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# Conspiracy Theories and Rational Critique: A Kantian Procedural Approach

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## ABSTRACT



This paper develops a new kind of approach to conspiracy theories – a *procedural approach*. This approach promises to establish that belief in conspiracy theories is rationally criticisable in general. Unlike most philosophical approaches, a procedural approach does not purport to condemn conspiracy theorists directly on the basis of features of their theories. Instead, it focuses on the patterns of thought involved in forming and sustaining belief in such theories. Yet, unlike psychological approaches, a procedural approach provides a rational critique of conspiracist thought patterns. In particular, it criticises these thought patterns for failing to conform to procedures prescribed by reason. The specific procedural approach that I develop takes its cue from the Kantian notion that reason must be used self-critically. I tentatively suggest that conspiracy theorists fail to engage in the relevant sort of self-critique in at least three ways: they do not critically examine their own motivations, they avoid looking at matters from the point of view of others, and they fail to reflect on the limits of human knowledge.

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## 1. Introduction

On 6 January 2021, a mob of violent insurrectionists stormed the US Capitol. Their goal was to reverse the results of the 2020 US Presidential Election. They had fallen for false conspiracy theories according to which the election had been rigged or stolen by a sinister group of ‘elites’. The role that conspiracy theories have played, not only in singular events like this, but also in larger developments such as the rise of right-wing

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populism in the West and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, indicates that they are not harmless fringe phenomena but powerful political tools (see Cassam 2019; Bergmann 2018; Snyder 2018).

The general public commonly regards conspiracy theorists as irrational. Indeed, the label 'conspiracy theory' is commonly used as a pejorative, to signal that a claim is untenable. By contrast, the bottom line of the philosophical debate is that, at least insofar as conspiracy theories are defined as *theories that posit conspiracies*, it is difficult to condemn belief in conspiracy theories as rationally criticisable *in general* (Basham 2003; Coady 2007, 2018a, 2018b; Dentith 2016, 2018a; Keeley 1999; Pigden 1995, 2007). By this minimal definition, everyone who is familiar with basic historical facts is a conspiracy theorist. After all, conspiracies are a common and well-documented part of history.

However, we should not yet give up on the project of providing a general rational critique of belief in at least a certain *type* of theories that posit conspiracies. After all, the public's attitude towards conspiracy theories seems far from unwarranted. The label 'conspiracy theories', as it is used by the public, seems to pick out theories which, as a *class*, are highly problematic and at least *prima facie* rationally criticisable. The above-mentioned theories surrounding the 2020 election are a case in point. Indeed, even some of the philosophers who insist on defining conspiracy theories as theories that posit conspiracies admit that a *subset* of these theories are problematic as a class (e.g. Dentith 2018b).

Moreover, the public's attitude towards conspiracy theories seems to be shared in large parts of psychology and the social sciences. Unlike philosophers, authors in these disciplines tend to assume that conspiracy theories are problematic in some way, and then attempt to explain why people believe them anyway. And their explanations often trace conspiracist belief to origins that are indeed problematic. For example, psychological studies have shown that subjects are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories when they are experiencing a loss of control, suggesting that conspiracy theories are appealing partly because they present the world as simpler, and thus more manageable, than the official account (e.g. Brotherton and French 2015).

This paper suggests that belief in a certain *type* of theories that posit conspiracies is rationally criticisable in general. I will simply use the label 'conspiracy theories' to refer to these theories. Connectedly, I will use 'conspiracist belief' and 'conspiracy theorists' or 'conspiracists' to refer to belief in these theories and people who believe in them, respectively. Indeed, I think that this is continuous with the way these terms are

used by the general public as well as in psychology and the social sciences. However, my arguments remain neutral on the issue of how conspiracy theories are to be defined. Readers who think that 'conspiracy theories' should refer to *all* theories that posit conspiracies are kindly asked to bear this in mind and read my arguments as concerned only with a specific *kind* of conspiracy theory.

I discuss previous attempts to show that belief in conspiracy theories is rationally criticisable in general and explain why they fail. It seems to me that philosophical approaches often fail because they focus too narrowly on the structure and content of conspiracy *theories*, as opposed to the reasoning patterns of conspiracy *theorists*. By contrast, psychological explanations focus on features of conspiracy theorists. Yet, by themselves, these explanations cannot establish the rational criticisability of conspiracy theorising either. They can tell us that conspiracist beliefs are generally due to problematic psychological features, but this is not obviously relevant to the question of whether anyone should have these beliefs.

In light of these failures, I outline a new kind of approach to conspiracy theories: a *procedural* approach. A procedural approach promises to combine the strengths of extant philosophical and psychological approaches while overcoming their weaknesses. Unlike most philosophical approaches, a procedural approach does not purport to condemn conspiracy theorists *directly* on the basis of features of their *theories*. Instead, it focuses on the *patterns of thought* involved in forming and sustaining belief in such theories. Yet, unlike psychological approaches, a procedural approach provides a rational *critique* of conspiracist thought patterns. In particular, it criticises these thought patterns for failing to conform to procedures prescribed by *reason*.

The specific procedural approach that I want to develop here is Kantian in spirit. It takes its cue from Kant's notion that reason is self-critical. This notion suggests that the verdicts of reason are not derived from self-evident foundations but are themselves subject to critique. The upshot is that rational critique must always involve self-critique. I suggest that conspiracy theorists fail to engage in the relevant sort of self-critique in at least three ways: they do not critically examine their own motivations, they avoid looking at matters from the point of view of others, and they fail to reflect on the limits of human knowledge.

While the Kantian procedural approach thus promises to vindicate the rational criticisability of conspiracy theorists, it also accommodates some of the legitimate concerns that might be raised when someone is dismissed as a conspiracy theorist all too quickly. We should be wary of

such dismissals because, arguably, they have the potential to silence critical discussion, increase social polarisation, marginalise individuals or groups, or even cover up genuine conspiracies (see, e.g. Coady 2018a; Pigden 2007). The Kantian procedural approach accommodates these concerns because the demand for self-critique applies to all reasoners, not just conspiracy theorists. Therefore, criticising a given theory *as* a conspiracy theory will not be fully *rational* unless it involves a critical examination of this very criticism. Thus, my approach does not lower but in fact raises the bar for dismissing a given theory as a conspiracy theory.

I should note that I appeal to two different notions of critique or criticism in this paper. When I discuss the Kantian notion of self-critique, or a critique of reason, I have in mind the possibility and appropriateness of *evaluating* claims by standards of reason. By contrast, when I argue that conspiracy theorists are rationally criticisable, I mean that they *run afoul* of these standards. This might seem confusing, but it is unavoidable because my argument ultimately aims to highlight a systematic connection between the two notions of critique. My suggestion is that conspiracy theorists are rationally criticisable, i.e. they are subject to the second kind of critique, precisely because they fail to engage in the first kind of critique, i.e. they fail to subject themselves to the critical scrutiny of reason.<sup>1</sup>

I start by giving a rough characterisation of the theories to which I am referring as ‘conspiracy theories’ (Section 2). Subsequently, I outline three approaches to conspiracy theories and argue that each of them fails to establish that believing such theories is rationally criticisable. Two of these approaches are philosophical. The first of these focuses on structural features of conspiracy theories (Section 3). The second philosophical approach focuses on their content (Section 4). The third approach is psychological rather than philosophical as it attempts to identify features of conspiracy theorists that account for their conspiracist beliefs (Section 5). Next, I outline the Kantian procedural approach, by sketching Kant’s notion of rational self-critique (Section 6) and explaining how belief in conspiracy theories seems to run afoul of this notion (Section 7). Finally, I outline the

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<sup>1</sup>One might wonder why it is important whether conspiracy theorising is *rationaly* criticisable. I think that it is important because it has direct implications for whether one *should believe* conspiracy theories. If conspiracy theorising is criticisable in some other way, e.g. morally or politically, this might be an interesting and important result in its own right (see Cassam 2019; Cíibik and Hardoš *forthcoming*; Stokes 2018). However, it could be argued that these types of criticizability do not correspond to *the right kind of reasons* for disbelieving conspiracy theories (see D’Arms and Jacobson 2000). For example, one might think that, when faced with the question of whether to believe a theory or not, one should only pay attention to features of the theory itself (also see Section 5).

implications of the Kantian procedural approach for how we should deal with conspiracy theories in academia and the general public (Section 8).

## 2. Conspiracy theories

Much of the philosophical debate about conspiracy theories is concerned with identifying the correct definition of this term (e.g. Coady 2007, 2018a; Dentith 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Pigden 1995, 2007; Keeley 1999). Now, as I said in the introduction, this paper is officially neutral on what *the* definition of conspiracy theories should be. I should nevertheless explain how I am using the label ‘conspiracy theories’.

I identify four features that the theories that I call ‘conspiracy theories’ *typically* exhibit, by virtue of the claims that they make about their subject matter. These will help us to get a grasp of the type of theories that I am concerned with. I take it that this is also the type of theory that the general public, as well as researchers in psychology and the social sciences, have in mind when they speak of ‘conspiracy theories’. Note, however, that these features are not intended as a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for something to be a conspiracy theory. I do not think that any such set of conditions could ever be satisfactory. After all, it seems likely that, like most terms, the term ‘conspiracy theories’ is vague and has borderline cases.

Here are the four features and their corresponding conspiracist claims:

*Heterodoxy:* The official account of some series of events is not correct. The truth is being concealed.

*Bad Intentions:* The series of events is the intended result of the actions of sinister conspirators.

*Deception:* The conspirators are also responsible for concealing the truth. They manipulate and deceive (by planting false evidence, employing false witnesses, etc.).

*Connectedness:* All salient facts surrounding the series of events are connected. They are not brute facts. The truth is fully discoverable.

The feature *Heterodoxy* is important because it distinguishes the theories I am interested in from theories that merely posit a conspiracy, such as the official account of the events of 9/11, according to which members of Al-Qaeda *conspired* to attack targets in the U.S.A.

The expression ‘series of events’ is supposed to be broad enough to cover singular occurrences like the assassination of John F. Kennedy as well as long-term developments like the entire history of mankind.

By the ‘official account’, I mean the account that the conspiracy theorist *perceives* or *presents* as being dominant among their audience. Note that, as I use the term, the official account need not *actually* be the dominant one (*pace* Coady 2007). For example, when Russian President Vladimir Putin spreads the theory that the West planted false evidence to implicate the Kremlin in the attempted assassination of opposition leader Nawalny, the account that he is challenging (according to which the Kremlin was in fact involved in an attempt to assassinate Nawalny) might not be dominant among his audience, which mainly consists of citizens of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, I would argue that Putin’s theory has the feature *Heterodoxy* because Putin perceives, or at least *presents*, the account it challenges as the dominant one.

There are two things worth noting about *Bad Intentions*. First, conspiracy theories typically claim that the series of events in question is due to the *intentional* actions of a group of conspirators. Second, the conspiracy theorist perceives the intentions of the conspirators as sinister. This second aspect of *Bad Intentions* distinguishes the kinds of conspiracies posited by conspiracy theories from benign secret group activities, such as the planning of a surprise party.

*Deception* enables the conspiracy theorist to explain how the official account is sustained despite being false. As we shall see in Section 3, this feature plays an important role in the ways in which conspiracy theorists typically deal with apparent evidence against their theory.

*Connectedness* reflects two related claims, one metaphysical and one epistemological. The metaphysical claim is that all the salient facts surrounding the series of events in question are connected such that whatever caused the series of events is also causally related to all these facts. None of these facts are *coincidental* in the sense of being causally independent from the cause of the series of events. The epistemological claim is that, due to their metaphysical connectedness, all the salient facts surrounding the series of events are *explicable* in terms of the cause of the series. The true account of the series of events will therefore also account for all these facts. Which facts count as ‘salient’ is ultimately determined by the conspiracy theorist.

*Connectedness* is not always directly asserted but usually presupposed in the way conspiracy theorists argue for their theories (Barkun 2003, 3–4; Harambam 2017, 109–111; Keeley 1999, 123–124). In particular, as we shall see in Section 3, it underpins conspiracy theorists’ appeal to so-called errant data, i.e. data that the official account leaves unexplained.

A corollary that follows from the conjunction of the four features listed above is that all those who continue to believe or promote the official account are either co-conspirators or complacent ‘sheeple’. After all, if the official account is false, the truth is fully knowable, and the only reason why the official account continues to be promoted is that sinister conspirators are trying to deceive us, then those who continue to endorse the official account are either not trying to find out the truth or they are trying to hide it.

With this rough characterisation of conspiracy theories in hand, we can turn to the question of whether belief in such theories is generally rationally criticisable. I sketch three unsuccessful attempts to show that it is before I turn to my own approach.

### 3. The structure of conspiracy theories

The first approach to the rational evaluation of belief in conspiracy theories that I want to discuss investigates whether the *structure* of conspiracy theories makes belief in such theories rationally criticisable. It evaluates this structure in light of criteria of theory choice that are championed in epistemology and the philosophy of science. By the structure of conspiracy theories, I mean the way the claims of these theories *relate* to each other and to empirical reality, as opposed to the content of these claims.

The problem with this approach is that conspiracy theories meet standard criteria of theory choice. In fact, they often meet these criteria better than the official account. If anything, conspiracy theories can seem to meet these criteria *too well* (see Hepfer 2015; Keeley 1999). But this, at least on the face of it, does not seem to furnish a rational criticism of belief in these theories.<sup>2</sup>

To illustrate, consider the criterion of *simplicity*. Many theorists think that, other things being equal, we should prefer simpler theories to more complex ones. But conspiracy theories are notoriously simple. By virtue of *Connectedness*, they tie together large amounts of data which other theories might regard as unrelated. By virtue of *Bad Intentions*, they cast events that might otherwise be regarded as the unintended, and perhaps unlikely, outcomes of complex social or natural systems as the intentional outcomes of human action. In short, conspiracy theories seem to provide an elegant, unifying account of what might otherwise be a fairly messy picture.

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<sup>2</sup>I return to this point in Section 7.3.



Next, consider the criterion of *explanatory power*. Other things being equal, we should prefer theories that explain more data. By combining *Bad Intentions*, *Connectedness* and *Deception*, conspiracy theories purport to explain *all* the salient data surrounding a series of events. An important role is played by the notion that none of the salient facts in this vicinity are brute facts. Everything can be explained (or explained away) by the conspiracy theory. In this way, conspiracy theories often seem to explain more data than the official account. Indeed, as Keeley points out, conspiracy theories usually take as their starting point a set of data which, from the point of view of the official account, must be considered 'errant data' (1999, 118; also see Novella 2009; Wood and Douglas 2013, 8). Errant data are data which contradict, or cannot be fully explained by, the official account. These include facts that the official account regards as coincidental. For example, from the point of view of the official account about the 9/11 attacks, the fact that one of the hijackers' passports not only survived the attacks but was found near the World Trade Center soon after can seem like an extraordinary coincidence (see Wood and Douglas 2013, 4). By contrast, 9/11 conspiracy theories can seemingly explain this fact as part of an attempt to provide convenient but false evidence for the official story. A conspiracy theory's ability to explain *both* the errant data *and* all the other salient data surrounding the series of events in question is usually cited as one of the main arguments in its favour.

Another pair of widely championed criteria of theory choice are internal and external coherence. A theory's elements should be coherent with each other as well as with the empirical data. It is not hard to see that conspiracy theories perform well by these criteria, too. All the empirical data can be interpreted *either* as the intended outcome of the conspiracy itself *or* as the result of attempts to cover up the conspiracy. In the first case, the data are considered to constitute evidence *for* the conspiracy theory. In the second case, they are considered *not* to constitute evidence *against* the conspiracy theory. Similarly, potential internal incoherencies can be overcome by positing further instances of deception and manipulation.

Thus, conspiracy theories seem to perform well by standard criteria of theory choice. Yet, there is one criterion that might appear to mark an exception. At least since Popper, it is widely thought that theories should make predictions or retrodictions that can be *falsified* by empirical data (see Popper 1963). Since conspiracy theories are potentially consistent with *any* data, they might not seem to meet this criterion. However,

falsifiability in the strong, Popperian sense does not seem like an appropriate criterion to evaluate conspiracy theories. As Keeley puts it, it is a reasonable criterion only 'in cases where we do not have reason to believe that there are powerful agents seeking to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter' (1999, 121; also see Basham 2003, 93). In cases where we do have reason to believe so, like when we are investigating a potential conspiracy, we should not be led astray by apparently contradictory data too easily.

Moreover, conspiracy theories are falsifiable in the more modest, Lakatosian sense. Conspiracy theories make claims that are falsifiable in principle. But when these theories threaten to be falsified, conspiracy theorists usually protect the 'hard core' of these theories by adding 'auxiliary hypotheses' to their 'protective belt' (Lakatos 1978). These auxiliary hypotheses protect the hard core by rendering the putatively falsifying data consistent with it. Now, Lakatos holds that a theory (or 'research programme') is 'degenerating' if the auxiliary hypotheses merely serve to salvage its hard core rather than to make new predictions or retrodictions (Lakatos 1978, 34). But arguably the auxiliary hypotheses added by conspiracy theorists need not be of this nature (*pace* Clarke 2002). They need not *just* salvage the theory but can also make new claims about the nature of the conspiracy: 'It is worse than we thought, the media are part of the conspiracy, too!' These new claims can in principle be falsified, though this is not likely to happen; instead, the conspiracy theorist will simply perform the same move again. In this way, conspiracy theories can be saved from falsification without clearly being identifiable as degenerating research programmes.

#### 4. The content of conspiracy theories

A second approach to the rational evaluation of conspiracist belief focuses on their content rather than their structure. In particular, it evaluates the substantive plausibility of conspiracy theories. One problem with this approach is that it seems overwhelmingly difficult to discredit conspiracy theories *in general* as substantively implausible. To see this, consider two arguments that purport to show that the content of conspiracy theories is generally implausible.

The first argument asserts that conspiracy theories generally overestimate the power of intentional human action (see e.g. Popper 1945, 104–106; Keeley 1999, 123–124; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 208). It roughly states that human actions, especially when they are intended to influence

complex social systems such as world politics or the economy, rarely achieve their end in an unqualified manner. Sometimes, it is added that *Deception* implies too large a number of co-conspirators to be plausible. After all, in addition to being fallible, human beings notoriously pursue their own agenda, making it unlikely that any conspiracy of the scale that conspiracy theorists usually posit would ever be successful.

Even setting aside the fact that not all conspiracy theories posit large groups of conspirators (Räikkä 2009, 195; also see Hagen 2018), this argument's ability to impugn the plausibility of conspiracy theories is very limited. Many of the conspiracies *that we know of* might have failed in the ways that the present argument suggests. But, in many of these cases, the reason *why* we know about these conspiracies at all is *that they failed*. If there are or have been successful conspiracies of a similar or larger scale, we might simply not know about them. Indeed, this is quite likely if these conspiracies are still unfolding or intended to remain secret even after they have achieved their aims. But then our ability to draw conclusions about the likelihood of conspiracies on the basis of what we know about the human agency is very limited.

The second argument asserts that conspiracy theories are implausible because, at least in liberal democracies, conspiracies of the scale that many conspiracy theories posit are likely to be exposed by investigative institutions such as academia or the press (see, e.g. Keeley 1999, 22; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 209).

This argument begs the question, at least against some conspiracy theories. It presupposes that said investigative institutions are *trustworthy*. However, due to *Deception*, a typical move by conspiracy theorists is to deny the trustworthiness of these institutions when they reject or ignore their theories (Basham 2003, 94–100).<sup>3</sup>

In addition, this second argument suffers from a similar flaw as the first one. That is, the likelihood that a conspiracy will be exposed by the investigative institutions of liberal democracies depends on how many conspiracies have so far eluded these institutions. And this is precisely what is at issue between the critic and the defender of conspiracy theories.

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<sup>3</sup>Keeley argues that, when they make this move, conspiracy theorists run the risk of committing themselves to global scepticism by mistrusting the institutions upon whose information most of their beliefs about the world are based (1999, 121–123). However, as Clarke points out, it is not clear why conspiracy theorists' scepticism could not be confined to specific persons' claims about specific issues (2002, 140–142).

Finally, as Basham points out, there actually might be an inverse relationship between the ‘momentousness’ of a conspiracy and its likelihood of being investigated, let alone revealed to the public (2018). After all, some conspiracies, if real and revealed to the public, might be so disruptive to society as to make it understandable for reporters to shy away from exposing them.<sup>4</sup>

An exhaustive investigation of the substantive plausibility of conspiracy theories is beyond the scope of this paper. But I hope that my brief discussion suffices to demonstrate that it is difficult to show that conspiracy theories *in general* are substantively implausible.

In any case, there is an even more serious problem with the attempt rationally to evaluate conspiracist beliefs by appeal to their substantive implausibility: even if conspiracy theories are substantively implausible because they rest on false assumptions about, say, the power of human agency or the trustworthiness of investigative institutions, it does not follow that believing these theories is *rationally criticisable*. Whether a person is rationally criticisable for forming false beliefs about these matters might partly depend on features of her epistemic community (see Baurmann 2007). In addition, as Basham argues, the truth about these matters lies somewhere on a spectrum between implausible extremes, and two equally sound reasoners might reach different conclusions about its exact location on this spectrum in light of one and the same set of empirical data (2003, 94–100). In light of these limitations, it seems that the substantive implausibility of conspiracy theories is the wrong kind of consideration to support a rational criticism of those who believe such theories.

## 5. The psychology of conspiracy theorists

The two philosophical approaches discussed so far purport to establish the rational criticizability of conspiracy theorists by pointing to the structure or content of their *theories*. I submit that this is why they fail. There is nothing about conspiracy theories themselves that *directly* renders belief in them rationally criticisable. Instead, conspiracy theorists are rationally criticisable for the *ways* in which they form and maintain belief in their theories. On the face of it, this seems to mirror a conclusion drawn by Keeley (1999, 126, italics added):

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<sup>4</sup>Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* provides a fictional example of such a conspiracy: an attack on planet earth is staged in order to unite all countries and thus prevent a nuclear war (Moore 1995). The protagonists face the choice between exposing the conspiracy and maintaining world peace.

I suspect that much of the intuitive “problem” with conspiracy theories is a problem with the theorists themselves, and not a feature of the theories they produce. Perhaps the problem is a *psychological* one of not recognizing when to stop searching for hidden causes.

This suggests a third, psychological approach to conspiracy theories. On this approach, what renders belief in conspiracy theories problematic are not the theories themselves, but the psychological mechanisms that *produce* such belief. However, there is a serious problem with this approach, too: the fact that belief in conspiracy theories is generally produced by problematic psychological mechanisms might not seem relevant to the question of whether one *should* believe such theories. After all, one might think that, when faced with the question of whether to believe a theory or not, one should only pay attention to features of the theory itself.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, I now want to provide an overview of some of the most prominent findings regarding the psychological mechanisms that produce conspiracist beliefs. Although these mechanisms, by themselves, do not suffice to show that conspiracy theorists are rationally criticisable, they will fuel the Kantian procedural approach to conspiracy theories that I develop in the next two sections.<sup>6</sup>

To begin with, studies suggest that belief in conspiracy theories might be more accurately characterised as *disbelief* in the official account (Wood and Douglas 2013, 2015). In particular, conspiracy theorists tend to argue for their position by appealing to alleged evidence *against* the official account rather than by highlighting data that support their favoured conspiracy theory directly. By contrast, subjects who believe in the official account are much more likely to argue for their position by pointing to the evidence *for* this account. This suggests that conspiracy theorists are motivated, not by the virtues of their own theories, but by a desire to reject the official account.

As Wood and Douglas point out, this suggestion is further supported by studies according to which one of the best predictors of someone’s attitude towards any given conspiracy theory is their attitude about *other* conspiracy theories (2018, 16; see, e.g. Brotherton, French, and Pickering 2013). That is, people who already believe in one or more conspiracy

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<sup>5</sup>A parallel challenge arises for accounts that trace conspiratorial belief to morally or politically questionable origins (see footnote 1). I believe that the insights of such accounts can be vindicated in the same way that those of psychological approaches can, but I do not have space to show this here.

<sup>6</sup>I will not appeal to Clarke’s claim that conspiracy theorists commit the fundamental attribution error (2002). I believe that this claim has been compellingly rejected by Dentith (2016, 580–581).

theories are more likely to be favourably disposed towards other, seemingly unrelated conspiracy theories, too. This indicates that conspiracist belief might be motivated by a negative attitude towards official accounts in general, rather than by the plausibility of particular theories.

Other studies suggest that conspiracy theorists are partly motivated by a desire to be *unique* (e.g. Imhoff and Lamberty 2017). By virtue of *Heterodoxy* and *Deception*, conspiracist beliefs might allow people to view themselves as the ones who have 'woken up' and know 'what's really going on', unlike the masses of 'sheeple'.

Furthermore, research indicates that conspiracy theorists are especially prone to report perceiving patterns among disconnected data and to give intentional explanations for random phenomena (e.g. Brotherton and French 2015). Part of the reason why conspiracy theorists are drawn to conspiracy theories, especially the features *Connectedness* and *Bad Intentions*, might thus be that they find it hard to accept that, as Keeley puts it, 'shit happens' (Keeley 1999, 125).

Connectedly, there is some evidence that belief in conspiracy theories promises to help subjects cope with a perceived loss of control (Brotherton and French 2015; Rothschild et al. 2012; Whitson and Galinsky 2008). Especially due to their features *Connectedness* and *Bad Intentions*, conspiracy theories may appeal to these subjects by offering a simple explanation of complex phenomena and clearly identifying a group of people who are to *blame* for the situation.

Finally, studies suggest that most people overestimate the extent to which they understand and can explain everyday phenomena (Rozenblit and Keil 2002). This phenomenon is known as the 'illusion of explanatory depth'. Levy follows Wilson in suggesting the following explanation for this illusion (Levy 2007; Wilson 2004): As members of society, the understanding and explanation of various phenomena is *available* to us. But we fail to appreciate the extent to which this understanding is *distributed* among the various individuals who make up society, many of whom possess detailed knowledge in highly specialised fields. Levy goes on to argue that the illusion of explanatory depth might foster belief in conspiracy theories (Levy 2007, 190). And, indeed, conspiracy theories purport to explain a wide range of phenomena by a simple hypothesis (*Bad Intentions* and *Connectedness*), contradicting official authorities (*Heterodoxy*), and explaining away apparently contradictory evidence and testimony (*Deception*). Thus, an illusion that makes us systematically underestimate the extent to which our understanding and ability to explain phenomena depend

on others, especially on experts in the relevant fields, might make us more prone to believe such theories.

## 6. Kant on reason and self-critique

Above, I argued that extant philosophical attempts to show that conspiracy theorists are rationally criticisable tend to fail because they focus on features of conspiracy *theories*. I suggested that there is nothing about these theories that *directly* renders belief in them rationally criticisable across the board. In a sense, the psychological approach suffers from the opposite problem: while it focuses on the problematic mechanisms that *produce* conspiracist beliefs, it fails to show that these beliefs are rationally criticisable. For it is not obvious how the fact that conspiracist beliefs are produced by problematic mechanisms bears on the question of whether an individual should believe in conspiracy theories.

In light of this, it seems that in order to rationally criticise conspiracy theorising in general we need to appeal to standards of reason that apply, not at the level of the contents or internal structure of our theories, but at the level of how we form and sustain belief in those theories. In other words, we need to adopt a *procedural approach*. I want to develop such an approach in this section and the next. In this section, I outline and explain the philosophical ideas underlying this approach. In the next section, I apply these ideas to the case of conspiracy theorists.

There are many potential ways to develop a procedural approach.<sup>7</sup> The particular approach that I want to advance here takes its cue from the Kantian idea that reason requires *self-critique*. In what follows, I largely rely on Onora O'Neill's reconstruction of this idea (see 1989a, 2015a). Let us start by considering Kant's famous characterisation of *enlightenment* as 'the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority' (*WE* 8:35, italics altered).<sup>8</sup> 'Minority', Kant explains, is the 'inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another' (*WE* 8:35). We might say that minority is marked by reliance on the verdicts of *unchecked authorities*. A person in this state takes for granted the 'precepts and formulas' of authorities, be they of a religious, medical, political or philosophical nature (*WE* 8:36). As a result of this

<sup>7</sup>Cassam's approach, on which conspiracy theorists embody epistemic vices, could perhaps be seen as a non-Kantian procedural approach (2015).

<sup>8</sup>I use the following abbreviations to refer to Kant's works: *WE* for "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?"; *WOT* for "What does it mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?"; *CPR* for *Critique of Pure Reason*.

*uncritical* acceptance, these precepts and formulas become *dogmas*, the axiomatic foundations of a person's worldview.

If enlightenment is the emergence from minority, and minority consists in the uncritical acceptance of the verdicts of authorities, then the way to achieve enlightenment is through *critique*. We are to use our understanding 'without direction from another', to *think for ourselves* (WE 8:35). But what does it mean to think for oneself? Kant emphatically warns us what it does *not* mean (WE 8:36, italics added):

*A revolution* may well bring about a falling off of personal despotism and of avaricious or tyrannical oppression, but never *a true reform in one's way of thinking*; instead new prejudices will serve just as well as old ones to harness the great unthinking masses.

Thus, we are not simply to *renounce* the authorities whose precepts and formulas we have been following uncritically. Uncritical obedience is not to be replaced by uncritical disobedience. To see this, recall that the problem with minority is not, fundamentally, that we accept the verdicts of this or that *person* or *institution*. That is, it does not just consist in 'personal despotism' and 'avaricious or tyrannical oppression', but in the fact that we take for granted certain *precepts* and *formulas*. It is our *uncritical* adherence to these precepts and formulas that accounts for our minority, *not* the fact that they are imposed on us by *others*. Thus, enlightenment is not advanced by simply replacing their precepts and formulas with *our own*.

Kant thinks that the use of *reason* itself must remain within strict boundaries if we are to avoid simply replacing traditional dogmas with our own prejudices. Breaking with the Cartesian rationalist tradition, Kant argues that there are no foundational claims or principles of reason that should be accepted uncritically. If there were such things, reason itself would be just another unchecked authority, the project of enlightenment doomed to failure. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he writes (CPR A738/B76):

Reason must subject itself to critique in all its undertakings, and cannot restrict the freedom of critique through any prohibition without damaging itself and drawing upon itself a disadvantageous suspicion. Now there is nothing so important because of its utility, nothing so holy, that it may be exempted from this searching review and inspection, which knows no [favouritism].<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>The Cambridge edition misleadingly translates "Ansehen der Person" as "respect for persons". However, Kant is not saying that persons deserve no respect, but that, before reason's critical scrutiny, they are all *equal*.



The very existence of reason depends upon this freedom, which has no dictatorial authority, but whose claim is never anything more than the agreement of free citizens, each of whom must be able to express his reservations, indeed even his *veto*, without holding back.

As O'Neill observes, Kant's use of political metaphors to describe the role of reason is not accidental (O'Neill 1989b, 37). Just like a sovereign who suppresses criticism and refuses to justify himself in the public forum must eventually lose his legitimacy, reason loses its characteristic authority if it refuses to justify its claims.

In a similar vein, Kant warns against a 'lawless use of reason' in his essay 'What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' (WOT 8:145). He argues that, if we regard any of our judgements as based on *rational inspiration*, i.e. on the self-evident expressions of an allegedly *healthy reason*, we will inadvertently hamper enlightenment (WOT 8:140). For any attempt to sidestep the arduous process of rational argument ultimately *dethrones* reason. When claims to rational authority are not critically examined, various parties will prop up their own 'inner inspirations' as pronouncements of reason (WOT 8:145). Instead of emerging from minority, they end up talking past each other, like the infamous builders of the Tower of Babylon (also see CPR A707/B735).

How is an uncritical, lawless use of reason to be prevented? Kant writes that 'the final touchstone of the reliability of judgment is to be sought in *reason alone*' (WOT 8:140). Thus, reason needs to criticise *itself*. Now, we might worry that using reason to criticise reason leads us into a circle or an infinite regress. After all, if we are to employ reason in our critique, we must rely on the standards of reason. And it seems that we cannot rely on the standards of reason if reason is what we are to criticise. However, this is where the idea of a *procedural* standard of reason comes in (O'Neill 2015b, 26–37). According to Kant, the only standard of reason that we can, and indeed must, rely on is the standard of *self-critique* itself (WOT 8:146n). This standard is purely procedural because it does not convey 'information' but prescribes a certain 'use of one's faculty of cognition' (WOT 8:146n) We must rely on this standard because, without it, we could not engage in self-critique, and hence use reason to achieve enlightenment, at all. We might say that it is the *constitutive* standard of self-critical reasoning.

But what does this standard demand? In a nutshell, it demands that we reason *publicly* (WOT 8:146n; also see O'Neill 2015b). After all, if the appropriate use of reason involves self-critique, we should ask ourselves whether our position can withstand the critical scrutiny of other *reasoners*.

Only a position that is supported by reasons that all reasoners can share, at least in principle, stands a chance to survive the critical scrutiny of reason. Consequently, Kant writes that enlightenment requires ‘the freedom to make *public use* of one’s reason in all matters’, i.e. ‘that use which someone makes of it *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *world of readers*’ (WE 8:37; see O’Neill 2015b).

This indicates that there is a *communicative* dimension to the self-critical use of reason. In particular, although not all reasoning needs to lead to *written* correspondences with *all* other rational beings, we need to be prepared to argue for our position in a way that can be understood and appreciated from others’ perspectives (O’Neill 1989b). Moreover, it means that we should be charitable to others’ criticisms of our own position. After all, we are not fully subjecting ourselves to their critical scrutiny unless we are prepared to concede that their objections might be justified. As Kant puts it, ‘conflict cultivates reason by the consideration of its object on both sides’, so we should ‘let [our] opponent speak only reason, and fight him solely with weapons of reason’ (CPR A744/B772). For ‘it is quite absurd to expect enlightenment from reason and yet to prescribe to it in advance on which side it must come out’ (CPR A747/B775).

Although the demand to reason self-critically does not tell us what to think or believe, it can at least *rule out* certain positions. Arguably, some positions cannot be motivated or defended in a way that can be understood and appreciated from all reasoners’ points of view. Those who hold such positions *ipso facto* violate reason’s procedural demand to engage in self-critique. In the next section, I suggest that conspiracy theories are among the positions that are ruled out in this way.

## 7. Implications for conspiracy theorists

I suggest that conspiracy theorists are *rationaly criticisable* (i.e. they run afoul of standards of reason) because they fail to engage in an appropriate level of *self-critique* (i.e. they do not subject themselves to the critical scrutiny of reason). While conspiracy theorists are highly *vigilant* in their scepticism of the official account of some series of events and highly *diligent* in explaining (or explaining away) all the data surrounding it, they fail critically to examine their own objections to the official account. I suggest that if they critically examined these objections, some of the points raised by the three previous approaches that I discussed in Sections 3–6 would undermine their confidence in conspiracy theories after all. The Kantian

procedural approach is the missing puzzle piece that turns these otherwise impotent points into fuel for a rational criticism of conspiracy theorising.

There are three main ways in which conspiracy theorists seem to run afoul of reason's requirement to engage in self-critique. First, they fail to engage in a critical examination of their own motivations. Second, they fail to be open-minded and charitable towards the arguments of those with whom they disagree. Third, they fail to take into account the limits of human cognition. I will explain these three failures in turn. It is important to note that these three failures do not correspond to three distinct demands of reason. Rather, they amount to three different ways or aspects of violating one and the same requirement: to engage in self-critique by reasoning publicly.

### **7.1 Examining one's motivations**

One upshot of the requirement to engage in self-critique and reason publicly is that we should not only object to the claims of external authorities but also subject our objections to these claims to critical examination. After all, we are not advancing a rational argument that could be appreciated by all reasoners if these objections merely reflect our personal prejudices or private agendas. This means that we have to ask what *motivates* our objections. Are they truly motivated by a desire to uphold only judgments that withstand critical scrutiny or do they mark an attempt to undermine one unchecked authority in favour of another?

I suggest that conspiracy theorists run afoul of the demand to subject their own motivations to critical scrutiny. This suggestion is supported by some of the features of conspiracy theories that we already encountered above. In particular, it is supported by the way in which conspiracy theories meet the criterion of falsifiability as well as by some of the findings about the psychological features of conspiracy theorists which I surveyed in Section 5. Let me explain these two points in turn.

Lakatos points out that falsification is not something that *happens* to a theory, through a crucial experiment whose outcome, by itself, determines whether the theory is to be rejected (1978, 35). Instead, falsification is a *decision* by those who hold the theory. Now, especially due to the feature *Deception*, conspiracy theorists can avoid falsification without having to regard their theories as degenerative research programmes (see Section 3). However, if they complied with the rational demand for self-critique, conspiracy theorists would also have to examine their

*motivation* for deciding not to reject their theory. They would have to ask themselves whether that motivation consisted in the fact that their theory would thereby generate a novel prediction (and thus avoid being degenerative) or simply in their desire to salvage their theory, come what may. I suspect that the latter is closer to the truth. In this case, the conspiracy theorist is revealed to treat the hard core of their theory as a *dogma*, and thus to act contrary to the demands of self-critical reason.

We might say that, although conspiracy *theories* comply with the standard of falsifiability, conspiracy *theorists* fail to comply with the standard of *intellectual honesty* which, according to Lakatos, goes along with it. Lakatos formulates this standard as follows (1978, 38):

[O]ne should try to look at things from different points of view, to put forward new theories which anticipate novel facts, and to reject theories which have been superseded by more powerful ones.

Conspiracy theorists fail to live up to this standard because, while their theories might be said to anticipate novel facts, this is not what *motivates* them to stick with these theories. Connectedly, as I explain in more detail in the next subsection, conspiracy theorists fail to look at things from different points of views.

As I noted above, the suggestion that conspiracy theorists fail critically to examine their motivations is also supported by some of the psychological findings surveyed in Section 5. If conspiracy theorists critically examined their motivations, they might realise that these findings provide *debunking explanations* of their belief in conspiracy theories.<sup>10</sup> Consider the finding that people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories when they suffer from a perceived loss of control. When looked at through the lens of rational self-critique, this finding should weaken conspiracy theorists' confidence in their theories. After all, it suggests that their belief in these theories might be motivated, not by these theories' ability to withstand critical scrutiny, but by their desire to regain a sense of control over an environment they would otherwise perceive as threateningly disorderly.

The same line of reasoning applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the findings that belief in conspiracy theories is more accurately described as disbelief in the official account, that such belief is partly motivated by a desire for uniqueness, and that conspiracy theorists tend to detect causal patterns

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<sup>10</sup>It might be objected that conspiracy theorists are likely to mistrust the relevant psychological studies. However, as I argue in the next sub-section, a self-critical use of reason also demands that we engage with others' positions charitably. This also applies to psychological studies.

and attribute intentions in situations where none are present. In this way, the procedural approach enables these psychological findings, which do not support a rational criticism of conspiracy theorists *on their own*, to play an important role in such a criticism after all. Its contribution is the notion that reason requires that we critically examine our own motivations for proposing or criticising a theory.

## 7.2. Engaging with others

One of the most straightforward implications of the demand that we reason self-critically, and thus publicly, is that we should engage with *others* in a certain way. More specifically, the requirement to subject our beliefs to the critical scrutiny of other reasoners, and to be charitable to their arguments and objections, prohibits a simple dismissal of those who disagree with us as dishonest, ignorant, or complacent. We at least need to entertain the possibility that they are sincere and have good reasons for disagreeing with us. Consequently, we need to try to examine the issue at hand from their point of view as well as from our own. Only then will we be able to judge their position by its merits (as opposed to by *whose* position it is).

To see how belief in conspiracy theories might be incompatible with the communicative dimension of self-critical reasoning, let us re-examine some of the ways in which conspiracy theorists meet criteria of theory choice and deal with criticism of their theories' substantive plausibility.

Let us first look at the way conspiracy theories meet standards of theory choice. As we saw in Section 3, the ability of conspiracy theories to meet the criteria of explanatory force, internal and external coherence, and falsifiability crucially depends on their ability to *explain away* evidence against these theories. In particular, conspiracy theories seem to be able to explain all the salient facts surrounding a series of events, while ruling out conflicting evidence, because their feature *Deception* allows them to recast anything that might not seem to fit their hypothesis as a result of the deceitful actions of the conspirators – it *looks* as if there is no conspiracy precisely because there *is* a conspiracy. Now, this strategy suffices to ensure that, from the point of view of the conspiracy theorist, there is no reason to abandon the conspiracy theory. However, this strategy seems to dismiss *other* points of view from the start. By contrast, a self-critical use of reason would require conspiracy theorists to take the apparently contradictory evidence at face value and assess the possibility

that they are wrong on its own merits, taking up the point of view of someone who disagrees with their theory in the process.

Let us now turn to the way conspiracy theories deal with objections to their substantive plausibility. In Section 4, I argued that such objections, by themselves, do not suffice to show that belief in conspiracy theories is *rationally* criticisable. In addition, I argued that it is difficult to show that conspiracy theories are generally substantively implausible. The reason is that the general substantive claims that threaten to undermine the substantive plausibility of conspiracy theories at least partly *depend* on the extent to which conspiracy theories are true. I sketched two such claims: the first was concerned with the limitations of human agency while the second asserted that investigative institutions would likely uncover conspiracies of the scale posited by conspiracy theories. I noted that conspiracy theorists could reply that, *if* their theories are true, human agency is not as limited as it might appear and investigative institutions are not trustworthy.

vvHowever, while this reply serves to *defend* conspiracy theories, by ensuring that there is no reason to doubt conspiracy theories from the perspective of those who hold these theories, it arguably fails to take up the point of view of the objector. That is, it fails to entertain the possibility that human agency *is* in fact limited in the alleged ways and that investigative institutions *would* indeed soon uncover conspiracies of the relevant scale. A truly critical use of reason requires, not only that our positions are defensible from our own perspective, but that we look at issues from several points of view. Accordingly, the dismissal of objections to the substantive plausibility of conspiracy theories by appeal to implications of these very theories arguably does not conform to the procedural standard of self-critical reason.

### **7.3. Reflecting on the limits of human cognition**

As I mentioned in Section 3, conspiracy theories seem to meet standard criteria of theory choice *too well*. They seem to be able to explain every single salient fact surrounding a series of events using a very simple hypothesis while maintaining external and internal coherence by a mechanism that is virtually *guaranteed* to explain away any contradictory evidence or internal tension. At first glance, conspiracy theories might thus seem to be *immune* to critique. But this very immunity is what should make us suspicious in light of the procedural standard of self-critical reason.

As Keeley points out, we should not expect our theories to be *perfect*, especially in the areas which conspiracy theories are concerned with, i.e. social and political events (1999, 125). He writes (1999, 125):

Invariably, not all the data are true. In particular, the irrational and fallible nature of humans should lead us to expect that some of the data generated by us are certainly wrong. Witnesses misremember the past or exhibit unconscious biases. Reporters and government agents will get things wrong in the early moments of a crisis, and will later be loathe to admit those mistakes. For this reason, a theory that has as one of its main features a unified account of all of the data in a variety of seemingly unrelated occurrences should be called into question on those grounds alone.

Keeley's point is that no theory about social or political events – not even a correct one – should be expected to fit all the data perfectly. Due to human fallibility, some of the data are bound to be false or misleading.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, we might add that we should not even expect any theory to fit all the data perfectly even if none of the data are false or misleading. After all, due to the complexity of social and political processes, some of the data are bound to be due to unsystematic factors such as the idiosyncratic motivations of a specific individual or sheer coincidence.

Now, while I agree that conspiracy theories 'should be called into question' on this basis, I do not think that, by itself, it is sufficient *rationaly* to criticise belief in such theories. After all, as we saw in Section 4, having false beliefs, e.g. about the trustworthiness of investigative institutions, need not, by itself, render a person rationally criticisable. Arguably, this also applies to false beliefs about the limits of human knowledge.

When combined with the Kantian procedural approach, however, Keeley's point might support a rational criticism of conspiracist beliefs after all. According to this approach, a critical examination of the limitations of one's own cognitive faculties is not only recommended by certain substantive theories, e.g. about the limits of social-scientific research, but demanded by reason itself. Arguably, if reason requires that we critically examine our own motivations for adopting or rejecting positions, by asking whether they could be shared by other reasoners, then we need to be aware of our cognitive limits as finite reasoners. If this is correct, the requirement critically to reflect on how good we can expect our own theories about a given subject matter to be is internal

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<sup>11</sup>Clarke objects that there is no more reason to doubt the errant data that conspiracy theorists pride themselves on being able to explain than any other data (2002, 40). However, Keeley's point is not that we should doubt *errant* data in particular. His point is that we should not expect any plausible theory to explain *all* the data. In other words, we should always expect there to be errant data.

to reason itself. By purporting to explain a potentially infinite number of facts in terms of a simple hypothesis, *ruling out* the possibility of contradictory evidence, conspiracy theorists arguably fail to engage in such critical reflection.

That conspiracy theorists fail to reflect on the limits of human cognition is also suggested by the hypothesis, mentioned in Section 5, that belief in conspiracy theories is due to the illusion of explanatory depth. If conspiracy theorists overestimate the extent to which they can understand and explain phenomena without relying on official authorities, then this suggests that a lack of self-critique forms part of the very root of conspiracist belief.

## 8. Implications for the debate about conspiracy theories

On a procedural approach to conspiracy theories, the problem with conspiracy theories is not a problem with the *theories* themselves but with the *reasoning* that feeds into belief in, and defence of, these theories. Such an approach purports to rule out conspiracist beliefs *indirectly*: instead of rejecting such beliefs on the basis of the features of conspiracy theories *themselves*, it holds that the features of conspiracy theories makes forming and sustaining belief in these theories incompatible with procedural standards of reason.

However, one might wonder in how far the Kantian procedural approach proposed here is able to condemn conspiracist belief as *especially* criticisable. It seems that the flaws in the reasoning of conspiracy theorists that I identified in the previous section are frequently exhibited in non-conspiracist reasoning as well. For example, if Kuhn's account of the history and sociology of science is correct, it seems that the scientific community does not conform to the standard of intellectual honesty which Lakatos associates with his falsification criterion either (Kuhn 1969). In light of this, one might object that the results of my analysis are rather uninteresting: instead of showing that conspiracy theorists uniquely fail by the standards of reason, it merely shows that conspiracy theorising does not constitute exemplary reasoning.

My response is threefold. First, my approach singles out conspiracy theorising as particularly criticisable *to some extent*. Second, to the extent that it does *not* single out conspiracy theorising as particularly criticisable, this is a virtue of the approach. Third, even if it were not a virtue, it would still not make my approach uninteresting. I argue for these points in turn.



To see that my approach singles out conspiracy theorising as particularly rationally criticisable to some extent, consider the psychological studies that I discussed in Section 5. As I argued in Section 7, these studies indirectly suggest that conspiracy theorising is rationally criticisable because procedural standards of reason require conspiracy theorists to view them as providing debunking explanations of their conspiracist beliefs. What I want to point out here is that many of these studies attribute features of conspiracist reasoning *in particular*. Some studies, such as those that seem to show that conspiracy theorists are partly motivated by a desire to be *unique*, seem to offer an explanation of conspiracist belief which does not serve as an explanation of non-conspiracist belief (see Imhoff and Lamberty 2017). After all, believing official accounts usually does not make one unique. Other studies, such as those which found that conspiracist belief is often motivated by perceived flaws in the official account rather than by the virtues of conspiracy theories, directly *compared* conspiracist and non-conspiracist reasoning (Wood and Douglas 2013, 2015). Accordingly, by appealing to these psychological studies, my approach suggests that there is an *asymmetry* between conspiracist and non-conspiracist reasoning: at least some considerations should serve as debunking explanations of conspiracist but not of non-conspiracist belief.

More generally, my approach ties the rational criticizability of belief in conspiracy theories to the four features of conspiracy theories that I highlighted in Section 2. I have tried to connect conspiracy theorists' failure to reason self-critically to these four features in Section 7. If I am right, it follows that conspiracist belief is rationally criticisable *as such*. This, arguably, is not true of various kinds of non-conspiracist beliefs, e.g. the beliefs of scientists. The latter kinds of beliefs *can*, but *need not*, be formed and defended in ways that violate the requirement of self-critical reason.

With that being said, my approach does not show that conspiracy theorists are the *only ones* who run afoul of the requirement to reason self-critically. But I think this is a virtue of my approach, for two reasons. First, a potential benefit of taking a procedural approach is that it might be able to uncover a systematic connection between conspiracy theories and certain other problematic epistemic phenomena, such as pseudoscience, esotericism, fake news, populism, and various kinds of fundamentalism. While it is widely assumed that such phenomena pose problems that are importantly connected to the problem with conspiracy theories (see, e.g. Bergmann 2018; Cassam 2019, 2022; Goertzel 2018; Robertson and Dyrendal 2018), it might be difficult to see *how* these problems are

connected as long as we assume that they are problems with the content or internal structure of these epistemic phenomena themselves. By contrast, if the problem with these phenomena is that they are all expressions of one and the same problematic *pattern of thought*, there is a deep *continuity* between these phenomena regardless of whether they are substantively or structurally similar. Indeed, the Kantian procedural approach seems especially promising in this respect. For, although I cannot argue for this claim here, it seems plausible that all these phenomena mark a lack of self-critique in a similar way as belief in conspiracy theories.

Second, as I mentioned in the introduction, while there is value in vindicating the general public's condemnation of conspiracy theorising as rationally criticisable, there are also legitimate concerns about overly quick dismissals of claims *as* conspiracy theories. More generally, a philosophical approach to conspiracy theories should not warrant feelings of superiority on the part of those of us who do not believe these theories. Since the requirement to reason self-critically applies, not only to conspiracy theorists, but to all reasoners at all times, the Kantian procedural approach bars against such excesses. On this approach, in order to criticise a theory for being a conspiracy theory in the relevant sense, one has to provide an argument to the effect that it has the features of *Heterodoxy*, *Bad Intentions*, *Deception*, and *Connectedness*. And if this argument is to be *rational*, it needs to be based on considerations that can be publicly shared. Since this requirement is not met by every rejection of some theory as a conspiracy theory, my approach supports a rational critique, not only of conspiracy theorists, but also of some of those who would defame others by labelling them 'conspiracy theorists'.

But even if the fact that my approach does not depict conspiracy theorising as uniquely rationally criticisable were not a virtue of that approach, I would deny that it makes my approach *uninteresting*. As I noted in the introduction, the bottom line of the philosophical debate so far seems to be that conspiracist belief as such is not rationally criticisable *at all*. To illustrate, here are some statements by prominent authors in the field:

[T]he idea that there *is* something suspect about conspiracy theories is one of the most dangerous and idiotic superstitions to disgrace our political culture. (Pigden 2006, 139)

[T]he treatment of those labelled as “conspiracy theorists” in our culture is analogous to the treatment of those labelled as “heretics” in medieval Europe [...]. (Coady 2018b).

We ought to know whether conspiracies are occurring, and also why. That is why we must take conspiracy theory seriously, not just as a field of study, but also as a set of theories which make claims about the world. (Dentith 2018c, 224)

Hence, if my approach is successful, it constitutes a significant step forward. *Pace* the authors quoted above, it purports to show that conspiracy theorising *as such* is rationally criticisable.

Another virtue of the Kantian procedural approach is that it promises to vindicate the widespread suspicion that there is a deep tension between conspiracy theorising on the one hand and freedom of speech and democracy on the other hand. Kant explicitly states that the lawless use of reason threatens free speech: on the assumption that we are reasoning from self-evident rational foundations that neither can nor need to be critically vindicated, free debate is not necessary for, and potentially detrimental to, rational life (*WOT* 8:144–5). Similarly, if conspiracy theorising systematically ignores the need for self-critique, it seems opposed to the considerations that support freedom of speech. If this argument is sound, then a parallel argument might be used to show that conspiracy theorising poses a threat to democracy. Arguably, like freedom of speech, democracy requires a consensus among citizens that disagreement among equally knowledgeable and sincere persons is possible. If they ignore the need for self-critique, conspiracy theorists effectively challenge this consensus.

The Kantian procedural approach also has implications for pedagogical strategies to combat conspiracist beliefs. A procedural approach to conspiracy theories generally implies that we should prioritise cultivating reasoning skills over controlling what information people have access to (*pace* Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 224–226). The Kantian procedural approach in particular implies that we should focus on cultivating *public* reasoning skills, where this includes the ability to be receptive to others’ perspectives, to examine one’s own motivations, and to be aware of one’s own cognitive limitations. The pedagogical strategy suggested by this approach might thus come close to a programme of *civic* education.

Before I conclude, I should highlight two limitations of my arguments. First, I have not provided a knockdown argument to the

effect that belief in every conspiracy theory falls short of the requirement to reason self-critically. Much more than my tentative suggestions in Section 7 would be needed to establish that conclusion. Second, even if conspiracist belief always falls short of the requirement to reason self-critically, this makes conspiracist belief rationally criticisable only if this requirement is indeed a requirement of reason. Readers who are not attracted to a Kantian conception of reason might thus not be impressed by my arguments.

## 9. Conclusion

I suggested that, instead of critically examining their own motivations, engaging with others in an open, public rational discourse and reflecting on their own cognitive limitations, conspiracy theorists entrench themselves in their own worldview, explaining away any apparently contradictory evidence and dismissing anyone who disagrees with them as ignorant, complacent or malicious. If Kant's conception of reason as self-critical is correct, it follows that conspiracy theorists violate procedural standards of reason and are therefore rationally criticisable in general. However, the Kantian procedural approach also raises the bar for any attempt to dismiss a given theory as a conspiracy theory. If people generally engaged in more self-critique, there would thus be fewer conspiracy theories as well as fewer dismissals of theories as conspiracy theories.

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