

Where conspiracy theories come from, what they do, and what to do about them

Keith Raymond Harris

To cite this article: Keith Raymond Harris (09 Jul 2024): Where conspiracy theories come from, what they do, and what to do about them, *Inquiry*, DOI: [10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375778](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375778)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375778>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 09 Jul 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Where conspiracy theories come from, what they do, and what to do about them

Keith Raymond Harris 

University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

Philosophers who study conspiracy theories have increasingly addressed the questions of where conspiracy theories come from, what such theories do, and what to do about them. This essay serves as a commentary on the answers to these questions offered by contributors to this special issue.



ARTICLE HISTORY Received 22 May 2024; Accepted 19 June 2024

KEYWORDS Consensus; conspiracy theories; epistemic authority; experts; propaganda; social epistemology

1. Introduction

Until recently, the lion's share of research in the philosophy of conspiracy theories has been devoted to questions about what conspiracy theories are and to questions about the rationality of believing and investigating such theories. As the essays in this issue attest, questions of definition and rationality have hardly been abandoned by philosophers interested in conspiracy theories. But philosophers have also increasingly turned their attention to where conspiracy theories come from, what they do, and what to do about them. In some cases, addressing these questions allows for new ways of approaching the questions of definition and rationality. But such questions are also interesting and important in their own right.

What follows is a commentary on what contributors to this issue have had to say about each of these questions, with a section devoted to each

CONTACT Keith Raymond Harris  keithraymondharris@gmail.com  University of Vienna, Universitätsring 1, 1010 Vienna, Austria

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

question. It would be a disservice to the contributors to suggest that their contributions amount only to answers to these narrow questions, but I focus on these in the interest of presenting something resembling a coherent whole. Most of what follows addresses points of disagreement with the contributions discussed. This should not be mistaken for an indication of a lack of agreement with many of the substantive points made by the contributors to this issue. To the contrary, despite the critiques I highlight below, I think that contributions to this issue offer a wealth of novel, interesting, and plausible arguments concerning the three questions highlighted above. I focus on points of contention only because I expect these to be of most value to readers and to contributors themselves.

It is worth acknowledging, from the outset, that this commentary is written from the perspective of a so-called generalist about conspiracy theories. As I understand it, being a generalist means that I think there are strong but defeasible reasons to doubt the truth of particular conspiracy theories even before considering the evidence for and against those particular theories. Writing this commentary from the generalist perspective raises two complications. First, it is often claimed that there is, among philosophers who publish on conspiracy theories, a consensus that generalism is false (Dentith 2023a; *in press*; Stokes 2018). Second, at least in my case, the basis for doubting conspiracy theories is that (1) conspiracy theories are by definition opposed to the consensus claims of relevant epistemic authorities and (2) one ought to treat conflict with the consensus of relevant epistemic authorities as a strong (albeit defeasible) basis for doubting the conflicting claim (Harris 2022). This puts me in a somewhat awkward position, as I am committed to claiming both that we ought generally to believe in line with the consensus of relevant epistemic authorities and that, when it comes to the generalism versus particularism debate, the apparent consensus is wrong. I can live with this awkwardness. For one thing, even if there is a pro-particularist consensus among philosophers working on conspiracy theories, this consensus is at odds with what is widely accepted among relevant researchers from other domains (Dentith 2023b). For another, in my view, the epistemic value of consensus as a form of evidence depends on that consensus standing up to scrutiny. Thus, affirming the evidential significance of consensus depends on, rather than recommends against, the contestation of consensus views (*cf.* Hauswald [*in press*]). All this is to say that the comments and critiques to follow originate from the perspective of what appears to be a minority position in the philosophy of conspiracy theories, and should be considered in light of this fact.

2. Where conspiracy theories come from

This section reviews contributors' arguments concerning, to borrow Patrick Brooks' phrase, *the origin of conspiracy theories* (2023). As a starting point, it is worth addressing an initial objection to the very idea that philosophers might have something important to say about the origins of conspiracy theories. One might worry that the issue of where conspiracy theories come from is an empirical question on which philosophical methods like conceptual analysis and thought experimentation can shed no light. Thus, one might think, philosophy is simply not the place to look for answers about where conspiracy theories come from.

The preceding objection, however, underestimates both the utility of certain philosophical tools and the range of tools within the philosopher's kit. Investigating the origin of any particular conspiracy theory would indeed require attention to the specific circumstances under which that theory arose, and such a project is admittedly not one for which conceptual analysis and thought experimentation are well-suited. However, philosophers are well-suited to considering what circumstances might lead one to *rationally* posit a conspiracy, given a certain body of evidence.¹ This latter question is primarily a matter of the content of conspiracy theories and their logical relations to (potentially) observable facts. Relatedly, even if it is not the primary role of philosophers to investigate empirical facts, philosophers are well-positioned to synthesize, clarify, and draw inferences from relevant empirical findings within the program of so-called *synthetic philosophy* (Novaes 2023). Because conspiracy theories are investigated using a wide range of empirical methodologies within a broad range of empirical disciplines, philosophers – whose careful focus on concepts might be described in terms of precision or pedantry, depending on one's degree of charity toward typical philosophical practices – are especially suited to drawing out the significance of diverse observations. For these reasons, and as the essays in this special issue illustrate, philosophers can helpfully contribute to discussions about where conspiracy theories come from.

Let us see, then, what contributors have said about the issue. Keeley ([in press](#)) and Stamatiadis-Bréhier ([in press](#)) offer somewhat cynical explanations of the emergence of some conspiracy theories. Keeley notes

¹Brooks (2023) for example, offers a rationalizing explanation of some beliefs in conspiracy theories. According to this explanation, the emergence of conspiracy theories is due in part to the (apparent) failure of epistemic authorities to seriously consider evidence and arguments that seem to conflict with orthodox views.

that, in many cases, conspiracy theories are not the product of good faith attempts to account for facts neglected or seemingly ignored by epistemic authorities. There are, as Keeley emphasizes, strong financial incentives that plausibly motivate high-profile figures like Alex Jones to continuously generate conspiracy theories. Nor are such ‘conspiracy liars’ constrained by the availability of facts left unaccounted for by epistemic authorities and official explanations. In some cases, conspiracy liars simply make up both the facts to be explained and the conspiracy theories that putatively explain them.

On the face of things, Keeley’s study of conspiracy liars might be taken to suggest a straightforward account of who is responsible for bringing conspiracy theories into the world. At least in some cases, full responsibility for the introduction of conspiracy theories falls upon the individuals who generate conspiracy theories and the evidence for them. Yet, as Keeley also notes, such an account of causal responsibility for conspiracy theories is overly simple. As Keeley suggests in his conclusion, an alternative possibility is that many consumers of the conspiracy theories propagated by Alex Jones and similar figures *want to be delivered bullshit*. This suggestion aligns, in part, with recent work on the so-called *marketplace of rationalizations* (Williams 2023) and on non-epistemic motives for believing conspiracy theories (Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka 2017). Beliefs are more than mere maps of the world, whose perceived value is determined by faithfulness to the objects they purport to represent. Rather, we have various non-epistemic bases for preferring certain beliefs to others. Particularly powerful motives include the desires to maintain positive self-conceptions and to signal loyalty to one’s favored groups (Williams 2023, 103). Karen Douglas and colleagues (2017), draw on a large body of empirical evidence to argue that beliefs in conspiracy theories in particular are perceived (albeit incorrectly) to offer a desirable sense of control and to excuse individual and group shortcomings. But, given the involuntariness of beliefs, individuals cannot simply decide to adopt existentially and socially beneficial beliefs (Williams 2023). Beliefs require evidential support. Thus, insofar as we want to hold certain beliefs, we will be in the market for rationalizations for them. Within this marketplace, individuals like Jones are valued suppliers.

I noted above that Keeley’s suggestions as to the desire for bullshit align *in part* with recent work on the marketplace of rationalizations. This qualification serves to indicate that, if the marketplace of rationalizations story is the correct way to account for the popularity of conspiracy theories, then it is not quite right to say that individuals want to be

delivered bullshit. Crucially, to fulfill its rationalization function, misinformation must be perceived as credible. Thus, even if those desiring to hold beliefs in conspiracy theories want to be given what is in fact bullshit, they do not – at least on the marketplace of rationalizations story – want to recognize what they are given as such. There is, additionally, some independent reason to doubt that the consumers of theories propagated by Alex Jones and similar conspiracy mongers knowingly want bullshit from these sources. As Keeley recognizes, conspiracist media outlets are often monetized, in part, by selling supplements, survivalist gear, and other products whose uses are tied to the conspiracy theories peddled. However, the success of such a business model would seem to depend on some significant portion of the audience figuratively and literally buying into such theories.

Like Keeley, Stamatiadis-Bréhier ([in press](#)) offers a relatively cynical account of the origin of (some) conspiracy theories. According to this account, some conspiracy theories are themselves the products of conspiracies. This category includes, notably, certain theories associable with anti-vaccination and climate change denialist groups, as well as politically-motivated conspiracy theories – for example that flight MH17 was shot down by the Ukrainian military. Stamatiadis-Brehier argues that the recognition that conspiracy theories are often constructed as parts of conspiracies offers a basis for concluding that certain subsets of conspiracy theories warrant strong suspicion, even before one considers the evidence for and against those theories. Roughly, insofar as a theory is produced by an entity that has previously produced other false conspiracy theories, there is reason to be (defeasibly) suspicious of that theory. This is a development of Stamatiadis-Brehier's earlier work on *genealogical undermining* of conspiracy theories (2023).

Stamatiadis-Brehier's focus on conspiracies to create conspiracy theories has implications for what we ought to do about conspiracy theories, and I return to these in section 3. For the present, I want to instead raise a complication for the claim that the source of conspiracy theories can provide a basis for doubting them. On the face of things, this claim is highly plausible, and appears to be continuous with familiar practices for incorporating information proffered by unreliable sources. We rightly put little stock in the testimony of known liars and, one might think, the same sort of doubt is appropriate when applied to conspiracy theories and their sources. However, this simple thought skates over an important distinction between ways of doubting information from unreliable sources. Suppose a known liar asserts that p . One way of

implementing one's concerns about the source would be to believe, in light of that source's testimony that p , that *not- p* is likely true. This way of updating one's beliefs on a source's testimony seems appropriate in some rare cases. For example, if the source is known to be highly competent about the relevant issues but is also known to be a devoted practitioner of opposite day, and it happens to be opposite day, then the thing to do is to believe the negation of whatever that source says. Alternatively, if the source is highly informed but known to *mostly* tell lies, then it will again be reasonable to think p is false, given that the source says p . It is worth noting, however, that suspicions of this degree will rarely be appropriate. As Thomas Reid says, albeit perhaps somewhat too optimistically, even liars tell one hundred truths for every falsehood² (Reid 1983, 94–95).

A more modest way of doubting information from unreliable sources is simply not to take the fact that that source has offered that information as a (strong) reason to think that information is true. For example, if a source known to be unreliable asserts that p , one might simply decline to treat this as a strong reason, or in extreme cases any reason at all, to believe that p . Notably, this relatively modest way of allowing one's scepticism toward a source to modulate one's incorporation of information gives the source less power than the abovementioned *believe-the-negation* strategy. After all, the latter strategy effectively grants the source the ability to dictate one's beliefs, albeit in an unusual fashion.

Stamatiadis-Brehier's contention is that certain genealogies – especially production by groups such as those that promote vaccine hesitancy and climate change denial – are grounds for warranted suspicion of conspiracy theories (2023; *in press*). On a modest reading, this claim would mean that, when such groups assert conspiracy theories, such assertions provide little or no reason to believe those conspiracy theories to be true. Such a contention is highly plausible and, as noted above, is continuous with how the testimony of liars is typically treated. However, Stamatiadis-Brehier (2023, sec. 5) appears to favor a stronger conclusion, namely that the production of conspiracy theories by such groups is reason to think those theories are false. By my lights, this conclusion is far less plausible. Consider one of Stamatiadis-Brehier's (*inpress*) examples:

²Reid's optimism about the infrequency of lies is born out, at least in part, by recent empirical work highlighting the rarity of lies (Levine 2020; Serota, Levine, and Boster 2010).

[T]he Russian news media complex put forward the conspiracy theory that flight MH17 in 2014 was shot down by the Ukrainian military, and there was a coverup to make it seem as if it was shot by Russian separatist forces.

One might treat the tendency of Russian media to advance false conspiracy theories as a reason for thinking that all future conspiracy theories shared by Russian media are false. But this would be a mistake. Even highly deceptive sources have an incentive to sometimes share truths, even if only to bolster their own credibility to promote subsequent deception.³ In fact, Russian media shares a combination of true and false allegations of conspiracy, possibly using the former to boost the perceived credibility of the latter. Russia news media is thus unreliable – and hence its reporting does not provide a strong reason to believe in the truth of any given conspiracy theory – but, unlike the devotee of opposite day – it is not reliably wrong. More generally, insofar as a given source is only unreliable, rather than reliably wrong, that source's sharing of a given allegation of conspiracy provides little evidence for the truth of the allegation, but also does not provide evidence *against* the truth of that allegation. For this reason, I am doubtful that consideration of the genealogy of conspiracy theories can be a basis for the limited form of generalism that Stamatiadis-Brehier favors.

One might think that this section has thus far overlooked two obvious factors in the popularity of conspiracy theories. First, one might think that conspiracy theorizing reflects an irrational conspiracist mentality. Second, some conspiracy theories are true, and can thus originate from consideration of the facts. This explanation of the origin of conspiracy theories will have the greatest application on a broad definition of the term *conspiracy theory*, on which such a theory is simply a theory that alleges a conspiracy. However, so long as one's favored definition does not rule out the existence of true conspiracy theories, one is all but forced to allow that conspiracy theories might arise from simply following the facts where they lead.

In his contribution to this issue, Pigden (*in press*) critiques existing evidence for the first of these factors, and argues for the importance of the latter. In particular, Pigden argues that much of the existing psychological work on conspiracy theories is tainted by a failure to recognize that conspiratorial activity is common, and thus belief in such activity need not reflect any tendency toward irrational conspiracist ideation. Specifically, Pigden criticizes Robert Brotherton and colleagues (2013) *Generic Conspiracist Beliefs* (GCB) scale on the grounds that many of the items

³This strategy is sometimes called *pre-propaganda* (Ellul 1973; Golovchenko et al. 2020).

included, and that are intended to measure conspiracist ideation, are plausibly or even obviously true. If this criticism is correct, then the GCB scale may measure awareness of history and current events, rather than any problematic psychological disposition to conspiracist thinking.

Pigden's critique of the GCB highlights eight items, agreement with which is taken to indicate conspiracist thought. I am largely in agreement with Pigden that agreement with these items need not indicate any sort of irrationality, as there is overwhelming evidence for all or most of the eight items. However, I do not think that this point invalidates the GCB as a measure of conspiracist thinking. First, all the items Pigden mentions belong to the category of *government malfeasance* conspiracies. This is one of five categories measure by the GCB scale, which also includes *extraterrestrial conspiracies*, *malevolent global conspiracies*, *personal wellbeing conspiracies*, and *control of information conspiracies*. Even if a high degree of agreement with government malfeasance conspiracy theories is indicative of background knowledge, rather than conspiracist mentality, strong agreement with theories belonging to these other categories might indicate such a mentality. Second, whereas the items Pigden mentions appear in Brotherton and colleagues' (2013) first study of agreement with 75 conspiracy-related statements, *none* of the eight items Pigden mentions appears on the 15-item scale used in the subsequent studies described in the same paper. That scale includes a sample of items representing each of the categories noted above. Importantly, the items on that scale generally appear less plausible than those Pigden describes. For example, whereas the 75-item scale includes the statement 'For strategic reasons, the government permits certain terrorist activities to occur which could otherwise be prevented,' the 15-item scale includes the logically stronger statement 'The government permits or perpetrates acts of terrorism *on its own soil*, disguising its involvement' (*emphasis added*). Whether or not one agrees with this item, or other items on the 15-item scale, I think it is fair to say that most or all of these lack the degree of evidential support that is enjoyed by the eight items Pigden describes. Thus, Pigden's criticism of the GCB scale is not enough to demonstrate its lack of value as an indicator of conspiracist mentality.

In his contribution, Clarke ([in press](#)) supports the view that belief in conspiracy theories is sometimes due to their truth by discussing an interesting case of a true conspiracy theory. In this case, a massacre of emigrants in the American west is now accepted to have been led by white

Mormons disguised as Native Americans. According to what is now the official account, the attack was conceived as a ‘false flag’ operation to disguise the attack as an instance of Native American hostility to emigrants. The emergence of the false flag conspiracy theory, in this case, is best explained by individuals simply following the evidence.

Clarke aims not only to illustrate one pathway by which conspiracy theories emerge, but also to suggest that the existence of this pathway is a problem for generalists about conspiracy theories. Clarke describes generalism as the view that ‘conspiracy theories, as a class, have epistemic defects’ (in press). Clarke argues that this view faces the following problem:

[B]elief in some theories that appear to be conspiracy theories is widely regarded as warranted, and it is difficult to understand how belief in epistemically defective theories could be warranted. (in press)

One possible response would be to define away the problem, adopting a definition according to which, by definition, no conspiracy theory can ever be regarded as warranted. Given such a definition, one might argue that nothing that counts as a conspiracy theory can emerge from simply following the facts where they lead. But, as Clarke notes, his central case study challenges this response. The ‘false flag’ theory plausibly is, or at least was, a conspiracy theory, and yet the theory appears, at least now, to be warranted. Thus, this response is not sufficient to address Clarke’s challenge.

I think that there is an alternative, straightforward response available to the generalist. Generalists think that there is good reason to doubt the truth of conspiracy theories as a class. But, according to a possible response, generalists should be fallibilists, and so this reason for doubt is defeasible. Consider an analogy. Suppose one is among a crowd of 50,000 fans at a sports stadium and everyone in the stadium has been told that a golden ticket has been placed beneath one lucky fan’s seat. Before checking under their seats, every fan *would be reasonable to doubt* that their seat has the ticket beneath it. Upon finding the ticket, one fan should come to think that their seat had the ticket beneath it. In other words, that fan would have been wrong to think that their seat did not have the winning ticket beneath it. Nonetheless, it was entirely *reasonable* for that fan to doubt that the golden ticket was there. Likewise, the generalist can say, it is entirely reasonable to doubt conspiracy theories as a class, even though these doubts may occasionally be misplaced.

Although the generalist *can* say this, I do not think this response fully captures what the generalist *should* say about Clarke's case. To see this, it is worth considering what, on the generalist view, motivates defeasible doubts about conspiracy theories. On my own view, these doubts are justified by the fact that conspiracy theories, by definition, conflict with the consensus claims of relevant epistemic authorities⁴ (Harris 2022). Cassam (2019; 2023), who claims that the amateurishness of conspiracy theories is a defeasible basis on which to doubt them, thus ascribes a somewhat similar function to epistemic authority.⁵ Insofar as the relevant consensus shifted over time, Clarke's 'false flag' case was once a conspiracy theory but is no longer a conspiracy theory. Thus, on generalist views that make much of the consensus of epistemic authorities, there was once good reason to doubt that theory, but no longer. But, one might object, conflict with the claims of epistemic authorities was *never* a good reason to dismiss the 'false flag' theory in this case. The deeper weakness of a generalism based on the reliability of epistemic authorities is that – as this case seems to illustrate – the epistemic authorities are not always reliable. This is especially true of those cases in which biases, prejudices, and imbalances in power may lead the epistemic authorities to systematically err. In this case, one might expect racial prejudices against Native Americans to lead to unwarranted lack of support for the 'false flag' theory. Indeed, Clarke notes that white Americans at the time placed little stock in the testimony of Native Americans. Against the backdrop of such biases, consensus among relevant epistemic authorities is not as strong of an indicator of truth as it would be in more ideal circumstances. Yet such weaknesses are not, in my view, cause to abandon reliance on epistemic authorities or a generalism built around such reliance. They are, instead, reasons to assess the evidential weight of consensus among expert authorities with the possibility of bias in mind and, ultimately, to work toward the creation of credentialing systems and policies that minimize bias among epistemic authorities.

In considering where conspiracy theories come from, we may be less interested in their emergence and more interested in their spread. This

⁴Clarke (in press) doubts the adequacy of such definitions, suggesting that any such definition makes an implicit appeal to whatever definition epistemic authorities favor and, as far as I understand Clarke's argument, thus depends on the latter definition. This seems to be a miscommunication. On my view, epistemic authorities need not have any particular definition of conspiracy theories in order for there to be a basis for defeasibly doubting theories that conflict with the claims of epistemic authorities – in fact epistemic authorities need not have the concept of conspiracy theories at all. What warrants skepticism toward conspiracy theories is that these theories conflict with the claims of epistemic authorities, not that the epistemic authorities dismiss these claims as *conspiracy theories*.

⁵Levy (2007) offers a similar basis for doubting some conspiracy theories.

question is addressed by Dutilh Novaes's ([in press](#)) contribution to this issue. Dutilh Novaes proposes to account for the spread of belief in conspiracy theories within the *three-tiered model of epistemic exchange* (TTEX). Within this model, what epistemic interactions occur is a matter of which sources receive attention, which sources are deemed worth engaging with, and which sources are ultimately selected for engagement. TTEX is a relatively simple but powerful approach to environmental epistemology, providing a framework for analysing how topographical features of epistemic networks, technologies for information distribution, patterns of trust, individual choices, and other factors interact to influence the spread of beliefs.

Here I want to focus on Dutilh Novaes's account of the role of gamification in the *engagement* element of epistemic exchange. Dutilh Novaes suggests that, by gamifying the pursuit and evaluation of conspiracy theories, those aiming to spread conspiracy theories can encourage both engagement with putative evidence for conspiracy theories and receptivity to that evidence. Dutilh Novaes follows others ([Berkowitz 2021](#); [Hon 2020](#); [Levy 2022](#)) in treating QAnon as a gamified conspiracy theory that benefits from this dynamic.

The gamification analysis of QAnon is an interesting hypothesis and illustrates the capacity of the TTEX framework to incorporate a variety of different factors into analyses of how beliefs spread. However, I suspect that this analysis exaggerates the distinction between QAnon and other objects of belief. The gamification interpretation of the popularity of QAnon highlights the cryptic 'Q drops,' the deciphering of which is thought to make QAnon especially engaging and, indeed, fun. This analysis plausibly explains early engagement with the Q drops, especially by those who directly visited the message boards on which the drops were initially posted and the sites on which they were later aggregated. However, this analysis does not explain the importance of so-called 'influencers' within the culture of QAnon. Many such influencers offer relatively authoritative analyses of the Q drops and some influencers have attracted hundreds of thousands of followers ([Argentino et al. 2021](#)). If what drives engagement with QAnon is the element of puzzle solving, then the role of these figures is somewhat mysterious. On the face of things, such figures would seem to take the fun out of the game – consulting them is more like checking the solution to a puzzle than trying to solve it oneself. One might argue that these figures serve only to allow individual followers to check their interpretations, thereby determining their degree of success in the game. However, a simpler

explanation is that such figures are simply regarded as sources of information about the world – sources of news, rather than game masters. In this case, although the *construction* of the QAnon mythos arguably involves a process of gamification, the subsequent *dissemination* of belief in QAnon more closely resembles familiar processes by which beliefs, both true and false, spread.

Magyari and Imre (*in press*) offer a further account of the origin of some conspiracy theories, this time focusing on right wing conspiracy theories in the Hungarian context. As Magyari and Imre and show, such theories purport to account for matters of legitimate grievance – especially Hungary’s marginalization to the periphery of European economic power – in terms of intentional conspiracy by international actors. Interestingly, such conspiracy theories sometimes co-opt the language of decolonialization that academics have used in a range of contexts. As the authors stress, these conspiracy theories reflect particularities of the Hungarian context, especially the history of the dissolution of the Hungarian empire. At the same time, the degree of continuity in the tropes deployed by Hungarian right wing conspiracy theories and conspiracy theories in a wide range of other geopolitical contexts – especially anti-Semitism, anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-immigrant prejudices, and anti-vaccine sentiment – is striking. Drawing on Naomi Klein’s recent book (2023), Magyari and Imre argue that Hungarian conspiracy theories function as distorted mirrors of legitimate decolonial critique. To again borrow Klein’s language, it is a worthy question why conspiracy theories – many of which mirror more legitimate critiques of power – so often incorporate the same harmful tropes, even across divergent geopolitical contexts. This question is arguably addressed, in part, by considering how conspiracy theories are used – an issue taken up in the next section.

3. What conspiracy theories do

Especially since Quassim Cassam’s *Conspiracy Theories* (2019), which analyses such theories as a kind of political propaganda, philosophers have increasingly devoted their attention to the question of what conspiracy theories *do*. This question may be interpreted in various ways, for example to concern the purposes to which conspiracy theories are intentionally put, their function, their actual consequences, and so on. Several authors in this issue address some version of this question. In this section, I review and comment on some of their answers.

Of the contributors to this issue, Mittendorf (*in press*) most explicitly takes up the question of what conspiracy theories do, and does so with a thesis explicitly opposed to Cassam's (2019, 2023). To understand Cassam's position, and how Mittendorf's differs, it is necessary to introduce Cassam's distinction between mere conspiracy theories and Conspiracy Theories. Whereas the former are given a neutral definition – simply as theories that allege conspiracies – the latter are understood as a subset of such theories that are speculative, contrarian, esoteric (or baroque (Cassam 2023, n. 4)), amateurish, and premodern (in the sense of overly explaining events by reference to agency) (Cassam 2019, chap. 1) as well as self-sealing (Cassam 2019, chap. 4). In Cassam's telling, such theories are unlikely to be true – indeed, many of them are preposterous. Thus, their popularity and influence demands some non-epistemic explanation. According to Cassam, the explanation is that such theories serve as political propaganda and, very often, anti-Semitic or otherwise racist propaganda. In Cassam's view it is, in light of the propagandistic function of Conspiracy Theories, a mistake to assess these as one would any other theory – by myopically focusing on the evidence for and against them (2023). Instead, Cassam suggests, it is appropriate 'to treat the class of anti-Semitic or otherwise racist conspiracy theories dismissively' (2023).

Mittendorf levels two main objections against Cassam's political approach to conspiracy theories. According to the first, it is a mistake to dismiss racist conspiracy theories as a class. According to the second, rather than invariably promoting racist causes, conspiracy theories sometimes serve the cause of antiracism. Let us consider the second line of objection. Mittendorf takes issue with the claim that 'conspiracy theories can only function to spread racist, antisemitic, or other extremist ideologies' (Mittendorf *in press*). I suspect that, in this case, Mittendorf is attributing a stronger view to Cassam than the one Cassam means to endorse. To see this, it is worth considering the following claim made by Cassam:

In the world of conspiracy theories, even supposedly progressive theories, anti-Semitic tropes and motifs are always just around the corner. (2023)

Here, Cassam *might* be interpreted as claiming that apparently progressive conspiracy theories are themselves anti-Semitic or otherwise racist. However, this claim is more charitably interpreted to mean that, as Cassam suggests, even conspiracy theories that are not themselves racist are gateways to racist theories (2023). This latter claim might well be unclear or even false, but it is at least more defensible than the strong claim that Mittendorf targets.

Even if Cassam does not intend the strong claim to which Mittendorf objects, Cassam's work nonetheless provides a deeply pessimistic perspective toward conspiracy theories. In contrast to this, Mittendorf argues that conspiracy theories, far from being inevitably racist, can sometimes serve anti-racist ends. Because racist conspiracies occur, conspiracy theorizing can sometimes uncover and thus help to confront such racist plots. In this way, some conspiracy theories can be seen as doing something positive for the world. I have two comments about this line of argument. The first is a point of caution: given how Mittendorf defines antiracist conspiracy theories, even anti-racist conspiracy theories can be racist. Thus, the fact that a conspiracy theory is anti-racist does not entail that it is not harmful. To see this, consider how Mittendorf's introduces the concept of antiracist conspiracy theories:

[S]ome theories that are racial, insofar as they posit race as part of the conspiracy, can be considered *antiracist* insofar as they resist white supremacy by uncovering *racist conspiracies* and challenging racist systems and ideologies. (in press)

Given this definition, it is possible for a single theory to be both antiracist and racist. Mittendorf considers two examples along these lines, 'melanin-theory' and the theory that OJ Simpson was framed, but these theories may not be strictly racist given that they target white people – whose systemic power confers conceptual immunity from being the targets of racism, according to some theories of the concept. However, there are clearer examples of theories that are simultaneously antiracist, by Mittendorf's definition, and racist – indeed *overtly* racist. Consider the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories propagated by Louis Farrakhan, which purport to explain the systemic oppression of black people in the United States by appeal to the supposed machinations of Jewish people. Given such examples, the fact that a given theory is anti-racist, in some sense, is not by itself sufficient reason to think that the theory has a positive function or is worth taking seriously.

Still, I think Mittendorf's focus on anti-racist conspiracy theories motivates an important caveat for research on conspiracy theories, including my own. Cassam argues that conspiracy theories are unlikely to be true, in part, because they are *amateurish*. As noted above, I and others have argued that conflict with the claims of epistemic authorities is a good reason to be dubious of conspiracy theories. But, given that there are real-world racist conspiracies, individuals who are subjected to those conspiracies may be best positioned to identify their occurrence

– even if those individuals lack recognized epistemic credentials. Being an amateur – lacking epistemic authority as marked by official credentials – does not always impugn the amateur. Rather, insofar as amateurishness is foisted upon an individual or group by exclusionary social forces that make recognition as epistemic authorities difficult or impossible to achieve, amateurishness reflects negatively on broader society. This does not, in my view, mean that conflict with the consensus claims of epistemic authorities is not a reason to be sceptical of conspiracy theories. The point does, however, underscore that there is reason to be dubious of conspiracy theories that posit racist conspiracies only insofar as the processes that confer epistemic authority are not themselves discriminatory.

Whereas Cassam and Mittendorf are mainly interested in the function (s) of conspiracy theories, Brooks and Duetz ([in press](#)) focus on the effects of allegations of conspiracy. These effects are also political but need not be tied to any particular political ideology. Rather, according to the authors, allegations of conspiracy promote polarization. This is because a given accusation of conspiracy, and a given response on the part of the accused and allies of the accused, is likely to be interpreted very differently by different audiences of the accusation and its aftermath. Brooks and Duetz illustrate this with the case of Dutch MP Thierry Baudet's 2022 allegation of conspiracy against fellow MP Sigrid Kaag. The cabinet's response to this allegation was to leave the chamber. In this way, Duetz and Brooks argue, the cabinet effectively limited Baudet's ability to participate in debate. To the cabinet, and to some viewers, this dismissive and exclusionary response no doubt seemed an appropriate reply to unwarranted conspiracy accusations having nothing to do with the budgetary debate planned for the day. But, to those already sympathetic to Baudet, this response likely indicated that the MP's accusations were 'over the target.' What looks like rightful dismissiveness to some audiences thus looks like confirmation of conspiratorial accusations to another. In this way, conspiratorial accusations and responses to them can exacerbate existing polarization.

Brooks and Duetz argue not only that conspiracy accusations and certain responses to them are likely to have certain effects, but also that 'an exclusionary response to a rule violation by such candidates is suboptimal' (this issue). We might generalize from this case to say, in light of the diverse audiences for conspiracy accusations and responses to these, dismissive responses to conspiracy accusations are likely to be perceived as suspicious and to exacerbate polarization.

While I find Brooks and Duetz's claims about the effects of the cabinet's response plausible, I am more sceptical of the normative claim that the cabinet's response was suboptimal. The cabinet's response, as suggested by some of the YouTube comments the authors sample, was likely regarded as excessively dismissive and suspicious by some audiences. However, this is not enough to conclude that the response was suboptimal. That conclusion only follows if they had alternative, better options available. One might, for example, suggest that the cabinet should instead have demanded a more explicit claim or evidence from Baudet. A failure to respond to this demand would, one might think, cause Baudet to lose some credibility. In short, one might think that the preferable response would be to engage in open debate with Baudet. This suggestion would, however, underestimate the importance of Brooks and Duetz's insight. The audiences for Baudet's accusation likely had divergent background beliefs and bodies of evidence and, consequently, the adequacy of Baudet's possible responses would likely be judged very differently by different audiences. For this reason, it is not clear that more careful engagement with the content of Baudet's claims would reduce polarizing consequences relative to the more dismissive approach taken by the cabinet. This is not to say that the cabinet clearly responded in the best possible way, only that it is not obvious that other available responses would have been preferable.

There is a more general concern for the notion that engaging with conspiratorial accusations as legitimate possibilities is preferable to dismissing or ignoring them. Consider the grotesque allegation, made by some followers of QAnon, that certain American Democratic politicians have engaged in the sexual abuse, torture, and cannibalism of children. To engage with these rumors, rather than simply dismissing or ignoring them, would be to fight on a battlefield of the accusers' choosing, and one on which the accused have no possibility of victory. As long as these allegations are discussed, the accused are associated with those allegations. This mode of disinformation, sometimes called the 'rotten herring' technique, not only distracts from the priorities of the accused, but threatens to alter the way in which audiences think about the accused (Harris 2023). Under these conditions, the best possible response – though one that is not without cost – may be to minimize the attention given to the allegations. Such a strategy may provoke further conspiratorial suspicions among some audiences, but this merely underscores a significant harm of baseless allegations of conspiracy – that they leave the accused with no non-costly options.

4. What to do about conspiracy theories

The final major question that I will focus on in this essay concerns what to do about conspiracy theories. One answer, which philosophers have argued for elsewhere and within this issue, is that conspiracy theories should be taken seriously (Dentith 2018b) and, more specifically, should be investigated (Dentith 2018c; Pigden 2007). The reasons for this are fairly straightforward. If conspiracy theories are simply dismissed then, as the argument goes, conspiracies are more likely to succeed. Thus, as some so-called particularists have argued, a dismissive attitude toward conspiracy theories serves the interests of conspirators (Coady 2007; Dentith 2016; Pigden 2006). Moreover, as Mittendorf (in press) has argued, dismissiveness toward anti-racist conspiracy theories in particular risks letting real racist conspiracies ‘slip by.’ Despite the apparent plausibility of these arguments, I will in this section lay out some in-principle and in-practice concerns for the particularist case for the practical importance of investigating conspiracy theories. I conclude the section by dispelling a possible misconception concerning the implications of generalism for what ought to be done about conspiracy theories.

First, recall from section 1 Stamatiadis-Bréhler’s (2023; in press) concept of a *second-order conspiracy*, roughly, a conspiracy to create a conspiracy theory. Stamatiadis-Brehier points out that this concept suggests that inevitability of conspiracy theorizing, in certain cases. The idea here is that there are certain cases in which the best way of debunking a given conspiracy theory is to accept another conspiracy – specifically, one according to which the former conspiracy theory was the product of a conspiracy. This point, according to Stamatiadis-Brehier, lends some support to the particularist position regarding the acceptability of conspiracy theorizing. But notice that the point also cuts *against* the particularist claim that dismissiveness toward conspiracy theories serves the interests of conspirators. Insofar as a given conspiracy theory is the product of a conspiracy, dismissiveness toward that theory is a way of thwarting its conspiratorial producers. This inversion of the particularist argument is not just a neat but idle trick of philosophical sophistry. Insofar as conspiracy theories are used in the real world to smear individuals and groups and to deflect attention from serious real-world problems – indeed including real conspiracies (Dutilh Novaes 2023; in press) – indulging in the investigation of such theories is sometimes exactly what conspirators want.

The preceding argument suggests that investigating conspiracy theories is *risky*, in that doing so may well play into the hands of conspirators.

But this alone is not a decisive reason not to conduct such investigations. If a given conspiracy theory is *not* the product of a conspiracy, then failing to investigate the first-order conspiracy theory may facilitate concealment of the alleged conspiracy. In this way, dismissiveness toward conspiracy theories is also risky. However, there are further considerations that militate against the particularist contention that we ought to investigate conspiracy theories.

To see this, it is worth rehearsing what Dentith (in press) calls the ‘peculiar problem for generalists.’ This problem arises for versions of generalism that, like my own, treat the falsity of past conspiracy theories as a basis for expecting that newly encountered conspiracy theories are likely to be false. According to the argument, any such induction requires, for its premises, that the truth values of past conspiracy theories are known. But, if so, then any such generalism relies on previous conspiracy theories having been investigated – in other words – on people having in the past acted as particularists would recommend. Generalism is, in this way, self-defeating. Or so the argument goes.

There are a few ways the generalist might respond to the argument. One way is to argue that, while generalism reaps the benefits of past exercises of particularism, this is no threat to the truth of generalism now. It might have once been the case that, to be justified in a given generalization about empirical reality, one would need to conduct some direct investigations of the relevant phenomena. But one might in this way discover regularities that allow oneself and others to make generalizations about present reality without now conducting direct empirical investigations of the phenomena in question. Consider an analogy. When I first began using my email client, I would regularly check the contents of the spam folder to make sure that the emails sent there were, in fact, spam. I was, in those days, a particularist about emails labeled as spam. But, having observed the reliability of the spam detection system, I now regard the fact that any given email has been sent to the spam folder as an excellent reason to think it is spam. I am, in short, now a generalist about email labeled as spam. By a similar token, one might think that conspiracy theories should once have been considered solely on their own merits but that, now that sufficient data has been collected about the rate of true and false conspiracy theories, there is ample reason to be sceptical of conspiracy theories even before investigating them directly. In other words, one might think that particularism used to be true, but now generalism is true. This is a *possible* response, but it is not entirely satisfying. I still occasionally check my spam folder to

make sure nothing valuable is being mischaracterized. Similarly, without sometimes considering new conspiracy theories, one can have little assurance that the falsity of past conspiracy theories has continued relevance for the prospects of future conspiracy theories.

A more adequate response is to argue that the inductive basis for pessimism about the truth of conspiracy theories does not require that past conspiracy theories were subjected to investigation. Consider an example. During the Obama presidency, conspiracy theories about the Jade Helm 15 military exercises alleged that these exercises were a cover for a plan to militarily take over Texas and other parts of the American southwest and to impose martial law. One might argue that, at the time, one would need to carefully investigate these theories and their evidential basis to know that such conspiracy theories were false. However, at the time of this writing, recognizing that these conspiracy theories were false requires no such investigation or, more modestly, nothing resembling the 'thorough' (Dentith in press) investigation that particularists would think was necessary to draw justified conclusions about the truth or falsity of those theories during the Obama presidency. This is not an isolated case – many conspiracy theories allege imminent coups, assassinations, impositions of martial law, and other events that would, if the theories were true, be easily observable without prolonged investigation. We need not rely on people acting like particularists to know that these theories are typically false – we need only keep our eyes peeled for the (non)occurrence of the sort of major events that are regularly predicted by conspiracy theories.

The preceding point is closely related to Alvin Goldman's (2001) distinction between esoteric and exoteric statements. Roughly, esoteric statements are those whose truth values are difficult or impossible for the layperson to reliably assess. Exoteric statements, in contrast, can be reliably assessed by the layperson. Goldman's key insight is that a given statement may be, relative to a given person, esoteric at one time and exoteric at another. When Jade Helm conspiracy theories first appeared on the scene, they made have been esoteric from the perspective of the layperson. But, by the end of Obama's presidency, such claims were clearly false – even to the layperson.

Particularists are likely to respond to the above argument by pointing out that, contrary to what I have written, coups, assassinations, and other conspiratorial activities are not especially rare. Thus, even if the inductive track record of conspiracy theories need not have been established by persons acting as particularists would recommend, that track record is

not of the right type to motivate generalism. Indeed, the track record recommends assignment of a fairly high prior probability to fresh allegations of conspiracy (Dentith 2016). Or so the particularist is likely to argue.

At this point, returning to the debate about the proper definition of conspiracy theory becomes unavoidable. If one thinks of conspiracy theories simply as theories that allege conspiracies, then the particularist response just suggested is highly plausible. However, if one favors an alternative definition of conspiracy theories, this response will not work. To illustrate, consider my own favored definition:

Conspiracy Theories

Theories that allege conspiracies and conflict with the claims of relevant epistemic authorities, where epistemic authority is a matter of credentials and positions. (Harris 2022)

Given such a definition, the relative commonality of conspiracies does not imply that there are many true conspiracy theories.⁶ Instead, insofar as the consensus of relevant epistemic authorities reliably conflicts with false theories, we have a basis for doubting newly introduced conspiracy theories.

In her contribution, Tsapos (in press) offers some reason to think that the above definition, as well as the argument for generalism that relies upon it, oversimplifies the relationship between epistemic authority and conspiracy theories. As Tsapos emphasizes, the category of experts – a concept I will treat as interchangeably with epistemic authority here – can be divided up along various dimensions. These include the breadth of expertise and how expertise itself is understood. Tsapos notes that, as to the former, we might think of the relevant sort of experts with respect to conspiracy theories as those who possess expertise regarding a specific detail of some conspiracy theory, a broader domain relevant to a conspiracy theory, or about matters that bear on conspiracy theories in general. As to the latter, we might, following Goldman (2001) think of experts as those with advanced knowledge, or the ability to generate such knowledge, in a domain or we might think of experts as those who possess relevant reputational markers – including credentials and professional positions.

⁶Even so, the definition given here – like that typically favoured by particularists (Pigden in press) – is not question-begging with respect to the issues of whether conspiracy theories are typically false or typically irrational to believe.

Although it is worth highlighting these complications, I think they are resolvable. In my view, it is most helpful in this context to think of experts in terms of reputational markers as these, but not objective measures of knowledgeability, will be relatively accessible to those who require guidance as to how seriously to take allegations of conspiracy. Tsapos rightly points out that, when experts are construed in terms of reputational markers, conflict between the claims of such persons and a given allegation of conspiracy, by itself, provides no reason to doubt that allegation. However, even if conflicting with the claims of reputational experts is not by itself sufficient to cast doubt on an allegation of conspiracy, it is sufficient reason to do so when we have independent reason to think that those bearing relevant credentials and the like are, at least in the aggregate, generally reliable about domain-relevant matters. Their reliability, in turn, is likely to be assessable by reference to their track records concerning past allegations of conspiracy (Harris 2022) and more generally. Importantly, what is validated in these cases is not just the reliability of individuals, but the reliability of the broader social systems that confer credentials, professional positions, and the like. It is because the domains of aeronautics, meteorology, and military history have track records of success that we take reputational expertise in such areas seriously. It is because the domains of phrenology, numerology, and astrology lack track records of success that we do not take reputational expertise in these areas seriously.

As to how to construe the breadth of expertise, I take it that anyone with markers of expertise relevant to one or more components of an allegation of conspiracy is a relevant expert with respect to that allegation. Thus, for example, relevant experts with respect to September 11 conspiracy theories may, depending on the specific version in question, include experts on Osama bin Laden, experts on Al Qaeda more generally, experts on the US intelligence apparatus, experts on the Mossad, experts on civil engineering, experts on explosives, and so on. Because the subject matter of conspiracy theories may cut across several domains of expertise, one might worry that there is no clear group of experts whose dissent casts doubt on the truth of a given allegation of conspiracy (Dentith 2018a; 2018c). However, there is reason to think that the fact that the content of a given conspiracy theory spans disciplines makes it *easier*, not harder, to determine the falsity of that conspiracy theory. Consider, first, a cartoon example. As Brooks and Duetz (*in press*) suggest, conspiracy theories may be understood as analogous to accusations in the game *Clue*. There, a typical accusation would be something like ‘The culprit

was Mrs. Scarlett in the lounge with a lead pipe.’ Notably, to be able to refute such an allegation, one need not be an expert on the character, the location, *and* the weapon. Because of its conjunctive structure, thorough knowledge of even one aspect of the accusation may be enough to know that the accusation, as a whole, is false. Perhaps, for example, one knows nothing of Mrs. Scarlett or the lounge, but knows the deed could not have been done with the lead pipe. More seriously, in the case of real-world conspiracy theories, specialized knowledge within a specific domain may be enough to know that a given conspiracy theory whose content includes that domain is false, even if that theory also involves claims better assessed by authorities in other domains. To determine that the conspiracy allegation ‘It was the Rothchilds in California with the space solar generator’ is false, one need not be an expert concerning all these theoretical components.

It might still be objected that generalism implies an answer to the question of what to do about conspiracy theories that is both *unwise* and *unrealistic*. If generalism is true then, one might think, one ought – at least for those conspiracy theories relative to which one is a layperson – to simply defer to the relevant epistemic authorities. Because conspiracy theories are defined as conflicting with the claims of epistemic authorities, this means that one need not investigate conspiracy theories and can, instead, rationally conclude based on the social evidence proffered by epistemic authorities that such theories are false. But such an account of what to do about conspiracy theories gives too much power to epistemic authorities, and thus it would be unwise to adopt it. Moreover, given that individuals are sensitive to the possibility of manipulation, it is simply unrealistic to expect laypersons to be content to defer to epistemic authorities. Thus, we need an alternative story about what to do about conspiracy theories – perhaps involving the establishment of what Dentith, taking inspiration from John Dewey, calls a *community of inquiry* (Dentith 2018c; *in press*).

The first point to notice about this objection is that it makes salient an important constraint on the epistemic force of consensus among epistemic authorities. As Hauswald (*in press*) argues, belief in a conspiracy theory in the face of disagreement from relevant epistemic authorities (or the public at large) can be reasonable so long as one is possessed of a sufficiently powerful theory of error to explain why others have gotten it wrong. In exceptional cases – for example, one in which one uniquely possesses direct eyewitness evidence of a conspiracy – one can be justified in believing in a conspiracy theory despite its conflicts

with the claims of epistemic authorities or the public more generally. The upshot of this point is that the right attitude toward consensus views, including expert consensus, is not to treat these as preemptive reasons (cf. Lackey 2018). One ought always to consider the consensus in light of one's own evidence – while bearing in mind that, in most cases, epistemic authorities and especially communities of epistemic authorities will have more evidence than oneself and will be able to process that evidence comparatively reliably.⁷

Even if generalism does not recommend treating consensus among epistemic authorities as a preemptive reason, one might worry that any generalism that insists that the views of epistemic authorities are a basis for rejecting conspiracy theories still leaves room for systematic deception on the part of epistemic authorities. After all, many conspiracy theories allege that epistemic authorities are party to the conspiracy. Even if one thinks that such suspicions are ultimately unreasonable and thus irrelevant for what it is rational to believe, one might worry that, in practice, individuals do not place sufficient stock in epistemic authorities to treat their claims as sufficient reason to reject conspiracy theories. Thus, one might think that we require something like Dentith's communities of inquiry. Let us consider this suggestion.

According to Dentith, communities of inquiry would, in part, serve to address the 'Economic Argument,' according to which the consideration of conspiracy theories on their own evidential merits is rendered difficult, if not impossible, by the sheer number of such theories (in press, fn. 7). Dentith treats this as principally a problem for individualistic inquiry, writing that:

[I]t seems a little churlish to demand people with, on average, two-point-five children, at least one pet, and a nine-to-five job to devote their morning coffee or tea break to investigating the suspicious conspiracy theories they have encountered ... (in press)

The establishment of communities of inquiry would, however, reduce the burden on individuals to investigate conspiracy theories.

Although I am generally amenable to proposals for distributing intellectual labor, I do not think the communities of inquiry proposal addresses the core problem highlighted by the Economic Argument. Such communities would presumably involve several individuals

⁷The comparative reliability of communities of epistemic authorities in processing evidence is plausibly due, in part, to greater competencies and, in part, to the fact that the social structures of such communities suppress the distorting influences of individual biases (Longino 1990).

considering conspiracy theories but, in this case, the total number of conspiracy theories that can be investigated is *lower* than if individuals pursued the investigation of conspiracy theories independently. Communities of inquiry would, of necessity, need to focus on some conspiracy theories to the exclusion of others. A second concern is that it is unclear that such communities would be sufficiently trusted that, if they found a particular conspiracy theory to be false, individuals not involved in the inquiry would accept that finding.⁸ If individuals do not trust communities of more traditional epistemic authorities, why would they trust communities of inquiry? These two concerns are related. Time limitations will require communities of inquiry to ignore some conspiracy theories, but failing to investigate conspiracy theories considered plausible by certain members of the public will likely seem suspicious to those individuals.

These concerns are perhaps overly pessimistic. Insofar as the opportunity to participate in communities of inquiry makes such communities appear less alien to members of the public than expert bodies, individuals may well be relatively receptive to their findings. Moreover, while such communities cannot plausibly investigate all or even a significant portion of conspiracy theories, their inquiries may serve as a test, and ultimately independent validation, of the consensus judgments of epistemic authorities, thereby encouraging both the trustworthiness of, and trust in, communities of epistemic authorities. Insofar as the communities of inquiry reach similar verdicts to the communities of epistemic authorities, the reliability of these authorities will be vindicated. In this way, the establishment of communities of inquiry need not be at odds with, and may even promote, trust in epistemic authorities.

The generalist thus has some reasons not to oppose communities of inquiry. In practice, however, I suspect that the better path is, to the extent possible, to incorporate what is good about communities of inquiry into the practices of communities of epistemic authorities. Typically, such persons possess bodies of knowledge and intellectual skill that would be difficult, costly, and perhaps impossible to confer on non-expert communities of inquiry. For example, authorities in electronic voting infrastructures might be able to immediately recognize what is wrong with certain election fraud conspiracy theories, based on their existing knowledge, while non-expert members of a community of

⁸Elsewhere, (Dentith 2018c; 2018) suggests that the diverse and decentralized nature of these communities would tend to promote trust in their findings. I return to this suggestion below.

inquiry would, at a minimum, likely require considerable effort to reach the same conclusions. More generally, the generalist need not deny that conspiracy theories should be considered. The generalist may instead say that, given their existing bodies of knowledge and intellectual skills, epistemic authorities are best positioned to reliably and efficiently distinguish between true and false allegations of conspiracy. Thus, rather than creating new communities, it is likely preferable in practice to do what we can to ensure that existing communities of epistemic authorities are in the best possible position to form reliable judgments. More concretely, it is important to insulate such collectives from external pressures and, as Clarke and Mittendorf's contributions to this issue suggest, to ensure that such bodies include diverse memberships. Finally, Dentith's concept of communities of inquiry suggests a strategy for addressing the problem that, from the lay perspective, trusting in epistemic authorities can feel like bobbing on waves of expert opinion whose motions appear, from that perspective, utterly mystifying. To ensure that the judgments of epistemic authorities do not appear to laypersons as little more than the oracular pronouncements of alien bodies, it is likely important, in the long run, to promote educational and other policies that ensure that positions of epistemic authority are both *accessible* and *widely recognized as accessible*.

To conclude this essay, I want to address a possible conclusion that one might draw from the preceding arguments. Insofar as false conspiratorial allegations can do real harm, and insofar as epistemic authorities are best positioned to assess allegations of conspiracy, it might be thought that allegations of conspiracy that conflict with the claims of epistemic authorities – conspiracy theories, as I define them – ought not be tolerated. One might think for example that such allegations should be eliminated from social media. While such drastic measures may be warranted in rare cases, as when they are likely to result in violence against the accused, such measures should not be taken lightly. As Hauswald (in press) suggests, belief in conspiracy theories or other heterodox views may be rationally maintained so long as one has a good theory of error to account for the consensus position. Regimes of censorship, even those that target only false claims, render too tempting theories of error according to which apparent consensus are artifacts of the non-toleration of dissent. Thus, while the answer to the question of what to do about conspiracy theories is not for laypersons to investigate them, the answer is also not to restrict the ability of laypersons or others to do so.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Austrian Science Fund: [grant no 10.55776/COE3]; Ministerium für Innovation, Wissenschaft und Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen: [grant no PROFILNRW-2020-135].

ORCID

Keith Raymond Harris  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2278-9028>

References

- Argentino, Mark-André, Blythe Crawford, Florence Keen, and Hannah Rose. 2021. "Far from Gone: The Evolution of Extremism in the First 100 Days of the Biden Administration." *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*.
- Berkowitz, Reed. 2021. "Perspective | QAnon Resembles the Games I Design. But for Believers, There Is No Winning." *Washington Post*, May 11, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/qanon-game-plays-believers/2021/05/10/31d8ea46-928b-11eb-a74e-1f4cf89fd948_story.html.
- Brooks, Patrick. 2023. "On the Origin of Conspiracy Theories." *Philosophical Studies* 180 (12): 3279–99. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-023-02040-3>.
- Brooks, Patrick, and Julia Duetz. In press. "Conspiracy Accusations." *Inquiry*.
- Brotherton, Robert, Christopher C. French, and Alan D. Pickering. 2013. "Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00279>.
- Cassam, Quassim. 2019. *Conspiracy Theories*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cassam, Quassim. 2023. "Conspiracy Theories Theories." *Society* 60 (2): 190–99. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-023-00816-1>.
- Clarke, Steve. In press. "When Conspiracy Theorists Win." *Inquiry*.
- Coady, David. 2007. "Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational? Conspiracy Theorists Irrational?" *Episteme; Rivista Critica Di Storia Delle Scienze Mediche E Biologiche* 4 (2): 193–204. <https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.193>.
- Dentith, M. R. X. 2016. "When Inferring to a Conspiracy might be the Best Explanation Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation." *Social Epistemology Epistemology* 30 (5–6): 572–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2016.1172362>.
- Dentith, M. R. 2018b. *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, edited by M. R. X. Dentith. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Dentith, M. R. 2018c. "Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously and Investigating Them." In *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, edited by M. R. X. Dentith, 217–25. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

- Dentith, M. R. 2018. "Expertise and Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theories." *Social Epistemology* 32 (3): 196–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2018.1440021>.
- Dentith, M. R. 2023a. "Some Conspiracy Theories." *Social Epistemology*.
- Dentith, M. R. 2023. "The Future of the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theory: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Conspiracy Theory Theory Future of the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theory: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Conspiracy Theory Theory." *Social Epistemology* 37 (4): 405–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2023.2173538>.
- Dentith, M. R. inpress. "A Prolegomena to Investigating Conspiracy Theories." *Inquiry*.
- Douglas, Karen M., Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka. 2017. "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories Psychology of Conspiracy Theories." *Current Directions in Psychological Science Directions in Psychological Science* 26 (6): 538–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261>.
- Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2023. "A Plea for Synthetic Philosophy (Guest Post) - Daily Nous." May 30, 2023. <https://dailynous.com/2023/05/30/a-plea-for-synthetic-philosophy-guest-post/>.
- Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. In press. "How Conspiracy Theories Spread or Hide: Attention and Trust in Belief-Forming Processes." *Inquiry*.
- Ellul, Jacques. 1973. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Goldman, Alvin I. 2001. "Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?: Which Ones Should You Trust?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (1): 85–110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2001.tb00093.x>.
- Golovchenko, Yevgeniy, Cody Buntain, Gregory Eady, Megan A. Brown, and Joshua A. Tucker. 2020. "Cross-Platform State Propaganda: Russian Trolls on Twitter and YouTube during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election-Platform State Propaganda: Russian Trolls on Twitter and YouTube during the 203576 U.S. The International Journal of Press/Politics Election." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 25 (3): 357–389. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220912682>.
- Harris, Keith Raymond. 2022. "Some problems with particularism Problems with Particularism." *Synthese* 200 (6): 447. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03948-9>.
- Harris, Keith Raymond. 2023. "Beyond Belief: On Disinformation and Manipulation Belief: On Disinformation and Manipulation." *Erkenntnis* (June), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-023-00710-6>.
- Hauswald, Rico. inpress. "Heterodox Conspiracy Theories and Evidence-Based Theories of Error." *Inquiry*.
- Hon, Adrian. 2020. "What Alternate Reality Games Teach Us About the Dangerous Appeal of QAnon." *Vice* (blog). August 5, 2020. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qj4xbm/what-alternate-reality-games-teach-us-about-the-dangerous-appeal-of-qanon>.
- Keeley, Brian L. In press. "Conspiracy Theorists Are Not the Problem; Conspiracy Liars Are." *Inquiry*.
- Klein, Naomi. 2023. *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World*. London: Allen Lane.
- Lackey, Jennifer.. 2018. "Experts and Peer Disagreement." In *Knowledge, Belief, and God: New Insights in Religious Epistemology*, edited by Matthew A. Benton, 228–245. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Levine, Timothy R. 2020. *Duped: Truth-Default Theory and the Social Science of Lying and Deception*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.
- Levy, Neil. 2007. "Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories." *Episteme; Rivista Critica Di Storia Delle Scienze Mediche E Biologiche* 4 (2): 181–92. <https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.181>.
- Levy, Neil. 2022. "Conspiracy Theories as Serious Play." *Philosophical Topics* 50 (2): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics202250214>.
- Longino, Helen E. 1990. *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Magyari, Attila Kustán, and Robert Imre. In press. "Resisting the 'Civilising Mission'. Analysing Hungarian Conspiracy Theories Through Standpoint Theory." *Inquiry*.
- Mittendorf, Will. In press. "Racist and Anti-Racist Conspiracy Theories." *Inquiry*.
- Novaes, Catarina Dutilh. 2023. "A Plea for Synthetic Philosophy (Guest Post) - Daily Nous." May 30, 2023. <https://dailynous.com/2023/05/30/a-plea-for-synthetic-philosophy-guest-post/>, <https://dailynous.com/2023/05/30/a-plea-for-synthetic-philosophy-guest-post/>.
- Pigden, Charles. 2006. "Complots of Mischief." In *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, edited by David Coady, 139–66. Burlington: Ashgate. <https://philarchive.org/rec/PIGCOM>.
- Pigden, Charles. 2007. "Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom." *Episteme; Rivista Critica Di Storia Delle Scienze Mediche E Biologiche* 4 (2): 219–32. <https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.219>.
- Pigden, Charles. In press. "How to Make Conspiracy Theory Research Intellectually Respectable (and What It Might Be Like If It Were)." *Inquiry*.
- Reid, Thomas. 1983. In *Thomas Reid's Inquiry and Essays*, 1st ed. edited by Ronald E. Beanblossom, and Keith Lehrer. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.
- Serota, Kim B., Timothy R. Levine, and Franklin J. Boster. 2010. "The Prevalence of Lying in America: Three Studies of Self-Reported Lies." *Human Communication Research* 36 (1): 2–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2009.01366.x>.
- Stamatiadis-Bréhier, Alexios. 2023. "Genealogical Undermining for Conspiracy Theories." *Inquiry*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2023.2187449>.
- Stamatiadis-Bréhier, Alexios. In press. "The Power of Second-Order Conspiracies." *Inquiry*.
- Stokes, Patrick. 2018. "Conspiracy Theory and the Perils of Pure Particularism." In *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, edited by M. R. X. Dentith, 25–37. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Tsapos, Melina. In press. "Should We Worry about Conspiracy Theorists Rejecting Experts?" *Inquiry*.
- Williams, Daniel. 2023. "The Marketplace of Rationalizations." *Economics and Philosophy* 39 (1): 99–123. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266267121000389>.