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An inquiry into the cognitive and epistemic standing of conspiracy theories

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Abstract: This doctoral thesis investigates the conceptual, epistemological, and psychological dimensions of conspiracy theories, aiming to develop a more precise and philosophically rigorous framework for understanding and evaluating them. The work is structured around five original papers that address key questions: What constitutes a conspiracy theory? Are such theories inherently irrational? How should we conceptualize their epistemic status in light of expert testimony, trust, and cognitive psychology?

The thesis begins by examining the contested nature of the term conspiracy theory, revealing the limitations of both pejorative and overly broad definitions. It engages with the philosophical debate between generalism and particularism, arguing for a neutral, theoretically useful definition based on Carnapian conceptual engineering. It then explores whether belief in conspiracy theories can be rational, with attention to decision-theoretic considerations and the epistemic role of experts. The final chapter investigates why individuals come to endorse conspiracy theories, evaluating claims that such beliefs are primarily driven by irrationality, cognitive biases, or social belonging.

A central contribution is the development of the *Dimensions framework*—a descriptive tool for analysing conspiracy theories not solely in terms of truth or falsity, but with attention to the contexts, motivations, and epistemic norms surrounding their adoption. This framework enables a more nuanced understanding of conspiracy theories as complex social phenomena. By combining conceptual analysis, epistemological evaluation, and psychological insight, the thesis offers a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach that contributes to ongoing debates in conspiracy theory theory—the academic study of conspiracy theories—as well as to social epistemology more broadly.

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To Marija & István Bodor

Table of Contents

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Lund, July 2025

Populärvetenskaplig Sammanfattning

Denna doktorsavhandling undersöker konspirationsteorier ur ett begreppsligt, kunskapsteoretiskt och psykologiskt perspektiv, med målet att utveckla ett mer precist och filosofiskt genomarbetad ramverk för hur vi kan analysera och utvärdera dem. Avhandlingen består av fem vetenskapliga artiklar som behandlar centrala frågor: Vad är egentligen en konspirationsteori? Är konspirationsteorier alltid irrationella? Och hur ska vi förstå deras kunskapsmässiga status i ljuset av expertutlåtanden, tillit och kognitiv psykologi?

Inledningsvis granskas begreppet konspirationsteori och dess kontroversiella förståelse. Här lyfts problemen med pejorativa men också alltför breda definitioner. Avhandlingen diskuterar den filosofiska debatten mellan generalister och partikularister, och argumenterar för en neutral och teoretiskt användbar definition, inspirerad av Rudolf Carnaps idé om begreppslig ingenjörskonst. Därefter undersöks om det kan vara rationellt att tro på konspirationsteorier, med fokus på beslutsteori och experters roll. I det avslutande kapitlet analyseras varför människor lockas av konspirationsteorier, där olika psykologiska och sociala förklaringar utvärderas.

Avhandlingens centrala bidrag är utvecklingen av det så kallade *Dimensionsramverket*: ett verktyg för att beskriva och analysera konspirationsteorier utifrån deras sammanhang, motiv och kunskapsnormer, snarare än att enbart efterfråga om innehållet är sant eller falskt. Ramverket möjliggör en mer nyanserad förståelse av konspirationsteorier som komplexa samhällsfenomen. Genom att förena begreppsanalys, kunskapsteori och psykologi ger avhandlingen ett brett och tvärvetenskapligt bidrag till den växande forskningen om konspirationsteorier – samt till den sociala epistemologin i stort.

Abstract

This doctoral thesis investigates the conceptual, epistemological, and psychological dimensions of conspiracy theories, aiming to develop a more precise and philosophically rigorous framework for understanding and evaluating them. The work is structured around five original papers that address key questions: What constitutes a conspiracy theory? Are such theories inherently irrational? How should we conceptualize their epistemic status in light of expert testimony, trust, and cognitive psychology?

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List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers.

Paper I
Tsapos, M. (2023). **Who is a conspiracy theorist?**. *Social Epistemology*, *37*(4), 454–463. DOI: 10.1080/02691728.2023.2172695.

Paper II
Tsapos, M. (2024a). **Betting on conspiracy: A decision theoretic account of the rationality of conspiracy theory belief**. *Erkenntnis*.
DOI: 10.1007/s10670-024-00785-9.

Paper III
Tsapos, M. (2024b). **Should we worry about conspiracy theorists rejecting experts?**. *Inquiry*, 1–21. DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2024.2375774.

Paper IV
Tsapos, M. (unpublished manuscript). **Towards a unifying framework for understanding conspiracy theory belief.**

Paper V
Tsapos, M. (unpublished manuscript). **What is interesting about conspiracy theories?.**

List of Papers Not Included in the Thesis

Coady, D., and **Tsapos, M.** (Forthcoming) Research Handbook on Conspiracy Theories and Society. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Dentith, M. R., Duetz, J., and **Tsapos, M.** (2024). Investigating conspiracy theories–introduction to the special issue. *Inquiry*, 1–9.

Tsapos, M., and Ekström, A. G. (2022). Small or no effects of education and political beliefs on conspiratorial thinking when conspiracies are unknown.

Dentith, M. R., and **Tsapos, M.** (2024). Why We Should Talk about Generalism and Particularism: A Reply to Boudry and Napolitano. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, *13*(10), 47–60.

Ekström, A. G., Madison, G., Olsson, E. J., and **Tsapos, M.** (2024) The search query filter bubble: effect of user ideology on political leaning of search results through query selection, *Information, Communication & Society*, 27:5, 878–894, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2023.2230242

Ekström, A. G., Gärdenfors, P., Snyder, W. D., Friedrichs, D., McCarthy, R. C., **Tsapos, M.**, and Moran, S. (2025). Correlates of vocal tract evolution in late Pliocene and Pleistocene hominins. *Human Nature*, 1–48.

Dimensions of Conspiracy

Chapter 1

Introduction

PICTURE THIS: you're at a dinner party. The conversation is unfolding comfortably—the weather, travels, and maybe even a meandering detour into politics—when someone leans in and says it, as though disclosing a guilty pleasure: "*I'm not saying I believe in conspiracy theories, but…*" Whether it's a theory about government surveillance, secretive elite cabals, or the real origins of a virus, such confessions often raise eyebrows, provoke controversy, and elicit strong reactions—ranging from outright dismissal to zealous endorsement. Conspiracy theories have a way of surfacing in the most unexpected places—not just in dinner conversations or internet forums, but also in our news cycles, on streaming platforms, podcasts, and, increasingly, in academic discourse. Some are patently absurd; others are unsettlingly plausible. For some, they're red flags of misinformation; for others, they're signals of hidden truths yet to be uncovered. Take the documentary *Cowspiracy*,[1] for example—it frames its central argument around the idea that leading environmental organizations are conspicuously silent about the ecological harm caused by animal agriculture. Whether or not one accepts its conclusions, the documentary exemplifies a form of conspiratorial reasoning: if the evidence is so compelling, why isn't it being discussed more openly? Who benefits from the silence? But despite the cultural visibility and

1 Produced by Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn. Copyright 2014.

persistent presence, conspiracy theories occupy a curious epistemic position: widely circulated, frequently discussed, and yet almost reflexively scorned and dismissed.

This thesis begins from the observation that the label 'conspiracy theory' is not a neutral descriptor. Rather, it functions as a social and rhetorical tool—one that frequently implies irrationality, paranoia, or unreliability (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen 2016), and sometimes as a performative speech act to dismiss someone's views (Austin 1975; Husting and Orr 2007). As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between the content of a theory and the connotations attached to the label. This raises important philosophical questions: What, exactly, is a conspiracy theory? Are beliefs in conspiracy theories inherently irrational? And what does it mean, epistemically, to be a conspiracy theorist?

As a starting point, it is worth noting that suspicion toward conspiracy theories is not new; nevertheless, many are convinced that belief in conspiracy theories is increasing. Events such as the election of Donald Trump, the U.S. Capitol riot, or vaccine hesitance during the Covid-19 pandemic, have prompted widespread concern from scholars, journalists, and the mass public about increases in mass conspiracism (Uscinsiki et al. 2022; Lewandowsky 2021). For example, 73% of Americans believe that conspiracy theories are currently "out of control" and 59% agree that people are more likely to believe conspiracy theories compared to 25 years ago (Uscinsiki et al. 2022, 1). Many scholars agree, and view conspiracy theories as indicative of a modern crisis, similarly citing new communication technologies as a primary cause (Dow et al. 2021; Van Der Linden 2022). Journalists contend that we are living in the golden age of conspiracy theorizing, a post-truth era in which conspiracy theories have never spread this swiftly nor lodged this deeply in the American psyche (Guilhot and Moyn 2020). Similar sentiments are frequent also in Europe and Sweden (Astapova et al. 2020; Önnerfors 2021). Government officials and organisation such as UNESCO, the European Commission, and the World Jewish Congress have responded with policy proposals to address the popularity and prevalence of conspiracy theories and stop them. There are, however, very few studies that demonstrate that belief in conspiracy theories has in fact increased over time. Uscinski et al. (2022, 1) address this explanatory gap, reporting that "[i]n no instance do we observe systematic evidence for an increase in conspiracism, however operationalized".

Nevertheless, philosophers such as Qassim Cassam (2019), Gulia Napolitano (2021), Keith Harris (2018), and others have criticized belief in conspiracy theories as irrational, and psychologists are busy searching for an inoculation against such beliefs (van Der Linden, Roozenbeek, and Compton 2020; Lewandowsky and van Der Linden 2021; Compton et al. 2021). Succinctly put, many scholars consider conspiracy theories as *mad, bad, and dangerous* (Dentith 2022). But such scepticism has not gone unchallenged. Pigden (1995), Keeley (1999), Basham (2001) and others have argued that many conspiracy theories—if we define them simply as theories about conspiracies—are not only rational but sometimes (or often) true. After all, history is replete with conspiracies: the Watergate scandal, the Iran-Contra affair, the NSA Prism affair, and so on.

This tension between suspicion and credibility has led to a broader debate in the philosophical literature—one centred around what has become known as the generalist–particularist divide (Buenting and Taylor 2010; Dentith and Keeley 2018). Generalists hold that conspiracy theories, as a category, are prima facie irrational. Particularists, by contrast, maintain that the rationality of belief in a conspiracy theory must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, just as we would with any other explanatory claim (Dentith 2018). The debate between these positions has far-reaching implications, not only for epistemology but also for public discourse and democratic deliberation (Coady 2007; Mittendorf 2023; Brooks 2023). A key challenge in this debate is the issue of definition. What counts as a conspiracy theory? Is it simply any theory that posits secretive, coordinated action by a small group toward some goal? Or does the term imply more—such as a challenge to official narratives, a lack of evidential support, or a tendency toward implausible speculation (Levy 2007; Cassam 2019; Harris 2022)? Particularists argue for a neutral definition—one that avoids embedding assumptions about epistemic status into the very concept (Dentith 2014), while the generalists argue that the term's pejorative connotation is integral to its everyday use and should be reflected in its philosophical treatment (Napolitano and Reuter 2022).

The purpose and goal of this thesis is not to determine the truth or falsity of any particular conspiracy theory. Nor is it to defend or reject conspiratorial thinking uncritically. Rather, the goal is to examine the conceptual, epistemological, psychological, and social dimensions of conspiracy theories. This includes considering how we define the term, how we evaluate the rationality of belief in such theories, and how cultural and institutional contexts shape our intuitions

about them (Dentith 2014; 2018; Cassam 2019; Coady 2007). At its core, this work is a philosophical investigation into how we conceptualize, evaluate, and ultimately judge conspiracy theories. It resists the temptation—common in both popular media and some parts of academia—to dismiss them wholesale. It also resists the opposite temptation: to embrace them uncritically as hidden truths suppressed by *Them* (whoever *They* may be).

Through five original papers this thesis explores the question of how to navigate the tension between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories. I develop a multidimensional framework for understanding and assessing conspiracy theories, aiming to clarify their definition, assess the rationality of belief in them, and explore how trust, authority, and epistemic norms shape our engagement with such theories. Taken together, the five papers aim to meet the overarching goal of the thesis: to reframe how we assess and engage with conspiracy theories in academic discourse for the purpose of promoting fruitful scientific inquiry and avoiding politicization. In the first paper (Paper I) I identify *The (conspiracy theory) Definition Dilemma*: On the one hand, a definition that aligns too closely with common usage risks reinforcing stigmatizing or unhelpful assumptions. On the other hand, a definition that is too broad may fail to capture what makes conspiracy theories a distinctive social phenomenon. In seeking a way forward, I draw on debates in conceptual analysis, particularly the work of Carnap, to evaluate which definitions are most fruitful for philosophical and empirical inquiry (Paper V).

Beyond definitions, this thesis engages with the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories, and whether they really are irrational because they reject expert testimony (Paper II and III). Further, considering the psychological dimension to conspiracy theories, scholars have proposed that belief in such theories is linked to cognitive biases, fear, and a desire for control. However, as argued by philosophers, the motivation to believe in conspiracy theories also has a dimension of legitimate epistemic concerns—such as distrust in institutions and seeking the truth. In paper IV, I explore how these factors (which I call dimensions) can crystalize into one account of conspiracy theory belief, and I offer a novel framework for evaluating conspiracy theories. The Dimensions framework—a framework that moves beyond binaries of true/false or rational/irrational—considers not only evidential factors but also the social and epistemic contexts in which these theories emerge and gain traction. And I suggest that these factors can play a role in

judgements concerning the epistemic status of those beliefs; by determining the motive for the belief in grand conspiracies, for example, we might be able to infer something about their tenability. Crucially, this framework is descriptive rather than normative. It does not prescribe how conspiracy theories *should* be evaluated but reveals the underlying structures that shape their adoption and persistence. By distinguishing between motivations (epistemic, social, cognitive) and content plausibility (anomie), the framework allows empirical research to uncover patterns and correlations. For instance, it may clarify why debunking efforts fail for theories high in group cohesion, but succeed for those driven by truth-seeking (e.g., investigative journalism) (Costello, Pennycook, and Rand 2024).

This thesis Kappa introduces the project, and evaluates and positions my findings in relation to the current state of research. In chapter 2, I consider the definitional and conceptual debate in the literature, paying special attention to the generalist/particularist divide. In chapter 3, I show the various intuitions and methodological tensions that shape how we define and reconstruct what conspiracy theories are. In chapter 4, I examine the rationality of believing in conspiracy theories, considering both their historical success rates and the challenges posed by reliance on or rejection of expert testimony. In chapter 5, I turn to the psychological and social-psychological explanations for belief in conspiracy theories, highlighting how cognitive and group dynamics contribute to conspiratorial thinking. In chapter 6 I offer concluding remarks on unresolved problems, and in chapter 7 I summarize my contribution and the five original papers.

In conclusion, the broader aim of this thesis is not to rehabilitate conspiracy theories as a category, nor to condemn them. It is to take them seriously—as intellectual phenomena, as social artifacts, and as reflections of deeper tensions in how we understand knowledge, authority, and truth. In doing so, I hope to contribute to a more nuanced and responsible discourse around a topic that is too often reduced to caricature and political disagreements. Conspiracy theories are part of our world. To ignore them, or to treat them solely as pathologies, is to miss an opportunity—not only to understand a persistent feature of human cognition, but also to reflect more deeply on the conditions under which we trust, doubt, and seek to explain the world around us.

Chapter 2

Why Study Conspiracy Theories?

SECRECY AND CONSPIRACY have been a topic of western political philosophy at least since Plato. In the *Republic* Plato introduces the idea of the "noble lie" (γενναῖον ψεῦδος) (Book III). The noble lie, according to Plato, was to be used as a tool of governance when the rulers needed to deceive the public for the greater good, ensuring social harmony and stability. For Plato, the noble lie would be used to create a myth to persuade people that their social status is natural and that it is divinely ordained for them to remain in a rigid class system (philosopher-kings, warriors, and workers). In the *Republic* Socrates suggests that if people believe that they are naturally suited for their role—since the gods had mixed different metals into their souls: gold in the rulers, silver in the auxiliaries and so on—they will be content to work for the collective good. Moving between the classes, he argued, would not end well. Rather, Socrates tells us that "the city will be ruined if a bronze or iron soul takes power," hence the need for the great lie to justify keeping people in their places (*Republic*, 414b–415d). Further, in *The Prince* we find Niccolo Machiavelli, writing in the late Middle Ages, warning the nobles of conspiracy against the rulers: "a prince cannot escape conspiracies if people hate him" (Bull 1974).

However, it wasn't until Karl Popper that philosophers began to show an interest in the topic of conspiracy theories and address it more directly. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), Popper argued that conspiracy theories are an extension of ancient superstitions—once, people attributed disasters to gods or malevolent spirits; in modern secular societies, they blame secret groups or elites.

He compared this way of thinking to religious or mystical belief systems. Conspiracies are a typical social phenomenon, according to Popper, but he is critical of any general approach that seeks to explain social phenomena in terms of conspiracies—an approach which he labels 'the conspiracy theory of society'. The conspiracy theory of society is the view that:

> [A]n explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed), and who have planned and conspired to bring it about. (Popper 1969, 94)

Popper argues that since conspiracies are rarely successful, they cannot adequately explain most events in history. Thus, for Popper, belief in the conspiracy theory of society is prima facie irrational. He explains that the conspiracy theory of society cannot be true because "[n]ot all consequences of our actions are intended consequences; and accordingly … it amounts to the assertion that events, even those which at first sight do not seem to be intended by anybody, are the intended results of the actions of people who are interested in these results" (Popper 1972, 342).

Philosophers have understood Popper as supposing that conspiracy theorists must believe that every event is due to intentional successful planning, and that he argues that people overlook the fact that many of our social phenomena are not under our control and are not intentionally planed. Hence conspiracy theories are irrational, because they rest on an untenable assumption concerning the degree to which we have control over the consequences of our actions. If many or most of these consequences are not intended, then it can't be true that all events are the product of successful intentional planning. Daniel Cohnitz (2018) points out that those who understand Popper as making this argument are quick to point out that Popper's critique of conspiracy theories can't be right: "Why should every conspiracy theorist assume that all events are the result of successful intentional planning? […] And, clearly, sometimes events do come out as planned, so how is Popper's argument supposed to work?" (357) In *Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?* (1995), for example, Charles Pigden argues that people *do* conspire, and that history is full of conspiracies. Thus, many conspiracy theories—theories about conspiracy—must be true and are not irrational to believe. He further argues that dismissing conspiracy theories as inherently

irrational is itself a form of superstition. In fact, Pigden argues, most people who are politically or historically informed believe in at least some conspiracy theories:

> Unless you think that the nightly news is not merely misguided, biased, or selective but a pack of lies from start to finish, you are pretty well bound to be a conspiracy theorist. (And, of course, if you think that—i.e., that the nightly news is a pack of lies from start to finish—you are again a conspiracy theorist, though of a different and rather more paranoid kind.) (Pigden 2019, 23)

However, Cohnitz believes critics such as Pigden have misunderstood Popper. Rather, according to Cohnitz, Popper is making a valid methodological point—referring here to sociologists who think that the social sciences work by providing intentional explanations of social events—that the conspiracy theory of society is the idea that social events are to be explained by identifying the social-class-related motives of the protagonists that brought an event about (which he calls Vulgar Maxism); and the event, in turn, is to be explained as the intended satisfaction of these class-related motives. But, Cohnitz argues, "that's not a theory or a criticism of conspiracy theories as such" (356–357). In other words, Popper didn't hold that all conspiracy theories rest on the one mistaken premise that all conspiracy theorists must believe that all events are due to a conspiracy. Nevertheless, one does find this view in the philosophical literature, and there are several attempts to show that belief in conspiracy theories rests on some fundamental mistake, such that it is always or almost always irrational to believe such a theory, just because it is a conspiracy theory (Cohnitz 2018): and this is what much of the contemporary philosophical debate is centred around. Before I continue further with that philosophical debate, let's return to Pigden's understanding of what a conspiracy theory is.

According to Pigden, history books and the nightly news are full of conspiracy theories, which means that anyone who believes any of it is a conspiracy theorist. The only way to avoid this conclusion would be to remain largely ignorant of historical and current political affairs. As Coady (2006) has pointed out, if conspiracy theories are simply theories about conspiracies, there should be nothing inherently wrong with being a conspiracy theorist. In fact, Coady remarks that under this definition, the term 'conspiracy theorist' might even carry positive connotations, showing that someone is politically and historically literate.

However, arguably the term in everyday language (at least in the English-speaking western part of the world) is often associated with irrationality, paranoia, and dangerous beliefs (Wood 2016). This raises important questions, such as: are conspiracy theories inherently flawed? And if conspiracy theories are not inherently flawed, how do we account for the intuition that there is something wrong with subscribing to them? Let's consider what the common linguistic intuition entails, before we say more about the conceptual debate. In brief, traditional intuition-based epistemology investigates knowledge with a focus on how the concept 'knowledge' is to be defined, as well as how it is used linguistically and conceptually. But the methodology of this approach is problematic, since it is reliant on evaluators' and conversation participants' intuitions. Although they might typically succeed at picking out obvious instances of phenomena, experimental findings indicate that intuitions about 'knowledge' differ in non-systematic ways. They might thus fail to relay relevant information. It might be interesting to find out what people report concerning their subjective understanding of the concept of knowledge from a first-person point of view in specific circumstances, but it is important to acknowledge that this amounts to a separate question from finding out what knowledge (the phenomenon) really is.

2.1 The Ordinary Meaning and Use of the Term

While many of us would recognize phrases like "this is just a conspiracy theory!" as frequently used to dismiss certain claims as mere speculation or baseless rumors, our capacity to use phrases in this sense does not amount to a full understanding of the original meaning of the term; to find this out, other means are required. Linguists, for example, often track the meaning of a term in a population by publishing dictionaries. Should we, then, consult a dictionary for the meaning of 'conspiracy theory,' we find it defined as:

> A theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators. [2]

[2] "Conspiracy theory." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy%20theory. Accessed 1 May. 2025.

A conspiracy theorist, according to the same dictionary, is "a person who proposes or believes in conspiracy theories."[3] However, if we were to consult philosophers and other researchers, we would not necessarily find the same answer. According to a corpus analysis study by Guilia Napolitano and Kevin Reuter (2021), the terms 'conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracy theorist' are inherently negatively loaded expressions in the common language. According to the authors "the predominant use of *conspiracy theory* is deeply evaluative, encoding information about epistemic deficiency and often also derogatory and disparaging information" (2035). Others have further noted that conspiracy theorists are often portrayed as irrational and that people tend to avoid applying the label to their own beliefs. In *I Am Not a Conspiracy Theorist: Relational Identifications in the Dutch Conspiracy Milieu*, social scientists Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers (2017) show that there is a stigma in being labelled a conspiracy theorist, noting that "they are categorized—with a little help from social scientists—as paranoid and dangerous militants" (117).

As such, labelling or designating someone with the term 'conspiracy theory' or 'conspiracy theorist' is a form of performative speech act (Austin 1975), usually intended to silence, dismiss, or discredit someone or their view. Ole Bjerg and Thomas Presskorn-Thygesen write:

> 'Conspiracy theory' is no trivial word. […A]ny use of the concept of conspiracy theory always already implies a demarcation between legitimate, rational knowledge and illegitimate, irrational nonsense. Furthermore, the concept not only refers to a given type of proposition but it also invariably calls into question the sanity and credibility of the person making or asserting the proposition, the conspiracy theorist. (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen 2016, 138)

Coady (2023) has argued that if the term 'conspiracy theory' plays the role in our secular society that the term 'heresy' once did in medieval Europe—that of stigmatizing beliefs that contradict the teachings of the day—then the psychologist plays the role of the inquisition, that of defining and enforcing orthodoxy. Conspiracy theories are assumed in many academic discussions to be something which should not be believed, and they are considered akin to rumours

[3] "Conspiracy theorist." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy%20theorist. Accessed 1 May. 2025.

(Berinsky 2023), false beliefs, and misinformation (Lewandowsky et al. 2012), while psychologists are interested in finding ways to minimize belief in conspiracy theories (see, e.g., Swami et al. 2014). According to Coady, this can be concerning because the beliefs that attract the pejorative label often tend to be marginalized political beliefs, in which case the term is being used as a political bat.

The sociologists Ginna Husting and Martin Orr (2007) explore how the term works in public discourse. Relying on the analysis of popular and academic texts, they found that the label 'conspiracy theory' functions in "mechanisms of social control to deflect distrust, anxiety, and threat" (Husting and Orr 2007, 127). Husting and Orr identify three primary ways in which the label 'conspiracy theory' operates: (i) it serves as a routine strategy of exclusion; (ii) it functions as a reframing tool to divert attention from questions of power, corruption, and motive, and (iii) it acts as a means of undermining the credibility and competence of those who voice such concerns. This label, they argue, operates at the transpersonal level of media and academic discourse, effectively stripping individuals of their status as reasonable interlocutors. In turn, this prevents meaningful engagement with their claims and diminishes the need for accountability. The label carries real causal power, shaping public discourse and determining which perspectives are deemed legitimate.

Of course, just because labelling someone or something as a conspiracy theorist or conspiracy theory is pejorative does not mean that the theories themselves, or belief in them, are inherently pejorative. Nevertheless, beyond studying the function of the terms in common linguistic use (as labels for discrediting opposition and so on), researchers argue that we ought to define conspiracy theories based on this common linguistic use in order to provide a conceptual account of conspiracy theories. For example, Napolitano and Reuter (2021) challenge the methodological approach that has led philosophers to focus on neutral definitions and suggest a way forward that relies on empirical investigations of the ordinary concept of conspiracy theory. They argue that defining the terms 'conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracy theorist' for scientific purposes requires consulting ordinary language use in this way, and further that the pejorative connotation which was concluded from their corpus analysis study should be incorporated into scientific definitions, and conceptualizations, of conspiracy theories. Thus, the methodological approach that would best capture the phenomena of conspiracy theories and belief in them has sparked a conceptual

debate in the conspiracy theory literature. I address this debate in papers I and V. In paper I, I argue that our approach, whether pejorative or neutral, will influence what we are in fact investigating. I further argue in paper V for the adoption of a non-pejorative, value-neutral definition if we wish our concept to be scientifically fruitful.

2.2 Can Conspiracy Theories be Rational to Believe?

According to M R. X. Dentith (2014), the academic world is divided in two when it comes to views about the rationality of belief in conspiracy. In one camp are the conspiracy theory sceptics, who, according to Dentith, take it that there are good grounds for scepticism towards conspiracy theories in general. In the other camp there are the 'conspiracy theory theorists,'[4] who take it that belief in particular conspiracy theories can be rational. These two don't necessarily disagree. As Dentith explains:

> One might be a conspiracy theory skeptic who is also a fallibilist: you might claim that, typically, we are entitled to take a dim view of conspiracy theories generally, although maybe from time to time some specific conspiracy theory might turn out to be warranted. You might also be a conspiracy theory theorist who thinks that, generally, people come up with conspiracy theories for all sorts of poor reasons, but, nonetheless, seeks to investigate each and every claim of conspiracy, in case one of them turns out to be true. (Dentith 2014, 8)

For example, Pigden (1995)—a conspiracy theory theorist—thinks that conspiracy theories ought to be investigated even if many are ill-informed or wrong. "It is a modest claim," he argues, "that it is sometimes appropriate to cite conspiracies in the explanation of historical events" and that "it means that blanket denunciations of conspiracy theories are simply silly." However, he argues

[4] In more recent work Dentith has defined conspiracy theory theorists as "scholars who study conspiracy theories" (2021, 9897). These include scholars who "associate or even conflate supernatural or paranormal beliefs with belief in conspiracy theories" and others who "associate belief in conspiracy theories with notable political conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones or David Ike" (9899).

for something more, something "a little less modest," namely that it "is often appropriate to cite conspiracies, i.e. that they don't just occur once in a blue moon" and that it is perfectly reasonable to look for conspiracies in the explanation of events "though you should not always expect to find them." He is not saying that conspiracy theories can explain everything, but that sometimes they work and sometimes they don't, "[i]t's a case of suck it and see" (1995, 2).

Further, Dentith (2014) identifies two subtypes in the sceptical camp: those who build into their definition that conspiracy theories are irrational, and those who take the definition to be neutral, but argue that when we evaluate conspiracy theories most of them turn out to be irrational. In such cases, Dentith takes it,

> the suspiciousness of the theory is less a part of the definition and more a sad fact about the kind of things it refers to. It just happens to turn out that we typically think that allegations of conspiratorial activity are suspicious, but this is not because it is defined as such. Rather, allegations of conspiracies just happen to be highly controversial and seldom end up being proven true (21).

Take, for example, Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermule (2009), who approach conspiracy theories as follows:

> We bracket the most difficult conceptual questions here and suggest, pragmatically, that a conspiracy theory can generally be counted as such if it is *an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)*. (italics in original, 205)

As Coady (2018) notes, on Sunstein and Vermeule's definition "conspiracy theories are not necessarily, or even typically, bad things" (2018, 2). Rather, "they are simply a form of explanation, a form that is often essential to understanding a wide variety of political and social phenomena" (ibid.). Sunstein and Vermule (2009) even concede that "some conspiracy theories have turned out to be true, and under our definition, they do not cease to be conspiracy theories for that reason" (206). However, Sunstein and Vermule narrow their focus to "demonstrable false conspiracy theories" (ibid.), and state that their "primary claim is that those who hold conspiracy theories of this distinctive sort typically do so not as a result of a mental illness of any kind, or of simple irrationality, but as a result of a 'crippled epistemology'" (2009: 204). Coady, however, objects to

such narrowing, arguing that "obviously they cannot form a subset of the category of false beliefs if some of them [are] true" (2018, 3). Coady continues his argument against such narrowing:

> The error of Sunstein and Vermeule's approach can perhaps most clearly be seen if we imagine someone writing in a similar way about another group of theories which has a better reputation than conspiracy theories, namely scientific theories. Sunstein and Vermeule's original article is called "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures", so imagine, if you will, that someone had written an academic paper called "Scientific Theories: Causes and Cures". Before even reading the paper a good referee would object that in seeking the causes of scientific theories the authors appear to be assuming absurdly that scientific theories are all false and unjustified. This is because we do not normally refer to the cause of a true theory (or true belief), not because true theories (or beliefs) do not have causes but because their cause is usually too obvious to mention. The cause is the fact believed. For example, the Copernican theory that the earth revolves the sun was caused by the fact that the earth does indeed revolve around the sun. It is clear that no adequate causal explanation of the theory (or of its eventual acceptance) can leave this fact out. The same goes for justification. We do not normally refer to the cause of a justified theory (or belief). Again, this is not because they do not have causes, but because the cause in such cases is obvious. The cause is the available evidence, along with the people in question's capacities for evaluating that evidence. (2018, 3)

Dentith has argued that the pejorative definitions of what counts as a conspiracy theory "either focus the debate on what, if anything, is wrong with belief in conspiracy theories on the wrong kinds of issues, or side-track us with misleading and sometimes confusing terminology"; for example, Dentith notes that "If we define 'conspiracy theories' as 'conspiracy theories that are (in some sense) irrational to believe,' then the debate on whether a theory that posits a conspiracy is true, or reasonable, becomes a debate about whether it is really a conspiracy theory" (Dentith 2014, 38).

However, as Sunstein and Vermule's account shows, there seems to be a third category, namely, to propose a neutral definition of conspiracy theory, while also considering that there is a subclass of conspiracy theories that are prima facie irrational. These may be so either by definition or by evaluation. For example,

Sunstein and Vermule's approach is to define the subclass of conspiracy theories as false, from which they conclude that belief in those conspiracy theories is prima facie irrational. Another example is Brian Keeley's (1999) attempt to define the additional characteristics of conspiracy theories—e.g., that they run counter to official explanations and assume the conspirators have nefarious intentions—such that belief in this subclass of conspiracy theories is unwarranted. Additionally, there are those scholars who think we can prima facie delineate a subclass of irrational conspiracy theories by evaluation. For example, by evaluating large conspiracy theories postulating the involvement of 1000 or more conspirators, we may find that these tend to be exposed after x amount of time, and thus it is warranted prima facie to consider these to be irrational and suspicious to believe after such a time (Grimes 2016; 2021).[5]

I position my framework within the latter category. My framework emphasises the importance of a neutral definition. Further, I consider various motivations for believing in conspiracy theories, which taken together play a role in the evaluation of conspiracy theories. After empirical study, a subclass of conspiracy theories may emerge as prima facie irrational to believe. Much like the way in which witness testimony in court may be assessed on the witness's credibility and reliability, so too we can assess conspiracy theories, at least in part, by the people who believe in them. Hypothetically, a distribution of different dimensions in the framework could be one feature by which we can assess the conspiracy theory. If an epistemically diverse group believes the particular conspiracy theory, we can assign a higher probability to its truth; if a conspiracy theory scores extremely high on group cohesion (like a political group, for example) and no other dimension, we may use that as information about the conspiracy theory itself. To illustrate, imagine there is some particular conspiracy theory that is only believed by a small group of YouTubers, who are highly motivated to keep the group's cohesion, and that subscribing to the conspiracy theory is a signal of membership of this group. And we might find that no other dimensions are represented, such as truth seekers. In other words, there are no historians, police, eyewitnesses, journalists and so on who have investigated the case and that also believe this conspiracy theory. This information can then inform how we assess and evaluate the conspiracy theory. On the flip side, there might be a conspiracy theory that is dismissed by large

[5] See Figure 1 for a diagram of the various positions on the prima facie irrationality of belief in conspiracy theories.

groups of people—for example, that the government is spying on its people—without their knowing any of the evidence or arguments in support of such a theory, but may be believed by a whistleblower. Such a nuance is left out of Sunstein and Vermule's (2009) account but is captured by the Dimensions framework. I return to the Dimensions framework in more detail in chapter 5.

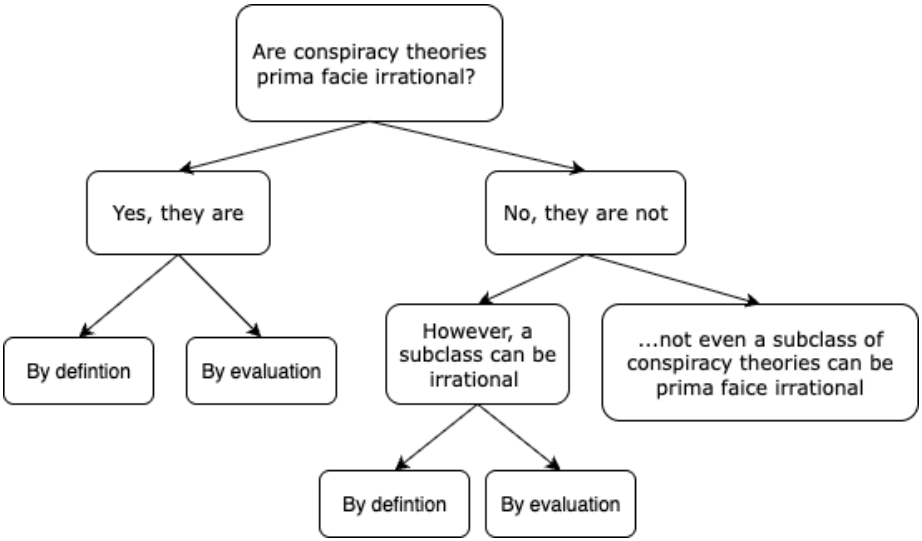

Figure 1 The diagram maps the positions currently in the literature on the prima facie irrationality of belief in conspiracy theories. I position my own framework as open to the possibility of there being a subclass of conspiracy theories that, after evaluation, are shown to be irrational to believe.

2.3 Generalism and Particularism

A similar and somewhat intersecting distinction in the conspiracy theory philosophical literature is the one between *generalism* and *particularism*, introduced by Buenting and Taylor (2010). According to Buenting and Taylor, generalism is the view that "the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories" (Buenting and Taylor 2010,

568), while particularism "denies that the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories" (568–569). Stokes explains that generalists "consider conspiracies to be so abnormal and not part of everyday life, that it is worth excluding them from immediate consideration" (Stokes 2023, 6). Generalists thus think that conspiracy theories are epistemically flawed and irrational. Particularism, by contrast, maintains that no general features of conspiracy theories can justify dismissing them without individual assessment, thus being open to assessing the individual merits of conspiracy theories.

Proponents of generalism typically think that conspiracy theories are inherently irrational, either (Napolitano and Reuter 2022) or by portraying such theories as epistemically flawed—either due to their opposition to epistemic authorities (Levy 2007; Räikkä 2023; Harris 2022), their function as right-wing propaganda (Cassam 2020), or their lack of evidence (Harris 2022), to mention a few. Particularists counter this by arguing that the historical occurrence of true conspiracies, and the absence of reliable a priori criteria to distinguish justified from unjustified theories, necessitate case-by-case evaluation. As Hagen (2018) emphasizes, the generalization is inappropriate: no theory can be ruled out simply for being labelled a conspiracy theory.

Stokes notes that generalists tend to focus "solely on examples of conspiracy theories with clear epistemic fault and on outlandish conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones and David Icke," whereas particularists "have a tendency to not engage with the troubling character of contemporary conspiracy theories at all" (Stokes 2023, 5). However, Dentith (2023) rejects the claim that particularists ignore these concerns, and both Keeley (1999) and Dentith acknowledge that some conspiracy theories are indeed problematic. As Dentith writes, "after all, it is not as if my colleagues think all conspiracy theorizing is healthy; just that some of it is, contra the claims of our critics. […] We simply think you can't assume a conspiracy theory is suspicious just because it is (or has been labelled) a conspiracy theory" (Dentith 2019, 6).

Stokes further observes that particularists often emphasize the epistemic risks of prematurely dismissing conspiracy theories, while generalists stress the societal dangers of entertaining them—even when true—due to their potential to erode institutional trust or promote harmful ideologies like antisemitism (see, e.g., Varelius 2023; Räikkä 2023; Cassam 2020). Yet, Dentith (2014) argues, this

general suspicion is less about conspiracy theories per se and more about how conspiracy theorists are viewed. Dentith explains that pejorative uses of the term 'conspiracy theorist' can serve to stifle legitimate critique, citing how Bush and Blair dismissed Iraq War critics by branding them conspiracy theorists—"a deliberate tactic designed to shut down debate" (32–33). This conflation between belief in conspiracy theories and the psychology of conspiracy theorists reflects a deeper problem in the literature, according to Dentith, who argues that while some conspiracy theorists may exhibit irrational tendencies, this does not justify assuming the irrationality of all conspiracy theory beliefs.

A common critique of particularism, particularly of the minimalist conception (Dentith 2014; Duetz 2023)—which defines conspiracy theories as explanations citing a conspiracy—is that it fails to adequately differentiate conspiracy theories from non-conspiratorial explanations (Harris 2022). However, some particularists, like Coady (2007) and Hagen (2024), do align their definitions more closely to the conventional wisdom (or the pejorative connotations) by defining conspiracy theories as contrary to official narratives. They maintain, though, that this does not imply that such theories are inherently irrational. Coady (2003) unequivocally argues that the "unwillingness to entertain conspiracy theories is an intellectual and moral failing" (Coady 2003, 199) and clarifies this by noting that "The problem is the term 'conspiratorial ideation,' along with related terms such as 'conspiracy theory' etc., not any phenomena to which they may refer" (Coady 2020, 86).

Stokes (2023, 536) contends that the divide is not merely semantic. "In true conspiratorial style," he suggests, "there's something else going on here." According to Stokes:

> Generalists don't just dislike the particularist definition because it strays from what they take popular usage to be, but because it threatens legitimate interpretations of the social world, leading to views that they take to be absurd and repugnant. Particularists don't just dislike the generalist definition because it is vague, but because it excludes interpretations of social reality they think should be at least open to consideration. Ultimately, the debate tracks not only a dispute about definitions, but also a largely undeclared conflict over the essentially undecidable question of how conspired the world really is. (Stokes 2023, 536)

While I agree with Stokes that there is more going on than simply a matter of defending definitions, I don't think the conflict over how conspired the world is sufficiently captures the divide. In paper V, I explore the persistent tension in the conspiracy theory research by reconstructing the debate in terms of two fundamentally different approaches to the study of conspiracy theories: one that treats conspiracy theories as socially inappropriate mistakes—a kind of intellectual faux pas—and another that aims for objective, descriptive analysis. The faux pas approach, I argue, is shaped by implicit cultural and ideological biases. Rather than investigating conspiracy theories, researchers working from this perspective tend to pathologize belief in them, often without engaging with the actual content or epistemic merit of the theories. I argue that this bias leads to circular reasoning, selective focus, and a narrowing of inquiry that undermines any comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Although this generalist and particularist divide has shaped much of the debate around defining 'conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracy theorist,' the idea that there is such a divide at all is not without critics. Diegues et al. (2016) argue that the distinction is "meaningless, self-serving and self-refuting," accusing its proponents of fabricating opposition. They contend that particularists are inconsistent—essentially generalists themselves—if they claim conspiracy theorizing is generally warranted. Hagen (2018), however, refutes this: "If we had asserted or implied that 'conspiracy theories are generally warranted' then they would have us. We would have been caught assessing conspiracy theories in general rather than evaluating particular conspiracy theories each on their own merit."

Diegues et al. (2016) also caution that generalist orientations—whether pro- or anti-conspiracy—can foster uncritical acceptance or rejection. Hagen concedes this point but argues it only strengthens the case for particularism, showing the epistemic problems of generalism irrespective of its direction (Hagen 2018, 130). He defends the distinction's usefulness, stating:

> Now, this distinction between particularist and generalist was first articulated for a reason. The distinction was designed to make it easy to point to two contrasting perspectives actually taken by philosophers engaged in the debate over conspiracy theories. There are those who think that the whole class of ideas counting as 'conspiracy theories' can be regarded as unwarranted based on quasi-a priori reasoning (these are the generalists) and those who think that one must treat each conspiracy theory on its own particular merits (the

> particularist). It is a clear and useful distinction that makes it easy to refer to two actual and distinctive camps. If making the distinction clear also makes generalists feel a little silly and inclines them to forsake generalism, either by claiming to have been some kind of particularist all along, or by framing the distinction as a spectrum along which they can take some middle positing (perhaps by pretending that we particularists don't already occupy that position), then the distinction is not just conceptually coherent but is doing some real work. (Hagen 2018, 130–131)

A more recent critique comes from Boudry and Napolitano (2023), who argue that "generalism is an obviously untenable position that nobody endorses. In other words: a straw man" (2023, 23). They propose replacing the generalist/particularist dichotomy with alternative conceptual frameworks. For instance, they argue that one could trivially vindicate generalism by defining conspiracy theories as inherently irrational. But this, they argue, simply shifts the disagreement into the semantic realm—about how the term 'conspiracy theory' should be defined. Räikkä (2023) similarly notes that disagreements often boil down to semantics. Nevertheless, Boudry and Napolitano believe such debates are not meaningless. They point out that particularists tend to favour neutral definitions because pejorative uses of the term have historically been employed to marginalize dissent, while generalists aim to preserve the term's ordinary (pejorative) usage for the sake of clarity and alignment with social science research. These disagreements, they argue, reflect deeper concerns within conceptual ethics and conceptual engineering. Accordingly, Boudry and Napolitano propose new labels: neutralists, who advocate for neutral definitions such as the minimalist one; and colloquialists, who endorse the popular view of conspiracy theories as epistemically suspect.

The generalist/particularist distinction is defended by Dentith (2018), Hagen (2018; 2024), Dentith and Tsapos (2024), and others, for its utility in philosophical and interdisciplinary inquiry. Adopting one view or the other carries implications for how researchers assess the rationality of conspiracy theorizing. A pejorative or evaluative definition, such as generalists adopt, leads to research focusing on irrationality and misinformation. A neutral definition, preferred by particularists, encourages the study of conspiracies as potentially legitimate phenomena requiring careful epistemic evaluation. In "Why We Should Talk about Generalism and Particularism: A Reply to Boudry and Napolitano" (2024),

co-authored with Dentith, we defend the utility and ongoing relevance of the distinction between particularism and generalism in the philosophy of conspiracy theories. We contend that this distinction is not only conceptually substantive but also epistemically fruitful and foundational to a robust research programme.

We challenge Boudry and Napolitano's portrayal of the particularist/generalist debate as reducible to a trivial dispute over definitions. They argue that both sides can be vindicated by choosing a preferred definition of conspiracy theory, which in their view renders the debate superficial. However, we argue that this is a fundamental mischaracterization. Particularists—ourselves included—do not simply stipulate definitions by fiat. Rather, we defend non-evaluative or minimally defined conceptions of the term 'conspiracy theory' on philosophical and methodological grounds. These definitions are chosen because they allow us to examine conspiracy theories without presupposing their irrationality, which is essential if the goal is to understand when and why some conspiracy theories are unwarranted, while others are not.

We also point out that the particularist camp is far from monolithic. There is a variety of positions within particularism—ranging from minimal definitional approaches to those that emphasize relational positioning with official narratives. This internal diversity shows that particularists are engaged in a genuine theoretical project, not just definition-mongering. We argue that the generalist view, on the other hand, often assumes what needs to be proven—namely, that conspiracy theories are inherently or typically epistemically defective—and that this assumption is built into their definitions in a way that undermines philosophical analysis from the start. In the end, we argue that the generalist/particularist distinction is not only descriptively useful but also crucial for the development of normative and epistemic theories about conspiracy theorizing. Attempts to replace this framework have not, in our view, offered improvements. Until such time as a better model emerges that accounts for the rich, diverse, and methodologically grounded research being done under the banner of particularism, we see no reason to abandon this distinction. On the contrary, we argue that it is precisely because the distinction continues to do real philosophical work that we should keep talking about it.

In summary, the literature reveals that there are different intuitions about whether conspiracy theories are prima facie irrational to believe (see Figure 1). Generalists argue that conspiracy theories are prima facie irrational to believe, either because

they define conspiracy theories as irrational, or because of some evaluation of the state of the world such that all conspiracy theories are prima facie irrational. Particularist have argued that conspiracy theories as a class are not prima facie irrational. Rather, they should be evaluated on their merits. However, there are particularists who agree that the class of conspiracy theories cannot be disregarded wholesale but who nevertheless think that there is a subclass of conspiracy theories that are irrational, either by definition or by evaluation. And, finally, there are those who think that not even a subclass of conspiracy theories can be determined as prima facie irrational to believe or subscribe to.

2.4 Conceptualizing Conspiracy Theories

Philosophers have appealed to different methods in their attempt to reconceptualize conspiracy theories. On the one hand, there are those who think that ordinary language intuitions should be the foremost guide to concept formation for scientific investigations, and that the definition should reflect the ordinary language usage and understanding of the term; on the other hand, there are those who maintain that something more traditional, such as conceptual engineering and explication are superior methods—which Coady (2021) calls a reformist approach. As discussed in the previous section, the generalist conceptualizes conspiracy theories such that they are prima facie irrational and bad to believe. According to Harris (2022):

> A pejorative definition would build in the claim that conspiracy theories are false, lacking in evidence, or something of the like. This proposal seems to better distinguish between theories that are and are not typically regarded as conspiracy theories. Moreover, some empirical evidence suggests that ordinary usage of the term reflects a pejorative definition. (447)

However, Coady (2021) has criticised contemporary discourse surrounding conspiracy theories of committing a fundamental error when the use of the term is conflated with the phenomena itself:

> The emergence and spread of a term has been conflated with the emergence and spread of a phenomenon to which that term putatively refers. As a society, we have made a use-mention error; the spread of a piece of language has

> wrongly been taken for the spread of something corresponding to it in the world. (Coady 2021, 756)

With the same line of reasoning, I suggest in paper V that an appeal to common language use for conceptual analysis in accounts such as Napolitano and Reuter (2021), Cassam (2020), and Harris (2022) risks committing the *naturalistic fallacy*—deriving normative conclusions from descriptive facts. Just because conspiracy theories are commonly viewed as irrational or dangerous does not mean that they inherently possess these qualities. If we uncritically adopt the everyday understanding of conspiracy theories, we conflate the term's usage with its essence, which amounts to deriving an *ought* from an *is*.

Furthermore, the study of common language usage is limited by cultural and temporal variability. Husting and Orr (2007) and Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen (2017) demonstrate that conceptions of conspiracy theories differ across cultures and historical periods. Thus, relying on contemporary English-language discourse to define conspiracy theories risks reinforcing cultural biases rather than fostering objective scientific inquiry. This methodological bias is significant because it shapes the framing, selection, and interpretation of data in research. When conspiracy theories are assumed to be irrational by definition, alternative explanations—such as the possibility that some conspiracy theories are justified—are often dismissed. This approach serves to uphold the status quo rather than critically engaging with the complexities of conspiracy belief, or so I argue in paper V. Nevertheless, rejecting the common language understanding for our conceptual analysis leaves the problem of the counter-intuitiveness of Pigden's and the particularist's so-called broad definition—which the generalist is disputing as too broad and counterintuitive.

Harris (2022) critiques the broad definition of conspiracy theories favoured by particularists, highlighting its failure to distinguish between conspiracy theories and other forms of covert political action. For instance, the official account of the September 11 attacks involves a conspiracy orchestrated by Al-Qaeda, yet it is rarely classified as a conspiracy theory. Likewise, Harris points to many historical events—such as the Watergate scandal or the Iran-Contra Affair—which involve conspiracies but are not typically framed as conspiracy theories. While Pigden and other particularists argue for a non-evaluative definition of conspiracy theorists, others like Keeley (1999) attempt to distinguish between rational and irrational conspiracy beliefs. The challenge remains: How do we define conspiracy theories

in a way that aligns with common usage while maintaining analytical rigour? The definitional debate underscores the complexity of conspiracy theories as a concept, and a justification for why common language usage should provide us with scientifically robust concepts is missing. Carnap's (1950) exposition of conceptual explication—one of the main reference points for conceptual explication—argues that a fruitful concept must be useful for formulating universal statements (empirical laws). Further, in paper V, I introduce a potential complication that arises because Carnap also considers similarity to the explicandum as a desideratum for explication. However, he would have rejected the notion that scientific definitions could include pejorative or evaluative terms. Rather than being concerned with what a term *truly* means, explication assesses how useful a concept is for theoretical or practical purposes. Critics argue that while explication is a useful tool, it should be applied carefully, especially in domains where conceptual flexibility is necessary, and the limitations of the method include potential detachment from ordinary language, excessive formalism, and normative assumptions about what counts as an *improved* concept. However, Carnap's method is not entirely detached from ordinary language; his *similarity requirement* ensures that the revised concept retains as much of the original meaning as possible. Thus, in papers I and V I argue that to capture more things that we find interesting about understanding conspiracy theories, and for a more scientifically fruitful concept, a Carnapian explication of the terms is better suited than an appeal to ordinary language use.

Chapter 3

What is a Conspiracy Theory?

OFFERING A CONTEXTUALIZED EXAMPLE, Wikipedia describes conspiracy theories about the 9/11 attacks as those that "attribute the preparation and execution of the September 11 attacks against the United States to parties other than, or in addition to, al-Qaeda."[6] However, as the attentive reader will have noticed, even the explanation that the attacks were orchestrated by al-Qaeda fits neatly within the dictionary definition of a conspiracy theory. After all, it posits that a small group of individuals coordinated and plotted in secret to carry out their plan. In that sense, it meets the basic criteria: it's an explanation of an event citing a hidden plan, by a group, with a specific intent. For some, this result is counterintuitive since the dictionary definition does not fully explain why the term carries the stigma or other connotations such as implied by the Wikipedia page.

Nevertheless, much of the debate among philosophers has been to respond to the challenge of how to define conspiracy theories in such a way that we can accommodate or justify the common language intuition about conspiracy theories, namely that there is something wrong about such theories that makes belief in them irrational. Keeley (1999) has explored this issue, analysing the deep-seated scepticism toward conspiracy theories. He proposes that while some conspiracy theories are justified, there is a specific category, a subclass of

[6] 9/11 conspiracy theories. (2025). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/9/11_conspiracy_theories#. Retrieved 17 April 2025.

conspiracy theories—which he calls *unwarranted conspiracy theories*—that we are justified in being suspicious of. Keeley acknowledges that there is no clear-cut analytic distinction between good and bad conspiracy theories; rather, we seem to be dealing with a spectrum, ranging from the plausible to the highly implausible. His definition of a conspiracy theory is as follows:

> A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret. (Keeley 1999, 126)

By this definition, a conspiracy theory qualifies as a theory because it provides an explanation for an event. It does not assume that conspirators are omnipotent, only that they played a crucial role in shaping events. It also presumes that secrecy is necessary; if the conspirators acted openly, others would likely obstruct them. Furthermore, a conspiracy requires a small group—although what constitutes 'small' remains somewhat vague. While Keeley agrees with Pigden that conspiracy theories as a general category are not necessarily irrational or false, he seeks to explore the generalist project. He proposes an analysis of conspiracy theories in the spirit of Hume's analysis of miracles, to distinguish unwarranted conspiracy theories. For Hume, miracles are, by definition, explanations that we are never warranted in believing. Thus, if we could show that there is a class of conspiracy theories so defined that should not be believed, then generalism is right.

For Keeley, the issue is one of *warranted belief*, and thus, even if some conspiracy theories turn out to be true, we must determine whether we should rationally believe in them in the first place. To address this challenge, Keeley proposes five additional criteria that characterize unwarranted conspiracy theories: (1) They run counter to an official or widely accepted explanation; (2) They assume that the conspirators have nefarious intentions; (3) They attempt to link seemingly unrelated events into a single, overarching plot; (4) They involve highly secretive and well-guarded knowledge; (5) They rely heavily on errant data—anomalous evidence that either lacks explanation (*unaccounted-for data*) or directly contradicts the accepted narrative (*contradicting data*). He proposed an additional criterion: that unwarranted conspiracy theories are often unfalsifiable. He argues: "The worry is that given a situation where all potentially falsifying evidence can be construed as supporting, or at worst as neutral evidence, then conspiracy theories are by definition unfalsifiable" (121).

He clarifies that the real issue with unwarranted conspiracy theories is not merely their unfalsifiability, but the escalating scepticism they require:

> In favor of conspiracy theorists, it should be noted that this unfalsifiability is not as ad hoc as it might initially seem, due to the active nature of the investigated, just noted. It is not ad hoc to suppose that false and misleading data will be thrown your way when one supposes that there is somebody out there actively throwing that data at you. […] No, the problem with [unwarranted conspiracy theories] is not their unfalsifiability, but rather the increasing degree of skepticism required by such theories as positive evidence for the conspiracy fails to obtain. These theories throw into doubt the various institutions that have been set up to generate reliable data and evidence. In doing so, they reveal just how large a role trust in both institutions and individuals plays in the justification of our beliefs. (121)

Keeley acknowledges that his criteria do not perfectly separate warranted from unwarranted conspiracy theories: "There is no criterion or set of criteria that provide a priori grounds for distinguishing warranted conspiracies from UCTs [unwarranted conspiracy theories]" (118).[7] After all, both the Watergate scandal and the Iran-Contra Affair meet these criteria, yet belief in those conspiracies seems rational. He argues that the real challenge is epistemic: we rarely have direct evidence of whether a conspiracy theory is true, just as we cannot definitively prove or disprove miracles. Thus, philosophy's role is to help us navigate this uncertainty and develop rational criteria for evaluating conspiracy theories. I will return to the question of rationality in conspiracy theory belief.

Philosophers have debated Keeley's criteria for unwarranted conspiracy theories: Coady (2006), for example, notes that secrecy alone does not imply malevolence, although conspiracies are often assumed to be sinister. Governments, corporations, and intelligence agencies routinely engage in secret operations without necessarily engaging in nefarious behaviour. The criteria of running counter to some official narrative has gained much discussion.

[7] Thus, although Keeley's emphasis is on purported problems with unwarranted conspiracy theories, reflecting an interest in determining whether generalism can work for some subset of conspiracy theories is not a vindication for generalism.

3.1 Contrary to the Official Story

Some scholars propose that contrarianism—that conspiracy theories are counter to the official accounts—is a defining feature of conspiracy theories. For many historical events, there are competing explanations available. In many cases, one such explanation is considered the official account and alternatives to it are, on this approach, conspiracy theories. Take 9/11 conspiracy theories, for example: the US government's official account according to the 9-11 Commission[8] is that the attacks were carried out by agents acting on behalf of Al Qaeda. There are many explanations that conflict with the official accounts of that same event, one particularly notorious one being the 'inside job hypothesis.' To be sure, there are many versions, but one version suggests that high-level officials in the US government knew about the planned attacks and not only let it happen but were actively in on it. It is often assumed when discussing conspiracy theories in terms of their being counter to the official account that they are problematic *because* they run counter to the recognized authorities (such as the US government's account in the case of the 9/11 attacks). Coady (2006) argues that conspiracy theories are best understood as explanations that challenge the narratives promoted by institutions with power. These institutions include governments, media, and academia. Coady (2003) argues that conspiracy theories must conflict with the official account, as he defines a conspiracy theory as follows:

> A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of an historical event, in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event which it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an "official" explanation of the same historical event. (Coady 2003, 201)[9]

While Coady appeals to the 'officialness' criteria, the intended implication is not that conspiracy theories are problematic because they are contrary to the official story. Other scholars such as Levy (2007), Räikkä (2023), Harris (2018; 2022),

[8] https://9-11commission.gov/report/ accessed 25 June 2025.

[9] However, as I understand Coady, he does not believe that conspiracy theories must necessarily be contrarian, since official institutions themselves sometimes promote conspiratorial explanations.

and Uscinski and Parent (2014) have argued that conspiracy theories, by virtue of conflicting with official accounts, are inherently suspect, and that a "conspiracy theory that conflates with the official story […] is prima facie unwarranted" (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 47).[10]

This criterion of officialness raises important questions. First, there are two senses in which an account can be official: (i) in the sense of issuing from an accredited authority, for example an institution (universities, state media, or governments, including the Russian and North Korean governments); (ii) in the sense of issuing from an expert who is a trusted source for knowledge, an epistemic authority. Consider, for instance, the historical case of the assassination of Julius Caesar. According to the consensus view among historians (arguably recognized both as experts that are accredited by institutions and as epistemic authorities), Caesar was assassinated by a small group of conspirators within his own ranks. Because this account is widely accepted and included in history books, it is considered a warranted conspiracy theory. In this case, we can say that the theory's warrant depends on its official status by experts of type (i), as well as its epistemic criteria because it is endorsed by most experts of type (ii).

Considering conspiracy theories that purport to explain historical events, Harris (2022, 446–447) has noted that "many authors have proposed that conspiracy theories are, by definition, contrary to an official account, where the official account is the one favoured by authorities" (see Coady 2006; 2007; Feldman 2011; Harris 2018; Ichino and Räikkä 2020; Keeley 2006; Levy 2007; Räikkä 2009).

But Harris (2022) argues that there is reason to think that defining conspiracy theories in relation to official accounts of historical events is too restrictive: First, conspiracy theories sometimes allege plots to influence future events. For example,

[10] Here, I focus on those accounts that we call official narratives or stories. I will return to the question of epistemic authorities and experts in section 4, since epistemic authorities don't necessarily also provide the official narrative. Depending on how we understand the concept of experts, we can easily imagine a scenario in a dictatorship where it is not the experts but an appointed oligarch, or dishonest academics and journalists, who provide the official accounts. Epistemic authorities might include researchers, scientist, and government officials. Uscinski and Parent (2014) argue that there are "compelling grounds for [Levy's] position," namely that "Experts know what they know because of the serendipitous discoveries and appalling errors accumulated over centuries. […] In fields of expertise, scientists and experts have a much better batting average than other groups of people" (47–48) But in paper III I problematize who these experts are when it comes to conspiracy theories.

conspiracy theories concerning speculation about the intent to establish a New World Order by the Illuminati. Secondly, as in the New World Order case, there is a conspiracy theory even though there is no clear official account with which that theory conflicts. A yet further reason to think the definition is restrictive concerns those cases where authorities of type (i) and type (ii) are in conflict. This problem was well illustrated in a *LiveNOW from FOX* interview (on March 19, 2025), about the recently declassified JFK files, with presidential historian (an accredited expert) James Robenalt. The news anchor presses Robenalt, asking "Why do you feel it is appropriate to question the actual story? The official version of the story is that Oswald was the lone gunman. So, why do you feel like it's fair to question that theory?" Robenalt goes on to answer by giving his reasons for why he feels it is appropriate to question the official story: "The problem is Kennedy gets hit, and within a split second you can see that Connelly gets hit. So, there isn't enough time, for Oswald [given the type of gun he had] to shoot […] load and shoot again. It had to be multiple shooters."

Psychologists have argued that the reason people reject the official story and believe alternative conspiracy theories regarding the JFK assassination is because of "fear" and "uncertainty." In a study about how public belief in JFK conspiracy theories has evolved over time, Willhelm van Prooijen and Karen Douglas (2017) analysed Gallup polling data, showing that in the three years following the assassination, over 50% of Americans believed Kennedy was killed as part of a conspiracy. By 1975, this belief peaked at 81%, remaining consistently above 70% until the early 2000s. Even today, over 60% of Americans still believe in a conspiracy, a higher percentage than immediately after the event. Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017) argue that, while fear and uncertainty may initially have driven belief in conspiracy theories, these explanations alone are insufficient. Instead, they suggest that conspiracy theories can evolve into coherent historical narratives that persist across generations, even without compelling evidence. What begins as a psychological response to uncertainty can become a widely accepted interpretation of history. Note, however, that this can also be said about conspiracy theories that are not contrary to official experts (e.g., it is conceivable that many believed that Al-Qaeda were responsible for the 9/11 attacks as a psychological response to uncertainty, but of course this is an empirical question yet to be determined).

Wood and Douglas (2013) further describe a *conspiracist worldview* as a generalized opposition to official narratives, where the specifics of a theory matter less than its contrarian stance. For people with a conspiracist worldview, belief in a conspiracy is not about endorsing a particular alternative theory but about rejecting the official explanation. However, even an appeal to psychological motivations does not seem to solve the problems raised for the officialness criterion. Keeley suggests that conspiracy theories often rely on data that official explanations don't address, but Harris points out that *all* theories—even well-supported ones—fail to account for vast amounts of unrelated data (e.g., biological theories don't explain astronomy). It would be unfair, he says, to assume conspiracy theorists dismiss official accounts just because they don't explain everything. Instead, Harris proposes a better definition: unaccounted-for data isn't just *ignored* by the official story but is *better explained* by the conspiracy theory. More precisely, it's data that's unlikely under the official account but likely under the conspiracy theory. Harris agrees with Keeley that conspiracy theorists often overvalue such "errant data," but not simply because the data might be false. Even if the data is genuine, its existence doesn't automatically discredit the official account. To think otherwise, he says, would rely on a flawed form of reasoning called probabilistic modus tollens. While modus ponens (if p then q; p is true, so q is likely) works probabilistically, modus tollens doesn't. For example, winning the lottery is incredibly unlikely if the game is fair, but when someone wins, we can't conclude the lottery was rigged. Similarly, just because an event (like a mistaken news report about 9/11) seems improbable under the official story, that doesn't mean the official story is probably wrong. Harris illustrates this with a BBC's erroneous 2001 report that World Trade Center Building 7 had collapsed—26 minutes before it actually did. While this seems bizarre under the official 9/11 account and *less* bizarre under certain conspiracy theories, it doesn't prove the official story is false. Jumping to that conclusion would misuse probability, much like assuming a lottery must be rigged just because someone won.

A reason to deny that conspiracy theories must, by definition, conflict with the claims of authorities—where authority is construed as power—according to Harris (2022) is that such authorities can and do engage in conspiracy theorizing:

> For example, the claim that Joe Biden won the 2020 US presidential election only due to widespread electoral fraud is widely regarded as a conspiracy

> theory. However, this theory was repeatedly alleged by Donald Trump, both during and after his presidency. We thus have a clear example illustrating that persons in power can engage in conspiracy theorizing. This example is not an isolated case. Consider the routine allegations of conspiracy against George Soros made by Central European heads of state […] In fact, allegations of conspiracy are common in the discourse of political leaders, especially populists […] and many such allegations are regarded as conspiracy theories. In fact, it seems appropriate to say that policy can be more or less driven by conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories can in principle, and sometimes do, influence the direction of political power. When considered in this light, the definition of conspiracy theories in opposition to the claims of those in power appears misguided. (Harris 2022, 447)

We can summarize the challenges for the officialness criterion as follows:

- The Problem of Official Accounts Being Conspiracy Theories: Officials often share and engage in what is widely regarded as conspiracy theories (that are against the official narrative).

- The Problem of Identifying the Warranted Official Account: If official status determines warrant, how do we justify dismissing alternative official theories that challenge it?

- The Problem of Time and Context Sensitivity: What is considered "official" at time t_1 may change at time t_2, making conspiracy theories moving targets. What is considered "official" in one country or cultural context may be different form another country or cultural context.

- The Problem of Conflicting Official Accounts: Different authorities (e.g., governments, historians, media) may endorse contradictory official explanations, raising the question of which one is epistemically superior.

The role of officialness in evaluating conspiracy theories presents significant epistemic challenges. The fluidity of official narratives, the persistence of alternative theories, and the public's sometimes justified distrust in epistemic authorities (Brooks 2023) suggest that defining conspiracy theories by their opposition to official accounts does not warrant a dismissal of conspiracy theories as a class. While contrarianism may explain why conspiracy theories arise in some cases, it does not resolve deeper issues about their epistemic status.

3.2 A Political Bat

In his essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964), historian Richard Hofstadter argues that conspiracy theories are not fringe anomalies but a recurring feature of American political culture. Hofstadter emphasizes that this style appears across the political spectrum (though he focuses on right-wing examples like McCarthyism) and throughout US history, from anti-Masonic movements to Cold War red scares. Crucially, he analyses it as a *rhetorical style* rather than a psychological diagnosis—a way of mobilizing followers through dramatic storytelling about good vs. evil. Unlike scholars who study conspiracy theories as belief systems, Hofstadter treats the paranoid style as a political strategy that flourishes during periods of social change, when groups feel their status is threatened. Considering a subjectivist approach to people's belief in conspiracy theories, in paper II I identify *social power*—using conspiracy theories to challenge or maintain authority—which is related to Hofstadter's idea of political strategy. Applying standard decision rules (e.g., Maximax and maximin), I show how rational agents might adopt conspiracy beliefs depending on their goals and risk tolerance. For instance, under the Maximax rule, believing in a conspiracy may be rational if the potential payoff (e.g., to undermine political oppression) outweighs the risks.

Cassam (2019) advances the thesis that conspiracy theories function primarily as a form of right-wing political propaganda. His argument builds upon the analysis of paradigmatic cases like the Birther-conspiracy—which calls President Obama's birthplace into question, and by extension his legitimacy as president of the United States—and contemporary far-right movements. Cassam contends that "conspiracy theories are not just false but politically pernicious" (12), serving as ideological weapons that reinforce authoritarian worldviews while undermining democratic discourse. Cassam's central claim is that conspiracy theories exhibit distinctive epistemic vices—intellectual arrogance, closed-mindedness, and prejudice—that align with right-wing political agendas. He writes: "The most dangerous conspiracy theories are those that circulate within extremist political movements and are used to justify hatred, discrimination, and violence" (45). Rather than being merely misguided explanations, they operate as propaganda tools that exploit fear and resentment, particularly against marginalized groups. For instance, he analyses how the Great Replacement–conspiracy theory, which claims that elites are deliberately replacing white populations with non-white immigrants, has been weaponized by far-right groups to stoke racial animus (67–71).

A key aspect of Cassam's argument is his rejection of the idea that conspiracy theories should be evaluated neutrally. He criticizes the particularist approach for failing to account for the broader political function of conspiracy theories, arguing that "To treat conspiracy theories as if they were merely hypotheses to be assessed on their evidential merits is to miss their role in sustaining oppressive ideologies" (89). Instead, he argues that conspiracy theories should be understood as "a distinctive mode of political discourse" (103), one that thrives in climates of distrust and cultivates a paranoid style of politics. Cassam argues that conspiracy theories are structurally predisposed to right-wing extremism because they rely on simplistic, Manichaean narratives of good versus evil. He observes: "The conspiratorial mindset divides the world into heroes and villains, seeing complex social phenomena as the product of deliberate malevolence rather than systemic factors" (112). This binary thinking, he suggests, aligns with authoritarian tendencies that reject nuance and institutional critique in favour of scapegoating: for example, Cassam argues that anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have historically blamed Jewish people for societal ills, reinforcing a reactionary worldview that resists structural analysis.

Ultimately, Cassam's position is that conspiracy theories are not just epistemically flawed but politically corrosive. He concludes: "The problem with conspiracy theories is not that they are false, but that they are designed to serve an ideological function—one that entrenches division and legitimizes reactionary politics" (150). His argument thus challenges scholars to move beyond abstract debates about evidence and rationality and instead confront the real-world harms of conspiratorial propaganda. While his perspective has been contested, particularly by those who defend a more value-neutral definition of conspiracy theories,[11] it is clear that Cassam is right that some conspiracy theories are right-wing propaganda and a means for scapegoating; but to define all conspiracy theories as such is itself a political bat, minimizing and excluding many other kinds of conspiracy theories, including non-political ones.

[11] See Hagen (2022) for an in-depth refutation of Cassam's definition of conspiracy theories as right-wing propaganda.

3.3 Conspiracism: A Malevolent Global Conspiracy

Keeley's third criteria for defining unwarranted conspiracy theories is that such conspiracy theories attempt to link seemingly unrelated events into a single, overarching plot (in paper I, I call this the Dark filter definition). According to Basham (2003) such a view of a total malevolent global conspiracy is the most extreme example, and he describes it as follows:

> Imagine that the "world" as we know it today is an elaborate hoax. A cabal of unaccountable, parasitic power elites virtually unknown to the public controls the economy, politics, popular ideology, and pop culture and so, by causal implication, the lives of the masses. These conspirators pursue a wholly Machiavellian program for the wealth, power, and challenge, perhaps even for the twisted entertainment and maniacal ego amplification, it provides them. Democracy is merely a status quo–maintaining media sham. Popular political ideologies are carefully constructed rationalizations that are wholly irrelevant to the real conduct and purposes of our global civilization. Right or left-wing libertarianism? Rawlsian egalitarianism? Marxist socialism? This, that, or another political-ism? All are equally putty in the hands of the conspiratorial elite. Academia with its prized intellectual freedom is nothing more than a labyrinth-like diversion, a house of leaves, for potential dissidents and competitors to waste their lives in. The conduct of nations in both peace and war, including whether they are at war or peace, is well orchestrated. The shape of our future—for the masses, a dismal future as personally isolated, intellectually crippled, emotionally shallow consumers and laborers—is largely a matter of plans put into action in the past, probably in the mid-twentieth century … We could go on, but this dark vision hits all the main bases of power and influence in a materialistic culture. If you think anything interesting is absent from the nightmare, feel free to add it. The tentacles of our conspiracy conceptions can extend as far one cares to contemplate. (Basham 2003, 91–92)

In *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2013), the political scientist Michael Barkun paints a similar picture of a conspiracy theorist who has a 'conspiracists' world view. He outlines three key principles that characterize the worldview of conspiracy theorists (Barkun 2013, 4):

- **Nothing happens by accident** – Conspiracy theorists reject randomness or coincidence, believing every significant event is the result of deliberate, hidden agency.

- **Nothing is as it seems** – Appearances are deceptive; what is publicly presented (e.g., official explanations) is a façade masking the true, sinister forces at work.

- **Everything is connected** – Events, no matter how disparate, are linked as part of a grand, often malevolent, design. Conspiracy theorists engage in "pattern-seeking" to uncover hidden linkages.

Barkun argues that these principles create a closed epistemic system where all phenomena are interpreted through the lens of an omnipresent conspiracy, making such beliefs resistant to falsification. Barkun also has a size criterion with respect to talk of conspiracies, ranging from 'event conspiracies' to 'systemic conspiracies' to 'superconspiracies.' It is rational, according to Barkun, to believe in event conspiracies, since they concern a "limited, discrete event or set of events … [where] the conspiratorial forces are alleged to have focused their energies on a limited, well-defined objective" (Barkun 2003, 6). Belief in an event conspiracy might be rational, depending on the evidence. But Barkun argues that belief in conspiracy theories is representative of a worldview, on the part of the conspiracy theorist, in which nothing happens by accident, nothing can be taken at face value, and everything is connected and, like Hofstadter, Barkun associates belief in conspiracies with a kind of paranoia style (Barkun 2003, 8).

The thesis of conspiracism describes a particular problem with belief in conspiracy theories on the part of certain conspiracy theorists, whom he labels the conspiracists. A conspiracist is someone who believes in the existence of conspiracies without good reason (Dentith 2014). The terms 'conspiracism' and 'conspiracist' are pejorative labels which reflect a pathological belief in conspiracies sans evidence. Dentith argues that while we can single out a subset of conspiracy theorists, those who believe that "nothing happens by accident"—the class of conspiracists—the thesis of conspiracism "tells us nothing particularly interesting about conspiracy theories in general, since it is not obvious that all conspiracy theorists follow a conspiracist mode of thinking" (35). Coady identifies this concern by observing that dismissing all conspiracy theories because some are flawed is an obvious argumentative fallacy. He writes:

> What needs to be shown is not that there are conspiracy theories and theorists with certain undesirable characteristics, but that there is a connection between being a conspiracy theory or theorist and these undesirable characteristics. What needs to be shown, in other words, is that the theories or theorists have the undesirable characteristics because they are conspiracy theories or theorists. (Coady 2012, 131)

Conspiracism is a folk-psychological thesis suggesting that conspiracy theorists don't just make a faulty inference when they believe a conspiracy theory; rather, they have jumped to the conclusion that a conspiracy is the best explanation of some event because of some psychological defect.

Dentith (2014) argues that while there is room for discussion about the psychology of conspiracy theorists, "we should not let psychological theses about the rationality of certain types of conspiracy theorists intrude on a discussion of the epistemic warrant of particular conspiracy theories" (36). Dentith highlights that while this may be true of people like David Icke and Glenn Beck—who might be thought of as signature conspiracy theorists—it still does not make them typical. Rather, Dentith writes, "they are significant" and "[n]othing about that significance, however, tells us about how typical they are with respect to the wider group of conspiracy theorists" (2014, 37). Of course, this is an empirical issue, and Dentith continues:

> without data as to how typical people like Icke and Beck are with respect to the group of conspiracy theorists in general, we should be charitable and talk about conspiracy theorists in a non-pejorative manner. After all, it would be silly to tar the thesis of atheism with the facile arguments of atheists who became atheists merely because they have been socially conditioned to be atheists, or have a certain psychological attitude towards disbelief in the existence of God or the gods. In the same way, we should not tar conspiracy theories with the attitudes of a certain class of conspiracy theorist, the conspiracist. After all, the truth or falsity of the thesis of atheism is a fact independent of what we believe about the world. Either there are gods or there are not. (2014, 36)

Dentith concludes that "We cannot analyse whether belief in conspiracy theories can ever be rational through the lens of conspiracism, because conspiracism is

based upon the assumption that belief in conspiracy theories is prima facie irrational" (2014, 37).

Psychologists and philosophers have suggested that the malevolent global conspiracy stems from paranoia (Pierre, 2023). Paranoia is an unreasonable fear of some person, group, institution or possible event, and it comes in degrees, from the most rabid psychosis in which everyone is feared in every imaginable way, to more topically narrow cases in which the fear is experienced selectively. Although such fear is not obviously psychiatric or self-destructive, it is the cases in which it attains that level that concern us. Does the accusation of paranoia necessarily apply to those who accept the possibility, even likelihood of malevolent global conspiracies animated by a global power elite? According to Basham (2003) it is not:

> Belief in the possibility of such conspiracies needn't be an expression of unreasonable fear. We have seen at length how a rational person can come to accept this possibility, perhaps even its likelihood or eventuality. While the conspiracy theorist's concerns may easily prove misplaced, there is nothing inherently exaggerated or distorted in them. This is all the more evident in the context of an extremely hierarchical, routinely secretive society like our own. Only the paranoid (or extremely inquisitive) are likely to become conspiracy theorists. But this reveals more about the current complacency of the average citizen than it does about the nature of the conspiracy theorist's concerns. While the details of her preferred conspiratorial account are frequently speculative, her motivating concern can be arrived at rationally. (Basham 2003, 100)

Much of the psychological and sociological research on conspiracy theories has focused on correlating belief in certain specific explanations—for example the theory that 9/11 was an inside job, or that Oswald didn't act alone—with a demographic or psychological profile. But, as Cohnitz (2018) argues, such a correlation will hold between this profile and conspiracy theories as defined in the proposed definition only if these theories are irrationally believed by the people that participate in that study. And these studies usually do not investigate on what evidence or with which justification these theories are believed. Rather, as Cohnitz notes: "The trick to close this gap is not to define conspiracy theory outright as an irrationally believed explanation of some event, but to show that conspiracy theories can only be believed in an irrational way" (358).

Peter Knight has also questioned this kind of analysis, arguing that:

> [L]abelling a view paranoid has now become an empty circular description with a gloss of scientific rigor: the paranoid is someone who (amongst other things) believes in conspiracy theories, and, conversely, the reason that people believe in conspiracy theories is that they are paranoid. (Knight 2000, 15)

Nevertheless, in paper I, when I discuss a conspiracy theorist as somebody who has a conspiracist world view, which I call the Dark-filter definition, I question if such a worldview that supposedly affects all aspects of one's reality makes it potentially difficult to operationalize (at least as a non-clinical pathology). One could also question whether there are such subjects in the first place. For similar reasons, Pigden (1995) argued, in response to Popper (1945) whose conceptualisation of a conspiracy theorist closely corresponded to the Dark-filter definition, that "it is a theory no sane person maintains" (Pigden 1995, 3)

3.4 Minimalist Definition

Having considered various notions of conspiracy theories, Dentith (2014) argues that if we aim to evaluate the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories, the starting point should be a minimal and non-pejorative definition. Such a definition captures the essential characteristics of conspiratorial activity without presupposing its epistemic status or moral valence. According to Dentith, "the most minimal conception of what counts as a 'conspiracy theory' is that it is a theory about a conspiracy: conspiracy theories posit that some conspiracy explains the occurrence of an event" (Dentith 2014, 36). This basic formulation provides a neutral foundation from which philosophical analysis can proceed. Dentith proposes three necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a conspiracy theory: First, the *Conspirators Condition* requires the existence of agents coordinating with intentionality. Second, the *Secrecy Condition* stipulates deliberate efforts to conceal this coordination. Third, the *Goal Condition* specifies that these agents pursue some intended outcome. If we accept that conspiracies fundamentally involve coordinated, secretive, goal-directed actions, then conspiracy theories become any explanatory hypotheses that identify such activities as salient causes of events. This includes everything from grand political machinations to mundane social

arrangements. The definition's breadth is intentional—as Dentith notes, "even surprise birthday parties qualify as conspiratorial under these terms, satisfying all three conditions through their planned secrecy and celebratory aims" (Dentith 2014, 40)

The minimalist approach deliberately separates the question "What is a conspiracy theory?" from "Which conspiracy theories warrant belief?" This methodological separation proves philosophically vital. As Dentith argues, adopting this neutral definition helps avoid "confusing the pathological psychology of some conspiracy theorists with the question of whether it is rational to believe certain conspiracy theories" (Dentith 2014, 42). The definition's inclusivity serves two critical philosophical functions. First, it prevents premature normative judgements from contaminating conceptual analysis. Second, it acknowledges that many historically validated explanations—from the Watergate scandal to various government spying programs such as MKUltra and the PRISM affair—began as conspiracy theories under this minimal definition. Dentith emphasizes this point when noting that numerous well-accepted, warranted explanations of events in history and in politics cite conspiracies as a salient cause (2014, 45).

While institutional conspiracies understandably attract greater scholarly and public concern due to their potential to undermine social trust, the minimalist approach insists that our conceptual framework must accommodate all varieties of conspiratorial explanation. Only then can we properly assess whether certain classes of conspiracy theories warrant particular epistemic suspicion. As Dentith concludes, "it is going to be easier to address the question of when it is rational, or irrational, to believe such an explanation, if we take an interest in the broad class of explanations covered by this definition" (Dentith 2014, 47).

While I have not suggested my own definition in my papers, I have argued for the usefulness of a value-neutral definition of the term 'conspiracy theory'. In paper I, in which I consider and discuss the various definiens on offer in the literature, I describe the simple definition of 'conspiracy theory', as found in most dictionaries. From Charles Pigden's (1995, 2006) argument that we are virtually all conspiracy theorists, I show how two problems emerge from this conclusion, namely the *Problem of Self-Identification*—all of us are conspiracy theorists, but few would identify themselves as such—and the *Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness*—because everyone is a conspiracy theorist, the construct is essentially theoretically useless. I then show that existing conceptions cannot solve both

problems. One must choose to solve one or the other, giving rise to a dilemma, the *Conspiracy Definition Dilemma.* Ultimately, while various criteria—such as secrecy, intent, or opposition to official accounts—may help define conspiracy theories, no single definition appears to resolve both the Problem of Self-Identification and the Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness. Balancing these two aims is difficult. If the definition is too broad, it risks becoming analytically useless; if it is too narrow, it may fail to capture what makes conspiracy theories distinctive. As Wlodek Rabinowicz aptly puts it, the definition dilemma is like "trying to steer between Scylla and Charybdis."[12] Ultimately, I do not propose a definition. I argue only that which definition we choose reflects other values and will ultimately depend on our interest in the matter.

[12] In personal correspondence.

Chapter 4

Is it Rational to Believe in Conspiracy Theories?

PHILOSOPHERS HAVE RAISED several objections to the rationality of believing in conspiracy theories. Whether we should regard conspiracy theorizing as irrational depends in part on what notion of rationality we have in mind. According to Levy (2020), sometimes rationality is understood in a way that implicitly presupposes an objectivist standard: someone is irrational if they fail to use the procedure that has the best chance of reaching the truth. But rationality can also be used in a more subjectivist fashion. According to the subjectivist standard, someone is rational if they use the procedure that is best by their lights (assessing someone's behaviour as rational because they adhere to Bayesian principles would be subjectivist, since they would be updating on their prior subjective probabilities, not on the objective probabilities that their beliefs are true) (Doyle 2021). These two standards can diverge—someone who consults tea leaves before acting may be acting rationally viewed from the subjective perspective, while being extremely irrational by an objective standard (Levy 2020). So, when we ask whether a conspiracy theory (or believing in conspiracy theories) is rational, we might also ask whether it is objectively or subjectively rational. Rationality understood objectively depends, *inter alia*, on how common conspiracy theories actually are, i.e., the success of the conspiracy, which is often measured by the degree to which the conspirators manage to keep it a secret, or whether they in fact carry it out to completion (Grimes 2016; Hagen 2018; Keeley 2018). According to Levy (2020),

"[t]he knee-jerk rejection of such theories is justified only if real conspiracies are rare or usually ineffectual" (65). Levy notes that "A number of philosophers have argued that conspiracies are in fact relatively common and relatively successful, such that it is irrational to rule them out without serious investigation" (ibid.). According to Stokes the difference in intuition on this "seems to come down to background assumptions about how the world works." Either conspiracies happen all the time, or they happen sometimes but most claimed conspiracies don't turn out to be true (Stokes 2023, 6). The argument for dismissing conspiracy theories as prima facie irrational, made by philosophers such as Stokes, Levy, and others, is that we ought to consider, for example, the low likelihood of a conspiracy being successful, or that conspiracy theories conflict with the claims of relevant epistemic authorities, as factors which make them irrational to believe. Let's consider both claims in turn.

4.1 The Success Rate of Conspiracy Theories

As far back as Machiavelli (Coady 2018, 179), many have claimed that conspiracies tend to fail, at least with respect to open, democratic societies (Popper 1956; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). Popper, for instance, claimed that the conspiracy theory of society only holds if conspiracies are both widespread and successful, meaning the conspirators fully accomplish their aims. He suggested that the Holocaust was unsuccessful because the Nazis failed to completely eradicate the Jewish people, despite the suffering and destruction they inflicted (Popper 1972, 342). Harris (2022) further agrees that, in contrast to the claims of particularists, the poor historical track record of conspiracy theories warrants adopting a defeasibly sceptical attitude toward such theories as a class (446). This raises the question of whether success should be measured by the fulfilment of the ultimate goals of the conspirators or simply by the concealment of the conspiracy itself.

Responding to this general idea, Coady writes that "The argument that conspiracies tend to fail because they always or usually end up being exposed is mistaken in two ways. First, there is no reason to believe the premise is true. Second, the conclusion does not follow from the premise" (Coady 2012, 117; cf. 2018, 180). Coady points out that no examples of secrets that have been kept

successfully to this day can be offered, no matter how numerous they are; and the fraction of exposed conspiracies relative to the total number of conspiracies thus cannot be determined, since there is no way of knowing the number of those not revealed. Further, based on what we know, Coady rhetorically asks, "Does the US government regularly engage in conspiratorial and clandestine operations? No one familiar with US history could think otherwise" (Coady 2012, 120). According to Hagen (2023), this consideration "actually gives us a reason to think that certain kinds of conspiracies do not tend to fail, at least in the sense of their specific details becoming widely known."

Basham (2003), for example, disputes the notion that conspiracy tends to fail. He argues on the contrary that conspiracy often succeeds:

> Frequently they succeed. Exclusion and manipulation of various institutions of public information is an inevitable requirement. The conspiracy theorist's concern is a natural response. The very idea of "secret societies," be they Freemasons, corporate boards, or government security agencies, inevitably invites the understandably suspicious question, "What's the secret?" Common sense about the public sphere is hardly at odds with the conspiracy theorist's background suspicion. Police investigations are frequently no more than conspiracies to infiltrate and entrap criminals or those liable to crime. Espionage is hardly restricted to the Secret Intelligence Service and the CIA. In the corporate world it's business as usual, unquestionably very good business, both for the practitioners and for their hired adversaries. Industries pour billions of dollars into preventing and no doubt conducting industrial espionage. They conspire against other corporations and expect the same against themselves. Competing political, ideological, and religious organizations are no different. They all conspire against each other. It's called history. Is the history of the world the history of warring secret societies? Seen in this light, it seems a banal truism. The issue before us is one of degree. A spectrum exists between the trusting and distrusting background theories of our civilization. Reasoned epistemic choice within this spectrum can only advert to empirical facts about the actual degree of conspiracy at work in the multitude of institutional relationships spanning all sectors of political, governmental, and economic enterprise. But getting the real measure of this is something that most all of us are in no reliable position to judge. I suspect that virtually no one is or can be. This is, literally, beyond our ken. (Basham 2003, 96)

Dentith (2014) suggests that Popper's claim—a conspiracy theory is unsuccessful once it is exposed—is really about perfectly kept secrets. This implies that "[a] revealed conspiracy is a conspiracy that is unsuccessful, if we take it that a successful conspiracy is one that no one other than the conspirators would ever know about" (Dentith 2014, 27). However, Dentith argues that if only perfectly concealed activities count as conspiracies, then real-world conspirators could easily dismiss accusations by labelling them as baseless conspiracy theories. Moreover, Dentith asks, if conspirators themselves know about the conspiracy, does that mean it is no longer a secret, and thus no longer genuine? For example, if a whistleblower reveals a plot, does that automatically negate the conspiracy's existence, even if the plot was real? By setting such stringent conditions, according to Dentith, these definitions not only undermine rational scrutiny of conspiratorial activity but also risk enabling conspirators by shielding them from accountability (Dentith 2014, 29).

The question of the success rate and the condition of perfect secrecy is further explored and developed by Grimes (2016). Grimes takes into account the common intuition that a large group of people cannot keep a secret for very long, and that the secret will at some point be exposed. He proposes an account to assess the viability of conspiracy theories by a mathematical model estimating the likelihood of a conspiracy's exposure based on the number of conspirators (N) and the time (t) that has passed since the alleged conspiracy. The model's parameters are derived from exposed conspiracies (e.g., NSA surveillance, Tuskegee experiments), calculating the probability (p) of failure due to leaks. Grimes applies this model to common anti-science narratives—claims such as the moon-landing being a hoax, that climate researchers are faking data, and anti-vaxx theories—demonstrating that large conspiracies (≥1000 agents) would quickly collapse under their own secrecy demands. While acknowledging that some conspiracies are real (e.g., the Watergate scandal), his model potentially provides a tool to differentiate plausible claims from untenable ones, countering harmful anti-science beliefs by quantifying their improbability over time.

Dentith (2019) challenges Grimes's foundational assumption that conspiracies are typically exposed by insiders, either accidentally or through whistleblowing. Examining Grimes's three key examples (including the NSA Prism affair, exposed by Edward Snowden), Dentith demonstrates that these conspiracies were revealed by outsiders who discovered—rather than participated in—the covert activities.

This creates what Dentith calls "a mismatch between Grimes' chosen examples, and his theory about how leaks over time revealed and made these conspiracies redundant; his examples fail to capture the very thing he wants to measure" (17). Dentith argues that Grimes's model fails to account for participants who may unknowingly contribute to conspiracies without recognizing their involvement, and who consequently would have no reason to become whistleblowers. This fundamental flaw in Grimes's parameter estimation undermines the reliability of his mathematical model for assessing conspiracy viability.

In paper III, I argue that there is yet another fundamental flaw in Grimes's model, one which Grimes himself partially anticipates. Grimes admits that using exposed conspiracies for parameter estimation may bias results toward higher failure probabilities p, though he downplays this concern by citing how even small conspiracies like Watergate were quickly exposed. However, this methodological issue is more serious than Grimes acknowledges. The model categorizes conspiracy theories into several classes: demonstrably false ones, plausible but unverified ones, plausible but time-expired ones, and exposed conspiracies. Crucially, Grimes's model estimates failure probabilities only for plausible conspiracies, but does so using data exclusively from exposed cases—a problematic approach since, as Grimes concedes, most conspiracies remain successfully hidden. According to Grimes, the model provides an estimate for the intrinsic failure of reasonable conspiracies after some time t. Importantly, these conspiracies may or may not be exposed in the future. However, the parameter estimates in the model are based solely on exposed conspiracies. Now, this matters because, as Grimes himself indeed emphasizes, "conspirators are in general dedicated for the most part to the concealment of their activity" so that "the act of a conspiracy being exposed is a relatively rare and independent event" (3–4). In fact, one of Grimes's assumptions about a decaying group of conspirators lends further support to the latter claim. In other words, Grimes's parameter estimates introduce not only overly high estimates of p, but quite possibly intolerably high estimates. Another way of putting it is that the model does not estimate the probability of failure per se, but the conditional probability of failure given that the conspiracy will be exposed at some point. In order to make probability estimates about the intrinsic failure of conspiracy theories generally, a model must be based on a representative sample from the class of reasonable conspiracy theories, one that is not skewed toward conspiracies that have been or will be exposed. Granted, this is very difficult, and most likely an unrealistic enterprise.

In effect, this is a dilemma for Grimes: either the model quite possibly grossly overestimates the probability of intrinsic failure, or it provides no guidance whatsoever as to the viability of a given reasonable conspiracy theory.[13]

In sum, while epistemic factors are certainly relevant, a fuller understanding of conspiracy beliefs must account for their social and psychological roots. The subjectivist under uncertainty framework, which I develop in paper II, offers a way to explore how rational agents might adopt belief in conspiracy theories, even when objectivist probabilities are lacking. This perspective encourages us to interpret conspiracy theories not merely as epistemic lapses, but as nuanced social behaviours driven by varied motivations.

4.2 Experts and Epistemic Authority

It is argued that conspiracy theories are not only counter to official narratives, but that conspiracy theorists actively reject experts, which may lead them to instead postulate a conspiracy theory (Brooks 2023).[14] According to Levy (2022), accepting experts' testimony is a far more reliable route to truth than relying on one's own skills or doing own research. He argues that expert knowledge is systematically more reliable than individual judgment, particularly in fields like epidemiology, climate science, and medicine, referencing the Dunning-Kruger effect—that people with less expertise tend to overestimate their competence—which plays a role by making people more susceptible to misinformation and conspiracy theories. Levy argues that rejecting experts often leads to worse epistemic outcomes because laypeople gravitate toward, for example, echo chambers (when they only engage with sources that confirm pre-existing beliefs),

[13] For a more detailed criticism of Grimes model, see Hagen (2023).

[14] Brooks's (2023) account of why conspiracy theories emerge in open democratic societies is a case in point. According to Brooks, democratic citizens presuppose that epistemic authorities (e.g., government agencies, experts, journalists) seek the truth in good faith. This expectation generates normative demands: authorities should be open to new evidence; they should demonstrate healthy scepticism; and they should engage fairly with critics. However, when authorities fail to meet these expectations—by being dogmatic, dismissive, or engaging in *ad hominem* attacks—citizens face a dilemma: either downgrade the credibility of epistemic authorities or propose an alternative, a conspiracy theory. Thus, the perceived failure of epistemic authorities to behave as truth-seekers can justify the emergence of conspiracy theories.

misinformation (when they lack the tools to separate credible from unreliable sources), and conspiratorial thinking (when they assume disagreement among experts is evidence of deception). Instead of blindly trusting either experts or alternative sources, he argues that people should cultivate epistemic humility—recognizing their own limitations and deferring to credible expertise. Thus, when conspiracy theorists reject expertise in favour of "doing [their] own research," their theories are epistemically flawed (Levy 2022, 355).

Dentith (2018, 197) raises three worries with the notion of relying on expert testimony: 1) Who are the experts in this case? 2) Are these experts acting sincerely? and 3) Are the experts conspiring? Although we often know who has the appropriate expertise when it comes to assessing evidence for certain kinds of theories or claims, Dentith argues that it is also true that many ordinary epistemic agents are insensitive to the distinction between someone being in a position of authority and someone being an expert. This is not just a problem for the laity, Dentith notes:

> even philosophers can be beguiled by the mere appearance of authority. Neil Levy, for example, argues that when conspiracy theories exist in contrast to some official theory (a theory which has been endorsed by some influential institution), then we should prefer the official theory. This is because—at least to Levy—official theories are largely the product of epistemic authorities, and we have a preference for such official theories when they exist in contrast to conspiracy theories [Levy 2007]. If there is a case for preferring official theories over conspiracy theories, it will be grounded in the understanding that only some official theories are epistemically superior; the officialness of a theory does not necessarily tell us anything about its epistemic merits. Officialness in this case only tells us that the theory has been endorsed by some influential institution. Given institutions are many and varied, some endorsements will be epistemic whilst others will be merely political or pragmatic. (Dentith 2018, 197–198)

Dentith continues:

> being an authority—a member of an influential institution—does not necessarily make one an expert; a theory can be labelled as 'official' just because it has been endorsed by some influential authority. This does not tell us about the epistemic nature of the endorsement, which might be political or pragmatic. As such, we should not confuse a theory's endorsement with it having any special epistemic character. An endorsement tells us little about whether the evidence supports the theory. It simply tells us that someone or some influential institution has leant support to it. (ibid.)

Our understanding of epistemic authorities may differ, since some authors understand epistemic authority as consisting of, or deriving from, reliability (Harris 2022; Brown 2004; Goldman 1999). On this construal of epistemic authority, the definition of conspiracy theories as conflicting with the claims of epistemic authorities would amount to a pejorative definition, and Harris argues that there are inherit weaknesses of such definitions. According to Harris (2022), there are reasons to avoid defining conspiracy theories as conflicting with the claims of epistemic authorities, so construed. Instead, Harris suggests we should "understand epistemic authority in terms of credentials, positions, and the like, rather than in terms of reliability" (7). He further defines the domain of such epistemic authorities in a well-functioning systems as follows:

> On this approach, the reliability of epistemic authorities will be contingent upon whether credentials and positions are reserved for those who are epistemically reliable. In well-functioning systems, only those who will be reliable judges about claims in a certain domain will receive credentials or positions constitutive of epistemic authority in that domain. For example, in a well-functioning system, only individuals who are reliable judges of questions concerning biochemistry will receive advanced degrees in biochemistry. Likewise, in a well-functioning system, only individuals with a high degree of reliability concerning questions related to engineering will occupy prominent roles within engineering associations. […] In a poorly functioning system, by contrast, individuals may occupy positions of epistemic authority by virtue of nepotism, bribery, or some further factor unrelated to reliability. (7–8)

Having clarified the concept of epistemic authority, Harris defines conspiracy theories as theories that allege conspiracies and "conflict with the claims of

relevant epistemic authorities, where epistemic authority is a matter of credentials and positions" (ibid.). This then begs the question who these experts on conspiracy theories are, as the relevant epistemic authorities with credentials. Dentith asks: "is there a community of experts with respect to conspiracy theories like there are, say, for scientific theories? Or is expertise—at least when it comes to particular conspiracy theories—'improvised'?" And Dentith continues: "After all, whilst there are experts in conspiracy theories as a class of theories (i.e. conspiracy theory theories) in social psychology, sociology and philosophy, when it comes to particular conspiracy theories the waters […] are muddy" (199). Dentith suggests a community of inquiry approach:

> A community of inquiry approach with respect to conspiracy theories would accept that whilst there may be no accredited experts with respect to such theories, the epistemic burden of analysing such theories can be shared by the members of a properly constructed epistemic community. (204)

In paper III I explore what it means to be an expert on conspiracy theories. I identify three levels of expertise: experts on particular facts relevant to a conspiracy theory, experts on a conspiracy theory domain, and general experts on conspiracy theories as a phenomenon. I suggest that while it's relatively easy to identify level-one and level-two experts on conspiracy theories, the identification of level-three experts remains deeply problematic. This is because, as I show, there is currently no institutionally recognized or methodologically sound way to determine who such experts are. My analysis of the levels of experts shows that conspiracy theorists do not necessarily reject experts on conspiracy theories, but they might reject the particular conclusion on a particular fact pertaining to the conspiracy theory that they are experts on. And if the claim that 'conspiracy theorists are psychologically predisposed to reject experts' means that they reject a particular fact, or conclusions drawn by an expert that perhaps doesn't fit their narrative or contradicts other information they may have, then it doesn't pick out any unique feature of conspiracy theorists. Rather, it is better described as belief bias and motivated reasoning, which is a cognitive trait that affects most (if not all) of us.

Chapter 5

Why do People Believe in Conspiracy Theories?

THE PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE has mainly focused on the epistemic status of the theories rather than those who believe in them. However, the discussion has naturally shifted from the definition or conceptualization of the term itself to the reasons and motivations individuals have when they come to believe in or subscribe to conspiracy theories. Clarke (2019), for example, shifts the attention to the conspiracy theorists, identifying some as "victims of cognitive failure." Clarke argues, however, that conspiracy theorists may still be beneficial for the community at large:

> Although conspiracy theorists do commit a cognitive error that leads them to prefer theories that are otherwise less plausible over theories that are otherwise more plausible, the activities of the conspiracy theorists are not to be condemned outright. The prevalence of conspiracy theorizing is beneficial to us in several ways. […] The conspiracy theorists may be a victim of cognitive error, but it is perhaps to our advantage that they remain in error. Although we would not wish to fall victim to the fundamental attribution error, it can sometimes be to our advantage that others do. Perhaps we should thank the conspiracy theorist for remaining vigilant on our behalf. (Clarke 2019, 34)

In contrast to the philosophical debate, research in the social sciences and psychology has mainly focused on correlations of the personality traits, political

orientation, and socioeconomical features of conspiracy theorists (van Prooijen and Douglas 2018). Study results have suggested that "conspiracy beliefs emerge as ordinary people make judgements about the social and political world" (Radnitz and Underwood 2015), and that people are more likely to believe more conspiracy theories if they live in countries with higher corruption (Alper 2023). Some studies have emphasized specific characteristics, personality traits, cognitive errors, and pathologies, such as narcissism, illusory pattern perception, magical thinking, hypersensitive agency detection, and paranoia as key factors for belief in conspiracy theories (Cichocka, Marchlewska, and De Zavala 2016; Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Biddlestone 2022). And other accounts tell us about the psychological benefits of belief in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen 2022) as well as of non-doxastic belief in conspiracy theories (Ichino and Räikkä 2020), for example because they may be entertaining (van Prooijen et al. 2022).

5.1 Psychology, Cognition, Pathology

Psychological research on conspiracy beliefs can be broadly divided into two perspectives: those that pathologize such beliefs and those that treat them as sub-clinical phenomena. Nevertheless, some argue that the pathological approach has lost traction (Moulding et al. 2016; Bortolotti 2024). Conspiracy theory belief has been associated with delusional belief, but most researchers agree that belief in conspiracy theories is different from many delusions (Bortolotti 2024; Pierre 2023). Most agree that the vast majority of people that believe in some conspiracy theory are non-clinical cases, given that approximately 50% of Americans are said to believe some conspiracy theory (Uscinski and Parent 2014). It has further been argued that there are other important ways in which belief in conspiracy theories is decidedly unlike (non-clinical) delusional beliefs. Cook and Griffin (2023), for example, point to the difference in how conspiracy theorists engage with evidence:

> Conspiracy beliefs and delusions also differ in their form, notably in relation to evidence. Proponents of conspiracy theories generally cite evidence that is discernibly pertinent to establishing the conspiracy's veracity and drawn from publicly verifiable external sources. Meanwhile, "Deluded patients often cite as evidence pieces of information that seem totally disconnected from the belief" and moreover are often sourced from private, subjective experience. Finally,

> conspiracy beliefs are to a significant extent socially shared within the relevant social-subcultural epistemic communities, and indeed distress associated with them is mitigated by their perceived credibility within the believer's social network. (Cook and Griffin 2023, 1412)

Studies have identified cognitive needs—such as the desire for closure, the maintenance of a coherent worldview, and the interpretation of stressful events—as motivational drivers behind conspiracy beliefs (Leman and Cinnirella 2013; Marchlewska, Cichocka, and Kossowska 2018). Since a sense of control is crucial for psychological well-being, cognitive science links illusory pattern perception—often triggered by a perceived lack of control—to conspiracy theorizing. Whitson and Galinsky (2008, 115) propose that when individuals feel a loss of control, they instinctively seek patterns, constructing meaningful connections between unrelated stimuli to create predictability. They argue that this compensatory mechanism leads to illusory pattern perception, manifesting in false correlations, imagined figures, and conspiracy theories. According to their hypothesis, conspiracy theories provide explanatory narratives that impose order on chaotic events, thereby restoring a sense of agency.

Moreover, studies have identified cognitive needs as part of the motivation for conspiracy beliefs, such as a cognitive need for closure to maintain one's world view and to make sense of stressful events (Leman and Cinnirella 2013; Marchlewska, Cichocka, and Kossowska 2018). Feelings of control are essential for people's psychological well-being. In cognitive science the phenomenon of illusory pattern perception, typically caused by experiencing a lack of control, is linked to belief in conspiracy theories. According to Whitson and Galinsky (2008), when faced with a lack of control, people turn to pattern perception (in general), the identification of a coherent and meaningful interrelationship between a set of stimuli, and through this they seek to make sense of events and develop predictions. Whitson and Galinsky hypothesize further that lacking control will lead to illusory pattern perception, such as the tendency to perceive false correlations, see imaginary figures, and embrace conspiracy theories. They suggest that seeing and seeking patterns as a response to sensing a lack of control is due to pattern perception being a compensatory mechanism designed to restore a feeling of control. Conspiracy theories are, according to the authors, one example of how this process works, by assigning causes and motives to events "in order to bring the disturbing vagaries of reality under control" (115).

5.2 Social Factors: Group Cohesion and Group Dynamics

Social-psychological research, however, emphasizes pragmatic rather than epistemic motivations for conspiracy beliefs, often framing them as non-doxastic (Ichino and Räikkä 2021). Psychologists and sociologists have identified specific social-cognitive processes that heighten susceptibility to conspiracy theories, including the need for belonging, self-esteem preservation, and in-group protection. Research suggests that conspiracy theories are particularly appealing to those who perceive threats to their self-image or group identity (Douglas et al. 2017; Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Golec de Zavala 2016). Douglas et al. (2017) argue that conspiracy theories function defensively, with belief in them linked to traits like narcissism and paranoid ideation. Marginalized or victimized groups, for example, are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories targeting powerful out-groups.

Kreko (2015) challenges the notion that conspiracy beliefs stem solely from individual pathology, arguing instead that they are a normal product of social-psychological processes. He distinguishes societal conspiracy theories from paranoid delusions, noting that the former target collective entities (e.g., nations or cultural groups) rather than individuals. Unlike mental disorders such as schizophrenia, conspiracy theories are widespread in modern societies. According to Kreko's framework of collective motivated cognition, conspiracy theories serve to delineate in-groups from out-groups and can either challenge or reinforce social hierarchies. They emerge across the political spectrum, motivating actions to change the status quo, control the powerful, or justify oppression against lower-status groups (Kreko 2015, 66).

Group dynamics play a significant role in conspiracy belief. Irving Janis's (1982, 2020) work on *groupthink* highlights how pressure to conform suppresses dissent, creating an illusion of consensus. Belief in a conspiracy theory can signal group membership or reinforce in-group identity by contrasting with out-group views. Political science links such beliefs to propaganda and extremism, with some studies associating them more with right-wing ideologies (Cassam 2020).

The social-psychological factors that contribute to and motivate belief in conspiracy theories are pragmatic rather than epistemic, in that they typically

feature non-doxastic beliefs (Ichino and Räikkä 2020) and are concerned to identify precisely those social motivations that are in play, such as signalling to the in-group (and not, for example, a motivation to understand the world). Psychologists and sociologists have focused on specific social cognitive processes that may increase the likelihood of people believing conspiracy theories. For example, people may have the desire to belong and to maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group, and as such conspiracy theories, it is argued, are particularly appealing to those who find the positive image of their self or in-group to be threatened in some way (Douglas et. al. 2017; Chichocka, Marchlewska, and Golec de Zavala 2016). Douglas et al. (2017) suggests that conspiracy theories are recruited defensively, and as such conspiracy belief is associated with narcissism and paranoid ideation; groups that feel that they have been victimized are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories about powerful out-groups.

Kreko (2015) argues against the view that beliefs in conspiracy are products of individual psychology.[15] Rather, conspiracy theories are 'normal', and should be explained as normalcy and not pathology, being seen as products of social psychological processes. Kreko argues that "Societal conspiracy theories should be distinguished from paranoic delusions: The perceived plot is directed against a collective as a nation, a group or a culture, while a paranoid person is afraid of conspiracies personally against him—or herself"; adding, "Conspiracy theories are, unlike mental disorders such as schizophrenia and paranoia, abundant in modern societies" (64). According to this framework of collective motivated cognition, beliefs in conspiracy theories "help draw a line between the in-group and the out-group" and conspiracy theories "emerge above and below in the social-political hierarchy, can motivate actions for changing the status quo, exercise control over the powerful, or, on the contrary, justify oppression and aggression against the lower status groups and cement social hierarchies" (66).

According to Janis (1982, 2020), some symptoms of groupthink and the desire for group cohesion can be identified as the collective effort to rationalize disparate events, and a pressure to differentiate oneself from those members who challenge the group consensus, this being indicative of disloyalty. Self-censorship occurs, in that members do not voice views dissenting or contrary to the groups, creating a

[15] Krekó (2015) focuses on conspiracy theories that are popular, malevolent, and seem to be highly improbable in light of logical investigations.

false perception that members have achieved consensus. Silence is considered consent. To believe in (or to commit to) a conspiracy theory, motivated by group cohesion, thus amounts to signalling and communicating one's own membership of the group. As we have seen, political science has linked belief in conspiracy theories to political propaganda and political extremism. Biddlestone, Cichocka, Žeželj, and Bilewicz (2020, 220–221) found that "portraying certain enemy groups as conspiring can be used in propaganda to mobilise war efforts and to engage society in collective goals." Although some suggest that conspiracy theories of this kind are more often associated with right-wing political leanings (Cassam 2020), others have found that the political leaning associated with such beliefs (whether right- or left-wing) will depend on the conspiracy theory (Radnitz and Underwood 2015). It may also be what mainstream media or others in one's group (who are perhaps motivated by other desires) have come to believe. A person who is less interested by the truth of the matter, then, may come to adopt the group's beliefs regarding a particular conspiracy theory. For a group or individual to whom group cohesion matters a great deal, there is a motivation to adopt a position further from the position of the out-group, so as to establish a clear contrast between the in-groups' and the out-groups' beliefs and increase group cohesion still further. Most people will probably be motivated by group cohesion to some degree, but not at the cost of embracing something that is obviously false.

The *particularist* argument that conspiracy beliefs may be motivated by epistemic aims, meanwhile, has gained little attention in the psychology literature, the latter having been more interested in psychological and social factors. Humans have, after all, evolved to be able to detect deceit: since mischief was part of our social reality, our cognitive abilities have evolved to detect it (van Prooijen and Van Vugt 2018). Such abilities may be affected by various other functions of the human belief-formation process, and cognitive needs may influence perception. There are some people who are primarily motivated by epistemic aims, and who believe in a conspiracy theory simply (or mostly) in order to understand the world. A conspiracy theory could be the best and most probable explanation. Such an epistemically motivated person is determined to find out what the truth is and feel no need to question their own personal interests or feelings with respect to this goal. The truth may not always be the most beneficial for a person to believe or commit to. In fact, it might make a person worse off: for example, someone could prefer to live with a lie rather than know that their significant other is being unfaithful.

These types of cognitive desires do not apply to the epistemically motivated person, who is more concerned with a search for truth, putting other elements aside, sometimes at the expense of personal relationships or of suffering the mental toll of giving up one's prior beliefs when ample evidence points to the contrary.

Taking stock, the results from the vast research on conspiracy theory belief show that people believe in conspiracy theories for all sorts of reasons, being motivated by the search for truth, psychological reasons, and sometimes distortions or even social identity. Future research would benefit from mapping these reasons to kinds (or types) of conspiracy theories, so as to better understand if, where, and why kinds of conspiracy theories appear to cluster (if they do). The dimensions framework that I suggest in paper IV offers a way to consider the various accounts of conspiracy theories, taking into account what motivates belief in conspiracy theories, as well as the content of the conspiracy theory, all in a single framework. The framework captures many of the results that have been discussed in this chapter. Further, it also sheds light on the generalist and the particularist divide by capturing how these views have focused on different areas in the dimension space. And the framework suggests that we might consider the motivations for belief in conspiracy theories in our judgements of the conspiracy theory, or in other words as part of our method of assessing conspiracy theories.

While the framework offers a descriptive foundation, further work is needed to operationalize the dimensions empirically (e.g., to develop scales for *content-anomie* or *truth-seeking*), to test causal relationships (e.g., does high *group cohesion* invariably lead to resistance to counterevidence?), and to explore cultural variability (e.g., how *content-anomie* thresholds differ across societies).

Conspiracy theories are neither uniformly rational nor irrational—they are heterogeneous phenomena whose epistemic and social implications depend on contextual factors. By adopting this multidimensional approach, I argue that researchers can move beyond polemical debates and develop targeted strategies to mitigate harm while preserving critical scrutiny of explanations of events often of social importance or consequence. The framework thus advances a pragmatic middle ground: one that takes conspiracy theories seriously *as theories* without ignoring their risks. In conclusion, I have argued that the academic study of conspiracy theories and belief in them would benefit from a framework capable of unifying seemingly rival accounts—one that can explain why some conspiracy theories function as political propaganda while others serve as reasonable (and

true) explanations of historical events. The four-dimensional model I propose (truth-seeking, group cohesion, cognitive needs, and content-anomie) addresses this divide, offering a way to reconcile why most people in a community might believe some conspiracy theories (e.g., NSA surveillance) while others, like paranoid or schizophrenic individuals, gravitate toward radically different ones (e.g., alien mind-control plots).

Chapter 6

Concluding Remarks

IN SECTION 3.4, I discussed Dentith's (2014) minimalist and non-pejorative definition of 'conspiracy theory'. The minimalist conception encompasses not only political but also ordinary social practices—even surprise birthday parties—as conspiracy theories. As Dentith puts it:

> If we accept the definition of a conspiracy theory as merely any explanation of an event that cites a conspiracy as a salient cause, then it looks as if we are all conspiracy theorists. After all, surely each of us is committed to at least one explanation that features a claim of conspiracy as a salient cause of an event? For example, the activity of organising a surprise birthday party for a child qualifies as conspiratorial, and any explanation that cites this activity as the cause of an event—say, a group of children having fun on a Sunday afternoon—will turn out to be a conspiracy theory. (Dentith 2014, 40)

This inclusive conception, however, does not negate the usefulness of the pejorative sense of the term when evaluating whether belief in a given conspiracy theory is rational. As Dentith notes, the minimalist definition "does not mean that the pejorative sense of those terms is not useful philosophically in determining whether belief in conspiracy theories can ever be considered rational" (40).

In a similar spirit, Basham (2011) explores the notion of 'conspiracies of goodness'. He discusses, for instance, the act of concealing one's religious identity in times of persecution. While this may appear suspicious to onlookers—especially to the oppressors—it is not inherently sinister. From the perspective of

the oppressed, concealing their faith is a prudent measure for survival. Basham points out that although such behaviour may appear secretive or suspicious, it does not necessarily imply malevolent intent. Dentith (2014) supports this distinction, stating: "this shows just how easy it is to conflate suspiciousness with being sinister. We should not make the same mistake when it comes to talk of suspicious conspiratorial activity—which is undertaken in secret—and the subset of such activity, sinister conspiracies" (49–50).

However, despite the strong case for particularist and a minimal definition, some reservations about the minimalist approach persist. A main concern—which Dentith acknowledges—is that the minimalist definition may be too broad, and not close enough to what are our strongest intuitions and reasons for interest in conspiracy theories. Dentith writes:

> [the critics of the minimal conception] might agree that we should use a non-pejorative definition of 'conspiracy theory' with respect to whether they can ever be warranted. However, they might also believe that there is another pejorative sense this definition does not capture, which is that conspiracy theories are beliefs about sinister political agents who are up to no good. The definition advanced here, as it stands, seems so general as to include conspiracies of goodness and to allow theories, say, about surprise parties to be considered in some cases as examples of conspiracy theories. (38)

Dentith's worry is that resistance to the minimalist definition often stems from the desire to preserve the intuition that conspiracy theories are necessarily sinister. While he effectively argues against including this criterion in the definition, it's clear that many scholars maintain the association between conspiracies and nefarious intent. This view aligns with how conspiracy theories are often discussed both in academic and public discourse. For instance, Wood and Douglas define conspiracy theories as "allegations that powerful people or organizations are plotting together in secret to achieve sinister ends through deception of the public (Wood and Douglas 2013, 1).

Likewise, Lewandowsky, Cook, Oberauer, and Marriott assert:

> [T]he presumed intentions behind any conspiracy are invariably nefarious: conspiracist ideation never involves groups of people whose intent is to do good, as for example when planning a surprise birthday party. Instead, conspiracist ideation relies on the presumed deceptive intentions of the people

> or institutions responsible for the 'official' account that is being questioned. (Lewandowsky et al. 2013, 4)

This framing reflects their focus on conspiracy that is nefarious, and on pathological belief systems, where conspiracy theories are treated as irrational or socially harmful. However, Dentith argues for the utility of a more general and philosophically useful conception—one that acknowledges that secretive acts, even when suspicious, are not always morally dubious. Indeed, secrecy is often necessary for benign or virtuous reasons: to preserve surprise, protect privacy, or avoid interference. To treat every instance of secrecy as inherently sinister is to commit a category error.

Coady (2006) provides a helpful insight here, noting that our tendency to view conspiracies as sinister often arises from the assumption that secrecy must be suspicious. But, as Dentith emphasizes, this suspicion stems from a lack of transparency rather than from the nature of the action itself. Historical examples like the operations at Bletchley Park (the Allied code-breaking operations during World War II) or the concealment of religious identity during persecution illustrate that conspiracies can be morally justified, or even commendable. These examples bolster the case for adopting a non-pejorative, general definition of conspiracy theory—one that focuses on the structural elements (secret plotting by a group) rather than on moral assumptions. Such a definition not only allows for a more nuanced philosophical analysis but also helps us evaluate conspiracy theories based on their epistemic merit rather than their emotional or political charge.

According to Carnap's (1950) framework of explication, any proposed explicatum must remain sufficiently similar to the ordinary usage (explicandum) to be recognizable and meaningful. Dentith's minimalist definition, while useful for clearing normative bias, risks overextension. It collapses critical distinctions between epistemically suspect and morally neutral forms of secrecy, thus blurring the conceptual boundary that makes the notion of a conspiracy theory distinct and analytically potent. Carnap's second desideratum—similarity to the explicandum—must be respected. This requirement ensures that the explicatum retains key aspects of the concept's ordinary understanding, even if it refines or extends them. Carnap does allow for considerable differences between the explicandum and the explicatum, but only when these changes improve clarity or usefulness (Carnap 1950, 7).

While Dentith is right to caution against including a criterion of sinisterness in the definition, I propose a slightly revised formulation that remains non-pejorative yet aligns more closely with our strong intuitions—particularly that surprise birthday parties, though executed via secretive plotting, should not qualify as conspiracy theories. I suggest the following definition:

> **The Fruitful Definition (of conspiracy theory)**: A conspiracy theory is an explanation of an event or a social structure, where that event or social structure is perceived as being contrary to the interests of some salient person or group, that cites a conspiracy (secret plotting by a small group of people) as the salient cause.

This definition preserves the theoretical benefits of Dentith's minimalist approach while avoiding some of its more counterintuitive implications. The proposed Fruitful Definition improves upon Dentith's in two key ways: it maintains philosophical neutrality, while refining the scope to better reflect the domain-specific concerns of political science, psychology, social science, cognitive science, and social epistemology. By specifying that conspiracy theories typically involve harm or actions against someone's interest, it avoids trivializing the concept without smuggling in normative judgements about sinisterness. Instead of baking moral suspicion into the definition, the Fruitful Definition allows us to treat pejorative connotations as the consequence of critical assessment, not a definitional prerequisite. This preserves the philosophical goal of neutrality while retaining the practical distinction between, say, Holocaust denial and birthday planning. It also strikes a balance between neutrality and fidelity to the concept's common usage, making it both analytically useful and sufficiently intuitive.

There is a possible objection to my definition, however, which is introduced by Coady (2021). Coady reasons that, since there is no good definition of the term, we should stop using it. He calls this view *eliminativism*: that we ought to stop using the term in academic contexts altogether. Coady argues:

> I don't think stripping the term of its negative connotations is practically feasible; furthermore, it's not clear to me that the term would serve any useful purpose after it was stripped of its negative connotations. Hence, I prefer another option: eliminativism. I have come to think that there is no such thing as a correct, or even a good, definition of this term. I hold that we should stop using, as opposed to mentioning, this term altogether. It appears to do no

> good, while doing considerable harm. Before the 1950s we got by without it. I see no reason we cannot learn to do so again. (Coady 2021, 759)

While I share Coady's concern about the equivocal use of the terms 'conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracy theorist', I defend continued use of them for the purposes of scientific research. I believe I have shown how a framework with a precise and neutral definition can open up new and interesting perspectives and deepen our understanding of the phenomenon that is conspiracy theories. Without the term, it remains unclear how we ought to investigate the things we find interesting and important about conspiracy theories, or the many aspects of our beliefs in such explanations.

Chapter 7

Scientific Publications

IN THIS KAPPA, I have introduced my doctoral project, discussed its findings, and positioned it within the broader research landscape at the intersection of epistemology, philosophy of language, and the cognitive and social sciences. I presented both the descriptive and explanatory wings of the project—descriptively clarifying how conspiracy theories function conceptually, socially, and rhetorically, and explanatorily examining why people believe in them and how such beliefs are evaluated. I examined the background assumptions that shape the definitional debate around conspiracy theories, the methodological tensions between ordinary language philosophy and conceptual engineering, and the role of expert trust and institutional credibility. I showed how these concerns are addressed across the five papers, each contributing to the overarching aim of developing a more nuanced, multidimensional framework for assessing conspiracy theories. I have considered the relation of my framework and conceptual stance to both historical positions and current philosophical debates—particularly the generalist/particularist divide—and outlined potential directions for future research, including how conceptual ethics and empirical epistemology might further inform our understanding of conspiratorial belief.

Paper I: Who is a Conspiracy Theorist?

In this paper, I examine the definitional challenges surrounding the terms 'conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracy theorist'. I begin by highlighting that the simplest and most intuitive definition of a conspiracy theory—an explanation of events that cites a conspiracy as a key cause—leads to a counterintuitive conclusion (CIC): virtually everyone qualifies as a conspiracy theorist. After all, many widely accepted historical and contemporary events, such as the 9/11 attacks or the Watergate scandal, involve conspiracies. Yet, as I argue, most people would reject the label 'conspiracy theorist' for themselves, a phenomenon I term the *Problem of Self-Identification* (PSI).

This tension gives rise to a second issue: the *Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness* (PTF). If nearly everyone is a conspiracy theorist, the term loses its analytical value, much like defining 'intelligence' so broadly that it applies universally. This undermines empirical research in psychology and political science, where distinguishing conspiracy theorists from non-conspiracy theorists is essential. I contend that these two problems create a *Conspiracy Definition Dilemma*—any proposed solution can address either PSI or PTF, but not both.

To explore this dilemma, I analyse existing approaches in the literature, which I categorize into two main strategies. The first involves refining the definition of a conspiracy theory (Simple CT) while keeping the definition of a conspiracy theorist (Simple C-ST) unchanged. For instance, some scholars argue that a conspiracy theory must contradict the official narrative (Not-Official CT), which could make the concept more empirically useful. However, this does not resolve PSI, as individuals may still resist the label even if they acknowledge believing in non-official explanations. Another approach, Partisan CT, defines conspiracy theories as beliefs held by outgroups, solving PSI by making self-ascription impossible. Yet this fails PTF, as it renders the term a rhetorical device rather than a tool for research.

The second strategy focuses on redefining what it means to be a conspiracy theorist (Simple C-ST) while retaining the simple definition of a conspiracy theory. One proposal, Sense-making C-ST, characterizes conspiracy theorists as individuals who interpret events through conspiratorial frameworks due to psychological needs, such as a desire for cognitive closure. While this could satisfy PTF by enabling empirical study, it does little to address PSI. Another definition,

Moving Goal-post C-ST, describes conspiracy theorists as those who cling to their beliefs despite contrary evidence. This resolves PSI, as few would admit to such dogmatism, but it risks conflating the concept with well-established psychological phenomena like cognitive dissonance or delusional thinking, violating the principle of theoretical differentiation. A final proposal, Dark-filter C-ST, portrays conspiracy theorists as seeing all events as part of a grand malevolent design. However, this definition is both empirically questionable and ineffective in resolving PSI.

I conclude that no existing solution successfully navigates the Conspiracy Definition Dilemma. Neutral, operationalized definitions facilitate empirical research but make self-identification more likely, while subjective or value-laden definitions don't cater to scientific fruitfulness. The choice between addressing PSI or PTF ultimately depends on whether the goal is rhetorical or scientific. While I leave open the possibility of future conceptual breakthroughs, I emphasize that current attempts fall short—either by collapsing into other psychological constructs or failing to provide meaningful distinctions. This paper underscores the deeper conceptual tensions in defining conspiracy theorist.

Paper II: Betting on Conspiracy: A Decision-Theoretic Account

In this paper, I explore the rationality of believing in conspiracy theories by contrasting three main approaches: the objectivist, the subjectivist under risk, and the subjectivist under uncertainty. The debate about conspiracy theories often divides philosophers into generalists, who argue that such beliefs are inherently irrational, and particularists, who insist each theory must be evaluated on its own merits. Empirical evidence shows that conspiratorial thinking is widespread, suggesting the need for a nuanced account of what separates rational from irrational conspiracy beliefs.

The objectivist approach, exemplified by Grimes (2016), uses mathematical models to estimate the probability of conspiracies based on factors like the number of conspirators and time elapsed. While this method offers a seemingly objective framework, it faces significant challenges, such as relying on exposed conspiracies

for parameter estimation, which may bias results. Critics like Dentith (2019) also highlight flaws in Grimes's assumptions, such as conflating conspirators with whistleblowers.

The subjectivist under risk framework, drawing on Bayesian decision theory, examines how individuals form conspiracy beliefs by weighing epistemic utilities (e.g., truth-seeking) and non-epistemic factors (e.g., personal satisfaction). Doyle (2021) argues that seemingly irrational beliefs can arise from rational processes, such as elevated priors or differing likelihood functions. However, this approach relies on known probabilities, which are often unavailable, and overlooks the social and psychological motivations behind conspiracy beliefs.

To address these limitations, I propose a subjectivist under uncertainty model, which treats conspiracy belief as a decision problem where probabilities are unknown. Here, I focus on two non-epistemic utilities: *puzzle hunt* (the drive to solve mysteries and gain social recognition) and *social power* (using conspiracy theories to challenge or maintain authority). Applying standard decision rules (e.g., Maximax and maximin), I show how rational agents might adopt conspiracy beliefs depending on their goals and risk tolerance. For instance, under the Maximax rule, believing in a conspiracy may be rational if the potential payoff (e.g., solving a puzzle or undermining oppression) outweighs the risks.

In conclusion, while epistemic considerations are important, a comprehensive account of conspiracy beliefs must incorporate their social and psychological dimensions. The subjectivist under uncertainty framework provides a flexible tool for understanding why rational individuals might endorse conspiracy theories, even in the absence of clear probabilities. This approach highlights the need to view conspiracy theories not just as epistemic failures, but as complex social phenomena shaped by diverse motivations.

Paper III: Should We Worry about Conspiracy Theorists Rejecting Experts?

In this paper, I address the increasingly common concern that conspiracy theorists pose a threat to society by rejecting expert testimony. My aim is to assess whether this concern is epistemically well-founded. To do so, I first explore what it means to be an expert on conspiracy theories. I argue for distinguishing between three levels of expertise: experts on particular facts relevant to a conspiracy theory (level one), experts on a conspiracy theory domain (level two), and general experts on conspiracy theories as a phenomenon (level three). I suggest that while it's relatively easy to identify level-one and level-two experts, the identification of level-three experts remains deeply problematic. This is because, as I show, there is currently no institutionally recognized or methodologically sound way to determine who such experts are.

To understand what kind of expertise matters in this context, I draw a distinction between the reputationalist and realist accounts of expertise. The reputationalist account sees experts as those socially recognized as such, whereas the realist account links expertise to the actual possession of knowledge. I argue that if we are genuinely concerned about the epistemic landscape—that is, if our concern is about truth and knowledge rather than social cohesion—then we must adopt the realist account. The reputationalist view doesn't sufficiently ground the worry that conspiracy theorists rejecting experts is a threat to our epistemic system, as it reduces to a concern about social trust rather than knowledge.

Next, I evaluate two normative models of how individuals should respond to expert testimony: the Preemptive View, which holds that one should defer to expert opinion outright, and the Community View, which emphasizes open deliberation and collective inquiry. Through the use of Laputa, a simulation program, I analyse the implications of each approach for the epistemic quality of belief-forming practices. My simulations reveal limitations in both views: preemptive deference can be unjustified and epistemically suboptimal when experts are not clearly identifiable, while unrestricted communication in epistemic communities can lead to polarization and entrenched error, especially when network connectivity is too high.

Ultimately, I conclude that the concern about conspiracy theorists rejecting experts only holds if we can identify genuine (level three) experts on conspiracy theories in the realist sense. Without a way to do this, the epistemic threat remains unclear. Moreover, I point out that many of the behaviours attributed to conspiracy theorists—such as rejecting certain expert claims—are not unique to them but are common cognitive tendencies much like motivated reasoning. While the rejection of experts may pose ethical or social risks beyond the epistemic—such as fostering distrust or polarization—my analysis shows that, from a strictly epistemic standpoint, the worry lacks urgency unless the problem of identifying real experts on conspiracy theories is solved.

Paper IV: Dimensions of Conspiracy: A Framework for Assessing the Probabilities of Conspiracy Theories

In this paper I develop a multidimensional framework to better understand and assess conspiracy theories, aiming to reconcile the divide between particularist and generalist approaches. Rather than beginning with a pejorative or overly narrow definition of conspiracy theories—as is common in generalist accounts—I argue for a value-neutral starting point grounded in particularism. This approach emphasizes that conspiracy theories should be judged on their merits and not dismissed wholesale. The framework I propose is built around four key dimensions: truth-seeking, group cohesion, cognitive needs, and content-anomie. These dimensions represent, respectively, epistemic motivation, social identification, psychological compensatory mechanisms, and the extent to which a theory deviates from prevailing knowledge norms.

Drawing on empirical research from psychology, sociology, and philosophy, I identify that beliefs in conspiracy theories are motivated by diverse factors, from rational inquiry to social signalling or responses to cognitive dissonance and stress. By mapping theories across these four dimensions, we can understand not just the content of a theory, but also *why* it is believed and *who* tends to believe it. This helps resolve apparent paradoxes in the literature—for instance, why highly intelligent individuals might believe some conspiracy theories, while others appear rooted in paranoia or political extremism. The content-anomie dimension, in particular, offers a novel way of distinguishing theories that challenge power but

remain within epistemic norms (such as NSA surveillance and the Watergate scandal) from those that deviate radically (like flat Earth claims), often signalling alienation or tribal identity.

I argue that this framework offers a more precise, empirically grounded tool for assessing the rationality and social function of conspiracy theories. It also allows us to situate generalist critiques—such as those regarding secrecy, self-sealing logic, or societal harm—within specific contexts rather than applying them universally. For example, while some theories do resist falsification or promote harm, these traits tend to correlate with high group cohesion or content-anomie, not with conspiracy theorizing per se. Importantly, the framework accommodates both epistemically motivated beliefs (as in the case of whistleblowers or journalists) and non-doxastic or socially driven adherence (as in ideologically unified groups). The goal is not to vindicate all conspiracy theories but to offer a methodologically sound basis for analysing their diversity and epistemic status.

Ultimately, I conclude that treating conspiracy theories as a heterogeneous category—mapped along dimensions that reflect both content and motivation—allows researchers to move beyond polemics and toward a more constructive, empirically testable account. This approach helps unify previously fragmented research and lays the groundwork for future studies to better understand belief formation, epistemic risk, and the social dynamics of conspiratorial thinking.

Paper V: What is Interesting about Conspiracy Theories?

In this paper, I argue that the persistent disagreements in conspiracy theory research stem not merely from different conceptual definitions but from fundamentally divergent scholarly motivations. I reconstruct the debate around conspiracy theories as shaped by two competing approaches: what I term the *Faux-pas view* and the *Descriptivist view*. The Faux-pas view treats conspiracy theories as social transgressions, or faux pas, guided more by the need to defend prevailing cultural norms than by an attempt to understand the phenomenon *tout court*. This orientation often leads to biased research, circular definitions, and a tendency to conflate common usage with conceptual clarity—contributing to the

stigmatization of conspiracy theories and those who believe them. By contrast, I advocate the Descriptivist view, which is motivated by scientific inquiry and aims to describe, rather than judge, the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. This perspective calls for a neutral, objective framework that avoids prejudging the epistemic validity of specific conspiracy theories and instead focuses on the motivations and social dynamics behind belief formation.

Through a critical examination of both philosophical and psychological literature, I show how the Faux-pas view commits the naturalistic fallacy by deriving normative conclusions from common usage or social consensus. For example, defining conspiracy theories as inherently false or harmful because they are widely seen that way risks excluding legitimate cases like the Watergate scandal. Furthermore, many empirical studies in psychology selectively sample alternative theories that deviate from mainstream accounts while ignoring those with mainstream or institutional acceptance. I suggest this selection bias reflects unacknowledged political or cultural motivations and undermines the potential for rigorous scientific understanding. The consequences of this are epistemically and methodologically significant: by reinforcing cultural biases, researchers limit their capacity to develop generalizable insights and instead reaffirm the very norms that should be under investigation.

Despite ongoing critiques of objectivity in social science, I argue that the Descriptivist view remains viable and, in fact, necessary. It allows us to treat conspiracy theories not as inherently suspect but as empirical phenomena that can vary in rationality, plausibility, and social function. This approach supports the development of theoretically fruitful models by enabling categorization based on motivational and contextual variables, rather than normative assumptions. It also resolves what I call the *Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness*—the tension between a neutral definition of conspiracy theories and the need to generate meaningful empirical generalizations. By treating conspiracy theories as part of normal cognition and social behaviour, rather than as epistemic deviance, we open the door to more nuanced and empirically grounded research. I conclude that only by adopting this descriptivist framework can we advance the field and move beyond ideological polemics, producing research that genuinely enhances our understanding of conspiracy belief and reasoning in all its complexity.

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