

# False Intellectual Humility

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DRAFT

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “false modesty” as “affected or pretended modesty concealing pride.” In this chapter, I explore a species of false modesty, which I call *false intellectual humility*. After providing an analysis of false intellectual humility (§1), I’ll present an example of a species of false intellectual humility that is common in contemporary political discourse (§2). I’ll then discuss the relationships between fallibilism, skepticism, and intellectual humility (§3), with the aim of showing how several familiar phenomena, despite a superficial resemblance to skepticism and fallibilism, are species of false intellectual humility (§4).

## 1 An analysis of false intellectual humility

False modesty is affected or pretended modesty concealing pride. Inspired by this definition, I propose that *false intellectual humility* is affected or pretended intellectual humility concealing intellectual arrogance. A few comments on this analysis.

I assume here no distinction between modesty and humility.<sup>1</sup> (Ordinary language is more subtle: “modesty” has connotations of sexual discretion and propriety; “humility” has connotations of submission and deference – thus the intuitive, if not entirely clear, connection between intellectual humility and testimony.) Thus, I assume that modesty is the same as humility, and that intellectual humility is a species of humility. (This is what is going to make it possible to say that false intellectual humility is a species of false modesty.)

More precisely, I assume that *humility* is excellence in self-attributing weakness – such that the humble person characteristically attributes weakness to themselves at the right time and in the right way – and that *intellectual humility* is excellence in self-attributing intellectual weakness – such that the intellectually humble person characteristically attributes intellectual weakness to themselves at the right time and in the right way. Intellectual weakness includes such things as uncertainty, ignorance, confusion, intellectual vice, and the lack of intellectual virtue. (This is not the ordinary sense of “weakness”; in the ordinary sense, uncertainty and ignorance per se entail no weakness.) Intellectual humility is thus manifested in admitting what you do not know or understand and those ways in which you fall short of intellectual virtue. The intellectually humble person will acknowledge what is mysterious, inexplicable, or beyond the scope of their

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<sup>1</sup> However, other theoretical contexts may well call for the use of the terms “modesty” and “humility” to draw some useful distinction; see e.g. Driver 2001, pp. 114-5.

understanding, and they will be aware of the extent to which they lack intellectual virtues, in a broad sense that includes both character traits like open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and intellectual autonomy as well as intellectual powers like good memory, reasoning ability, and creativity.

The present account of the virtue of intellectual humility combines elements of an account I defend elsewhere (2012, 2016a) and an account defended by Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Dan Howard-Snyder (2015). I incorporate two ideas from Whitcomb and company: (i) that intellectual humility is concerned with intellectual weakness in general (rather than mere ignorance or unjustified belief) and (ii) that intellectual humility is concerned with humble person's own intellectual weaknesses (as opposed to those of others). But I retain one idea from myself: intellectual humility is manifested in the attribution of intellectual weakness; manifestation of intellectual humility does not require "owning" said weakness, in the sense of taking responsibility for it.

Having defined humility and intellectual humility as *excellences*, it is natural to say that both, so defined, are *virtues*. And thus, following Aristotle, we can recognize the virtue of humility as a mean between two vicious extremes: the vice of *arrogance*, characterized by insufficient self-attribution of weakness (as well as excessive self-attribution of strength), and the vice of *servility*, characterized by excessive self-attribution of weakness (as well as insufficient self-attribution of strength).<sup>2</sup> The virtue of intellectual humility thus emerges as a mean between intellectual arrogance and intellectual servility.<sup>3</sup>

The vice of intellectual arrogance, which appears in our definition of false intellectual humility, is manifested in the failure to appreciate what you do not know, what you are not in a position to know, the relative strength of your intellectual powers, your biases and blindspots, and subjects about which you lack expertise. Moreover, it is manifested in the overestimation of your knowledge, of your ability to know, or your impartiality, and of the extent of your expertise.

This understanding of the virtues of humility and intellectual humility jibes with two other ideas about virtue that have been suggested by neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists. First, we can agree that virtues are *corrective*, serving to counteract or guard against some vicious tendency.<sup>4</sup> In as much as you are prone to (intellectual) arrogance and (intellectual) servility, (intellectual) humility is the cure for what ails you.<sup>5</sup> Second, we can agree that the virtues correspond to domains or spheres of human activity or experience, such that virtues can be individuated by

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<sup>2</sup> Note that "pride," unlike "arrogance," is an apt name for a certain virtue, namely, excellence in self-attributing strength (cf. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part III, Section II, Hazlett 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Whitcomb et al. 2015, pp. 530-2, Tanesini 2016, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Foot 1978, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> However, we should resist the temptation to attribute such tendencies to human nature without empirical evidence: the apparent universality of a tendency for arrogance could easily be an artifact of parochial features of the kind of people we tend to think about when we theorize about humility (cf. Hazlett 2017).

appeal to the various problems and situations with which human beings have to cope.<sup>6</sup> For each such problem or situation, the virtue ethicist wants to say, there's a virtue for that. In as much as reflective monitoring and awareness of our own (intellectual) weaknesses is, in this way, one of the things that human beings naturally do, there is a virtue for that: (intellectual) humility.

I said that false modesty “conceals” arrogance. This requires two points of clarification. First, such concealment, in the relevant sense, need not be successful. Someone's arrogance might be obvious, despite their false modesty. Second, concealment, in the relevant sense, does not require the intention to conceal. This is because falsely modest people often do not know that they are arrogant, and thus do not intend to conceal their arrogance. For the same kind of reason, we should not assume that affecting modesty or pretending to be modest is always deliberate or conscious. We are not always aware of our affectations and pretensions; it is possible to affect or pretend that you possess a trait without realizing that you are doing so.

## 2      **Insincere self-attributions of ignorance**

False intellectual humility in particular, and false modesty in general, find their natural home in public life, where our tendencies to arrogance inevitably run up against our socio-political needs to appear virtuous. Consider insincere self-attributions of ignorance, i.e. cases in which someone claims not to know something that they, in fact, take themselves to know. This is a pervasive feature of Donald Trump's political rhetoric – if Trump could be said to have an epistemology, it would be a skeptical one, which posits ignorance of the answers to various crucial questions about “what is going on.” As a Presidential candidate, Trump repeatedly insisted that “we have to figure out what's going on” when it came to various topics. For example, on then-President Barack Obama's connection to the Pulse nightclub shooting, Trump said, “we're led by a man that either is not tough, not smart or he's got something else in mind[.] He doesn't get it or he gets it better than anybody understands. It's one or the other. [...] There's something going on.”<sup>7</sup> Implications of ignorance are part of some of Trump's most arrogant moments, such as his call for a “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on.”<sup>8</sup>

Why think that these are *insincere* self-attributions of ignorance? Trump, like a bad novel, tends to resist interpretation, but it seems like there are two possibilities here. One is that Trump is quite sure, such that he takes himself to know, that Muslims are dangerous and should be excluded from the United States – in which case he is insincere when he implies that he does not know “what the hell is going on.” Another possibility is that Trump knows full well that nothing of consequence is “going on” – in which case he is also insincere when he implies that he does not know “what the hell is going on.” In this second case, he follows a strategy famously

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Nussbaum 1993, pp. 244-7.

<sup>7</sup> June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016, on *Fox and Friends*.

<sup>8</sup> December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, on [donaldjtrump.com](http://donaldjtrump.com).

employed by Hillary Clinton when she said that there was no basis, “as far as I know,” for the claim that Obama was a Muslim.<sup>9</sup> Clinton knew full well that Obama was not a Muslim, but by hedging, she implied that she was not quite sure.

Insincere self-attributions of ignorance are standard fare when politicians seek to silence reports of sexual assault and sexual harassment. One kind of strategy resembles a kind of skepticism about the past. In connection with the Alabama Senate candidate Roy Moore, Sean Hannity maintained that “none of us knows the truth of what happened 38 years ago.”<sup>10</sup> (As with Trump, there are two possibilities here: either Hannity is confident that Roy Moore did not sexually assault anyone 38 years ago, in which case his claim is insincere, or he is confident that Moore did sexually assault someone 38 years ago, in which case his claim is insincere.) Another strategy resembles a kind of skepticism about testimony. For example, defenders of Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh frequently cited the dearth of evidence against him, with the implication that the testimony of his victims was not evidence. This strategy exploits an ordinary-language and quasi-legal distinction between “testimony” and “evidence.”<sup>11</sup> Appeals are sometimes made to the need for “hard” evidence, and an epistemic vocabulary borrowed from the law – “corroborating evidence,” “due process,” “burden of proof” – is adopted.<sup>12</sup> In all these ways, a politician or pundit can under-state the strength of their evidence and suggest a state of doubt. (Again, we find the same two possibilities: either the relevant testimony is being rejected or ignored, in which case the implication of doubt is insincere, or it is being accepted, in which case the implication of doubt is insincere.)

### 3 Fallibilism, skepticism, and intellectual humility

Without qualification, *fallibilism* is the view that certainty is impossible, but we can also speak of fallibilism about a particular domain, i.e. the view that certainty in that domain is impossible. We mean not mere psychological certainty – i.e. being completely sure or maximally confident – but rather *justified* or *rational* psychological certainty. Without qualification, *skepticism* is the view that knowledge is impossible, but we can also speak of skepticism about a particular domain, i.e. the view that knowledge in that domain is impossible. You might think that knowledge requires certainty; if so, fallibilism entails skepticism.

But we can also think of “fallibilism” and “skepticism” as the names of two virtues, namely, excellence in attributing uncertainty – call that the virtue of *fallibilism* – and excellence in

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<sup>9</sup> March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008, on *60 Minutes*.

<sup>10</sup> November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017, on *Hannity*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Moran 2005; see also Code 1991, Chapter 6.

<sup>12</sup> Compare the way in which evidential standards are often raised in discussions of theism and atheism, e.g. the focus on proof.

attributing ignorance – call that the virtue of *skepticism*.<sup>13</sup> These virtues overlap with, but are distinct from, the virtue of intellectual humility (§1).

First, that these virtues overlap with the virtue of intellectual humility: the latter includes, as a proper part, both excellence in self-attributing uncertainty, which is also a proper part of fallibilism, and excellence in self-attributing ignorance, which is also a proper part of skepticism. Given our definitions, fallibilism entails excellence in self-attributing uncertainty (which is one part of intellectual humility) and skepticism entails excellence in self-attributing ignorance (which is another part of intellectual humility). This vindicates the historical association of fallibilism and skepticism with intellectual humility. For example, in defense of his “mitigated” or “academic” skepticism, Hume, urges us to “become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding,” as “such a reflection would naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists.”<sup>14</sup> For another, Pierce, articulating his fallibilism, denounces “overconfident assertion” as a “venomous error [that] assails our knowledge.”<sup>15</sup>

Second, that the virtues of fallibilism and skepticism are distinct from the virtue of intellectual humility. For one thing, fallibilism and skepticism are concerned exclusively with uncertainty and ignorance, and not with other forms of intellectual weakness, such as epistemic vice, with which intellectual humility is concerned. For another, which is more important, the virtue of intellectual humility, given our account (§1), is concerned exclusively with *self*-attribution of intellectual weakness, and not with attribution of intellectual weakness to *others*, with which fallibilism and skepticism are concerned. This is confirmed by our image of the skeptic as a dogged interlocutor who ceaselessly challenges our assertions and claims to knowledge, which hardly manifests anything worthy of the name “humility.” By stressing the “strange infirmities of human understanding,” Hume not only implies his own intellectual weakness, but the intellectual weakness of human beings in general. It is the attribution of intellectual weakness to others that distinguishes skepticism, in the present sense, from mere humility. Were Hume merely intellectually humble, he might refrain from metaphysical speculation on account of the limited scope of his own intellectual powers. However, Hume the skeptic does more than that: he offers a blistering critique of *other* metaphysicians who attempt to go beyond the limited scope of *their* intellectual powers.

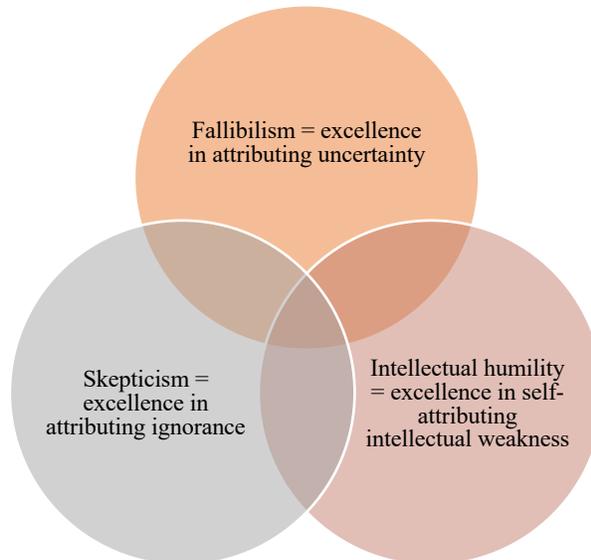
Moreover, since attributing ignorance sometimes entails attributing uncertainty, fallibilism and skepticism overlap, in the same sense, with each other. Given all this, we can represent the relationship between our three virtues like this:

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. LeMorvan 2011, Hazlett 2016a, Hazlett 2019.

<sup>14</sup> *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 12.24.

<sup>15</sup> Pierce 1955, p. 55.



Someone who possesses the virtue of fallibilism, so defined, need not by definition accept fallibilism the view, as defined above – either without qualification or about any particular domain. For the present account of the virtue of fallibilism leaves open the possibility that excellence in attributing uncertainty sometimes requires *not* attributing uncertainty. In the same way, someone who possesses the virtue of skepticism need not by definition accept skepticism the view, either without qualification or about any particular domain, because the present account of the virtue of skepticism leaves open the possibility that excellence in attributing uncertainty sometimes requires *not* attributing ignorance. Nevertheless, it is clear why anyone attracted to fallibilism or skepticism, the views, either without qualification or about some particular domain, would be a fan of the virtue of fallibilism or the virtue of skepticism: skeptics and fallibilists are concerned about people’s tendency to over-attribute certainty and knowledge – i.e. their tendency to attribute certainty and knowledge *not* at the right time – and thus will be keen to promote the virtues of fallibilism and skepticism as correctives (cf. §1).

As above (§1), we can recognize both of these virtues as means between vicious extremes: the virtue of fallibilism is a mean between a vice characterized by excessive attribution of uncertainty (as well as insufficient attribution of certainty) and a vice characterized by insufficient attribution of uncertainty (as well as excessive attribution of certainty), while the virtue of skepticism is a mean between a vice characterized by excessive attribution of ignorance (as well as insufficient attribution of knowledge) and a vice characterized by insufficient attribution of ignorance (as well as excessive attribution of knowledge). “Quietism” seems an apt name for the first in each of these pairs of vices; “dogmatism” an apt name for the second.

Historical fallibilists and skeptics seem to disagree about what their stance implies about inquiry. Hume famously insists on the “limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to

the narrow capacity of human understanding.”<sup>16</sup> However, Pierce rejects as another “venomous error” any insistence that “this, that, and the other never can be known,” on the grounds that this necessarily “blocks the way of inquiry.”<sup>17</sup> We could understand this as a disagreement between skepticism and fallibilism: if knowledge is impossible, then inquiry is pointless and should be closed; but if it is merely *certainty* that is impossible, then inquiry may sensibly remain open. But we could also understand this as a disagreement about the scope of fallibilism and skepticism. For Pierce, the closure of inquiry about whether p on the grounds that we cannot know whether p is rash and dogmatic, since we cannot be certain of anything, including whether we cannot know whether p; inquiry must therefore be kept open. However, for Hume, the closure of inquiry on the grounds we cannot know whether p may well be sensible and modest, since the conclusion that we cannot know whether p may well be the justified conclusion of empirical reasoning about our cognitive powers. In any event, both of these stances seem to manifest a kind of intellectual humility.<sup>18</sup>

Fallibilists and skeptics also associate their views with tolerance and open-mindedness. Karl Popper, articulating the “doctrine of essential human fallibility,” sympathetically quotes Voltaire on tolerance, which is said to be “a necessary consequence of our humanity. We are all fallible, and prone to error; let us then pardon each other’s follies.”<sup>19</sup> And we have already encountered Hume’s idea that skepticism diminishes “prejudice against ... antagonists”; the problem skepticism is meant to solve is that “affirmative and dogmatical” thinkers “have no idea of any counterpoising argument ... nor have they any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments.”<sup>20</sup>

A final theme from fallibilism and skepticism is a particular diagnosis of dogmatism.<sup>21</sup> Here is Hume on the “affirmative and dogmatical” thinkers mentioned above:

To hesitate or balance perplexes their understanding, checks their passion, and suspends their action. They are, therefore, impatient till they escape from a state, which to them is so uneasy; and they think, that they can never remove themselves

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<sup>16</sup> *Human Understanding*, 12.25.

<sup>17</sup> Pierce 1955, p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> Related to this is suspicion about claims that “this, that, or the other element of science is basic, ultimate, independent of aught else, and utterly inexplicable – not so much from any defect in our knowing as because there is nothing beneath it to know.” (Pierce 1955, p. 55) Compare Hume’s evident concern to avoid implying that a good explanation must be fundamental, e.g. the principle of custom (*Human Understanding*, §V) or the fact that utility pleases (*Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, §V).

<sup>19</sup> Popper 1963a, p. 22; cf. 1963d, p. 479.

<sup>20</sup> *Human Understanding*, 12.24.

<sup>21</sup> In connection with this, consider also the association of fallibilism with intellectual integrity or honesty, as manifested by the disposition for disinterested or impartial inquiry, a willingness to abandon one’s beliefs in the face of counterevidence and to seek out such counterevidence, and the tendency to “follow the argument where it leads” (cf. Pierce 1955, p. 42-54, Peirce 1905/1972, p. 291, Popper 1963b, p. 68, 1963c, p. 309, p. 323, Haack 1998, pp. 8-15, 2008, pp. 195-208, Kelly 2011).

far enough from it, by the violence of their affirmations and obstinacy of their belief.<sup>22</sup>

And here is Pierce on those who employ the “method of tenacity” in forming beliefs:

[T]he instinctive dislike of an undecided state of mind, exaggerated into a vague dread of doubt, makes men cling spasmodically to the views they already take. The man feels that, if he only holds to his belief without wavering, it will be entirely satisfactory.<sup>23</sup>

Recall the idea that the virtues are corrective and correspond to spheres or domains of human life or experience. We can put Hume and Pierce’s point like this: dogmatism, i.e. insufficient attribution of uncertainty and ignorance combined with excessive attribution of certainty and knowledge, at least in a certain class of cases, is a manifestation of an inability to cope well with uncertainty and ignorance, involving an intense and unmanageable discomfort with being unsure or not knowing – an especially strong desire for certainty, or “need for closure,” in the psychological jargon. Two conclusions at this point seem reasonable. First, the intellectually virtuous person will be able to *handle* uncertainty and ignorance, even when they would very much like to be certain or to know – they will not, for example, become foolishly overconfident as a way of dealing with the annoyance of not knowing or being sure. Second, the intellectually virtuous person’s desires for certainty and knowledge will not entail an inability to feel comfortable or safe in their absence; the intellectual virtuous person will, in other words, can be quite happy in a state of doubt or suspension of judgment.

#### **4 False skepticism and false fallibilism**

I have dwelt on these affinities between the virtue of skepticism, the virtue of fallibilism, and the virtue of intellectual humility (§3) because I would like to now turn to some species of false intellectual humility (§1) which masquerade as manifestations of (the virtues of) fallibilism and skepticism. False intellectual humility is affected or pretended intellectual humility concealing intellectual arrogance. The present species of false intellectual humility all involve affected or pretended skepticism or fallibilism, but nevertheless all involve concealed intellectual arrogance. I propose three overlapping categories: conspiracy thinking, amateurism, and science denial.

##### *Conspiracy thinking*

By “conspiracy thinking” I have in mind the kind thinking characteristic of those who (i) believe in a *conspiracy* (i.e. a clandestine attempt to do something wrong), (ii) the existence of which is denied by a consensus of *official sources* of information (i.e. mainstream news media, academic

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<sup>22</sup> *Human Understanding*, 12.24.

<sup>23</sup> Pierce 1877/1955, p. 12.

experts, government reports, etc.)<sup>24</sup>, (iii) *without first-hand evidence*. Although it has been suggested that conspiracy thinking is most at home in right-wing politics<sup>25</sup>, it is a pervasive feature of American politics more generally: for every person who believes that the Sandy Hook massacre was a hoax, there is someone who believes that 9/11 was an inside job. Populist politicians across the political spectrum maintain that the “economy is rigged” and that liberal (for right-wingers) or capitalist (for left-wingers) elites are secretly scheming against the interests of the common man.

Knowledge denials are thus an essential part of conspiracy thinking: the conspiracy theorist must reject the claims to knowledge made by the official sources that reject the existence of the conspiracy. This accounts for the superficial resemblance between conspiracy thinking and the manifestation of the virtue of skepticism (§3) – the conspiracy theorist is rightly described as being *skeptical* of the official story. The conspiracy theorist asks whether we really *know* that the official story is true; they ask how we can be so *sure*. *Inquiry* is called for – inquiry is to be left *open*, despite the conclusion of institutional investigations and the publishing of official reports. Indeed, the conspiracy theorist often insists that others, those who accept the official story, are insufficiently committed to inquiry. The rhetoric of the conspiracy theorist resembles that of fallibilists and skeptics who insist on the perpetual continuation of inquiry (§3): the conspiracy theorist refuses to close inquiry, conducts their own investigations, and has an insatiable appetite for debate. Like Trump, the conspiracy theorist wants to know what the hell is going on.

However, these expressions of curiosity and open-mindedness are inauthentic, because the conspiracy theorist already takes themselves to know what the hell is going on: they already believe, and typically are quite sure, that the conspiracy exists. This is not to say, or at least not yet to say, that conspiracy theorists are irrational. Certainly there are conspiracies; the conspiracy theorist’s characteristic belief is not necessarily false. But it is a belief, and it is typically a quite confident belief, which makes the conspiracy theorists’ articulated interest in inquiry insincere.

Recall the diagnosis of dogmatism offered by fallibilists and skeptics (§3), which appeals to the dogmatist’s desire for certainty. Such a desire is a familiar feature of conspiracy thinking: the need for answers, the desire to tie up loose ends, to account for complex or seemingly inexplicable events. There is more than a superficial resemblance between the dogmatist’s inability to cope well with uncertainty and ignorance and the virtuous person’s curiosity. The difference is revealed in the results: the virtuous are led to suspension of judgment and genuine inquiry; the dogmatic are led to conviction and sham inquiry.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Keeley 1999, pp. 116-7, Coady 2003, p. 199, Harris 2018, p. 236.

<sup>25</sup> Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*.

The conspiracy theorist's reluctance to inquire is a consequence of that feature identified by Popper as characteristic of pseudo-science: the refusal to accept anything as evidence *against* the existence of the alleged conspiracy. Genuine inquiry is premised on the possibility of evidence one way or another; "sham inquiry," as Pierce calls it, is not. It might be said, in defense of conspiracy thinking, that that conspiracy theorists are not insensitive to evidence in this way. Indeed, we are familiar with the way in which conspiracy theorists are able and willing to incorporate new evidence into their explanations. However, it is distinctive of conspiracy thinking that there is an non-negotiable "core" of the conspiracy theory, some basic assumption or allegation that is not genuinely open for revision, even if it is something as ambiguous and unspecific as that "something is going on" or that "the truth is out there." (This leads to a tension in some instances of conspiracy thinking, whereby it is insisted both that inquiry is needed, since we don't know the whole story, and that inquiry is pointless, because we can never know what really happened.)

It is this dogmatic commitment to the existence of a conspiracy, more than their special relationship with any particular conspiracy theory, that characterizes the intellectual arrogance of the conspiracy thinker. The reason we can level this charge of intellectual arrogance against the conspiracy thinker is that we have defined conspiracy thinking as both conflicting with a consensus of official sources of information and lacking a first-hand evidential basis. The conspiracy thinker refuses to defer to those official sources, but without the kind of evidential support that would justify doing so. By classifying conspiracy thinking as a species of false intellectual humility, we can appreciate the kind of confidence that is masked by the conspiracy thinker's would-be skeptical and fallibilistic pronouncements.

### *Amateurism*

According to a familiar narrative, contemporary politics is characterized by the rise of skepticism about expertise.<sup>26</sup> According to the British MP Michael Gove, who argued in favor of a "Leave" vote in the UK's 2016 "Brexit" referendum, "people in this country have had enough of experts."<sup>27</sup> Like conspiracy thinking, this tendency can be found across the political spectrum: populists and their supporters, whether conservative or progressive, are inclined to reject what economists have to say about free trade and immigration. Academics, in particular, and professionals, in general, are suspected by amateurs of bias, confusion, and ungrounded speculation.

At first glance, this could be mistaken for prudent caution about expert consensus – experts, after all, even when there is consensus among them, are often wrong. A case could be made that doubting the consensus view among experts often manifests the virtue of skepticism or the virtue of fallibilism (§3). However, the phenomenon that characterizes contemporary politics involves

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<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Nicols 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Mance 2016.

more than merely *doubting* the consensus view among experts. It also involves *believing* some alternative view. The “Leave” voter who rejects the standard view among economists does not *suspend judgment* about the economic consequences of the UK leaving the EU, the way someone might if they simply thought that the experts were unreliable, because that would not particularly support voting “Leave.” The “Leave” voter not only *fails to believe* that leaving the EU will have negative economic consequences; they, in addition, *believe* that leaving the EU will *not* have negative economic consequences.

The phenomenon in question here, therefore, is better described as a kind of *amateurism*, rather than as “skepticism about expertise.” The people who have “had enough of experts” are not going around suspending judgment, the way a skeptic might. They are going around believing the negation of what the experts say. What is distinctive of them is less their *distrust* of experts than their *trust* in alternative sources of information.

What alternative sources, exactly? In some cases, amateurism comes in the form of heightened self-trust. As Gove put it, in the same interview mentioned above, “I’m not asking the public to trust me. I’m asking them to trust themselves.”<sup>28</sup> Amateurists are thus disposed to work things out for themselves and to draw their own conclusions. However, amateurism just as often comes in the form of deference to someone other than the experts – a politician, a pundit, a website, or an anonymous stranger on social media. Amateurists are particularly fond of intellectual iconoclasts – an especially appealing type is the “rogue” or “renegade” academic, especially if they have been censured or rebuffed in some way by the academy; ideas that have failed to survive peer review are especially exciting, and ex-academics who have been fired or resigned under pressure are particularly compelling. There is an instability in the logic of this kind of amateurism: academic credentials still mean something; but agreement with other likewise-credentialed people is grounds for suspicion.

Both of these forms of amateurism manifest intellectual arrogance, although in different ways. First, consider the amateurist who puts their trust in themselves – the voter who conducts their own economic analysis of Brexit, say. There is, we should acknowledge, something valuable about people who are prepared to put independent thought into their political decisions.<sup>29</sup> There is a temptation to complain that intellectual autonomy is a vice when autonomous reasoners come to different conclusions than those to which we have come. However, the value of independence and autonomy needs to be balanced against the value of truth: even if there is something good about my coming to my own conclusions, there is something bad about coming to conclusions that are uninformed, not supported by evidence, and based on fallacious reasoning. Typically, the self-trusting amateurist simply fails to recognize these costs, by

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Hazlett 2016b.

overestimating their own intellectual powers and scholarly abilities, relative to the experts of whom they are suspicious. In this way, they manifest intellectual arrogance.

Second, consider the amateurist who defers to someone other than the experts. Here, there is really no question of the value of independence and autonomy, although amateurists may be tempted by the incoherent idea that, by deferring to someone outside of the mainstream, they are not being deferential. But in what way does such deference manifest intellectual arrogance? Unlike the amateurist who conducts their own research, the amateurist who defers to some “alternative” source of information has not overestimated their ability to conduct the relevant research. However, they are overestimating their ability to evaluate sources of information for the purposes of deference. There is a temptation in epistemology to think that deference involves a kind of abdication of intellectual responsibility, in which the person who defers is an entirely passive recipient of information. Perhaps in some cases. But in the case of amateurists who defer to “alternative” sources of information, deference is active: intellectual agency is exercised in the selection of such sources. (If anything, deference to expert consensus, in as much as it is standard or normal, is relatively passive.) Amateurists who defer to “alternative” sources of information take themselves to know something that others do not – and, in this way, they have an inflated opinion of their own ability to select sources of information.

As above, a desire for certainty (§3) seems to play a role here. Amateurism is appealing for someone suffering from an excessive desire for certainty, for expert explanations are often complex, invoking a plurality of factors, and hedged in probabilistic terms, such that no simple, decisive answer can be given to any question addressed by experts. Expert explanations, relative to such a desire for certainty, tend to be unsatisfying, and amateurism provides a way to avoid this, with the simple and decisive answers provided by “common sense” or “alternative” experts.

As with conspiracy thinking, we gain insight by classifying amateurism as a species of false intellectual humility, because there is a temptation to think of amateurism as something negative, involving a distinctive kind of doubt or suspicion, directed at experts and expertise. On the present analysis, amateurism is, in fact, something positive, involving a distinctive relationship of confidence or trust, directed at one’s own intellectual powers.

### *Science denial*

Let us consider, finally, that which is probably the most famous form of skepticism in contemporary political life, climate change skepticism. The climate change skeptic doubts that anthropogenic climate change is occurring; they argue that we do not know or cannot be sure whether it is occurring; they concede that the climate may be changing but profess not to understand why.

However, as in the case of amateurism, “skepticism” is not quite the right word here, because the climate change skeptic does not merely doubt that anthropogenic climate change is occurring;

rather, they believe that anthropogenic climate change is *not* occurring. The climate change “skeptic” does not merely doubt the scientific consensus about climate change, they *deny* that consensus, by believing its negation.<sup>30</sup> This reveals the essential insincerity that climate change “skepticism” shares with conspiracy thinking and amateurism: belief (that anthropogenic climate change is not occurring) is combined with articulated doubt (about whether anthropogenic climate change is occurring).

The denial of climate science is part of a broader pattern of *science denial* in contemporary political life. Like conspiracy thinking and amateurism, science denial is at home both on the right (e.g. climate change “skepticism”) and the left (e.g. preference for organic and GMO-free foods). Some instances of science denial manage to have bipartisan appeal despite political polarization: both conservative Presidential candidate Ben Carson and progressive celebrity activist Robert DeNiro have expressed concerns about the safety of common vaccines, and suspicions about scientific bias and corruption are voiced with equal vehemence on conservative talk radio and in college humanities classrooms.

For the same reason that amateurism manifests intellectual arrogance, science denial manifests intellectual arrogance: the science denier overestimates their own intellectual powers and scholarly abilities. But the relevant contrast here is not so much with the intellectual powers and scholarly abilities of scientists, such as they are, but with the overwhelming evidential value of the scientific method and the consequent reliability of scientific consensus.<sup>31</sup> The science denier’s arrogance is the presupposition that their methods – whatever they are – are superior to the scientific method. And this is an arrogant presupposition simply because the scientific method is the best method known to human beings for inquiring about contingent empirical questions.

As above, a desire for certainty (§3) seems involved in this species of false intellectual humility. Because science necessarily offers probability, and never certainty, the person who desires certainty will always be disappointed by what science has to say. Climate change “skeptics” are right that anthropogenic climate change hasn’t been proven – but no scientific theory ever will be.

## 5 Conclusion

False intellectual humility is affected or pretended intellectual humility concealing intellectual arrogance. There are important conceptual connections between intellectual humility, fallibilism, and skepticism; one consequence of this is that several familiar species of false

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<sup>30</sup> There is, of course, a species of propaganda which aims merely to create uncertainty or confusion, which can be deployed against science (cf. Oreskes and Conway 2010). Such propaganda no doubt plays a role in sustaining climate change “skepticism.” However, most of those who are called “climate change skeptics,” it seems to me, are not merely unsure or confused; they positively believe the negation of the scientific consensus.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Hazlett 2016b, pp. 148-9.

intellectual humility are naturally described as forms of skepticism and are naturally articulated in terms of uncertainty and doubt. It is important to recognize these as species of *false* intellectual humility, and in particular to recognize them as species of (concealed) intellectual arrogance, involving belief and self-confidence, rather than uncertainty and doubt. This, more than anything else, distinguishes them from fallibilism and skepticism proper.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Thanks for Michael Lynch for comments on a draft of this chapter.

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