

Of Sheeple and People: Echo Chambers, Pseudo–Experts and the Corona Crisis

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AS THE COVID–19–PANDEMIC EMERGED several conspiracy theories arose alongside it. Although the content of the different theories varies, most of them share at least one of two fundamental assumptions: Either that there is no pandemic or that the crisis was brought about deliberately. While some argue that there is no virus at all, others acknowledge its existence but doubt the severity of its potential harm. Both fractions agree that the measures taken to respond to the pandemic situation are entirely unnecessary or at least far too extensive. Some, on the other hand, believe that the situation was brought about or is used for a hidden agenda, which may be financial gain, abolishing civil rights or installing a new world order, the so–called Great Reset. Behind this agenda, they either suspect outstanding persons such as Bill Gates or George Soros but also more abstract agents such as a “Jewish elite”, the Chinese government or politicians and the “the media” in general. Furthermore, researchers working on COVID–19–related topics are asserted to produce fraudulent evidence. When discussing conspiracy theories surrounding the COVID–19–pandemic, we refer to narratives that meet these criteria without further distinction.

The wrong information which is succeeded through these theories can cause serious harm as it might stop people from seeking treatment when infected or lead them to disobey infection prevention measures, thereby contributing to the spread of the virus and harming the people around them. This is especially alarming as the ongoing research on the effectiveness of non–pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) suggests that access to vital information is key (Levelu and Sandkamp 2022). We think it is safe to say that the threat posed by misinformed people to themselves and others renders it morally blameworthy to pass on these hazardous claims. However, we suspect that another type of moral wrong is caused through the spread of these theories, which is not based on physical, but on epistemic harm: epistemic injustice.

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Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin
Vol. 11, No. 20, May 2022, pp. 119–131
ISSN: 2254–0601 | [EN] | **ARTÍCULO**

Epistemic injustice, as famously presented by Miranda Fricker (2007; 1998), occurs when a person is discredited, i.e. if their testimony is dismissed, ignored or distrusted, not based on an epistemically relevant feature but based on prejudice towards the person or a social group they belong to. The wrong here consists of the disrespectful and probably hurtful disregard against the person's knowledge and capability to convey it. They are not merely thought to be wrong but denied having the status of a knower and informant on the matter. Vivid cases that illustrate this type of injustice arise in the context of structural discrimination when, e.g., a woman's statement about her qualifications as a software engineer is dismissed or when a police officer distrusts a person of colour. Injustice and prejudice in the epistemic domain might be part of a wider, structural injustice and discrimination that tracks the target group through various contexts, such as the financial, educational or legal domain. The prejudice, however, is not necessarily structurally embedded but can be incidental and limited to particular situations in the epistemic context. Even though Fricker focuses on the character of structural epistemic injustice, she highlights that incidental epistemic injustice isn't any less severe or constitutive of moral wrong. (Fricker 2007, p. 29) In this article, we will link both types of injustice to the spread of COVID conspiracies, however, mainly the incidental kind.

Our assumption for this article is that echo chambers are a critical factor for the persistence of conspiracy theories as defined above and for the epistemic injustice they bring about. We follow Chris Thi Nguyen, who describes echo chambers as "a social epistemic structure from which other relevant voices have been actively excluded and discredited". (2020, p. 141) Echo chambers, on this account, are formed by a group of people united through a particular belief or set of beliefs. Crucial is that they do not only miss out on information that might contradict their belief but that they actively shut out alternative positions from their epistemic community. This creates an insider–outsider dynamic in which members of the group are assigned considerably high credibility while outsiders are rendered untrustworthy, confused or even dishonest.

This dynamic is strengthened by what Thi Nguyen describes as the disagreement–reinforcement mechanism. Counterarguments against the set of beliefs held inside the echo chamber (Thi Nguyen 2020, p. 147) are met with counter–counter narratives that turn the objections into arguments for the echo chambers belief set. For example, people outside the echo chamber are not only seen as holding wrong beliefs but actively trying to misguide the chamber members into believing, e.g., the conspiracy cover. Their counterarguments are therefore anticipated, and when they occur, they prove the expectations correct and foster the narrative about the deceiving outsiders.

This way, echo chambers have an intensively polarising effect, isolating their members from other epistemic communities not only in terms of their antagonistic worldviews but also through a structurally established distrust against non-members.

In the following, we will explore whether, firstly, these dynamics contribute to or cause epistemic injustice in general, and secondly, whether it is directed against scientific or medical experts in particular. Both sections will show that the picture is much more ambivalent, for the conspiracists appear not only as perpetrators but also as victims of epistemic injustice and other malice.

§ 1. Echo Chambers and Epistemic Injustice

Recall that epistemic injustice consists of the prejudicial withholding of credibility. Someone is presumed to be less or untrustworthy based on a feature, usually a presumed marker of social identity, that is not tangent to their trustworthiness (see above or Fricker 2007, 28). When members of an EC judge someone outside the EC to be untrustworthy, this is independent of the objector's actual epistemic competence but affiliated with their membership in a social group, namely them being outsiders. However, we need to pay attention not to confuse prejudicial distrust with disagreement because what sets members and non-members apart is their acceptance of a particular set of beliefs. A first discreditation against non-members might not be based on prejudice but on disagreement; the non-members are believed to be mistaken and therefore dismissed (for an alternative view of echo chambers inherently causing epistemic injustice see Catala 2021).

However, it is crucial for the leading cause of epistemic injustice through echo chambers how the disagreement-reinforcement mechanism is spelled out. The narratives that the mechanism is based on often explain attempts to disprove the echo chamber's beliefs as malicious aims to hide the actual truth or as a sign of the epistemic inferiority of the opponent. In terms of the COVID-conspiracy chambers, outsiders are, for example, framed as "sheeple", manipulated, delusional or part of the conspiracy, and are thereby discredited on terms that exceed the disagreement. Here, actual prejudices enter the picture, and they play a vital role in the distrust conspiracists have in people outside their echo chamber. In these cases, it is not only thought that the opponents are wrong, but that they are not reliable informants after all, based on the prejudice that whoever disagrees with the conspiracy is either sheepishly deceived or has a malicious agenda and can therefore not be trusted. Being dismissed by a COVID conspiracist for being "just another deluded one of those sheeple" therefore

qualifies as incidental epistemic injustice. We suggest that understanding the dismissal of counterarguments in these cases as injustices opens ways to make their impact more intelligible. It offers an understanding of the polarising and emotional effects of the rise of conspiracy theories during the corona crisis on personal relationships and the society that demands future investigation.

Additionally, it is essential to consider that the insider–outsider dynamic of echo chambers can overlap with structural discrimination; for example, when the chamber is formed by a racist societal majority that systematically discredits the oppressed group and their supporters. The active shutting out of a particular group’s contributions and framing them as untrustworthy could be viewed as a form of silencing, and a chamber that sustains itself this way inherently causes structural epistemic injustice (Catala 2020, p. 30).

This form of injustice can be spotted among COVID conspiracists who claim that the virus was purposely spread. Often overlapping with already existing racist bias, various social groups are accused of being the conspirators who caused the crisis following their own interests. This not only severely discredits the group but also perpetuates the discrimination they already suffer. One group mainly targeted by this is the Jewish community (Eder 2021, p. 115). We take Echo chambers that defend theories like this as causes of structural epistemic injustice, for they frame a particular group as conspirators, systematically discrediting them and thereby fostering or even creating social inequalities.

Breno Santos (2020) points out another way echo chambers might cause structural epistemic injustice beyond the level of discrediting testimony: through “hermeneutic domination” (Santos 2020, p. 115). Hermeneutic domination is a type of epistemic injustice that occurs when the hermeneutic contributions of an oppressed group, which are part of understanding the oppression itself, are dismissed. An example is the ignorance of a white majority against claims to name and understand “blackfacing” as a racist practice instead of a fun carnival feature. Echo chambers that already contribute to structural injustice, therefore might not only exercise their social power through the maintenance of distrust against outsiders but also through the domination of terms and concepts.

We want to claim that this type of injustice is also committed by COVID–conspiracist against the Jewish Community. The issue has been raised that certain types of conspiracy theoretical motifs, such as deliberate disease spreading or a secret elite’s plan for world domination, perpetuate antisemitism, even though this might not be obvious or known to the conspiracists (Eder 2021, p. 115). Both motifs are deeply entangled with the history of antisemitism through reoccurring narratives of “well poisoning” or “new world order”–conspiracy theories

(Gerstenfeld 2020, pp. 41,43). That the reinforcement of narratives like these also reinforces antisemitic narratives articulates a facet of oppression that the community is facing, and silencing claims like these creates a similar case to Santos' blackfacing example. It can therefore be judged as an instance of hermeneutic domination.

The presented approach to the injustice caused through echo chambers would assign the COVID conspiracists an extensive case of epistemic injustices which is not only epistemically but also morally blameworthy. We showed examples of how epistemic injustice is committed incidentally when certain narratives about outsiders are at play, and in a twofold structural way, for instance, against the Jewish community. By pointing out these instances of injustice, we hope to add a new perspective on the harm which COVID-19-related conspiracy theories may cause.

However, we have to note that our just-won perspective on the injustice caused is short-sighted. For an action to be blameworthy at all, we have to ensure that the agent had the relevant awareness of the wrong, could have reasonably been expected to act otherwise or is not in exculpating circumstances. The following will show that all three conditions give rise to question the blameworthiness of the conspiracists. We will shortly consider the lack of awareness and perspectives to do otherwise and investigate further exculpating circumstances when moving on to the relation between COVID conspiracists and medical experts as a potentially special case of epistemic injustice in the last section of the article.

Firstly, in line with Thi Nguyen (2020, p. 154), it is questionable whether all or any members of the echo chamber are aware of their malpractice. Take, for example, someone who grew up as part of a chamber, who learned at an early stage to distrust outsiders because they will want to deceive them and who is genuinely convinced by the mindset that their surrounding community encourages. This person might even act epistemically virtuous, for they think the sources they consult are trustworthy and the evidence they follow up on shows the actual truth. Within the framework of the echo chamber and the belief-set that this person would navigate, they might not be doing something wrong, let alone be aware of the injustice or the false beliefs they might endorse.

Therefore, we think it might be too rash to call members of echo chambers inherently blameworthy for a prejudicial and malevolent credibility economy. We are even willing to extend this from people who grew up in this way to those who entered later. Even though someone might have culpably gotten themselves into an echo chamber, once one is part of the dynamics that reinforce the beliefs in

question, one might get “epistemically trapped” (Thi Nguyen 2020, p. 143). This may not only cause the members unawareness of the wrong but make it very hard or even irrational to accept counter-testimony. When it comes to blaming individuals for exercising their echo-chambered distrust, it needs to be taken into close consideration whether they know of a reason or the possibility to do otherwise. Thi Nguyen (2020, p. 158) points out that deviating from an echo chamber would be a psychologically challenging undertaking because it would require a person to shed all beliefs and trust relations affected by the echo chamber. But if members are unaware of anything wrong with these beliefs and relations due to the epistemic trap, they wouldn’t have any good reason to engage in such a painful “reboot” (Thi Nguyen 2007, p. 158.). Furthermore, it “occurs with the active participation of the subject and with a battery of defense mechanisms, an ignorance that is not easy to undo and correct, for this requires retraining – the reconfiguration of epistemic attitudes and habits – as well as social change” (Medina 2013, p. 39).

Still, this doesn’t mean we have to shed our newly won perspective on the ignorance that COVID-conspiracists profess and that epistemic injustice is caused. However, it leaves us in a challenging position when asking if or how someone should be blamed for this injustice. What makes this situation even more entangled is that the chamber members are not only causing injustice towards the outsiders but are also the ones that perpetuate the situation that keeps them epistemically trapped. If one wants to put it like that, they are excused as the victims of the circumstances they created themselves.

Finally, it is relevant to note that even though the aspects above might excuse many of the people who are part of COVID-conspiracy chambers, they certainly do not dismiss all of them. Especially the people who can reasonably be expected to have a correct understanding of the pandemic but used and spread conspiratorial narratives to gain publicity or endorse their political interests cannot be excused by any of the mentioned aspects. These can, for example, be journalists, political leaders, medical professionals or public figures that have contributed severely to the spread of misinformation (See, e.g. the US-American professor of law, Francis Boyle, who claims the coronavirus is a bioweapon developed in Wuhan (Klepper et al. 2021). Similarly blameworthy are leading personalities of echo chambers who maintain or start the echoing dynamics by introducing counter-explanations to the opponent’s arguments, strengthening the inside beliefs, and providing a platform for the echo chamber to develop (Thi Nguyen 2020, p. 145). Often these leaders enjoy an influential or financial gain by assembling as many people as possible in their echo chambers. Whether hosting and fostering echo chambers constitutes a new instance of epistemic

harm or even injustice against the members is another topic for further investigation. A way to flesh out this thought could, for example, be via the epistemic disadvantage that people are placed in when they are drawn into an echo chamber. This will be considered further in the following section.

§ 2. Discrediting Experts and Amplifying Pseudo-Experts

There is a distinct epistemic relation between experts and laypeople. Considering the platitude that not everyone can be an expert in everything, experts hold particular and usually very specified sets of knowledge that are not accessible to many other people. Experts are in an epistemically privileged position, and laypeople must rely on their testimony. The relationship between medical experts and laypeople is even more distinct, for medical experts are not only in a position of epistemic privilege but also in a position of power since their knowledge can be of fundamental importance to the layperson and their health. This also assigns them a specific responsibility for the people whose well-being depends on their expertise. If unjust discrediting within the context of echo chambers is understood as a problem of power, it is questionable how experts that are recognised by a vast majority may be victims of epistemic injustice: “One can be rejected as an epistemic source in this way and continue to live one’s life normally, without having one’s authority further doubted in one’s daily life and without suffering any practical consequence of such rejection” (Santos 2021, p. 115).

Nevertheless, we believe that this distinct relation between experts and laypeople serves as a source for injustice which adds to what we have already discussed above. In the following, we will focus on the leaders of echo chambers and suggest that they instrumentalise this particular position of medical experts against them to reinforce their systematic discreditation. Further, we will show that this is not only a potential epistemic injustice against science as a system of gaining knowledge but also poses an epistemic harm and disadvantage to the people within the echo chambers.

First, it is necessary to take a closer look at the demographics of the echo chamber population. Various studies suggest that belief in conspiracy theories significantly correlates with lower education and low self-esteem (Kuhn et al. 2021, Freeman et al. 2021). Hence, it has to be noted that members are likely to be epistemically disadvantaged in the first place, which could, for example, be traced back to unequal access to education. We assume that people in an epistemically underprivileged situation are in a more vulnerable relation to experts, especially to those who hold power over other people’s well-being. At

the same time, conspiracy theories offer their supporters the special standing of knowing a supposed truth that the majority wasn't able to see (Apuke and Omar 2021). Targeting experts and their epistemic privilege might lead to a felt redistribution of epistemic power. Although we lack the data for a conclusive answer, it might at least be argued that echo chambers spreading misinformation about the coronavirus answer to social needs, especially if members think they're doing a good deed (Apuke and Omar 2021).

Understanding echo chambers this way means understanding their members as people who enter the chamber because it, in a way, caters to their needs. We believe that leaders of the echo chambers, such as former academics, celebrities and politicians prey on these needs and use them to accumulate more people behind their theory. As mentioned above, it is not fully clear whether leaders of echo chambers actually believe all, some or none of the false information they spread. But for several reasons, we assume it to be a viable claim that they can gain, for example, public and political influence, or even gain financially through their followers' endorsement and by collecting donations. The systematic discreditation of medical experts may be seen as a powerful tool to strengthen the conspiratory belief set as well as the distrust against outsiders, thereby binding members even stronger to the echo chamber and isolating them further from other epistemic communities. This at least poses epistemic harm to the members as it uses personal needs to keep them away from relevant information concerning their own as well as the health of those around them. The experts themselves are not suffering practical consequences, but the participants of the echo chambers are: "There is a social force in the community that determines what is and is not good epistemic practice. These practices are essential to maintain the relevant features of the group and its insulation from external disturbances" (Santos 2021, p. 114).

A factor furthering this problem is the amplification of pseudo-experts. As pseudo-experts, we identify those who, first, claim knowledge they don't have and, second, gain their importance by having contrary opinions to mainstream research. What separates pseudo-experts from mere imposters is that they have the ability to differentiate between true and false information. Furthermore, pseudo-experts are seen as insiders of the academic community. In the German debate, for example, Sucharit Bhakdi, a former professor of microbiology, is a leading voice. As a former professor and esteemed academic, his critique that the coronavirus is not very dangerous, but vaccines are, appears to be scientific. And that he, who the chamber members trust, abstains from scientific rules – e.g. peer-reviewed publishing – signals that scientific production of knowledge is untrustworthy and "the truth" can only be found outside of academia. This does

not only pose epistemic harm to the members of echo chambers, in that it affects their ability to tell actual from pseudo-experts, but it also poses a very physical threat as they might follow some of the bad medical advice that has been circulated, i.e., harmful treatments against the virus such as drinking bleach or taking ivermectin.

Additionally, it may be argued that actual experts are perpetrators of epistemic injustice when they don't sufficiently live up to their responsibilities. The role of experts, besides the production of knowledge, is to explain and spread evidence non-experts cannot access. Experts, therefore, need to be trustworthy. As Hardwig puts it: "[T]he rationality of many of our beliefs depends not only on our own character but on the character of others as well; the rationality of many of our beliefs depends on what others do and hence is not within our individual control" (Hardwig 1991, 700).

As argued above, pseudo-experts sponge off the fears and uncertainties of members of echo chambers. If experts do not take the people's fears seriously, this might be considered an epistemically unjust treatment. Henceforth, unsuccessful science communication might even broaden the problem of epistemic injustice by not addressing people with uncertainties – whether rational or irrational – in the proper manner. Pointing back to our first view on experts and epistemic injustice as well as our depiction in the first part, holding false beliefs might be excused pointing to the lack of trustworthiness towards experts.

A final and maybe much more significant problem we want to address, is the distrust in science as a whole or at least parts of science. If an expert is shown to be untrustworthy qua being an expert, scientific expertise is weakened as such. There are two ways to make that happen. The first is to deny the ability of science to gain knowledge completely. This is, we think, rarely found within echo chambers. The other way is strategic doubt. Strategic doubt is a rhetorical device to undermine the authority of some experts or whole research programs (Reutlinger 2020, Oreskes and Conway 2010). In our case, especially scientists who are at the center of public attention are victims of that strategy. For example, the term *faucism* is used in the US for pandemic politics advised by Anthony Fauci. In Germany, Christian Drosten is referred to as *Dr.Osten*, following a rumour that he never gained a PhD. As those are the primary communicators of the scientific research development, not just their own research but also further research on the coronavirus is neglected. Changes in what is known in a field of research, corrections of former "knowledge" and a better understanding of the phenomena observed are therefore not accessible for echo chamber members. Thus, they are ignorant about the scientific debate and left with what they "knew" from the beginning: "The person who is ignorant, in this sense, might end up

with a small number of true beliefs, but by rejecting external epistemic inputs, they will preempt relevant new knowledge – that is, they will stagnate their body of knowledge (Santos 2021, p. 114)”.

§ 3. Closing Remarks

Our article suggests that echo chambers, especially in the case of COVID-19-related topics, depend on epistemic inequality. Especially people who cannot identify who is an expert and who is a mere pseudo-expert fall prey to demagogues organizing echo chambers. We have shown, though, that COVID-conspiracy-related echo chambers cause at least three different types of epistemic injustice: Incidental, structural and hermeneutic domination. And these are directed against those whom they frame as sheeple and those who are part of the conspiratory narrative.

Furthermore, we argued that the leaders of echo chambers might be particular subjects of blame, as they not only commit the injustices we pointed out in the first section, but also pose epistemic harm to the members of the chambers that they host. Additionally, medical experts play a relevant role since their privileged position can be instrumentalised to further irrational distrust against them, but also makes themselves prone to be perpetrators of epistemic injustice. As they are in a position of power, they must communicate relevant information in a way accessible to all social groups, broadly understood and taken seriously. Widespread distrust in experts may lead to severe consequences for individuals and societies as a whole, significantly if the area of expertise directly influences everyday life and bodily well-being.

Finally, we want to suggest that members of echo chambers may be – at least partly – excused for their behaviour. Therefore, we suggest a preventive instead of a blaming reaction to the current popularity of conspiracy theories. Misinformation and conspiracy theories must be tackled long before the rise of echo chambers. As long as large parts of the population do not understand how science works, scientific findings may be met with scepticism or distrust that is not founded in the matter itself and harmful to the people involved.

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Of Sheeple and People: Echo Chambers, Pseudo-Experts and the Corona Crisis

Throughout the COVID-19-crisis conspiracy theories and false information spread all around the globe. In this article, we want to suggest that the spreading and retainment of disinformation despite counter-evidence is best to be understood in the context of echo chambers as described by Chris Thi Nguyen. Moreover, we want to argue that people active in those echo chambers are at the same time perpetrators as well as victims of epistemic injustice to different amounts. Although this article cannot cover the phenomenon as a whole, we hope to outline a path for further investigation.

Keywords: Epistemic Injustice · Echo Chambers · COVID-19.

De ovejonas y personas: cámaras de eco, pseudo-expertos y la crisis del coronavirus

Durante toda la crisis del Covid-19 teorías de conspiración e información falsa se extendió por todo el globo. En este artículo queremos sugerir que la diseminación y retención de desinformación se entiende mejor -evidencia contraria no obstante- en el contexto de una cámara de eco tal como la describe Chris Thi Nguyen. Queremos argüir, además, que las personas activas en estas cámaras de eco son, al mismo tiempo, en diferentes grados tanto perpetradores como víctimas de injusticia epistémica. Este artículo, aunque no pueda cubrir ese fenómeno en su totalidad, esperamos señalar una ruta para una investigación adicional.

Palabras Clave: Injusticia epistémica · Cámaras de eco · COVID-19.

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HISTORIA DEL ARTÍCULO | ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 15–November–2021; Accepted: 20–December–2021; Published Online: 31–May–2022

COMO CITAR ESTE ARTÍCULO | HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Tappe, Lily and Lucas, Daniel (2022). «Of Sheeple and People: Echo Chambers, Pseudo-experts and the Corona Crisis». *Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin* 11, no. 20: pp. 119–131.

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