



Conspiracy Theories, Populism, and Epistemic Autonomy

ABSTRACT: *Quassim Cassam has argued that psychological and epistemological analyses of conspiracy theories threaten to overlook the political nature of such theories. According to Cassam, conspiracy theories are a form of political propaganda. I develop a limited critique of Cassam's analysis.*

This paper advances two core theses. First, acceptance of conspiracy theories requires a rejection of epistemic authority that renders conspiracy theorists susceptible to co-option by certain political programs while insulating such programs from criticism. I argue that the contrarian nature of conspiracy theories partially accounts for the prominence of such theories in populist movements.

Second, the contrarian nature of conspiracy theories partially accounts for their attractiveness, especially among those to whom populism already appeals. I argue that for those who resent what appears from their perspective as the shaping of the epistemic landscape by alien perspectives, conspiracy theorizing may facilitate the reassertion of epistemic autonomy.

KEYWORDS: applied epistemology, conspiracy theories, epistemic autonomy, epistemic dependence, populism

Introduction

Events ranging from Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 to mass shootings to the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021 have been partially attributed to belief in conspiracy theories. Vaccine hesitancy and related attitudes that have frustrated efforts to combat COVID-19 in the United States have likewise been blamed on conspiracy theories. Unsurprisingly, interest in the nature, causes, and consequences of conspiracy theories has surged among academics, policy makers, and members of the public more broadly.

Scholars representing a range of fields have worked to advance our understanding of conspiracy theories. There is substantial interdisciplinary disagreement concerning both what conspiracy theories are and why such theories are popular. Some philosophers contend that conspiracy theories are simply theories that allege conspiracies, while others favor more restrictive definitions. These fundamental disagreements are at least partially responsible for further disagreements concerning the proper explanation for the popularity of conspiracy theories. Some

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have attempted to account for conspiracy theories by appeal to psychological characteristics of their believers (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Brotherton and French 2014; Cichocka, Marchlewska, and de Zavala 2016; Darwin, Neave, and Holmes 2011; Douglas et al. 2016; Swami et al. 2011; Van Prooijen 2018; Van Prooijen, Douglas, and De Inocencio 2018) or situational factors (Van Prooijen and Acker 2015), others have appealed to epistemic vice (Cassam 2016; Harris 2018), while others have stressed the seductive sense of clarity furnished by conspiracy theories themselves (Nguyen 2021).

In a recent book, Quassim Cassam (2019) has argued that attempts to understand conspiracy theories from a psychological or epistemological perspective threaten to overlook the political nature of conspiracy theories. According to Cassam, conspiracy theories—or at least an important subclass of these—are a form of political propaganda. Put differently, Cassam asserts that the function of such theories is political. The present paper offers a limited critique of Cassam's analysis.

This paper advances two core theses. First, the political utility of conspiracy theories derives principally from the nature of such theories as contrary to the claims of epistemic authorities. Yet this contrarian nature does not imply that conspiracy theories are inherently political. Rather, acceptance of conspiracy theories, like commitment to alternative medicine and belief in the supernatural, requires a rejection of epistemic authority that renders conspiracy theorists susceptible to co-option by certain kinds of political programs and insulates such programs from criticism by epistemic authorities. I argue, in particular, that the contrarian nature of conspiracy theories helps to account for the prominence of such theories and those who believe and espouse them in populist political movements.

The second core thesis is that the contrarian nature of conspiracy theories partially accounts for their attractiveness, especially among those to whom populism already appeals. A major focus in recent epistemology is the extent to which epistemic authorities determine which beliefs are regarded as credible and which are not. How this authority is perceived by those who reject the ideologies endorsed by epistemic authorities has received less attention among philosophers. Drawing on recent empirical work, I argue that for those who resent what appears from their perspective as the shaping of the epistemic landscape by alien perspectives, the adoption of conspiracy theories may facilitate the reassertion of epistemic autonomy. I begin in section 1 by offering a working definition of conspiracy theory. Then, in section 2 I dispute the claim that conspiracy theories have a political function. In section 3 I offer an explanation of the political utility of conspiracy theories that does not require that such theories have a political function. Then, in section 4, I argue that conspiracy theories offer believers the opportunity to reclaim epistemic autonomy from epistemic authorities with whom they do not identify. Section 5 concludes.

1. Conspiracy Theories

Much of the existing philosophical work on conspiracy theories is devoted to the project of specifying just what such theories are. According to one approach, popular among philosophical defenders of conspiracy theories and those who

believe them, conspiracy theories are simply theories that allege conspiracies (Dentith 2014; Pigden 2007). Many commentators regard such a definition as implausibly broad. The basic concern here is that the proposed definition fails to account for why, for example, the claim that operatives working on behalf of Al-Qaeda conspired to strike targets in the United States on September 11, 2001, is not typically regarded as a conspiracy theory. More generally, the proposed definition fails to account for the tendency to regard only a subset of allegations of conspiracy as conspiracy theories.

Examples such as the previous one suggest the need for a relatively narrow definition of conspiracy theory. Some have proposed that part of what makes a theory a conspiracy theory is that the theory is lacking in evidence, is false, or is otherwise deficient (Brotherton and French 2014). Call any definition fitting this mold a pejorative definition of conspiracy theory. According to an alternative approach, conspiracy theories are, by definition, contrary to the claims of authorities (Coady 2006, 2007; Feldman 2011; Harris 2018; Keeley 1999; Rääkkä 2009). This approach can be elaborated in at least two ways, depending on how authority is construed. On one approach, the relevant form of authority is governmental or otherwise related to power. According to an alternative approach, the relevant form of authority is epistemic—this is the form of authority invoked when someone is characterized as an authority on a subject. In what follows, I will assume that conspiracy theories are theories that allege conspiracies and that are inconsistent with the claims of relevant epistemic authorities, where epistemic authority is possessed in virtue of credentials, professional positions, and the like. So understood, an epistemic authority on a subject matter is not necessarily a reliable judge of claims concerning that subject matter. Rather, the reliability of relevant epistemic authorities depends on the extent to which credentials and positions are reserved for those who are reliable judges with respect to a subject matter.

Because epistemic authorities so understood may in principle not be reliable judges, the proposed definition is not a pejorative definition. However, it does not follow from the fact that the proposed definition is nonpejorative that, given this definition, we have no reason to be skeptical of conspiracy theories. On the present approach, the reliability of epistemic authorities is a contingent matter. However, to the extent that we have reason to believe that epistemic authorities in a given context are reliable, we have some basis for skepticism of those theories they reject. Treating those epistemic authorities whose reliability we have independent reason to endorse as furnishing reason for skepticism of conspiracy theories does not exclude the possibility that there are contexts in which recognized epistemic authorities are comparatively unreliable and hence in which the fact that some theory is a conspiracy theory provides little if any reason to doubt it.

The motivation for defining conspiracy theories in opposition to the claims of epistemic authorities is as follows. First, the proposed definition largely tracks ordinary usage of the term conspiracy theory. For example, the definition accounts for the fact that some allegations of conspiracy concerning the events of September 11 are conspiracy theories and others are not. Second, unlike the

pejorative definitions, the proposed definition allows that it is possible to identify conspiracy theories without first determining whether they are true and allows that conspiracy theories might in principle be well-supported by evidence. Third, the proposed definition, unlike the definition of conspiracy theories in opposition to the claims of governmental authorities, allows that governmental authorities can participate in conspiracy theorizing. These points are not intended as a decisive motivation for the definition according to which conspiracy theories are theories that allege conspiracies and that are inconsistent with the claims of relevant epistemic authorities. No definition, including this one, can be expected to conform perfectly to ordinary usage of the term—terms can be misused, after all—and some degree of arbitrary stipulation is necessary to arrive at a definition that is suitably simple and general. The arguments to follow will depend on understanding conspiracy theories as contrary to the claims of epistemic authorities, and so one might worry that the arbitrariness in the proposed definition undermines the significance of these arguments. However, even if one prefers an alternative definition of conspiracy theory, one can nonetheless acknowledge that an important subclass of conspiracy theories have the nature of those captured by the present definition. One may in this case think of the arguments to follow as concerning only that subclass of conspiracy theories. Thus, semantic complications in how precisely to understand conspiracy theories do not undercut the main thrust of the arguments to follow.

2. Do Conspiracy Theories Have a Political Function?

Beyond the project of definition, a great deal of existing philosophical work on conspiracy theories focuses on when, if ever, belief in conspiracy theories is rational and on whether there are characteristics of such theories in virtue of which such theories warrant suspicion as a class. Cassam (2016) initially connected belief in conspiracy theories to epistemic vice, but has since argued that conspiracy theories are better understood in political terms (2019). It should be noted that Cassam distinguishes between conspiracy theories, which he defines along the lines of the broad definition considered at the beginning of section 1, and Conspiracy Theories, a title he reserves for those conspiracy theories characterized by a body of features—they are speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish, and premodern—that jointly make the theories in question unlikely to be true (2019: ch. 1). I do not adopt Cassam's distinction here. However, where I present counterexamples to Cassam's claim that the function of conspiracy theories is political, the examples I highlight possess the relevant features to identify them as Conspiracy Theories, in Cassam's sense. Thus, the claim that the function of conspiracy theories is political cannot be defended by appeal to Cassam's distinction. According to Cassam, conspiracy theories are a form of political propaganda. Here is how Cassam puts the point:

The way to understand what [Conspiracy Theories] are is to understand what they are for, to grasp their basic function. Their basic function is to advance a political or ideological objective, be it opposition to

gun control, anti-Semitism, hostility to the federal government or whatever. Conspiracy Theories advance a political objective in a special way: by advancing seductive explanations of major events that, objectively speaking, are unlikely to be true but *are* likely to influence public opinion in the preferred direction. (2019: 11)

According to Cassam, recognizing that the function of conspiracy theories is political helps to account for the popularity such theories enjoy despite their epistemic deficiencies.

Cassam's argument that conspiracy theories are a form of political propaganda appeals to a range of real-world examples of conspiracy theories. These include Holocaust denialism, contrarian accounts of the September 11 attacks, Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories, and claims that various school shootings were false flag operations. Such theories, according to Cassam, serve clear political agendas. Holocaust denialism is an important tool for extremist right-wing movements, contrarian accounts of the September 11 attacks serve political interests on the left and the right, Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories facilitate criticism of the so-called deep state, conspiracy theories concerning school shootings derail calls for effective gun control legislation, and so on.

Examples like those discussed in the previous paragraph lend some initial plausibility to the claim that conspiracy theories are a form of political propaganda. However, it is not clear that generalization from such cases is warranted. After all, some prominent conspiracy theories have no immediate connection to any political agenda. Consider the notorious conspiracy theory according to which the Earth is flat. In contrast to the conspiracy theories considered in the previous paragraph, the connection between flat Eartherism and politics is, at a minimum, far more tenuous. The flat Earth theory is far from the only conspiracy theory with at most tenuous ties to political agendas. To cite just a few additional examples, consider the theories that the Earth is hollow, that vaccines cause autism, that the US Air Force made contact with extraterrestrials in Roswell in 1947, that Paul McCartney died in the late 1960s, that NASA faked the moon landing, and so on.

At a stretch, one might perhaps argue that some of the above-mentioned theories are political in Cassam's sense. Perhaps, for example, the theory that the US Air Force made contact with extraterrestrials in the 1940s and has since suppressed this information has the function of stoking suspicion of the US Air Force and other federal agencies. Indeed, some disseminators of the theory might share it for this very reason. Yet, two difficulties with Cassam's identification of conspiracy theories as political remain. First, some conspiracy theories—the flat Earth theory and the McCartney theory, for example—are even further disconnected from political agendas than the Roswell conspiracy theory. Second, and perhaps more important, it is not clear that it is enough for the function of conspiracy theories to be political that conspiracy theories tend to produce a certain political effect and that some promoters intend the theories to produce that effect. After all, it is difficult to deny that many individuals believe and even promote conspiracy theories for a range of reasons having nothing to do with political agendas. Some

individuals promote conspiracy theories principally for personal financial benefit, for instance. Such profiteers may cash in on the theories they promote in various ways. For one example, helpfully suggested to me by an associate editor, the well-known conspiracy theory promoter Alex Jones profits through the sale of supplements and apparel on the Infowars website. There is also profit to be had through live events, including numerous conferences promoting the flat Earth conspiracy theory. More recently, promoters of the QAnon conspiracy theory have held conferences devoted to the theory, sometimes charging upwards of \$500 per ticket (Rondeaux 2021; Vaughn 2021). Moreover, conspiracy theories produce a range of effects. It is hardly plausible that the function of conspiracy theories is to produce all those effects that are intended by those who believe or promote them. Thus, it is unclear that we can identify the function of conspiracy theories simply by considering the intentions of conspiracy theorists and the effects that such theories tend to produce. Additionally, even if conspiracy theories are regarded as having a political function in virtue of the intentions of some conspiracy theory promoters and the actual effects of conspiracy theories, the same bases will support the identification of a range of other functions of conspiracy theories.

In this section, I have argued against the claim that the function of conspiracy theories is political. It should be emphasized that everything I have said here is consistent with the fact that conspiracy theories are often utilized by individuals with particular political agendas to produce desired political outcomes. Conspiracy theories can be—and often are—used as political propaganda, even if this use is not inherent to what conspiracy theories are. Given that this political function is not inherent to conspiracy theories, it is reasonable to ask why conspiracy theories are useful in this way. I turn to this question in the next section.

3. Conspiracy Theories and Populism

I have thus far argued that it is a mistake to treat conspiracy theories as invariably political. This should not be mistaken for a denial that conspiracy theories have political utility—that the dissemination of conspiracy theories can serve political ends. In some cases, much of the political utility of conspiracy theories is plausibly a function of the specific content of the theories in question. This is especially clear in the cases of the conspiracy theories highlighted by Cassam and discussed in section 2. For example, Holocaust denialism can be used to motivate and defend anti-Semitic attitudes and, in this way, to further various extremist agendas. Conspiracy theories concerning mass shootings in the United States can be used to derail campaigns for gun control legislation. As I now argue, however, conspiracy theories as a class possess potential political utility that is not owed to the distinctive claims of individual conspiracy theories. The counterofficial nature of conspiracy theories makes such theories potent weapons for political movements that purport to challenge dominant institutions. For this reason, the political utility of conspiracy theories as a class reveals itself most clearly in the prominence of such theories in populist political movements.

According to the definition of conspiracy theories defended in section 1, conspiracy theories are defined, in part, as theories that conflict with the claims of

epistemic authorities. Conspiracy theories thus, by nature, challenge prevailing epistemic authorities. Precisely what epistemic authorities are challenged depends on the conspiracy theory in question. For example, flat Earth and moon landing conspiracy theories challenge the authority of NASA and other scientific bodies, while September 11 conspiracy theories challenge the authority of US intelligence agencies and journalists. Of course, as conspiracy theories are met with apparent counterevidence, the theories may develop so as to challenge a wider range of epistemic authorities. Thus, for example, some members of the September 11 truth movement have questioned the epistemic authority of expert associations (Straughan 2009). At a minimum, the contrary nature of conspiracy theories guarantees that such theories challenge some forms of epistemic authority. The principal political utility of conspiracy theories is owed to the challenges such theories present to epistemic authorities, or so I now argue.

Because conspiracy theories conflict with the claims of epistemic authorities, the belief in a conspiracy theory requires its holder, on pain of consistency, to reject that epistemic authority—at least with respect to the matter at hand. However, as a great deal of recent work in epistemology has emphasized, individuals are highly dependent upon epistemic authorities for developing their beliefs (Hardwig 1985). The rejection of epistemic authority thus comes at a substantial cost, effectively cutting a believer off, at least partially, from epistemic authority. This point has been developed most extensively by Neil Levy (2007), who argues that the distrust of epistemic authorities required to sustain belief in conspiracy theories renders effective inquiry into complex matters all but impossible. In short, much of our knowledge is owed to our reliance on epistemic authorities, and insofar as conspiracy theories challenge such authorities, these theories threaten our attainment of knowledge.

Having briefly reviewed the social epistemic harms of conspiracy theories, we are now positioned to better understand the political utility of such theories. First, insofar as conspiracy theories sever the connection between believers and epistemic authorities, such theories can be expected to remove obstacles to the co-option of believers into political movements they might otherwise reject. For example, where the prevailing orthodoxy is critical of nationalist political movements, conspiracy theories may soften the intellectual resistance of members of the public to such movements.

But the political utility of conspiracy theories is not restricted to the capacity of such theories to weaken the influence of epistemic authorities. Conspiracy theories may drive believers more directly into otherwise fringe epistemic networks. In his discussion of the social epistemic harms of conspiracy theories, Levy writes that:

Doubting the official story tears a hole in the web of distributed knowledge. . . . It throws [the conspiracy theorist] back upon her own cognitive resources—and, no matter how clever she is, no matter how educated, these resources are meagre. (2007: 190)

The acceptance of a conspiracy theory and consequent rejection of various epistemic authorities might in principle lead a believer to epistemic self-reliance of the sort Levy discusses. However, in practice, this seems not to be the path taken by typical

conspiracy theorists. Rather than abandoning the very possibility of epistemic authority, conspiracy theorists often place their faith in alternative individuals and outlets. Thus, those critical of what they regard as mainstream media tend not to abandon their faith in media altogether. To cite one notorious example, Rush Limbaugh repeatedly used his enormously popular radio program to rail against what he called the ‘four corners of deceit’: government, academia, science, and media (Roberts 2017). In this way, Limbaugh invited his listeners into an echo chamber (Nguyen 2020) in which many sources of information—but not right-wing media programs—were treated as suspect (Jamieson and Cappella 2008). Similarly, those critical of science may still place their trust in religious authorities. More generally, those that distrust epistemic authorities on the basis of conspiracy theories may yet place substantial trust in those individuals and outlets that lend support to the conspiracy theories in question. The second major factor in the political utility of conspiracy theories is now coming into focus. Conspiracy theories may not only soften individuals’ resistance to co-option by political movements, but may encourage entry into such movements insofar as individuals and outlets associated with the movements in question endorse or at least decline to condemn the relevant conspiracy theory.

Let us consider an example. Suppose an individual, Alice, comes to accept the conspiracy theory according to which vaccines cause autism. This theory is rejected by mainstream medical and scientific associations as well as by mainstream media organizations. Thus, insofar as Alice accepts the conspiracy theory, she has reason to reject the epistemic authority of these associations and the mainstream media, at least with respect to certain issues. The denunciation by these organizations of some fringe political movement will thus lose some of its force for Alice. Moreover, the toleration or endorsement of the antivaccination conspiracy theory by members of the political movement may encourage Alice’s interest in that movement.

It should be acknowledged that there is a great gap between the acceptance of a conspiracy theory and consequent rejection of certain epistemic authorities, on the one hand, and co-option into some particular political movement, on the other. The example of Alice is not intended to deny the existence of this gap, but to present a model of the trajectory that acceptance into a fringe political movement might take. Political movements may facilitate this process by actively courting individuals who have, through acceptance of conspiracy theories, become disillusioned with epistemic authorities. For example, recent empirical research suggests that rejection of epistemic authorities is, at least, correlated with support for populist political movements (Motta 2018). An especially concerning recent example of this pattern is the attempt by various far right extremist groups to recruit followers of QAnon (Argentino et al. 2021).

Conspiracy theories can be expected to do more for political movements than to facilitate the initial absorption of individuals into such movements. Insofar as such theories call into doubt various forms of epistemic authority, conspiracy theories may insulate members of political movements from criticism of their leaders and the ideas around which such movements are organized. In C. Thi Nguyen’s terms, conspiracy theories can serve to reinforce echo chambers (2020: 148), thereby

preventing members of political movements from encountering effective challenges to their ideologies.

I have thus far suggested that the political utility of conspiracy theories, as a class, derives principally from the nature of such theories as contrary to the claims of epistemic authorities. We can better grasp this point by considering the prominence of conspiracy theories in real-world populist movements. While debate over the proper understanding of populism persists, populism is widely understood to recognize a bipartite distinction between ‘the people’ and elites, while glorifying the former and disparaging the latter (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Stanley 2008; Woods 2014: 11). This distinction is central to those forms of populism that conceive of the people as united chiefly by shared economic interests and to those forms that conceive of the people as distinguished from others along racial, ethnic, or religious lines (Kazin 2017: xi–xv). There is thus an immediately recognizable affinity between populism and conspiracy theorizing insofar as both critique some form of authority. The connection between populism and conspiracy theorizing is also evident in both the attitudes of individuals and in the nature of populist rhetoric. Empirical work demonstrates a strong correlation between populist attitudes and belief in conspiracy theories (Eberl, Huber, and Greussing 2021; Silva Vegetti, and Littvay 2017). Conspiracy theories and populist rhetoric tend to offer simplistic critiques of power (Fenster 2008: 43). Unsurprisingly, then, historians have emphasized the prominence of conspiracy theories in historical populist rhetoric (Kazin 2017; Ostler 1995). The historians just cited focus principally upon the deployment of conspiracy theories as a tool against perceived political elites. However, populist rhetoric often includes explicit attacks on perceived epistemic authorities as well (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Motta 2018; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Saurette and Gunster 2011; Tomasi 2020; Waisbord 2018). Notorious recent examples include Donald Trump’s consistent attacks on members of the press and American intelligence agencies as well as populist criticism of economists in the run-up to Brexit. The latter criticism was captured in the following widely cited claim made by then Lord Chancellor Michael Gove:

I think the people of this country have had enough of experts with organizations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong. (Quoted in Portes 2017)

In populist movements, epistemic authorities are often perceived as upholding a status quo that favors political elites at the expense of ordinary citizens (Forchtner, Kroneder, and Wetzel 2018). Thus, insofar as conspiracy theories motivate skepticism toward epistemic authorities, such theories support populist lines of attack against elites.

Considering the centrality of conspiracy theories in populist rhetoric helps to illustrate how the political utility of such theories derives from the conflict between such theories and the claims of epistemic authorities. Populists may seize on existing hostility toward elites, including epistemic authorities, to attract new supporters. At the same time, conspiracy theories serve to insulate populist

political movements from scrutiny by challenging the force of critiques by putative epistemic authorities. This is not to say that conspiracy theories have no place among nonpopulist political factions. For example, a growing body of empirical work links conspiracy theories to extremist political programs (Pipes 1997) and extremist political attitudes (Krouwel et al. 2017). Such results do not present a straightforward challenge to the claim that conspiracy theories are especially central to populist movements, however, as contemporary political extremism often takes a populist form. Still, it would be a mistake to conclude that the political utility of conspiracy theories is recognized solely among populists. As the popularity of some especially outlandish allegations linking the 2016 Trump campaign to Russia illustrates, even establishment political forces may engage in conspiracy theorizing. Although the appeal of conspiracy theories is not restricted to populists, the antagonism toward elites that is characteristic of such movements helps to account for the distinctive prominence of conspiracy theories in populist movements.

It is worth emphasizing that the fact that conspiracy theories have substantial political utility is not enough to make such theories political—to identify them as inherently a form of political propaganda. To see this, it is worth noting that conspiracy theories belong to a range of phenomena that encourage criticism of epistemic authorities and that thus have political utility owing to the same factors. Consider an example. To date, little scholarly work has been devoted to the connections between alternative medicine and populism. Jakub K. Górka (2021) provides a rare exception and indeed refers to alternative medicine in places as *medical populism*. However, entries in the popular press have remarked upon the similarities between right-wing populist rhetoric and defenses of alternative medicine (Levinovitz 2020) and have documented the curious phenomenon of support for right-wing populist politicians in alternative medicine and wellness circles (Dickson 2020). Support among members of these communities for populist right-wing politicians may be surprising, but I suggest it is explicable in terms of a similar dynamic to the one I have suggested above. A commitment to alternative medicine depends on an at least partial rejection of epistemic authorities in mainstream medicine—indeed alternative medicine is sometimes defined in explicit opposition to institutionally recognized medical practice (Górka 2021: 133)—and so commitment to alternative medicine might well facilitate co-option into populist political movements in much the same way as beliefs in conspiracy theories appear to do. This is a speculative point and one that can only be adequately investigated empirically. For present purposes, the core point is that even if promotion of alternative medicine does serve political ends and is sometimes carried out for this purpose, that alone would not make promotion of alternative medicine inherently political or a form of political propaganda. Similarly, despite their recognized political utility, conspiracy theories need not be inherently political.

4. Conspiracy Theories and Epistemic Autonomy

As I noted in section 3, a major theme of recent epistemology is our dependence on others and especially on epistemic authorities for knowledge. Epistemologists have considered, at length, related issues including the precise conditions under which

knowledge from testimony is possible, what to believe in cases of expert disagreement, and so on. Less attention has been paid to how epistemic dependence is likely to be experienced by dependents. In this section, I argue that epistemic dependence is likely to be experienced by some dependents as alienation from knowledge production and that, from the perspective of some dependents, conspiracy theorizing is likely to be perceived as a means of reclaiming epistemic autonomy. I suggest that this aspect of conspiracy theories contributes to their popularity.

Epistemic dependence is the general condition of humankind. Such dependence may be due to practical constraints. We lack the time and opportunity to investigate every matter personally. Epistemic dependence may also be due to a lack of intellectual ability. One may simply lack the intellectual skills to understand climate science, for instance. In the latter case, relevant epistemic authorities are of special importance insofar as they are recognized as having the standing to determine on behalf of the broader public what is true and what is false. In practice, this recognition is realized in platforms afforded to epistemic authorities and in the ability of epistemic authorities to influence policy decisions. Insofar as members of the public identify with epistemic authorities and the intellectual frameworks those authorities represent, the dependency of the broader public upon epistemic authorities need not produce a sense of alienation.

However, a sense of alienation is likely to arise among members of the public who do not identify with the dominant intellectual frameworks that shape the epistemic landscape and guide policy decisions. For example, religious believers may experience alienation in those cases in which the intellectual landscape—including, for instance, educational institutions and journalistic outlets—and public policy are shaped by secular assumptions. I suggest that for those feeling so alienated embracing conspiracy theories offers the opportunity to regain epistemic autonomy.¹ Such feelings of alienation—and the attendant attractiveness of conspiracy theories—are likely to be especially pronounced among those drawn to populism.

As discussed above, antagonism toward epistemic authorities is prevalent in populist discourse. Recent research adds texture to these findings. Populist rhetoric and the attitudes of members of populist movements often demonstrate a suspicion of scientists, scientific processes, and other epistemic authorities and show a corresponding valorization of common sense and individual experience (Moffitt and Tormey 2014: 391). Indeed, Paul Saurette and Shane Gunster identify the rejection of epistemic authority in favor of common sense and individual experience as a form of epistemological populism (2011). Some individuals evidently perceive the rejection of epistemic authority as a means of retaining or retaking control from such authorities. Consider the following testimony from a subject interviewed as part of a study conducted by Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers (2014: 475):

¹ Social epistemologists sometimes understand epistemic autonomy as a highly demanding status that excludes all belief formation through trust in the testimony of others (Fricker 2006). However, a growing body of work in epistemology suggests that epistemic autonomy is consistent with and perhaps even requires reliance on others (Elgin 2013; Encabo 2008; Grasswick 2018; Roberts and Wood 2007: ch. 10). Here, I take up this more encompassing approach to epistemic autonomy.

I consider it strange that people think: “Oh these white coated people, they know it all, so we follow, we surrender.” Because they don’t know it all! As a human being I can decide “how,” I want to stay in charge and don’t want to surrender to doctors like that! I would like to have conversations about how we are going to fix things, what the other possibilities are.

In this case, the subject evidently resents the authority that doctors have regarding questions of her own health. More generally, in a study of subjects recruited for their participation in Dutch conspiracy culture, the authors found that subjects were generally hostile to the authority, granted only to a subset of the population, to decide on behalf of the broader public what is true (2014: 470).

Part of the attractiveness of conspiracy theories, I now suggest, is that such theories seem to grant their believers the opportunity to reassert their epistemic autonomy—to decide for themselves what is true, what is false, and what amounts to a legitimate source of knowledge. We can begin to get a handle on this role of conspiracy theories by considering the language that often surrounds such theories. Those who accept the claims of epistemic authorities are notoriously derided as ‘sheeple’, suggesting a lack of autonomy on the part of nonconspiracy theorists. That embracing conspiracy theories is a way to assert one’s epistemic autonomy is also suggested by the recently prominent association of conspiracy belief with ‘taking the red pill’. Unsurprisingly, epistemologists tend to think of this metaphor—drawn from the popular *Matrix* franchise—as illustrating the possibility that one’s perceptions are largely illusory. Yet, it is also worth emphasizing that the red pill—in the context of both the film and as it appears to prospective believers in conspiracy theories—is presented as a choice. In this way, the red pill is a fitting metaphor for the attempt to use conspiracy theories to reclaim epistemic autonomy.

The attempt to reclaim autonomy through adoption of conspiracy theories may take a more or less social form. As we have seen above, Levy (2007) suggests that the adoption of conspiracy theories leaves the believer to her own cognitive devices. While some conspiracy theorists might well pursue epistemic autonomy by coming to regard themselves as the only epistemic authorities, they need not do so.

Conspiracy theorists may instead pursue epistemic autonomy by identifying non-mainstream figures as epistemic authorities. So long as an individual identifies with the perspectives of such putative alternative epistemic authorities, the very selection of these new authorities may present itself as an expression of epistemic autonomy. Indeed, recent work on epistemic autonomy suggests that autonomy is not in conflict with epistemic dependence, but with heteronomy (Grasswick 2018; Encabo 2008). On this conception of epistemic autonomy, to allow oneself to be guided by epistemic frameworks with which one *does not* identify is to lose one’s epistemic autonomy, while accepting guidance from epistemic frameworks with which one *does* identify is consistent with, and perhaps even required for, epistemic autonomy.

Unsurprisingly, given the parallels between conspiracy theorizing and populism emphasized here, the same dynamic has been found at play in the epistemic practices of populists. While populism is, as I have noted above, often thought to

glorify common sense (Mede and Schäfer 2020; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Saurette and Gunster 2011), thus allowing ordinary citizens to regard themselves as epistemic authorities, Tuukka Ylä-Anttila (2018) has stressed the importance of identifying ‘alternative knowledge authorities’ to certain contemporary populist movements.

To illustrate the attempt to reclaim epistemic autonomy by conspiracy theorizing, let us consider a prominent contemporary example. The individualist and social strategies for pursuing epistemic autonomy are evident among adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory. The core of this theory is the allegation that high-profile politicians—mostly Democrats—and Hollywood celebrities are participants in an extensive child trafficking operation with connections to the occult. Claims made as part of the conspiracy theory were based, initially, on internet forums by a poster ‘Q’ who followers believed to be [a] high-ranking member[s] of US military intelligence. Posts by Q—‘Q drops’—were typically highly cryptic, leaving followers—‘anons’—the task of deciphering them. In this way, the QAnon conspiracy theory offered believers the opportunity, in a phrase widely beloved by conspiracy theorists, to ‘do their own research’ and reach their own conclusions. Anons are also encouraged to take an active role in spreading Q drops and their own interpretations of these. QAnon is thus an especially participatory conspiracy theory, one which offers anons the opportunity to partake in the development and dissemination of the theory. This feature of the conspiracy theory is illustrated by the language with which QAnon participants describe themselves. As of April 2021, one of the most popular QAnon channels on the Telegram messaging app was titled *We The Media* (Argentino et al. 2021: 41). The channel name, I suggest, is indicative of the desire on the part of anons to supplant traditional epistemic authorities, thereby restoring their own sense of epistemic autonomy. However, even as the QAnon conspiracy theory encourages individuals to investigate various allegations of conspiracy for themselves, the QAnon community recognizes its own authorities. These include Q, but also various influential promoters of the theory. Such figures include the retired general Michael Flynn (Rondeaux 2021), who has parleyed prior military experience and political activity into a position of status in the QAnon community, but also figures who have achieved influence only through the movement itself (Rodrigo 2021).

Because conspiracy theorizing demands the abandonment of epistemic authorities, this practice can in many contexts be expected to frustrate the attainment of knowledge—even if it allows conspiracy theorists to reclaim their epistemic autonomy. It should be noted though that epistemic authorities, as understood here, are not necessarily reliable. Consequently, there may be contexts in which the epistemic autonomy pursued through conspiracy theorizing serves legitimate challenges to possessors of undeserved epistemic authority and facilitates the attainment of knowledge. Nonetheless, I take it to be a plausible empirical assumption that epistemic authorities recognized in modern societies are generally reliable and thus that conspiracy theorizing in such societies tends to be at odds with the acquisition of knowledge.

Supposing that conspiracy theorizing is a cause for concern, the preceding remarks suggest a remedy. The attractiveness of conspiracy theories may be

reduced by offering individuals alternative pathways for reclaiming epistemic autonomy. Empirical studies have demonstrated, for instance, that belief in conspiracy theories is tempered by education (Van Prooijen 2017). While there are likely many reasons for this inverse relationship, one plausible factor is that education promotes identification with the perspectives of epistemic authorities, thereby reducing individuals' sense of alienation from such perspectives and limiting the attractiveness of conspiracy theories. Thus, the promotion of epistemic autonomy through education plausibly has, among its merits, the effect of mitigating belief in conspiracy theories.

5. Concluding Remarks

I have argued that while conspiracy theories are not invariably political, conspiracy theories have political utility insofar as they can be used to undermine epistemic authorities, thereby attracting believers into political movements and insulating those movements from criticism. Understanding the political utility of conspiracy theories in this way helps to account for their prominence in populist political rhetoric. I have also argued that conspiracy theories are attractive, in part, because they offer believers the chance to reclaim their epistemic autonomy from epistemic authorities. This latter conclusion suggests that one long-term strategy for combating harmful conspiracy theories and associated political movements might be to promote alternative means by which individuals might maintain their senses of epistemic autonomy.

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