

Conspiracy Theories, Epistemic Self-Identity, and Epistemic Territory

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1. Introduction

To determine how to combat the spread of false conspiracy theories, we first have to understand the nature of conspiracy theorizing and why people get caught up in it. My goal in this paper is to carve out a distinctive category of conspiracy theorist and explore the process by which one becomes a conspiracy theorist of this sort. I'll focus on those who claim their beliefs ultimately trace back to simply trusting their senses and perceptual experiences in a commonsense way, citing what they take to be authoritative firsthand evidence or observations. Specifically, they appeal to firsthand observations of some pseudoscientific phenomenon which they claim the scientific, political, or medical establishment has conspired to cover up.

As an initial example, consider flat Earthers who claim the scientific establishment is keeping the truth from the public. The beliefs of the modern flat Earth movement trace back to Samuel Rowbotham (1865). Rowbotham accused scientists of building abstract, unfalsifiable theories for which there was no “simple and direct” evidence. He insisted that, to discover the truth that the Earth is flat, one needs to set aside these theories and simply trust one’s senses, “learning from observation and experience the true constitution of things” (2). He thus claimed that various simple observations provide authoritative proof that the Earth is flat, for example: that horizons observed from high altitudes still look flat; that standing water always comes to rest with a flat surface, not a convex one; and that objects moving across distant horizons appear to move in a straight line. Rowbotham describes such observation as a commonsense, “natural method of investigation” which humans are innately inclined to follow—that is, until we’re conditioned to replace it with abstract scientific theorizing that’s disconnected from firsthand experience (6-7).

The beliefs of many contemporary flat Earthers trace back to similar claims to rely on firsthand evidence. Like Rowbotham, they claim to possess commonsense evidence that’s accessible to anyone, rather than relying on specialized methods for discerning the truth. Many modern flat Earthers go even further than Rowbotham in adopting explicitly conspiratorial views: rather than simply claiming the scientific establishment spreads falsehoods, they claim the establishment is *intentionally conspiring* to cover up the truth (Ingold 2018; Kelly 2018; Mohammed 2019; Olshansky et al. 2020).

As we'll see below, there are some other cases in which members of certain conspiratorial communities trace their views back to similar appeals to firsthand observation and evidence. This is evidence they claim anyone could in principle possess once their minds cease to be clouded by the establishment's false narratives. In what follows, I'll refer to these as "Rowbothian" conspiracy theorists, in honour of their Rowbotham-like commitment to trusting firsthand observation over specialized methods. I'll argue that, by more closely examining Rowbothian conspiracy theorists' understanding of themselves as epistemic agents, we can better understand how one forms an identity of this sort.

In §2, I'll begin more precisely carving out Rowbothian conspiracy theorists as a distinct category. I'll do this by contrasting them with another kind of conspiracy theorist that has recently occupied a prominent place in popular consciousness and in some recent academic work. Specifically, I'll contrast Rowbothians with those I'll call "Esotericists": conspiracy theorists who claim to use complex, specialized methods to piece together clues and uncover the existence of a conspiracy theory and coverup (in drawing this contrast, I don't mean to claim that Rowbothians and Esotericists the *only* two kinds of conspiracy theorists; this isn't meant as an exhaustive taxonomy). In §3, I'll introduce some general epistemological machinery that will feature in my more detailed account of the pathway to becoming a Rowbothian conspiracy theorist. §4 leverages this machinery to give this account.

The remainder of the paper turns to some takeaways and implications. §5 draws on philosophical literature about the rationality of conspiracy theorizing to explore whether Rowbothians form their beliefs irrationally. Finally, §6 concludes with practical takeaways about combatting beliefs in misinformation.

One more note on the aims of this paper. The paper is somewhat speculative and exploratory, mapping out what I take to be a plausible, empirically supported distinction between one type of conspiracy theorist and others. However, I'll also note in relevant places where the evidence isn't conclusive, and where further empirical investigation is needed. So, my goals in the paper are primarily conceptual: to stake out a distinction which, if it indeed reflects reality, is useful for understanding a certain pathway into becoming one sort of conspiracy theorist, as well as having practical implications. I thus hope to lay conceptual groundwork for further research.

2. Distinguishing Rowbothian conspiracy theorists

For my purposes in this paper, I'll assume only a minimal definition of "conspiracy theory," according to which a conspiracy theory is an explanation of some phenomenon which cites a group

of agents secretly conspiring (for classic statements of this sort of definition, see Pigden 1995, 5; Keeley 1999, 116). This definition doesn't build in the assumption that believing in a conspiracy theory is always irrational or epistemically vicious, as some recent philosophical accounts do (e.g., Cassam 2019; Napolitano 2021).¹ I am, nevertheless, restricting my focus to *false* conspiracy theories which claim that some putatively observable, pseudoscientific phenomenon, such as the flat Earth, has been covered up. My goal is to better understand the epistemological and psychological forces that might, in at least some cases, lead to beliefs in such false conspiracy theories. I'll set aside the question of Rowbothian (ir)rationality until §5, after I've given my full account of Rowbothian conspiracy theorizing.²

When I talk about conspiracy theories in this paper, I also primarily have in mind what we might call “anti-establishment” conspiracy theories: those that claim that the (political, scientific, and/or medical) establishment is conspiring to hide some facts from the general public. Anti-establishment conspiracy theorists exhibit a kind of “us vs. them” mentality about their relationship to the establishment, whom they see as trying to pull the wool over their eyes.³ Both Rowbothians and non-Rowbothians can be anti-establishment conspiracy theorists. My goal in this section, though, is to identify some epistemic features that make Rowbothian conspiracy theorists distinctive.

To do this, I'll contrast Rowbothians with a different category of conspiracy theorists who also subscribe to false conspiracy theories—those I'll call the Esotericists. This is the sort of conspiracy theorist exemplified by cases like QAnon and Pizzagate, the details of which I'll return to below.

¹ Instead, on this minimal definition, there are many actual conspiracy theories one can be justified in believing: the well-evidenced official narratives about Watergate and 9/11, for example. For detailed defenses of this definition, see, e.g., Pigden (1995) and Dentith (2018).

² On the minimal definition of “conspiracy theory” I'm adopting, *belief* in conspiracy theories is distinct from conspiracy theories themselves: the conspiracy theory is the explanation of a phenomenon, and to believe a conspiracy theory is to believe that explanation. While some accounts conflate these two (e.g., Napolitano 2021), I'll follow Duetz (2022) in keeping them distinct. Furthermore, while I'll frame my arguments simply in terms of Rowbothian “belief” in conspiracy theories, the reader is free to understand “belief” in a fairly broad sense. This could be a matter of what epistemologists call “full” or “outright” belief, and/or a matter of having credence 1 in a conspiracy theory. It could also mean merely taking a conspiracy theory to be likely true, or to be more plausible than not. Actual Rowbothians likely fall along the spectrum between mere high likelihood and outright belief, but I'll gloss over this nuance in what follows.

³ I'm not assuming that being “anti-establishment” is necessarily an epistemic problem. Specifically, I'm not assuming that merely failing to fully trust mainstream sources of information makes one irrational or vicious (for discussion on both sides of this issue, see Harris 2018; Hagen 2022). I'm merely gesturing towards the kind of conspiracy theorist on whom I'm primarily focused: Rowbothians who claim the establishment is tricking the masses by covering up some observable fact.

Recently, Esotericists have occupied a prominent place in popular discussions of how to counteract beliefs in false conspiracy theories, as well as drawing the attention of various philosophers and other academics.⁴ As we'll see, it's central to these conspiracy theorists' self-conceptions that they see themselves as using complex, specialized methods to piece together clues or crack codes, thus unlocking the existence of a conspiracy.

My main purpose in introducing the category of Esotericists is to use them as a foil for Rowbothians, with the goal of demonstrating that Rowbothian conspiracy theorists are a distinct category in their own right. I use Esotericists for this purpose because they're close to what popular sentiment might see as a stereotypical conspiracy theorist: someone who pieces together overly complex clues to build a far-fetched narrative about a conspiracy. This section shows that popular tropes of this sort don't give us the full picture, since considering Rowbothians makes it clear that there are other ways to be a conspiracy theorist.⁵ I remain neutral about the empirical question of exactly what proportion of all conspiracy theorists fall into which category—the paper's goal is merely to conceptualize the idea of a Rowbothian as a distinctive category into which at least some actual conspiracy theorists seem to fall.

I turn now to exploring some of the key characteristics that distinguish Rowbothians from Esotericists.

⁴ For popular discussions, see Graziosi (2021), Siddharth and Murphy (2021), and Smith (2021); for discussion amongst philosophers, see Ichino (2022), Smith (2022), Buzzell and Rini (2023), Clarke (2023), Munro (2023), Levy (forthcoming), and Ganapini (forthcoming); for a small sampling of academic discussion in areas outside philosophy, see Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019), Packer and Stoneman (2021), McIntosh (2022), and Beyer and Herrberg (2023). One issue I'll set aside concerns whether Esotericists genuinely believe their conspiracy theories. Some philosophers have recently argued that many instead merely imagine or pretend (Ichino 2022; Munro 2023; Levy forthcoming; Ganapini forthcoming). This issue is somewhat orthogonal to my purposes, given that I'm mainly focused on differences in the kind of evidence to which each sort of conspiracy theorist appeals. It's a further, interesting question exactly what cognitive attitude each forms on the basis of this evidence, whether belief, imagination, or something else (cf. Ichino and Räikkä 2021). I'll follow the majority of philosophers of conspiracy theory in assuming the relevant attitude is belief.

⁵ However, I don't claim that these two categories exhaust *all* possible kinds of conspiracy theorists (see fn. 6). I'm also not the first to argue that one can be a conspiracy theorist without subscribing to highly complex, far-fetched narratives—as per fn. 1, the minimal definition of “conspiracy theory” I adopted in this paper all but guarantees that some well-evidenced “official” narratives count as conspiracy theories.

2.1. Specialized methods vs. firsthand evidence

QAnon supporters claim left-wing public figures are secretly running a satanic child abuse and murder ring, while Donald Trump leads efforts to combat them. They piece together their ideas using very complex methods to interpret various sources of evidence; they're especially focused on cryptic, anonymous posts to fringe online message boards supposedly left by a high-level government insider nicknamed "Q," as well as hidden messages in Trump's tweets (Packer and Stoneman 2021; McIntosh 2022). As various commentators have noted, QAnon resembles a big puzzle-solving game in the way participants piece together clues and try to crack cryptic, coded messages (Davies 2022; Levy forthcoming). As Munro (2023) observes, something similar goes for Pizzagate, a predecessor of QAnon that posited Democrats were abusing children in the basement of a pizza restaurant. To piece this theory together, proponents employed decoding methods for deciphering messages in sources such as John Podesta's leaked emails (Silverman 2016).

Such conspiracy theorists thus appeal to specialized methods for uncovering hidden knowledge. For these Esotericists, there's a sense in which only those who buy into the community's methods for discerning the truth are able to avail themselves of the evidence that a conspiracy is occurring. Specifically, one first has to learn from other community members how to employ specialized decoding and puzzle-solving methods. One can't participate in these conspiracy theory communities unless one learns and follows a system of rules which are distinctive of that community's theorizing.

Now, one clue that Rowbothian conspiracy theorists are distinct from Esotericists is the fact that they describe their sources of evidence quite differently. Instead of claiming to follow specialized decoding methods, they claim to trace their beliefs in conspiracy theories back to their own firsthand observations—observations which anyone else could, in principle, just as easily have made. In doing so, they take themselves to be trusting everyday perceptual experience and common sense, rather than relying on specialized rules that must be learned.

Landrum and Olshansky's (2019) interviews with attendees at the 2017 Flat Earth Conference make clear the extent to which many rely on firsthand evidence (and see Olshansky et al. 2020 for further analysis). Take the following excerpts, each from different interviewees:

I grew up in San Diego. I spent lots of time at the beach. [...] Every time you look at the horizon, it's flat as far as your eye can see. Then I went to college in Vermont. So, I've spent a lot of time on airplanes going back and forth from California to Vermont. And, since then,

as an adult, I've never seen the earth curve from an airplane window. It's flat. The horizon's always flat.

The reason I believe in flat Earth, is because of the physics of water. It seeks level. And if you stop and just really stop and think about water, for a while, you go, "It's never curved, it never does this, unless it's in motion." But still water doesn't freeze like this, I lived in Michigan, it always freezes flat. So, it seeks its level.

Um, but one thing we do know about the sky, is uh, the stars, and sun, and planets, uh, are moving. I trust my senses that they're doing the moving. And we're doing the staying still. [...] We know that because we feel earthquakes when the Earth moves. [...] If the Earth was moving in another way, I think we'd know it.

When asked whether any evidence *could*, hypothetically, convince them otherwise, many interviewees say they'd be convinced if they travelled to space and saw for themselves that the Earth is round. This again reinforces their emphasis on firsthand evidence.

To be clear, it's not that *all* Flat Earthers appeal to such evidence—some non-Rowbothians instead appeal to, for example, the way Flat Earthism coheres with certain passages from the Bible. My focus, though, is on the Rowbothian subset of flat Earthers.⁶

Similar self-attributions of firsthand evidence occur amongst a subset of anti-vaxxers who claim the medical establishment provides misinformation about the true effects of vaccines, such as physical injury, death, or autism. Some parents of young children say they became convinced vaccines are harmful after seeing these effects for themselves, given that their children developed symptoms or died very soon after receiving a vaccine (Kata 2012; Shelby and Ernst 2013; Hoffman et al. 2019; Lander and Ragusa 2020; Reich 2020; Ten Kate et al. 2022). As we'll see in more detail below in §2.2., this includes at least some parents who go on to conclude the medical and/or pharmaceutical industries are engaged in a conspiracy to coverup the harms of vaccines. (As with flat Earthers, it's not that all anti-vax conspiracy theorists appeal to firsthand evidence—some instead appeal to, for example, the testimony of discredited medical authorities. But my focus will be restricted to Rowbothian, conspiratorial anti-vaxxers.)

⁶ This distinction between types of flat Earthers demonstrates that the class of *non*-Rowbothian conspiracy theorists is heterogeneous: it includes those who subscribe to specialized methods as in QAnon or Pizzagate, but it also includes those who simply defer to authorities like the Bible.

As a final example, consider Hayes' (2022) study of Canadian UFO conspiracy theorists, who accuse the Canadian government of covering up the existence of unexplained aerial phenomena, abductions, and the like. During the 20th century, various branches of the Canadian government corresponded with citizens sending in letters about UFOs. Some of these had more theoretical and quasi-scientific concerns—for example, some were interested in uncovering how UFO technology and engineering might work, so asked the government to declassify information on this topic. But others wrote in to report firsthand sightings, with many claiming it took a personal experience to convince them of the reality of UFOs. After their claims were dismissed by the government, these Rowbothians decided a coverup must be taking place.⁷

As these examples show, Rowbothians don't claim to rely on sources of evidence that require following specialized systems of rules or deploying puzzle-solving skills. This marks the first key epistemic difference between Rowbothians and Esotericists.⁸

Two clarifications about my arguments in this and the next subsection. First: by pointing out epistemic differences between Rowbothians and Esotericists, I don't mean to suggest there aren't *also* similarities. For example, both seem to claim their theories are based on what Keeley (1999) calls "errant data": anomalies that aren't well-explained by the official, establishment-endorsed account. In this vein, QAnon proponents point out apparent unexplained coincidences between Q's posts and Trump's tweets, while anti-vax parents might appeal to the coincidence between a child being vaccinated and getting sick. It's unsurprising that there are some such similarities, given that errant data of this sort seems to be one of the main tools employed by various sorts of conspiracy theorists. Still, there are important differences in how each find and make use of such data: Esotericists claim

⁷ In describing three examples of Rowbothians, I've said that they *claim* to base their beliefs on firsthand experiences of phenomena like the harmfulness of vaccines. In some cases, these self-descriptions may be a bit misleading—for example, it may not be that one literally has an experience as of a vaccine causing injury, but instead that one sees one's child get vaccinated, sees one's child get sick, and then infers from these experiences that the vaccine caused the illness. However, as will become even clearer in later sections, my focus is primarily on Rowbothians' own self-understanding of their evidence and beliefs. What matters for my purposes is that they conceptualize themselves as trusting firsthand experience, even if the psychological reality is more complex.

⁸ This brings out one respect in which Rowbothians depart from Basham's (2001, 277) characterization of conspiracy theorists as questioning how things appear on the surface rather than simply trusting appearances (in a way akin to questioning the nature of the external world rather than accepting what our senses tell us). Instead, Rowbothians claim their starting point is relying on naïve appearances.

that, in order to notice it and fully appreciate its significance, one must be versed in specialized interpretive methods; Rowbothians instead claim anyone can easily recognize it.

Second: one might object to my characterizations of Rowbothians thus far on the grounds that, in actuality, people become conspiracy theorists because of a messy mix of psychological forces, not because they base their beliefs on any single source of evidence. Specifically, those who claim to trust their firsthand experiences may *also* rely in part on other sources (e.g., other conspiracy theorists' testimony). I grant that this is true, and therefore that there may be very few "pure" Rowbothians whose beliefs trace *solely* back to the belief-forming processes I describe. However, we can at least *conceptually* isolate different influences on conspiracy theorists' beliefs, even if in reality these influences often combine in messier ways. This section, as well as the rest of the paper, can be read as conceptualizing what a pure Rowbothian would look like, even if in reality this process is often one vector of influence among many.

2.2. *Direct vs. indirect evidence of a conspiracy*

As Buzzell and Rini (2023) observe, proponents of conspiracy theories like QAnon and Pizzagate seem to subscribe to a "cinematic epistemology." They envision themselves as underdog outsiders who are piecing together clues to uncover a vast conspiracy that's been hidden from the public, in a way that resembles "Hollywood films about crusading journalists and lonely conspiracy crackers" (Buzzell and Rini 2023, 910). Part of the pleasure of participating in these conspiracy communities comes from the sense of uncovering secret, hidden knowledge that the general public lacks (cf. Barkun 2015; Munro 2023).

This suggests another difference in the type of evidence Esoteric conspiracy theorists claim to possess versus the kind Rowbothians claim to possess. Notice that QAnon and Pizzagate theorists claim to have evidence *directly* supporting the belief that a conspiracy and coverup have occurred. Proponents claim to be uncovering coded messages directly *about* Democrats running a child abuse ring—either because they're decoding testimony from a government insider describing the conspiracy (as in QAnon) or because they're decoding hidden messages written by the conspirators themselves (as in Pizzagate).

However, there's evidence that things look different for Rowbothians. It suggests that, rather than taking themselves to have evidence directly supporting the occurrence of a conspiracy, Rowbothians begin by taking themselves to have firsthand evidence for some kind of empirical phenomenon: that the Earth is flat, vaccines are harmful, or UFOs exist. At this first stage, they aren't

yet full-fledged conspiracy theorists, in that they haven't yet adopted an "us vs. them" mentality about how the establishment is spreading disinformation. It's only once they encounter certain reactions to their beliefs that they *infer* the establishment is conspiring to cover up these phenomena. Specifically, they encounter quite dismissive attitudes towards the beliefs for which they take themselves to have firsthand evidence, attitudes coming from people with establishment-aligned views (either professional members of the medical, scientific, or political establishments, or members of the public with establishment-aligned beliefs). Then, rather than admitting they were mistaken, they double down on their initial beliefs, inferring that the establishment is hiding something.⁹

Some of the clearest evidence of this sort of Rowbothian belief-forming trajectory comes from Hayes' (2022) detailed study of 20th century UFO conspiracy theorists in Canada. His findings are based on a large volume of historical documents, such as correspondence between citizens and the government, internal correspondence amongst government officials, and media reports. Many of the citizens Hayes describes started out believing in UFOs after alleged firsthand sightings. From there, they wrote to the government to report their sightings or to ask for more clarification about UFO phenomena. However, the attitude amongst most government officials was that belief in UFOs was "nothing but ignorance and superstition that the state needed to clear away" (15), with believers being "delusional" or "ill-informed" about science (12).

Now, this attitude was based on the views of many relevant experts—for example, scientists with knowledge of natural phenomena that could be mistaken for UFOs, as well as those with expertise on aircraft and military engineering. Still, what matters for my purposes is the way it led to dismissive responses to the concerns of individual citizens. The ways officials documented and responded to citizens' sightings were often quite dismissive of citizens' firsthand experiences and epistemic competence, and officials regularly complained to one another about a lack of time and resources to devote to a foolish topic. As such, sightings typically didn't receive much investigation, and citizens often received very little in the way of response or follow-up; when they did, it was often a condescending explanation of how the government didn't share their belief in UFOs, or even a note dissuading them from further correspondence.

⁹ This isn't to say they necessarily draw an inference to a detailed, full story about exactly what the conspiracy and coverup look like. It could be that they're already aware of such a story from other conspiracy theorists, and that they infer the story must be true. It could be that they infer *some* kind of coverup must be taking place, after which they engage with other conspiracy theorists to fill out the details of what it looks like.

Crucially, these dismissive attitudes towards citizens' firsthand reports led some to infer that a coverup was occurring. As Hayes (2022) sums up: "citizen activists turned to conspiracy theories to explain the state's unwillingness to engage" (164). One of my goals in this paper is to dig into the epistemological and psychological forces involved in inferring a conspiracy under these sorts of circumstances. For now, though, we can see intuitively how this might happen: people take themselves to have clear, firsthand evidence for UFOs; the government acts very dismissive of this apparently clear evidence; and this leads people to think they're trying to hide what's really going on.

There's evidence that a similar kind of trajectory occurs amongst certain anti-vaxxers whose views are based on firsthand experiences of childhood illness or death. Many parents report encountering dismissive attitudes from medical practitioners after claiming a vaccine caused an adverse reaction. Specifically, they report that such dismissive reactions lead them to place less trust in the medical establishment's views about vaccines (Reich 2020; Smith et al. 2022; Ten Kate et al. 2022). Merely decreasing trust isn't equivalent to inferring that the establishment is conspiring to cover up evidence. However, it's not hard to see how some might follow a similar process to that of Hayes' (2022) UFO believers—i.e., how this decrease in trust might come with the thought that something is being covered up.

Indeed, there's at least anecdotal evidence that this is the trajectory some anti-vaxxers take. Consider this quote from one of Reich's (2020) interviews with a vaccine hesitant mother:

I'm part of a vaccine group online, and I'm on there every day, and it's interesting, because one of the things that's talked about is how so many moms will say, "What's going on with my child? We really only got vaccines and now she's lethargic." But they don't put two and two together that it was the vaccine. And part of that's because they called the doctor and the doctor says, "No, it's not the vaccine." Part of it is, there's this huge cover-up and they don't want to admit it (Reich 2020, 4).

Here, the interviewee explicitly posits a connection between the way doctors dismiss parental concerns and alleged "collusion between physicians who do not believe mothers and pharmaceutical companies that hide evidence of the risks vaccines present" (Reich 2020, 4).

Similarly, consider the case of prominent anti-vax advocate Deanna Gromowski, whose infant son Ian fell sick hours after receiving a hepatitis B shot, then eventually died. Initially, the Gromowskis were simply convinced their son's illness was caused by the hepatitis B vaccine. Then, as described in

the following firsthand account, they continuously received dismissals from medical professionals to whom they expressed this belief:

My father-in-law Larry said all along the cause was the hepatitis B shot. Scott and I knew the same and kept telling the doctors at St. Joe's this. No one listened... Again and again we suggested the vaccination as the cause. We were told each time it was impossible. He was poked, prodded and tested for the rarest of rare diseases, yet the vaccination explanation would not be considered. We could not figure out why not. While Scott and I insisted it was the hepatitis B vaccine, we were continually told that this was not possible (Shelby and Ernst 2013, 1795).

After facing these dismissals, the Gromowskis became public advocates about the dangers of vaccines, taking steps such as creating a website to spread the word about how doctors weren't acknowledging the dangers. While the Gromowskis don't explicitly describe inferring from doctors' dismissals that a *conspiracy* is occurring, their website does link to various conspiratorial resources that describe conspiracies and coverups within the medical establishment.¹⁰ So, they do seem to have moved from first merely believing in the harmfulness of the vaccine, to encountering dismissive attitudes, to, finally, believing in the existence of a conspiracy.

In Landrum and Olshansky's (2019) interviews with Flat Earthers, some also describe very dismissive establishment responses to their beliefs—responses which try to shut down any debate, call them “crazy,” etc. For someone who thinks the firsthand evidence is clear, it's not hard to see how this might lead to the inference that the establishment is trying to obscure the truth. Indeed, this interviewee suggests exactly this:

I've listened to people like, um, what's his name? Neil DeGrasse. And he just makes fun of people, instead of having a real conversation. He just insults. [...] Obama and a lot of the administration keeps saying, “Pay no attention to flat,” you know, it's like, it's like don't listen to flat earthers [...]. And they're making fun of it, and I thought that, that's not a standard, that's not a standard, um, protocol for governments to make fun of groups, one way or

¹⁰ An archived version of the Gromowski's website is retrievable from <https://web.archive.org/web/20190408134955/http://www.iansvoice.org:80/>. Its “Resources” bar includes links to various conspiratorial anti-vax organizations, such as the National Vaccine Information Center and the ThinkTwice Global Vaccine Institute.

another. So, when they do, I pay attention. Because usually, it's don't, pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.

The idea here is that, when politicians like Obama make fun of a group of citizens, it suggests there's a truth that they're trying to cover up.

Much of the above evidence is anecdotal, so more study is needed to determine exactly how prevalent this sort of trajectory really is. However, it seems that at least some members of these conspiracy theory communities don't start out uncovering evidence that directly supports the existence of a conspiracy. Instead, they start out taking themselves to have evidence for some observed phenomenon; then, the shift to becoming a genuine conspiracy theorist occurs once others have dismissed their beliefs. Rather than revising their initial belief, they end up doubling down on it and inferring that the establishment is intentionally spreading disinformation.

Now, such Rowbothian theorizing may still resemble QAnon and Pizzagate theorizing insofar as Rowbothians see themselves as individuals discovering a truth that goes against the mainstream story. However, there are subtle differences which suggest we shouldn't lump Rowbothians in with Esotericists. The process of becoming an Esotericist *starts by* depicting one as a heroic lone wolf piecing together clues to uncover a conspiracy. For Rowbothians, the process of becoming a conspiracy theorist begins from what they describe as ordinary, firsthand observations that anyone could in principle make, observations which simply involve trusting their experiences and common sense. It's only once others react a certain way to their putative firsthand knowledge that they react by inferring a conspiracy and coverup have occurred.

Recognizing this indirect route to believing a conspiracy theory makes clear that not every Rowbothian need become a conspiracy theorist. When one faces dismissals from the establishment, there are other routes one could subsequently take instead of inferring that the establishment is conspiring. For example, one could infer that those whose views align with the establishment are mistaken, stupid, and/or deluded rather than intentionally conspiring.¹¹ My main focus in this paper

¹¹ A Rowbothian's belief in a conspiracy thus sounds more like an *auxiliary* hypothesis to a core hypothesis about a phenomenon like the flat Earth, harmfulness of vaccines, or UFOs (cf. Lakatos 1970). In other words, the belief in such a phenomenon is more central and secure, while the belief in a conspiracy is more likely to be revised in the face of new evidence (e.g., when faced with proof that the establishment hasn't conspired to cover up the flat Earth, they'll be more likely to shift to believing the establishment is stupid or deluded than to believing the Earth is round). Following Clarke (2002), it's at first natural to analyze conspiracy theorizing in terms of conspiratorial *core* hypotheses rather than auxiliary ones, which would make Rowbothians unlike other conspiracy

will be restricted to becoming a Rowbothian *conspiracy theorist*, specifically, since I'm in part interested in distinguishing Rowbothians from other sorts of conspiracy theorists.

2.3. Key characteristics of Rowbothians

In distinguishing Rowbothians from Esotericists, two positive characteristics of Rowbothians have emerged:

Firsthand evidence: The process of becoming a Rowbothian conspiracy theorist begins with taking oneself to have commonsense, firsthand evidence for some pseudoscientific phenomenon (e.g., flat Earth, harmfulness of vaccines, UFOs).

Doubling down: When they encounter dismissive attitudes towards their beliefs in this phenomenon, Rowbothians double down on their beliefs and infer that the establishment is conspiring, rather than admitting they were mistaken.

My goal in §4 will be to probe more deeply into the psychological and epistemological forces involved in becoming a Rowbothian conspiracy theorist, and my explanation will take into account these two characteristics. Specifically, it will explain how these characteristics are causally related to one another: why taking oneself to have firsthand evidence could cause one to double down when faced with dismissive attitudes, thus inferring that a conspiracy is occurring rather than giving up one's initial belief in a pseudoscientific phenomenon.

First, though, the next section turns to a more general investigation of the nature of epistemic self-understanding. This will equip me with some additional theoretical tools for developing my account in §4. These tools will help us better understand why those who take themselves to have firsthand evidence would double down in the face of dismissive attitudes, as well as what the nature of this doubling down process looks like.

theorists. However, Poth and Dolega (2023) discuss various examples which suggest beliefs easily recognized as beliefs in conspiracy theories occur as auxiliary hypotheses, too. Paraphrasing, their examples include: core hypothesis "Princess Diana is alive" with auxiliary "the government covered up her death"; and core hypothesis "5G is damaging our health" with auxiliary "the government installed 5G networks with nefarious aims." Such examples suggest conspiracy theories often come as auxiliary hypotheses even for non-Rowbothians. I take it that what makes someone a conspiracy theorist isn't believing in a conspiratorial *core* hypothesis but in a conspiracy theory in general.

3. Epistemic self-understanding: two aspects

One's epistemic self-understanding is comprised of the ways one understands oneself as an agent who forms beliefs, possesses knowledge, and the like. In this section, I identify two aspects of this self-understanding: epistemic self-identity and apparent epistemic territory.

3.1. *Epistemic self-identity*

The general notion of self-identity I have in mind is one that's sometimes used in psychology: roughly, the kind of person one perceives oneself as being, defined in part in terms of one's values (for uses of this sort of notion in empirical work, see Suinn et al. 1995; Eccles 2009; Trevors et al. 2016; Barbarossa et al. 2017; Kahan et al. 2017). This might include, for example, identifying as an environmentalist, a feminist, a member of a certain religious group, or a member of a certain political ideology. One of the functions of such self-identities is to align oneself with certain ingroups that share one's values, thus setting oneself apart from outgroup members. So, for example, identifying as a socialist has the function of aligning oneself with others who share similar political values, while simultaneously setting oneself apart from those who don't.

I'll focus in on one kind of self-identity: namely, *epistemic* self identity. This is, roughly, the kind of person one takes oneself to be as an epistemic agent, defined in part in terms of the epistemic practices one values. As with self-identities more generally, epistemic self-identities have the function of aligning oneself with others who share these values, while setting oneself apart from outgroup members. So, one's epistemic self-identity isn't determined by the total set of belief forming methods one happens to think are justified; instead, it has to do with the subset of methods one values more deeply as part of how one sees oneself as an epistemic agent, where these values generate certain ingroup/outgroup distinctions.

To get a sharper grip on this notion, it's helpful to consider some examples. Consider statements like the following:

- (1) I'm the kind of rational person who follows the science, not religious dogma that can't be proven.
- (2) I'm an independent thinker, not the kind of person who blindly trusts authority figures.
- (3) I don't trust what the corrupt medical establishment tells me; when I need information about my health, I research natural remedies instead.

I take it that these are familiar kinds of self-descriptions. Notice that all of them have the function of self-identifying with a certain class of belief forming methods one values, while setting up this self-identity in opposition to other identities associated with distinct values.¹²

To better bring out the way such epistemic self-identities run deep in terms of one's values, consider some responses to statements (1) to (3):

- (1*) You *think* you're more rational than religious believers, but your trust in science is really just another form of faith.
- (2*) You *think* you're an independent thinker, but really you just blindly follow what Donald Trump tells you.
- (3*) You *think* you trust evidence-based natural health remedies, but really you just want to be like those wellness gurus on Instagram.

These responses don't come across as merely trying to correct someone's false beliefs. Instead, they seem aimed at undermining someone's conception of *who they are* as an epistemic agent, something that runs deeper than just correcting things one happens to believe.

We can also get a sharper grip on the notion of epistemic self-identity by contrasting the belief forming methods one values deeply with other methods that, though one regularly employs them and takes them to be justified, one doesn't value in the same identity-constituting way. Consider, for example, ordinary perceptual experience or episodic memory. Virtually everybody forms beliefs via these processes without ever giving it much thought. It would therefore be strange to say that one *values being the kind of person* who forms beliefs in these ways. Instead, we all just happen to find ourselves forming perceptual and memory beliefs because we're cognitively set up to do so by default, not because we deeply value them as part of our identities. As such, there's no ingroup/outgroup distinction to be drawn on the basis of valuing these methods.¹³

¹² At first glance, it's natural to construe epistemic self-identities in terms of the way one *actually* forms beliefs, i.e., whether one actually forms beliefs based on scientific evidence, independent thinking, etc. However, this isn't strictly correct. Although it may be true of many people that they form beliefs via the kinds of methods with which they self-identify, the actual belief forming methods one follows can come apart from how one *perceives* oneself as forming beliefs (the examples given in the next paragraph make this clear). As per fn. 7, my focus in this paper is primarily on how conspiracy theorists perceive themselves and their own epistemic positions, rather than on how they *in fact* form their beliefs.

¹³ Other philosophers have recently discussed notions that are related to, though slightly distinct from, that which I'm calling epistemic self-identity. For example, Callahan (2021) argues that

3.2. *Apparent epistemic territory*

This subsection develops the notion of “apparent epistemic territory,” a second aspect of epistemic self-understanding. To do so, it’s necessary to first get on the table the more fundamental idea of epistemic territory, a notion coined by sociologist John Heritage (2012).

As we converse with another person, we intuitively keep track of the domains of knowledge about which their epistemic position is stronger than our own. In other words, we don’t merely keep track of the propositions each of us individually and mutually know. Instead, we also keep track of the degree to which the other person is more authoritative about various topics of conversation than ourselves—i.e., the degree to which those topics fall within their epistemic territory (see also Pomerantz 1980; Nagel 2019).

Typically, we see other people as more authoritative than us about topics like their own firsthand experiences, domains about which they’re experts, and their own family and friends. This sort of assessment affects which particular propositions we expect the other person to know. It also affects the propositions about which we defer to the other person—if I previously took myself to know that P but you tell me P is false, I’ll defer to you if I take P to fall within your epistemic territory to a greater degree than it falls within mine.

For my purposes, firsthand experiences will be most relevant: we take people to be especially authoritative about things they know firsthand. Various evidence supports this. As Mahr and Csibra (2018; 2021) note, we’re more likely to assert ourselves as authorities about past events we witnessed firsthand versus heard about secondhand, and we typically treat other people’s firsthand testimony as more authoritative than secondhand testimony or inferences we’ve made ourselves (see also Smith 2013). Heritage and Raymond (2005) suggest that we act deferentially towards other people’s firsthand knowledge that P even in cases where we ourselves already know that P. Suppose I know that a film is very sad because I’ve seen it myself, but you only know this because you learned secondhand that

our values can drive which “epistemic frameworks” we commit to, which then dictates how we form beliefs in response to evidence. Her proposal could be used to complement and flesh out my own in this subsection, as a way of more concretely understanding how our epistemic self-identities translate into particular belief forming practices. Another related notion is what Byrd (2022) calls “epistemic identity.” Byrd’s notion refers to “the phenomenon of treating certain beliefs as part of one’s identity” (57), such as one’s religious or political beliefs. In other words, while my notion of epistemic self-identity is defined in terms of belief forming *processes* one values, Byrd’s notion of epistemic identity is defined in terms of certain *beliefs*. Still, the two notions are related: we take certain individual beliefs to result from processes with which we self-identify. Plausibly, such beliefs are among those that constitute what Byrd calls one’s epistemic identity.

it was sad. Even though you already know the film is sad, you'd typically still treat me as being in a better position to assess this. You might even ask me for confirmation, almost as if you're uncertain (e.g., "Oh, I heard that movie is really sad?").

So, it seems that, typically, we treat domains about which other people have firsthand knowledge as falling more deeply within their epistemic territory than our own.¹⁴ At the same time, though, it's also possible to *intrude* on other people's territory. We do this when we act as if we're more authoritative than another person about a domain that falls more deeply within their territory (cf. Ballantyne 2019; Bristol and Rossano 2020). Such intrusions can be offensive or disrespectful. For example, it would be inappropriate for me to constantly try to correct your claims about what you had for dinner yesterday, or about your close family members who I don't know very well. As Nagel (2019) notes, one extreme version of this is gaslighting—i.e., persistent, manipulative attempts to undermine someone's confidence in their own experiences (cf. Abramson 2014).

Gaslighting is clearly problematic in the sense that it involves attempted manipulation and control. But it seems like all cases of deep intrusion into one's epistemic territory are disrespectful, even the less abusive ones. What makes them so? Plausibly, such intrusions are disrespectful in virtue of the fact that they deny one's basic competence as an epistemic agent. The things that fall well within one's territory are things about which one *should* be an authority if one is epistemically competent. Take my everyday experiential knowledge. If I have a basic level of competence at forming perceptual beliefs about the world, I'll be an authority about this domain. So, to say I'm mistaken about something I saw firsthand seems to imply that I lack a basic level of competence.

This explains why it seems much less intrusive to, for example, correct a non-expert's beliefs about complex domains like physics or philosophy. Non-experts with basic epistemic competence can easily misunderstand these domains, so it doesn't seem as disrespectful to correct them. However, agents with basic epistemic competence typically don't go wrong about things that fall more deeply within their epistemic territory, which explains why intrusions seem more disrespectful.¹⁵

¹⁴ Of course, as Mahr and Csibra (2021) note, there are exceptions. Sometimes, one person's expertise can outweigh another person's firsthand evidence—you might say you saw a robin in your backyard, but, once you've described it to me, my ornithological expertise might result in more authoritative testimony that it was a thrush. Still, it seems like we typically default to treating firsthand testimony as authoritative.

¹⁵ Of course, there are disrespectful ways to correct people about domains on which they aren't experts—it would be disrespectful for a philosophy professor to correct a student in a condescending way or in a public context where the correction leads to embarrassment. My point is just that, bracketing such considerations about tone and context, the *mere* act of correcting someone about

Now, I take it that one's genuine epistemic territory is comprised of topics about which one is *in fact* knowledgeable (cf. Nagel 2019). However, we can distinguish between one's actual epistemic territory and one's *apparent* epistemic territory—i.e., that which one *takes* to fall within one's territory. Very often, the two go together. However, they can also come apart. If I misremember a past event I witnessed, it might seem to me that I have firsthand knowledge about it, even though my beliefs about it are false. Similarly, it might seem to me that I know a person very well when really they've been deceiving me about their identity.

When one has a false sense of one's epistemic territory, corrections from others can falsely *feel* like disrespectful intrusions. If I have good reason to think your apparent firsthand memory of an event is a total confabulation, it might feel as if I'm intruding on your territory or gaslighting you when I attempt to correct you. In other words, intrusions on one's apparent territory can give rise to the feeling that one's basic epistemic competence is being called into question, even if the apparent intruder is actually the more knowledgeable one.

We should expect beliefs that fall well within our apparent epistemic territories to be especially resistant to being undermined. Typically, when someone tries to question something we (think we) saw firsthand, we push back on them. This resistance makes sense given that allowing such beliefs to be undermined feels like admitting that one is lacking in basic epistemic competence, which most of us would want to avoid admitting. Of course, as Nagel (2019) suggests, persistent questioning from other people can often wear us down, as in the case of successful gaslighting. Still, it seems that our default reaction to intrusions on our apparent territory is to resist allowing our beliefs to be undermined.

4. Rowbothian conspiracy theorists: self-identity and apparent territory

I now argue that, by appealing to the notions of epistemic self-identity and apparent epistemic territory, we can understand how Rowbothian conspiracy theorist identities are initially formed.

In §2.3, I summarized two characteristics of Rowbothians, based on features that distinguish them from Esotericists:

things that fall well within their territory seems disrespectful, while the same isn't true of domains about which one isn't an expert.

Firsthand evidence: The process of becoming a Rowbothian conspiracy theorist begins with taking oneself to have commonsense, firsthand evidence for some pseudoscientific phenomenon (e.g., flat Earth, harmfulness of vaccines, UFOs).

Doubling down: When they encounter dismissive attitudes towards their beliefs in this phenomenon, Rowbothians double down on their beliefs and infer that the establishment is conspiring, rather than admitting they were mistaken.

An account of the process by which one becomes a Rowbothian conspiracy theorist should centrally be able to explain **doubling down**—i.e., explain why one doubles down on the belief instead of giving it up, which leads them to infer that the establishment is covering up the truth. As I'll now argue, the notion of apparent epistemic territory can help us better understand why **firsthand evidence** gives rise to this doubling down process. I'll then appeal to the notion of epistemic self-identity to provide a more precise description of the nature of this doubling down process.

Initially, when Rowbothians take themselves to have firsthand evidence for some pseudoscientific phenomenon, they'll take their belief in that phenomenon to fall deeply within their epistemic territory. That's because, in general, we view beliefs formed on the basis of firsthand experience this way. In other words, Rowbothians would see themselves as possessing greater epistemic authority about the relevant domain than others whose beliefs are not based on firsthand evidence.

Evidence that Rowbothians take these beliefs to fall deep within their epistemic territories comes from the fact that, when it comes to these beliefs, they see their own epistemic positions as quite strong. For one thing, Rowbothians allow their beliefs to guide their actions even in very high-stakes situations. This is especially clear in the case of anti-vax parents, who go as far as refusing to vaccinate their children on the basis of their belief in the harms of vaccines. Similarly, flat Earthers report confidently maintaining their belief that the Earth is flat even when it costs them relationships with loved ones who disagree (Olshansky et al. 2020). These sorts of actions suggest Rowbothians have a high degree of confidence in their own epistemic position, which fits well with the idea that they take these beliefs to fall deeply within their epistemic territories.

There's also anecdotal evidence that Rowbothians explicitly self-describe their epistemic positions quite strongly. Specifically, when others try to press them to justify their beliefs, they respond by insisting they possess *knowledge*. Kelly (2018) describes one Flat Earther who, when asked by a passerby to clarify whether he believes the Earth is flat, responded, "We don't believe, we know."

Similarly, in the face of resistance by medical professionals, the Gromowskis continued to insist they “knew” the vaccine was to blame. Rowbothians thus seem to maintain confidence in their own epistemic position when others try to dismiss or question them. This fits with the general idea that, when we see some domain as falling deeply within our epistemic territory, we see our judgments about it as more authoritative than those of others who might question us.

All of this can help us understand the **doubling down** process that occurs in the face of dismissals by those with establishment-aligned views. Given Rowbothians’ conceptions of their own epistemic territories, dismissive attitudes from establishment-aligned subjects will feel like attempts at trying to undermine their basic epistemic competence, potentially even going as far as seeming like attempts at gaslighting. As I argued in §3.2, correcting someone on a topic which they take to fall well within their epistemic territory feels akin to trying to undermine their basic epistemic competence, since things that fall well within one’s territory are typically things about which a competent agent should be authoritative. This means giving up the belief would feel like admitting to lacking basic epistemic competence. As such, a natural response is to try to resist by reasserting one’s competence in the face of dismissals.

How might someone engage in such resistance? One way to do so is to explicitly reflect on the value of the method by which one formed the belief. Specifically, one can reassert one’s competence by asserting that one’s particular belief-forming method is superior to the methods recommended by those who are being dismissive. In this case, that would involve reflecting on the fact that one trusts one’s own firsthand experiences over testimony from the establishment.

This does seem to be the way the conspiracy theorists on whom I’m focused react to dismissals of their beliefs. Rowbothian flat Earthers come to view themselves as prizing their common sense and trust in experience, in a way that sets them as epistemically superior to those who blindly trust the scientific establishment. Similarly, Rowbothian anti-vaxxers describe themselves as trusting parental instinct and their firsthand knowledge of their own children, in opposition to people who blindly trust the medical establishment. And the Rowbothian UFO conspiracy theorists took themselves to be consciously breaking away from a tradition of trusting establishment authority figures, since they saw themselves as part of a movement towards independent thought.

The notion of epistemic self-identity can help us more precisely flesh out this process of reflectively doubling down on one’s apparent epistemic territory. Specifically, this process is one of forming a *new* epistemic self-identity. One begins to reflectively self-identify as valuing the trust one places in one’s own experiences and common sense in the face of dismissals by the establishment. In

other words, one starts to value being the kind of person who exhibits a certain sort of independence and epistemic tenacity in the face of attempts by the establishment to undermine trust in one's own cognitive faculties. This is a process of coming to value being the kind of person who forms and retains beliefs in a certain way, which is part of the very definition of an epistemic self-identity. Furthermore, it has the ingroup/outgroup differentiation that's characteristic of how self-identities work: these conspiracy theorists self-identity as trusting in their own epistemic competence *in the face of attempts by the establishment to undermine it*.¹⁶

The examples of Rowbothian conspiracy theorists I've considered do seem to end up deeply valuing their epistemic tenacity as a core part of their self-identities. Flat Earthers, for example, describe a process of "coming out of the closet" to friends and family, in a way that mirrors descriptions of coming out about one's sexual identity (Olshansky et al. 2020). This suggests they value their flat Eartherism as a central part of their identities; and, since tenacity in the face of establishment disinformation is a core part of flat Eartherism, they'd value this tenacity as one part of this self-identity. Similarly, when anti-vaxxers insist they know the true cause of their child's illness, they associate their resistance to the medical establishment with their role as a loving parent, which again seems to put it at the core of their self-identity. And the relevant UFO believers saw themselves as rejecting the idea that the government and scientists had "a monopoly on what was considered legitimate knowledge" (Hayes 2022, 12)—i.e., they self-consciously decided to start valuing their own observations and epistemic capacities as legitimate.

To sum up: we can understand why the process described by **doubling down** occurs once we understand that Rowbothians take their beliefs in pseudoscientific phenomena to fall well within their epistemic territories, which is in turn explained by the way they take these beliefs to be based on authoritative **firsthand evidence**. As such, dismissals feel like attempts to undermine their basic epistemic competence, so they respond by trying to reassert their competence. And we can understand what this reassertion of competence involves by appealing to the notion of epistemic self-identity: namely, it involves a process of forming a new epistemic self-identity, in the sense that one reflectively

¹⁶ In §3.1, I claimed it wouldn't make much sense to base an epistemic self-identity around being the kind of person who forms beliefs based on perceptual experience, because everyone forms beliefs this way. Note that I'm not contradicting this claim when I describe how Rowbothians form new self-identities. They're not merely coming to value being the kind of person who forms beliefs on the basis of firsthand experience. Instead, they're coming to value being the kind of person who *forms and remains tenacious in such beliefs despite attempts from the establishment to try to undermine them*.

begins to value trusting in one's experiences and common sense in the face of the establishment's attempts to undermine them.

Now, one might wonder whether the process I've described—of doubling down and inferring the existence of a conspiracy in the face of establishment dismissals—is really distinctive of *Rowbothian* conspiracy theorists, versus applying to many others who believe conspiracy theories. Isn't it plausible that many people would double down and infer the existence of a conspiracy and coverup when faced with such dismissals? What, exactly, is distinctive of Rowbothians here?

For one thing, my account would not be generalizable to Esotericists—the main group with which I contrasted Rowbothians in §2. Recall that Esotericists take themselves to be uncovering evidence that directly supports the existence of a conspiracy (by, e.g., deciphering coded language in which politicians discuss their schemes). It wouldn't be that Esotericists present this evidence to the establishment, then encounter dismissals, and *only then* infer a conspiracy. Instead, they *already* take the evidence to support the existence of a conspiracy, before they even express it to establishment-aligned figures. Perhaps the establishment's dismissals would lead them to *further increase their confidence* that a conspiracy has occurred, since these dismissals would seem to confirm the conspiracy theory's predictions about establishment cover up attempts (cf. Nguyen 2020). However, this wouldn't be what leads them to posit the existence of a conspiracy in the first place.

We can grant, then, that I've brought out a key difference between Rowbothians and Esotericists. However, Brooks (2023) has recently given an account of conspiracy theorizing that might seem to suggest doubling down in the face of dismissals is a much more general phenomenon that characterizes many other (non-Esoteric and non-Rowbothian) conspiracy theorists. Brooks argues that people posit conspiracy theories when, after pointing out seemingly anomalous evidence that conflicts with official explanations, they encounter dismissive attitudes from epistemic authorities (journalists, academics, scientists, etc.). On his account, this inference to a conspiracy theory occurs because people have the antecedent belief that epistemic authorities are engaged in good faith pursuits of truth.¹⁷ When epistemic authorities act dismissively towards putative new evidence, their behaviour appears to be in tension with this antecedent belief. That's because we expect those engaged in good faith pursuits of truth to be open to considering counterevidence and alternative points of views. If they instead act dismissive or condescending, we might infer that they're not really engaged in a good

¹⁷ At least, those of us living in open, democratic societies do—his account is meant to apply to such societies.

faith pursuit of truth after all, but that something fishy must be going on—like a conspiracy to cover up the truth.

I'm happy to grant that many conspiracy theorists—including some Rowbothians, even—engage in this sort of inference; as I said in §2.1, there are likely many different psychological forces involved in becoming a conspiracy theorist, even for Rowbothians. However, the pattern of inference Brooks describes is, in two key respects, different from the one I described for Rowbothians in this section.

First, on Brooks' account, it's necessary that one has an antecedent belief that epistemic authorities are engaged in good faith pursuits of the truth: one infers a conspiracy only because authorities' dismissive responses conflict with this antecedent belief. On my account of Rowbothians, such an antecedent belief isn't necessary. Rowbothians infer a coverup about (say) the effects of vaccines because they think they've *seen the true effects for themselves*. They infer that something fishy must be going on when establishment-aligned figures dismiss their apparent experiences, given that these are experiences they take to fall deeply within their apparent epistemic territories. This process doesn't require any antecedent trust in the establishment to engage in a good faith pursuit of truth. A Rowbothian could be neutral, or even *distrust* the establishment, yet still infer they must be covering something up by trying to dismiss their apparent firsthand experiences.

Second, Brooks' account doesn't require that conspiracy theorists take the apparent anomalies they point out to fall deeply within their epistemic territories. It would be enough for his account that conspiracy theorists try to raise apparent problems for official explanations even in a very tentative way; what matters is that, in response to these concerns being raised at all, the establishment responds dismissively. Apparent epistemic territory thus plays no role in Brooks' account. In contrast, it plays an essential role in mine: the reason Rowbothians don't just give up their beliefs about matters like the true effects of vaccines, and instead end up inferring a conspiracy, is because these beliefs fall deeply within their apparent territories.

So, my account of Rowbothians aligns with Brooks' more general account of conspiracy theorizing only in a superficial sense: the fact that both involve inferring a conspiracy in response to one's evidence being dismissed in a condescending way. However, the exact pattern of inference involved looks different under each of our accounts. My account is distinctive of those who start with a belief they take to fall deeply within their epistemic territory, since they take it to result from trusting firsthand experience.

5. Rowbothian (ir)rationality?

Recently, philosophers have debated whether being a conspiracy theorist is by definition epistemically irrational, or whether we should judge each conspiracy theory on its own merits (see Dentith 2023 for a recent overview). It's beyond my scope to conclusively defend either side of this debate (as per §2, I instead opted to assume a minimal, non-evaluative definition of “conspiracy theory”). However, both sides agree that at least *some* prominent examples of conspiracy theorizing involve irrational belief, and various proposals have emerged about the exact sense in which these cases might involve irrationality. These proposals are useful for exploring the question of whether Rowbothian conspiracy theorists are irrational, the question to which I now turn.

Phenomena like the flat Earth can sound extremely far-fetched to those of us who aren't believers. As such, upon first hearing about beliefs in such phenomena, it's tempting to assume these beliefs aren't based on *any* evidence or arguments whatsoever—one might assume, for example, that Rowbothians are simply paranoid “conspiracists” that tend to see conspiracies everywhere.¹⁸ However, my account in this paper would, if accurate, suggest that there's something more complex going on.

I won't argue that all Rowbothians are forming their beliefs in a way that's all-things-considered rational. However, before we turn to ways in which their beliefs might be irrational, it's important to recognize the ways in which Rowbothians are attempting to follow epistemic patterns which are *normally* rational to employ.

For one thing, it's typically rational to trust one's own firsthand experiences. In fact, we typically use firsthand experience as a way of checking and verifying other people's testimony (if you tell me there's no oatmeal in the cupboard but my eyes tell me otherwise, it's normally clear which source of evidence I should trust). Rowbothians believe in a conspiracy ultimately because they refuse to give up their trust in certain firsthand experiences. Of course, they're in one of the rare situations where these firsthand appearances are misleading. Still, it's not as if they altogether fail to take any kind of evidence into account.

It's also important to recognize that Rowbothians' inferences about the existence of a conspiracy are in part a response to dismissals by people who seem to be trying to infringe upon their epistemic territory. This sort of doubling down on one's apparent territory, in the face of attempts to

¹⁸ This is in line with a stereotypical view of the psychology of conspiracy theorists. However, it's controversial how many actual conspiracy theorists fit this mould, if any. For relevant discussion, see Dentith (2018) and Lewandowsky et al. (2018).

undermine it, can sometimes be a rational process that allows one to retain firsthand knowledge. Suppose, for example, that an abuser is attempting to gaslight you by undermining your trust in your firsthand experiences. In that case, it would be epistemically beneficial to double down on your firsthand beliefs: you might form a self-identity as someone who exhibits resilience in the face of abuse, while inferring that your abuser is covertly trying to manipulate you.

So, Rowbothians do try to form their beliefs based on strong evidence, and they conform to patterns of belief formation and maintenance that are often epistemically healthy. If there's irrationality involved, it must be because relying on these patterns is unwarranted in the sort of case in which Rowbothians find themselves. In other words, it's not because they're relying on patterns of reasoning which are irrational in a highly general sense, but because of some epistemic failing that's more specific to the particular kind of case at hand.

What, if anything, might this more specific epistemic failing be? Some philosophers have argued that (at least some) conspiracy theorists fail to place appropriate degrees of *trust* in reliable epistemic authorities (for various versions of this view, see Keeley 1999; Levy 2007; Cassam 2016; Nguyen 2020). In the Rowbothian cases I've discussed, this would mean failing to place appropriate levels of trust in the scientific, medical, and political establishment when they claim it's false that the Earth is flat, that some vaccine is harmful, or that one saw a UFO. I think this explanation is useful as a starting point for understanding where (at least some) Rowbothians go wrong, though it requires some additional nuance.

For one thing, it's important to note that it isn't *always* an epistemic failing to blindly trust what institutions tell us over our firsthand experiences, especially when it comes to government institutions. As philosophers such as Pigden (1995) and Basham (2001) have argued in detail, governments throughout history have sometimes conspired in secret, so there are cases in which we're warranted in distrusting their testimony. So, the issue with Rowbothians would have to be more specific than *merely* failing to trust establishment accounts.

One important feature of Rowbothian cases is that relevant bodies of scientific evidence exist: evidence which provides alternative explanations for why the Earth looks flat, why childhood illnesses often coincide closely with vaccines, or why certain aerial or meteorological phenomena might appear to be UFOs. These bodies of evidence explain why these are special cases where the perceptual appearances are misleading—i.e., they're cases in which there exist defeaters for the justification that perceptual appearances would otherwise provide. So, when the scientific, medical, and political establishments dismiss Rowbothian beliefs based on appearances, they're doing so based on the

testimony of reliable scientific experts. Rowbothians are thus failing to trust what the establishment tells them despite the fact that their dismissals ultimately trace back to such evidence.

However, this alone doesn't mean that Rowbothians are behaving irrationally when they refuse to trust establishment dismissals of their beliefs and instead double down on their apparent epistemic territories. As I'll now argue, it also matters whether a given Rowbothian can reasonably be expected to be aware that a potential defeater may exist for the perceptual appearances. If they can be, then it seems less rational to respond to establishment dismissals by doubling down; if they cannot, though, then it's less clear that they're being irrational.

To bring this out, compare two hypothetical Rowbothians. Although each follows the general belief-forming trajectory I've described in this paper, there are differences in whether they're aware that alternative explanations may exist for the relevant perceptual appearances:

ANTI-VAXXER: Malika is a first-time parent. She has little knowledge about medical matters like vaccines, as she's from a community where relevant information isn't easily accessible. She decides to get her infant son the hepatitis B vaccine on the advice of her doctor, and he becomes seriously ill a day later. She tells her doctor she thinks the vaccine caused his illness. The doctor merely condescendingly shuts down her concerns, without any suggestion of an alternative explanation. Malika decides the medical establishment must be covering up the harms of vaccines.

FLAT EARTHER: Brian believes the Earth is flat based on the way it looks. He's aware that most people take it as common knowledge that the Earth is round and that this has been well-studied in the history of science, though he doesn't himself know the scientific explanation for why it merely looks flat. He expresses his flat Earth beliefs to an astronomer friend. His friend condescendingly dismisses him, while suggesting some reading material about the relevant science. Brian decides the scientific establishment must be covering up the true shape of the Earth.

Intuitively, Malika seems to be behaving more rationally than Brian, given the epistemic position in which she finds herself. Plausibly, this has to do with differences in their respective levels of knowledge relevant to deciding whether a potential defeater might exist. It seems that Malika can't reasonably be expected to know there may be a good explanation available for why the appearances can't be trusted: since she lacks relevant knowledge about vaccines, and since her doctor doesn't help point her in the right direction, she might not even be able to conceptualize what such a defeater

would look like. In contrast, Brian in *FLAT EARTHER* has relevant background knowledge that should lead him to expect there may be a defeater out there. Even if he isn't aware of what this defeater is, he's in a position to infer that one could be available. It therefore seems he should at least suspend judgment until he can better assess it.

These are highly schematic, hypothetical cases. However, the point they illustrate is that whether a given Rowbothian is believing rationally seems to depend on features that can vary between cases. Someone who is more like Malika might be justified in inferring that the establishment is trying to pull the wool over her eyes; someone who is more like Brian seems like they should know better. Where an individual Rowbothian falls on this spectrum depends on background knowledge they possess about the relevant scientific facts or consensus. This, in turn, depends in part on facts about the community of which they're part—for example, whether it's a community in which common knowledge makes it reasonable to assume there may be a defeater available for beliefs about the shape of the Earth, vaccines, UFO sightings, and the like.

While space prohibits it in the present paper, we could further dig into the psychological details about exactly why someone like Brian might go on believing irrationally in a case like this, doubling down on his belief in the flat Earth despite the fact that he should be aware there are potential defeaters for it. The literature on biases and epistemic vices amongst conspiracy theorists may be relevant here: for example, it could be due to motivated reasoning (Harris 2018) or close-mindedness (Cassam 2016). Similarly, perhaps Brian's belief in the flat Earth is “evidentially self-insulated” in the sense described by Napolitano (2021)—i.e., he irrationally holds it in a way that's immune to being revised on the basis of new evidence. Factors like these may vary case-by-case, either between individuals or between different communities of Rowbothians. It's worth exploring in future research whether any such factor is common amongst (some communities of) Rowbothians.¹⁹

6. Takeaways: talking to Rowbothians

Suppose you realize a loved one believes a false conspiracy theory. How should you talk to that person in a way that's aimed at (starting the process of) counteracting their beliefs? Scholars commenting on this question often give similar advice: don't be too combative, because this can cause

¹⁹ On the question of Rowbothian rationality, it's also worth further investigating the details of how different Rowbothian conspiracy theories get fully fleshed out—for example, when it comes to how they describe the exact nature of the conspiracy and coverup. It could turn out that Rowbothian theories are epistemically deficient *qua* theories—for example, perhaps they resemble “degenerating research programs” (Clarke 2002; Lakatos 1970).

your interlocutor to become defensive and shut down the conversation; instead, it's crucial to start by looking for common ground with the conspiracy theorist, which can then serve as the groundwork for a more productive discussion (Lorch 2017; Warzel 2020; Spring 2020).

In this section, I'll argue that there are specific versions of this "common ground" strategy which may work well with Rowbothians even though they don't work well with other kinds of conspiracy theorists. Specifically, it may be that we can find common ground with Rowbothians by appealing to aspects of their epistemic self-understanding, though this isn't true of many other people who believe false conspiracy theories, such as Esotericists.

Recent advice about how to approach conspiracy theorists typically doesn't focus on finding common ground in the *epistemic* realm, specifically; instead, it focuses more on empathizing with the emotional factors that drive people to be attracted to conspiracy theories. For example, psychologists have argued that conspiracy theorists often feel socially isolated and find comfort in online conspiracy theorist communities; similarly, they've argued that they're often angry at the current state of politics and find comfort in theories that demonize their political opponents. As such, recommendations for finding common ground typically focus on showing an understanding of these sorts of feelings. The hope is that empathetic conversation will help mitigate or provide an alternative outlet for these feelings, thus undermining the psychological need for conspiracy theories (Graziosi 2021; Siddharth and Murphy 2021).

For many conspiracy theorists, it makes sense to restrict one's focus to such non-epistemic points of common ground. That's because, when it comes to their beliefs on a domain about which their theories are concerned, they see their beliefs as falling more deeply within their epistemic territories than non-conspiracy theorists' beliefs. Many who subscribe to false conspiracy theories, including many Esotericists, take themselves to be epistemically superior to anyone who hasn't "done their own research" to the extent that they have (cf. Buzzell and Rini 2023; Levy 2022). It's thus integral to their epistemic self-understanding that there's an epistemic gulf between themselves and the general public. Since they don't see themselves as epistemically on par with non-conspiracy theorists, it will be difficult to find any kind of epistemic common ground on matters related to their theories. Since these theories fall more deeply within their apparent epistemic territories, they'll always think that others should defer to them.

However, if my account in this paper is on the right track, then there's more potential for finding points of common ground related to Rowbothians' epistemic self-conceptions. I'll consider three ways of doing so.

First, consider how Rowbothians ultimately trace their theories back to belief forming methods which they agree everyone generally accepts as epistemically valuable—namely, trusting one’s own firsthand experiences. This already opens up room for finding points of common ground. It’s easy for non-conspiracy theorists to acknowledge that Rowbothians are trying to follow epistemically healthy belief forming practices. Typically, it’s good to trust one’s firsthand experiences; unfortunately, Rowbothians find themselves in a case where the way things appear is misleading. Still, we can acknowledge that Rowbothians are trying to form beliefs in accordance with generally healthy patterns: both sides can agree that, usually, how things appear to you is a good guide to the truth.

Second, there’s room to find common ground when it comes to the process by which Rowbothians develop their conspiracy theorist identities. Recall that, when the establishment dismisses beliefs Rowbothians take to fall well within their epistemic territories, this causes them to double down on these beliefs and infer the establishment must be spreading disinformation. When looking for common ground, we should keep in mind what I argued in §5: that doubling down on one’s apparent epistemic territory, in the face of attempts to undermine it, can sometimes be a rational process that allows one to retain firsthand knowledge (as in, e.g., cases of gaslighting). So, we can acknowledge in conversations with Rowbothians that forming a new epistemic self-identity in this way can be healthy and valuable. Again, this is something that both sides can easily agree upon.²⁰

Finally, a third suggestion for helping Rowbothians recognize common ground with non-conspiracy theorists. As I’ve emphasized, Rowbothians take themselves to be exercising basic, commonsense epistemic competencies that are available to everyone. And they become conspiracy theorists in part because they feel as if others are disrespecting them as competent epistemic agents. Yet, when Rowbothians claim that the general public has been duped by the establishment, there’s a sense in which they themselves are guilty of disrespecting the other side’s epistemic competence. It’s not as if the evidence to which Rowbothians appeal is esoteric and complex, such that their opponents simply can’t understand it. Instead, by Rowbothians’ own lights, their opponents have an equal ability to understand and evaluate the evidence for themselves. Even if Rowbothians continue to think we’ve all been fooled by external forces, they can at least recognize that each side wants the other to respect their attempts to exercise their own epistemic competencies. In other words, we can prompt Rowbothians to empathize with the other side by recognizing that, when they claim the other side is

²⁰ Of course, most people don’t explicitly have the concept “epistemic self-identity,” so these conversations wouldn’t necessarily invoke that label. Still, they could involve discussion of one’s values, the kind of person one sees oneself as being, and the like.

being duped, this comes across as calling their opponents' basic epistemic competence into question, which is the very thing Rowbothians themselves found insulting.

For the reasons described above, these three strategies for approaching Rowbothians likely wouldn't translate well to conspiracy theorists who see themselves as epistemically superior to non-conspiracy theorists, such as Esotericists who take themselves to be employing highly specialized research methods. This underscores the fact that we shouldn't be too quick to assume that strategies for counteracting one kind of false conspiracy theory will be applicable in other cases. Instead, when choosing which strategies to adopt, we should be careful to attend to epistemic differences between different kinds of conspiracy theorists.

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