

Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation

M. Giulia Napolitano

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What are conspiracy theories? And what, if anything, is epistemically wrong with them? I offer an account on which conspiracy theories are a unique way of holding a belief in a conspiracy. Specifically, I take conspiracy theories to be *self-insulating* beliefs in conspiracies. On this view, conspiracy theorists have their conspiratorial beliefs in a way that is immune to revision by counter-evidence. I argue that conspiracy theories are always irrational. Although conspiracy theories involve an expectation to encounter some seemingly disconfirming evidence (allegedly planted by the conspirators), resistance to all counter-evidence cannot be justified on these grounds.

1. Introduction

The moon landing was faked. 9/11 was an inside job. Secret societies control the world. Immigration is a plan of the political elite aimed at extinguishing the white race. These are just a few examples of widely believed conspiracy theories (at least more widely than one would have hoped). To most, conspiracy theories are wacky stories, the evidence for which is allegedly given in YouTube videos where eccentric characters point out long series of coincidences that the official accounts cannot account for. When we call these theories ‘conspiracy theories’, we often use the term pejoratively to indicate theories that should not be believed, and perhaps should be met with ridicule. Similarly, the public debate about conspiracy theories assumes that conspiracy theories are fictions that undermine the trust required for the spread of knowledge in our societies, and that belief in such theories is inappropriate.

But what are conspiracy theories, exactly? And what is epistemically wrong with them? In this paper I offer a joint answer to these two questions that is based on two observations: (i) many explanations that involve conspiracies are not to be considered conspiracy theories, and (ii) whatever distinguishes conspiracy theories from mere theories that involve conspiracies makes the former epistemically problematic. Contrary to those who argue that conspiracy theories are just explanations of events that involve conspi-

racies,¹ I maintain that conspiracy theories are not theories (or explanations) at all.² Instead, I take ‘conspiracy theory’ to refer to a particular way of holding a belief in the existence of a conspiracy. The attitude of the believer, rather than any feature of the theory, determines whether a person’s belief in a conspiracy is a conspiracy theory or not.

Here is a sketch of the account to come. There is an interesting feature that we observe in people who defend conspiracy theories. It seems to be the case that, no matter what evidence we present to them against their theory, they’ll find a way to dismiss it. I take this to be a central characteristic of conspiracy theories; they give rise to this dismissive epistemic behavior. Some have argued that the resistance to disconfirming evidence is not, *per se*, a problematic feature of conspiracy theories (Keeley 1999; Dentith 2017; Harris 2018). The reason behind this claim seems to be that if a conspiracy is going on, the conspirators would be trying to cover it up. Hence, misleading counter-evidence is to be expected. The resistance to counter-evidence typical of conspiracy theorizing seems to be warranted by the kind of thing conspiracies are, namely, plots by a group of people who are trying to keep their intentions and actions secret. I will argue that the simple explanation of this feature of conspiracy theories is misleading. While it is true that belief in a conspiracy warrants a certain type of resistance to counter-evidence, I argue that the evidential *insulation* typical of conspiracy theories makes them epistemically problematic.

I begin in §2 with a discussion of the methodology employed in the conspiracy theory debate, and I motivate the need for a negatively loaded conception of conspiracy theories that tracks the same phenomenon as the ordinary expression ‘conspiracy theory’. In §3 I present my account of conspiracy theory as a self-insulated belief in the existence of a conspiracy. In §4, I argue that conspiracy theories so understood are epistemically irrational. In §5, I address three objections to my view.

2. Conspiracy theories and philosophical methodology

¹ For instance, Pigden (1995); Keeley (1999); Basham (2001); Räikkä (2009); Buenting & Taylor (2010); Dentith (2014); Harris (2018).

² In line with the literature on conspiracy theories, I use ‘theory’ and ‘explanation’ as synonyms, despite the obvious differences between the two.

First, a word about the methodology in the discussion ahead. Typically, when giving an account of conspiracy theories, the first step is to provide a definition of ‘conspiracy theory’. But what are we doing when defining the expression ‘conspiracy theory’? And what constraints should we have in mind? The kind of definition I am after is aimed at revising the ordinary expression of ‘conspiracy theory’ in order to help advance the understanding of a phenomenon that has become the object of much academic and public discussion—the phenomenon of people believing absurd theories about conspiracies, and believing them to be the best explanations of the available evidence.³ I am thinking of theories such as the fake moon landing, flat earth, or the Illuminati controlling the world. I will not discuss the rationality of any of these theories in particular, but I will assume that when we talk about conspiracy theories, we have in mind outlandish theories like these. However, our natural language intuitions about conspiracy theories seem rather confused. It is not clear what people mean by ‘conspiracy theory’, and what exactly makes them theories that should not be believed. My account looks to maintain the epistemically negative connotation that characterizes the current meaning of ‘conspiracy theory’, while making this expression clear, more precise, and suited to be employed in empirical studies of the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing.⁴

Even though explicit mentions of philosophical methodology are quite rare in the debate, there seems to be a trend in the philosophical literature about conspiracy theories to adopt a revisionary definition of conspiracy theories as any theory that involves a conspiracy.⁵ While it is commonly recognized that ‘conspiracy theory’ is ordinarily used to indicate a special type of theories about conspiracies, and that it is a negatively loaded expression, most philosophers working on the topic agree that ‘conspiracy theory’ should be defined as any explanation of an event that cites a conspiracy.⁶ One reason that is of-

³ While the perception and discussion of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories seem to have become more prominent in recent years, empirical data suggests that the phenomenon itself has not. See, for instance, van Prooijen & Douglas (2017). I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

⁴ For an empirical study regarding the negative meaning of the expression ‘conspiracy theory’ and a discussion of its consequences for the conceptual engineering of ‘conspiracy theory’ see Napolitano & Reuter (MS).

⁵ One person who does discuss the methodology of giving an account of conspiracy theories is David Coady (2018a). He argues that, given the ambiguous use of the expression and the reasoning fallacies it produces, we should abstain from ever using it.

⁶ For an in depth discussion of this definition, see Dentith (2014).

ten cited in favor of the broad, neutral definition is the practical consequences of the ordinary meaning of the expression. Some philosophers argue that, by allowing ‘conspiracy theory’ to be a pejorative expression, we help powerful people get away with their conspiracies. ‘Conspiracy theory’ can be (and often is) used as a negative label to dismiss charges of genuine conspiracies. In order to avoid dismissing real conspiracies due to this, they argue, we should stop attaching a negative value to the expression. Hence, they conclude, the meaning of ‘conspiracy theory’ should be re-engineered to mean any theory about a conspiracy, and it should not have a negative valence.⁷

However, by assuming that every theory involving a conspiracy is a conspiracy theory, these philosophers seem to have changed the meaning of ‘conspiracy theory’ in a way that is neither warranted nor fruitful. It is unwarranted because their claim that attributing the negative label ‘conspiracy theory’ to a theory might be employed to dismiss actual conspiracies has not been confirmed by empirical data—in fact, some empirical research suggests that labeling a theory a ‘conspiracy theory’ does not reduce belief in that theory (Wood 2016). Even granting that their worry is well founded and that a negatively loaded definition of conspiracy theory could help powerful conspirators get away with their conspiracies, this worry only applies to negatively loaded definitions that are *broad*, i.e., that consider *all* theories about conspiracies to be conspiracy theories. If every theory involving a conspiracy was negatively labeled as a negative ‘conspiracy theory’, then any theory involving a conspiracy would run the risk of being erroneously dismissed. On the contrary, *narrow* definitions which allow for the semantic possibility of theories involving conspiracies that are not conspiracy theories, do not fall prey to the same pragmatic concern. The narrow, negatively loaded expression ‘conspiracy theory’ does not warrant the dismissal of just any theory involving a conspiracy. Moreover, adopting a broad, neutral definition is not fruitful because

⁷ For instance, see Basham & Dentith (2016); Coady (2012). While practical concerns are the most discussed in the literature, other reasons for the minimal re-engineering have been proposed. For instance, it has been suggested that the ordinary concept is ambiguous and leads to fallacious reasoning (Coady 2018a). This assumption is discussed in Napolitano & Reuter (MS). Moreover, it has been suggested that focusing on a neutral and minimal definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ is necessary in order to avoid begging the question whether it is ever rational to believe conspiratorial explanations, and what the difference is between this explanation type as opposed to other types, more discussed in philosophy of science. Investigating the epistemic status of conspiratorial explanations could be a worthwhile philosophical project, and a minimal account of conspiracy theory might be the best revisionary account for *this* goal. However, I take it that what we’re interested in as a public and as a research community is not this goal, but rather, we want to understand and address resilient beliefs in wild conspiracies.

it does not allow for studying conspiracy theories as the phenomenon I described at the beginning of this section. Many psychologists, cognitive scientists, and social scientists who have investigated the topic of conspiracy theories have typically focused on conspiracy theories as a problem to be addressed, or as an instance of irrational behavior. The broad account has given rise to several instances of tension and misunderstanding with scholars from those other fields. Some defenders of the broad conception of conspiracy theories have harshly criticized researchers with different approaches to the topic for their negative attitude towards conspiracy theories and for ‘pathologizing’ belief in such theories, thus creating a hostile intellectual climate where different research projects on conspiracy theories seem to be talking past each other.⁸

I believe that the best revisionary definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ is going to be narrow and negatively loaded, where the narrowing factor explains the irrationality of conspiracy theories without irrationality being built directly into the definition, in the sense that conspiracy theories are not simply identified with irrational theories involving conspiracies.⁹ Such a definition allows us to investigate conspiracy theorizing as a phenomenon that seems to have become increasingly common in recent years, and it enjoys some important advantages over its broad rival. This methodological digression has two important upshots. First, the account I propose seeks to capture what we have in mind when we talk about conspiracy theories in ordinary language, i.e., the phenomenon of people believing outlandish theories about conspiracies in a way that seems to resist falsification. Second, my account is still an instance of conceptual re-engineering for theoretical fruitfulness. Hence, a failure to completely match our intuitions about what conspiracy theories are should not be considered a reason to reject it.

3. Conspiracy Theories

⁸ See, for instance, the exchange between Basham and Dentith (2016) and Dieguez et al. (2016). Other examples are Basham (2018); Dentith & Orr (2018); Hagen (2018), Coady (2018b).

⁹ As it will become clear later on, irrationality is *indirectly* built into my definition, but in a way that aims at providing understanding of how and why conspiracy theories are irrational. On my account, conspiracy theories are irrational just in virtue of the way in which they are defined—but they are not directly defined as irrational theories that involve conspiracies. They are identified with *one precise way* in which one could irrationally believe in the existence of a conspiracy.

It is commonly assumed that conspiracy theories are, at the very least, theories that involve conspiracies.¹⁰ I will challenge this assumption. I maintain that being a *theory* is not even a necessary feature of conspiracy theories, but rather that conspiracy theories are a way of holding a conspiratorial belief. Anyone who has ever met a conspiracy theorist will be familiar with the frustrating experience of trying to debunk the relevant belief. No matter what evidence we present to the conspiracy theorist, their confidence seems to remain intact. Evidence that seems to contradict the conspiratorial belief is likely to be seen by the believer as evidence that has been planted as part of the cover up. I take this to be the core feature of conspiracy theories. Belief in such theories seems to be completely immune to counter-evidence. In this section, I argue that we identify conspiracy theories with a distinctive way of holding the belief in the existence of a conspiracy, namely, one that is *self-insulated*.

Roughly, we can say that conspiracy theories are conspiracy-beliefs (beliefs in the existence of a conspiracy) that are self-insulated. Both parts of this account require clarification. I take a conspiracy to be the plotting by a group of actors—the conspirators—to achieve a goal in their interest, while trying to keep their intentions hidden.¹¹ Accordingly, a conspiracy-belief is a belief that a certain conspiracy has happened in the past or is currently going on. Conspiracy-beliefs are interesting from an epistemological point of view. Believing that a conspiracy is behind a certain event or fact entails believing that the conspirators have likely planted evidence against the conspiracy to mislead us. In their attempt to keep their actions and intentions secret, conspirators try to orchestrate cover-ups, disseminate misleading evidence, and promote alternative narratives for the public to believe. Hence, believing that a conspiracy is going on entails believing that things are not as they seem, i.e., that what seems like disconfirming evidence should not be taken to actually speak against the existence of a conspiracy. It follows from what con-

¹⁰ See Pigden (1995); Keeley (1999); Basham (2001; 2003); Räikkä (2009; 2014); Buenting & Taylor (2010); Dentith (2014). Sometimes the minimal definition is supplemented by additional feature that theories about conspiracies need to have in order to count as conspiracy theories. For instance, Coady (2012) and Feldman (2011) add that the conspiratorial explanation should be unofficial.

¹¹ While there tends to be general agreement on what conspiracies are, there has been some discussion regarding how powerful the conspirators must be, whether their goal has to be nefarious, and what role the secrecy should play. For a discussion of the definition of ‘conspiracy’, see Dentith (2014); Dentith and Orr (2018).

spiracies are that conspiracy-beliefs will screen off parts of the relevant evidence, because if a conspiracy is going on, someone is trying to make us believe otherwise.

It is part of what conspiracies are that the evidence against them could be the result of the conspirators' attempt to stage a cover up. However, this does not mean that conspiracy-beliefs are *always* immune to revision. Conspiracies may render part of the available evidence unusable while keeping other evidential relations intact. For instance, one may encounter contrary evidence that they had no reason to believe was tampered with by the conspirators. Or one may encounter defeaters for their reasons to believe in the existence of a conspiracy to begin with. For example, I might believe that most common diseases could be cured with acupuncture, but, due to a conspiracy of the pharmaceutical companies, evidence of this was hidden from the public. My conspiracy-belief could be shaken if, for instance, I discovered that the evidence I had to believe this did not come from a reliable source, or, say, if acupuncture failed to cure my flu. My conspiracy-belief would not be, on my definition, a conspiracy theory.

I submit that conspiracy theories are only those conspiracy-beliefs that are self-insulated. What I mean by 'self-insulated' is that the believers take the conspiracy to neutralize the relevant counter-evidence. No evidence could be presented to them that would cause them to change their minds, because any counter-evidence would be dismissed as a fabrication of the conspirators to steer the public away from the truth.¹² When I say that conspiracy theories are a distinctive way of holding a conspiracy-belief, I take 'conspiracy theory' to refer to an *attitude* of the believers, rather than to a type of explanation. However, the content of the belief is key. In a conspiracy theory, the conspiracy is what the believers take to justify their dismissive attitude towards the evidence, and what plays the role of immunizing one's conspiracy-belief. By defining conspiracy theories as a certain attitude, I take conspiracy theories to be essentially tied to the believers of the theories. The same explanation could be a conspiracy theory for one agent, and not for another, according to how each of them accommodates counter-evidence. Nevertheless, I still consider conspiracy theories a way of holding beliefs, rather than a derivative notion of an

¹² This does not imply that, on my account, conspiracy theorists could never abandon their beliefs. They could, but, in a conspiracy theory, this would not be a transition based on the evidence.

independently defined ‘conspiracy theorist’. A conspiracy theorist, on my view, is a person who holds one or more self-insulated conspiracy-beliefs—one or more conspiracy theories.

One more clarification of self-insulation is necessary. A self-insulated belief in a conspiracy is a belief that is immune to being disconfirmed by counter-evidence. However, the counter-evidence that is relevant to determining whether the belief is self-insulated should be restricted to counter-evidence that the subject could encounter in normal circumstances. In other words, we could say that the evidence to which conspiracy theorists are insensitive is any evidence that they might encounter in nearby possible worlds. It is possible that a believer in a conspiracy theory might change their mind in far-fetched scenarios where they might encounter exceptional evidence, such as if they could travel to the past and observe the events, or if they received an omniscient oracle’s testimony, or if they could read minds. In my view, whether these exceptional and exceptionally unusual pieces of evidence would lead someone to reduce their confidence in a conspiracy-belief is not relevant to whether or not a conspiracy-belief counts as being self-insulated in the target sense. A self-insulated belief is a belief that is immune to being disconfirmed by the kind of evidence that is available in normal circumstances. In the rest of the paper I will talk of self-insulation in this restricted sense.¹³

To summarize, a conspiracy theory is the belief in the existence of a conspiracy, where the existence of the conspiracy is taken to justify the dismissal of any seemingly disconfirming evidence that one could encounter under normal circumstances. Having defined conspiracy theories, in the next section I turn to the question of their epistemic status.

4. Are conspiracy theories irrational?

On my account, conspiracy theories are beliefs in conspiracies that are resistant to revision in light of counter-evidence. In this section I argue that, given the empirical nature of conspiracies, one can never

¹³ I am grateful to Paul Silva for helping me formulate this point.

be rational in holding a belief in a conspiracy that is self-insulated.¹⁴ In other words, I argue that it is irrational to hold conspiracy theories.¹⁵ Even though my account of conspiracy theories is significantly different from traditional accounts, the discussion in this section has substantial implications for those traditional accounts that have also claimed that the unfalsifiability of conspiracy theories does not make them irrational to believe.

The discussion over the epistemic status of conspiracy theories has traditionally focused on the question of whether it is ever rational to believe theories about conspiracies. Many have argued that it is sometimes rational because a conspiracy may be the best explanation of the evidence.¹⁶ In the debate, the question of *revising* conspiratorial beliefs in light of new evidence has always been secondary to the question of *forming* belief in conspiracies. It is often assumed that the extreme resistance to counter-evidence is built into what conspiratorial explanations are, and that it is not an epistemically problematic feature:

By invoking a conspiracy hypothesis, large amounts of “evidence” are thrown into question. This is one of the most curious features of these theories: to my knowledge, conspiracy theories [i.e., explanations involving conspiracies] are the only theories for which evidence against them is actually construed as evidence in favor of them. The more evidence piled up by the authorities in favor of a given theory, the more the conspiracy theorist points to how badly “They” must want us to believe the official story. (Keeley 1999: 120)

¹⁴ Evidential insulation, *per se*, need not be necessarily irrational. It could be argued that things such as mathematical proofs and necessary truths might be rationally believed in a way that resists revision. In this paper I only argue that evidential insulation is problematic for *empirical* beliefs, including beliefs in conspiracies, and I leave open whether evidential insulation is problematic for a priori beliefs. See Casullo 2003.

¹⁵ It is certainly the case that, on my account, the epistemic status of conspiracy theories depends on the believer, rather than on the theory to which they subscribe. When I claim that conspiracy theories are irrational, this should not be confused with a claim about any theory, but it should be read as ‘beliefs in conspiracies that resist revision in the way I described are irrational’, or better, ‘an agent is irrational insofar as they hold a self-insulated conspiracy-belief’. Being rational or irrational is a property of the agent who holds a certain belief in a certain way. However, I am not making any claims about the believer as an epistemic agent in general. The focus is on individual beliefs and whether they are rationally held. This is the main difference between my account of conspiracy theory and accounts of what some have called *conspiracism*, i.e., the tendency of some theorists to believe in conspiracies without good reason (Dentith 2018). Attributing conspiracism to believers runs the risk of suggesting a stable disposition of the believer to form this type of irrational beliefs. My account of conspiracy theories is an account of beliefs in conspiracies that are held irrationally, and not an account of the people who hold these beliefs. I thank an anonymous referee for pointing out this unclarity to me.

¹⁶ See Pigden (1995); Keeley (1999); Rääkkä (2009); Buenting & Taylor (2010); Basham (2011); Coady (2012); Dentith (2014; 2017); Harris (2018).

The thought is that, if one is epistemically justified in believing that a conspiracy is going on, then one is epistemically justified in interpreting evidence against one's belief as an attempt by the conspirators to hide their plot. This argument has much intuitive appeal and has largely gone unchallenged. However, it is unclear to what extent the hypothesis of a conspiracy warrants the dismissal of disconfirming evidence. Keeley suggests that theories about conspiracies could potentially be immune to *any* evidence:

The worry is that given a situation where all potentially falsifying evidence can be construed as supporting, or at worst as neutral evidence, then conspiracy theories are by definition unfalsifiable. In favor of conspiracy theorists, it should be noted that this unfalsifiability is not as ad hoc as it might initially seem, due to the active nature of the investigated, just noted. It is not ad hoc to suppose that false and misleading data will be thrown your way when one supposes that there is somebody out there actively throwing that data at you. (Keeley 1999: 121)

According to Keeley and those who have endorsed his argument, theories about conspiracies can be unfalsifiable, and this is not problematic because of the active nature of conspiracies.¹⁷ On this view, holding an unfalsifiable conspiratorial explanation can be rationally permissible. Hence, proponents of the view take it that it is sometimes rationally permissible to hold the belief in the existence of a conspiracy that is immune to being disconfirmed. I spend the remainder of this section arguing against this claim. Pace Keeley, not all evidence against the conspiratorial explanation can be neutralized by the belief that the conspirators are staging a cover-up.

To make the point, I will rely on some insights from Bayesian epistemology. Bayesianism gives us a theoretical framework to evaluate how relevant new evidence is to the conspiratorial hypothesis, given the background assumption that, if the conspiracy is going on, the conspirators are trying to keep their intentions and actions secret. The core features of the Bayesian model are (i) that the level of confidence in a hypothesis can be represented with a credence value varying from 1 to 0, where 1 corresponds to certainty in the truth of the hypothesis, 0 corresponds to certainty in its falsehood, and 0.5 to equal

¹⁷ Basham 2001: 268; 2003: 93; Dentith 2017: 9; Harris 2018: 243-245. For Keeley, the conspiracy theory will be abandoned when the skepticism that is required in order to maintain the belief in the conspiracy becomes 'more than we can stomach' (1999:126). The resilience to counter-evidence is not a problem *per se*, of conspiracy theories. However, in order to maintain the belief in the conspiracy, one would have to assume the involvement of more and more institutions and people until the amount of scepticism required is simply too much, and the belief in the conspiracy is abandoned.

confidence in its truth and its falsity; (ii) that ideally rational agents have credences that can be modeled by probability functions; and (iii) that agents learn from new evidence by updating their credence using conditionalization.¹⁸

Using these terms, we can define a conspiracy theory as the belief in the existence of a conspiracy C such that the credence in the existence of a conspiracy $P(C|E)=P(C)$, for any evidence E that one might encounter in normal circumstances.¹⁹ The Bayesian framework allows us to identify two conditions under which discovering new evidence will not have any effect on a rational agent's belief: certainty and irrelevance.²⁰ Let's consider each of these.

First, one could be certain that there is a conspiracy. If one's credence in a hypothesis $P(H)=1$, then the conditional probability of the hypothesis on the evidence is $P(H|E)=1$, for any new evidence E that the agent may encounter. Let's consider the case in which h is a conspiratorial hypothesis, such as:

Con: The Twin Towers fell as the result of a controlled demolition, intended by government officials.

Imagine a believer who is certain of the truth of Con. Could her belief in Con be an instance of a rationally held conspiracy theory? First, I am inclined to say that conspiracy-beliefs that are immune to revision because of certainty would not count as *conspiracy theories* on my account. Conspiracy theories are beliefs that are insulated because the evidence is dismissed by appeal to the conspirators' attempt to hide the truth. If one were certain that the Twin Towers were demolished, then certainty, rather than the belief that the conspirators are trying to hide their plot, would guarantee the immunity to revision (any non-conspiratorial hypothesis would be equally immune to revision). Hence, it is not clear that certainty in the existence of a conspiracy would count as a conspiracy theory, and thus that it would constitute an

¹⁸ For an introduction to Bayesian confirmation theory see Strevens (MS), Bovens & Hartmann (2003).

¹⁹ It would still count as a conspiracy theory if the confidence in the existence of a conspiracy could only be brought down to a certain threshold but no lower. In that case, even though the conspiracy-belief would not be *totally* immune to revision in light of new evidence, it would still be immune to revision in the sense that it could never be fully disconfirmed by counter-evidence.

²⁰ Silva (forthcoming) makes a similar point regarding the rationality of sexist and racist beliefs.

instance of a rationally held conspiracy theory. Moreover, it is hard to see how one could rationally come to be *certain* of an empirical claim such as the existence of a conspiracy. Beliefs in the existence of secretive plots are not the kind of thing that one could rationally come to believe beyond doubt. Thus, the certainty condition can never justify the evidential insulation of conspiracy theories. So let's move on to the second condition that could justify conspiracy theories' dismissal of disconfirming evidence: probabilistic irrelevance.

The irrelevance condition is the more interesting condition because it seems to be grounding Keeley's claim that, with conspiratorial beliefs, "all potentially falsifying evidence can be construed as supporting, or at worst as neutral evidence" (1999). Bayesian confirmation theory provides a quantitative method for assessing the impact of new evidence on hypotheses, based on the general principle that, if a particular observation is more likely given the truth of the hypothesis, than it is given its falsehood, then the observation is evidence in favor of the theory. An observation is probabilistically irrelevant to the hypothesis if it is assigned the same probability on the assumption that the hypothesis is true and that it is false. Keeley seems to be arguing that some conspiratorial explanations satisfy the irrelevance condition. Under the irrelevance condition, a belief in a conspiratorial hypothesis is immune to being disconfirmed because the seemingly disconfirming observation is equally predicted by the truth and falsity of the hypothesis. Given that conspiracies are plots designed by agents trying to keep their intentions and actions secret, conspiratorial explanations sometimes predict that the conspirators are fabricating misleading evidence in order to hide the truth. Seemingly disconfirming evidence can be just as likely on the assumption of a conspiracy as it is on the assumption that there is no conspiracy. And this, according to Keeley, could in some cases hold for any potential disconfirming evidence.²¹

Can conspiracy theories be rationally held in virtue of the probabilistic irrelevance condition? I believe that a conspiratorial explanation can only be immune to being disconfirmed by any new evidence if

²¹ I find it hard to make sense of Keeley's claim that seemingly disconfirming evidence could be construed as supporting the conspiratorial explanation (rather than just neutral), because it is difficult to imagine a case in which the disconfirming evidence is more strongly predicted by the conspiratorial explanation than by its negation. It seems to be part of what seemingly disconfirming evidence is that it cannot support the conspiracy hypothesis *more* than its negation.

it remains so general that it makes no specific predictions. A conspiratorial explanation of a fact or event seems to be constituted by two complementary claims: a *conspiracy claim*, according to which the activity of a group of agents is behind some fact or event, and a *cover-up claim*, which states that these agents are planting misleading evidence in order to hide their conspiratorial activity. If the conspiratorial explanation stays at a high level of generality, then it would indeed be able to account for any evidence that might arise. By not committing to a precise account of how the conspiratorial activity was carried out and by whom in the conspiracy claim, the explanation leaves open all possibilities for the kind of misleading evidence that is expected by the cover-up claim. So, no matter what is offered as disconfirming evidence, it can be dismissed as a fabrication of the conspirators. Consider a very vague version of Con, according to which:

Con Gen: The attacks on 9/11 were part of a conspiracy of agents who are trying to hide the truth.

In Con Gen, the general conspiracy claim that someone orchestrated the attacks on 9/11 is compatible with the most general cover-up claim that someone is hiding the truth. Any disconfirming evidence could have been planted by whoever is behind the attacks. Even though no explosive was found on the site of the alleged demolition, this could be a false report of the investigators, or of the media. Or it is possible that the Twin Towers weren't demolished, but whatever happened to them, someone within the US was behind it. Even though there is no evidence of people entering the building with large amounts of explosives during the days prior to the attacks, someone may in fact be hiding evidence of this, or the explosive material may have been brought inside bit by bit over a very long span of time. The generality of the conspiracy claim, together with the cover-up claim allow Con Gen to accommodate any relevant disconfirming evidence. However, Con Gen is a bad explanation of the evidence, because it fails to make specific predictions. It just claims that 9/11 was an inside job, and "they" are trying to make us believe otherwise. Hence, we should expect evidence that disconfirms the conspiratorial account. But this is far from being a prediction. We would not say that a scientific theory makes predictions if it

claims that at some point some evidence in favor of it will come up. Making genuine predictions requires more than this.²²

If the conspiracy claim of the conspiratorial explanation takes a precise form, then the level of immunization will be constrained accordingly in the cover-up claim. When the hypothesis is made more precise regarding the exact form of the conspiratorial activity, including who is involved and why, it can make specific predictions regarding what counter-evidence can be expected and which sources of information are not to be trusted. A more precise conspiratorial hypothesis makes genuine predictions, but it also leaves open the possibility of encountering disconfirming evidence should the predictions fail to come true. This disconfirming evidence will have an effect on a rational agent's confidence in the truth of the hypothesis. Let's now consider a specific version of Con, according to which:

Con Spec: Government officials staged the attack to the Twin Towers on 9/11. The buildings collapsed as the result of a controlled demolition. In fact, the jet-fuel-induced fires in the Twin Towers could not have melted steel. Nano-thermite was secretly brought inside the buildings and planted in the metal beams supporting the buildings to demolish them.

This hypothesis is specific enough to provide a genuine explanation of the events, and it makes testable predictions. But, by doing so, it makes itself vulnerable to disconfirming evidence. The evidence that insufficient amount of explosive residue was found on the site is more likely on the hypothesis that Con Spec is false, than on the hypothesis that it is true. Similarly, other observations would disconfirm Con Spec, including the fact that the majority of world's experts agree that the collapse resulted from the structural damage produced by the jet-fuel-induced fires, the amount of thermitite necessary to cut steel beams vertically is enormous and not likely to have been brought into the building in secret, and so on.²³ Once a specific version of the conspiratorial explanation is proposed, then the cover-up claim must also take a determinate form, and disconfirming evidence must be taken into account. Of course, a believer could maintain a coherent set of beliefs by altering the explanation—both the explanation of the

²² In a similar fashion, a conspiratorial hypothesis that identified all-powerful conspirators would be immune to being disconfirmed but equally incapable of making genuine predictions. I elaborate this point in section 5.2.

²³ For instance, Dunbar & Reagan (2006).

conspiratorial activity, and the explanation of who is involved in covering it up—as counter-evidence arises. However, these alterations would be ad hoc and would make the believer irresponsive to the evidence in a problematic way. While it is always possible to maintain a coherent set of beliefs by using the conspiracy claim to modify one’s predictions, doing so renders one’s belief irrational because one is not appropriately responding to the evidence.²⁴

Detailed conspiratorial hypotheses cannot rationally resist falsification in light of any disconfirming evidence. Only very general conspiratorial hypotheses, which do not make any specific claims about how the conspiracy was carried out and who is involved, can. However, the resilience of these conspiratorial hypotheses comes at the cost of indeterminacy and lack of predictive power. These hypotheses are not explanations of the evidence because they provide little understanding of the phenomena they purport to explain.²⁵ Could an agent rationally hold a very general, indeterminate conspiracy theory? First, it is hard to see what kind of evidence could support forming the belief in such a theory, other than the disbelief in the received account. In order to avoid committing to a specific conspiratorial and cover-up claim, they need to remain at such a level of generality that is more similar to scepticism in the received account than to a genuine hypothesis. However, disbelief in the received account does not warrant positive belief in the existence of a conspiracy. Secondly, if the conspiratorial hypothesis is based on evidence rather than just scepticism in the received account, for any general conspiratorial hypothesis there will be

²⁴ I am sympathetic to the argument made by Clarke (2002) that conspiracy theories often have the characteristics of what Lakatos (1978) referred to as *degenerating research programs*. A degenerating research program is a research program in which the participants are dedicated to protecting the core of a theory from falsification by altering auxiliary hypotheses and initial conditions in light of the new disconfirming evidence. I agree with Clarke that conspiracy theories are often rendered immune to falsification in this problematic way. It has been objected to Clarke that the exact point at which a conspiracy theory becomes a degenerating research program is unclear (Harris 2018). However, a similar concern does not apply to my account, since I take conspiracy theories to be the extreme case of conspiracy-beliefs held in such a way as to be completely immune to disconfirmation in nearby possible worlds. If there is a such a point at which a research program becomes a degenerating one, conspiratorial explanations whose believers will retain in light of *any* disconfirming evidence one could encounter are an example of that.

²⁵ I take this to be a further advantage of my account of conspiracy theories over traditional ones. Some conspiracy-beliefs which we would ordinarily call ‘conspiracy theories’ do not seem to meet the threshold for being considered explanations or theories; they do not make any specific predictions, and they don’t explain any evidence. Muirhead & Rosenblum (2019) refer to this phenomenon of conspiracies without theories as *the new conspiracism*. In the traditional account, conspiracy-beliefs of this kind would not be called ‘conspiracy theories’. By identifying conspiracy theories with self-insulated conspiracy-beliefs, my account of conspiracy theories has the advantage of including these conspiracy-beliefs that do not meet the conditions for being considered explanations or theories.

a more specific one that is a better explanation of the evidence in virtue of exhibiting more epistemic virtues, and should as such be preferred.

I take it that neither of the two conditions (certainty and irrelevance) that would render the evidence irrelevant to a rational agent's credence in a conspiratorial hypothesis can justify conspiracy theories' evidential insulation. Certainty is not a good candidate because, given the empirical nature of conspiracies, one could never be rationally certain of the existence of a conspiracy. As for probabilistic irrelevance, it only applies to conspiracy claims so general that they can barely be considered explanations, and are not supported by evidence so as to warrant positive belief in them. Genuine explanations, those specific enough to make predictions regarding what disconfirming evidence is to be expected, will either have to be disconfirmed by new evidence, or will have to be adjusted to accommodate for the new evidence in an ad hoc way. It follows that one could never rationally hold the belief in a conspiracy that is immune to being disconfirmed by counter-evidence. So, conspiracy theories as self-insulated conspiracy-beliefs can never be rationally held. Having restricted self-insulation to immunity in nearby possible worlds, we cannot claim that conspiracy theories are *necessarily* irrational. However, we can say that they are irrational to hold in this world and all the nearby possible worlds in which evidence coming from things like omniscient oracles, time travel, and mind reading are not available.

This analysis also shows that the resistance to revision that many conspiracy theorists exhibit is better understood as a feature of the believers, as my account suggests, rather than of the theories. Conspiratorial beliefs may be resistant to revision for different reasons having to do both with the content of the theory and with the agent's epistemic flaws, extra-epistemic motives and biases. In this section I have shown that the content of the theory *alone* cannot justify evidential insulation. If we are interested in conspiracy theories that are unfalsifiable, we need to look at the individuals' beliefs.

In the next section, I address two objections to my account and point out some of its upshots. The first objection concerns the philosophical methodology on which my account is based. The second objection targets some assumptions I made in this section regarding the epistemic standards for conspiratorial explanations.

5. Objections and replies

5.1. The change in meaning is a change in topic

Some readers might worry that re-engineering the expression ‘conspiracy theory’ as evidence-insulated beliefs will push the meaning of this expression too far from its current one. They might object that, by changing the intension and extension of the concept so radically, we have changed the topic of our inquiry. In fact, the way in which the expression is currently employed seems to refer to theories about conspiracies of a certain kind, rather than beliefs about conspiracies. Instead, on my view, the same theory could count as a conspiracy theory in some cases but not in others, according to the way in which each individual believer holds the conspiracy-belief (if it is evidentially insulated or not). In this section I address two related worries: the general worry that the methodology of conceptual engineering, which I employ, is a flawed methodology, and the worry that my proposal in particular is uninteresting because it changes the meaning of ‘conspiracy theory’ too radically.

The first objection can be seen as an instance of the well-known Strawsonian challenge to Carnap’s method of conceptual explication (Strawson 1963). In a nutshell, Strawson claims that any revisionary project that advocates for changing the extension and intension of a concept is bound to fail because, even in the most successful case, it necessarily entails a change in topic. While I think there are convincing ways of successfully rebutting the Strawsonian challenge, I will not consider them here, as this falls outside of the scope of this paper.²⁶ Notice that my account is not the only one engaged in conceptual engineering. The widely accepted definition of conspiracy theory as any explanation involving a conspiracy is *also* a revisionary definition. In fact, in its ordinary use, ‘conspiracy theory’ has a negative valence, and does not refer to just any explanation about a conspiracy. This fact is acknowledged by the proponents of the broad definition. If conceptual re-engineering is a flawed methodology, then the most popular alternative to my account is just as doomed.

²⁶ See, for instance Cappelen (2018); Haslanger (forthcoming); Nado (2019); Prinzing (2017); Thomasson (forthcoming); Sawyer (2018).

In its more specific sense, this objection could be read as an objection against my view in particular. One could argue that, while conceptual engineering may in general be a viable philosophical methodology, and changes in concepts' extensions and intensions may succeed at maintaining the same topic as the original concept, the account I propose is just too much of a shift, and fails to do so. I want respond to this objection by suggesting that the both the change in intension and in extension may not be as radical as they initially appear.

First, the focus on the extreme resistance to counter-evidence as a distinctive feature of conspiracy theorizing neatly fits with the ordinary meaning of 'conspiracy theory'. Conspiracy theories have often been compared to paranoid ideation,²⁷ and more recently to impostor syndrome (Hawley 2019). One of the reasons for this parallel is this *self-sealing* property that they seem to have (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008; Cassam 2019). In conspiracy theories, just like in paranoid ideation and impostor syndrome, the core of the beliefs set includes the reasons to discredit disconfirming evidence and many conspiratorial beliefs seem to be 'sealed' and totally insensitive to contradicting information. The shift from theory to belief is indeed a change of perspective. However, it is a way of focusing on what has been widely recognized as a central feature of conspiracy theorizing—namely, a distinctive way in which believers resist revising their beliefs in light of new evidence.

Moreover, even the extension of the ordinary concept may, to a large extent, be preserved. The ordinary expression 'conspiracy theory' seems to imply negative value, indicating theories about conspiracies that are somehow irrational to believe, outlandish, or simply bad theories about conspiracies. The paradigmatic cases of theories that are currently called 'conspiracy theories'—the outlandish and absurd ones—might fall under the revised concept, and might do so for many of their believers. In fact, it seems plausible to suppose that the reason why such outlandish theories have survived over the years, given that there's overwhelming and easily available evidence against them, is that most people's beliefs in these theories are immune to rational criticism and disconfirming evidence. Even though only empirical

²⁷ See, for instance, Barkun (2003); Fenster (1999); Hofstadter (1965).

investigations could tell us whether this is actually the case, it is plausible that the extension of the concept would to a large extent be preserved despite the change in meaning I advocate for.

While my proposal advocates for a shift in meaning, I don't think that focusing on stubbornly held beliefs in conspiracies represents a shift in topic.

Last, from a methodological point of view, my account is aimed at promoting the understanding of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. The change in meaning I propose is targeted to a specific *theoretical discussion* of conspiracy theories. The ordinary expression need not be affected by it.²⁸ Accordingly, our intuitions about what a conspiracy theory is are only subordinate to the potential theoretical advantages that a revisionary account might have. The main advantage of understanding conspiracy theories as self-insulated conspiracy-beliefs rather than as mere theories involving conspiracies, is that it allows for empirical studies in the psychology of conspiracy theorists without having to make problematic assumptions about the rationality of believing conspiracies. On my account, evidential insulation makes conspiracy theories irrational and warrants a psychological approach to explain why people have such beliefs. Moreover, differently from traditional accounts of conspiracy theories, on my account conspiracy theories are understood as a distinctive phenomenon of people having epistemically problematic beliefs regarding conspiracies. My proposal could be seen as an attempt to carve out a space for conspiracy theories as a phenomenon irreducible to other epistemic phenomena that could explain evidence resistance (e.g., echo chambers and filter bubbles). As a working definition, the one I propose looks like a promising way to further our understanding of conspiracy theorizing. These considerations should have priority over our intuitions about what conspiracy theories are.

5.2. Predictions, reflexivity and ad hoc-ness in conspiratorial explanations

In §4, I argued that it is never permissible to hold a belief in a conspiracy that is self-insulated. My discussion of the second condition, probabilistic irrelevance, relied on the two assumptions that an ex-

²⁸ This approach to the problem is also compatible with the existence of different revisionary accounts of 'conspiracy theory'.

planation that does not predict novel observations is worse than one which does, and that an explanation that was adjusted in light of new evidence to resist falsification would be ad hoc and thus irrational to believe. One might object that, given what conspiracies are and how they differ from explanations of natural phenomena, these assumptions are unwarranted in our case (Keeley 1999; 2019; Harris 2018).

Let's consider the first claim, that a general conspiratorial hypothesis which does not make specific predictions is a worse hypothesis than one which does. Harris (2018) argues that conspiratorial hypotheses might predict novel observations:

[C]onspiracy theorists may predict that evidence apparently conflicting with the conspiracy theory will be presented, and such predictions will ordinarily be borne out. Hence, it would be inaccurate to claim that conspiracy theories are not capable of predicting novel observations. (Harris 2018: 247)

I take it that a genuine prediction is a claim that a particular state of affairs will occur. In order to predict a novel observation, a conspiracy theorist would have to predict what sort of seemingly disconfirming evidence will be encountered, and who is involved in trying to hide the truth of the conspiracy. Only a specific conspiratorial hypothesis, consisting of a specific conspiracy claim and cover-up claim, can do this.

Harris might grant this point, yet still deny that a lack of predictive power is problematic for conspiracy theories. He claims, following Keeley (1999), that:

Even if one denies that conspiracy theories can predict novel facts, it is not clear that this would be a strike against such theories. As Keeley points out, the objects whose behavior is described by conspiracy theories are unlike the objects of ordinary empirical sciences insofar as the objects of conspiracy theories can be expected to actively resist investigation. (Harris 2018: 247)

Since the conspirators are trying to mislead us to avoid detection, Harris and Keeley argue, it is unclear why we would expect a good theory about a conspiracy to be able to predict their moves. In other words, predicting novel observations is not necessarily a feature of good conspiratorial explanations.

While it is often the case that the nature of the explanandum is different in the case of conspiratorial explanations than in the case of explanations of natural phenomena,²⁹ the claim that this difference warrants different criteria for evaluating hypotheses is controversial. Sometimes conspiratorial explanations are explanations of social phenomena. If we assume that social systems are indeterministic and that the behavior of agents cannot be predicted, then we should not expect to be able to understand social phenomena at all. Conspiratorial or not, explanations of people's motives and intentions could not be assessed.³⁰

On the other hand, if we assume that, to some extent, we can predict people's behavior and understand their intentions, we would expect explanations of social phenomena to be similar to other empirical explanations and subject to the same standards of assessment, including the ability to predict novel observations, explanatory power, explanatory depth, and unification. While conspiratorial explanations which are detailed accounts may exhibit these traits, general ones lack the determinateness necessary to provide significant understanding of the phenomena they are formulated to explain.

The second claim, that specific conspiratorial hypotheses would have to be falsified by disconfirming evidence that the theory failed to predict, or else be irrational in virtue of being ad hoc, could be criticized on similar grounds. In comparing conspiratorial and scientific explanations, Keeley notices that:

[C]onspiratorial explanations generally engage social behavior of purposive agents, whereas the natural sciences typically restricts its studies to non-agents (or at least agents lacking an agenda to interfere with their investigations). The fact of the matter is that the scientific study of human agents by humans is fraught and methodologically contested, whether it be social psychology, economic behavior, or sexuality. When your research subjects can read your results and explanations of their behavior—and then respond with changed behavior—science gets a lot more difficult, and the easy proclamations of natural science (including falsification) go by the wayside. (Keeley 2019: 429)

²⁹ Conspiratorial explanans always involve the intervention of human agents, but not all explananda are social phenomena. For instance, the theory that the Earth is flat, and that some powerful people in the world are trying to keep it a secret, is supposed to be an explanation of different natural observations. Similarly, the hypothesis that vaccines are a cause of autism, and that there is a conspiracy of pharmaceutical companies trying to hide the truth, is an explanation of natural observations.

³⁰ In fact, if anything, conspiratorial explanations would fare worse than non-conspiratorial ones because they attribute more intentionality to agents than their non-conspiratorial rivals. See Mandik (2007).

So, one could grant that explanations in the social domain are not subject to different standards of evaluation, but argue that resistance to falsification is warranted for those domains subject to *reflexive prediction problems*. In domains where the behavior of the object of investigation can be influenced by knowledge of the explanations proposed, falsifiability does not seem to be a valid requirement to expect of a hypothesis. Conspiratorial explanations may be explanations of this kind. One could argue that, if a conspiratorial hypothesis' predictions fail to obtain this need not necessarily disprove the theory, because it could also indicate that the conspirators changed their behavior after the conspiratorial explanation was made known to them.

I agree with Keeley that reflexive predictions could occur in conspiratorial explanations, thus altering the disconfirming effect that failed predictions should have on the hypothesis.³¹ However, there are two reasons to resist the conclusion that reflexivity problems can justify conspiratorial explanations' immunity to falsification. First, the existence of reflexive predictions is typically employed to criticize the methodology of some social sciences, rather than to claim that, in these fields, unfalsifiable theories are warranted.³² Similarly, the possibility of reflexive predictions seems to speak in favor of the difficulty (and in some extreme cases impossibility) to formulate good conspiratorial explanations, rather than supporting the claim that explanations which make reflexive predictions can be valid explanations even though they cannot be falsified by seemingly disconfirming evidence. If we believe that the subject of our investigation could potentially interfere with all the predictions that our theory makes, then we should give up the hope of formulating a good conspiratorial explanation of the events. We should come to terms with the impossibility of arriving at the truth, and suspend judgment on the matter, rather than claiming that unfalsifiability is not a problematic feature of conspiratorial explanations.

Second, not all the predictions made by conspiratorial hypotheses are of the kind that can give rise to reflexivity worries. Recall the distinction between the conspiracy claim and the cover-up claim that constitute a conspiratorial hypothesis. The conspiracy claim states that the activity of a certain group of

³¹ For a Bayesian analysis of how reflexivity alters confirmation relations see Kopec (2011).

³² For a discussion of the methodological problems generated by reflexive predictions, see Buck (1963); Grünbaum (1963); Romanos (1973); Vetterling (1976).

agents is behind a fact or event. The cover-up claim makes predictions as to what kind of counter-evidence will be encountered. While the conspirators might change their behavior to falsify the cover-up claim's predictions, many of the conspiracy claim's predictions cannot be altered by the conspirators' behavior in the same way. Especially in those cases where a conspiracy is postulated to explain a past event, reflexivity is not a problem for the conspiracy claim's predictions relative to who is involved in the conspiracy and how the conspiratorial activity was carried out.

Nothing about the nature of conspiratorial explanations allows us to assess them according to standards different from other empirical explanations. Just like any other explanations, very general conspiratorial explanations that do not make novel predictions and lack other explanatory virtues are bad explanations, and conspiratorial explanations that are modified in light of new evidence to resist falsification are problematically ad hoc.

5.3 Testimonial insulation

Another objection against the idea that conspiracy theories as insulated beliefs are irrational is that, given that evidence of conspiracy theories in normal circumstances is rarely first hand, one could be rational in resisting revision if one mistrusted the sources from which counter-evidence could be obtained. Hence, one could rationally hold a conspiracy-belief that is immune to revision in normal circumstances.

In order to respond to this objection, we need to consider two different scenarios: (i) all of the sources of evidence relevant to the existence of the conspiracy are deemed untrustworthy for reasons independent of the conspiracy; (ii) the sources are discredited after receiving the conflicting testimony, on the basis of the belief in the conspiracy. It should become clear that (i) is a case in which it is rational to resist revision in light of any testimonial evidence, but (i) does not represent an instance of conspiracy theory in the relevant sense. On the other hand (ii) is a genuine case of conspiracy theory, but it is not an instance of a rationally held one.

Let's consider each case with an example. Imagine a person, Anna, who believes that vaccines cause autism, and that a conspiracy of the pharmaceutical companies is hiding the truth on this issue. If Anna had independent reasons to mistrust scientists, doctors, news outlets, and anyone else who may be providing testimony that could disconfirm her theory, then it would seem that Anna is behaving rationally when ignoring these sources and remaining confident in her conspiracy-belief. But it would also be clear that Anna's belief is not a conspiracy theory in the relevant sense. In fact, her resistance to counter-evi-

dence is not due to her belief that a conspiracy is going on, but rather to her independent reasons not to trust some sources of information relevant to the issue of whether vaccines cause autism. Her belief might be rationally immune to disconfirmation, but it is not a conspiracy theory.

On the other hand, imagine that after forming her conspiracy-belief, Anna received testimonial counter-evidence from sources that her initial conspiratorial explanation gave no reasons to mistrust. If she then demoted these sources on the basis that, given what they testify, the conspirators must have influenced them (for instance, by deceiving them or by buying their complicity) or that they may themselves be part of the group of conspirators, then the insulated belief would count as a conspiracy theory. The conspiracy is what is taken to justify the dismissal of the relevant evidence. However, it would be irrational for Anna to demote the new sources on the basis of her conspiratorial belief. As I argued in §4, the new testimony could only be accounted for by a vague theory which did not commit to a specific cover-up claim. If she had a more specific conspiratorial hypothesis, then conflicting testimony from sources who were not initially thought to be involved in the conspiracy should affect (at least minimally) her confidence. A failure to respond to testimonial evidence would make her belief an irrational conspiracy theory.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have offered an account of conspiracy theories as self-insulated beliefs in the existence of conspiracies. I have argued that conspiracy theories so understood are always irrational.

A big advantage of my account over the alternative broad and neutral understanding of ‘conspiracy theory’ is that it allows for treating conspiracy theories as a specific epistemic phenomenon that has been playing an important role in the political and social climate of the past decade. Traditional accounts of conspiracy theories, which identify conspiracy theories with conspiratorial explanations, have failed to recognize the deeply problematic aspects—both political and epistemic—of the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing, and have often depicted conspiracy theorists as analogous to investigative journalists. Focusing on conspiracy theories as insulated conspiracy-beliefs is an attempt to promote an investigation of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories as a distinctive one, to be understood in its current political and social function.³³

³³ Such as the role of conspiracy theories as forms of political propaganda (Cassam 2019).

In this sense, this account of conspiracy theories is in line with other research in social epistemology aimed at making sense of the seemingly absurd opinions that some people hold (despite the easy and widespread access to information that the internet grants), without having to assume that, somehow, these people have stopped being responsive to the demands of truth and rationality.³⁴ Conspiracy theories are an irrational way of holding conspiracy-beliefs. However, they are seductive explanations which can easily accommodate disconfirming evidence, because they can be made internally coherent by dismissing the evidence as a fabrication of the conspirators. Only when we look closely at the dynamics of the dismissal of counter-evidence it becomes apparent that conspiracy theorists can only maintain the internal coherence of their theories by not being adequately responsive to the evidence—either by adopting a poor, indeterminate explanation of the evidence, or by adopting a more specific hypothesis but failing to respond to new evidence.³⁵

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³⁴ Fake news is one such research topic. Other examples include echo chambers and filter bubbles (Nguyen forthcoming; Jamieson and Cappella 2008), and evidential preemption (Begby forthcoming).

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