Capturing the Conspiracist's Imagination

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Abstract: Some incredibly far-fetched conspiracy theories circulate online these days. For most of us, clear evidence would be required before we'd believe these extraordinary theories. Yet, conspiracists often cite evidence that seems transparently very weak. This is puzzling, since conspiracists often aren't irrational people who are incapable of rationally processing evidence. I argue that existing accounts of conspiracist belief formation don't fully address this puzzle. Then, drawing on both philosophical and empirical considerations, I propose a new explanation that appeals to the role of the imagination in conspiracist belief formation. I argue that conspiracists first become imaginatively absorbed in conspiracist narratives, where this helps to explain how they process their evidence. From there, we can better understand why they find this evidence so compelling, as well as the psychological role it plays in their belief forming processes. This account also has practical implications for combatting the spread of online conspiracy theories.

1. Introduction

Some incredible conspiracy theories circulate online these days. You might have heard stories of politicians trafficking children and murdering them to drink their blood; of COVID-19 vaccines developed in order to spread "Satan's DNA" to the entire population; or of a new "Queen of Canada," installed by Donald Trump, who is executing Canada's elected leaders for their crimes against humanity.[1]

In what follows, I'll use "conspiracy theory" to refer to especially extreme theories like these, which seem quite fantastical and far-fetched on their face.[2] My goal is to elucidate a role for the

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[1] Read on for more about child-murdering politicians; see Wood (2022) on Satan's DNA; and see Lamoureux (2021) on the Queen of Canada.

[2] It's controversial whether we should restrict the term to such theories or apply it to any theory that cites a conspiracy of some kind (see, e.g., Coady 2007; Dentith 2014; Cassam 2019; Napolitano 2021). I'll set aside this terminological dispute and just stipulate that I'm using the term to refer to the most far-fetched theories, since I take it such theories are a phenomenon worth studying in and of themselves. However, as Räikkä and Basham (2018) argue, many theories about conspiracies aren't so prima facie unbelievable—including stories about conspiracies that really happened, such as Watergate or the official account of 9/11. So, while many theories citing conspiracies can be dismissed as absurd, many plausibly cannot (cf. Pigden 2007, 221).

imagination in the process by which conspiracists form beliefs in such theories.[3] In doing so, I aim to better understand how conspiracists form beliefs in response to evidence that, to outsiders, seems to be extremely weak. For most of us, clear evidence would be required before we'd believe theories as extraordinary as those mentioned above. Yet, conspiracists often cite evidence that seems transparently bad. Some examples will bring this out.

Conspiracists often appeal to the assertions of public figures, which they interpret in outlandish ways. Consider, for example, how proponents of the "Pizzagate" theory interpreted the content of John Podesta's leaked emails. Various emails referred to pizza, including references to eating pizza for dinner and to political fundraisers held at a Washington, D.C. pizza restaurant called Comet Ping Pong. Conspiracists interpreted these emails as referring to a child sex trafficking and murder ring operating out of the basement of Comet Ping Pong, led by high-profile Democrats such as Podesta, Hilary Clinton, and Barack Obama (Aisch et al. 2016; Silverman 2016).

Similarly, conspiracists sometimes interpret extremely vague, cryptic assertions or online posts in ways that seem like a huge stretch. This is the modus operandi of recent "QAnon" conspiracy theorizing. Supporters claim that Donald Trump is covertly waging a battle against Democrats and Hollywood elites involved in an international cabal of child abusers and murderers, whom Trump will eventually have arrested and executed. They piece together various elaborations on this core theory from cryptic posts on fringe online message boards, which they claim are posted by an anonymous, high-ranking government insider. This insider is nicknamed "Q" and his posts are known as "Q drops" (Roose 2021).

To use an example: in December 2017, a Q drop containing the following text was posted to the message board 8chan:

> FLASH_BREAK_
> /* /\ /*
> Shall we play a game?
> Map is critical to understand.
> Future unlocks past.
> DECLAS_ATL_(past).

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[3] "Conspiracist" is sometimes used to refer only to those who already believe a conspiracy theory. I'll use it more loosely, also referring to anyone who professes support for a conspiracy theory or actively participates in a community centered around investigating one, even if they don't (yet) fully believe it.

      News unlocks map.
      Find the markers.
      10 & [10].
      12/7 – 12/17.
      Concourse F.
      Terminal 5.
      Private_operated plane (OP)?
      ATL -> IAD
      Extraction/known.
      Dark.
      Darkness.
      Learn double meanings.

This came two days after a fire at the Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in Atlanta, which caused a power outage and many cancelled flights. As McIntosh (2022) documents, many QAnon supporters took this drop to reveal that Obama had been arrested at the Atlanta airport. They interpreted the word "extraction" to mean someone had been extracted from the airport, with the fire and power outage used to cover this up. They also interpreted the reference to "IAD" (Washington Dulles International Airport) as revealing it was a political figure who was extracted. Finally, they interpreted the words "Dark" and "Darkness" as referring to Obama's dark skin, thus concluding it was Obama.

Conspiracists often claim they started off open-minded but skeptical, then were finally convinced when they saw evidence like the above laid out (Garry et al. 2021; Packer and Stoneman 2021).[4] Yet, it's a widespread feature of recent conspiracy theorizing that the evidence is extremely weak (cf. Cassam 2019; Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019). It seems a much simpler explanation to assume Podesta was literally writing about eating pizza, and there seem to be infinitely many possible interpretations consistent with the above Q drop (not to mention the question of why a government insider would post classified information on fringe message boards in the first place). So, it seems like an enormous stretch to base beliefs in these theories on such evidence.

This gives rise to a puzzle. It's not as if conspiracists are totally irrational people who are incapable of processing evidence and forming rational beliefs. Instead, they're often well-functioning people in most areas of life—they hold down jobs, have families, and the like. Anyone who is able

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[4] As should be clear, I'll use "evidence" in a relatively loose way—as, roughly, synonymous with whatever conspiracists *take* to be evidence for their theories. Whether this is sufficient for it to count as genuine evidence depends on larger background issues about the nature of evidence.

to competently navigate the world must generally be able to form beliefs by discriminating good from bad evidence, even if they occasionally get things wrong. Yet, when it comes to this conspiracist evidence, it's difficult to see why anyone would seriously countenance it in the first place, let alone form a belief based on it.

In this paper, I argue that looking to the role of the imagination in conspiracist belief formation can help illuminate what's going on here.[5] First, §2 gives a more detailed account of the specific conspiracists and theories on which I'll focus. It then argues that prominent existing accounts don't fully explain the role of the evidence in conspiracist belief formation. In §3, I'll take a detour away from conspiracism to consider the role of the imagination in *religious* contexts, drawing heavily on Luhrmann's (2020) empirical account of imaginative engagement with religious narratives. Then, §4 argues that we can extend this account of religious imagination to give an account of the imagination's role in engagement with conspiracy theories.[6] §5 argues that this account of conspiracist imagination can explain how many conspiracists end up forming beliefs in conspiracy theories. §6 explains why this account helps us understand how conspiracists form beliefs in response to such weak evidence. Finally, §7 draws out some practical implications about combatting the spread of online misinformation.

2. Narratives, consumers, and existing accounts

2.1. Conspiracist narratives and the Theory Consumers

A unifying feature of the conspiracy theories on which I'm focused is their *narrative* structure, a property commonly noted by empirical researchers (Tangherlini et al. 2020; Lazić and Žeželj 2021). A narrative is, roughly, a story which describes a sequence of concrete, causally connected events. Pizzagate and QAnon theorizing resemble such storytelling, in that they contain various concrete details about people, their actions, and their motivations—for example, about specific Democrats drinking children's blood during occult rituals, or about a government insider called "Q" trying to

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[5] Recently, several other philosophers have invoked imagination in analyzing conspiracy theorizing (Ichino 2022; Ganapini forthcoming; Levy forthcoming; Munro forthcoming). Throughout, I'll situate my account in relation to theirs, including ways in which I depart from them.

[6] Note: my account shouldn't be read as arguing that religion is a form of conspiracy theorizing, nor that religious and conspiracist beliefs are epistemically on par. For all I say, it could be that, for example, a similar belief forming process is employed in a more rational way by religious believers than by conspiracists.

expose them in online message boards. Such concrete details come together to resemble the plot of a fictional story, such as a political thriller or horror film.

My analysis will primarily concern those to whom online conspiracy theories *spread*, rather than those who initially develop them. Some background will make clear what I mean.

Prominent online conspiracy theories are typically first developed on fringe message boards like 4chan, 8chan, or 8kun. These boards contain a chaotic mix of online sleuths trying to piece together interpretations of some body of evidence (call these users the "Theory Builders"). Thus, for example, Theory Builders combed through Podesta's emails for clues to a coverup, developing the Pizzagate theory based on various references to pizza. Similarly, when a new Q drop appears, QAnon Theory Builders analyze it to come up with interpretations, justifying them with complex webs of evidence including connections to prior drops, Trump's recent tweets, and other recent events. Other users reject some of these theories, while some gain wider acceptance.

From there, the most promising theories are taken up and shared by conspiracists with larger followings, through more mainstream social media platforms, blogs, alternative news sites, and self-published e-books (call these conspiracists "Theory Transmitters," their followers "Theory Consumers"). Theory Consumers typically don't directly observe the initial, chaotic process of theory-building on message boards like 8kun. Instead, when Theory Transmitters lift theories from those boards and propagate them more widely, they often include explanations of how Theory Builders pieced them together, thus laying out the evidence for Theory Consumers to walk through themselves.

To see more concretely how Theory Consumers encounter such evidence online, consider a tweet from a Pizzagate Theory Transmitter named Jared Wyand (as documented by Silverman 2016). Wyand's tweet instructs his followers to search Podesta's leaked emails for keywords, with the aim of "uncovering a child sex ring." It includes a screenshot from a 4chan post containing instructions for decoding these keywords:

"hotdog" = boy
"pizza" = girl
"cheese" = little girl
"pasta" = little boy
"ice cream" = male prostitute
"walnut" or nuts = person of colour

"map" = semen

"sauce" = orgy

In a similar vein, McIntosh (2022) captures instances in which QAnon Theory Transmitters share "proofs" that Q and Donald Trump are working together. In one example, a Theory Transmitter tweets annotated screenshots of a Q drop alongside one of Trump's tweets. The annotations point out coincidences between them: Trump's tweet mentions healthcare and was posted at 5:56pm, while Q's 556th drop cryptically refers to "The 'CURE." These coincidences are framed as covert signals that Trump and Q are in cahoots.

My arguments in the rest of the paper will primarily be directed at the Theory Consumers—specifically, the ways they form beliefs in response to evidence of this sort. So, rather than focusing on how conspiracy theories are initially built, or on how evidence is initially pieced together, I'll focus on the point when Theory Consumers encounter evidence already laid out by Theory Transmitters.[7]

Note that Theory Consumers' engagement with theories and evidence isn't necessarily passive and receptive. Often, they claim to actively seek out evidence Theory Transmitters have laid out, aiming to assess for themselves whether it really supports a theory. As should become clear below, my account in this paper likely applies most to such actively engaged Theory Consumers. Of course, there's a spectrum of engagement; there are likely also many, much more credulous internet users who merely encounter conspiracy theories and passively accept them. I'm less focused on those Theory Consumers.

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[7] I focus on Theory Consumers in part because it's very difficult to tell when Theory Builders and Theory Transmitters genuinely believe their own theories. Theory building involves many ideas being proposed and rejected, with only a few emerging as winners; it's therefore often unclear when posters on sites like 8kun genuinely believe, versus merely throwing out ideas to see which ones "stick." Furthermore, these message boards have an established history of "LARPing" ("live action roleplaying"), with posters merely *pretending* to endorse deep state conspiracy theories (Zadrozny and Collins 2018; Packer and Stoneman 2021). This makes it even more difficult to determine who genuinely believes.

2.2. Gaps in existing literature

The examples I've considered reveal how much of a stretch conspiracist evidence seems, at least to those of us outside conspiracist communities. If we want to fully understand the process of conspiracist belief formation, we have to understand the psychological role of such evidence, including why it seems so much more compelling to conspiracists than outsiders.

I'll now argue that many existing accounts from philosophy and psychology don't give a complete explanation of the role this evidence plays in bringing about conspiracist beliefs. This isn't to reject these accounts—it may be that all give an accurate, partial explanation of some mechanisms involved in conspiracist belief formation. I also don't mean to *criticize* these accounts by pointing out that they're incomplete, since none purport to offer complete explanations in the first place. Instead, my goal is to bring out the gap in existing literature that I aim to fill. All the accounts I discuss in this subsection are consistent with my positive account in this paper, since there are likely multiple different psychological forces involved in generating conspiracist beliefs.

First, consider accounts from psychology that describe conspiracists as succumbing to irrational influences on belief. Beliefs in conspiracy theories are highly correlated with certain desires—for example, to feel special because one possesses secret knowledge (Imhoff and Lamberty 2017; Douglas and Sutton 2018; Sternisko et al. 2020) and to find community and a sense of belonging (Douglas et al. 2017; Sternisko et al. 2020; Phadke et al. 2021). Similarly, after finding that willingness to endorse a conspiracy theory is correlated with how entertaining the theory is, van Prooijen et al. (2022) argue that entertainment value influences beliefs. There are two ways to interpret such data; empirical researchers aren't always clear about which they intend, so I'll consider each in turn.

On a first interpretation, factors like desires and pleasurable feelings of entertainment exert a *direct* causal influence on conspiracists' beliefs, in the sense that these factors themselves (are among those that) directly give rise to beliefs. This sort of account doesn't address my driving question about the causal role of conspiracist evidence in belief formation, since it gives no such causal role to this evidence. As I said in §1, conspiracists report forming beliefs in response to this evidence. Furthermore, conspiracists are often engaged in very actively seeking out evidence before making up their minds (cf. Harris 2018; Levy 2022). This sort of account, however, doesn't explain why there seems to be a causal connection between conspiracists' evidence and their beliefs. (Again, I'm not *criticizing* such accounts or arguing they're *false*; I just aim to bring out how we don't yet have a full understanding of the role of conspiracists' evidence.)

A second way of interpreting the data about irrational influences on belief is to claim these influences are more *indirect*, infecting conspiracist belief formation through familiar biases that affect everyone to some extent—for example, by generating motivated reasoning or confirmation bias in the ways they seek out or process evidence. As Harris (2018) argues, perhaps they're motivated to actively seek out only evidence in favour of their preferred theories, while avoiding sources of counterevidence. Alternatively, perhaps they do encounter evidence both for and against their favoured theories, but their desires cause them to give undue weight to confirming evidence while dismissing counterevidence.

This sort of explanation again seems incomplete. Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning subtly affect how all of us seek out and process evidence. But they don't completely obviate our ability to detect when some evidence is very bad: the fact that I'm biased towards believing P doesn't mean that I altogether lose my ability to rationally evaluate evidence, such that I see any evidence for P put before me as good (cf. Kunda 1990; Epley and Gilovich 2016; Pennycook and Rand 2019). Instead, such biases more subtly modulate our reasoning processes. So, we need to appeal to more than just biases of this sort to explain why conspiracists seem to rely on such weak evidence.

Instead of arguing that conspiracists' evidence processing is influenced by desires, some philosophers have argued that it's influenced by how they allocate *trust* in epistemic sources. Conspiracists seem to place too much trust in sources who already agree with their existing beliefs (e.g., conspiracist media platforms), while distrusting sources who disagree with them (e.g., mainstream news outlets). As both Nguyen (2020) and Cassam (2016) point out, this way of allocating trust would explain why they give credence to evidence coming from conspiracist sources, while distrusting evidence from non-conspiracist sources.

This explanation again seems incomplete, for reasons similar to what I said above about confirmation bias and motivated reasoning. We're of course more likely to accept evidence from a trusted source over a distrusted one. However, trust doesn't just unconditionally hold up even after a source produces evidence that's obviously incredible. We can often recognize when a source we initially trusted is misleading us, intentionally or unintentionally, by feeding us bad evidence. So, again, merely appealing to trust doesn't explain why conspiracists end up taking seemingly absurd evidence to be compelling.

For similar reasons, Cassam's (2016) broader account in terms of epistemic vice is also incomplete. Cassam explains why conspiracists trust unreliable sources by appealing to epistemic vices—intellectual traits like gullibility, close-mindedness, and cynicism about legitimate sources.

However, simply possessing traits like these doesn't make one altogether unable to spot clearly bad evidence. Much like confirmation bias, many of us possess such vices to some extent, and they subtly modulate how we process evidence. Still, they don't typically make us immune to spotting when some evidence is obviously absurd.

Psychologists have also posited that conspiracists are influenced by an especially strong tendency to perceive illusory patterns. Some people are more prone than others to see patterns in random data, and van Prooijen et al. (2018) found that conspiracists were particularly likely to see patterns in a series of random coin tosses and unstructured Jackson Pollock paintings. This would help to explain why conspiracists seem to see meaningful patterns in leaked emails and Q drops, while non-conspiracists don't.

However, this again doesn't offer a full explanation. When we seem to see meaningful patterns in random noise, we can often recognize when those patterns are illusory—upon seeming to see a face in the clouds, for example, we know it's not *really* a face. So, we need to understand not only why someone would *seem* to see a meaningful pattern in leaked emails or Q drops, but also why one would take this appearance at face value. It's not so far-fetched to think experimenters in a laboratory have presented you with a series of coin flips that covertly contains a pattern, so we can see why someone would take seriously their apparent pattern perception in that case. Similarly, it's not so far-fetched to think one is picking up on a subtle pattern within an abstract painting. It's much more far-fetched to think that an apparent pattern in a Q drop supports the idea that Trump is waging a war against Democrats who murder children and drink their blood.

Finally, the remainder of this section turns to accounts that, like mine in this paper, understand conspiracy theorizing in terms of imagination.

Recently, various philosophers have converged on the idea that many conspiracists merely *imagine* or *pretend* their theories are true rather than genuinely believing them (Ichino 2022; Ganapini forthcoming; Levy forthcoming; Munro forthcoming). If that's right, then it might initially seem we have no need to explain the role of far-fetched evidence in conspiracist *belief* formation, since conspiracists don't really *believe* in the first place.

Various evidence speaks in favour of thinking many conspiracists are merely imagining. For one, as I mentioned above, conspiracy theories typically have *narrative* structures. As Ichino (2022) and Ganapini (forthcoming) note, these theories contain various tropes standardly found in fictional narratives, such as their focus on epic battles between good and evil forces. And it's natural to think that the imagination is involved in processing narratives of all kinds: that, as we consume a story, we

grasp its contents by imagining them. In addition to being intuitive, this view is standard amongst philosophers of imagination and fiction (see, e.g., Stock 2013; Van Leeuwen 2016a).

Conspiracy theories also often function as a source of *entertainment*, with many people sharing them alongside jokes, memes, and playful trolling. In line with this, empirical evidence suggests that the conspiracy theories which spread most efficiently online are especially juicy, titillating, and entertaining (Vosoughi et al. 2018; Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, ch. 2; Van Prooijen et al. 2022). Conspiracy theories are also often highly *gamified*—QAnon, for example, resembles a puzzle-solving game in the way participants piece together clues and try to crack cryptic, coded messages (Levy forthcoming). So, participation in online conspiracy theorizing often looks more like playing a game of pretend than seeking the truth.

In various ways, the functional role of conspiracists' attitudes towards conspiracy theories also seems more imagination-like than belief-like. Beliefs are generally sensitive to one's evidence; yet, as I've been stressing, the evidence conspiracists cite seems to be transparently very weak. Furthermore, conspiracists' attitudes don't seem to guide their behaviours the way beliefs typically do. Mercier (2020, ch. 10) notes that, in the case of Pizzagate, many conspiracists don't act as we'd expect them to if they genuinely believed. Proponents claimed children were being abused in the basement of a specific pizza restaurant; however, rather than taking concrete steps like calling the police or protesting outside the restaurant, many were content to simply post about it online and engage with likeminded conspiracists. Their attitudes therefore seem to guide their actions only in certain settings (e.g., when conversing with other conspiracists), rather than in the general way beliefs do.[8]

I think there's much to these arguments, and I agree that they suggest many conspiracists merely imagine conspiracy theories are true. However, following Munro (forthcoming), it's also important to recognize that there are stark exceptions. We can see this in cases where conspiracists' attitudes motivate them to carry out quite drastic actions. Among the proponents of Pizzagate were one man who brought a gun into Comet Ping Pong to investigate (Silverman 2016), as well as

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[8] As Dub (2015) argues, the cognitive attitudes *acceptance* and *delusion* also differ from belief in the ways described in this paragraph. However, positing that conspiracists exhibit either of these attitudes wouldn't explain the narrativity or entertainment aspects the way imagination-based theories do.

another who tried to blow up a public monument (Winter 2019). QAnon has also motivated actions far beyond just engaging with other conspiracists online, such as inspiring some of the participants in the January 6, 2021 riot at the US Capitol (Holoyda 2022). Such conspiracists don't seem to be merely pretending, since we'd expect someone who is merely pretending to stop short of such drastic actions; instead, they seem to be true believers.

There's a parallel debate about religious belief that's instructive here. Van Leeuwen (2014) and Luhrmann (2020) note that people's attitudes towards religious claims often aren't sensitive to evidence the way beliefs are, and that they often don't guide action the way beliefs do—for example, they don't guide day-to-day actions (people don't pray to God to stop at a traffic light instead of simply braking) and don't guide actions outside of specific contexts (e.g., religious rituals). However, as Luhrmann (2020) argues, there are exceptions. Some religious believers undertake drastic actions: handling venomous snakes, drinking poison, or refusing conventional medicine because God will protect them, as well as committing violence or mass suicide in the name of their religion (see also Boudry and Coyne 2016). As a general rule for both conspiracists and religious subjects, it's prima facie plausible that those willing to undertake extreme actions are true believers.[9]

Ultimately, it's difficult to determine just how many conspiracists really believe the theories they claim to believe; adjudicating this would take empirical investigation. Still, it seems we should

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[9] As two anonymous reviewers point out, an alternative explanation is that those who undertake extreme actions are also merely pretending but engage in costly behaviours to signal loyalty to an ingroup (see, e.g., Bulbulia 2004 for relevant discussion of religious cases). If so, extreme actions may not be airtight evidence that one truly believes. However, this wouldn't falsify my claim that we need an account of the true believers. That's because it would be highly implausible to say that *no* extremists are true believers, with all merely pretending for signalling purposes; it's doubtful that we can give such a uniform analysis of all conspiracists. So, at most, accepting this alternative explanation only restricts my account's scope, in that fewer are true believers than we might initially have thought.

Still, even if one accepts this, it's plausible that extremists *take themselves to believe*—i.e., even if they have a first-order attitude of merely imagining a theory is true, they have a second-order belief that they believe (cf. Levy forthcoming on conspiracists; van Leeuwen 2016b on religious subjects). My positive account of conspiracist belief in this paper could plausibly be revised to accommodate this. §5's account of how conspiracists progress from merely imagining to truly believing could be revised to an account of how they progress to *taking themselves to be* true believers. Similarly, §6's explanation of the role of far-fetched evidence in conspiracist belief could be revised to explain its role in *coming to see themselves as* true believers. I don't have space to fully develop this alternative and weigh it against my main account, but I hope to explore these issues in future work.

take at least some conspiracists' claims seriously. The idea that many conspiracists merely imagine rather than genuinely believing doesn't explain why many people *do* form beliefs despite how weak the evidence seems to be. (Again, this isn't a criticism of existing imagination-based accounts, which don't claim to describe *all* conspiracists; I'm simply pointing out where our understanding remains incomplete.)

One recent account (Munro forthcoming) does give imagination a role in conspiracist belief. Munro argues that conspiracists start believing as a result of becoming deeply absorbed in fantasies (specifically, fantasizing that they possess a kind of secret or esoteric knowledge). However, Munro's account doesn't directly address the causal role of conspiracists' seemingly far-fetched evidence in their belief formation; it's focused more on facts about the epistemology of imagination, as well as how conspiracists' social environments are set up to obscure the line between fantasy and reality, making it difficult to keep track of what's real and what's pretend.

As we'll see below, my positive account will take on board the idea that many conspiracists merely imagine rather than believe, along with many of the insights from the imagination-based accounts just described. However, I'll argue that imagining can be the first step of a process on the way to forming a genuine belief; specifically, I'll argue that understanding this process helps us get a clearer picture of the way far-fetched evidence ends up influencing conspiracist beliefs.[10]

3. Luhrmann on religious imagination

This section introduces and expands upon Luhrmann's (2020) account of the imagination's role in how God and other supernatural entities come to "feel real" for religious people (a somewhat

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[10] There's another close relative of the imagination-based views just discussed: Van Leeuwen's (2014) view that "religious credence" is a distinct cognitive attitude, one whose functional role is very *similar to*, but different from, imagination. There's much to be said for Van Leeuwen's arguments, which appeal to evidence similar to that which motivates imagination-based views of conspiracy theories (e.g., that religious commitments aren't evidence-sensitive or behaviour-guiding the way beliefs are). He also proposes that religious credences could be operative in domains outside religion (e.g., some political beliefs), which may include conspiracy theorizing. Properly evaluating this proposal would require more detailed consideration of the nature of religious credence and how it differs from imagination. However, I think it's possible that my arguments in this paper which appeal to imagination could be reformulated in terms of Van Leeuwen's notion of religious credence. I leave this open for future research.

vague notion I'll define more precisely below). In doing so, I'll introduce various notions that will be adapted to §4's account of conspiracy theorizing.

As an anthropologist who has spent time immersed in various faith communities, Luhrmann observes that religious people are constantly in danger of losing the felt realness of God or whichever spiritual entities they profess belief in. That's because, if one simply goes about interacting with the world in mundane, everyday contexts, one typically doesn't gain clear confirmation that supernatural entities exist. Instead, one simply experiences and interacts with ordinary objects and people. This may even seem like evidence *against* the existence of supernatural entities: one's religious community might, for example, profess that God is everywhere at all times, yet when one looks around one sees only physical objects.

So, Luhrmann argues, members of faith communities follow strategies for drawing their attention away from the ordinary world and keeping it focused on the supernatural, which allows evidence against the existence of supernatural entities to drop out of their awareness. They also follow strategies for making it seem *as if* they possess positive evidence that supernatural entities exist. These strategies, the steps of which I'll unpack below, give rise to the feeling that supernatural entities are real.

Before turning to the specifics, though, it would help to have a more precise account of what it means to say some entity "feels real." For Luhrmann, to say a supernatural entity feels real doesn't imply that one believes it exists—instead, it's supposed to be consistent with disbelief or suspended judgment. How might we more precisely cash out this idea? I propose we construe this in an epistemic way: to say that an entity feels real is to say it feels as if one *knows* the entity exists.

It's controversial whether there's a singular feeling or phenomenology associated with states like possessing knowledge, acquiring knowledge, or achieving understanding (for relevant discussions, see Koriat 1993; Gopnik 1998; Nguyen 2021). Rather than take a stance on this, I'll adopt a minimal definition of what it means to say it feels as if one knows that P: namely, one undergoes a cognitive process that's phenomenologically similar to some way of coming to know (or of sustaining one's existing knowledge) that P. In other words, one undergoes a cognitive process that's phenomenologically similar to some reliable, knowledge-producing process.

On this construal, processes that yield knowledge—such as successful, veridical perception—would themselves involve a feeling of possessing knowledge. But one can also have an illusory feeling *as if* one possesses knowledge when one undergoes a hallucination that's phenomenologically indistinguishable from knowledge-yielding perception, or when one accepts

dishonest testimony from a seemingly honest, reliable informant. This sort of feeling is also consistent with belief, disbelief, or suspended judgment. When experiencing a known perceptual illusion, one's experience can feel very much like veridical, knowledge-yielding perception, even if one disbelieves. Similarly, one can bring to mind an apparent memory that feels as if it yields knowledge of the past, while suspending judgment because one has reason to doubt it.

To say a supernatural entity feels real, then, is to say that one undergoes a cognitive process that feels like a way of coming to know the entity exists. While Luhrmann doesn't explicitly propose this epistemic construal, it fits well with her focus on the way one processes evidence: again, according to her account, this feeling arises through processes which turn one's attention away from counterevidence, focusing it instead on apparent evidence. As will become clear in the rest of this section, my epistemic construal provides a fruitful way of unpacking the steps Luhrmann describes for how this feeling arises.

I'll now walk through the two steps of Luhrmann's account, as well as elaborating and building upon them by drawing on philosophical and empirical insights about the imagination.

3.1. Step 1: Imaginative absorption in narratives

The first step, Luhrmann argues, is to engage with narratives which capture the imagination, causing one to become absorbed in their details. Such narratives include holy texts like the Bible, as well as orally transmitted stories and legends. Luhrmann argues that the function of such narratives is to cause vivid imaginings, in which the imaginer becomes so absorbed that the narrative starts to feel real. They do this in part by drawing one's attention away from the ordinary world around oneself, focusing it instead on the supernatural details of the story. This imaginative absorption thus directs one's attention away from evidence against the imagined narrative and towards the content of the narrative itself, causing counterevidence to drop out of one's awareness.

On my construal of what it means for supernatural entities to feel real, it must be that this process of imagining feels much like a process of acquiring knowledge that these entities exist. In this subsection, I'll argue that, when one undergoes a process of constructing mental imagery representing the contents of religious narratives, the resulting imagining feels phenomenologically very much like imaginings which paradigmatically afford knowledge.

Some imaginings don't characteristically have the function of affording knowledge or a grasp of the truth, such as when we intentionally aim to imagine something we know is fictional or far-fetched. While such imaginings may afford knowledge under some circumstances, they don't

characteristically aim at doing so. In contrast, perhaps the paradigmatic examples of constructing mental imagery in a way that affords knowledge are those which occur during "mental time travel" (MTT).

MTT occurs when one episodically remembers an event one experienced in the past or imagines an event one will experience in the future (Tulving 2002). It involves using mental imagery to either re-construct a past experience or imagine a future experience. Both past and future directed instances are constructed in similar ways: for example, both involve piecing together bits of prior experiences to construct an overall representation of an event.[11] Exercises of MTT are thus aimed at giving one a conscious grasp of how things were in one's past or will be in one's future. If one reliably and accurately remembers the past or imagines the future, then MTT generates occurrent knowledge of the past or future (cf. Michaelian 2016).

I'll next argue that the religious imaginings Luhrmann describes share many of the characteristic properties of knowledge-affording exercises of MTT (hereafter "MTT simulations," following a common way of referring to MTT as mentally "simulating" past or future events). This will give us a grip on what it means to say these imaginings feel as if they afford knowledge: it means they feel a lot like simulations that paradigmatically afford knowledge.[12]

3.1.1. *Autonoetic consciousness*

One central phenomenological feature of knowledge-affording MTT simulations is their *autonoetic* character. Autonoesis involves a subjective sense of re-experiencing a past event (in memory) or pre-experiencing a future event (in imagining the future). MTT therefore doesn't merely involve representing a past or future event in an impersonal way. Instead, it involves representing

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[11] This isn't to take a stance on whether, as Michaelian (2016) argues, remembering *just is* a form of imagining, rather than the two being different in kind. Even if they're constructed in similar ways, there might still be substantive metaphysical or epistemological differences.

[12] Luhrmann's idea that religious imaginings direct attention away from real life, focusing it instead on the narrative one imagines, is reminiscent of Kampa's (2018) notion of *imaginative transportation*, a state achieved by attending to contents one is imagining while not attending to one's beliefs. It's possible to read my arguments in the rest of this section as, in part, fleshing out some of the psychological mechanisms by which transportation can be brought about—i.e., by having one's attention directed to a vivid, MTT-like simulation that causes one to cease paying attention to one's beliefs. Kampa doesn't put things this way, but it's consistent with his account.

one's own, subjective perspective on that event (Tulving 2002; Markowitsch and Staniloiu 2011).[13] This doesn't apply to imaginings which don't paradigmatically afford knowledge—when reading a novel, for example, one often imagines fictional events in a more detached way, without imagining that one is actually there witnessing the events.

According to Luhrmann, religious subjects don't merely imagine the contents of religious narratives in an impersonal way. Instead, they imagine them as if they were involved or personally witnessed them. For example, Luhrmann describes Christians who imagine the contents of biblical stories as if they were present. During a Bible study group, she witnessed participants who "read a passage about the Israelites fighting with the Midianites and talked about it as if it were something that had happened to them that afternoon at work with a colleague" (32). Similarly, one might imagine that one was among the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years, or that one personally witnessed Jesus' crucifixion.

Such examples don't involve merely representing an event from a particular visual perspective, as one must do when forming a mental image of any concrete event. Instead, they involve representing a (putative) past event as if one experienced it oneself. Religious imaginers thus place themselves in their imaginings, representing their subjective perspectives on imagined events. This makes their imaginings phenomenologically very similar to MTT simulations, which characteristically involve autonoetic consciousness. So, this is one key sense in which religious imaginings feel like knowledge-affording MTT simulations.

3.1.2. *Level of detail*

Empirical evidence suggests we're more likely to believe the contents of mental simulations which are more vivid and detailed. Greater detail in an imagining is associated with higher ratings of plausibility (Szpunar and Schacter 2013; van Mulukom et al. 2016; Wiebels et al. 2020). We're also more likely to mistake an imagining of a fictional past event for a veridical memory when it's more detailed (Dobson and Markham 1993; Bernstein et al. 2009).

Various psychological factors make MTT simulations more detailed, and I'll now argue that similar factors would render the imaginings of Luhrmann's religious subjects especially detailed.

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[13] At least, it typically does—it's controversial whether autonoesis is *necessary* for MTT, but it's generally agreed that it's a central characteristic of well-functioning MTT (see Michaelian 2016 on the function of autonoesis).

Both rememberings and imaginings are constructed by re-combining details stored in memory—representations of objects, people, places, and the like. Consequently, we're able to imagine events in more detail when they better resemble prior experiences (Arnold et al. 2011; Chang 2013; van Mulukom et al. 2016; Addis 2020). That's partly because we simply have more relevant stored details on which to draw. It's also because details which co-occurred in experience are stored with stronger associations between them, making it easier to activate these details together. For similar reasons, simulations are also more detailed the better they resemble prior simulations (Bernstein et al. 2009; Szpunar and Schacter 2013; Wiebels et al. 2020). Since we can form and strengthen associations between details by constructing simulations involving those details, repeatedly imagining some event makes it easier to later imagine similar events.

This suggests that religious imaginings would be especially detailed. When imagining the contents of religious narratives, one typically wouldn't do so for the first time. Instead, as Luhrmann notes, religious subjects have been steeped in these narratives throughout their lives—biblical stories about God, for example, get repeated over and over during a person's lifetime. So, we should expect they'll have imagined the contents of similar narratives many times, making their imaginings more and more detailed. Essentially, these subjects will have repeatedly practiced imaginatively engaging with the same sorts of narratives, rendering them better and better at imagining the contents of those narratives.[14]

There's also good reason to think MTT simulations are more detailed when groups of people *together* remember or imagine an event. Michaelian and Sutton (2019) survey evidence suggesting this is true of remembering. The details one remembers about an event can be shaped by the way other people describe it; so, since memories are constructed from elements of past experiences, having more people contributing to the construction of a memory means more resources on which to draw for that construction. Furthermore, as Michaelian and Sutton argue, we should expect the same to apply to imagining the future, since future imaginings are constructed via the same sort of process as memories and can also be shaped by other people's input.

This again suggests that religious subjects would construct especially detailed imaginings. People don't just engage with religious narratives in isolation. They often read them together with

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[14] For discussion of imagination as a skill that improves with practice, see Kind (2020).

family, hear authorities talk about them at religious services, discuss them at Bible study meetings, and the like. These contexts often involve commentary and elaboration on religious narratives, where people add more detail. The result should be a kind of group imagining that's more detailed than individual imagining, just as MTT simulations are more detailed when constructed amongst groups.

3.1.3. *Narrative testimony and vicarious experience*

We can also compare religious imaginings to a particular kind of knowledge-affording simulation: those Werning (2020) calls "vicarious experiences," which can be involved in acquiring knowledge by testimony. Such simulations aren't, strictly speaking, MTT simulations, since they don't involve remembering one's *own* past; nevertheless, they allow one to re-experience an event that *someone else* previously experienced, via a constructive process that's similar to MTT.

When a testifier describes from memory an event they witnessed firsthand, their testimony often takes the form of a narrative about the event. It's natural to think we often imagine the event a testifier describes as they describe it—if, for example, someone describes a car accident they witnessed on their way to work, you'd likely imagine the accident they describe. Psycholinguists posit that such imagery is often involved in comprehending testimony: as we read or listen to a description of an event, grasping its contents involves constructing mental imagery, which is updated and modified as the descriptions unfold. This process is known as "situation modelling" (Fincher-Kiefer 2001; Kurby and Zacks 2013; Zwaan 2016). It allows one to grasp the particular constituents of an event described in testimony by activating mental representations of those constituents (particular people, objects, places, etc.). And it allows one to organize these constituents into the overall spatiotemporal configuration described by a narrative. It thus affords an overall cognitive grasp of the event described, enabling transmission of knowledge about the event.

Werning argues that, if some firsthand testimony is detailed enough, it can produce in the listener a simulation that functions as a "vicarious experience." Some testimony conveys especially rich, concrete details about an event, as well as rich details about what it felt like to experience the event—about, for example, the testifier's emotions as they experienced it. Such testimony can generate in the listener a simulation of what the testifier's own experience was like. So, processing such testimony allows us to acquire knowledge of both the past event itself and of what it was like to experience it.

Now, notice that religious narratives are often presented either as firsthand accounts or as being passed down in a chain of testimony from a firsthand account. The Gospels telling the stories of Jesus' life, for example, are presented as being either written by someone who was actually there or as written by someone who knew people who were there. So, we should expect the way people process these sorts of narratives to be similar to the way we process testimony about other people's firsthand experiences, which involves constructing mental imagery in order to grasp the contents of that testimony.

More specifically, Luhrmann (2020, ch. 2) observes that the most effective religious narratives are those which contain the richest detail about the events described, while generating particularly strong emotional reactions. This rich detail and emotionality means that processing these (quasi-)firsthand narratives would feel a lot like the process of acquiring knowledge by constructing a vicarious experience.

3.1.4. Summing up step 1

There are thus various ways the religious imaginings Luhrmann describes would feel a lot like knowledge-affording simulations: they resemble the autonoetic character of MTT; they're highly detailed, like simulations on which we typically base beliefs; and they're constructed in response to narratives presented as (close to) firsthand testimony, so feel much like acquiring testimonial knowledge via vicarious experience.

An imagining can have all of these properties even if one ultimately disbelieves or suspends judgment about it. So, to say that these imaginings feel a lot like MTT simulations helps us get a sharper grip on what it means to say they feel as if they afford knowledge, even while one may not actually believe their contents.

3.2. Step 2: Rules of engagement

Luhrmann next argues that such imaginings alone aren't sufficient to *sustain* the feeling that a supernatural entity is real over an extended period of time; instead, once one ceases imagining and turns one's attention back to the ordinary world, this feeling will dissipate. She argues that our engagement with fictions is often like this. We sometimes vividly imagine characters in a novel, for example, in such a way that we feel as if they're real—think of the emotional reactions we have to a hero facing mortal danger or falling in love, which can be similar to how we'd react to stories about people we know in real life. Such feelings quickly cease once we turn our attention away from our imagining, back to the ordinary world.

To sustain these feelings beyond the imagining, members of faith communities follow what Luhrmann calls "rules of engagement." Such rules differentiate engagement with religious narratives from ordinary engagement with fiction. Among other functions, they specify how to find evidence for supernatural entities outside of one's imagining, including how to engage in personal interactions with these entities.

This often includes rules about how to pray and set up religious rituals, as well as how to discern when a supernatural entity is communicating with one during these activities. For example, Luhrmann describes an evangelical Christian community whose members follow rules for discerning when God has communicated with them during private prayer, by implanting thoughts and images directly into their minds: they observe whether the thought was "different from what they had just been thinking about," whether it was "in keeping with God's character," and whether "the experience brought peace" (50). Similarly, Luhrmann describes witchcraft practitioners who "develop competence with astrology, tarot cards, and books about the gods in the old European pantheons" (34). They apply a complex system of rules to discern messages from the gods in celestial events, tarot cards, and the like.

Luhrmann argues that, when one follows such rules, supernatural entities can continue to feel real once one ceases being imaginatively absorbed in a narrative. A vivid imagining initially allows one to turn one's attention away from the ordinary world, with all the ways it might seem to disconfirm these entities' existence. Rules of engagement are then a means of extending an imagined narrative into the way one attends to and interacts with phenomena outside one's imagining. When following them, the background narrative shapes how one attends to the world around oneself (e.g., the order in which a set of tarot cards are dawn) and to one's own thoughts (e.g., images that come to mind during prayer). Following these rules allows one to find apparent evidence in these phenomena, sustaining the feeling that supernatural entities are real.[15]

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[15] Van Leeuwen and van Elk's (2019) account of religious belief can help flesh out the process of collecting evidence of this sort. They argue that religious believers actively seek out situations which trigger certain experiences and feelings—e.g., the feeling that an unseen agent is communicating with them—which they interpret according to their religious community's background beliefs. So, for example, one might pray in a way that's aimed at experiencing certain mental images, then interpret them as coming from the God one's community believes in. If we

We can put this point in my preferred, epistemic terms. In general, acquiring evidence for an entity's existence can be a process of sustaining one's knowledge that it exists. If one first comes to know an object exists through a MTT simulation of the past, one can sustain that knowledge over time by collecting evidence of the object's continued existence. So, after an MTT-like imagining generates an initial feeling of knowing that a supernatural entity exists, following rules of engagement to collect apparent evidence will feel like a process of sustaining one's knowledge. If one regularly engages in relevant prayer and rituals (which faith communities typically encourage), this sustained feeling will become part of one's everyday life.

That completes my exploration of Luhrmann's account of religious imagination. In the next section, I borrow some tools from Luhrmann's account to analyze the role of the imagination in Theory Consumers' engagement with conspiracy theories.

4. Imagination in engagement with conspiracy theories

Recall that Luhrmann began her account by arguing that religious people face the following problem: when they turn their attention to the ordinary, mundane world around them, they don't seem to find evidence for the existence of supernatural entities. They therefore engage in processes aimed at making these entities feel real.

Notice that conspiracists face a similar problem: most of the time, when we look around at the news, current events, social media, and the like, we find little confirmation for far-fetched conspiracy theories like Pizzagate and QAnon. Yet, as per the evidence I surveyed in §2, conspiracists often desire to be special, find community, possess secret knowledge, and the like. This means they have some incentive to generate the feeling of knowing that their theories are true, because this would allow them to feel as if they've fulfilled their desires. While this feeling might not (initially) involve genuine belief, it would still be pleasurable in the way fantasizing about having one's desires fulfilled can be pleasurable.

Why think conspiracists do this via processes similar to the ones carried out by religious subjects? For one thing, empirical research suggests many psychological similarities between religion

replace the role of background *beliefs* in their account with *imaginings*, it can help fill out Luhrmann's story of how people engage with evidence.

and conspiracy theorizing. Both help to restore a sense of control for those who feel powerless, while imposing a sense of order and meaning on a world full of events that seem chaotic or disconnected (Wood and Douglas 2018). Similarly, conspiracy theorizing is, like religion, a means of finding community and a sense of belonging with likeminded individuals (Douglas et al. 2017; Sternisko et al. 2020; Phadke et al. 2021). Since the two play such similar psychological roles, it would be unsurprising if people engage in them via similar psychological processes.

Furthermore, I'll argue in this section that, for each part of the 2-step process from §3's account of religious subjects, there's reason to think Theory Consumers follow similar steps. I don't mean to argue that *every* conspiracist follows these steps, since no single account could hope to describe every case. Still, the many similarities with Luhrmann's account of religious subjects suggest that similar phenomena are common among conspiracists (exactly *how* common is a matter for further empirical investigation).

4.1. Step 1: Imaginative absorption in narratives

For religious subjects, step 1 involved engaging with narratives in which one becomes imaginatively absorbed, such that it begins to feel as if one knows imagined supernatural entities are real. As described in §2.2, various philosophers have recently argued that engaging with conspiracist narratives also involves the imagination. This lends some initial plausibility to thinking we can extend Luhrmann's account to Theory Consumers; still, it's insufficient to get step 1 of the process described in §3. To get this step, we also have to drill into more specifics about the phenomenology of these imaginings—namely, we have to show that they feel like knowledge-affording MTT simulations. I'll now walk through several reasons to think that Theory Consumers' imaginings do feel this way, paralleling those I gave for religious imaginings.

4.1.1. Autonoetic consciousness

A paradigmatic phenomenological property of knowledge-affording MTT simulations is autonoesis, the subjective sense of re-experiencing or pre-experiencing an event. There's evidence that Theory Consumers' imaginings resemble the autonoetic character of MTT, by incorporating the imaginer's own perspective on an event.

This evidence comes from Douglas and Sutton (2011). As they elaborate in their (2018), their research was inspired by some suggestive remarks from Hofstadter (1964), who argues that conspiracist beliefs arise from a "projection of the self" onto the conspirators described by a theory (32). Based on this suggestion, Douglas and Sutton (2011) hypothesized that, when deciding whether

to endorse a theory, people mentally "project" themselves into the situation described by the theory, then think about how they would act if put in that situation. If they think they would conspire if put in the same position as the conspirators, then they're more likely to endorse the conspiracy theory.

In support of this hypothesis, these authors found a correlation between willingness to endorse a conspiracy theory and willingness to participate in the conspiracy described by the theory. More specifically, their subjects were more likely to endorse a theory when they reported that they'd be willing to engage in a conspiracy if they found themselves in the same position as the conspirators.[16] This is exactly what we'd expect if deciding whether to endorse a conspiracy theory involves considering what one would do if one were in the position of the conspirators.

While Douglas and Sutton don't explicitly describe mental projection as a kind of imagining, it seems most natural to understand it as a process of imagining oneself in the position of the conspirators. This suggests that, when deciding whether to believe a conspiracist narrative, Theory Consumers wouldn't merely imagine the narrative's contents in an impersonal way. Instead, they'd simulate the events described in a way that includes their own perspective on those events. Their simulations would therefore resemble the autonoetic character of MTT simulations.

4.1.2. Level of detail

We're more likely to believe the contents of more vivid and detailed MTT simulations. I argued that religious imaginings, too, would be especially detailed. This is in part because religious imaginers build up relevant stored associations during prior simulations, and also because their imaginings are often collectively constructed by groups of people. There's reason to think that, for similar reasons, Theory Consumers' imaginings would be especially detailed.

First, consider the point about prior simulations. Theories like Pizzagate and the various QAnon sub-theories don't simply emerge from some creative Theory Builder's mind. Instead, if we look more closely at relevant online contexts, we see that they're typically extensions and adaptations

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[16] This might sound dubious when applied to the theories on which I've focused. It might seem to imply, for example, that QAnon supporters would themselves be willing to participate in murdering children, the behaviour about which they're purportedly outraged. But we should keep in mind that these studies asked subjects whether they'd be willing to conspire *if in the same position as the conspirators*. They would thus be projecting themselves into the shoes of the conspirators— considering what they'd do if, for example, they were a Democrat like Hilary Clinton. We can see why a conspiracist would imagine that, if they were someone like Clinton, they'd murder children.

of theories that were already circulating. Furthermore, we should expect that typical Theory Consumers spend time engaging with online conspiracist communities prior to becoming fully convinced by a particular theory, rather than simply encountering a theory and coming to accept it immediately (cf. Packer and Stoneman 2021). So, most Theory Consumers will already have imagined the contents of narratives that are similar in various details to new theories they encounter.

To use a more concrete example, imagine a Theory Consumer who, when Pizzagate emerged, was already interested in online conspiracist culture. At the time, theories about the Clintons leading a cabal of Satanic child abusers were already circulating (Silverman 2016). Furthermore, many conspiracists already had stored associations between pizza and child abuse, since the phrase "cheese pizza" was already circulating as alleged code for "child pornography" (Aisch et al. 2016). So, Theory Consumers first encountering Pizzagate would have previously engaged in imaginings that built up stored associations between elements of the theory.

Similarly, prior to the development of the theory that Obama was arrested at the airport in Atlanta, QAnon adherents were already circulating theories about the impending arrest and execution of Democrats like Clinton and Obama. And even before the existence of the QAnon movement as a whole, there were similar deep state conspiracy theories like Pizzagate, while 4chan users regularly roleplayed as government insiders leaking information (Zadrozny and Collins 2018; Packer and Stoneman 2021). So, QAnon Theory Consumers would already have relevant stored associations built up from prior imaginings.

We can also extend my argument that religious imaginings would be especially detailed because they're constructed collectively by groups. Conspiracists don't just encounter a theory in isolation and imagine its contents. Instead, online conspiracist spaces are communities in which people share and discuss theories on social media with other likeminded people. So, the way their simulations are constructed will have input from multiple different people. This will again tend to increase level of detail.

4.1.3. Narrative testimony and vicarious experience

There's reason to think conspiracist imaginings would feel similar to acquiring knowledge from testimony via what Werning (2020) calls "vicarious experiences." Similar to religious narratives, conspiracist narratives are often interpreted as coming from firsthand testimony, or at least testimony that's close to being firsthand.

When Theory Consumers encounter the Pizzagate theory laid out alongside screenshots from John Podesta's emails, for example, they're meant to see for themselves Podesta's own coded testimony about abusing children. Something similar goes for encountering QAnon theories alongside screenshots of Q's posts: these posts are meant to come directly from a high-ranking government insider who is involved in the events he describes. It may not be that Q himself was actually present for Obama's arrest at the airport, but he's at least reporting on events about which he putatively has access to firsthand testimony. This is part of what makes QAnon conspiracy theorizing so alluring: the sense that one is "close to the action" oneself, since one is communicating directly with a powerful political insider about ongoing events.

Constructing vicarious experiences involves constructing especially rich, detailed imaginings, such that one simulates the firsthand experience of someone who witnessed the event described by the relevant testimony. As per the previous subsection, there's reason to think conspiracists' imaginings will be especially detailed. Furthermore, the evidence about mental "projection" described above suggests that conspiracists will simulate what it was like to be a conspirator who witnessed an event firsthand—for example, what it was like for Podesta to be involved in a child abuse ring, or for Q to carry out the Obama arrest operation.

So, imaginatively processing conspiracist narratives should feel much like the process of acquiring testimonial knowledge by constructing vicarious experiences, just as processing religious narratives does.

4.2. Step 2: Rules of engagement

In §3's account of religious imagination, step 2 involved following "rules of engagement," which sustain the feeling of knowing supernatural entities exist after one has ceased imagining. These rules shape how one attends to and processes evidence in the world around oneself, thus giving rise to the appearance of continuing to encounter evidence that supernatural entities exist.

In §2, I already described how conspiracists follow rules for interpreting evidence to discern communicated messages. In the case of Pizzagate, this involves, for example, combing Podesta's emails for references to words like "pizza," which are then decoded as referring to child abuse. Similarly, QAnon supporters follow complex sets of rules to discern messages from Q drops, as well as how to detect hints in Trump's tweets that Trump and Q are working together. So, much like religious rules of engagement, these rules shape the way Theory Consumers process their evidence, causing them to attend to and fixate on certain words, coincidences, and the like.

As with religious subjects, such rules and evidence only make sense from within the perspective of prior imagined narratives, not to anyone who isn't already immersed in those narratives. Without the backdrop of a narrative about Democrats abusing children in a pizza restaurant, the rules about decoding Podesta's emails don't make much sense. Similarly, without the background narrative about Q working with Trump and sending hidden messages to their followers, it seems of very little significance that there are small overlaps between Trump's tweets and Q's strange posts on a fringe message board.

Following these rules of engagement would thus sustain the feeling of knowing a theory is true beyond a Theory Consumer's initial imagining, by generating an appearance of possessing evidence. This is especially so for people who regularly immerse themselves in online conspiracist spaces where this sort of evidence is presented.

5. Conspiracist belief formation

The previous section described two steps for how conspiracists end up with a sustained feeling of knowing a theory is true. Of course, as in the religious case, this feeling on its own is consistent with belief, disbelief, or suspended judgment. So, I haven't yet given an explanation of the imagination's role in conspiracist belief formation. In this section, I'll argue that there's a natural story to tell about how this sustained feeling of knowing could give rise to genuine belief. I'll survey several reasons to think this is psychologically plausible; when taken together, they make a strong case that conspiracists can shift from imagining to believing as a result of the process described in the previous section.

Some of these reasons come from the fact that conspiracists' feeling of possessing knowledge is generated in part by absorption in their imaginings. First, consider the general relationship between imagining and belief formation. As covered in §3, empirical work suggests that imaginative simulations with certain properties are more likely to give rise to beliefs, even when we initially took those imaginings to be fictional—for example, simulations with an autonoetic character and those which are especially vivid and detailed. As I argued in §4.1, we should expect conspiracist imaginings to exhibit these properties. So, the same psychological mechanisms generally involved in forming beliefs on the basis of MTT simulations could be involved in forming beliefs on the basis of conspiracist imaginings.

Furthermore, empirical research shows that we're more likely to be persuaded by narratives the more deeply we become imaginatively absorbed in them (Hamby et al. 2018). That's in part

because deep absorption in a narrative is cognitively taxing, leading us to suspend critical faculties that might otherwise be used to reflectively evaluate the narrative. If my account is right about how deeply people become imaginatively immersed in conspiracist narratives, then this should make them more likely to believe the contents of those narratives.

Of course, we're usually good at distinguishing reality from content we merely imagine; even when becoming deeply immersed in a work of fiction causes us to feel as if the story and characters are real, this feeling dissipates once we've turned our attention back to the real world. In other words, while becoming immersed in a narrative can cause counterevidence to drop out of one's awareness and generate a feeling of knowing the story is true, this feeling normally dissipates if one ceases imagining. So, it's unlikely that *merely* becoming absorbed in imagining a conspiracist narrative is sufficient to generate beliefs.

The key difference between conspiracists and ordinary consumers of fiction, however, comes in step 2 of the process described in §4. Conspiracists don't *merely* engage in imaginings and then turn their attention back to the ordinary world, such that their feelings of possessing knowledge dissipate. Instead, their imagining is the first step of a process that continues when they follow appropriate rules of engagement, where doing so sustains their feeling of possessing knowledge when they turn their attention back to reality. As a result, they continue to direct attention towards apparent evidence for the theory and away from apparent counterevidence. This is unlike ordinary engagement with fiction, where turning back to real life dissolves the illusion that the story was true. Instead, conspiracists continue to *seem* to encounter evidence confirming their theory, and seemingly fail to encounter counterevidence.

This would, over time, make it difficult to keep track of what one genuinely believes: by all appearances, one genuinely possesses knowledge, while one fails to attend to evidence that one doesn't possess knowledge. So, one could start to lose track of the line between what one does and doesn't know.

This is especially true given that conspiracists will lack an awareness of markers that allow them to keep track of what's real versus pretend. As Munro (forthcoming) and Levy (forthcoming) argue, such markers are typically present in contexts like games of pretend play. Children having a pretend tea party can see that the teapot is made of plastic, and they don't take real bites out of the toy food; children pretending a rug is lava can see that it's really just a rug; and an actor on stage can see the audience and stops performing once she exists the stage. Markers like this make it easy to keep track of that which is merely imaginary. However, the very function of becoming absorbed in

narratives and following rules of engagement is to *attend away from* markers of this sort, instead focusing one's attention on the imagined narrative and on apparent evidence that the conspiracy theory is true. Markers of this sort therefore won't be salient for conspiracists who are enacting the process I described in the previous section.[17]

So, once conspiracists get to the point of experiencing a sustained feeling of knowing a theory is true, it's plausible that they would eventually slip into genuinely believing the theory. In the next section, I'll argue that this account helps us better understand why conspiracists form beliefs in response to such weak evidence.

6. Demystifying conspiracist evidence

The evidence to which conspiracists appeal seems transparently very weak. Yet, conspiracists claim this evidence helps convince them of their favoured theories, and they often make up their minds only after a period of seeking out such evidence. This gives rise to some puzzling questions. How, exactly, does such evidence end up contributing to conspiracist beliefs? And why does this evidence seem so compelling to conspiracists, despite the fact that, during everyday life, they're rationally able to discriminate good from bad evidence?

§2 argued that existing accounts of conspiracist belief don't provide complete answers to such questions. Some give no causal role to the evidence, such as those that claim desires or entertainment value directly influence belief. Others do give a role to the evidence, arguing that the

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[17] My arguments in this section are distinct from a view discussed in the literature on imaginative "immersion." Schellenberg (2013) argues that there's a continuum between the functional roles of imagination and belief, such that the more one is immersed in imagining P the more one's imagining resembles a belief that P. On this view, it may be possible for the functional role of an imagining to become so belief-like during immersion that it eventually *becomes* a belief. However, various philosophers have objected to this view (Kampa 2018; Chasid 2021), and it's not a view I mean to endorse. I'm not arguing that the functional role of conspiracists' imagining shifts to become belief-like. Instead, I'm arguing that various phenomenological properties of one's imagining, as well as the way one follows rules of engagement to sustain a long-term appearance of possessing knowledge, can together contribute to one forming a belief. Still, it's plausible that, in order for conspiracists to form beliefs, the fact that they're merely imagining must drop out of their conscious awareness, since being conscious of the fact that one is imagining is likely to block one from believing. In this sense, it may be that what Kampa (2018) calls "transportation" is a necessary, enabling condition for the process I've described, since it involves a subject ceasing to be explicitly aware of the fact that they're imagining (see also Chasid 2021, sec. 5 on factors that increase attention to one's imagining while turning it away from reality).

way conspiracists process it is shaped by psychological forces like motivated reasoning, confirmation bias, misplaced trust, epistemic vice, or overactive pattern recognition. Yet, these explanations also seem incomplete: while it's plausible that such forces contribute to conspiracist belief formation, they aren't strong enough to totally override how far-fetched the evidence seems.

My account in this paper helps make conspiracist belief formation less mysterious. It's difficult to understand how subjects with ordinary levels of rationality could base beliefs on such far-fetched evidence in the straightforward kind of way that we typically form beliefs on the basis of evidence. However, my account suggests that, while the evidence does play a role in conspiracist belief formation, the relationship between evidence and belief is more subtle and complex. I've argued that the evidence doesn't *directly* cause conspiracists to form beliefs. Instead, the evidence more directly contributes to sustaining the feeling of knowing a theory is true, after this feeling first originates in vivid imaginings. This sustained feeling of knowing and possessing evidence more directly gives rise to a belief.

My account also helps to explain why conspiracists seem to see their evidence as so much more compelling than non-conspiracists do. When appropriate rules of engagement guide the way conspiracists attend to their evidence, it ends up having the appearance of providing good support for a theory. It can therefore genuinely seem to a conspiracist that Q drops, for example, provide compelling evidence, even if for the rest of us this seems totally absurd.

7. Combatting the spread

I close with some reflections on the practical implications of my account. I've argued that the process of conspiracist belief formation begins when a theory captures the imagination in the right way, causing the imaginer to become vividly absorbed in a narrative. What can this tell us about the most effective strategies for *preventing* conspiracist belief formation?

Recently, social media platforms have adopted various strategies for combatting misinformation. These often involve adding simple warnings alongside content to flag it as misleading—Facebook, for example, has tried tagging fake news as "disputed" by third party fact checkers. Research suggests this strategy is at least mildly effective (Clayton et al. 2020; Mena 2020). However, I'll now argue that it may be less effective for disrupting the specific process of conspiracist belief formation I've described, then sketch what a more effective intervention might look like.

We can disrupt the conspiracist belief-forming process by preventing online users from becoming absorbed in conspiracist imaginings in the first place. However, it seems unlikely that merely flagging conspiracy theories as false or disputed will effectively accomplish this. For one thing, Kaiser et al. (2021) found these sorts of warnings are easily ignored, especially once one has become accustomed to doing so. The subjects I've described in this paper, who already have a desire to engage with conspiracist content, may therefore be motivated to simply ignore them, becoming imaginatively absorbed anyway. Even worse, such warnings may signal that some theory is especially juicy and entertaining, thereby *encouraging* them to imaginatively engage.

A more effective strategy might be to employ what Kaiser et al. (2021) call "interstitial" warnings. Rather than simply appearing alongside misinformation, these warnings interrupt the user experience and require user interaction. When one clicks on a link to a conspiracist news source, for example, one might be interrupted with a warning page prompting one to confirm one wishes to proceed. Similarly, before one can view a tweet containing conspiracist content, one might be confronted with a warning that prompts one to actively choose to reveal the tweet. Kaiser et al. found such interventions more effective at preventing engagement with misinformation, since they're less easily ignored and take more effort to bypass.

Even so, these types of warnings must be properly designed to disrupt the kind of conspiracist belief formation I've described. Someone who is already particularly motivated to engage with conspiracist content may again only find a warning like this alluring, such that they become more encouraged to click through it. So, once such a warning has initially grabbed one's attention, we need ways to keep attention diverted away from the problematic content. Rather than simply including a warning that contains no additional information, one way to do this could be to include counterevidence that debunks the conspiracy theory. As I've described in this paper, conspiracist imaginings have the function of drawing one's attention away from counterevidence, such that it drops out of one's awareness. So, it may be that warnings which actively direct one's attention to counterevidence are more effective than simply flagging when information is misleading.

Drawing on research by Ecker et al. (2022), Feigenbaum and Tonnesen (2022) describe one method of presenting counterevidence that may be particularly relevant. They argue that one shouldn't *first* present a piece of misinformation and *then* debunk it with counterevidence, because leading with the falsehood only serves to draw attention to it. This seems especially relevant to my account in this paper, since first presenting a conspiracy theory may simply cause one's audience to

begin imaginatively engaging with it. Feigenbaum and Tonnesen argue that "fact wrapping" is a more effective strategy: first present the facts, then the misinformation, then rehash the facts in more detail as a means of explaining why the misinformation is false. This draws attention away from the misinformation by using it as a tool to help reinforce the facts.

When it comes to debunking conspiracy theories that engage the imagination, one especially effective way of implementing this strategy may be to first present the facts in a way that vividly captures the imagination. If one's imagination is already preoccupied by engaging with the truth, then this should interfere with one's ability to become deeply absorbed in a conspiracy narrative. This might mean, for example, presenting factual accounts in a narrative format with concrete details that are easy to imagine.

This proposal faces a difficulty: the truth is often much less entertaining and imagination-grabbing than conspiracy narratives, highlighting how much of an uphill battle is involved in combatting this sort of misinformation. Nevertheless, some recent work suggests that creative solutions could help. For example, Feigenbaum et al. (2021) discuss the use of comic strips to communicate facts about the COVID-19 pandemic and combat medical misinformation (by, e.g., personifying the virus as a cartoon monster to convey information about slowing its spread). By using a visual, entertaining format, such strategies may make it easier to translate factual information into engaging visual imagery. They may therefore be more effective at inoculating against imaginative absorption in conspiracy theories, by pre-emptively causing imaginative absorption in factual narratives.

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