Jolley, Douglas, and Sutton 2018). For, if the official theory is 'just a theory', orchestrated by people who had a political agenda in doing so, then it seems irrational to 'just believe' the official theory *qua* being the official theory. Hence, individuals are encouraged to decide between conflicting theories themselves, and to do their own research.

4.3. 'Theory' Senses in Conspiracy Theory-Induced Polarization

What does this dichotomy of views on belief in conspiracy theories tell us about the disagreement that exists between Critics and Friends?

Firstly, the Critics can be understood as arguing that conspiracy theory-believers have both misapplied (in the negative sense) the sense of 'theory' appropriate to the official theory at hand, and misapplied (in the positive sense) the sense of 'theory' appropriate to the conspiracy theory at hand. In other words, the Critics maintain that the official account is not merely a hypothesis, but rather an established account, and neither is the conspiracy theory a hypothesis, for it is a conjecture at best (i.e. a hunch).

Secondly, the Friends will argue that official theory-believers have both misapplied (in the negative sense) the sense of 'theory' appropriate to the conspiracy theory at hand, and misapplied (in the positive sense) the sense of 'theory' appropriate to the official theory at hand. In other words,

Friends maintain that Critics are gullible in thinking that the official account meets the standards of an established account, and are also wrong in believing that conspiracy theories are no better than conjectural hunches.

So, both views can be seen to appeal to similar arguments, although in opposite directions. As we have seen in section §3, to say that some sense of 'theory' is misapplied to a theory X can be understood as a subjective judgment based on epistemic norms concerning what are the most important features of a theory in deciding the appropriateness of one sense over others. Thus, it seems that (at least part of) the disagreement between Critics and Friends boils down to a dispute, not only about what the correct epistemic evaluation of some theory is, but also about which properties—i.e. that are established account-, hypothesis-, or hunch-making—should be given more weight than others. Also, we should note that such evaluations typically survive even after being informed by the evaluations of the opposing party, which is also what should be expected in terms of the failure of rational deliberation as a means of resolving deep disagreements. This is true for those who can be seen as representing the Friends' View as well as for those representing the Critics' View.

Diametrically opposed beliefs about (i) the epistemic evaluation of theories, and, consecutively, (ii) the epistemic norms governing the evaluation of theories is a newly uncovered take on the nature of conspiracy theory-induced polarization. I believe we may take away from this a new starting point for finding solutions to such conspiracy theory-induced polarization (and, indeed, polarization more generally). That is, by inquiring into the belief policies[27] and epistemic norms that govern the commitment to conspiracy theories, and by engaging with conspiracy believers' standpoint not from an outsiders' perspective (i.e. governed by different epistemic norms and starting from different epistemic evaluations), but by taking seriously the idea that, from their view, the conspiracy belief-position can be rationally supported, and is the result of reasonable considerations.[28]

In sum, Friends and Critics of conspiracy theories are not merely polarized because the theories they disagree about appeal to conspiracies—accompanied by the implication that the explanations are (im)probable for reasons having to do with the likelihood of conspiracies actually existing (as was the upshot of the debate that focused on 'conspiracy')—but also because their epistemic evaluations of what counts as 'theories' are so far apart that bridging the divide between their respective positions seems impossible.[29] For Friends, conspiracy theories are (at least) hypotheses that are credible, warranted, and on a par with official theories. For Critics, conspiracy theories are hunches that are false, unwarranted, and epistemically inferior to official theories. Depolarizing disagreement between these Friends and Critics requires more than just presenting factual arguments to undermine the other party's epistemic evaluation of a theory: it requires taking the other group's perspective seriously and being attentive to their ways of determining the conditions for the theories' epistemic evaluations.

5. Generalist versus Minimalist Conceptions

In this final section, I will explain how the insights from section §4 concerning conspiracy theory-induced polarization entail not just limitations regarding an adequate conception of 'conspiracy theory' but also argue that, across disciplines, we should prefer a minimalist/particularist conception of 'conspiracy theory' over a generalist one. After considering various arguments and objections, I conclude that the pejorative conceptions of 'conspiracy theory' proposed by generalists rule out or obstruct the possibility of finding the kind of depolarization strategies that are expected to be effective considering the nature of the disagreement between Friends and Critics of conspiracy theories. I believe this to be a serious drawback for generalism as a viable and socially acceptable starting point for research on conspiracy theories across disciplines because it not only blocks future polarization-ameliorating research projects but also contributes to conspiracy theory-induced polarization.

As noted in section §2, generalists often take the ordinary meaning of "conspiracy theory" to imply a pejorative connotation, which they then argue should be included in the conceptualization of 'conspiracy theory'.

In response, particularists object that defining conspiracy theories as false or unwarranted explanations citing conspiracies as causal factors begs the question. After all, the generalist assumes a positive answer to 'Is there a unifying feature of conspiracy theories that warrants prima facie dismissal of all such theories?' to argue that prima facie dismissal is warranted. Particularists propose an alternative starting point for answering this question; by defining 'conspiracy theory' in a minimal way—i.e. in a way that is both epistemically and morally neutral—even though this conception does not accommodate the pejorative connotation we see in ordinary language contexts.

Furthermore, it does not seem to be a disadvantage of particularism to propose a non-reportive or non-descriptive definition—i.e. capturing the way in which the concept is used correctly—since, despite the alleged basis of their definition in ordinary usage, I believe that the generalists' final conception is not to be taken as reportive or descriptive either. Instead, most generalists end up with a stipulative definition—i.e. assigning a new (and more precise) meaning to a term—like most other (including the minimal) conceptions proposed in conspiracy theory theory. For example, suppose some generalist proposes to conceptualize 'conspiracy theory' as 'any unwarranted conspiracy explanation' to account for the pejorative connotation commonly associated with conspiracy theories in ordinary language usage. For theoretical purposes, the generalist needs to flesh out further what is understood as 'unwarranted' in ordinary language contexts. Unwarranted with respect to what characteristic, for whom, or by which norms?

Generalists have proposed various answers to these questions, though none of them are particularly empirically informed (which should be expected if their definitions are reportive of how the concept is used correctly in ordinary language contexts). For example, Neil Levy argues that unwarranted conspiracy theories are those which 'conflict with (the right kind of) official stories [. . .] where the official story is the explanation offered by the (relevant) *epistemic authorities*' (2007, 181–2). Notice, though, that any such specification of what it means for a conspiracy theory to be an *unwarranted* conspiracy theory will inevitably mean departing from a regulative to a more and more stipulative definition. For, the correctness of attributing the label "conspiracy theory" in ordinary language contexts does not depend on the right *kind* of epistemic authority postulating a contrary, official theory. Conversely, an absence of such a specification will leave the concept similarly non-regulative; without identification of the norms governing the warrant of some conspiracy theory, any conspiracy theory can be taken as warranted, or unwarranted, meaning that the generalist's conception does not capture the way in which the concept is used correctly.

Understood as stipulative definitions, we can analyze generalist conceptions to see if they are appropriate and suitable for the goals central to conspiracy theory theory. Such goals, for example, might concern; acquiring a better understanding of conspiracy theories, understanding the people who believe them, analyzing their logical structure, examining the possibility of finding defeaters, and proposing solutions for conspiracy theory-induced polarization.

However, the two positions typical of conspiracy theory-induced polarization discussed in section §4 have shown us that pejorative definitions can only address one side of the debate. *Limiting our view to conceptions that include the pejorative connotation means that we are implicitly choosing sides as to which epistemic evaluation is objectively correct for the whole class of conspiracy theories* (thereby condemning those with other evaluations of the status of certain theories and their arguments) *and precludes constructive engagement with the reasons or rationales behind deviating epistemic evaluations of the theories*.

Still, generalists may respond that even though their stipulative conception has unfortunate practical consequences, it should nonetheless be preferred over minimal conceptions because it accommodates our intuitions about conspiracy theories as being unwarranted in one way or another. Accommodating these intuitions is important, Napolitano argues, because they also figure at the basis of empirical research into conspiracy theories.[30] She claims that philosophical accounts

incorporating the minimal definition, lacking the typical pejorative connotation, have ignored the fact that psychologists, cognitive scientists, and social scientists have taken conspiracy theories as 'a problem to be addressed, or as an instance of irrational behavior' (2021, 85).[31]

Yet, social psychologists, already before Napolitano's (2021) was published, have widely acknowledged that belief in conspiracy theories is relatively normal (Bost, Prunier, and Piper 2010), and not, as was formerly believed, reserved for paranoid individuals whose judgment is affected as the result of 'uncommonly angry minds' (Hofstadter 1965, 54). Various empirical scientists have purposefully focused their research of conspiracy theories on the positive elements (both epistemic and moral) of belief in conspiracy theories (e.g. see Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Furnham 2010; van Prooijen 2022; Imhoff and Lamberty 2017; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016). And some have even argued that belief in false conspiracy theories may have a rational basis (Swami et al. 2013). So, as Douglas and Sutton explain:

> [R]ecent findings call into question this rather pathological view of conspiracy beliefs. Far from being limited to people who are paranoid and delusional, research suggests that conspiracy beliefs are common [. . .]. That is, everyone is to some extent likely to believe in conspiracy theories. (2018, 259)

Thus, it is simply not true that empirical research into conspiracy theories warrants a pejorative conception of 'conspiracy theory'[32]: derogatory assumptions made by previous conspiracy theory theorists are being overturned across disciplines, and, as we have seen, rightly so. In other words, striving for an interdisciplinary fruitful[33] conception of 'conspiracy theory' does not justify including (derogatory) assumptions on the epistemic status of such theories in such conceptions.

Minimalist/particularist conceptions, on the other hand, do not rely on assumptions of the general epistemic status of conspiracy theories. Such conceptions do not beg the question as to whether belief in a conspiracy theory is warranted. Some conspiracy theories will be warranted, some will not be, but both are conspiracy theories all the same. This means that minimalist conceptions furnish, rather than obstruct, constructive engagement with the rationales underlying conspiracy belief across disciplines.

To conclude, the account I have put forth insists that the pejorative connotation commonly associated with "conspiracy theory" in ordinary language usage does not warrant a generalist conception of 'conspiracy theory' in conspiracy theory theory. Such a pejorative conception would be theoretically problematic in that it precludes constructive engagement with the reasons or rationales behind other epistemic evaluations of the theories, in both philosophical and empirical research contexts, and practically problematic because it contributes to, rather than provides a starting point to resolve, conspiracy theory-induced polarization.

6. Conclusion

Conspiracy theory theorists strive to acquire a better understanding of the specifics of conspiracy theories and theorists, but this is only a means to an end: an important purpose of conspiracy theory theory surely should be contributing to depolarization in a way that respects ideological pluralism, is epistemologically sound, and avoids unjustified condemnation of ideological minorities.

Contributing to depolarization requires a thorough understanding of the (deep) disagreements foundational of conspiracy theory-induced polarization. What epistemic norms are underlying the claims made by either position, and what do these norms imply in terms of possible resolutions? I have shown that, whilst people claim to be debating whether conspiracy theories are deserving of their pejorative connotation based on their being about *conspiracies*, most such discussions end up revolving around people's view on conspiracy theories' being a certain kind of *theory*. An official story is often not considered as a "conspiracy theory" but as a 'conspiracy fact' or a 'conspiracy explanation' because it is the 'theory'-aspect that is doing an important part of the work in derogatory "conspiracy theory"-talk.

By revealing the relevance and importance of shifting the focus in conspiracy theory theory from 'conspiracy' to 'theory', I have put forth a new (and perhaps more rigorous) perspective for arguments to reject pejorative conceptions of 'conspiracy theory'. As generalism is based on the presumption that all (or the vast majority of) conspiracy theories are bad theories, it precludes constructive engagement with the reasons or rationales underlying conspiracy theory-belief. For generalists (or, the Critics) conspiracy theory-belief is overly epistemically risky because they start out from the idea that the relevant official theory is an established account. If we are interested in the possible ways to achieve depolarization, however, constructive engagement with conspiracy theory (−belief) requires another approach: one—like the minimalist account associated with particularism—that allows us to be more responsive to the higher-order reasons for and the epistemic principles foundational of conspiracy theory-belief.

Notes

1. Throughout the paper, I use single quotation marks to denote the concept 'conspiracy theory', and double quotation marks to denote the ordinary language usage of "conspiracy theory".
2. For discussions on these topics, see Pigden 1995, 6; Keeley 1999, 116; Dentith and Orr 2017, 446; Mandik 2007, 205; Harris 2018, 236–7; Basham 2003, 99, respectively.
3. This point is also made by M R. X. Dentith and Brian L. Keeley, who argue: 'It is fair to say that many beliefs about the likeliness or unlikeliness of conspiracy theories hinge on the definition of what counts as conspiratorial. If you build into your definition of what counts as conspiratorial that such events are unlikely [. . .], then that changes our understanding as to whether belief in theories about conspiracies [. . .] can ever be considered rational' (2018, 287).
4. For an example of the first line of reasoning see Cass R. Sunstein & Adrian Vermeule (2009, 208–9) and for discussions of the second line of reasoning see Juha Räikkä (2009, 193–4), David Coady (2012, 117–8), and Dentith (2014, 110–1).
5. A similar point is made by Lee Basham (2003, 95).
6. Obviously, there is more to particularism than claiming that generalism is wrong. For present purposes, however, a negative definition of particularism will do.
7. Throughout the paper, I use 'conspiracy theorist' and 'conspiracy believer' interchangeably as denoting someone who believes one or more conspiracy theories.
8. Quassim Cassam makes a similar point: 'it's in the nature of Conspiracy Theories to rely on circumstantial rather than direct evidence' (2019, 30).
9. Although Keeley is not a generalist (i.e. his argument only pertains to mature unwarranted conspiracy theories), the argument may also work for a broader generalist account.
10. Other generalist-style arguments advance that the epistemic problems lying at the base of the pejorative connotation of "conspiracy theory" do not have to do with the explanations, but with the people believing such explanations. The argument is quite similar to the one above: because such explanations concern conspiracies, people who believe them are (i) overestimating the intentionality of social events and thereby the likelihood of successful conspiratorial activities (e.g. Clarke 2002; Mandik 2007), and/or (ii) irrationally paranoid and overly skeptical of epistemic authorities, leading them down a path of epistemic impairment (e.g. see Hofstadter 1965; Harris 2018; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009).
11. Dentith (2016) goes even further by arguing that not only do conspiracies occur, but the theories describing them are also not more unlikely than the alternative (often official) explanation of the same event.
12. Similarly minimal definitions are proposed by other particularists, for example, see Pigden (2007, 222) and Basham (2003, 91).
13. For example, Cassam argues that '[t]he story of Operation Northwoods isn't a Conspiracy Theory; it's conspiracy fact. Genuine Conspiracy Theories are speculative in a way that [a conspiracy fact] is not. That's why they are *theories*' (2019, 18).
14. These evaluations are clearly not agent-neutral as people who believe conspiracy theories do not evaluate their pet-theories in the same way as critics. I turn to different kinds of subjective evaluations of conspiracy theories in the next section.
15. Although this is not an exhaustive list of definitions, it does capture three of the most common senses in which we talk about theories. Another sense of 'theory' is: a field or mode of professional inquiry that is demarcated by specific methods or principles (e.g. decision theory or theory of knowledge). I do not address this sense of 'theory' in this paper as I assume that this is not how most people understand 'theory' in talking about conspiracy theories.
16. The properties I list here and in similar lists for hypothesis-making and hunch-making properties should be taken as a rough proposal. If one disagrees with the properties I list here, nothing hangs on this.

17. 'Heliocentric theory' is to be understood here as the claim that the Sun lies at or near the central point of the solar system while the Earth and the system's other celestial bodies revolve around the Sun.
18. Even though Xiao believes the theory is well-evidenced, Robin does not agree. From Robin's point of view, Xiao cannot have good evidence because it is either not the right kind of evidence (i.e. that would actually lend credence to this type of linguistic theory), or because the evidence is false.
19. A point also made by Räikkä (2018).
20. It must be clear that the Critics' View maps onto generalism (as explicated in §2) in that it accommodates the epistemic deficiency generalists claim is a defining feature of conspiracy theories. However, the same does not hold for the Friends' View and particularism, as I will explain in §4.2.
21. For a discussion of the more specific metaphysics of deep disagreements, see Chris Ranalli (2021). For simplicity, I only claim that conspiracy theory-disagreements as described above *resemble* deep disagreements.
22. For example, Kai is not responsive to Jessie's arguments because they believe that all conspiracy theories are false. Kai holds this belief, for example, because they endorse the belief policy that says 'believe p if and only if p is advanced by relevant authorities'. Jessie's arguments, however, are not directed at those higher-order reasons, and therefore fail to convince Kai. Conversely, Jessie is not responsive to Kai's arguments for disbelieving the conspiracy theory because those arguments similarly fail to address Jessie's higher-order reasons. Jessie's belief in the conspiracy theory may be the result of, for example, (rational) government distrust, in which case Kai's reasons misfire in defeating Jessie's belief. Does the fact that reasonable debate is obstructed by features of conspiracy theory-induced polarization mean that Kai and Jessie are not reason-responsive? I believe not: Kai and Jessie seem unresponsive to the reasons proposed by the other party because those are not the real (i.e. higher-order) reasons underlying their disagreement.
23. In cases where there is no obvious 'official' counterpart-theory, Critics might still believe that there are such official theories as located on the scalar representation, and that the conspiracy theories are typically located at the other end of the spectrum.
24. Cassam has gone as far as to include 'being speculative' as one of the characteristics of conspiracy theories (understood with the pejorative connotation in mind), by which he means: 'based on conjecture rather than knowledge, educated (or not so educated) guesswork rather than solid evidence' (16).
25. The Friends' View illustrates the perspective of those who believe (or are open to believing) conspiracy theories *and* for which there is a rival official theory they hold is of the same epistemic status as said conspiracy theory. In contrast, the particularist maintains that we should investigate the epistemic status of particular theories (whether or not there is some rival official theory), instead of mapping all conspiracy theories on one of the sides of the spectrum. So, although it could be the case that, for some *particular* conspiracy theory, the particularist agrees with the Friends' View as depicted above, this will not be true for conspiracy theories *generally*.
26. The Friends' View accounts for the fact that we see conspiracy theories evolving over time, and see that the propositional content of the conspiracy theorists' belief can be flexible—e.g. who exactly is 'in' on the plot, which events are brought about by the conspirators, different justifications for new implications of the theory, et cetera. Many conspiracy theorists are not deeply committed to one specific and detailed narrative of how the conspiracy went down, and belief in conspiracy theories may fluctuate over time (van Prooijen 2020). Instead, most conspiracy theorists seem deeply committed to suspicions like 'something is being kept a secret' and 'things are not as they seem', while it is the conspiracy entrepreneurs that promote a specific and detailed narrative that map onto those suspicions. These aspects of conspiracy theorizing or believing make sense if you think of conspiracy theories and their official counterparts as working hypotheses—i.e. as having suspicions in a certain direction, which need more elaboration and fleshing out to become a full-fledged, watertight theory.
27. A notion developed by Paul Helm (1994), meaning: standards for accepting and rejecting evidence as belief-worthy.
28. See, for another version of this kind of argument, Mittendorf's paper in this issue (forthcoming).
29. See, in this issue, Dentith's discussion of bridging problems in conspiracy theory theory (forthcoming).
30. For a more elaborate critical discussion of Napolitano's account, see Duetz (2022).
31. A similar argument can be found in Räikkä (2018). Also, Shields, in this issue, addresses some of the conceptual concerns with this kind of project (forthcoming).
32. Though there might be room for a pejorative conception of 'extreme conspiracy believer' (see Duetz and Dentith 2022).
33. For a more elaborate discussion of different conceptions of 'conspiracy theory' and their interdisciplinary fruitfulness, see Melina Tsapos (forthcoming).

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