When to Dismiss Conspiracy Theories Out of Hand

**Introduction**

Given that people conspire, can we be justified in dismissing conspiracy theories out of hand? To dismiss something out of hand is to reject it almost immediately without much or any consideration. Everyone agrees that we can be justified in rejecting a conspiracy theory if that is what the evidence supports. But few people have the competence to evaluate the relevant evidence when it to comes to the views ordinarily referred to as “conspiracy theories” because most of us are laypeople. Nevertheless, we tend to reject these theories without concerning ourselves with specific details.

When we reject a so-called “conspiracy theory,” our justification almost always depends on the testimony of a source of information we think is reliable. This is fine. A lot of our beliefs are based on testimony. But our justification for believing a source’s testimony can be lost, or *defeated*, if we learn about strong countervailing evidence. This is important because there are people who purport to have enough countervailing evidence to show that some seemingly outlandish conspiracy theories are true or at least warrant further investigation. If someone presents us with evidence like this and we don’t know how to respond due to lacking relevant background knowledge, it can seem dogmatic to dismiss the conspiracy theory in question. Nevertheless, I argue that many of us are justified in rejecting a variety of conspiracy theories even though we don’t know how to respond to such arguments if we know that the conspiracy theories in question conflict with testimony from a reliable source.

By “justified,” I mean rationally permitted. The fact that someone’s belief is justified implies that their belief is permissible but not that it’s obligatory. I use “defeasibly justified” to mean “justified in the absence of strong countervailing evidence.” So, if your belief is defeasibly justified and you have no strong countervailing evidence, then your belief is justified. When I use the term “defeasibly justified,” I’m leaving it open whether the person in question has strong countervailing evidence. When I use the term “justified” by itself, I mean to imply that the person in question doesn’t have strong countervailing evidence.

My argument concerns what laypeople are justified in believing about contrarian conspiracy theories. A *contrarian conspiracy theory* just is a theory about a conspiracy that conflicts with testimony from a reliable source. A contrarian conspiracy theory *conflicts* with someone’s testimony if and only if this theory is false or implausible enough to reject given that the testimony in question is true. Meanwhile, a *layperson* just is someone who doesn’t have significantly more knowledge about the topic at issue than the average person.

My reason for using the stipulative term “contrarian conspiracy theory” is that the ordinary meaning of “conspiracy theory” is contested. One view is that a conspiracy theory just is a theory that explains things in terms of a conspiracy (Basham 2011: 52-3). Another view is that conspiracy theories must, in addition, conflict with some official position (Coady 2003: 199; Buenting and Taylor 2010: 569; Feldman 2011: 15-6). Charles Pigden has argued that a conspiracy theory must posit a morally suspect conspiracy (2006: 163). In other work, Pigden has said that “conspiracy theory” is a chauvinist term that is typically used to cast doubt on theories that “postulate evil schemes on the part of recent or contemporary Western governments (or government agencies) and that run counter to the current orthodoxy in the relevant Western countries” (2007: 299). Other philosophers think that “conspiracy theory” is a pejorative term that implies an intellectual shortcoming of anyone who believes such a theory (Cassam 2019; Napolitano and Reuter 2021; Boudry in press). And some philosophers opt to avoid these disputes by using a stipulative definition (Dentith 2014: 51; Harris 2018: 236; and Hagen 2022: 26).

Despite being stipulative, the term “contrarian conspiracy theory” closely matches ordinary usage of “conspiracy theory.” For example, theories that say Lee Harvey Oswald was part of a CIA conspiracy to assassinate John F. Kennedy, 9/11 was an inside job, or the Freemasons are secretly controlling most world events are contrarian conspiracy theories as well as conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, the two terms don’t match perfectly. For example, suppose Sherlock Holmes learns about the existence of a conspiracy based on his ingenious analysis of the evidence. But reliable sources mistakenly reject the existence of this conspiracy. Seemingly, since Sherlock’s belief constitutes knowledge, what he believes isn’t a conspiracy theory in the ordinary sense. If so, this theory is a contrarian conspiracy theory but not a conspiracy theory.

A final clarification is that not all contrarian theories are thereby contrarian *conspiracy* theories. For example, someone could deny that anthropogenic climate change is occurring without thinking that there is a conspiracy among climate scientists to deceive the public. Instead of positing a conspiracy to deceive the public, a climate change denier might think that climate scientists are simply biased by groupthink, political pressure, or funding opportunities. Antivaxxers, flat Earthers, and others could also avoid positing conspiracies in this way. That said, when I mention these views, I mean to focus specifically on the versions that posit conspiracies.

In this terminology, the conclusion I argue for is that many laypeople are justified in rejecting various contrarian conspiracy theories based on testimony even if we don’t know how to respond to the arguments given in support of those theories. In §1, I argue that many laypeople are defeasibly justified in rejecting a variety of contrarian conspiracy theories based on testimony. In §2, I distinguish four kinds of evidence used to support contrarian conspiracy theories: (i) alleged evidence that requires vetting, (ii) allegedly scientific evidence, (iii) anomalies, and (iv) considerations of *cui bono* (who benefits). I argue that the justification many laypeople have for rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories based on testimony usually isn’t defeated by any of these arguments given the evidence we actually have. In §3, I discuss several clarifications.

**1. Testimony That Conflicts with Contrarian Conspiracy Theories**

My argument would be moot if testimony were rarely or never a good reason for laypeople to reject a contrarian conspiracy theory. Therefore, it’s important to show that testimony can defeasibly justify rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories and that the right kind of testimony is usually available to laypeople. In §1.1, I describe a range of sources that give testimony that conflicts with various contrarian conspiracy theories. In §1.2, I distinguish between three kinds of justification based on testimony: justification based on assertion, justification based on implicature, and justification based on inference from testimony. In §1.3, I introduce the term “rationalizing constraints” to describe whatever constraints need to be satisfied for testimony to justify belief. In §1.4, I argue that the rationalizing constraints for testimony that conflicts with contrarian conspiracy theories can be satisfied despite the secretive nature of the conspiracies in question.

**1.1 Sources Relevant to Contrarian Conspiracy Theories**

If we are justified in rejecting a variety of contrarian conspiracy theories, then our justification is based on testimony. This is because few people have the time, inclination, equipment, or competence to investigate these topics (Dentith 2018: 204). For example, laypeople don’t know enough about physics to evaluate the demolition theory of 9/11 or enough about forensic pathology to say how many bullets struck John. F. Kennedy. And even if someone who has relevant expertise rigorously investigated one contrarian conspiracy theory, they wouldn’t be able to investigate all or even most of them (Hardwig 1985: 335). Consequently, we are all laypeople regarding most contrarian conspiracy theories even if some people are experts regarding a few of them (Levy 2007: 189). Even the people who have expertise relevant to a specific contrarian conspiracy theory often don’t have expertise concerning *all* the evidence related to that theory. This is because the range of expertise relevant to a contrarian conspiracy theory will often involve several disciplines. For example, expertise relating to the 9/11 attacks includes knowledge of structural engineering as well as knowledge of foreign terrorist organizations (Dentith 2018: 199).

In many cases, testimony that conflicts with a contrarian conspiracy theory is expert testimony. For example, experts tell us that the Earth isn’t flat, anthropogenic climate change is occurring, approximately six million Jewish Europeans were murdered during the Holocaust, and the MMR vaccine doesn’t cause autism. Laypeople can receive expert testimony in several ways—for example, quotes from experts in news articles, books written by experts, lectures given by experts, video recordings of experts in documentaries or on the news, and other ways. Notably, it’s possible to quote someone out of context, use a misleading soundbite, or just make up a quote. Therefore, our justification for believing expert testimony usually depends on our justification for believing that the news source, documentary maker, or publisher is representing what the experts say accurately. Moreover, our justification for believing that a given person is even an expert usually depends on information from a third party in the form of credentials, work history, awards, publications, or testimony from the news (Goldman 2001: 93).

In addition to expert testimony, there are also news reports that are written based on expert testimony. For example, consider science reporting. Reporters write articles about recent scientific developments based on press releases, interviews with scientists, or reading peer-reviewed articles. Then, people learn about these recent scientific developments from the news. A person who reads, watches, or listens to the news learns from the science reporter’s testimony, and the science reporter learns from scientists’ testimony (Gerken 2022: 18, 172). For most of us, our knowledge about anthropogenic climate change, the MMR vaccine, and COVID-19 is partially based on testimony from news sources.

In other cases, the term “expert” isn’t apt even though the testimony can still be rationally believed. For example, according to one contrarian conspiracy theory, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) masterminded the Oklahoma City bombing. Some relevant testimony against this theory comes from FBI agents who conducted the investigation into Timothy McVeigh. But criminal investigators, such as FBI agents, aren’t usually referred to as “experts” even though they have better competence than most people to investigate crimes. According to another contrarian conspiracy theory, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was a false flag operation. Some relevant testimony against this theory comes from teachers, police officers, and parents. This is eyewitness testimony but not expert testimony. Last, consider the contrarian conspiracy theory that says the US presidential election of 2020 was rigged. There is a rigorous process involved in collecting and counting votes, but it doesn’t seem that this amounts to expertise.

Because different contrarian conspiracy theories are supported by testimony from different sources, our justification for rejecting some will probably be better than others. For example, our justification for denying that the Holocaust is a hoax seems better than our justification for denying that Oswald was part of a conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy. Nevertheless, our justification for rejecting one contrarian conspiracy theory can be better than our justification for rejecting another even if they are both permissible for us to reject. For comparison, my justification for believing that I have hands is better than my justification for believing that Caesar was assassinated, but both claims are permissible for me to believe.

**1.2 Three Kinds of Justification Based on Testimony**

There are three main ways we can be justified in rejecting a contrarian conspiracy theory based on testimony: by assertion, implicature, or inference from these (Lackey 2008: 29). In the case of *justification based on assertion*, we are justified in rejecting the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory based on an explicit denial of that theory. In the case of *justification based on implicature*, we are justified in rejecting the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory based on someone’s implicatures rather than their explicit assertions. In the case of *justification based on inference from testimony*, we are justified in rejecting the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory based on the fact that what someone asserted or implicated entails the falsity of the theory in question.

One way for a source’s testimony to conflict with a contrarian conspiracy theory is for the source to explicitly assert that the contrarian conspiracy theory in question is false. But testimony that conflicts with contrarian conspiracy theories is often not in the form of an explicit assertion, saying that such-and-such a contrarian conspiracy theory is false. For example, we wouldn’t expect a history textbook to explicitly say, “The Holocaust isn’t a hoax.” Instead, history textbooks usually just describe the Holocaust.

Additionally, we can be justified in believing what a person communicates through conversational implicatures (Buenting 2006; Lackey 2008: 26). An implicature is what someone conveys, suggests, or implies in addition to the literal meaning of the sentences they use to communicate (Grice 1975: 43-4). For example, when asked about a particular theory on the news, an expert might say that they aren’t going to dignify it with a response. This communicates via implicature rather than assertion that the expert regards the theory as either false or too implausible to take seriously. But a contrarian conspiracy theory doesn’t need to be explicitly mentioned by anyone for there to be implicatures about it. For example, news sources say that the 9/11 attacks were carried out by Al Qaeda, but they don’t go on to say that George W. Bush deliberately let the attacks happen. If the idea that Bush might have deliberately let the attacks happen were worth taking seriously, then failing to mention this to the public would constitute being less informative than is required in the present context. If failing to mention that *p* would constitute being less informative than is required in the present context, then the speaker is implicating that not-*p* by not mentioning it. This is because cooperative communication requires us to be as informative as necessary given the context (Grice 1975: 45). Therefore, based on this implicature, we are defeasibly justified in believing that Bush didn’t deliberately let the 9/11 attacks happen.

Our justification for rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories can also be based on an inference from a source’s testimony rather than based directly on the testimony itself. This is useful because inferences from testimony can justify us in rejecting theories that our sources never explicitly mention. If you know that *p* contradicts *q* and you are justified in believing that *p*, then you are justified in denying that *q*. Many laypeople are justified in believing claims that they know contradict various contrarian conspiracy theories based on testimony. Therefore, many laypeople are justified in rejecting various contrarian conspiracy theories. For example, according to testimony that we are justified in believing, the MMR vaccine doesn’t cause autism, anthropogenic climate change is occurring, approximately six million Jewish Europeans were murdered during the Holocaust, children and adults were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Biden received more votes than Trump. Such testimony contradicts theories according to which pharmaceutical companies are covering up the fact that the MMR vaccine causes autism, anthropogenic climate change is a hoax, the Holocaust is a hoax, the Sandy Hook shooting was a false flag operation, and Trump received more votes than Biden.

Importantly, in several of these cases, no one directly investigated the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory. It might seem that we can’t be justified in rejecting a contrarian conspiracy theory based on testimony if we know that no one directly investigated the theory in question. However, there are infinitely many theories that are logically consistent with any body of evidence, and it would be impossible to investigate them all. Instead, investigators only investigate theories that meet a certain threshold of plausibility given their evidence (Lipton 2004: 148-51). Nevertheless, it’s possible to gain knowledge from investigations (for example, scientific or criminal investigations). Therefore, it’s possible for our beliefs to be justified even though not every logically possible rival theory has been investigated. (For comparison, I’m justified in denying that there is a teapot in outer space orbiting the sun and that the CIA is plotting to murder me even though no one has investigated these things.) Granted, if a contrarian conspiracy theory meets the relevant threshold of plausibility, then it should be investigated. However, the mere logical possibility of a theory doesn’t show that it needs to be investigated.

**1.3 The Rationalizing Constraints**

Testimony justifies belief only if further conditions are satisfied. Otherwise, we would be justified in gullibly believing everything we are told, no matter how implausible. I will use the label “rationalizing constraints” to refer to whatever conditions are necessary and jointly sufficient for testimony to justify belief. In this terminology, you are justified in believing that *p* based on assertion if and only if you have received testimony that *p* in the form of an assertion and the rationalizing constraints are satisfied. You are justified in believing that *p* based on implicature if and only if you have received testimony that *p* in the form of an implicature and the rationalizing constraints are satisfied. And you are justified in believing that *q* based on inference from testimony if and only if you have received testimony communicating that *p*, the rationalizing constraints are satisfied, and you are justified in believing that *p* implies *q*.

There are different views about what the rationalizing constraints are. One necessary condition everyone should agree on is that this: A hearer is justified in believing something based on testimony only if this hearer doesn’t have evidence that defeats their justification for believing the testimony in question (Coady 1992: 133-51). But we can add further conditions if this one seems too minimal: for example, positive reasons to believe that the source’s testimony is true (Adler 1994), the fact that the source is reliable (Goldberg 2010), the fact that the hearer has monitored the source’s testimony for reliability (Fricker 1994: 150), or something else. My argument is meant to be neutral on whether further conditions are needed.

The rationalizing constraints are needed to avoid permitting gullibility, but there is a limit to how demanding they can be. For example, they can’t require that the source is perfectly reliable, that hearer has done a detailed background check on the source, or that the hearer can always spot a lie. Any of these requirements would make knowledge based on testimony rare and burdensome. But it’s common and easy to learn things based on testimony from friends, family, experts, the news, and even strangers giving us directions. Therefore, the rationalizing constraints need to be construed such that satisfying them is an everyday occurrence for most people and often easy to do without much effort from that person receiving the testimony.

Specifically, the rationalizing constraints are usually satisfied for testimony from credible news sources and experts. These sources give testimony that conflicts with many contrarian conspiracy theories. Therefore, unless testimony that conflicts with contrarian conspiracy theories is less credible than other kinds of testimony, we should be no less justified in rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories based on testimony from these sources. For example, if we are justified in believing that humans are the product of evolution based on scientific testimony, then, unless there is some relevant difference, we are justified in believing that anthropogenic climate change is occurring (that is, it’s not a hoax) based on scientific testimony.

**1.4 The Secrecy of the Subject Matter**

It might be thought that, due to the secrecy of the subject matter, the rationalizing constraints are more difficult to satisfy for testimony that conflicts with contrarian conspiracy theories. This is because every popular contrarian conspiracy theory says that the relevant conspirators have tried to cover their tracks by misleading the investigators or bringing the investigators into the conspiracy (Keeley 1999: 121; Basham 2006: 95-6). I will discuss four arguments based on this consideration that might lead someone to doubt that we are often justified in believing testimony that conflicts with contrarian conspiracy theories.

The first argument is based on the principle that we shouldn’t appeal to testimony from a source if it’s logically consistent with our knowledge that this source is mistaken or lying. This principle is false because it entails too much skepticism. If the bare logical possibility that someone is mistaken or lying were reason enough not to believe their testimony, then we would never be justified in believing anyone’s testimony. It’s always logically possible that someone has made a mistake or lied. Even if our evidence is strongly against the idea that a trusted friend, family member, colleague, or doctor is mistaken or lying, this is still logically possible.

The second argument is based on the idea that there is a sensitivity condition on knowledge. A good way of formulating the sensitivity condition is that, if you know that *p* based on evidence *e*, then if *p* were false, you wouldn’t believe that *p* based on *e* (Ichikawa 2011: 302). A quick response is that knowledge doesn’t require satisfying the sensitivity condition (see Vogel 1987; Sosa 1999; Williamson 2000: 147-63). For example, I know that there is no perfectly covered-up conspiracy to fool the public into believing that humans are the product of evolution or that Lincoln was a Republican. But if there were such conspiracies, I wouldn’t believe that there are (because, by hypothesis, the cover-ups would be perfect). Therefore, I know that some theories are false even though the relevant beliefs don’t satisfy the sensitivity condition. Or take an example that doesn’t mention conspiracies: I know that the money in my wallet isn’t counterfeit even though, if it were counterfeit, I wouldn’t believe that it’s counterfeit.

But, for the sake of argument, suppose knowledge does require satisfying the sensitivity condition. I assume this requirement is correct only if it can be combined with non-skepticism, the view that we know a lot about the world. If we combine sensitivity with non-skepticism, then it turns out that I know I have hands (by non-skepticism) but I don’t know I’m not a disembodied brain in a vat being deceived by an evil scientist (by sensitivity) (Nozick 1981: 204-11). Granted, it seems implausible that I know I have hands but I don’t know I’m not a handless brain in a vat, but let that pass (DeRose 1995: 28). The result is that we don’t know that skeptical hypotheses are false but, given the knowledge we do have, skeptical hypotheses are irrelevant for all practical purposes. But if the only worry about some contrarian conspiracy theory is that rejecting it flouts the sensitivity condition, then our interlocutor must give it the same treatment as skeptical hypotheses. Otherwise, we will have no historical or scientific knowledge because it’s always possible to posit some perfectly covered-up conspiracy among historians or scientists to deceive the public. The result is that we don’t know that such contrarian conspiracy theories are false but they are irrelevant for all practical purposes. This is, at best, a Pyrrhic victory for contrarian conspiracy theorists because, absent compelling evidence, their theories end up being no more relevant to everyday life than skeptical hypotheses about brains in vats.

The third argument is based on the idea that there is a safety condition on knowledge. There are different formulations of the safety condition (see Rabinowitz n.d.). But I will work with this one: You know that *p* only if your belief that *p* couldn’t easily have been false in a similar case (Williamson 2000: 147). For example, normally, if a person believes that a traffic light is red, based on looking at it (while in good lighting, being of sound mind, and so on), then their belief couldn’t easily have been false in a similar case. That is, in this situation, it couldn’t easily have been the case that they believed that the traffic light is some other color. In contrast, for most people, a belief based on a fleeting glimpse in the dark is unlikely to satisfy the safety condition because, in this kind of case, most of us could easily be wrong about what we thought we saw.

Plausibly, there is some safety condition on knowledge; however, this isn’t problematic for rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories based on testimony. Usually, if a layperson believes that a given contrarian conspiracy theory is false, then their belief is based on testimony from a reliable source. If a belief is based on testimony from a reliable source, then, other things being equal, it’s not the case that this belief could easily have been false in a similar case. (Otherwise, this source wouldn’t be reliable in the first place.) Therefore, usually, if a layperson believes that a given contrarian conspiracy theory is false, then, other things being equal, it’s not the case that this belief could easily have been false in a similar case. To object, it would need to be shown that other things aren’t equal. However, absent further argument, there is no reason to believe that testimony that conflicts with contrarian conspiracy theories always or usually fails to satisfy the safety condition.

The fourth argument is based on the principle that we shouldn’t believe a source’s testimony if we have evidence that defeatsour justification for believing that this source’s testimony is true in the present context. Notably, this principle only makes a difference in cases where we have actually received the evidence in question. Similarly, Räikkä and Ritola write:

As far as we accept that, generally speaking, fact-gathering institutions work tolerably well, we must conclude that every conspiracy theory is *prima facie* implausible and that the burden of proof rests on the side of the conspiracy theorists. (2020: 58)

Some contrarian conspiracy theorists merely *allege* that our sources are incompetent or dishonest, citing these allegations as if they were evidence. Without further argument, these claims beg the question, presupposing the truth of the contrarian conspiracy theory at issue. But often contrarian conspiracy theorists do attempt to provide relevant evidence.

**2. Arguments for Contrarian Conspiracy Theories**

Even if we are defeasibly justified in rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories based on testimony, this doesn’t tell us what we should do when we are presented with arguments for these theories. In this section, I argue that our justification for rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories is almost never defeated by such arguments. This holds even if we don’t know how to object to the argument in question. In §2.1, I show that knowing something doesn’t always require knowing how to respond to objections to it. In §2.2, I discuss arguments for contrarian conspiracy theories that are claimed to be based on eyewitness testimony, incriminating documents, photographs, audio recordings, and video recordings. In §2.3, I discuss allegedly scientific evidence. In §2.4, I discuss appeals to anomalies. In §2.5, I discuss considerations of *cui bono* (who benefits).

**2.1 The Inability to Respond to Objections**

In many cases, if you are unable to adequately respond to an objection to one of your beliefs, then you aren’t justified in continuing to hold that belief. For example, suppose Detective believes that Jones is guilty of the crime because Jones’ fingerprints were found at the crime scene, Jones lives nearby, and he has a criminal record. Detective explains his reasoning to Partner, who responds that Jones has a decent alibi, he had no apparent motive, and his fingerprints should be expected at the crime scene because he was the victim’s friend. Detective doesn’t know how to rebut this evidence, but he is no less confident that Jones is guilty. In this case, Detective isn’t justified in believing that Jones is guilty because his justification depends on knowing how to respond to the arguments presented by Partner. Detective is being dogmatic, stubborn, closed-minded, and unreasonable.

Initially, it might seem like there is a principle of rationality according to which it’s always unreasonable to believe something if you don’t know how to respond to relevant objections; however, there are cases where this norm doesn’t apply. For example, I know that things move even though I don’t know how to respond to Zeno’s paradoxes. Likewise, I know that some people are bald even though I don’t know how to respond to sorites arguments (Fantl 2018: 27, 35). I assume it would be implausibly skeptical to deny knowledge in these cases. If this assumption is right, then, in some cases, it’s possible for people to know something even though they have been presented with an argument against it that they don’t know how to respond to.

This exemption from responding to objections doesn’t only apply to commonsense beliefs, such as the belief that things move or that some people are bald. Suppose someone tried to convince you that humans aren’t the product of evolution, viruses don’t exist, or Lincoln wasn’t assassinated. These aren’t items of common sense that we can figure out on our own; rather, we need experts to tell us these things. But we wouldn’t have to give up these beliefs just because someone presented us with complicated counterarguments that we didn’t know how to respond to. Therefore, even for beliefs that aren’t part of common sense, the mere fact that you don’t know how to respond to an objection doesn’t suffice to show that you lack knowledge.

Nevertheless, the fact that you don’t know how to respond to an objection to one of your beliefs is higher-order evidence that arguably can defeat your justification for that belief (Fantl 2018: 42). Higher-order evidence is evidence that “bears on a believer’s rational capacities, epistemic performance, or evidential situation” (Horowitz 2022). Meanwhile, first-order evidence is any evidence that isn’t higher-order evidence. For example, the fact that you were drunk when you did a mathematical calculation is higher-order evidence that you did the calculation incorrectly (even if you calculated correctly). Arguably, this higher-order evidence defeats your justification for believing that the answer is such-and-such.

However, the fact that you don’t know how to respond to an objection to one of your beliefs doesn’t *always* defeat your justification for the belief in question. Some higher-order evidence is weak evidence, and some is strong. Sometimes, this is because you haven’t had time to think about the objection. Suppose you’re an expert who heard a complicated objection to one of your views two seconds ago. Often, even if you’re an expert, the fact that you don’t know what’s wrong with an objection after two seconds of thinking about it is extremely weak higher-order evidence against the belief in question. Because this higher-order evidence is extremely weak, it doesn’t defeat the justification of your belief.

That said, the fact that we don’t always have to respond to objections doesn’t license a blanket refusal to consider objections. If you’re an expert who has spent a long time doing your best to answer an objection, but you can’t find a problem with it, then you have stronger higher-order evidence against the belief in question. If it’s probable, given what you know about your ability to respond to objections, that you would have figured out what’s wrong with the objection by now, then, other things being equal, this higher-order evidence at least partially defeats the justification of your belief (Fantl 2018: 64, 99-100).

In other cases, it doesn’t matter how much time you have to think about an objection because you lack the background knowledge to evaluate it. Consider a layperson who is justified in believing somethingbased on testimony but who has just been presented with an objection against this belief that they don’t know how to respond to. In many cases, it will be improbable, given what a layperson knows about their own ability to answer objections, that they would have figured out what’s wrong with the objection. This is because, if someone is a layperson, they often won’t know whether relevant evidence is being left out, whether the relevant inferences are strong, or whether all the premises are supported by the available evidence. If it’s improbable, given what this layperson knows their own ability to answer objections, that they would have figured out what’s wrong with the objection by now, then the fact that they don’t know how to respond to the objection in question is weak higher-order evidence. Sometimes, this higher-order evidence will be too weak to defeat the justification of the belief in question (Fantl 2018: 59). For example, a layperson’s justification for believing evolutionary theory wouldn’t be defeated by their inability to refute a revisionary interpretation of the fossil record.

When we encounter objections that we don’t know how to respond to, we might experience a feeling of doubt. This might cause some people to suspend judgment about things that they would otherwise know. But we can resist this feeling by acknowledging that we already knew that we wouldn’t be able to answer questions on specifics from someone trying to challenge the belief in question (Fantl 2018: 64). That’s why we were relying on someone else’s testimony in the first place.

Thus, there are many cases in which the justification of our beliefs doesn’t depend on being able to answer objections. For example, even if we don’t know how to respond to relevant objections, we are still justified in believing that things move, some people are bald, humans are the product of evolution, viruses exist, Lincoln was assassinated, and many other things. There is no reason why this shouldn’t also apply to beliefs about the truth or falsity of contrarian conspiracy theories. Therefore, there should be cases in which we are justified in rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories even if we don’t know how to respond to arguments for them.

If these arguments are correct, then it isn’t always dogmatic to believe things despite not knowing how to respond to objections. In saying this, I use the word “dogmatic” in its ordinary sense, according to which being dogmatic is a bad disposition that involves a person being more confident about something than their evidence supports. Some philosophers agree that we can be justified in maintaining beliefs in the face of objections we don’t know how to respond to, but they regard this as a good kind of dogmatism (Kripke 2011: 49; Fantl 2018: 29). In contrast, I wouldn’t call this “dogmatism” in the first place. It’s hardly dogmatic to believe that some people are bald or that Lincoln was assassinated. Moreover, we should avoid giving credence to the allegation that the average person exhibits a bad disposition when they reject contrarian conspiracy theories based on testimony from reliable sources.

**2.2 Alleged Evidence that Requires Vetting**

Some arguments for contrarian conspiracy theories are claimed to be based on eyewitness testimony, documents written by the conspirators, photographs, audio recordings, or video recordings. For example, testimony from whoever was posting as Q has been used to argue that there is a deep state composed of Satan-worshipping pedophiles. These arguments assume that Q is an eyewitness rather than a liar. And *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is sometimes cited as documentary evidence of a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world. This argument assumes that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was written by Jewish conspirators rather than an antisemite. We can expect that, soon, fake photographs, fake audio recordings, and fake video recordings will be used to argue for contrarian conspiracy theories. For example, someone could create a deepfake of a politician claiming to be part of the New World Order or a climate scientist saying that anthropogenic climate change is a hoax (Ballantyne 2019: 240). These arguments would assume that the relevant image or recording hasn’t been altered in a misleading way.

To refute these kinds of arguments, it would be necessary to show that the premises aren’t based on the kinds of evidence they are allegedly based on. But this would require vetting that laypeople lack the background knowledge to do. Laypeople lack the background knowledge needed to vet eyewitness testimony, documents, photographs, videos, or audio recordings. Maybe we can tell an obvious fake, but most people must leave difficult cases to professionals. If we lack the background knowledge to tell whether these things are fake, then we won’t be able to show that the relevant premises are false.

Nevertheless, even if we can’t vet the alleged evidence in question, these arguments don’t defeat our justification for rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories. This is because we are justified in believing these premises are false. Consider a layperson who starts off justified in rejecting a contrarian conspiracy theory based on testimony from a source they know is reliable. Later, this layperson watches an alleged video recording posted online of someone discussing their involvement in the relevant conspiracy. There is no way that the content of this video is being taken out of context. If it’s real, then it’s conclusive evidence of a conspiracy. For example, maybe the alleged video recording is of Anthony Fauci talking to his colleagues about how to mislead the public into believing that there is a COVID-19 pandemic.

Whether watching this video defeats a layperson’s justification for rejecting the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory depends, in part, on where they found the video. If this video were shown and taken seriously by a credible news source, then, other things being equal, most laypeople wouldn’t be justified in dismissing the contrarian conspiracy theory in question. This is because most laypeople are justified in believing that credible news sources are unlikely to take fake video recordings seriously. In this case, it’s not watching the video, by itself, that gives someone a reason not to dismiss the contrarian conspiracy theory. Rather, the fact that a credible news source takes the video seriously is the reason not to dismiss it. In contrast, suppose a layperson found the video in a way that doesn’t provide additional reason to take it seriously. For example, maybe they saw the video because a stranger posted it on social media. Most laypeople aren’t justified in believing that social media posts are unlikely to take fake video recordings seriously. Therefore, in this case, the only evidence a typical layperson gains comes from watching the video.

But, for many laypeople, watching this video, by itself, wouldn’t have enough probative value to defeat their justification for rejecting the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory. This is because many laypeople would know that the content of this video conflicts with testimony from a reliable source, which constitutes a defeasible justification for believing that the video is fake. Moreover, the mere fact that the video exists doesn’t defeat this justification because, given the background knowledge that many laypeople have, it’s not implausible that someone would make a fake video recording with the relevant content that looks convincing and post it online to fool people. And precisely because the video is unvetted, we have no reason to believe that it came from a reliable source. (Conversely, if we knew that we were living in a world where it’s technologically impossible to create fake video recordings, then presumably we would be required to believe the contrarian conspiracy theory in question based on watching the video.)

Granted, seeing a video like this might cause a twinge of doubt. Nevertheless, many laypeople would be justified in thinking, “It will take more than an unvetted video from the internet to change my mind.” It would be too concessive to think, “I know what the news says about this, but I saw an unvetted video on the internet that indicates otherwise, so I’m not sure.” Should laypeople at least check to see whether the video has been discredited? Checking is a good habit, but, in this kind of case, our justification doesn’t require it: If your internet went out right after watching the video, you wouldn’t be required to suspend judgment about the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory while waiting for internet access.

Parallel reasoning applies to arguments that are claimed to be based on eyewitness testimony, documents written by conspirators, photographs, and audio recordings. In each case, many laypeople would have a defeasible justification for believing that the alleged evidence had been fabricated based on knowing that there is a conflict with testimony from a reliable source. And many laypeople wouldn’t have evidence that defeats this justification. Therefore, the justification many laypeople have for rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories wouldn’t be defeated by arguments that are claimed to be based on these kinds of evidence.

Notably, this is consistent with the fact that much of what we know is based on eyewitness testimony, documents, photographs, audio recordings, and video recordings. Usually, we don’t put additional effort into vetting these kinds of evidence before basing our beliefs on them. For example, we usually don’t vet videos sent by friends, emails from colleagues, or photographs shown on the news. Maybe this is due to our background knowledge about the reliability of the relevant friend, colleague, or news source. Or maybe this is because, absent defeating evidence, we don’t need a positive reason to take these kinds of evidence at face value. In either case, knowledge based on these kinds of evidence usually doesn’t require us to put any additional effort into vetting the evidence in question.

**2.3 Allegedly Scientific Evidence**

In other cases, the evidence cited in favor of contrarian conspiracy theories can only be competently evaluated by someone who has specialized scientific knowledge. For example, according to Architects & Engineers for 9/11 Truth (n.d.), the demolition theory is supported by facts about the rate at which the Twin Towers and WTC 7 collapsed. Meanwhile, people who believe that Oswald was part of a conspiracy to assassinate John F. Kennedy might use information from Kennedy’s autopsy to argue that he must have been shot by more than one person. If evaluating an argument requires specialized scientific knowledge, then laypeople won’t be able to refute it.

Nevertheless, many laypeople are justified in denying that the allegedly scientific evaluations in arguments for contrarian conspiracy theories are correct. This is because many laypeople know that scientists who have relevant expertise have given testimony in favor of a rival explanation. Based on this knowledge, we are at least defeasibly justified in denying that the allegedly scientific evaluations in arguments for contrarian conspiracy theories are correct. Moreover, this justification isn’t defeated by countervailing evidence: Laypeople have no good reason to believe that these allegedly scientific evaluations are correct because we lack the competence to evaluate the relevant evidence. But if we are justified in denying that the allegedly scientific evaluations in these arguments are correct, then these arguments don’t defeat our justification for rejecting the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory. Therefore, arguments based on allegedly scientific evidence don’t defeat our justification for rejecting the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory.

This point can apply to experts too. Even an expert’s justification for rejecting a contrarian conspiracy theory isn’t always defeated by allegedly scientific evidence. There are cases where there is no expert who is familiar with all the relevant evidence. This happens in inquiries that span several disciplines and in cases where the literature is too large for one person to read (see Gerken 2022: 28-33). For example, the evidence for anthropogenic climate change spans several disciplines and is so vast that no one can have it all. If someone is an expert in one domain but evaluating a piece of evidence requires background knowledge from a domain that falls outside their area of expertise, then they are a layperson with respect to this piece of evidence. Then, for the reasons already given, this expert’s justification for rejecting the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory isn’t defeated by the piece of evidence in question. Importantly, however, experts won’t be able to get away with this response in cases where the relevant background knowledge is within their domain of expertise (and they have had a reasonable amount of time to think about the issue).

Notably, some laypeople might believe contrarian conspiracy theories because they mistakenly believe that they have the competence to evaluate specialized scientific evidence. It’s usually not easy to convince people that they are overestimating their own intelligence. But your justification for rejecting a contrarian conspiracy theory doesn’t depend on being able to convince other people that they have overestimated themselves. Rather, you only need to correctly recognize that you lack the relevant background knowledge.

**2.4 Anomalies**

Often, contrarian conspiracy theorists adduce evidence that doesn’t require vetting or scientific evaluation. This is the situation we are often in when contrarian conspiracy theories are defended by appeal to anomalies. By *anomaly*, I mean an established fact that doesn’t cohere well with the explanation in question. Whereas people who accept the explanation in question usually write anomalies off as mere coincidences, contrarian conspiracy theorists aren’t convinced. For example, the mainstream explanation of the Oklahoma City bombing doesn’t cohere well with the fact that no ATF agents (McVeigh’s primary target) were killed or the fact that McVeigh’s attempt to flee the bombing was so seemingly inept (Keeley 1999: 115). Meanwhile, the mainstream explanation of the 9/11 attacks doesn’t cohere well with the fact that there was a larger-than-chance sell-off of airline stock just prior to the attacks or the fact that American Airlines Flight 77 hit the only reinforced wall of the Pentagon (Buenting and Taylor 2010: 573). Additionally, laypeople may be able to spot some shortcomings in the experts’ reasoning. For example, a layperson could notice that a sample size is small, that a variable wasn’t controlled for, that other evidence points to a different conclusion, or that the study in question conflicts with other studies.

If someone were trying to convince me of a contrarian conspiracy theory by arguing that it’s the best explanation of various anomalies, I wouldn’t know enough to prove them wrong. To show that the relevant anomalies don’t support believing the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory, I would need to know many specific details about the subject matter. There are probably no cases in which I know enough about a contrarian conspiracy theory to hold my own in an argument like this. Presumably, this is true of most people. Therefore, few people have enough background knowledge to respond to arguments for contrarian conspiracy theories based on anomalies.

At the same time, a rational layperson might agree that a specific anomaly (or set of anomalies), in isolation, supports a contrarian conspiracy theory. In symbols, a rational layperson can have a credence distribution *cr*, such that *cr*(*c*|*a*) > *cr*(*c*), where *c* is some contrarian conspiracy theory and *a* is some set of anomalies. But considering anomalies is only part of the story because we need to consider our total evidence, not just part of it. For many laypeople, their total evidence includes facts of the form:

(*e*1) I have received testimony that conflicts with the hypothesis that *c* from a reliable

source.

(*e*2) I lack the background knowledge needed to tell whether the first-order evidence

supports believing that *c*.

Because many laypeople’s evidence includes facts like these, the relevant conditional credence isn’t *cr*(*c*|*a*); rather it’s, *cr*(*c*|*a* & *e*1 & *e*2). This is important because a person can be justified in assigning a higher value to *cr*(*c*|*a*) than to *cr*(*c*|*a* & *e*1 & *e*2).

Plausibly, even if an anomaly is suggestive, it’s still weak evidence given typical laypeople’s total evidence. This is because many laypeople’s evidence includes *e*2. But if your evidence includes *e*2, then it’s rational for your confidence that *c* to remain the same or almost the same despite learning about facts that, in isolation, support *c*. Therefore, it’s rational for many laypeople’s confidence that *c* given (*a* & *e*2) to be approximately equal to their confidence that *c* given *e*2. In symbols, there is a rationally permissible credence distribution *cr*, such that *cr*(*c*|*a* & *e*2) ≈ *cr*(*c*|*e*2). For short, I describe this situation by saying that “*e*2 mostly screens *a*.” If *e*2 mostly screens *a*, then *a* is, at best, exceedingly weak evidence for believing that *c* for someone whose evidence includes *e*2. But the typical layperson’s justification for rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories is based on *e*1, which is a good enough justification that it isn’t defeated by exceedingly weak evidence. Therefore, a layperson’s justification for rejecting a contrarian conspiracy theory *c* isn’t defeated by appeals to anomalies if their total relevant evidence is (*a* & *e*1 & *e*2).

What if a new anomaly is discovered? A new anomaly is one that wasn’t considered by our sources when we received their testimony. If we know that *a* is a new anomaly relating to whether *c*, then we know that

(*e*3) There is evidence relevant to whether *c* that my sources didn’t consider.

In this case, the question is how confident we are permitted to be that *c* given that (*a* & *e*1 & *e*2 & *e*3). As before, *a* is mostly screened by *e*2. But *e*3 lessens the probative value of *e*1 because *e*3 makes it more likely that the sources in question overlooked something.

Nevertheless, we are still justified in rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories that are supported by new anomalies. Consider an analogy. Scientists don’t reject a theory just because of the mere existence of new counterevidence. Instead, if a theory is otherwise well-supported, then new counterevidence is often attributed to experimental error, accommodated by adding auxiliary hypotheses, or tolerated on the assumption that further research can accommodate it (Lakatos 1978: 4; Kuhn 1996: 78, 81). Scientists reject theories based on new evidence only if the evidence in question is seriously problematic, which is a determination that can only be made holistically. I assume this scientific practice is rational and applies to investigating conspiracies. Even if laypeople know that there is a new anomaly, we won’t know that it’s a serious problem because we lack the background knowledge needed to make a holistic judgment about how serious the anomaly is. But (based on the testimony of reliable sources) many laypeople do know that the theory in question is otherwise well-supported. Therefore, many laypeople are justified in rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories despite learning about new anomalies.

Notably, new anomalies might not stay new for long. If we know that some reliable sources have already commented on the anomaly, saying that it doesn’t change anything, then we are justified in rejecting the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory. In this case, the anomaly would no longer be new, so the relevant instance of *e*3 would be false. But the point of appealing to scientific practice is that we don’t need to suspend judgment while waiting for our sources to comment on new anomalies. Even if we haven’t heard what our sources think about a new anomaly, we are still justified in putting little stock in it.

What the contrarian conspiracy theorist needs is a piece of evidence that even a layperson can tell is serious. For example, laypeople would be able to tell that the following pieces of evidence are serious (though maybe it’s not apt to describe them as “anomalies”):

* Upon reexamination based on the latest technology, the new expert consensus among forensic pathologists is that John F. Kennedy couldn’t have been killed by a lone gunman.
* A credible news source reports new evidence that the ATF masterminded the Oklahoma City bombing.
* There is an authenticated audio recording of George W. Bush helping to plan the 9/11 attacks.
* There is vetted, unambiguous documentary evidence (maybe leaked by a whistleblower) that SARS-CoV-2 was deliberately released into the general population to cause a pandemic.

Outside of unusual circumstances, laypeople wouldn’t be justified in dismissing the relevant contrarian conspiracy theories upon learning about pieces of evidence as serious as these. Therefore, it’s possible for there to be an anomaly that justifies believing or at least investigating a contrarian conspiracy theory. But now the crucial point is that, in many cases, we don’t actually have this kind of evidence for contrarian conspiracy theories. Given the evidence we actually have, we are justified in rejecting many contrarian conspiracy theories.

**2.5 Considerations of *Cui Bono***

Last, consider the appeal to *cui bono* (who benefits). For example, if someone’s argument that the Holocaust is a hoax invokes the premise that Israel benefits from people believing that the Holocaust occurred, then their argument involves an appeal to *cui* *bono*. Unlike the other arguments, the problem with appeals to *cui bono* isn’t that they go beyond laypeople’s background knowledge. Rather, the problem is that they are a weak kind of evidence.

To start, considerations of *cui bono*, by themselves, aren’t strong enough to require believing that there is a conspiracy. Otherwise, anytime a wealthy parent dies, we would be required to believe that the children conspired to kill the parent solely on the grounds that the children stood to benefit from the wealthy parent’s death. But it’s false that we would be required to posit such a conspiracy based on nothing but considerations of *cui bono*. Therefore, considerations of *cui bono*, by themselves, aren’t enough to require positing a conspiracy.

Even if considerations of *cui bono* don’t require us to believe that there is such-and-such a conspiracy, it remains to be seen whether they require us to increase our confidence that there is a conspiracy to a high enough degree that we are no longer justified in rejecting the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory. After all, the conditional probability that the antivaxxer conspiracy theory is true given that pharmaceutical companies have an incentive to lie about vaccine safety is higher than the unconditional probability of the antivaxxer conspiracy theory. Nevertheless, we aren’t required to be highly confident (for example, 80% sure) or even more confident than not (for example, 55% sure) that the antivaxxer conspiracy theory is true given this consideration. Again, think of the late wealthy parent. We aren’t required to be more confident than not that the children conspired to kill the wealthy parent based on nothing but considerations of *cui bono*. Likewise, we aren’t required to be more confident than not that a contrarian conspiracy theory is true based nothing but considerations of *cui bono*.

Moreover, absent other considerations, the appeal to *cui bono* isn’t even a good reason for *suspecting* that there is a conspiracy. We might reasonably suspect that there is a conspiracy if the wealthy parent died under unusual circumstances (for example, they died of an apparent suicide despite lacking signs of depression, their children were known criminals, or they warned people that their children would kill them). But the mere fact that their death financially benefitted their children isn’t a good reason for suspecting that the children conspired to murder them.

So far, I have argued that considerations of *cui bono*, by themselves, don’t require us to believe, be confident, or suspect that there is such-and-such a conspiracy. But plausibly considerations of *cui bono*, by themselves, don’t even *permit* us to believe, be confident, or suspect that there is such-and-such a conspiracy. Nevertheless, this claim is more controversial since some philosophers think that all probabilistically coherent sets of credences are rational (see Lin 2022: §4.1). In any case, my argument doesn’t need this assumption.

**3. Some Clarifications**

In this section, I discuss some clarifications of the practice of dismissing contrarian conspiracy theories out of hand. In §3.1, I distinguish the idea that laypeople are justified in dismissing many contrarian conspiracy theories from similar-sounding claims. In §3.2, I show that rejecting a contrarian conspiracy theory based on testimony doesn’t presuppose that, if it were true, someone would have talked by now. In §3.3, I explain why my argument isn’t meant to change someone’s mind if they already believe a contrarian conspiracy theory. In §3.4, I consider and reject the idea that contrarian conspiracy theorists can cite the fact that they are laypeople to justify their inability to answer relevant objections.

**3.1 Similar-Sounding Theses about Positing Conspiracies**

The idea that laypeople are justified in dismissing many contrarian conspiracy theories doesn’t imply that there is anything irrational about positing conspiracies. This is because not all theories that posit conspiracies are contrarian. For example, reliable sources affirm that Nixon was part of a conspiracy to cover up the fact that members of his reelection campaign were spying on the Democrats at the Watergate Office Building.

It can also be rational to suspect that there is a specific conspiracy even if there isn’t enough evidence to justify believing it. For example, consider the beginning of the Watergate scandal. It was immediately obvious that there was a conspiracy to spy on the Democrats because five men with listening equipment were caught breaking into the Democrats’ offices at the Watergate Office Building. But, soon after the arrests, investigative journalists and federal investigators were justified in suspecting that there was a broader conspiracy because of evidence linking the break-in to Nixon’s reelection campaign (despite claims of innocence from the Nixon administration) (see Bernstein and Woodward 1974). People who read the newspaper were justified in having this suspicion because they read about the relevant evidence in the newspaper. Additionally, the fact that news sources and federal investigators were taking the possibility of a broader conspiracy seriously constituted further evidence for laypeople to be suspicious.

Moreover, the idea that laypeople are justified in dismissing many contrarian conspiracy theories is even consistent with the fact that we know that people conspire *a lot*. On any given day, there is almost certainly some group of people conspiring about something (for example, to achieve some political or criminal goal). But this fact doesn’t conflict with testimony from reliable sources. Therefore, the idea that people conspire a lot isn’t a contrarian view.

Notably, my argument doesn’t even entail an all-out ban on believing *contrarian* conspiracy theories. This is because it’s possible for a person to find evidence that outweighs the probative value of testimony that conflicts with a contrarian conspiracy theory. Maybe this person would have to be an expert or an investigative journalist rather than a complete layperson. Nevertheless, my argument allows that it can be rational for independent groups (for example, the Dewey Commission) to investigate potential conspiracies and come to contrarian conclusions (see Dentith 2018: 198).

Last, my argument is consistent with the idea that societies should be vigilant about investigating potential conspiracies. Vigilance is required to avoid creating a situation in which it’s easy for people to get away with unethical conspiracies (Coady 2007: 202; Pigden 2006: 165). But vigilance needs to be understood in a social way. The responsibility for vigilance doesn’t lie with each individual layperson. Instead, we can “outsource” this vigilance to experts, criminal investigators, and journalists (Coady 2007: 196).

**3.2** **The Idea that Someone Would Have Talked**

Rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories based on testimony doesn’t presuppose that, for any important or interesting conspiracy, someone would have talked by now. For example, Keeley has argued that conspirators wouldn’t be able to keep a large group of people from divulging an important secret (1999: 123-4). To see the difference between these arguments, consider an example. Did a small group of ATF agents mastermind the Oklahoma City bombing? According to the idea that someone would have talked, this kind of conspiracy would eventually grow larger and larger until there were so many people involved that the conspiracy would leak to the public. This argument continues that, because no such conspiracy has leaked to the public, we are justified in believing that the ATF wasn’t involved in the Oklahoma City bombing.

In contrast, according to my argument, we can reject the theory that the ATF was involved because we know that this theory conflicts with testimony from reliable sources (for example, news sources) and we have no strong countervailing evidence. We are justified in believing the relevant testimony because the rationalizing constraints are satisfied. And we have no strong countervailing evidence because the arguments cited in support of this theory fail to defeat our justification. Notably, this argument doesn’t require the assumption that the relevant conspiracy would eventually grow larger and larger. The reason it’s good to avoid this assumption is that it’s not clear that every contrarian conspiracy theory needs to posit a conspiracy that would inevitably grow larger and larger (Hagen 2023; Ross in press).

It might be thought that the only way for my favored sources to reach a conclusion that conflicts with the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory is for them to assume, at least implicitly, that someone would have talked if there were such a conspiracy. If this is right, then my argument does end up presupposing that someone would have talked. However, this is usually not a plausible reconstruction of the relevant sources’ reasoning. For example, when news sources reported the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, they didn’t need to assume that, if the event in question were a false flag operation, then someone would have talked already. Rather, they were justified in drawing their conclusions from interviews with the relevant teachers, parents, police officers, and so on.

At this point, an interlocutor might ask: If the relevant sources aren’t presupposing that someone would have talked, then what evidence justifies them in rejecting the relevant contrarian conspiracy theory? Often, laypeople won’t know the answer to this question. But it’s not necessary for laypeople to know how these sources arrive at their conclusions in order for us to be justified in believing something based on their testimony. Otherwise, laypeople would rarely be justified in believing expert testimony. This is especially true when it comes to scientific testimony. I usually don’t know much about how scientists arrive at their conclusions because I don’t have the time or competence to evaluate their reasoning. Ideally, scientific testimony will, to some extent, explain how the scientific evidence justifies the claim in question (Gerken 2022: 158). But there is much more to how scientists reach a conclusion than can be described in a news article.

**3.3 Limitations of Persuasion**

Whereas some arguments purport to show that *believing* contrarian conspiracy theories is usually rationally *prohibited*, my argument concerns whether *rejecting* them is rationally *permissible*. For example, Levy argues that “A conspiracy theory that conflicts with the official story, where the official story is the explanation offered by the (relevant) *epistemic authorities*,is *prima facie* unwarranted” (2007: 182, italics in original). In contrast, my argument doesn’t explicitly mention whether believing contrarian conspiracy theories is unwarranted, unjustified, irrational, or impermissible. My argument doesn’t entail that there is no body of evidence that supports believing a contrarian conspiracy theory. For example, some people might have misleading evidence that justifies believing a contrarian conspiracy theory, or Sherlock might have excellent evidence for believing one. Moreover, my argument doesn’t entail that the body of evidence that permits *me* to reject a contrarian conspiracy theory thereby prohibits *others* from believing it. This entailment would go through given the assumption that there is, at most, one fully rational response to any body of evidence (White 2005). But this principle is contested, and I’m not presupposing it here (Schoenfield 2014).

To convert my argument into a prohibition against believing contrarian conspiracy theories, we need a different epistemic principle and a discussion of potentially defeating evidence. The epistemic principle would need to be something like this:

If you have received testimony that conflicts with a specific contrarian conspiracy theory and the rationalizing constraints are satisfied, then you are rationally prohibited from believing the contrarian conspiracy theory in question.

Part of showing that the rationalizing constraints are satisfied would involve showing that the alleged evidence that our interlocutor cites doesn’t justify believing their contrarian conspiracy theory. If they are relying on their own evaluation of the first-order evidence (for example, facts about Kennedy’s autopsy), then showing that the rationalizing constraints are satisfied can only be done by assessing the first-order evidence. However, even if most of us are justified in rejecting a specific contrarian conspiracy theory, few of us have enough familiarity with the relevant first-order evidence to show contrarian conspiracy theorists that they are wrong. This is why it’s not easy to give a non-question-begging argument for a prohibition against believing specific contrarian conspiracy theories. And even if we did prove that believing a specific contrarian conspiracy theory is prohibited by the first-order evidence, our interlocutor’s reasoning might be affected by cognitive biases (for example, motivated reasoning) that prevent them from appreciating the probative value of our argument.

This limitation concerns persuasion rather than justification. Plausibly, many contrarian conspiracy theorists are justified in rejecting their favorite contrarian conspiracy theories even if they don’t know that they are justified in rejecting them. This is because many contrarian conspiracy theorists probably have the same lifetime of experience as the rest of us that speaks in favor of the reliability of the mainstream sources whose testimony conflicts with contrarian conspiracy theories (for example, news sources, historians, and scientists). Contrarian conspiracy theorists might be persuaded by testimony from sources who write books, make documentaries, or run websites that defend contrarian conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, their lifetime of experience with the relevant mainstream sources still constitutes a huge asymmetry that defeasibly justifies them in preferring mainstream sources to contrarian sources. Likewise, contrarian conspiracy theorists might be persuaded by arguments in support of a contrarian conspiracy theory. But their status as laypeople still permits them to reject the contrarian conspiracy theory despite knowing about these arguments.

That said, citing testimony that conflicts with contrarian conspiracy theories might be convincing to someone who is in an epistemic bubble. A person is in an epistemic bubble regarding a given claim or topic if and only if the sources that the person relies on omit relevant information about thatclaim or topic (Nguyen 2020: 141). Someone who is in an epistemic bubble might not even know that their view is contrarian. For example, 97%-99% of climate scientists agree that anthropogenic climate change is occurring (Cook et al. 2013; Powell 2016). However, in 2016, a Pew poll found that “Just 27% of Americans say that ‘almost all’ climate scientists hold human behavior responsible for climate change” (Funk and Kennedy 2016). This might be a lingering effect of years of balanced reporting about climate change in the news (Antilla 2005; Boykoff and Boykoff 2004). In any case, the example of anthropogenic climate change is probably an outlier. Probably, most people who believe a contrarian conspiracy theory know that their theory conflicts with testimony from sources that most people regard as reliable, as evidenced by the fact that they typically spend a lot of time trying to discredit these sources and refute their arguments. Therefore, citing testimony that conflicts with a contrarian conspiracy theory will only lead our interlocutors to change their minds in rare cases.

**3.4 The Contrarian *Me Quoque***

I have been arguing that we are often justified in rejecting contrarian conspiracy theories without knowing what is wrong with the arguments for them due to the fact that we are laypeople. This raises the question of whether contrarian conspiracy theorists can be justified in using their own status as laypeople to resist refutation. This strategy isn’t so much a *tu quoque* that says, “You’re guilty like me” as a *me quoque* that says, “I’m innocent like you.” But there is a dilemma for this *me quoque*. Either contrarian conspiracy theorists have the relevant competence or not. If they do, then they can’t cite their lack of competence to avoid refutation. If not, then they aren’t justified in believing their contrarian conspiracy theories based on their own reasoning about the evidence. Therefore, contrarian conspiracy theorists can’t appeal to a *me quoque* to get out of responding to objections to their views.

For example, suppose someone cites an argument involving complex applied physics as evidence for the demolition theory. Moreover, suppose an expert objects to that argument and shows that the demolition theory isn’t needed to explain how fast the Twin Towers fell or why WTC 7 collapsed. Either this demolition theorist is a layperson or not when it comes to applying physics to building collapses. If they are a layperson, then they aren’t justified in believing the demolition theory based on their own evaluation of arguments involving complex applied physics. Meanwhile, if they aren’t a layperson, then they need to know how to respond to the expert’s counterarguments (given a reasonable amount of time) in order to be justified in believing the demolition theory. The same considerations apply to contrarian conspiracy theories that say the MMR vaccine causes autism, the ATF must have planted bombs inside the Murrah Federal Building, and anthropogenic climate change is a hoax.

One way for the contrarian conspiracy theorist to get around this problem is to claim only certain areas of expertise. Some contrarian conspiracy theories are relevant to more than one domain of expertise. Suppose a contrarian conspiracy theorist claims expertise in Domain 1 but not Domain 2. If an expert objects by citing evidence from Domain 2, then the contrarian conspiracy theorist can cite their status as a layperson concerning Domain 2 to get out of responding to the objections in question. Nevertheless, this loophole won’t help much because there are experts who have expertise in Domain 1 rather than Domain 2, and they can give counterarguments that relate to Domain 1.

But even if the *me quoque* fails, some laypeople might be justified in believing contrarian conspiracy theories. I have argued that many laypeople are justified in rejecting various contrarian conspiracy theories even when we are presented with objections that we don’t know how to respond to. However, I haven’t argued that laypeople are never justified in believing contrarian conspiracy theories. For example, maybe some laypeople are justified in believing contrarian conspiracy theories based on misleading evidence, due to being in an epistemic bubble. My aim is only to show that the practice of dismissing contrarian conspiracy theories is *permissible* for many laypeople. This doesn’t entail that all laypeople are *obligated* to dismiss all contrarian conspiracy theories.

**4. Conclusion**

Many people dismiss contrarian conspiracy theories out of hand even though few of us have a firm enough grasp of the relevant evidence to explain why the evidence tells against these theories. Initially, it might seem dogmatic for a person to maintain a belief when they have been presented with objections to it that they don’t know how to respond to. But in many cases, laypeople aren’t being dogmatic when they dismiss contrarian conspiracy theories; rather, they are responding correctly to their evidence. This is because many laypeople are defeasibly justified in rejecting many contrarian conspiracy theories based on testimony and the arguments for these contrarian conspiracy theories usually don’t defeat this justification.

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