

# The power of second-order conspiracies

Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier

To cite this article: Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier (15 Jul 2024): The power of second-order conspiracies, *Inquiry*, DOI: [10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375781](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375781)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375781>



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



Published online: 15 Jul 2024.



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



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# The power of second-order conspiracies

Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier

Department of Philosophy, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

## ABSTRACT



A second-order conspiracy (SOC) is a conspiracy that aims to create (and typically also disseminate) a conspiracy theory. Second-order conspiracy theories (SOCT) are theories that explain the occurrence of a given conspiracy theory by appeal to a conspiracy. In this paper I argue that SOC and SOCT are useful and coherent concepts, while also having numerous philosophically interesting upshots (in terms of epistemology, explanation, and prediction). Secondly, I appeal to the nature of two specific kinds of second-order conspiracies to make the case for what has been called 'local generalism' (Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023a). Specifically, I focus on so-called 'denial industries' to argue that the structure of these second-order conspiracies allows us to infer non-accidental generalisations about the domain of conspiracy theories. Even though it is true that there is nothing epistemically problematic with the general class of conspiracy theories, there are specific subsets of conspiracy theories that warrant immediate strong suspicion (cf. Dentith 2022). By looking at the intricate mechanisms by which these denial industries operate, we can infer that the conspiracy theories that are produced by them are epistemically unwarranted. I conclude by making some exploratory remarks about what the metaphysics of second-order conspiracies would look like.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 24 May 2024; Accepted 29 June 2024

**KEYWORDS** Second-order conspiracy; local generalism; genealogical undermining; climate change; anti-vaccine; denial industries

## 1. Introduction

Conspiracies happen all the time. The Nixon administration conspired to wiretap the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) in the Watergate Complex. The French foreign intelligence agency planted explosives on a Greenpeace vessel named 'Rainbow Warrior' (resulting

**CONTACT** Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier  alexios.brehier@gmail.com  Azrieli International Post-doctoral Fellow, Department of Philosophy, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv 6997801, Israel

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

in the death of Fernando Pereira).<sup>1</sup> The Allied nations coordinated an intricate military deception operation to draw attention away of Normandy as a potential entry point for the 1944 invasion (aka 'Operation Fortitude'). This operation involved a series of ingenious tactics, devised and developed by Dudley Wrangel Clarke, such as the creation of fake military formations using inflatable tanks.

These conspiracies involved bringing about some concrete event, such as the sinking of Rainbow Warrior, the wiretapping of the DNC, etc. In this paper I want to focus on a different kind of conspiracy which, I believe, deserves philosophical consideration. Specifically, I want to draw attention to conspiracies that involve *the creation of conspiracy theories*. Call these conspiracies *second-order conspiracies*, and the theories about such conspiracies *second-order conspiracy theories*:

**(SOC)** A conspiracy C is a second-order conspiracy, iff, C is the reason (or one of the reasons) why a conspiracy theory T exists.<sup>2</sup>

**(SOCT)** A conspiracy theory T is a second-order conspiracy theory, iff, T purports to explain the existence of a conspiracy theory T\* by appealing to a (second-order) conspiracy.

Here's what I take to be a paradigmatic SOC: the conspiracy to create and disseminate the conspiracy theory described by the (so-called) Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Infamously, these protocols are supposed to involve the proceedings of a secret international meeting held by the Jewish elite aiming for global dominance. Of course, it is a well-established historical fact that such a meeting never took place, and that the Protocols is a forged document created and disseminated by antisemites (see Ben-Itto 2005, ch. 9). In other words, the *reason* why the conspiracy theory described by the Protocols exists is the fact that some agents *conspired* to bring that conspiracy theory into existence.

This is plausibly not the case for other conspiracy theories (whether warranted or unwarranted). For instance, standard Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories (e.g. ones involving a second shooter from the Grassy Knoll) are neither designed or manufactured: rather, they are the spontaneous result of epistemic agents trying to make sense of the available evidence.

---

<sup>1</sup>Although the degree to which Francois Mitterrand knew about the nature of the operation is still a matter of dispute. <https://www.france24.com/en/20150906-france-rainbow-warrior-dgse-sinking-greenpeace> (accessed: 03/01/2024)

<sup>2</sup>In Stamatiadis-Bréhier (2023a, 3), the definiens relativizes C in terms of a specific theory T. Here SOC is defined more liberally to allow for the production of multiple conspiracy theories (see sec. 4.2.).

How is ‘reason-talk’ supposed to be understood here? A conspiracy C is the *reason* (or *one of the reasons*) why a conspiracy theory T exists if, broadly speaking, C is one of the causes of T. There is a lot of room for nuance here. Details will depend on one’s background theory of causation and, even then, there are many ways in which a cause can bring about an event. For example, C might be a difference-maker for T (in the sense that C is the *salient*, most central, influence upon T), or perhaps C is something like a *structuring* cause (i.e. C belongs in the background conditions which *allow* for the relevant difference-maker to directly cause T).

If C causes T, then C brings T into existence. But what does it mean for a conspiracy theory to *exist*? The question of what a conspiracy theory *is*, metaphysically speaking, is largely ignored in the literature.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps conspiracy theories are like scientific theories and, thus, abstract logico-semantic structures in their nature (for discussion see Winther 2021). In this paper when I talk about ‘conspiracy theories’ I mean something more mundane. Even if a theory (scientific, conspiracy-related, or otherwise) is abstract in its nature, what matter for my purposes are its *instantiations*. Thus, I take a conspiracy theory to exist in the sense that there are concrete artifacts (such as texts, books, blog posts, etc.) or *beliefs* which express a proposition involving a putative conspiracy.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I will focus on a specific subset of SOC: namely, second-order conspiracies which involve the *fabrication* of conspiracy theories. In other words, such SOC’s constitute a form of disinformation: specifically, disinformation via the use of some conspiracy theory.<sup>5</sup> This means that a *fabricated conspiracy theory* is ipso facto a theory that is epistemically misleading in some important sense: e.g. by being false, or deliberately epistemically confusing (I follow Harris’s 2023 theory of disinformation here) (Stamatiadis-Bréhier uses the less-weighty notion of not being ‘geared towards to truth’) (Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023a, 4).

---

<sup>3</sup>Similarly, the question concerning the metaphysics of *explanation* is also largely ignored in the relevant literature (although see Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2021, 2.a.).

<sup>4</sup>Of course, conspiracy theories are not *identified* with conspiracy beliefs, in the same way that a proposition is not to be identified with token-utterances expressing that proposition.

<sup>5</sup>SOC, as defined above, would also allow for conspiracies aiming to create conspiracy theories which are neither false nor epistemically misleading. For example, it could be said that Edward Snowden conspired, together with journalists from The Guardian, to create a conspiracy theory involving a widespread NSA domestic wiretapping scandal. But this is not a *fabricated* conspiracy theory: it is a conspiracy theory involving actual events and, thus, true in its nature. Thanks to Melina Tsapos, Steve Clarke, and Daniel Barbarrusa for discussion on this.

These second-order conspiracies generate disinformation, but not every instance of disinformation is necessarily the result of a second-order conspiracy. Simply put, there are ways to disinform people without the use of conspiracy theories: e.g. by disseminating false data about supposed sudden deaths from vaccines. Second-order conspiracies can also generate propaganda: e.g. propaganda by 'Press TV', an Iranian state-controlled broadcasting channel, systematically uses social media to produce and propagate antisemitic conspiracy theories.<sup>6</sup> But, again, not every instance of propaganda is the result of a second-order conspiracy: for example, mythology was a prime vessel of propaganda in ancient Greek times.

Nor do second-order conspiracies necessarily generate conspiracy theories for nefarious reasons. For example, the 'Birds are not real' theory is a *satirical* conspiracy theory manufactured as a kind of social experiment (more on this later).

In this paper I do two things. First, I argue that SOC and SOCT are useful and coherent concepts, while also having numerous philosophically interesting upshots. To do so, I will present three types of examples of second-order conspiracy theories (some uncontroversial, some probable but not completely uncontroversial, and some unwarranted) (section 2). Then I also note that second-order conspiracies have epistemological, explanatory and predictive functions (sections 3–4). Secondly, I appeal to the nature of two specific kinds of second-order conspiracies to make the case for what has been called 'local generalism' (Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023a) (section 5): the view that certain proper subsets of conspiracy theories are inherently epistemically problematic. Specifically, I focus on the anti-vaccination industry and the industry behind climate change denialism (aka 'denial industries') and I argue that the *structure* of these second-order conspiracies allows us to infer non-accidental generalisations about the domain of conspiracy theories. In other words, even though it is true that there is nothing epistemically problematic with the general class of conspiracy theories, there are specific subsets of conspiracy theories which warrant immediate strong suspicion.<sup>7</sup> By looking at the intricate mechanisms by which these denial industries operate, we can infer that the conspiracy theories that are generated by such industries are unwarranted. Finally, I conclude by making some exploratory remarks about what the metaphysics of second-order conspiracies should look like (section 6).

---

<sup>6</sup><https://counterhate.com/research/state-hate/> (accessed: 23/05/2024).

<sup>7</sup>Here I allude to what Dentith (2022) calls 'strong' or 'type-2' suspicion (i.e. suspicion which involve an epistemic – rather than purely pragmatic – reason to think that a given conspiracy theory is false).

## 2. Examples

Second-order conspiracy theories, like first-order conspiracy theories, are diverse. The first axis of diversity concerns the various potential uses of conspiracy theories. Some are used for distinctively *political* reasons.<sup>8</sup> The Protocols, for instance, were used to motivate the anti-Jewish pogroms in nineteenth century Russia.<sup>9</sup> More recently, the Russian news media complex put forward the conspiracy theory that flight MH17 was shot down in 2014 by the Ukrainian military, and there was a coverup to make it seem as if it was shot by Russian separatist forces. Or consider how EU far-right hubs produce and sustain largely coordinated anti-refugee and anti-Muslim disinformation campaigns.<sup>10</sup>

Others are used as *hoaxes*. The ‘Birds aren’t real’ conspiracy theory, as mentioned, was a theory put forward, in the words of its creator Peter McIndoe, as ‘a spontaneous joke’.<sup>11</sup> Or consider the ‘Satanic Panic’ conspiracy theory concocted by the art group ‘The Luther Blissett Project’. According to this fabricated conspiracy theory, in 1997 the Italian town Viterbo was a kind of ‘satanist hub’ where multiple rituals and satanic masses were being performed. The point of this hoax was to raise awareness for the dangers of moral and satanic panics, while the general objective of The Luther Blissett Project was, in the words of one of its former members, ‘to raise awareness of important issues and the way the media covered them. [Also] the pranks had an ‘educational’ aspect’.<sup>12</sup>

Others are used by *state actors*. COINTELPRO, an FBI program for domestic espionage, fabricated and disseminated conspiracy theories in order to weaken and undermine various social movements (such as the Black Panthers and the native American movement). To illustrate, they employed a technique called ‘bad-jacketing’, which involved falsely

---

<sup>8</sup>For an account that takes the link between political propaganda and conspiracy theories very seriously see Cassam 2019 (although I am very sympathetic to the ‘generalist-friendly’ critique by Shields 2022) (for particularist critiques see Dentith 2020 and Hagen 2022).

<sup>9</sup>Here one should not conflate such theories with conspiracy theories which are not the result of a conspiracy but are, still, used for political reasons. For example, the Great Replacement Theory, a far-right white nationalist theory suggesting that there is a coordinated plan (using immigration) to ‘replace’ white European populations with non-white people, fuelled Anders Breivik’s mass shooting in Norway (and, more generally, an anti-muslim sentiment in Europe). But there is no evidence to suggest that this is a *fabricated* conspiracy theory (rather, its author, Renaud Camus seems perfectly sincere).

<sup>10</sup>For two reports on this see: <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-networks-and-narratives-of-anti-migrant-discourse-in-Europe.pdf> and [https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/disinfo\\_network\\_report/](https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/disinfo_network_report/) (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/technology/birds-arent-real-gen-z-misinformation.html> (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/01/19/qanon-the-italian-artists-who-may-have-inspired-americas-most-dangerous-conspiracy-theory> (accessed: 30/10/2023).

accusing various members of social movements of being covert government agents (Churchill and Wall 1990). In turn, this was supposed to fuel the theory that such movements were widely infiltrated, oftentimes resulting in the false accusation of these members.<sup>13</sup>

Or consider when the US government presented ‘wrong and in some cases *deliberately misleading*’<sup>14</sup> information (in Colin Powell’s own words; my emphasis) concerning whether Saddam Hussein’s government was in the possession of ‘weapons of mass destruction’.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, some are driven by monetary incentives. In general, there is a conspiracy theory industry (see Harambam 2020 on conspiracy theory ‘entrepreneurs’). Two plausible examples, which will be my main focus in the rest of this paper, are the so-called ‘Denial Industries’ such as the anti-vaccine lobby and the lobby behind climate change denialism. The anti-vaccine lobby is part of a large multimillion dollar industry which aims to make money out of the fostering of vaccine hesitancy. It is an industry comprised of an ecosystem of companies (most of which can be traced back to just a handful of individuals) which are in the market of various anti-vaccine media (such as documentaries, books, movies, etc.) and ‘alternative-medicine’ supplements (such as ‘treatments’ to ‘vaccine-caused autism’, COVID-19 ‘detox’ pills, etc.).<sup>16</sup>

The climate change denialist lobby is directly linked to the fossil fuel industry. It is well documented that, at least since the 70s, there has been an extensive and highly sophisticated disinformation campaign to cast doubt on the view (supported by overwhelming scientific consensus) that anthropogenic climate change is a reality (Oreskes and Conway 2010, ch. 6). Part of this campaign is to suggest, via the use of conspiracy theories, that contemporary climate science is corrupt (e.g. the ‘Climategate’ conspiracy theory) (Mann 2021, 36–41). In both cases, these denial industries engage in second-order conspiring in an attempt to defend their industry (I return to these examples later).

Another axis of diversity of second-order conspiracy theories is in terms of *epistemic status*. Some second-order conspiracy theories are (plausibly) true. It is indeed the case that the Protocols involve an *unwarranted*

---

<sup>13</sup>What comes to mind here is Sunstein and Vermeule’s (2009) talk about the ‘cognitive infiltration’ of conspiracy theorist groups (for replies see Hagen (2010) and Coady (2018)). It is conceivable that one way of cognitively infiltrating, and ultimately *undermining*, these groups is via the dissemination of fabricated conspiracy theories (see my example on 9/11 conspiracy theories in a bit).

<sup>14</sup>Quoted in <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/32505.htm> (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>15</sup>Many thanks to Charles Pigden for the example.

<sup>16</sup>See <https://counterhate.com/topic/anti-vaxx-misinformation/> (accessed: 23/05/2024).

conspiracy theory. It is also very plausible that climate change conspiracy theories are also fabricated by the fossil fuel disinformation campaign. Similarly, there is a lot of good evidence to suggest that AIDS/HIV-origin conspiracy theories were fabricated in the context of a KGB disinformation campaign (aka project 'Denver' and project 'INFEKTION') (Selvage 2019).

There are also second-order conspiracies which, even though they are not conclusively proven to be true, they are serious *contenders* for being true. In other words, such second-order conspiracy theories should be given serious consideration when considering the relevant space of hypotheses. Consider recent UFO conspiracy theories linked to the leaked pentagon videos called 'GIMBAL', 'GOFAST', and 'FLIR'. Such theories suggest that these videos show evidence of advanced (physics-defying) aircraft flown into US airspace with apparent impunity. At the same time, it is suggested that the US government is engaged in an elaborate cover-up.

There are a couple of ways one can respond to this conspiracy theory. One could say that the theory is true and there is indeed a cover-up. Another is to say that the videos are misleading and that there is nothing extraordinary in these videos, entailing that the conspiracy theory is false.<sup>17</sup> Or, one could say that the conspiracy theory is false *and* that it was fabricated (i.e. by being the result of a second-order conspiracy). And, in fact, there is some evidence to suggest this, such as the existence of a lobby within the US military trying to extract funding from the military budget by creating the impression that these supposed advanced aircraft present a security threat (I return to the question of hypotheses comparison in the following sections).<sup>18</sup>

Finally, there are second-order conspiracy theories which are (plausibly) unwarranted. For example, proponents of the 'nano-thermite' theory concerning the collapse of the WTC<sup>19</sup> claim that some rival 9/11 conspiracy theories are the result of a second-order conspiracy. The classic example here is Judy Woods' so-called 'DEW' theory (DEW for 'Directed Energy Weapon') which claims that the Twin Towers were

---

<sup>17</sup>Indeed, most of these videos have plausible, mundane, explanations (see Mick West's analysis <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/11/i-study-ufos-and-i-dont-believe-the-alien-hype-heres-why>) (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>18</sup>There are many moving parts in this story which I cannot develop here (for a fascinating report see <https://nypost.com/2023/03/21/ufo-believing-pentagon-bosses-missed-spy-craft-for-years/>) (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>19</sup>This is the theory according to which the Twin Towers were laced with nano-thermite before being deliberately demolished.



brought down using a ‘cold fusion’-based energy weapon. The idea here seems to be that such theories are fabricated to create confusion and draw attention *away* from factual 9/11 conspiracy theories.<sup>20</sup>

The above illustrates several features about the class of second-order conspiracy theories. First, particularism about second-order conspiracy is *prima facie* true: there is nothing inherently problematic with the class of second-order conspiracy theories (some are warranted, and some are unwarranted).<sup>21</sup> Secondly, SOC and SOCT are *conceptually* coherent: they have clear instances, and they can be utilised to make sense of a variety of real-life cases. Also, the very notion of a conspiracy to fabricate conspiracy theories is *already assumed* by actual conspiracy theorists (as per the 9/11 example in the previous paragraph). This also highlights that SOC and SOCT, on their own, are neutral in terms of *which* second-order conspiracy is actually taking place. For example, I think it is very plausible that the anti-vaccine industry produces fabricated conspiracy theories (see sec. 4.1). But it could be argued, instead, that *that* (second-order) conspiracy theory is the result of a conspiracy (perhaps produced by Big Pharma to undermine the anti-vaccine movement).<sup>22</sup>

In the next section, I explore deeper philosophical consequences concerning the epistemology of conspiracy theories.

### 3. Epistemology

Once the notion of a second-order conspiracy theory is included in our philosophical apparatus, the first thing to notice is that a key particularist insight is vindicated: the idea that the domain of conspiracy theories is very complex. The particularist correctly notes that conspiracy theories are widely epistemically diverse. The appeal to second-order conspiracies enhances that point by showing that there are not only warranted conspiracy theories but there are also warranted conspiracy theories *about* conspiracy theories. In other words, some conspiracy theories are false, but some conspiracy theories are false *because* a second-order conspiracy

---

<sup>20</sup>Interestingly, Judy Woods claims that the *nano-thermite* theory is the result of a second-order conspiracy, instead.

<sup>21</sup>Although, as it will become apparent, this does not entail that particularism about *first-order* conspiracy theories is also true (see sec. 5). For recent defences of particularism see Dentith (2023) and (Duetz 2022; 2023) (although see Tsapos (2023) for some nuances concerning what she calls the ‘conspiracy definition dilemma’).

<sup>22</sup>Ditto for the fossil fuel industry second-order conspiracy (see Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023a, sec. 6). Many thanks to Catarina Dutilh Novaes for pressing me on this.

theory *about* them is true. This showcases that the structure of the domain of conspiracy theories is even more intricate than perhaps it was initially thought.<sup>23</sup>

Another particularist insight is that that conspiracy theorising is *inevitable*. Even the official story about the 9/11 terrorist attack is a conspiracy theory. This means that the question shouldn't be whether conspiracy theorising is an acceptable practice but, instead, *what kind* of conspiracy theorising one should engage in. Adopting the notion of a second-order conspiracy theory also enhances that point. Second-order conspiracy theorising is *itself* a kind of conspiracy theorising. And a way in which one can uncover unwarranted conspiracy theories is engaging precisely in that kind of *conspiracy* theorising.

Also, at a psychological level, second-order conspiracy theorising is a way of creating a kind of rapport with conspiracy theorists who adopt unwarranted conspiracy theories. Instead of dismissing a given conspiracy theory T in virtue of the putative problematic nature of conspiracy theories *as a class*, one could reject T because it is the result of a second-order conspiracy. In this sense, one grants the 'conspiratorial mindset' (which at times can be epistemically sound given the existence of actual conspiracies) but urges the conspiracy theorist to consider whether the conspiracy theory which they are espousing is *itself* the result of a conspiracy (and whether, perhaps, they should adopt a conspiracy theory about *that* conspiracy theory, instead).

Relatedly, I take it that the most important epistemological feature of second-order conspiracies is that it allows for what Stamatiadis-Bréhier (2023a) calls the *genealogical undermining* of certain conspiracy theories. Some conspiracy theories are *fabricated* by being the result of a (second-order) conspiracy. These conspiracy theories warrant immediate suspicion based on the fact that they can be traced back to an epistemically problematic source.<sup>24</sup> This is similar to how other projects of genealogical undermining operate, like ones concerning normative beliefs or beliefs involving controversial phenomena such as libertarian free-will (Korman 2019; Queloz 2021).

<sup>23</sup>Expanding on Dentith's influential (2016) paper, I would argue that in some cases we can infer the best explanation for the existence of a conspiracy theory by positing a second-order conspiracy.

<sup>24</sup>At least this is what Stamatiadis-Bréhier argues. Of course, genealogical undermining projects are not entirely uncontroversial (there are, for example, issues such as the possibility of so-called 'meta-undermining' and epistemic hijacking of a given genealogy, which are addressed by Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023a, secs. 6, 7). There are also other issues which Stamatiadis-Bréhier does not explicitly tackle such as the question of what *kind* of defeater is at play in genealogical undermining, or whether there is a *conceptual* connection between an undermining genealogy and its product (Ktenas 2023, 128–131).

In the next section I look into two distinctive kinds of explanatory upshots one can draw from second-order conspiracies.

#### 4. Explanation

A second-order conspiracy does at least two things: it generates a conspiracy theory, but it also *designs* that conspiracy theory. Concerning the first feature: there can be a conspiracy to generate a single conspiracy theory, but there can also be a conspiracy to generate *multiple* conspiracy theories. Concerning the second feature: the fact that there is design involved in the fabrication of a conspiracy theory means that there's *a process* by which such a conspiracy theory is brought about. Based on these two features (the fact that a conspiracy can generate multiple conspiracy theories, and the fact that such theories are generated via an intricate process) we can draw two distinct explanatory projects.

The second project is mechanistic: it concerns the identification of a complex multidimensional causal sequence moving towards some appropriately defined termination-condition (echoing here the popular notion of mechanistic explanation from the philosophy of science literature).<sup>25</sup> To illustrate, consider two examples of second-order conspiracy theories (and to keep things contained, I will frame the rest of this paper in terms of these examples):

**(SOCT<sub>A</sub>)** There is a conspiracy by the anti-vaccine industry to fabricate and disseminate conspiracy theories related to vaccines.

**(SOCT<sub>F</sub>)** There is a conspiracy by the fossil fuel industry to fabricate and disseminate conspiracy theories related to climate change.

Both SOCT<sub>A</sub> and SOCT<sub>F</sub> explain the fabrication of a conspiracy theory in terms of a highly sophisticated process. And this process is surprisingly similar to both the anti-vaccine and the fossil fuel denial industry. To illustrate, consider what Stamatiadis-Bréhier calls the *repackaging* technique (for additional techniques see Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023a, secs. 2 and 4):

**(Repackaging)** The technique of presenting the same conspiracy-claim in different ways depending on which target group is being addressed.

For instance, the conspiracy theory about the dangers of mRNA-based COVID-19 vaccines takes a different form when it is targeted towards

---

<sup>25</sup>Examples could include mechanisms underlying the development of symptoms from a virus, or how kinase 'activates' proteins via phosphorylation. See Ioannidis and Psillos (2022).

the black community compared to when it is targeted towards prospective mothers. In the former case, the claim becomes: 'mRNA vaccines cause autism'. This is based on the (grossly unscientific) view that the black community is more susceptible to vaccine-related autism.<sup>26</sup> In the case of prospective mothers, the conspiratorial claim becomes: 'mRNA vaccines cause infertility' (for related discussion see also (Klein 2023, ch. 10)).<sup>27</sup>

Similar remarks apply to the industry fabricating climate change conspiracy theories. It is no accident that the conspiratorial narrative about climate change has shifted continuously in the past decades. Initially, the fossil fuel industry wanted to cast doubt on the very *idea* of climate change (claiming that there is no anomalous fluctuation of temperature to begin with). Then, it was claimed that climate change exists but human fossil fuel-based industrial activity is not to blame (instead, the blame was put on solar influence). The reason for all this 'repackaging' is simple: the same messaging must shift depending on the societal circumstances in order for the messaging to become as potent as possible (for discussion see Mann 2021).

The key takeaway here is the following: SOCT<sub>A</sub> and SOCT<sub>F</sub> both describe industries which, through a high degree of sophistication, fabricate conspiracy theories for a given (non-truth conducive) goal. Crucially, there is a *mechanism* by which this happens. Drawing from work from the philosophy of science, let us suppose that the structure of a given mechanistic explanation has three components: a description of the relevant *components*, the connections or *interactions* between those components, as well as the *activities* performed by those interactions of components.<sup>28</sup> Applying the mechanistic explanation structure to the question of second order-conspiracies, we get the following three questions:

- (1) Who are the main *actors* (or *conspirators*) involved in these second-order conspiracies?

---

<sup>26</sup>See <https://counterhate.com/research/pandemic-profiteers/> (accessed: 23/05/2024). Another example: racist COVID-19 conspiracy theories claim that the (human-engineered) virus was designed to *spare* Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese people (a claim famously made by anti-vaccine industry superstar Robert F. Kennedy Jr.). <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/15/us/politics/rfk-jr-remarks-covid.html> (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>27</sup>Many thanks to Steve Clarke for bringing Naomi Klein's book to my attention.

<sup>28</sup>There a lot of room for discussion concerning the exact features of mechanistic explanation. E.g. some 'new mechanists' claim that we should dispense with activities-talk (on the more conciliatory 'consensus'-view of mechanism see Illari and Williamson 2012), and others claim that talk of interactions between components or 'parts' should be understood in a highly deflationary sense (Ioannidis and Psillos 2022). Still, my characterization here is neutral enough, or, at the very least, can be *translated* into one's preferred background ontology, without compromising the main point I am trying to make.

- (2) How are they *connected* to each other?
- (3) *How* (i.e. in terms of which set of *activities*) is the relevant conspiratorial activity being performed?

Taking the tactic of Repackaging as a case study of how the anti-vaccine and the climate change denialist industry operate, I use the mechanistic explanation structure to spell out the mechanisms by which these second-order conspiracies operate.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.1. *The anti-vaccine mechanism*

Take SOCT<sub>A</sub>. The anti-vaccine industry existed long before COVID-19. In 1998 Andrew Wakefield published a paper in *The Lancet* suggesting that the MMR vaccine is causally connected to autism in children (through a process he and his colleagues dubbed ‘autistic colitis’). The paper was retracted for being fraudulent and non-replicable, and it was later revealed (mainly through the work of investigative journalist Brian Deer) that Wakefield was embarked in an elaborate hoax to portray the MMR vaccine as dangerous, while at the same time making money from promoting *his own* vaccine patent (it is worth mentioned that, at the time, over 90% of UK children were being vaccinated with the MMR vaccine) (Deer 2020).<sup>30</sup> Wakefield, after getting his medical licence stripped, became an anti-vaccine ‘activist’ and helped build various aspects of the anti-vaccine industry (and he is still largely incorporated in that industry by being affiliated with paradigmatic anti-vaccine companies such as Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s (henceforth: RFK Jr.) Children’s Health Defence, as well as anti-vaccine figures such as director Del Bigtree).<sup>31</sup>

On the 16th of October 2020, a few months after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a semi-private anti-vaccine conference (the Fifth International Public Conference on Vaccination) was organised by the

---

<sup>29</sup>Stamatiadis-Bréhier (2023c, 7–9) appeals to Repackaging and other tactics to argue that these second-order conspiracies have an intricate causal structure. In that paper, however, Stamatiadis-Bréhier largely ‘black-boxes’ the components and activities underlying these tactics (since the objective of that paper was primarily to show that there can be genealogical defeat for certain conspiracy theories *assuming* that they are produced by an epistemically suspicious mechanism).

<sup>30</sup>Deer also reveals that even though Wakefield was paid more than £400,000 by his lawyers, that money was ‘part of £3.4m distributed from the legal aid fund to doctors and scientists who had been recruited to support a now failed lawsuit against vaccine manufacturers.’ Elsewhere, Deer draws the following conclusion: ‘This Barr-Wakefield deal was the foundation of the vaccine crisis – morphing into campaigns against shots for everything from human papillomavirus to SARS-CoV-2 – both in Britain and throughout the world.’ (Richard Barr was one of the Wakefield’s lawyers). <https://briandeer.com/mmr/st-dec-2006.htm> and <https://briandeer.com/mmr/lancet-summary.htm> (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>31</sup><https://counterhate.com/research/pandemic-profiteers/> (accessed: 23/05/2024).

National Vaccine Information Center (NVIC).<sup>32</sup> In that conference, a number of key anti-vaccine figures and companies set out their ‘game-plan’ on how they would use the COVID-19 pandemic as an ‘opportunity’ to advance their anti-vaccine agenda, now under a new guise.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, the NVIC conference acted as a central ‘hub’ of coordination and strategy-setting for the anti-vaccine ecosystem. For this reason, it is not surprising that anti-vaccine messaging stayed relatively consistent at a global scale (see Butter and Knight 2023).

This gives us the first two component of the mechanistic explanatory structure: the actors and their interactions. The anti-vaccine industry is a complex whole comprised by entrepreneurs (such as Wakefield, RFK Jr., and Del Bigtree), companies, and anti-vaccine-advocacy organisations such as the NVIC and Children Health Defence. Additionally, we know at least one way in which these actors co-ordinated: the NVIC conference.

I cannot fully make justice here to the level of complexity involved in the anti-vaccine disinformation machine. Still, here is one interesting case in which we get a good glimpse into the way anti-vaccine messaging is being coordinated (which would give us the third component of the mechanistic explanatory structure). The so-called ‘HART-leaks’ refer to the internal chatroom records of the Health Advisory and Recovery Team (HART), a UK-based anti-vaccine organisation.<sup>34</sup> These leaks illustrate how much thought and coordination was put into crafting the right type of messaging to effectively promote anti-vaccine legislation. For example, there was a conscious effort to ‘seed the thought that vaccines cause COVID’ (my emphasis), as well as to target young adults instead of kids because ‘trying to influence kids would be an absolute minefield in terms of PR, ethics and law’<sup>35</sup> (this last quote is from Patrick Fagan – an ex-psychologist of Cambridge Analytica – which further illustrates the use of social-engineering techniques in the context of anti-vaccine lobbying).<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup><https://www.protectinghealthandautonomyinthe21stcentury.com/> (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>33</sup><https://counterhate.com/research/pandemic-profiteers/> (accessed: 23/05/2024).

<sup>34</sup>For the complete files see <https://ddosecrets.com/wiki/HART>. (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>35</sup>The rest of the quote: ‘A vaccinated child is like a vegan cat: we all know who’s really making that decision. I don’t think there’s much point trying to persuade kids when it will be up to their parents mostly, anyway.’ For a selection of quotes from the HART-leaks see <https://counterdisinformationproject.substack.com/p/the-pandata-file> and <https://www.logically.ai/articles/hart-files-anti-vaccine-myths-westminster>. (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>36</sup>HART, in turn, is part of a group called PANDATA, which acts as a coordinating hub for anti-vaccine lobbying across the globe. <https://counterdisinformationproject.substack.com/p/the-pandata-file>. (accessed: 30/10/2023).

## 4.2. The climate change denialist mechanism

Similar remarks apply to SOCT<sub>F</sub>. It could even be said that the mechanisms underlying the climate change ‘denial machine’ are even more sophisticated than the ones involved in the anti-vaccine industry (for one, the genealogy of climate change denialist goes back to the 70s) (Dunlap and McCright 2011; Oreskes and Conway 2010). The fossil fuel industry and (more broadly) the petrochemical industry have long been embarked in a coordinated disinformation campaign about the phenomenon of climate change.<sup>37</sup> To quote leading climate science sociologists Dunlap and McCright (2010), the ‘denial machine’ was:

[i]nitially funded primarily by the fossil fuels industry, [and] over time conservative foundations and thinktanks have become major supporters and promoters of climate change denial. Conservative think-tanks in particular have facilitated and promoted the efforts of a small number of ‘contrarian’ scientists in an effort to provide the forces of denial with the guise of scientific credibility, magnifying the visibility and impact of the contrarians’ views. (Dunlap and McCright 2010, 240)

Thus, and somewhat simplifying, we have the following actors at play: the fossil fuel and petrochemical industries (comprised by companies like ExxonMobil and Chevron),<sup>38</sup> conservative foundations (such as the ‘Heritage Foundation’), libertarian think tanks (such as the ‘Cato Institute’), and, crucially, contrarian scientists whose primary objective and function is to create doubt about the overwhelming scientific consensus concerning human-caused climate change (Dunlap and Brulle 2020).<sup>39</sup> In turn the coordination of these actors is being accomplished in a number of ways, including through the use of PR firms (Brulle and Werthman 2021) and organisations acting as networking platforms such as the Council for National Policy (whose secretive work has been expertly portrayed by investigative journalist Anne Nelson).<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup>The deeper (non-monetary) motivations behind this campaign are intricate (see McCright and Dunlap (2010) on ‘anti-reflexivity’, and Oreskes and Conway (2022) on the role of conservative anti-regulatory politics).

<sup>38</sup>On what I take to be ‘smoking gun’ evidence concerning ExxonMobil’s public deception campaign see Supran and Oreskes (2017).

<sup>39</sup>To be clear there are *even more* actors at play here: e.g. industrial sectors which are dependent on fossil fuel such as the American Iron and Steel Industry, coalitions such as the Global Climate Coalition (GCC) (for the coordinating function of the GCC see Brulle 2023), ‘astroturf’ groups (i.e. largely manufactured groups trying to emulate legitimate grassroots movements), conservative philanthropists such as the Kochs and the Scaifes (Dunlap and Brulle 2020), as well as fossil fuel lobbyists acting as ‘double agents’ within universities or genuine climate movements (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jul/05/double-agent-fossil-fuel-lobbyists>). (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>40</sup><https://newrepublic.com/article/167002/council-national-policy-documents-right-wing-conspiracy>. (accessed: 30/10/2023).

So, again, we have at least two components of the mechanistic explanatory structure: the actors and their connections. What about the set of *activities* which produce the climate change denialist messaging? I have already mentioned that climate change conspiracy theories have been presented in terms of Repackaging: the main conspiratorial claim (that climate science is corrupted) has shifted depending on the context. This was mainly done through the works of contrarian scientists such as Fred Singer and Patrick Michaels who have received funding from the climate change denial industry (either directly or indirectly) (Dunlap and Brulle 2020, 54). Climate change denialism also operates through the publication of climate ‘sceptic’ books (research by Dunlap and Jacques (2013) demonstrates 92% of these books, most published in the US since 1992, are linked to conservative think tanks), scientific reports that attempt to emulate the reports made by the IPCC (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), as well through petitions signed by contrarian scientists and ‘experts’ (such as the ‘Oregon petition’, which was the denialist reaction to the Kyoto Protocol treaty of 1997) (Mann 2021, 31–32).

### 4.3. Explanatory unification

In the previous sections, I argued that the second-order conspiracies described by  $SOCT_A$  and  $SOCT_F$  can be used to explain the existence of certain conspiracy theories: the anti-vaccine industry produces COVID-19 conspiracy theories, and the climate change denialist lobby produces climate change conspiracy theories. I also argued that these kinds of explanations are mechanistic in nature: they specify the actors at play, the connections holding between them, and the activities in which they are involved.

In this subsection, I argue that there is yet another kind of explanation that second-order conspiracies (such as the ones described) can deliver: explanations that are based on the idea of *unification*. Again, taking as a template the way in which explanatory unificationism has been modelled in the philosophy of science, I will assume that such explanations have the following structure: an explanandum  $Q$  is being explained by a set of explanantia  $P_1 \dots P_n$ , where at least one of such explanantia is a non-accidental regularity (i.e. a nomic generalisation). For example, the fact that  $x_1$  has anemia is explained by at least two facts: (i)  $x_1$  is homozygous for the sickling allele, and, (ii) it is the case that a specific organism  $x$  is homozygous for the sickling allele, iff, it is the case that  $x$  develops



anemia (i.e. the relevant nomic regularity holds) (this is a classic example due to Kitcher 1989).<sup>41</sup>

To see how the second-order conspiracy mechanisms I have sketched can do explanatory unificationist work, consider that these mechanisms are responsible for the production of *multiple* types of conspiracy theories. For example, the anti-vaccine industry does not only produce conspiracy theories about mRNA-based vaccines (e.g. theories saying that the spike-protein breaches the brain–blood barrier), but conspiracy theories about lockdowns, the very existence of SARS-CoV-2, as well as, super-conspiracy theories involving the ‘Great Reset’ (more on this later).

A few notes. First, conspiracy theories produced by the same second-order conspiracy are not necessarily compatible with one another in terms of truth. This is as it should be. Recall that Repackaging aims to maximise the reach of the conspiracy theory messaging (rather than, say, trying to produce a coherent theory about reality). Also, it has been suggested (plausibly in my opinion) that one can hold two contradictory conspiracy theory beliefs at the same time (by holding a *non-doxastic* higher-order attitude which, in turn, can be exemplified by these first-order beliefs) (for something similar to what I have in mind see Ichino and Räikkä 2020).

Secondly, the fact that the generalisations involved in these explanations are not exceptionless is a *feature*, not a bug: the fact that COVID-19 conspiracy theories are typically produced by the anti-vaccine industry does not entail that *every* COVID-19 conspiracy theory is produced in this manner. Many explanations in the sciences are similar in nature (especially in the special sciences) and, in fact, the explanatory unificationist model was modelled with precisely those kinds of explanations in mind.

Finally, explanatory unification does not need to stop at the first ‘stage’ (so to speak). Let a conspiracy theory T be produced by some second-order conspiracy C. But it could be that C *itself* is also subject to the unificationist treatment. The Great Reset conspiracy theory is a good example of what I have in mind here. According to that theory, the Great Economic Forum is engaged in a global conspiracy to transform the planet into a moneyless, insect-eating, totalitarian state. In that effort, the COVID-19

---

<sup>41</sup>Kitcher’s unificationist framework is supposed to capture the idea that explanation proceeds by *incorporating* some regularity under some even more abstract regularity, and so on. There is also no reason to think that the unificationist framework should be restricted to the sciences (on the possibility of an ecumenical account, even accommodating unificationist-friendly ‘non-causal’ explanations see Stamatidis-Bréhier 2021; 2023b).

pandemic as well as the threat of climate change are seen as tools for implementing the Great Reset. The crucial point here is this: there is evidence to suggest that the genealogy of the Great Reset can be traced back to both the anti-vaccine *and* the climate change denialist lobby. And, in turn, this seems to suggest that these two industries are more intimate than perhaps it might have been initially thought.<sup>42</sup> Another well-documented case is the way in which disinformation campaigns involving acid rain, the ozone hole, and second-hand smoke, eventually collectively morphed into climate change denialism (Oreskes and Conway 2010).

## 5. Local generalism

Time to take stock. So far I have looked into the features of two second-order conspiracy theories: SOCT<sub>A</sub> and SOCT<sub>F</sub>. I have argued that they describe second-order conspiracies which are underwritten by a complex mechanism of actors, connections between these actors, and the activities they perform. Based on that feature, one can appeal to SOCT<sub>A</sub> and SOCT<sub>F</sub> to *mechanistically explain* the existence of certain conspiracy theories (i.e. by showing the intricate ways in which those conspiracy theories came about). I have also argued that these mechanisms can be used for *unificationist* explanatory purposes: e.g. the climate denial machine produces many types of conspiracy theories, and they can be all subsumed by the *same* regularity. Thus we have the following features:

**(Mechanism)** The ability to explain a conspiracy theory in terms of the mechanism which produced it.

**(Unification)** The ability to explain a conspiracy theory in terms of the nomic regularity it is being subsumed under.

**(Prediction)** The ability to predict future token-occurrences of a conspiracy theory.

Mechanism plausibly suggests Prediction: if I know the mechanism by which climate change conspiracy theories are produced then, insofar as the appropriate conditions are in place, I can anticipate new occurrences of these conspiracy theories. E.g. whenever there is an upcoming IPCC report or some kind of climate summit, it is reasonable to expect some kind of reaction by the climate change lobby. To illustrate: the Kyoto accords were met with the Oregon petition, the 2007 Copenhagen

---

<sup>42</sup>For a genealogy of the Great Reset conspiracy theory see <https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-great-reset/> (accessed: 30/10/2023)

climate change mitigation negotiations were met with the (largely manufactured) 'Climategate' scandal (Mann 2021, 36–41), and the World Economic Forum's Great Reset initiative was met with a barrage of Great Reset super-conspiracy theories.

Unification (combined with Mechanism and Prediction) also ensures that the predictive features of  $SOCT_A$  and  $SOCT_F$  are not isolated phenomena. Rather, we know the production-mechanism of *many* conspiracy theories (since they come from a unified source), and we can make a wide array of predictions based on these mechanisms. For these reasons, I submit that there is *non-accidental regularity* involved in the second-order conspiracies described by  $SOCT_A$  and  $SOCT_F$ :

**(Regularity)** There is a nomic regularity describing the behaviour of a conspiracy theory.

If SOCA and SOCF exhibit Regularity, then this has implications for particularism. But there are different ways in which particularism can be understood. For example, particularism might be understood as a claim about the epistemic status of the class of conspiracy theories *taken as a whole*:

**(Particularism)** There is nothing inherently epistemically problematic with the *class* of conspiracy theories taken as a whole.

Particularism is unaffected by the existence of regularities in the domain of conspiracy theories: even if there are clusters of regularity involving certain subsets of conspiracy theories, it will still be the case that there is nothing inherently epistemically problematic with the *class* of conspiracy theories (in the same way there is nothing problematic with the class of 'scientific theories'; even though some of its members are unwarranted). But this is not the case if particularism is understood as a view about how one should *investigate* conspiracy theories:

**(Particularism-investigation)** Conspiracy theories should be examined on a case-by-case basis to determine whether they warrant (strong) suspicion.

SOCA and SOCF exhibiting Regularity is compatible with Particularism but not with Particularism-investigation. If there is something inherently problematic with a specific subset of climate change conspiracy theories (i.e. the ones produced by the climate change denial machine) then these conspiracy theories warrant *immediate* suspicion. This results in a kind of localised generalism:

**(Local Generalism)** There is something inherently epistemically problematic with certain proper subsets of conspiracy theories (e.g. conspiracy theories produced by the anti-vaccine industry). Also, these conspiracy theories warrant immediate (strong) suspicion.

This is not an entirely uncontroversial claim, and there are legitimate questions which I cannot address here (although see Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023a, 10). Still, I take the remarks made in the previous paragraphs to show that Local Generalism is a thesis worth considering. Those who take the existence of second-order conspiracies seriously, should also take Local Generalism seriously since it is plausible to argue that there *are* local regularities by appealing to the existence of second-order conspiracies.

There is also a *parity* argument for Local Generalism: the idea that there are local regularities is plausible when applied in domains which are *also* prone to particularistic treatments. Take metaethics. Moral particularism is, roughly, the view that there are no usable moral principles (for an overview see (Väyrynen 2023)). This means that we cannot appeal to moral principles (like the principle of utility) as a *standard* in our everyday moral theorising in order to determine whether particular moral acts are morally good or not. This view is supposed to be motivated by the so-called ‘argument from holism’ according to which the attribution of normative reasons is a radically context-sensitive matter: an act is a reason for  $\varphi$ -ing under circumstances  $C$ , but that same act is *not* a reason for  $\varphi$ -ing under circumstances  $C^*$ . Or consider the special sciences: it is plausible that there are no exceptionless scientific principles in domains such as biology and psychology.

In both the moral domain and the domain of the special sciences, it would be a mistake to try to locate exceptionless principles. But it would be also a mistake to conclude that there are no regularities whatsoever. In metaethics it is plausible that there are *hedged* moral principles: these could be principles like ‘If such-and-such conditions apply, lying is wrong’, or, ‘Inflicting pain is morally wrong, all else being equal’ (for a detailed account see Väyrynen (2009)). According to these principles, there is nothing *inherently* wrong with lying or inflicting pain, even though pain and lying *are* morally wrong given the right set of circumstances. This grants the particularist insight from holism, but it also retains the generality of moral principles albeit in a localised manner. Similarly, in the case of special sciences it is plausible that there are true *ceteris-paribus* principles such as Mendel’s law in biology.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup>For discussion on the analogy between moral and scientific principles see Stamatiadis-Bréhier (2022; 2023c).

Local Generalism is supposed to be the analogous view applied to the landscape of conspiracy theories. There is nothing wrong with conspiracy theories themselves but granting the existence of the second-order conspiracies I have sketched, there *is* something wrong with specific localised subsets of conspiracy theories.

## 6. Metaphysics

Local Generalism suggests that there are clusters of regularity in the domain of conspiracy theories. Two such clusters, the anti-vaccine and climate change denialist industries, were described in terms of being second-order conspiracies. The fact that they have an intricate structure (involving actors, connections, and activities) allows them to deliver mechanistic explanations. Also, the fact that many different types of conspiracy theories can be subsumed by them, allows them to deliver unificationist explanations. And the fact that they have a dual-explanatory function in the above sense indicates that they have a predictive function as well.

This suggests, to my mind, that the conspiracy theories produced by these industries are members of a robust social kind, or, in other words, a kind exhibiting features which we usually ascribe to natural kinds (such as projectability).<sup>44</sup> This means that there is *objective similarity* between the conspiracy theories produced by the climate change denialist industry, and, analogously, for the theories produced by the anti-vaccine industry ('denial industries' henceforth). And since this kind of objective similarity is supposed to be understood in metaphysical terms, I would like to explore what the *metaphysics* of second-order conspiracies would look like.

I can only make speculative remarks at this point. And there are plenty of potential avenues concerning the metaphysics of conspiracies which are likely to be worthy of exploration. For example, are second-order conspiracies fusions of the conspirators involved (and who counts as a conspirator in this case?), or are they also comprised by entities like corporations and the like? Should denial industries be understood as *agents* (or perhaps *zombie-agents* as per Leffler (2023)), or should they be understood as a *group-mind* (or, perhaps as collections of individuals exhibiting collective intentionality via 'we-attitudes')?

---

<sup>44</sup>See Mallon (2016) and Karagiannopoulos and Stamatiadis-Bréhier (2024) for discussion.

A question about the metaphysics of denial industries *specifically* could be framed as a problem about their *unity*:

**(Unity)** What makes sure that these (second-order) conspiracies persist through time as a unified entity?

In other words, what makes sure that these conspiracies ‘hang together’? This question is important for potentially many reasons (e.g. intrinsic metaphysical interest or making sense of conspiracies in the setting of social ontology). But the most important reason to my mind is that failing to accommodate Unity risks compromising the fact that there is *regularity* involved in the production of conspiracy theories by the denial industries (what I called Regularity earlier). And if Regularity does not hold then it is unclear if we can indeed appeal to these denial industries to explain, predict, and epistemically assess the conspiracy theories that they produce.

Why think that Unity fails? There are at least two kinds of considerations that speak against the homogeneity and continuity of these denial industries. First, these industries have *internal rivalries*. In the anti-vaccine industry there are multiple sub-groups each pursuing their own interests. Expanding on some of the remarks made in sec. 4, it is worth noting that some anti-vaccine groups have a purely entrepreneurial aspect (e.g. Joseph Mercola’s supplement industry), and others also have a political agenda (e.g. RFK’s recent campaign as a candidate for the US Democratic Party; before turning independent).<sup>45</sup> Crucially, some of these agendas don’t always align. For example, Jayanta Bhattacharya, a professor from Stanford who co-authored the so-called ‘Great Barrington Declaration’ (a controversial anti-lockdown and pro-herd immunity open letter)<sup>46</sup> opposes the radical anti-vaccine thesis that *every* vaccine is dangerous.<sup>47</sup>

Secondly, it is unclear how such a vast conspiracy, like the second-order conspiracy of the fossil fuel lobby, is successfully coordinated. Perhaps it could be argued that a *hierarchical* conception concerning the structure and organisation of conspiracies is what does the trick (Dentith and Orr 2018). The idea is that not every actor involved in a

---

<sup>45</sup><https://counterhate.com/research/pandemic-profiteers/> (accessed: 23/05/2024).

<sup>46</sup>He is also the author (together with John Ioannides) of a paper downplaying the severity of COVID-19 (which was later revealed to have received undisclosed funding from JetBlue’s founder David Neeleman). <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/stephaniemlee/stanford-coronavirus-neeleman-ioannidis-whistleblower> (accessed: 30/10/2023).

<sup>47</sup>Although he did host a panel where Martin Kulldorff and anti-vaccine entrepreneur Steven Kirsch claimed that vaccines have killed more than 500k people (<https://sciencebasedmedicine.org/new-school-covid-19-antivaccinexers-are-becoming-less-and-less-distinguishable-from-old-school-antivaccinexers/>) (accessed: 30/10/2023).

conspiracy needs to be a conspirator themselves. Rather, coordination is supposed to happen in a ‘top-down’ fashion: for example, in the ‘Diesel-gate’ conspiracy, it was only a handful of executives and top engineers who were aware of Volkswagen’s plan to tamper with the emissions control mechanism.

Still, it is unclear if this strategy alone can be successful in the case of denial industries: for example, the denialist strategy of the fossil fuel industry extends through many decades and it seems likely that the ‘denialist strategy’ is part of a more general *culture* of the industry itself rather than a feature to be entirely attributed to specific individuals. To be clear, there *are* particular executives and politicians whose role was instrumental in setting up and sustaining the denialist strategy (such as John H. Sununu, the White House chief of staff under G. W. Bush) (Rich 2019). But given the vastness of that second-order conspiracy surely there is something *more to be added* in order to fully explain Unity.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, it is plausible that the anti-vaccine industry *is* homogenous. Recall that the majority of COVID-19 anti-vaccine content can be traced back to the same source.<sup>49</sup> So there needs to be some kind of story as to how these denial industries explain Unity, while at the same time accommodating considerations that pull towards the opposite direction (such as the existence of internal rivalries and the fact that the relevant coordination cannot be exhaustively attributed to specific conspirators).

As a final note, I make no claims about whether Unity is a problem that is *unique* to the metaphysics of denial industries. Perhaps, complex first-order conspiracies (e.g. super-conspiracies) would face similar issues. All I claim here is that this is an interesting metaphysical puzzle and, at the very least, it arises in the case of second-order conspiracies qua denial industries. So, if anyone is interested in spelling out the metaphysics of conspiracies they might as well start here.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper I introduced the concept of a second-order conspiracy and the concept of a second-order conspiracy theory. Some conspiracy theories are

---

<sup>48</sup>A potential suggestion: perhaps one of the missing pieces here is the idea of an *ad hoc coalition* (Downie 2018). In the case of the fossil fuel industry, for example, a kind of coordination between industries having different business agendas (such as the gas, coal, and oil industries) is accomplished *locally* in terms, for example, by being commonly interested in contesting a single legislative issue (Downie 2018, 6).

<sup>49</sup><https://counterhate.com/research/pandemic-profiteers/>, <https://counterhate.com/research/the-disinformation-dozen/> (accessed: 23/05/2024).

themselves the result of a conspiracy. In particular, I focused on *fabricated* conspiracy theories in the form of conspiracy theories produced by the denial industries: the climate change denial machine and the anti-vaccine industry. In doing so, I illustrated that the structure of these conspiracies has important epistemic, predictive, and explanatory upshots. Most importantly, denial industries make a plausible case for the view of ‘local generalism’: the idea that even though there is nothing inherently problematic with conspiracy theories in general, there *is* something problematic with specific subsets of conspiracy theories. Finally, I made some exploratory remarks concerning a potential *metaphysics* of conspiracies.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the audience of the 2nd International Conference for the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories. Special thanks to M Dentith, Steve Clarke, Melina Tsapos, Julia Duetz, Catarina Dutilh Novaes, Brian Keeley, Daniel Barbarrusa, Lola Vizuete, David Heering, and Charles Pigden for some very helpful comments and suggestions which turned this into a much better paper.

## Disclosure statement

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

## Funding

Research on this paper has been generously funded by the Azrieli Foundation in the context of an International Postdoctoral Fellowship.

## References

- Ben-Itto, Hadassa. 2005. *The Lie That Wouldn't Die: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. London: Vallentine Mitchell.
- Bulle, Robert J. 2023. "Advocating Inaction: A Historical Analysis of the Global Climate Coalition." *Environmental Politics* 32 (2): 185–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2022.2058815>.
- Bulle, Robert J., and Carter Werthman. 2021. "The Role of Public Relations Firms in Climate Change Politics." *Climatic Change* 169 (1): 8.
- Butter, Michael, and Peter Knight, eds. 2023. *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003330769>
- Cassam, Quassim. 2019. *Conspiracy Theories*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Churchill, Ward, and Jim Vander Wall. 1990. *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*. Cambridge: South End Press.



- Coady, David. 2018. "Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule on Conspiracy Theories." *Argumenta* 3 (2): 291–302. <https://doi.org/10.23811/56.arg2017.coa>.
- Deer, Brian. 2020. *The Doctor Who Fooled the World: Science, Deception, and the War on Vaccines*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Dentith, M. R. X. 2016. "When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation." *Social Epistemology* 30 (5–6): 572–591. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2016.1172362>.
- Dentith, M. R. X. 2020. "[Review] Conspiracy Theories, Quassim Cassam, 2019." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 37 (5): 895–897.
- Dentith, M. R. X. 2022. "Suspicious Conspiracy Theories." *Synthese* 200 (243): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03602-4>.
- Dentith, M. R. X. 2023. "Some Conspiracy Theories." *Social Epistemology* 4: 522–534.
- Dentith, M. R. X., and Martin Orr. 2018. "Secrecy and Conspiracy." *Episteme* 15 (4): 433–450. <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2017.9>.
- Downie, Christian. 2018. "Ad Hoc Coalitions in the U.S. Energy Sector: Case Studies in the Gas, Oil, and Coal Industries." *Business and Politics* 20 (4): 643–668. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bap.2018.18>.
- Duetz, J. C. M. 2022. "Conspiracy Theories Are Not Beliefs." *Erkenntnis*, September. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-022-00620-z>.
- Duetz, J. C. M. 2023. ". 'What Does It Mean for a Conspiracy Theory to Be a "Theory"?" *Social Epistemology* 37 (4): 438–453. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2023.2172697>.
- Dunlap, Riley E., and Robert J. Brulle. 2020. "Sources and Amplifiers of Climate Change Denial." In *Research Handbook on Communicating Climate Change*, edited by D. C. Holmes, and L. M. Richardson, 49–61. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Dunlap, Riley E., and Peter J. Jacques. 2013. "Climate Change Denial Books and Conservative Think Tanks: Exploring the Connection." *American Behavioral Scientist* 57 (6): 699–731.
- Dunlap, Riley E., and Aaron M. McCright. 2010. "Climate Change Denial: Sources, Actors and Strategies." In *Routledge Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, edited by C. Lever-Tracy, 240–259. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Dunlap, Riley E., and Aaron M. McCright. 2011. "Organized Climate Change Denial." In *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, edited by J. S. Dryzek, R. B. Norgaard, and D. Schlosberg, 144–160. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hagen, Kurtis. 2010. "Is Infiltration of "Extremist Groups" Justified?" *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24 (2): 153–168.
- Hagen, Kurtis. 2022. "Are "Conspiracy Theories" So Unlikely to Be True? A Critique of Quassim Cassam's Concept of "Conspiracy Theories"." *Social Epistemology* 36 (3): 329–343.
- Harambam, Jaron. 2020. "Conspiracy Theory Entrepreneurs, Movements and Individuals." In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by Michael Butter, and Peter Knight, 278–291. London: Routledge.
- Harris, Keith R. 2023. "Beyond Belief: On Disinformation and Manipulation." *Erkenntnis*. June. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-023-00710-6>.
- Ichino, Anna, and Juha Räikkä. 2020. "Non-Doxastic Conspiracy Theories." *Argumenta* 7 (1): 247–263.

- Illari, Phyllis McKay, and Jon Williamson. 2012. "What is a Mechanism? Thinking About Mechanisms Across the Sciences." *European Journal for Philosophy of Science* 2: 119–135.
- Ioannidis, Stavros, and Stathis Psillos. 2022. *Mechanisms in Science: Method or Metaphysics?* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Karagiannopoulos, Yorgos, and Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier. 2024. "Social kind realism as relative frame manipulability." *Philosophical Studies* 181: 1655–1679. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-024-02164-0>.
- Kitcher, Philip. 1989. "Explanatory Unification and the Causal Structure of the World." In *Scientific Explanation*, edited by P. Kitcher, and W. Salmon, 410–505. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Klein, Naomi. 2023. *Doppelgänger: A Trip into the Mirror World*. London: Allen Lane.
- Korman, Daniel Z. 2019. "Debunking Arguments." *Philosophy Compass* 14 (12): 1–17.
- Ktenas, Yannis. 2023. *Value Polytheism in the Pandemic: Politics and Epistemology of a virus*. Athens: Polis.
- Leffler, Olof. 2023. "Zombies Incorporated." *Theoria* 89 (5): 640–659.
- Mallon, Ron. 2016. *The Construction of Human Kinds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mann, Michael E. 2021. *The New Climate War: The Fight to Take Back Our Planet*. New York: Scribe Publications.
- McCright, Aaron M., and Riley E. Dunlap. 2010. "Anti-Reflexivity." *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2–3): 100–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409356001>.
- Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. 2010. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues From Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.
- Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. 2022. "From Anti-Government to Anti-Science: Why Conservatives Have Turned Against Science." *Daedalus* 151 (4): 98–123.
- Queloz, Matthieu. 2021. *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rich, Nathaniel. 2019. *Losing Earth: The Decade We Could Have Stopped Climate Change*. Pan Macmillan.
- Selva, Douglas. 2019. "Operation "Denver": The East German Ministry of State Security and the KGB's AIDS Disinformation Campaign, 1985–1986 (Part 1)." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 21 (4): 71–123.
- Shields, Matthew. 2022. "Rethinking Conspiracy Theories." *Synthese* 200: 331. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03811-x>.
- Stamatiadis-Bréhier, Alexios. 2021. "Backing as Truthmaking." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 51 (5): 367–383. <https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2021.31>.
- Stamatiadis-Bréhier, Alexios. 2022. "Nomic Moral Naturalness." *Inquiry*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2022.2035814>.
- Stamatiadis-Bréhier, Alexios. 2023a. "Genealogical Undermining for Conspiracy Theories." *Inquiry*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2023.2187449>.
- Stamatiadis-Bréhier, Alexios. 2023b. "Grounding Functionalism and Explanatory Unificationism." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 9 (4): 799–819. <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2022.29>.
- Stamatiadis-Bréhier, Alexios. 2023c. "Wholesale Moral Error for Naturalists." *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-023-09938-5>.

- Sunstein, Cass R., and Adrian Vermeule. 2009. "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17 (2): 202–227. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x>.
- Supran, Geoffrey, and Naomi Oreskes. 2017. "Assessing ExxonMobil's Climate Change Communications (1977–2014)." *Environmental Research Letters* 12 (8): 084019. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/aa815f>.
- Tsapos, Melina. 2023. "Who is a Conspiracy Theorist?" *Social Epistemology* 38 (4): 454–463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2023.2172695>.
- Väyrynen, Pekka. 2009. "A Theory of Hedged Moral Principles." In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics 4*, edited by R. Shafer-Landau, 91–132. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Väyrynen, Pekka. 2023. "Moral Generalism and Moral Particularism." In *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Ethics (2nd edition)*, edited by C. B. Miller, 381–396. Bloomsbury.
- Winther, Rasmus G. 2021. "The Structure of Scientific Theories." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2021 Edition)*, edited by E. N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/structure-scientific-theories/>.