**Facing Epistemic Authorities: Where Democratic Ideals**

**and Critical Thinking Mislead Cognition**

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*Abstract.* Disrespect for the truth, the rise of conspiracy thinking, and a pervasive distrust in experts are widespread features of the post-truth condition in current politics and public opinion. Among the many good explanations of these phenomena there is one that is only rarely discussed: that something is wrong with our deeply entrenched intellectual standards of (i) using our own critical thinking without any restriction and (ii) respecting the judgment of every rational agent as epistemically relevant. In this paper, I will argue that these two enlightenment principles—the Principle of Unrestricted Critical Thinking and the Principle of Democratic Reason—not only conflict with what is rationally required from a purely epistemic point of view, but also have bad cognitive consequences in furthering the spread of conspiracy theories and undermining trust in experts. I will then explain in more detail why we should typically defer to experts without using any of our own reasons regarding the subject matter. Moreover, I will show what place this leaves for critical thinking and why it does not have the crazy consequences that the critics expect.

In 2016, “post-truth” was declared to be the word of the year by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The OED defined post-truth as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Accordingly, in post-truth circumstances, truth-makers have less influence on public opinion than factors that are irrelevant to truth. Of course, the facts never fully determine public opinion, not even under ideal conditions of a scientifically-oriented public discourse. Even rational beliefs are sometimes false, science itself is not immune from errors, and slips can never be ruled out completely. However, in post-truth times the detachment of public opinion from truth is much more radical. Under these *pathological* circumstances, public opinion is systematically and mainly shaped by truth-unrelated factors. This is an epistemic disaster; and it is clear from the outset that the majority of users of the term “post-truth” have this epistemically bad evaluation in mind. The OED definition mentions two truth-unrelated factors that may shape public opinion: emotion and personal belief. Of course, emotions are not always in conflict with what is true. For example, we often fear what is really dangerous to us. Something similar applies to beliefs. However, in post-truth circumstances emotions and beliefs will shape public opinion, no matter whether they correspond to the truth or not. Even worse, they do so when it is obvious to everyone that emotions and beliefs do not correlate with truth. This becomes transparent when, e.g., right-wing politicians base their arguments on people’s fear of refugees, even in areas where there are literally no such refugees. Bullshit is another phenomenon of this kind (cf. Frankfurt 2005). When people utter bullshit they simply do not care whether what they utter is true or not. Often, they treat their utterance simply as an authentic expression of their personal mental lives, even if what they utter is completely unsupported by or even in conflict with their evidence.

The two truth-unrelated factors mentioned by the OED definition are factors that result in *irrational* public opinion. Forming opinions without any evidence of their truth is clearly irrational. However, there seem to be many more factors that lead public opinion away from the truth in systematic ways.[[1]](#footnote-1) Interestingly, only some of these factors involve epistemic irrationality in the believer. Among the irrational factors, *individual biases* (e.g., overconfidence,[[2]](#footnote-2) confirmation biases,[[3]](#footnote-3) narrative biases,[[4]](#footnote-4) epistemic vices[[5]](#footnote-5) or affective biases[[6]](#footnote-6)) and *social biases* (group think[[7]](#footnote-7) or social identity signaling[[8]](#footnote-8)) play a dominant role. However, when the environment is such that huge bodies of fabricated or misleading evidence are presented to the public, or when only selective evidence is disclosed, this—most likely—will result in a general public opinion that is radically detached from the truth, even if the public uses this evidence in a fully rational way. *Agents of misinformation* use a variety of different strategies to manipulate the available evidence, in such a way that the public is radically misguided even when it closely follows the standards of rationality. These agents of misinformation can fabricate fake news;[[9]](#footnote-9) they can hide relevant evidence completely or present only parts of the relevant evidence;[[10]](#footnote-10) they can swamp the publicly-accessible body of evidence with counterevidence, such that well-established views seem to no longer be defensible;[[11]](#footnote-11) they can direct public attention exclusively to evidence that induces doubts about official sources of evidence;[[12]](#footnote-12) they may even raise doubts about the epistemic norm of assertion itself. Then, there are *structural features* of communication that lead—independently of anyone’s bad intentions—to a selective disclosure of evidence that may mislead public opinion radically. What I have in mind here are phenomena such as information cascades[[13]](#footnote-13) (people hiding relevant information because they either wrongly believe that it is irrelevant or fear social pressure), filter bubbles (when internet algorithms confront the user exclusively with information that fits the content of her previous searches),[[14]](#footnote-14) journalistic practices (e.g., the tendency to prefer dramatic stories results in the illusion of general decline; the norm of balanced reporting amplifies the felt significance of fringe views in the public),[[15]](#footnote-15) or specific features of social media (e.g., the option of quick likes for interesting news facilitates the vast distribution of false news[[16]](#footnote-16)). Finally, deeply entrenched *ideologies* may also explain the post-truth condition, at least in part.[[17]](#footnote-17) When postmodernists deny the existence of truth, or relativists defend the idea of alternative facts, or when the zeitgeist dictates that assertions should be treated as authentic expressions of the self rather than truth claims that are eligible for criticism, this may lead to an excessive public tolerance of false opinions.

As this list impressively demonstrates, post-truth circumstances have many (often complementary) explanations. Whether some of these sources are completely new phenomena that are closely tied to contemporary communication technologies is controversial.[[18]](#footnote-18) It is also not fully clear whether today’s post-truth condition is worse than it was in the past.[[19]](#footnote-19) In this paper, I will leave these questions open. Here I want to argue that the above list is not exhaustive. One widely-neglected factor is missing from the list. I will argue, perhaps surprisingly, that our deeply entrenched Enlightenment principles of unrestricted critical thinking and democratic reasoning also play an important role in explaining our current post-truth condition.

Let me first introduce these Enlightenment principles. I start with the *Principle of Unrestricted Critical Thinking* (PUCT). In his essay “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?”, Kant famously writes:

Have the courage to use your own understanding […] without another’s guidance. […] It is so comfortable to be a minor. If I have a book that thinks for me, a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who prescribes my diet, and so on—then I have no need to exert myself. I have no need to think […].

In this passage, Kant ironically condemns people who rely on moral or medical experts in their judgments rather than thinking for themselves. Lynch (2016:38) strongly disagrees, writing:

When, for example, we aren’t an expert on something ourselves, we seek advice from those who say they are. But if we are wise, we also get evidence of that person’s expertise: references, degrees, or word of mouth. Moreover, we look for them to explain their opinions to us in ways that make sense given what we know.

In contrast with Kant, Lynch clearly recommends reliance on experts, with the caveat that we should not trust experts *blindly*. However, even Lynch claims that the expert’s judgment must make sense from our lay perspective in order for it to be acceptable. Although Kant and Lynch give different epistemic weight to expert judgments (Kant: zero, Lynch: some significant weight), both agree that the weight of one’s own judgment should never be reduced to zero. This shared view is expressed by what I call the *Principle of Unrestricted Critical Thinking* (PUCT). Here is what it claims:

**(PUCT)** Whenever you rationally consider the truth of some proposition p, you must never stop using your own reasons for p.

This principle neither excludes the judgments of others from counting as evidence, nor gives equal weight to the judgments of laypeople and experts. But it defends the rational significance of the agent’s judgment, no matter whether they are an expert or a layperson.

Compare this with the *Principle of Democratic Reason* (PDR):

**(PDR)** Whenever you rationally consider the truth of some proposition p, you must not exclude, marginalize or silence any rational thinker’s reasoning (including your own one) about p.

(PDR) requires that the judgments of all rational thinkers are considered seriously and that nobody should simply defer to the judgments of others. Alongside many other philosophers[[20]](#footnote-20), Habermas (1991: 132) seems to be an advocate of this principle:

No one can honestly join a discussion, unless she presupposes a context of discourse in which public access, equal participation […] are—at least in principle—guaranteed. The participants can aim to convince each other only if they pragmatically implicate that their acceptance or denial is determined by nothing but the force of the better argument. [My translation, TG]

What is the relation between (PUCT) and (PDR)? (PDR) entails (PUCT), but not vice versa. This is because (PDR) is a generalization of (PUCT), the latter being a special case of the former. Whereas (PUCT) rules out ignoring the reasoning of the epistemic subject, (PDR) rules out ignoring anyone’s reasoning when reasons are rationally aggregated. Since (PDR) is the more general principle, we will focus on its implications. (PDR) prohibits the exclusion of anyone’s reasoning, when reasons are aggregated. It does *not* imply that everyone’s judgment has equal weight (the Principle of Epistemic Equality), but it does imply that one must not simply defer to experts (thereby giving zero weight to one’s own reasoning) and that experts must not ignore laypeople’s judgments completely. According to (PDR), expert beliefs must always be critically checked against what rational believers take to be the plausible view. In the extreme case, an expert judgment that appears outrageous or crazy to laypeople may be rejected because it fails this test.

In this paper, I will defend the following three claims: first, I will argue that (PDR) and (PUCT) are both in conflict with what is required from a purely epistemic point of view; second, I will demonstrate that following the advice of (PDR) can have epistemically dangerous consequences, by facilitating the spread of conspiracy theories and eroding our trust in experts; and, third, I will show in detail that one alternative to (PDR), namely the Preemption View (PV), restricts the scope of critical reasoning and inclusive deliberation in plausible ways.[[21]](#footnote-21)

I will proceed as follows. In section 1, I will argue that (PDR) is in conflict with the most reasonable view about how one should rationally respond to the judgment of epistemic authorities, i.e., the Preemption View (PV). I will present two arguments for this view and engage with some recent objections from Lackey (2018). In section 2, I will show how (PDR) can lead to the acceptance of conspiracy theories. In section 3, I will address three deep worries that Lackey (2018) expresses about the view that results from restricting (PDR) in line with (PV). I will argue that these worries can all be dispelled. I conclude with some general remarks.

**1. What’s wrong with (PDR) from an epistemic point of view**

Epistemic abilities are unequally distributed in society. Not everyone has the same cognitive competences. Some people stand out by being much more reliable than average. This epistemic superiority is relative to a reference class of people; and it is always relative to a domain of expertise. No one is an expert on everything. Epistemic superiority is the product of two independent factors: the available body of evidence and one’s reasoning competences.[[22]](#footnote-22) Some people have a more reliable judgment than others on a specific topic because they are equipped with more relevant evidence. This is, e.g., true for the judgment of an eyewitness in comparison with someone who was not present at the time and place in question. Some people have a more reliable judgment than others because they are more clever in drawing rational inferences from the shared body of evidence. This is, e.g., the case when Sherlock Holmes outperforms Watson in his judgments about who was the murderer. Of course, a lack of evidence can be compensated, or even overcompensated, by superior reasoning competences, and vice versa.

Given this background, epistemic authorities are people who are not only the epistemic superiors of specific other people, but who also do well enough objectively. And they are known to have these properties.[[23]](#footnote-23) We can turn this into the following definition:

*A is an* ***epistemic authority*** *for S with respect to domain D iff S is justified in believing that (i) A is an expert about D, and A is epistemically superior to S with respect to domain D (i.e., has superior reasoning competences, and has very likely considered all of S’s relevant evidence).[[24]](#footnote-24)*

What does it mean that, from S’s perspective, the authority must have very likely considered all of S’s relevant evidence; and isn’t that a very strong, may be unstisfiable requirement? The idea is that authorities should typically take into consideration types rather than tokens of lay evidence that are relevant to the target proposition and that rely on trustworthy sources. The authority thus need not know every minute detail about the cognitive perspectives of laypeople or all the information they gathered from completely untrustworthy sources. Rather, she must have considered all pieces of noteworthy lay evidence. This is what scientific experts typically do and does not overexert them.

In my definition, being an expert implies that one does sufficiently well on an absolute scale. Typically, expert scientists are epistemic authorities for laypeople in their domain of expertise. Often, these authorities help laypeople to compensate for their lack of knowledge or understanding about this domain.[[25]](#footnote-25) At other times, laypeople confront the judgments of authorities when they already have beliefs and evidence of their own about the subject matter. So, when laypeople hear the advice of their medical doctors, they often already “know” something about the topic themselves. The interesting question is how laypeople should *rationally* respond in the latter case.

Two extreme responses are obviously inapt. The layperson should not blindly trust the authority, since this reaction would not be *rational*. Blind trust is not based on any reasons. On the other end of the spectrum, the layperson may treat the authority merely as a source of reasons, arguments and data that must then be assessed by the layperson herself. This response would not give *any* epistemic weight to the authority’s judgment, over and above the evidence she discloses. This is what typical individualists such as Plato, Descartes, or Locke would claim. However, the authority’s judgment is *additional* higher-order evidence for the proposition in question. This can easily be seen by considering the following argument that is available to the layperson:

(1) The epistemic authority believes that p (where p is some proposition in D).

(2) The authority’s beliefs about p are most likely true.

(C) Therefore, p is most likely true.

If the layperson can identify authority judgments, and knows that authorities have reliable judgment in their domain of expertise (which follows from the concept of epistemic authority), then they will be able to justify the conclusion. And this amounts to additional evidence for p. This evidence is available even in cases where the layperson is not able either to understand or to rationally use the first-order evidence discosed by the authority. So, it is unreasonable to treat the epistemic authority merely as a source who distributes first-order evidence.

Apart from these two options, there are more moderate and more attractive reactions to the authority’s judgment: the Total Evidence View (TEV) and the Preemption View (PV). According to (TEV), we should take into account all of our first-order evidence with respect to the target proposition p; and this may include pieces of evidence that were disclosed by the authority. Additionally, we should also take into account the authority’s judgment as an extra bit of evidence that has a lot of weight. Then we should base our judgment on the aggregation of all this evidence. As Lackey (2018: 239) puts it: “What I am proposing […] is that the testimony of experts should always be regarded as a piece of evidence to be weighed with the other relevant evidence we have on the matter.” According to (PV), the opposite is true. When we discover that an epistemic authority believes that p, we should not make any more use of our own reasoning about p as evidence for or against p. The use of our own reasoning concerning p is to be bracketed. As Zagzebski (2012: 107) puts it: “ The fact that the authority has a belief p is a reason for me to believe p that replaces my other reasons relevant to believing p and is not simply added to them.” Whereas the aggregation model of (TEV) is in line with (PDR), (PV) obviously conflicts with (PDR). This is because (PV) explicitly requires one to ignore the layperson’s judgment when forming one’s own belief.

In what follows, I will present two arguments in favor of (PV). The first of these is the **Track Record Argument**, which has Raz and Zagzebski as its main advocates. This argument runs as follows. Suppose you regard someone as an epistemic authority with respect to a target proposition p. Then you take her judgment on this proposition to be more reliable than your own. Now, if you give any weight to your own reasoning about p, there will be cases in which even this little weight outweighs the authority’s judgment. Hence, the resulting track record will be inferior to a general strategy of deference to the authority. But then giving zero weight to your own reasoning about p will produce the most reliable result, and is therefore instrumentally most rational.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Jennifer Lackey (2018: 238) has objected that even if this strategy of general deference to authority is the most reliable one, its implementation does not require preemption. She thinks that even if our own lay reasoning is not fully preempted, we may regard the authority-based reasons as so powerful that they always outweigh our other reasons. Hence, (PV) would not be required to explain why we should always follow the authority’s lead.

However, this move is unconvincing. It seems clear to me that one cannot simply assign to the authority’s judgment whatever weight is needed to outweigh one’s own reasoning. This would be completely ad hoc and unmotivated. One should rather assign a weight that is proportional to the relative trustworthiness of the authority’s judgment. But then there will be cases in which making use of our own reasons is not outweighed by the authority’s judgment. Here is a toy case that may help to illustrate my point:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Agent** | **Credence with respect to p** | **Relative trustworthiness (weighting factor)** | **Credence x weighting factor** |
| **Epistemic authority** | .55 (weak belief) | 0.66 | .366 |
| **Layperson** | .1 (strong disbelief) | 0.33 | .033 |
| **Weighted average credence** |  |  | ≈ .4 (weak disbelief) |

How is this table to be read? The layperson recognizes that whereas she is strongly disbelieving p, the authority she is confronting weakly believes that p. Given that she takes the authority to be twice as trustworthy as herself in her judgment about the target proposition she calculates the weighted average credence and revises her credence accordingly. The result of this strategy obviously conflicts with the strategy of general deference to epistemic authority because the former leads to weak disbelief whereas the latter leads to weak belief.

Lackey has a second objection to the Track Record Argument that is not affected by this criticism. She explicitly claims that always following the authority’s advice is not the best strategy:

[I]t is not the case that in order to avoid worsening one’s track record for getting the truth, one should always follow the advice of an authority. Here are some alternative policies that would have even better epistemic results: follow the advice of an authority, except when one is certain that the authority is wrong, follow the advice of an authority, except when what the authority says is highly doubtful. If humans adopted any of these policies, they would end up faring better […] and, moreover, following them relies directly on not screening off the normative force of background evidence […]. (Lackey 2018: 238)

Lackey is right that *if* the rules she suggests were better than the strategy of straight deference, then this could not be adopted by (PV). The reason is that implementing these rules requires using one’s relevant background evidence to assess whether what the authority says is wrong or highly doubtful. However, (PV) strictly prohibits the use of this evidence.

So, the crucial question is: is Lackey right in claiming that her rules are better than straight deference? Her thought is that in cases in which what the authority says looks crazy or outrageous to the layperson, the latter is more often right than wrong. Hence, rejecting the authority’s claim *only* *in these cases* would improve the general track record. However, I do not think that Lackey is right about this. Often, propositions that look crazy or outrageous to laypeople, are in fact true and rational. Lay intuitions are often strongly misleading. Moreover, as Dunning’s (2005) empirical work suggests, laypeople are often blissfully unaware of their own incompetence. In particular, even when they are highly confident that their judgment is competent, they often err. This is because their meta-cognitive cues for accurate judgments are highly unreliable.[[27]](#footnote-27) According to Dunning, people are highly confident if (i) they have explicit reasons for their judgment, (ii) their judgment is very fluent, or (iii) this judgment fits well with their pre-existing background views. Now, as Dunning convincingly argues, these cues are often unreliable when people are incompetent. Let us look more closely at each of the cues. First, incompetent people may be ignorant of the most relevant reasons. But if this is so, then having explicit reasons for one’s judgment falls far short of establishing that one is right. Second, the fluency of one’s judgment is not always determined by competence. Incompetent people judge fluently simply because of repetition effects or recent exposure. Third, fitting one’s cognitive background only indicates truth if that background is true itself. However, in incompetent people this background can be grossly misleading. In the end, it is an empirical question whether laypeople would improve their track record by adopting one of the rules that Lackey suggests. But so far, there is no reason to believe that she is right.

Lackey (2018: 236) raises a further objection to the Track Record Argument that is—in my view—her most important one: the **challenge from the epistemic obscurity of preemptive reasons**. As she correctly observes, the core idea of preemption, namely that the layperson’s evidence is properly ignored, does not seem to cope with evidentialism, according to which evidence is always aggregated and never ignored. Preemption thus requires that there are also non-evidential reasons. But then it becomes unclear how these can be integrated into a unified framework of evidential and non-evidential reasons. It seems to me that Zagzebski’s account does not have the resources to answer this challenge.

The second argument for (PV) is the **Higher-Order Undercutting Defeat Argument**.[[28]](#footnote-28) I will argue that this argument can answer the challenge from the epistemic obscurity of preemptive reasons, because it can explain preemptive reasons as a special case of undercutting defeaters that any reasonable account of reasons should allow for.

I will introduce this second argument by means of an example. But before I do that, some additional terminology is needed. *Defeaters* turn prima facie justified beliefs into unjustified ones; or—more roughly—they remove justification. How they do that is a matter of controversy.[[29]](#footnote-29) What is not controversial, however, is that there are at least two types of defeaters that work differently. A rebutting defeater is a new piece of evidence that outweighs one’s prior justification (to some extent). Typically, this kind of defeater involves evidence against the truth of the target proposition. In contrast, undercutting defeaters involve a new piece of evidence that makes one’s prior evidence rationally unusable as evidence for the target proposition.[[30]](#footnote-30) One might think that undercutting defeat can be explained in the same way as rebutting defeat, namely by the aggregation of evidence. For example, whereas red-impressions are evidence of something red in view, red-impressions together with the information that the visible objects are illuminated by red light are no longer evidence of red objects. However, the mechanism of undercutting defeat also seems to work in cases of conclusive evidence. Suppose you have a perfect proof of some mathematical solution. In fact, your evidence entails the conclusion and you draw this conclusion. In this case, adding further pieces of evidence cannot turn your conclusive evidence into evidence that no longer supports the conclusion. This kind of reasoning is monotonic. But now suppose that you are informed by a highly trustworthy testifier that you were, without noticing it, exposed to some gas that strongly tends to create the illusion of proper proofs even in cases in which the actual reasoning is grossly invalid. If you share my intuition about this case, you will think that after having received this information you are no longer justified in believing in your mathematical solution.[[31]](#footnote-31) This judgment cannot be explained by the aggregation of evidence. Rather, higher-order evidence seems to possess the normative epistemic power to neutralize the epistemic weight of your conclusive first-order evidence.[[32]](#footnote-32) In this case, it would seem irrational if you still relied on your proof after having received the higher-order information. In my view, this demonstrates that undercutting defeat can be fully explained only if we accept that there are preemptive reasons. So, a proper explanation of undercutting defeaters requires the mechanism of preemption. However, if preemption is required to explain such a mundane phenomenon as the full spectrum of undercutting defeat, then it is hard to see how one can insist that preemptive reasons are obscure.

Let us assume that at least some cases of undercutting defeat are such that the higher-order evidence that a lower-order judgment is irrational makes this judgment irrational. It is still an open question whether and how the identification of an authority’s judgment provides us with an undercutting defeater for any judgment that would be based on our own reasoning. To get clearer about this issue, it will be helpful to consider a specific case.

Suppose you meet Bryan, a mental math crack. Someone asks, “What is 175,998 plus 22,453?” It takes Bryan only a few seconds to answer “198,451.” Having received this information, should you use your own mental calculation in determining the correct answer? The answer is clearly no. Either the result of your own calculation would correspond to Bryan’s or it would deviate from it. A corresponding result would make no difference. In the case of a deviant result, however, it would be highly likely that you made a mistake. After all, you disagree with a superior. Hence, your own reasoning is undercut.

Here is a more abstract characterization of what happens in this case. When the layperson identifies an epistemic authority on some domain, she not only has reasons to believe that the expert’s judgment is more competent than her own judgment, but typically she also has reasons to believe that the authority has considered all of the layperson’s reasons that are *relevant* to the assessment of the target judgment. This is what we expect of authorities by default.[[33]](#footnote-33) If the layperson then relied, in making her judgment, on her own reasons *in addition* to the expert’s judgment, this would, in all likelihood, lead to a deviation from the expert’s judgment, which is from the layperson’s own perspective the more competent and, most probably, the rational judgment. However, if this is true, then it is, from the layperson’s perspective, very likely that she would deviate from the rational judgment if she relied, in making her judgment, on her own reasons as well. In this way, the layperson acquires reasons to believe that using her own domain-specific reasons would lead to an irrational belief. This in turn generates an undercutting defeater in the technical sense.

We can now turn these considerations into the following argument, which is available to the layperson when she identifies an authority’s judgment:

(1) I am justified in believing that the authority’s judgment about p is most likely rational (given that p is a proposition within the authority’s domain of expertise).

(2) I am justified in believing that the authority has most likely considered all of my relevant domain-specific evidence regarding p.

(3) If (1) and (2) are true, then I am prima facie justified in believing that deviating from the authority’s judgment on p would most likely render my judgment irrational.

(4) I am prima facie justified in believing that deviating from the authority’s judgment on p would most likely render my judgment irrational. (from 1, 2, 3)

(5) If I made use of my own domain-specific reasons for judging whether p, this would lead to a judgment that either conforms with the authority or deviates from her judgment. (truism)

(6) When use of my own domain-specific reasons makes no difference to the resulting judgment, it is irrelevant.

(7) When use of my own domain-specific reasons makes a difference, I am prima facie justified in believing that it is most likely irrational. (from 4)

(8) If I am justified in believing that my use of reasons is irrational, then making use of them is irrational. (undercutting defeat)

(9) When using my own domain-specific reasons makes a difference, making use of them is irrational. (from 7, 8)

(10) I cannot rationally use my own domain-specific reasons regarding p.

(from 5, 6, 9)

As I have already argued, (1) and (2) are reasonable because the layperson expects the authority to be a rational believer in her domain of expertise, and one who has already considered all the relevant evidence that is accessible to laypeople like the layperson in question. (3) is reasonable because laypeople take *uniqueness*, i.e., the view according to which there is only one rational response to a given body of evidence, to be the default position. This does not entail that uniqueness is true without any restrictions.[[34]](#footnote-34) (6) seems to be obviously correct: if the use of some evidence makes no difference with respect to the target judgment, then it is irrelevant for this judgment. Finally, (8) articulates a specific interpretation of undercutting defeat, namely one that involves level-connection, according to which the higher-order evidence of first-order irrationality is sufficient to render the corresponding first-order judgment irrational. This is a controversial assumption that I nevertheless rely on here without further justification.[[35]](#footnote-35) I think that cases of undermined judgments that rely on conclusive evidence indicate that this assumption is correct. However, my assumption here would clearly need further defense on another occasion.

In contrast to the Track Record Argument, the Argument from Higher-Order Undercutting Defeat emphasizes that the layperson’s identification of an authority judgment makes her own (domain-specific) reasons rationally unusable for her. This is an issue of rationality rather than reliability. Moreover, the second argument uses the initially mysterious-looking mechanism of preemption only insofar as it can be explained by undercutting defeat. Hence, it provides an answer to Lackey’s third objection. Finally, the second argument restricts preemption in specific ways. The layperson is prohibited from using her domain-specific reasons when she judges whether p. However, she is still permitted to use any of her domain-independent reasons, because there is no reason for the layperson to expect the authority to have superior judgment in these areas as well.

**2. Why (PDR) can have epistemically dangerous consequences**

In the previous section, I argued that (PDR), as it stands, is false. According to this principle, we cannot rationally ignore anyone’s reasoning, not even if it is the reasoning of laypeople who happen to be ourselves. This directly conflicts with (PV), which requires us to refrain from using our own domain-specific reasons when confronting epistemic authorities. In this section, I will argue that (PDR), in addition to being false, also has very bad epistemic consequences for the formation of public opinion. In particular, it facilitates the spread of conspiracy theories among the public. Or so I will argue.

Defining conspiracy theories is not an easy task. Clearly, not all theories about conspiracies are conspiracy theories. Otherwise, people like me who believe in Nixon’s Watergate conspiracy or the NSA conspiracy would correctly be classified as conspiracy theorists. On the other hand, the term “conspiracy theory” is more substantial than purely pejorative, weaponized concepts that can be applied to basically everything. On my view, this term characterizes theories about conspiracies as having an epistemic basis that exhibits a specific kind of epistemic deficiency. Hence, it is an epistemic vice to believe in such theories on this basis.

Typically, conspiracy theories are radical alternatives to official, scientific or expert views (cf. Levy 2007). These alternatives are accepted by their believers because the official story seems unacceptable to them. Now, one explanation of why the official stories seem unacceptable is that they do not pass the laypeople’s plausibility check. These stories look so outrageous and crazy to laypeople that they simply cannot be accepted as true from their commonsense perspectives. However, true scientific and expert views often are so radically different from laypeople’s background beliefs that they must look outrageous to them.[[36]](#footnote-36) This is simply a by-product of these theories’ degree of novelty, complexity and sophistication. So, as long as laypeople have switched *on* their plausibility checks, we can expect them to tend to reject official and scientific theories, and to look for some alternative theory instead.

Here are two familiar examples. The first concerns the collapse of the World Trade Center on 9/11 (cf. Dunbar & Reagan 2006). According to the data on this collapse, it took the Twin towers between fourteen and sixteen seconds to collapse. In comparison, it would take something nine seconds to free-fall from the top of this building. This difference is so small that laypeople do not understand how the buildings could collapse so quickly without a controlled demolition, i.e., without simultaneous controlled explosions on many of its floors. Keep in mind that the World Trade Center was a very solid construction. The outrageousness of this fact is clearly expressed by Rosie O’Donnell, one of the “Truthers” who characteristically express incredulity here:

Do you know how fast it took those towers to fall? Nine seconds …. You know how fast it would have taken something to free-fall from the top of that building? Nine seconds. It’s physically impossible.[[37]](#footnote-37)

However, according to the relevant community of experts, simulations have proven that a period like the actual period of the collapse was to be expected under the circumstances. Here we have a clear case of an expert judgment that appears outrageous to some laypeople, even though it is correct.

My second example is the Monty Hall Puzzle. This case has nothing to do with conspiracy theories, but the standard reaction of laypeople in this case is structurally analogous. Suppose you are in a game show. Behind one of three doors is a brand-new car that the player will win if she picks the correct door. The player picks, say, door number one. Then the host opens one of the other doors, say door number three, showing that this is not the correct door. The host now offers the player the option to switch from door 1 to 2. Should she accept this offer to raise her chances? A number of scientific studies have shown that an average of 85% of people do not switch here (Bruns & Wieth 2004). For them, the chances seem equal and hence there is no reason to switch. However, as expert mathematicians have proven and also simulated, the player’s chances are raised from 1/3 to 2/3 if she switches.[[38]](#footnote-38) This is an outrageous but true expert judgment.

Both of these cases have in common that laypeople tend to reject a correct judgment because it looks outrageous on the basis of their own domain-specific reasoning and subsequently take an alternative conspiracy theory to be correct. Only to the extent to which people rely on this reasoning will conspiracy theories or conspiracy-analogous theories be accepted by laypeople and the general public. The public’s susceptibility to conspiracy theories thus seems to depend on whether (PDR) is accepted. People who choose (PV) instead seem to be less susceptible to conspiracy theories. (PV) thus protects laypeople from conspiracy theories.

Before moving on, we must address a serious objection to this line of thought. Perhaps we have been misled here by a one-sided selection of cases. Aren’t there also famous cases of well-respected authorities who are in fact gurus who lead laypeople away from the truth? Then, giving up on (PDR) would sometimes have the opposite effect, i.e., removing the resources of reasonable lay criticism when authorities are massively wrongheaded. I am thinking here of cases such as the story of Peter Duesberg.[[39]](#footnote-39) He is a famous University of California molecular biologist who does not accept that AIDS is caused by a virus. His political influence on Mbeki’s administration in South Africa caused a massive failure to provide the public with antiretroviral drugs, which in turn caused hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths. Now, if we accepted (PV) instead of (PDR), wouldn’t that lead to an uncritical acceptance of Duesberg’s authority view? You might even speculate that such uncritical acceptance of authority judgments was the main reason for his influence on administrative decisions in South Africa.

This objection, however, underestimates the resources of (PV). It is true that (PV) prohibits the use of *domain-specific* reasons when, e.g., the truth of Duesberg’s claim is to be assessed. But laypeople can still rely on *domain-independent* social reasons when they form their judgments. In Duesberg’s case, it is a publicly well-known fact that he has published his view in renowned peer-reviewed journals such as *Lancet*, *Science*, *Nature*, and *Journal of AIDS*. But none of his colleagues accepted his view, even after carefully considering his arguments. So, in this case, Duesberg’s authority judgment is defeated as a testimonial reason and as an undercutting defeater by the overwhelming rejection by his colleagues. Hence, (PV) clearly provides laypeople with the resources to reject minority views among epistemic authorities.

**3. Remaining deep worries about restricted critical thinking**

So far, I have argued that *unrestricted* democratic reasoning and *unrestricted* critical thinking cannot be accepted. These are suboptimal strategies for achieving true beliefs on the basis of authority reasons; they violate the norms of rationality when one confronts authority judgments; and they can lead to the spreading of unwarranted conspiracy theories. These are good reasons to revise the principles (PDR) and (PUCT) in the light of (PV).

The Principle of Democratic Reason needs to be amended by the following caveat (underlined):

(PDR\*) Whenever you rationally consider the truth of some proposition p, you must not exclude, marginalize or silence any rational thinker’s reasoning (including your own) about p, unless you receive authority reasons regarding p. In that case, you are not permitted to use your own domain-specific reasons.

Correspondingly, the Principle of Unrestricted Critical Thinking should also be revised as follows:

(PUCT\*) Whenever you rationally consider the truth of some proposition p, you must never stop using your own reasons for p, unless you receive authority reasons regarding p. In that case, you are not permitted to use your own domain-specific reasons.

In this section, I will address three remaining worries that Lackey (2018) has directed against these restrictions. Her **first worry** is that epistemic preemption leaves us with *blind* and *indefeasible trust* in authorities. More specifically, Lackey (2018: 236) thinks that if one’s own reasons are preempted by the authority judgment, then there aren’t any reasons left to identify authorities or to reject them as authorities. Moreover, laypeople would lack the required reasons for ranking conflicting authorities.

Lackey’s worry here would be substantial, if preemption prohibited the use of any reasons by the layperson. But this is not what preemption in fact requires. It merely prohibits the use of *domain-specific* reasons. In turn, this means that all domain-independent reasons are still usable. These reasons may concern credentials, social facts, logical facts, etc. And these facts allow for a reasonable identification of authorities as well as their criticism. If, e.g., a layperson recognizes that someone who has so far been accepted as an epistemic authority in biology asserts something that conflicts with what all of her peers claim, or that is based on a fallacy, the layperson is justified in disputing the authority’s current assertion. Laypeople can also rely on reputational facts and acceptance by colleagues when they rank epistemic authorities. So, as long as one keeps in mind that preemption does not screen off all reasons across the board, Lackey’s first worry can be dismissed.

Lackey’s **second worry** (Lackey 2018: 234) concerns the rational inescapability of informationally encapsulated sects or corrupted scientific institutions, when laypeople are not permitted to use their own domain-specific reasons. Suppose you are layperson living in a totalitarian country in which the scientific acceptance of theories is generally determined by political ideologies (as in Nazi Germany, where race theory dominated biology and German physics disputed relativity theory and quantum mechanics; or as in the Stalinist USSR, where Lysenkoism disputed the relevance of genetics and natural selection for agriculture). Then, (PV) would advise you to follow the grossly misleading majority view of experts. Now, Lackey argues, you might escape from this ideology by using your own reasoning about the subject matter. But this road is closed off if one accepts (PV). Something similar might happen when you are caught in a deceptive echo chamber in which you do not have access to any respectable expert with a diverging view.[[40]](#footnote-40)

What does this worry show exactly? It seems true that (PV) is not a safe escape route from deeply deceptive environments. (PV) cannot guarantee that there is a rational way to avoid deception. It also seems true that it is *possible* for laypeople to break free of such deception when they use their own reasoning, rather than following the authorities’ lead. But how realistic is it for this possibility to become actual? I think that this is not very realistic. Of course, experts may be able to escape from such kinds of ideological deception. In Nazi Germany, physicists were able to recognize that the official rejection of relativity theory was a fraud. And in the Stalinist USSR, biologists were able to recognize that Lysenkoism was a fraud. However, (PV) does not apply to experts, even if not all experts are cognitively equal. Inferior experts should not treat superior experts as epistemic authorities, because they cannot generally expect their superiors to have considered all their relevant evidence. Since scientists actively seek new evidence, evidential inequality is the default assumption. But when we consider laypeople, it is very unlikely that they will be able to see the fraud in official science when they use their own reasoning. However, even if an alternative to (PV) were the instrumentally better strategy for extreme situations, such as encapsulated deceptive groups or corrupted science, it does not follow that this alternative would be generally more successful. So, instrumentally speaking, (PV) is not perfect but, in general, better than any other strategy. Lackey’s worry does nothing to show that this is wrong.

Lackey’s **third worry** is perhaps her most serious one. She thinks that adopting (PV) may lead to an epistemic catastrophe (2018: 236-37). For, imagine that the layperson always defers to the authority’s judgment. Then she does not need to seek new evidence, nor does she have to practice her reasoning skills, nor does she need to derive new knowledge from old knowledge. On (PV), all these required things are outsourced to the authority. What is scary about this situation becomes visible when we consider what happens when we reject someone as an authority for us who had this status before. According to Lackey, we will then lack the resources to form any judgment; and this would indeed be a catastrophe.

I think there is indeed a serious problem with lacking the resources for reasoning oneself. But it is not the one indicated by Lackey. Epistemic dependence on others just seems to be the human condition. If we reject one authority because she turns out to be corrupt or all the other experts disagree with her, then we do not become dependent on our own reasoning, but may also defer to the other authorities who are typically available.

The real problem with lacking the resources for reasoning oneself is twofold. If laypeople always follow the expert’s lead, then (i) they will never acquire understanding,[[41]](#footnote-41) and (ii) experts will gradually die out. Experts must be able to reason on their own. Thus, if laypeople did not develop reasoning skills themselves, this would lead to the community’s cognitive suicide in the long run. There would not be any new experts to which laypeople could then defer. Moreover, laypeople would lack an appropriate understanding of what they accept, because they would not be able to grasp the reasons for the truths they accept on authority.

If (PV) is correct, then one cannot claim that acquiring new evidence, cultivating reasoning skills and making inferential connections is needed as a proper basis for believing. But there may be other values associated with possessing these things. I have already mentioned two additional epistemic values: acquiring understanding and developing expertise. Since even laypeople want to acquire understanding and gradually develop expertise, it is reasonable to seek new evidence and to practice reasoning, even if these things are not strictly required for forming beliefs.[[42]](#footnote-42)

So far, this is only an abstract argument. How do deference to authorities and developing reasoning skills fit together in practice? Consider the following case. A lay mathematician defers, in his mathematical judgments, to an expert mathematician. So, he does not base his judgments on his own proofs. However, the lay mathematician not only wants to know mathematical theorems, he also wants to understand why they are true. In order to acquire this additional understanding, the lay mathematician does two things. First, he follows the expert’s lead in his genuine judgment. Second, he forms off-line simulated judgments for himself, following his own assessment of his domain-specific reasons and thereby trying out proofs. If the lay mathematician can use his own reasoning to reach those mathematical solutions that he already believes on authority, then he grasps *why* these propositions are true. He gains understanding without basing his beliefs on his own reasoning. By checking whether his off-line judgments typically correspond with his beliefs on authority, and calibrating his off-line judgment, the lay mathematician may also recognize whether he makes progress in acquiring mathematical expertise himself. We can now see that developing one’s own reasoning skills and deferring to authority do not exclude each other, but are in fact complementary if we take into account further epistemic goals beyond just forming epistemically proper beliefs.

**4. Conclusion**

It turns out that the Principle of Democratic Reason and the Principle of Unrestricted Critical Thinking must both be revised. As they stand, these principles do not reflect what rationality requires, and tend to facilitate the spreading of conspiracy theories among the public. Instead, laypeople must defer to what they identify as the views of epistemic authorities, without giving any weight to the plausibility or implausibility of these views from a lay perspective. In contrast to what critics have claimed, this local restriction of critical thinking does not have any crazy consequences. In particular, it does not involve giving up critical thinking in general. When we confront authorities, critical thinking should have its exclusive role in domain-independent reasoning (e.g., assessing their status as authorities in light of their credentials, reputations, awards, peer reviews, educations, but also signs of bribery, bias, or being drunk or tired, etc.). If I am right, revising our received intellectual standards is not only a matter for academic discourse, but should also have social and political consequences. That experts play a specific epistemic role in society should be taught in schools and at universities; and institutions should make epistemic authorities and their ranking more visible to the public. It remains to be seen how this can be implemented in the Age of the Internet.

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1. For an excellent survey of these explanatory factors, see McIntyre 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Dunning 2005; Kahneman 2011: part III. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Kahneman 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brotherton 2015 argues that conspiracy theories are often the results of our natural tendency to give narrative explanations. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Cassam 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Kahneman 2011: ch. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. Sunstein 2006: ch. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. Lynch 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. According to the majority view, fake news results either from a deceptive intention or an attitude of indifference to truth. See Gelfert 2018; Jaster & Lanius 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jaster & Lanius 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is how I interpret Kellyanne Conway’s reference to “alternative facts” when she defended the claim that Trump had more visitors at his inauguration speech than Obama, on NBC in 2017. I take it that she did not rely here on ontological relativism, but was just claiming that there were pieces of evidence (namely reports from a massively overcrowded subway system) that were in conflict with what the official pictures of the event suggested. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. According to Orsekes & Conway 2010, these strategies were used by lobbyists from the tobacco industry and the oil industry to discredit scientific findings about the harmful effects of these industries. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. Sunstein 2006: ch. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For the general worry, see Pariser 2011. Recent empirical studies suggest, however, that these effects are not significant. Cf. Hannack et al. 2013; Haim et al. 2017; Curtois et al. 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. McIntyre 2018, ch. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. Vosoughi et al. 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Cf. McIntyre 2018, ch. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For discussion, see, e.g., Duthil Novaes & de Ridder in this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Uscinski & Parent 2014: 110 present some evidence from letters to the editors of *The New York Times* (1890-2010) that suggests that conspiratorial talk has recently declined. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cf., e.g., Landemore 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Of course, there are other alternatives to (PDR) such as individualism, i.e. the view that testimony does not provide us with any epistemic reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Whether one possesses the relevant evidence or the reasoning competences will, of course, depend on further factors such as training or opportunity [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. One should keep in mind here that being an epistemic authority is different from being an expert. Whereas the status of an expert does not depend on being recognized as such, an authority has her normatively binding force only in virtue of being recognized as an expert. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Let me flag that this definition is far from being uncontroversial. Some philosophers treat “authority” and “expert” as more or less synonymous terms (Goldman 1999, Lackey 2018), others share my view that authorities must be recognized as superiors (Zagzebski 2012: 103; Jäger 2016: 170). Most closely, my definition resembles Jäger’s. There is, however, one crucial difference: Jäger does not require that S takes the authority to have considered all of S’s own evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For service-oriented accounts of experts, see Quast 2018 and Croce 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Zagzebski 2012: 114: “[T]here is another problem with treating the authority’s belief that p as just another reason among others to believe. If I do so, I will worsen my track record in getting the truth.” See also Raz 1988: 68-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For the following, see Dunning 2005, ch. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For an earlier version of this argument, see Constantin & Grundmann forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For accounts that are either more internalist or externalist in spirit, see Melis 2014 and Constantin forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The locus classicus for this distinction is Pollock 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Cf. Christensen 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For opposing views, see Lasonen-Aarnio 2014, 2020, and Weatherson 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. In the case of Bryan, the evidence is shared since both, the layperson and Bryan, calculate the same math problem; and even if Bryan does not know all mental math strategies, he knows that they are all deductive and their proper use thus cannot lead to different rational results. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For a defense of uniqueness, see White 2005; for a critique, compare Kelly 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. This assumption is disputed by, e.g., Lasonen-Aarnio 2014, 2020 and Weatherson 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For a general interpretation of the clash between common sense and science along these lines, see McCauley 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Cited from Dunbar & Reagan 2006: 42-43. Obviously, O’Donnell did not report the exact numbers, but speeded up the collapse a bit to make her point more vivid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For a comprehensive discussion, see Rosenhouse 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. For the following, see Oreskes 2019: 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. For more on this kind of worry, see Nguyen forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Here I assume without any further argument that understanding cannot be transmitted through testimony. For dissenting views, see Boyd 2017 and Croce 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. A further value of cultivating these skills may be epistemic autonomy. For an approach along these lines, see Faulkner 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)