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Genealogical undermining for conspiracy theories

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ABSTRACT
In this paper I develop a genealogical approach for investigating and evaluating conspiracy theories. I argue that conspiracy theories with an epistemically problematic genealogy are (in virtue of that fact) epistemically undermined. I propose that a plausible type of candidate for such conspiracy theories involves what I call 'second-order conspiracies' (i.e. conspiracies that aim to create conspiracy theories). Then, I identify two examples involving such conspiracies: the antivaccination industry and the industry behind climate change denialism. After fleshing out the mechanisms by which these industries systematically create and disseminate specific types of conspiracy theories, I examine the implications of my proposal concerning the particularism/generalism debate and I consider the possibility of what I call *local generalism*. Finally, I tackle three objections. It could be objected that a problematic genealogy for T merely creates what Dentith (2022) calls 'type-1' (or 'weak') suspicion for T. I also consider a challenge according to which the genealogical method is meta-undermined, as well as an objection from epistemic laundering.

1. The proposal

In this paper I develop a *genealogical* approach for investigating and evaluating conspiracy theories:

> **(GENEALOGY)** If a conspiracy theory T has an epistemically problematic genealogy, then, because of that, T is epistemically undermined.

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Epistemically problematic genealogies are collections of belief formation mechanisms that tend to operate without regard for truth. In other words, the sources of these genealogies act as undermining *defeaters* for the phenomena they produce.

This style of argument is an instance of a broader class of *debunking* arguments.[1] As Korman (2019) notes, such arguments can be applied to a variety of phenomena including causation, consciousness, free will, religion, and time. Of course, particular applications of such debunking arguments might be unsuccessful given the nature of the phenomenon under examination. For example, a paradigmatic debunking argument against moral judgements has been presented by Street (2006). Roughly, the idea is this: the fact that our moral beliefs were selected for evolutionary purposes (e.g. increase in fitness, etc.) is an undermining defeater for the truth of those beliefs (i.e. it seems that we have no good reason to think that *true* – instead of false – moral judgments were selected by evolution).[2]

To be clear, there are powerful objections against the application of these arguments to *moral* beliefs (e.g. Copp 2019). But if moral beliefs are not undermined by their genealogy, then this is due to the nature of the ethical phenomenon and the fact that the relevant genealogy is not epistemically problematic. In other words, there is nothing *inherently* wrong in trying to undermine a particular phenomenon by appealing to its genealogy. On the contrary, the genealogical method has had a lot of success and is considered as a powerful *type* of argumentation (see Korman 2019). In this paper, I extend this type of approach to the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, and I show that its application yields interesting philosophical consequences.

There are potentially many examples of epistemically problematic sources for a conspiracy theory T. Perhaps the source of T is an appropriately defined echo chamber (Nguyen 2020), or a combination of epistemic vices.[3] In this paper I will focus on what I take to be plausible and

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[1]Note that evolutionary debunking arguments focus on beliefs, not theories. I could run the same discussion focusing on beliefs but in the relevant literature the focus is on the warrant of conspiracy theories themselves. Also note that I am appealing to a notion of 'undermining' instead of 'debunking' as the latter has theoretically unfruitful consequences and connotations in the literature (see, in particular, Dentith 2021; for a similar point concerning the use of adjacent terms like 'fake-news' see Habgood-Coote 2019).

[2]Although there is some controversy about what kind of argument Street was putting forward (for discussion see Vavova 2015).

[3]The paradigmatic approach here is Cassam (2016). See also Alfano (2021) and Virvidakis (2021) on one's responsibility to adopt certain epistemic *virtues* in the face of misinformation (interestingly, Virvidakis (2021), 32–5) highlights the interplay between epistemic and *moral* virtues).

philosophically interesting candidates for being an epistemically problematic source. In doing so, I appeal to what I will call *second-order conspiracies*:

> **(SECOND-ORDER CONSPIRACY)** A conspiracy C is a second-order conspiracy of conspiracy theory T, iff, C (as a whole, or some part of C) is, in some important way, the reason why T exists.[4]

SECOND-ORDER CONSPIRACY is abstractly stated but it will do for present purposes. The main idea is this: it might be that a given conspiracy theory is *itself* the result of a conspiracy. In this formulation I am adopting the consensus (i.e. minimal/non-pejorative) view concerning the definition of 'conspiracy' and 'conspiracy theory': a conspiracy theory is a theory that purports to explain a phenomenon in terms of a conspiracy, and a conspiracy is a coordinated effort to act in secret in order to bring about some goal.[5]

In the next section (and the rest of this paper) I will focus on two types of second order conspiracies which I take to be very plausible candidates for being epistemically problematic sources: the conspiracies orchestrated by the antivax lobby, and the climate change denial lobby.

Still, to illustrate the idea behind SECOND ORDER CONSPIRACY it is worth mentioning some further examples. Consider the conspiracy theory described in the so-called 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion'. Infamously, these protocols purportedly describe a meeting that took place in late nineteenth century where Jewish leaders conspired to accomplish global dominance. But according to the historical consensus this is a fabricated text which was produced and distributed by antisemites (Ben-Itto 2005).

Or consider COINTELPRO, an FBI programme consisting in a series of covert operations which, among other things, involved what is known as 'bad-jacketing' (or 'snitch-jacketing'). This practice was infamously used against the Black Panthers and consisted in the fabrication of

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[4]I use the 'as a whole, or some part of C'-qualifier to acknowledge that a conspiracy might involve a number of activities *other than* fabricating a conspiracy theory (thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me tweak the definition here). Also, I take it that a conspiracy C is an 'important reason' why a certain conspiracy theory T exists when C is a *difference-maker* for T. Of course, there are interesting questions concerning the different ways conspiracies can cause their effects which, unfortunately, I cannot discuss here: for example, consider cases where C is *distant* cause of T, or cases where C is merely an *enabling* condition for C (or a 'structuring' cause à la Dretske 1991) (thanks to Miriam Bowen for discussion on this).

[5]See Dentith (2016b, 2021, sec. 3). There are some nuances about the relevant notion of 'secrecy' (Dentith and Orr 2017) as well as whether an 'official narrative' component (Coady 2003; cf. Dentith 2016b) needs to be included in the definition. I will put these issues to the side.

rumours according to which the target was a CIA informant (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990, 49–50).

In both cases, the relevant conspirators aim to *create* and *put forward* a conspiracy theory. The dissemination of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion promoted the conspiracy theory that a Jewish elite aims to take over the world. COINTELPRO's 'bad-jacketing' techniques, similarly, aimed to create the conspiracy theory that the Black Panthers have been infiltrated by CIA agents. In such cases, the relevant genealogies of these conspiracy theories are epistemically suspect: the Protocols of the Elders of Zion were created to foster a political climate that promoted the 1902–1903 anti-Jewish pogroms in the Russian Empire (Ben-Itto 2005, 280), and COINTEL-PRO aimed to undermine the rising popularity of the Black Panthers (and that of other movements) (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990).

These genealogies are epistemically suspect because they are not geared towards the truth. In this sense, if a second-order conspiracy of the appropriate sort is part of the genealogy of T, then, in virtue of that, T is epistemically undermined.

> **(S-GENEALOGY)** If a conspiracy theory T is the result of an appropriately defined second-order conspiracy, then, because of that, T is epistemically undermined.

Why is something like S-GENEALOGY important? First, it is a novel, non-content-based, way of evaluating conspiracy theories. A typical way to examine a conspiracy theory is compositional: it proceeds by identifying the individual claims made by the theory and by evaluating them based on the available evidence and certain background epistemic norms. But this strategy has limitations: it takes time, it is hard, and some conspiracy theories tend to be compositional *all the way down* (so to speak). What I have in mind is what Bronner calls *argumentative millefeuille*: roughly, some conspiracy theories are extremely *complex* in a way that creates the impression that while not every claim is true, not every claim is false either.[6] A way to sidestep this problem is by looking at the *origins* of that theory without looking at its content.

This is important for another reason. It is plausible that a conspiracy theory involves a certain degree of meta-evidential scepticism. If a

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[6]This is known as the 'Fort effect' (named after Charles Fort) (Bronner 2012). 'Super conspiracies' are a case in point (e.g., David Icke's conspiracy involving fantastical [Räikkä and Basham 2018] claims about interdimensional lizards, a bio-security conspiracy à la Great Reset, antivaccination claims, etc.) (CCDH 2020a). I also suspect that these characteristics create intuitions about conspiracy theories being supposedly self-sealing, or unfalsifiable (or, similarly, conspiracy *beliefs* being epistemically insulated) (Napolitano 2021; for a convincing response see Duetz 2022).

conspiracy C has occurred, it is plausible that the relevant conspirators would have taken action to hide evidence that indicate C's occurrence (Keeley 1999; for a more extreme case see Basham 2003). So, a certain sceptical stance towards the quality of the available evidence is epistemically warranted. But this means that attempts to argue against such conspiracy theories by providing first-order evidence are unlikely to succeed on their own. Instead, looking at the genealogy of a conspiracy theory sidesteps this problem as well (although I return to a similar problem in section 6).

Secondly, S-GENEALOGY is a *non-psychologistic* method of investigation. This is a theoretical feature: part of the consensus view in the philosophical literature is that psychologistic accounts against conspiracy theorising are problematic.[7] Roughly, the proper epistemic functioning of conspiracy *theorists* can come apart from the truth of conspiracy *theories* (e.g. rational agents can believe in false conspiracy theories, and irrational agents can believe in true conspiracy theories) (Coady 2007; see also Levy 2021a, 2021b, 2022).[8]

Thirdly, S-GENEALOGY can be used *alongside* other methods of investigation. For example, Dentith proposes a *community of inquiry* approach according to which conspiracy theories should be investigated by a highly diverse community of inquirers in a democratic and participatory way (Dentith 2021, 10–1). There is no reason to think that this methodology cannot be *enriched* by something like S-GENEALOGY.

Fourthly, S-GENEALOGY reflects and vindicates the philosophy of conspiracy theory consensus that a wholesale rejection of conspiracy theories is a mistake.[9] According to the view presented in this paper, conspiracies occur, and some of these conspiracies involve the *creation* of conspiracy theories. So, we should be particularly careful about *which* conspiracy theories we reject.

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[7]See Coady (2003). See also Dentith (2016b) against Clarke's (2006) claim that conspiracy theorising commits a 'fundamental attribution error' (i.e. by overestimating agential/dispositional explanations compared to explanations that draw on situational factors) (for a similar view see Mandik 2007).

[8]See also Dentith (2018a) on the problem of *conspiracism*. A more sophisticated, *procedural*, approach has been recently proposed by Schaab (2022). According to this proposal, we should focus on the patterns of thought employed by conspiracy theorists to form and sustain belief in conspiracy theories. In that context, Schaab notes that conspiracy theorist thinking fails to be self-critical (e.g. by failing to consider the motivations of their own thinking). I don't have the space here to fully engage with his proposal, but I am inclined to think that an agent can be adequately self-reflexive and still fall victim to a second-order conspiracy. This is particularly evident if one considers the high degree of sophistication exhibited by the second-order conspiracies I will examine below (being self-critical to a level where one could *see through* that kind of sophistication seems like setting the epistemic bar unrealistically high).

[9]As per Pigden (2006), doing so would be a 'gift' to actual conspirators (see also Dentith [2021, sec. 5] on conspiracy theorising as a contingent cultural activity).

Finally, appealing to S-GENEALOGY can potentially show that certain collections of conspiracy theories are objectively similar to one another, in the sense that they have the same genealogy (I return to this point later). It should also be noted that, in doing so, certain *stereotypes* about conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists are refuted. For example, Cassam (2019) takes conspiracy theories to be amateurish (among other things). But this claim is implausible when applied to the second-order conspiracy theories I have in mind. It will become apparent that these conspiracy theories describe sophisticated mechanisms which produce and sustain conspiracy theory beliefs and conspiracy theories themselves.[10]

Here is the plan of the paper. In the next section, I sketch two cases where second-order conspiracies are the (epistemically problematic) source of conspiracies. Then, I consider the implications of my approach on the generalism/particularism debate. Finally, I consider three objections. First, it could be objected that S-GENEALOGY produces what Dentith calls 'type-I' (or 'weak') suspicion. Then, I consider an objection according to which genealogical explanations are self-undermining, as well as an argument from epistemic laundering.

2. Cases of epistemically problematic sources

It is plausible that conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines have an epistemically problematic source. Specifically, it is not an *accident* that there are such theories: given their genealogy, we can identify the *mechanisms* by which these theories are formed, as well as the *reason* for which this is the case. Roughly speaking, these conspiracy theories are the product of systematic *anti-vaccination lobbying* by people and organisations who have a vested interest in people rejecting the COVID-19 vaccine.

Antivaccine lobbying has both political and entrepreneurial aspects. For reasons of space, I will focus on the latter.[11] The antivaccine industry (*antivax*, henceforth) is highly profitable and is comprised of a handful of businesses and public figures. Estimates based on a very limited view of

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[10]For a different refutation of such conspiracy theory stereotypes see Shields (2022, sec. 5). For a recent critique of Cassam (2019) see Hagen (2022).

[11]These two aspects often overlap. For example, according to the so-called 'HART leaks' (i.e. the leak of the internal communications of the Koch-backed *Health Advisory and Recovery Team* – an antivax organisation in the UK), Steve Bannon (the chief strategist of Donald Trump) was actively involved in developing strategies within HART to advance misinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19. https://misinformationkills.substack.com/p/the-hartleaks (accessed: 04/02/2023)

their finances indicate an annual revenue of 36 million dollars spread around 22 organisations, whereas the public figures in this ecosystem earn up to six-figure salaries. On the whole, the antivax presence on social media involving around 62 million followers in 2020 is estimated to be worth 1.1 billion dollars (CCDH 2020b, 2020c).

Antivax's main source of revenue comes in the form of product marketing: these products involve alternative health supplements (e.g. 'COVID-19 pills'), books, movie series, documentaries, as well as the hosting of events and workshops (CCDH 2020b). So there is a lot at stake to keep this industry live and kicking. To that end, a number of interconnected tactics are involved. I will mention two: what I will call the *Repackaging* and *Clustering* tactic, respectively.

> **Repackaging.** According to the Center for Countering Digital Hate (a non-profit organization battling disinformation), the contemporary antivax master thesis involves three main conspiratorial claims which, put together, form the basis of their brand: 'COVID-19 is *not* dangerous', 'COVID-19 vaccines *are* dangerous', 'mainstream science cannot be trusted' (CCDH 2020b). What is interesting is that despite the simplistic nature of these claims, the *way* in which they are disseminated and presented in public discourse can be extremely nuanced. This is because the same messaging can take a different *form* depending on the target group: for example, 'prospective mothers should fear about infertility and miscarriages'; 'the black community should worry about black kids being more prone to developing autism due to vaccination', etc. This difference in packaging is also reflected in the products that are offered: for example, the documentary 'Medical Racism: the new Apartheid' is specifically catered to the black community.[12] *Repackaging* is one of the ways in which the antivax message manages to reach many different parts of the population.

> **Clustering.** Another tactic focuses on the way the consumer population *itself* is shaped. Specifically, antivax actively creates community clusters that have a number of functions: *identifying* people who are prone to vaccine hesitancy and *training* these people to adopt and spread the antivax message themselves.[13] These clusters are also encouraged to 'force debates' on venues

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[12]There also seems to be a kind of *division of labour* between the antivax figures concerning the kind of negative effect that COVID-19 vaccines produce. E.g. Rizza Islam almost exclusively targets the black community and anti-abortion groups through his antivax messaging. Rashid Buttar focuses on infertility (as well as and the supposed health risks of facemasks). Erin Elizabeth draws on antisemitism by arguing that the Rothschilds have engineered the COVID-19 pandemic. Kelly Brogan targets the 'holistic medicine' crowd while also claiming that COVID-19 doesn't even exist. For more examples see (CCDH 2021b).

[13]For more detail see how Sherri Tenpenny uses affiliated marketing techniques to do this (CCDH 2020b, 2021b) (see also [Shields 2021, sec. 4] on some of the tactics involved in pyramid schemes of this sort). Another side function of these groups is for them to be another selling platform (e.g. for vaccine-related medical exemptions). This further highlights the interconnected architecture of the antivax industry (CCDH 2020c).

(either online or offline) that are disconnected from the antivax ecosystem (e.g. by 'asking questions' on the Facebook profiles of mainstream doctors, or via online spamming). Crucially, Clustering is supposed to create the impression that there is a serious issue to be discussed, and that this sentiment is expressed by multiple, apparently independent, 'grassroots' movements.[14] But this impression is illusory: to wit, over 65% of the antivax content (much of which involves antivax *conspiracy theories*) can be traced back to the main pillars of the antivax industry (whereas on Facebook, in particular, that figure goes up to 73%).[15]

These are some of the numerous tactics that comprise the complex mechanism by which the antivax industry produces and sustains beliefs in specific conspiracy theories. These tactics are by no means novel. They are highly sophisticated marketing techniques developed and used by the tobacco industry.[16]

It is also well documented that the same mechanisms are used by an industry promoting climate-change denialism. For example, the oil industry systematically funds front-groups that *appear* independent even though they advance the interests of oil companies (a tactic also known as 'astroturfing').[17] They also fund a *parallel academia* of sorts which produces books, documentaries, conferences, and 'scientific' papers which go against the idea of anthropogenic climate change (for discussion see Dunlap and McCright 2012). All these tactics have the function to challenge the (overwhelmingly strong) scientific consensus concerning climate change (as is the case for the scientific consensus surrounding vaccine safety, and the link between nicotine and cancer).

There is a pattern here that should be noted. A significant, non-trivial, portion of beliefs involving conspiracy theories pertaining to vaccines and climate change are not *random* or *spontaneous* occurrences in the population. They are not the product of healthy scepticism and critical free thinking. On the contrary, there are mechanisms that *design, disseminate,* and *sustain* these beliefs for monetary and political reasons.[18] For

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[14]This kind of proliferation of actors extends through a variety of platforms, each with its own kind of loopholes that can be taken advantage of (e.g. Facebook groups are extremely difficult to monitor) (CCDH 2020b). In fact, CCDH stresses the fact that social media giants largely benefit from the spread of misinformation given that it generates a lot of revenue.

[15]This is what CCDH calls 'the disinformation dozen' (CCDH 2021b). Some of the main figures include Robert F. Kennedy Jr, Del Bigtree, and Joseph Mercola. Antivax non-profits can be traced back to only *two* antivax figures: Joseph Mercola and Del Bigtree (CCDH 2021b).

[16]https://tobaccotactics.org/wiki/astroturfing/ (accessed: 04/02/2023)

[17]For example, ExxonMobil is behind at least 164 'sceptical' organisations and has spent a minimum of 2 billion dollars on lobbying challenging anthropogenic climate change (Lewandowsky 2021).

[18]There are additional motivating factors at play which, unfortunately, cannot be fully discussed here. McCright and Dunlap (2010), for example, argues that a larger motivator behind climate change denialism is what they call 'anti-reflexivity', that is, a negative stance towards – so-called – *impact* science

example, CCDH has revealed that in the context of a private online antivax conference (organised by the National Vaccine Information Centre on 16–18 October 2020) prominent figures of antivax called the COVID-19 pandemic a 'historic opportunity' to advance the antivaccination agenda they have been pushing for years (CCDH 2020b).[19]

In this sense, the genealogies involving these mechanisms are undermining reasons for the antivax and climate change conspiracy theories they produce. Lobbyists behind such industries produce and disseminate certain conspiracies in terms of profit and political gain.[20] In what follows I will refer to these two industries as *denial industries*.

3. Particularism

Particularism is the view that conspiracy theories should be investigated on a *case-by-case* basis in terms of each theory's claims and the available evidence. On the other hand, *generalism* is the view that a theory should be treated with suspicion in virtue of being a *conspiracy* theory (Buenting and Taylor 2010, 568–9) (I return to the question of suspicion in the next section). In a sense, S-GENEALOGY is a natural ally to the particularist programme: one shouldn't investigate a conspiracy theory merely in terms of its content, but also in terms of its genealogy.[21]

In another sense, however, S-GENEALOGY has a certain generalist *flair*. If S is an epistemically problematic source, and S undermines a conspiracy theory T, then T is undermined. But, crucially, S plausibly produces *other* types of conspiracy theories as well. In this sense, a quasi-generalist

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(science which assesses environmental and health impacts). Monbiot (2007) also argues that 'denial industries' like the ones I have been discussing are heavily motivated by the *personal* gains of the main figures of these industries (i.e. acquiring celebrity status). See also Oreskes and Conway (2010) on the influence of the 'red scare' on denial industries.

[19]It is important to note that what is at stake here isn't the *complete* rejection of (say) vaccine effectiveness. Rather, the antivax industry wants to create *doubt* into the minds of the general public. Similarly, suspending belief about the dangers of climate change due to uncertainty and epistemic pollution (largely manufactured by denial industries) is one of the desired outcomes (Oreskes and Conway 2010 famously make this point) (see also Levy [2021a, ch. 5] on epistemic pollution). Thanks to an anonymous referee here.

[20]In fact, it is well documented that both the tobacco industry and fossil fuel companies like ExxonMobil were perfectly *aware* that their claims are false (Lewandowsky 2021). Supran and Oreskes (2017) conclude based on ExxonMobil's internal documents that during the 1977–2014 period it is evident that ExxonMobil knew about anthropogenic climate change. It is also documented that ExxonMobil and Chevron have backed anti-lockdown rallies as well as COVID-19 denial science (https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/09/13/covid-19-and-the-new-merchants-of-doubt/ (accessed: 04/02/2023)).

[21]This type of investigation can involve 'first-order' and 'higher-order' evidence (e.g. like evidence provided through expert testimony). Levy (2022), for example, has recently suggested that in certain contexts, epistemic deference to the appropriate experts is a better guide to truth (though not always, and without this entailing that self-reliance is not epistemically valuable for other reasons). At any rate, I don't have to take a particular stance concerning the question of epistemic deference.

principle emerges: conspiracy theories produced by S are epistemically undermined. For example, it is plausible that conspiracy theories about the MMR vaccine have an epistemically problematic source. But that source also produces conspiracy theories pertaining to the COVID-19 vaccines, mask-wearing, and lockdowns (see, e.g. fn. 11 and 20). In this sense, we can cast suspicion on a whole *class* of conspiracy theories in virtue of knowing the problematic nature of a given source. This goes against a *metaphysical* version of particularism:

> **(M-PARTICULARISM)** There is no objective similarity between the members of the class of conspiracy theories.

M-PARTICULARISM is false.[22] There are at least *some* classes of conspiracy theories that involve objectively unified members: these involve the conspiracy theories produced by epistemically problematic sources like the denial industries.

Let me stress that the proposal here isn't simply that conspiracy theories with bad genealogies are epistemically undermined. This is true but uninformative. Rather, my claim is that certain *local* generalisms can be secured (i.e. one for each problematic source). So, to be clear, there is nothing inherently problematic with conspiracy theories, *in general*. In this sense, I respect the particularist consensus. But, I argue, there is something problematic with certain, *highly localised*, classes of conspiracy theories. I've identified two examples: conspiracy theories produced by the antivax industry, and conspiracy theories produced by the climate change denial lobby. This is what makes my account a version of what could be called local generalism.

4. Tracking problematic genealogies

Still, the rejection of M-PARTICULARISM is compatible with epistemic versions of particularism:

> **(E-PARTICULARISM)** Assessing the epistemic merit of a given conspiracy theory T requires investigating T.

E-PARTICULARISM is true in the broad sense: evaluating T requires investigating T *even if that involves merely looking at the genealogy of T*. But I

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[22]M-PARTICULARISM has not been explicitly defended in the literature (so my appeal to that thesis at this point is mostly dialectical in nature). But a metaphysical construal of generalism seems to capture what generalists typically have in mind (i.e. that conspiracy *theories* has something *inherently* problematic to them). For example, see Dentith (2019) on the various ways generalists might take evidence to supposedly figure in the architecture of conspiracy theories. So, insofar, as particularism is taken to be an antithesis of generalism (although see Basham 2018), M-PARTICULARISM is a coherent thesis.

take it that this is somewhat of a departure from what particularism was originally supposed to be. To see this, consider that in some cases genealogical investigating is *relatively easy*.

There are at least two reasons for this. First, knowing that a given conspiracy genealogy is problematic, we can immediately cast suspicion upon conspiracy theories with the same genealogy. I have assumed that antivax conspiracy theories have a problematic genealogy. *That* genealogical investigation was certainly not easy: it involved looking at the various political mechanisms involved in libertarian politics, examining the literature produced by organisations like Children Health Defence and World Freedom Alliance, investigating the attempted vaccination fraud involving Andrew Wakefield and his (now retracted) paper in the Lancet, etc.[23] But when COVID-19 came along and it was revealed that the *same* mechanisms were responsible for conspiracies pertaining to COVID-19 *in particular*, then the epistemic undermining of these conspiracies should be relatively straight-forward. We don't really have to look into the details of COVID-19 conspiracies since they are produced with the same source (and the same mechanisms) that has been producing antivaccination conspiracies for the last 40 + years. In other words, even if a certain genealogical investigation is hard, the *upshot* of that investigation is significantly valuable: knowing the problematic nature of a source S, provides a 'shortcut' (of sorts) into casting suspicions upon all the different conspiracy theories produced by S.

Secondly, there are good reasons to think that a genealogical investigation of a conspiracy theory is, in general, easier to do than evaluating the individual claims made by that theory. To see this, consider the level of expertise required to even start reviewing the particular details of a given conspiracy theory: e.g. theories pertaining to climate change require an array of knowledge into climate science, climate policy, etc.[24] In contrast, investigating the genealogy of climate change conspiracy theories requires little to no climate science expertise.

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[23]In this sense, the kind of local generalism I have in mind is *enabled* by the appropriate particularistic analysis. But this has no bearing on the viability of local generalism. If I know, via particularistic investigation, that source S is problematic, then *from that moment on,* I ought to treat theories produced by S with suspicion (bracketing some caveats I will consider shortly). This is as it should be: *every* kind of generalism is plausibly enabled by some kind of particularism (knowing that some law of nature L holds, requires looking at the instances that fall within L's scope and then making some kind of inductive inference towards L's truth).

[24]Deferring to experts won't work at this point for two reasons: determining what the relevant experts are is, in itself, very difficult. As Dentith (2018b) points out, it is plausible that there are *no* experts of this sort (and even if they were, it would be epistemically dubious to refer to them).

It could be objected that even assuming the problematic nature of a given genealogy, it is a non-trivial issue whether a given conspiracy theory falls under *that* genealogy. After all, some of the tactics I described earlier aim at *secrecy*. The Repackaging strategy, for example, is used to increase the reach of antivax conspiracy theories, but it is also used to *conceal* their source. Similarly, prominent climate change sceptics conceal the fact that they are on the payroll of oil companies.[25]

This is a fair point, but it shouldn't be exaggerated. It is true that second-order conspiracies like the ones above would take measures to conceal the fact that they produce conspiracy theories. This is typically done by trying to create front-groups or think-tanks that look independent, and by hiding the fact that they are all funded by the same source.

Two points against this: First, in at least some cases, it will still be relatively easier to track down these connections *compared* to what it would take to examine the contents of the relevant conspiracy theory. It is an understatement to say that these theories are *extremely* complicated and nuanced (recall the argumentative millefeuille) while also having the tendency to *shift*: for example, climate change denial-ism started off as the claim that climate change doesn't exist, but then shifted to the claim that it exists but it is not anthropogenic (Oreskes and Conway 2010).

Secondly, there are many plausible heuristics one can appeal to *other than* 'following the money'. Bracketing more sophisticated methods such an AI-assisted tools[26], coordination detection techniques (Schoch et al. 2022), and author-attribution techniques (see Diani and McAdam 2003), there are various heuristics (or signs) that indicate the existence of second-order conspiracies like the ones discussed above:

- Association with the 'conservative ecosystem' (involving various proble-matic think-tanks and institutions)[27], as well as falling within a broad lib-ertarian-based ideology (Lewandowsky 2021).

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[25]For example, climate change sceptic Fred Singer has received money from the Heartland Institute, ExxonMobil, and the Koch family (this is based on the Heartland institute's own internal documents; see https://www.desmog.com/2012/02/14/heartland-institute-exposed-internal-documents-unmask-heart-climate-denial-machine/ (accessed: 04/02/2023)).
[26]https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jun/22/amazon-ai-fake-reviews-star-ratings-astroturfing (accessed: 04/02/2023)
[27]E.g. the Hoover Institute, or the Cato Institute. In saying this I am presupposing that we have indepen-dently plausible reasons to be suspicious of these institutions (at least concerning the issue of climate change).

- The publication of 'sceptic' books and documents using publishers that don't practice peer-review (Dunlap, Riley, and Freeman 2008; Dunlap and Jacques 2013; Shields 2021, 15063–4).
- Being non-transparent regarding their *financials* (e.g. by using cryptocurrencies, or mediating through philanthropic institutions) (CCDH 2021a). Shields (2021, 15063) also highlights a general unwillingness to be transparent concerning their overall motives.[28]
- The use of *petitions* signed by 'experts' which seem to go against scientific consensus (without enforcing strict criteria concerning the level – and type – of expertise one should have to be able to sign).[29]
- Character assassination of mainstream scientists (e.g. the targeting of Anthony Fauci by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the targeting of climate scientist Michael Mann by the American Tradition Institute, etc.).
- The simultaneous, and apparently spontaneous, emergence of seemingly grassroots movements (recall the various astroturfing techniques described above).
- Association with other conspiracy theories (CCDH 2020a, 2020b, 2021b) – e.g. Larry Cook links vaccine conspiracy theories to QAnon, climate change conspiracy theories are sometimes linked to 'global governance' theories (e.g. like the 'Great Reset' theory) or to conspiracy theories about wildfires.[30]

This list is by no means exhaustive. For example, Shields (2021) has recently suggested, in a similar context, that there are similar heuristics are linked to what he calls 'conceptual domination' (Shields 2021, 15063–4). Roughly, conceptual dominators are not in the business of finding the 'correct' meaning of terms (i.e. by accommodating folk usage, etc.) but, instead, aim to *enforce* a particular view concerning the meaning of a term in order to advance their personal agenda. Second-order conspirators like the ones I have in mind routinely use conceptual domination tactics: for example, the antivax industry has recently attempted to shift the meaning of 'mRNA vaccine' in a way that suggests

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[28]https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jun/09/secretive-donors-gave-us-climate-denial-groups-125m-over-three-years (accessed: 04/02/2023).

[29]For example, the Great Barrington Declaration petition (https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/news/organisers-of-anti-lockdown-declaration-have-track-record-of-promoting-denial-of-health-and-environmental-risks/ (accessed: 04/02/2023)).

[30]Roughly, the idea is that wildfires are not due to climate change but due to bad actors trying to enforce the narrative that climate change is happening. For example, see Marjorie Taylor Greene's 'solar energy generator' theory (https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2021/01/30/did-rep-marjorie-taylor-greene-blame-a-space-laser-for-wildfires-heres-the-response/?sh=6a19a6fce44a (accessed: 04/02/2023)).

that COVID-19 vaccines based on mRNA technology are, secretly, forms of 'gene therapy'.[31] In this sense, being in the lookout for such instances of conceptual domination would also be a potential shortcut for detecting second-order conspiracies of the relevant sort.

Of course, the presence of one or two of these signs has limited evidential weight. Rather, it is the combination of *multiple* of these signs that give proper grounds to suspect that a given conspiracy is the result of a second-order conspiracy. Also, I haven't said that these signs generalise in any important way: these are techniques routinely used by antivax and climate change denialists. So, insofar as a kind of local generalism is possible, it only concerns the conspiracy theories generated by these two sources.

5. Type-I suspicion

Part of my proposal is that if a conspiracy theory has a problematic genealogy, we can generate reasons to be suspicious of that theory. Dentith (2022) has recently distinguished between two types of suspicion when it comes to conspiracy theories: type-I (or *weak*) suspicion, and type-II (or *strong*) suspicion. Type-I suspicions are purely pragmatic: they can be used to differentiate conspiracy theories in terms of those that require our immediate attention, and those that can be investigated at some later stage.

> Suspicions can, of course, be useful: in a situation where we have little time but a lot of demands on it, we are better off if we can spend our time looking into, say, the more plausible claims about the existence of conspiracies. We might consider this to be an *economic problem*. […] because we often need to prioritise our precious time, we often have to make do with weak/type I suspicions. (Dentith 2022, 243)

Type-II suspicion about a conspiracy theory involves the existence of genuine epistemic *defeaters* against that theory: type-II suspicion about a theory T indicates that we have good reasons to take T to be false (Dentith 2022, 243).

The worry here is that a conspiracy theory with a problematic genealogy should be treated with type-I instead of type-II suspicion, thus making S-GENEALOGY a significantly weaker thesis. To see if this is the case consider a view that plausibly delivers type-I suspicion and is similar to S-GENEALOGY:

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[31] https://fullfact.org/health/bayer-covid-vaccine-gene-therapy/ - accessed: (04/02/2023)

> **(NARRATIVE)** If a conspiracy theory T falls under a problematic recurrent narrative, then, because of that, T is undermined.

Dentith suggests that NARRATIVE delivers type-I suspicion for two reasons. First, in an interesting exchange with Patrick Stokes (2016), Dentith (2016a) proposes that conspiracy narratives should be distinguished from conspiracy *theories*. It is plausible that conspiracy narratives are 'arational' (i.e. not apt for rational examination and assessment), whereas conspiracy theories are subject to empirical confirmation. In this sense, even if a conspiracy theory T falls within a problematic narrative, T should still be evaluated in terms of its individual merits. After all, the notion of a conspiracy 'narrative' is quite coarse-grained: conspiracy narratives have exceptions.[32] So, at best, falling under a problematic narrative delivers type-I suspicion.

Secondly, Dentith argues that, even bracketing the previous point, it is a non-trivial issue whether it is *in fact* the case that T falls under some problematic narrative N. The idea is that T might *look* like it falls under N without this actually being the case. Consider the 'false flag operation' narrative:

> Take, for example, conspiracy theories that claim mass shooting events are part of a government-led conspiracy to bring in strict gun control/regulation: every time a new mass shooting event occurs someone posits that the event must have been staged, and thus is just another instance of a false flag event (Dentith 2022, 243).

Even if the 'false-flag' narrative is problematic, it is not clear that a given T falls under it. Perhaps T *looks* like a typical pro-NRA conspiracy theory but relies on 'new evidence or novel arguments' and, for this reason, 'it ought to be analysed afresh' (Dentith 2022, 243).

In response to Dentith's second point, I agree that the aforementioned remarks indicate that NARRATIVE involves type-I suspicion. But S-GENEALOGY is significantly different from NARRATIVE. The main differentiating feature has to do with the fact that a problematic genealogy about T needs to specify the *mechanisms* by which T is brought about. This makes S-GENEALOGY especially fine-grained: if one knows that T is brought about by mechanism M, then one knows (in virtue of knowing the specifics of M) that T is not an accidental occurrence and that future instances of T will be brought about by more-or-less the same

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[32]E.g. the 'false flag operation' conspiracy theory narrative has plausible exceptions: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/business/russia-has-been-laying-groundwork-online-for-a-false-flag-operation-misinformation-researchers-say.html (accessed: 04/02/2023)

mechanism. So, under S-GENEALOGY, it isn't enough for two conspiracy theories to be superficially similar in order to for them to be treated with the same level of suspicion. If T_1 is similar to T_2 in terms of its core claims, but T_1 has a problematic genealogy whereas T_2 doesn't, then T_1 warrants more suspicion than T_2, ceteris paribus.

What about the point according to which conspiracy narratives are inherently arational? Perhaps, it could be claimed that genealogies are also arational in the sense that they do not bear on the epistemic merit of the conspiracy that falls under their scope. In this sense, genealogies (like narratives) might be mere epiphenomena.

Even if this is true for conspiracy narratives, this is not the case for conspiracy genealogies. This is because, in contrast to conspiracy narratives, conspiracy genealogies *produce* conspiracy theories. After all, I have argued that we can appeal to the mechanisms that produced a given conspiracy theory for explanatory and predictive reasons (e.g. concerning other conspiracy theories with the same genealogy).

For examples, consider the so-called 'Climategate' conspiracy theory according to which a number of climate scientists from the University of East Anglia conspired to exaggerate data about the impact of human influence on climate change. A genealogical investigation on Climategate would reveal at least three important pieces of data:

(1) The infiltration of the university of East Anglia servers was performed by Saudi-backed Russian hackers (with Russia being one of the key sources of misinformation about climate change).[33]
(2) The emails were filtered by the hackers, and then deliberately misinterpreted to show 'smoking gun' evidence that anthropogenic climate change is an elaborate hoax.
(3) The dissemination of those emails and the relevant conspiracy theory behind climate change was disseminated by Koch-backed front groups and right-wing media outlets like Breitbart.

(1)-(3) is only part of an elaborate mechanism that produced the conspiracy theory behind Climategate. Most crucially, (1)-(3) generate type-II suspicion: we have no reason to think that the mechanism behind Climategate has any regard for truth. So, even if we concede that conspiracy

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[33]https://bylinetimes.com/2019/07/01/climategate-email-hacking-was-carried-out-from-russia-in-an-effort-to-undermine-action-on-global-warming/ (accessed: 04/02/2023)

narratives are epiphenomena, conspiracy genealogies (in the form of denial industry second-order conspiracies) are not.

6. Meta-undermining

Another type of objection concerns the possibility of a given genealogical claim being *itself* undermined. Let theory T be undermined by some source S. This undermining-claim is plausibly based on some *evidence* about S, in virtue of which S is an epistemically problematic source. But it could be that claims about S's problematic nature are *themselves* undermined.

A concrete example: the genealogy of antivax conspiracy theories is deemed problematic in terms of the evidence provided by various journalists, scientists, and anti-disinformation NGO's. But such evidence can be challenged. The proponent of antivax conspiracy theories would argue that the relevant evidence has been fabricated by Big Pharma in the context of a smear campaign against the attempt to bring out the truth about the effects of COVID-19 vaccination. Relatedly, climate change deniers would argue that analogous evidence about the supposed problematic genealogy of climate change conspiracy theories is the result of a crypto-communist agenda.[34] So, as the worry goes, a given genealogical undermining attempt can be itself undermined given that the epistemic source it appeals to is not problematic after all.

> **(META-UNDERMINING)** Let conspiracy theory T be putatively undermined by source S. It is epistemically possible that the evidence in favour of S's problematic nature is itself undermined. If so, then T is not undermined by S.

The first thing to note here is that this is not a new problem in the philosophy of conspiracy theories literature. It is a given that if an actual conspiracy has taken place, it should be expected that evidence for that conspiracy will be either missing or fabricated (Keeley 1999).[35] Crucially, this does not entail that a given conspiracy theory is unfalsifiable. After all, the proponent of a particular instance of META-UNDERMINING is not a global sceptic: the careful and thorough examination of a conspiracy theory can detect whether, in fact, the relevant source is undermined. In this sense, one shouldn't take the mere epistemic possibility of META-

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[34]See Oreskes and Conway (2010) on climate activism being like watermelons ('green on the outside, but red on the inside').

[35]See also Buenting and Taylor (2010) on the notion of 'fortuitous data' (i.e. data that are 'too convenient' for the official narrative). It could also be that the relevant evidence is available but too *toxic* to reveal (see Basham [2018] on 'toxic truths').

UNDERMINING to be a significant blow against the genealogical method.[36]

In this sense, when I argue that denial industries constitute epistemically problematic sources, I am knowingly making an empirical claim (albeit a highly plausible one, in my opinion).[37] So, those who wish to genealogically undermine these sources face a double challenge: First, they must furnish the appropriate evidence which, in turn, needs to be more secure than the evidence in favour of the problematic nature of these sources. Secondly, if they insist that these sources are undermined, they will need to take a *proliferation* of conspiracy theories on board. For example, a proponent of COVID-19 vaccine conspiracy theories might note that the evidence showing that antivax is epistemically problematic are themselves undermined. But this move comes at a cost. In making this move, they would need to accept that *every* conspiracy theory generated by the antivax industry (not merely the ones pertaining to COVID-19 in particular) is not epistemically undermined.[38] Based on these two points, those who wish to appeal to META-UNDERMINING need to do so with caution and in an empirically informed way.

According to a different variation of the above challenge, a given genealogical attempt is self-undermined because, even if we accept that some source S is epistemically problematic, it is not obvious that a given conspiracy theory is *produced* by S.

> **(META-UNDERMINING*)** Let T be putatively undermined by S. It is epistemically possible that S is an epistemically problematic source, but T is not produced by S (i.e. the evidence concerning T's *association* to S is undermined). If so, then T is not undermined by S.

The idea behind this interpretation is a 'guilt by association' style of argument. If a conspiracy theory T is true, and the conspirators are trying to

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[36]There is a sense in which *every* party in these debates engages in some kind of META-UNDERMINING. After all, in saying that the denial industry genealogies are epistemically problematic entails the second-order claim that evidence *to the contrary* is fabricated. In other words, whichever genealogical claim one makes, they would also need to undermine the underminers of that claim, thus engaging in meta-undermining. For example, ExxonMobil claims to have undermined the Oreskes and Supran paper cited in footnote 20 (https://energyfactor.exxonmobil.com/insights/partners/flawed-study-claiming-exxonmobil-misled-public-disappointing/) (accessed: 04/02/2023). A proponent of the view that ExxonMobil is an epistemically problematic source (at least when it comes to climate change) ought to undermine that undermining-claim.

[37]Note, again, that I am not merely appealing to the *maturity* (Keeley 1999; cf. Dentith 2022) of climate change conspiracy theories. Rather, I note that there is a powerful inductive argument to make for the existence of a *mechanism* which underlies the existence and dissemination of those theories.

[38]Recall that COVID-19 vaccine conspiracy theories typically want to *dissociate* themselves from the antivax industry in an attempt to gain credibility (recall sec. 2). So, admitting that COVID-19 conspiracy theories and antivaccination (simpliciter) theories all come from the same source is a significant cost.

supress evidence in favour of T, it is plausible that they will try to *associate* T with certain epistemically problematic sources. Perhaps, proponents of the theory that mRNA vaccines are 'cytotoxic' are correct, and Big Pharma is trying to associate that theory with the antivax industry in order to cast doubt on it.

This tactic shouldn't be completely dismissed or underestimated.[39] This line of thought has certainly been part of the argumentative arsenal of many conspiracy theorists. For example, conspiracy theorists who explain the collapse of the World Trade Centre by appealing to nano-thermite, argue that some *rival* conspiracy theories (like Judy Wood's 'directed-energy weapon' theory) have been advanced by the government to undermine the 9/11 'truther' movement.[40] Similarly, and more plausibly, it is well documented that the infamous Roswell incident was deliberately associated with extra-terrestrial visitation to draw attention *away* from what was the testing of a nuclear surveillance balloon under Project MOGUL (which, roughly, involved detecting via sound-waves whether the Soviet Union had nuclear weapons).[41]

So, to be clear, I am not claiming that there are no instances of META-UNDERMINING*. But meta-undermining* charges are perhaps more difficult to mount than it might at first appear. Let conspiracy theory T be putatively epistemically undermined by source S. T's proponent could accept that S is epistemically problematic but reject that T was produced by it. Instead, the proponent of T would say, S produces a *different* conspiracy theory: T*. In turn, the superficial similarity of T to T* licences the illegitimate association of T to S.

But the superficial/non-superficial distinction is more difficult to draw when applied to concrete cases of conspiracy theories. Simply put, it is unclear if and how T can be superficially similar to T* to the point where the two can be reasonably associated, *while also* being the case that T is significantly different from T* in terms of its core claims. On the contrary, it is plausible that the success of T's association to T* is

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[39]After all, Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) have infamously argued for the potential benefits of the 'cognitive infiltration' of the groups that produce conspiracy theories (which arguably would involve a tactic like the one described). This involves a mixture of counterspeech aimed to discredit these theories and the hiring of private parties to do that kind of infiltration (2009, 218) (for critiques see Hagen [2010] and Coady [2018]). As a contrast, Shoaibi (2022) has recently argued for a 'community activism' approach which, in contrast to cognitive infiltration, aims to build trust with the relevant communities by being transparent.

[40]Interestingly, Wood makes similar accusations against 'Architects and Engineers for 9/11 truth' (a paradigmatic truther organisation) (See number 42 of the following list https://www.drjudywood.com/wp/faq/#_Toc525640101) (accessed: 04/02/23)

[41]https://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/18/us/wreckage-in-the-desert-was-odd-but-not-alien.html (accessed: 04/02/23)

proportional to T's similarity to T*. Of course, there might be a certain 'sweet-spot' where T* is significantly dissimilar to T without compromising the legitimacy of T's association to T*. The existence of these sweet-spots explains why there can be legitimate scenarios involving META-UNDERMINING*.

But the existence of these scenarios is a non-trivial issue. The conspirators would need to find the relevant sweet-spot and sustain the association of T with T* by carefully tweaking the relevant evidence. The point here is not that this can't happen but that it would take significant conspiratorial effort for this to be accomplished. This puts pressure on any claim that a given genealogical attempt has been meta-undermined*.

Secondly, it is part of the *defensive mechanism* of these epistemically problematic sources that they will try to *dissociate* themselves from the conspiracy theories they produce. This is another function of the tactics I sketched in section 2. According to Repackaging, the same master narrative gets a different *twist* depending on the relevant target group. So, at a surface level, an anti-vaccination narrative stating that vaccine mandates are part of a global depopulation programme, is distinct from a narrative according to vaccines contain foetal tissue (CCDH 2020b).

This is so *by design*. As mentioned, the aim is to maximise reach and increase sales and influence. Another reason for this, however, is that it *obscures* the fact that these narratives all come from the same source. Things are similar with the Clustering tactic: numerous front-groups will be created in other to attract and train vaccine-hesitant people. Again, the diversity of these groups serves a dual role: it increases the reach of recruitment, but it also gives off the faulty impression that there is a pro-liferation of spontaneous grassroots movements.[42]

In this sense, META-UNDERMINING* can be appealed to as a *strategy* of epistemic pre-emption employed by denial industry epistemic sources in

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[42]Both the antivax product (regardless of the many forms it can take due to Repackaging) and the activi-ties of antivax clusters involve an element of epistemic pre-emption. Consider the antivax master thesis again: 'COVID-19 is *not* dangerous', 'COVID-19 vaccines *are* dangerous', 'mainstream science cannot be trusted'. The third of these claims instils a defence strategy *in the product itself* against future debunk-ing attempts. For example, if someone claims that the scientific data appealed to by the antivax indus-try are false, one could insist that this is question begging against the antivax thesis (for a similar notion of *automatic* epistemic pre-emption see Shoaibi 2022). Secondly, part of the training contained in community clusters involves anticipating and preparing against potential objections to antivax theses. To that end, even the language and format of 'fact-checking' is appropriated (CCDH 2020b, 2021b, 2020c). The difference here with traditional echo-chambers is important: echo-chambers are primarily defensive and passive entities in the sense that relevant 'outsider voices' are anticipated and neutralized (in contrast to 'epistemic bubbles' where outsider voices are not even considered) (Nguyen 2020). However, the cluster groups I have in mind are also 'outward-looking': they do not merely aim at defending their claims, but also to recruit, and propagandize outsiders.

order to dissociate themselves from the conspiracy theories they produce. So, it is not merely the case that we have strong empirical reasons to suspect that these denial industry lobbies produce false conspiracy theories. We can also *anticipate* (given our knowledge of their modus operandi) that they will try to adopt various dissociation tactics as a defensive strategy. So, again, claims of meta-undermining* should be treated with caution.

7. Epistemic laundering

In the previous section I considered two types of cases where a given undermining-claim can be itself undermined. The objection I explore in this section takes for granted the truth of certain undermining-claims. The idea is this: even if certain (second-order) conspirators wish to put forward a conspiracy theory, the optimal strategy would be to do so in terms of an epistemically non-suspicious genealogy. In other words, the best way to *launder* a conspiracy theory is to produce and disseminate it via an epistemically reliable source.[43] To illustrate consider the following ingenious case sketched by Dentith (2022, 242–3):

> [W]e can also imagine that tomorrow climatologists–who have been warning us of the danger of anthropogenic climate change for nearly half a century now–might decide to do something drastic. They believe that no government or corporation is doing enough to mitigate the worst of the coming climate crisis, so they decide to do the thing they have been blamed for doing all along: they come together in secret to start exaggerating the evidence for an impending climate collapse, all in the hope that this will cause the public to demand immediate action from their governments!

In this case, the genealogy of the conspiracy theory that climatologists exaggerate the evidence for anthropogenic climate change *fails* to be an undermining defeater for that theory. This is because mainstream climatology is, ex hypothesi, an epistemically reliable source. So, as the worry goes, there is a sense in which the genealogical method is of limited use: there are reasons to think that many false conspiracy theories are laundered via epistemically reliable sources.

I have two responses. First, for this objection to be forceful, cases of such epistemic laundering should be widespread. But this is not obviously true. The nature of epistemic laundering *requires* the existence of epistemically reliable sources. But if a source S is *systematically* used to launder

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[43]I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pushing me on this type of objection.

conspiracy theories then it is unclear in what way S is reliable. For example, mainstream science presumably has certain methodologies and self-correction procedures in virtue of which the theories that it produces are said to belong in an epistemically reliable genealogy.[44] If mainstream science is systematically highjacked to launder conspiracy theories this entails that the relevant self-correction procedures fail to work systematically. In other words, *successful* epistemic laundering via S is very hard: it needs to be done in a way that doesn't compromise the reliable nature of S.[45]

Secondly, even in cases where epistemic laundering *is* successful, it is plausible that there are constraints on the type of conspiracy theory produced by the relevant source. Consider Dentith's case once more. It is certainly possible that climatologists could decide in secret to exaggerate the evidence for climate change. But it seems less plausible that they could decide to put forward the (much) more radical claim that anthropogenic climate change does not exist (never mind actually succeeding in doing so). Epistemic laundering requires moving *around* the relevant self-correcting procedures of a given epistemic source thus securing its epistemic reliability. But in doing so, there is a trade-off: the more radical a conspiracy theory is, the more difficult it will be to stay within an epistemically reliable genealogy.

These points show that epistemic laundering is, like meta-undermining, possible but highly non-trivial. There is no reason to suspect that epistemically reliable sources are systematically undermined, and even when they do there are constraints on the characteristics of the conspiracy theories that are being produced. So, I do not take the possibility of epistemic laundering to be particularly threatening towards the idea that conspiracy theories can be undermined in terms of their genealogies.

Conclusion

In this paper I argued that S-GENEALOGY is an important philosophical tool concerning the evaluation and investigation of conspiracy theories.

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[44]Of course, this is not to say that epistemically reliable sources cannot produce falsehoods. On the flipside, problematic genealogies can produce truths. As a referee helpfully notes, there are plausible cases of problematic sources that, due to epistemic luck, have produced true conspiracy theories. For example, David Icke (an epistemically problematic source) has long claimed that there exists an elite paedophile ring in the British Government. But this claim was partially vindicated in light of Operation Yewtree (and other operations; see https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/aug/04/police-child-abuse-inquiries-operation-yewtree-to-operation-midland) (accessed 04/02/2023). The key thing to note here is that such cases are produced *in spite of* the nature of the relevant genealogy.

[45]It could be objected that what epistemic laundering requires, instead, is the *impression* that S is epistemically reliable. I disagree. Claiming that S is not *actually* reliable would be an instance of META-UNDERMINING as discussed previously.

Specifically, I noted that S-GENEALOGY is a non-compositional method of evaluation that sidesteps problems like the argumentative millefeuille and the meta-evidential scepticism that plausibly accompanies certain conspiracy theories. S-GENEALOGY is also a non-psychologistic method of evaluation that can be used alongside other methods. In doing so, S-GENEALOGY is compatible with the philosophical consensus that a wholesale rejection of conspiracy theories is a mistake while also adding further nuance to the discussion surrounding the sources of conspiracy theories.

I then considered two plausible cases of epistemically problematic sources, and I argued that we can generate local generalisms for each type of these cases. Finally, I considered two objections. First, I rejected the claim that S-GENEALOGY generates mere type-1 suspicion by noting that S-GENEALOGY, in contrast to NARRATIVE, is particularly fine-grained by concerning the mechanisms by which certain conspiracy theories are created and sustained.

Then, I considered two ways in which it could be said that S-GENEAL-OGY is itself undermined: either by noting that certain putatively epistemically problematic sources are not *really* problematic, or by noting that a given conspiracy theory could be falsely associated with a problematic genealogy in order to cast doubt on the former. In response, I argued that, in at least some cases, there are examples of independently plausible epistemic problematic sources. In response to the 'false-association' objection, I noted that the success of that scenario is a non-trivial issue (to say the least), and that we should *expect* for conspirators to adopt the 'false-association' technique as a defence mechanism.

Finally, I argued that, similarly to meta-undermining-style worries, the objector who wishes to appeal to the objection from epistemic laundering needs to do a lot of work in order to present a distinctively threatening challenge to S-GENEALOGY.

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