Conspiracy Theories: Unwarranted Absurdities, Propaganda, or a Specific Way of Holding a Belief?

A Critical Response to Quassim Cassam's
Approach to Conspiracy Theories and a Proposal of
Conceptually Distinguishing between
Conspiracy Theories, Theorists, and Theorizing

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Leah Jule Ritterfeld, s4560949
Supervised by Prof Dr. Jan Bransen
Philosophy of the Behavioral Sciences
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Abstract

It is not self-evident what renders conspiracy theories less warranted than justified suspicions of *real* conspiracies. This thesis is an examination of proposed criteria for distinguishing between the two kinds of conspiratorial allegations. It consists of a critical response to Quassim Cassam's approach of characterizing conspiracy theories as improbable political propaganda. Issues with his criteria are highlighted and an alternative perspective is introduced. Instead of finding a special feature in the *theories,* the suggested alternative focuses on epistemological flaws in the *theorizing* of such theories. Conspiracy theorizing is introduced as a specific way of holding a belief that is self-insulating and thereby immunized to counterevidence. Self-insulating beliefs are compared to Hannah Arendt's concept of ideology and Karl Popper's principle of non-falsifiability.

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Preface

Over the course of the past year, the topic of conspiracy theories has received much attention in the public discourse. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic caused many to become skeptical of their government and turn to conspiracy theories which offered alternative explanations for the rapidly changing circumstances and the resultant uncertainties. It fascinated me to try to understand the perspectives of the people who seemed to be living in an entirely different world from mine: there was no consensus about any observations or facts, even the very basic and fundamental truths could not be agreed upon anymore. Curious to understand these fundamentally different worldviews, I observed some of the Telegram channels where QAnon followers would discuss the latest political decisions and the supposed consequences which they were afraid of or angry about. Even in my closer surrounding, I was hearing more and more suggestive hints about suspected conspiracies. Some of these people I was able to sincerely and seriously talk to. There was a lot of enthusiasm in their words. One told me they had been "reborn." Some told me to "open my eyes" and "finally wake up." But there was nothing inherently "crazy" about these people, unlike how many of the mainstream media had been portraying conspiracy theorists. Most of them seemed to be merely well-intentioned citizens who felt disillusioned about the current state of affairs and were convinced that something was fundamentally not going the way it was supposed to.

This thesis is motivated by the attempt to understand what makes conspiracy theories conspiracy theories. It is a search for criteria that allow us to distinguish problematic and unwarranted conspiracy theories from real and justified conspiratorial allegations. As will evidently become clear, this search did not supply me with straightforward answers. Instead, it felt like a never-ending cycle of believing I had found a criterium and then realizing each time that there were issues that rendered it insufficient. Consequently, this thesis must be read as a preliminary *approximation* to the essence of conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, I hope to be able to contribute with this thesis to a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms of conspiracy theories and an improvement in communication with people who believe in such worldviews.

I would like to thank Professor Dr. Jan Bransen for the supervision and especially the challenging and helpful feedback, as well as the guidance in narrowing down my enthusiasm for the topic of conspiracy theories to a philosophical quest. In addition, I would like to thank the thesis-group of the *Philosophy of the Behavioral Sciences* for fruitful discussions as well

So all I need, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, is to find in each of them at least *some* reason for doubt. I can do this without going through them one by one, which would take forever: once the foundations of a building have been undermined, the rest collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

Whatever I have accepted until now as most true has come to me through my senses. But occasionally I have found that they have deceived me, and it is unwise to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.

[…]

So I shall suppose that some malicious, powerful, cunning demon has done all he can to deceive me […]. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely dreams that the demon has contrived as traps for my judgment.

- René Descartes[1]

[1] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy in Which Are Demonstrated the Existence of God and the Distinction between the Human Soul and the Body (Online Archive Version)*, ed. John Cottingham (translation) and Andy Blunden (transcription) (Cambridge University Press, 1639), https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/descartes/1639/meditations.htm.

Introduction

Over the past months, we have been confronted not only with a global pandemic and the various ethical, social, and political difficulties accompanying it, but also with a surge in popularity of conspiracy theories and the question of how to respond adequately to this development.[2] We find a significant share of the population in the US, Germany, and the Netherlands that believes various alternative postulations (e.g., the Covid-19 virus does not exist or was produced in a lab to reduce population, the vaccine is a cover up for implanting microchips in the population, and the entire pandemic is part of Bill Gates's intrigues to take over the world).[3] Though – to some – such beliefs may seem to be absurd nonsense not worth consideration, the consequences of widespread support of such allegations can be detrimental. For example, it was recently pointed out that the anti-Corona demonstrations of German initiative *Querdenken* are responsible for thousands of additional Covid infections.[4]

However, while we may intuitively know what we are talking about when we refer to "conspiracy theories," a closer examination shows that it is not at all evident *where* to draw the distinguishing line between problematic, obviously fantastical, and unwarranted conspiracy theories, on the one hand, and justified suspicions of *real* conspiracies, on the other. Without clarity on this question, attempts at adequately responding to the problematic conspiracy theories will be difficult. In addition, although conspiracy theorists are easily ridiculed (e.g., as "magic thinkers"[5]) or even pathologized (e.g., as "paranoid, irrational, or delusional"[6]), a closer epistemological examination of their arguments and methods offers some uncomfortable resemblances with accepted scientific and philosophical approaches.

This indistinctiveness has brought forth the claim that we simply *cannot* generally dismiss conspiracy theories as there does not exist a criterium which sufficiently distinguishes

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[2] Richard A. Stein et al., "Conspiracy Theories in the Era of COVID-19: A Tale of Two Pandemics," *International Journal of Clinical Practice* 75, no. 2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcp.13778.

[3] Katharina Nocun and Pia Lamberty, *Fake Facts. Wie Verschwörungstheorien Unser Denken Bestimmen* (Köln: Quadriga, 2020); Jack Goodman and Flora Carmichael, "Coronavirus: Bill Gates 'Microchip' Conspiracy Theory and Other Vaccine Claims Fact-Checked - BBC News," *BBC*, May 29, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/52847648; "Sekteninfo NRW," December 17, 2020, https://sekten-info-nrw.de/; Kristel van Teeffelen, "De Coronacrisis Zet Complotdenkers Aan Tot Actie, Hoe Zorgwekkend Is Dat? | Trouw," *Trouw*, October 30, 2020, https://www.trouw.nl/verdieping/de-coronacrisis-zet-complotdenkers-aan-tot-actie-hoe-zorgwekkend-is-dat~b470b327/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F.

[4] SWR, "Coronavirus: 'Querdenken' Demos Haben Infektionen Ausgelöst," *SWR*, February 9, 2021, https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/baden-wuerttemberg/mannheim/querdenker-studie-mannheim-100.html.

[5] Kirby Ferguson, *What Do We Do About Q? (Film)*, The New York Times, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000007409726/qanon-conspiracy-donald-trump.html.

[6] Ginna Husting, "Governing with Feeling," in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, ed. M R. X. Dentith (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 115.

the unwarranted conspiracy theories from the (potentially) true conspiracy allegations. Nonetheless, the conclusion of this thesis is that we *can* pinpoint problematic tendencies prevalent in conspiracy theory discourse which render the belief in conspiracy theories irrational. However, I will argue that the problematic component cannot be found in the theories themselves but instead in the way that conspiracy theorists hold on to their belief in the theory. In other words, the issue lies not in the *conspiracy theories* but in the *conspiracy theorizing*.

This thesis consists of four parts of an argument which ultimately lead me to the conclusion that we ought to focus on the *theorizing* instead of the *theories*. To do so, I will first elaborate why it is so difficult in the first place to distinguish between the two forms of conspiracy theories (the fantastical versus the (potentially) real ones) in section 1. In section 2, I will introduce a contemporary proposal by philosopher Quassim Cassam, who recently argued that we *can* clearly distinguish between the two kinds of conspiracy allegations and offers several criteria to do so. In section 3, I will put forward a critical response to Cassam's approach by pointing out issues with each of his criteria, arguing that they are insufficient for distinguishing which conspiracy theories we are justified in dismissing. Section 4 will consist of the introduction of an alternative perspective for distinguishing the problematic issues underlying conspiracy theories which I regard as more explanatory than Cassam's approach. This perspective rests heavily on recent work by philosopher Giulia Napolitano who emphasizes that the core problematic feature of conspiracy theories is to be found not in the theories but in the way that the belief in a conspiracy theory is held onto: belief in conspiracy theories is *self-insulating*, meaning that the belief is protected from counterevidence and even manages to incorporate counterevidence as evidence *in favor* of the theory. I will extend her claim but conceptualize it differently by locating the issue not in the *believers* of the conspiracy theories (as Napolitano does) but instead in the relationship between the believers and the theories (i.e., in the *theorizing*). In addition, I will further investigate this feature of self-insulation with the help of Hannah Arendt's concept of *ideology*, which I believe may offer an explanation for why conspiratorial beliefs are so often held onto in this self-insulating manner. Finally, as there are seeming similarities, I will compare this self-insulation of beliefs to Karl Popper's non-falsifiability, arguing that the two are distinct. This becomes clear when one makes the conceptual distinction between *theories* and *theorizing*. As such, it cannot be said that conspiracy theories are non-falsifiable. Instead, it is the theorizing that is problematic. The conceptual distinction I propose thus helps to better pinpoint the problematic issues surrounding conspiracy theory discourse.

1 What are Conspiracy Theories and Why is it Hard to Distinguish Them?

1.1 Definitions "conspiracy" & "conspiracy theory"

If we attempt at dissecting the term "conspiracy theory", we must first appreciate the fact that the term describes (very literally) a *theory* about a *conspiracy*. A "conspiracy" (from Latin, meaning: "to breath together") constitutes the deliberate and secretive collaboration of two of more people to accomplish a certain goal. Oftentimes, this goal constitutes an illegal or harmful act (for others), which is why the collaboration is kept secret.[7] Only a small group (the conspirators) is informed about the plans and they will be strongly motivated to protect their plotting from being uncovered.[8] Thus, a "conspiracy *theory*" first and foremost describes a theory about such a conspiracy taking place. Such a theory can already be expected to pose an *a priori* challenge for validation, as the conspirators will vehemently attempt to prevent the exposure of their conspiracy.

What follows from these broad definitions is that there are (and have been) many *real* conspiracies and, consequently, many correct and true conspiracy theories. In fact, it is considered a truism that people "routinely conspire to deceive people"[9] and that "history is full of well-documented conspiracies".[10] As international studies researcher Jeffrey Bale remarks:

> Real conspiracies do exist […]. How, indeed, could it be otherwise in a world full of intelligence agencies, national security bureaucracies, clandestine revolutionary organizations, economic pressure groups, criminal cartels, secret societies with hidden agendas, deceptive religious cults, political front groups and the like?[11]

A general suspicion of covert conspiring can therefore not be considered to be principally ungrounded. Many conspiratorial operations have been uncovered in the past: we know that we have often been lied to and that personal, economic, and political interests have made people

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[7] James McConnachie and Robin Tudge, *The Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Greg Ward and Andrew Lockett (London: Rough Guides, 2005), ix.

[8] M R. X. Dentith, "When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation," in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, ed. M R. X. Dentith (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 8.

[9] Lee Basham and M R. X. Dentith, "The Psychologists' Conspiracy Panic," in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, ed. M R. X. Dentith (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 79.

[10] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories,* 6.

[11] Jeffrey M. Bale, "Political Paranoia v. Political Realism: On Distinguishing between Bogus Conspiracy Theories and Genuine Conspiratorial Politics," *Patterns of Prejudice* 41, no. 1 (2007): 45–60, 56, https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220601118751.

conspire against the general public.[12] Based on this fact, philosopher David Coady concludes that we ought to be less worried about the widespread public acceptance of conspiracy theorizing as this in an accurate assessment of reality. He gives the example of a survey demonstrating that 74% of US-Americans "believe that the US-government regularly engages in conspiratorial and clandestine operations".[13] Statistics like these are often presented as disconcerting, but, according to Coady, for the wrong reasons. Instead of being concerned about the 74%, he makes the point that it is even more disconcerting that 26% of US-Americans "appear to be unaware that their government regularly engages in conspiratorial and clandestine operations". Coady regards this as simply wrong and naïve, as "conspiring is, and always has been, an important part of politics".[14]

However, the realization that conspiracies are omnipresent and that, consequently, conspiracy theories can be correct and *true*, stands in somewhat of a contrast to what we *commonly* think about when we talk about conspiracy theories. As philosopher Giulia Napolitano points out:

> […] 'conspiracy theory' is ordinarily used to indicate a special type of theories about conspiracies, and that it is a negatively loaded expression, [even though] most philosophers working on the topic agree that 'conspiracy theory' should be defined as *any* explanation of an event that cites a conspiracy [emphasis added].[15]

When we commonly speak of conspiracy theories, we usually use the term to describe those theories we consider bogus or absurd. We might think of chemtrails, lizard politicians, or flat earthers and may even smile away the very idea of ever believing such a wacky story. The term thus already carries with it the implication that the theory is false and unwarranted.[16] This dismissive understanding of conspiracy theories can be traced back to Karl Popper[17], who first

[12] Gertrud Nunner-Winkler, "Wahrheit – Gefühlt Oder Geprüft?," Literaturkritik.de, November 5, 2019, https://literaturkritik.de/skudlarek-wahrheit-und-verschwoerung-wahrheit-gefuehlt-oder-geprueft,26211.html.

[13] David Coady, "Anti-Rumor Campaigns and Conspiracy-Baiting as Propaganda," in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, ed. M R. X. Dentith (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 182.

[14] Coady, 182.

[15] M. Giulia Napolitano, "Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation," in *The Epistemology of Fake News (Forthcoming)*, ed. Sven Bernecker, Amy Flowerree, and Thomas Grundmann (Oxford University Press, 2021), 4, https://philarchive.org/rec/NAPCTA?all_versions=1.

[16] Basham and Dentith, "The Psychologists' Conspiracy Panic," 81; Coady, "Anti-Rumor Campaigns and Conspiracy-Baiting as Propaganda," 184; Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers, "Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science," *Public Understanding of Science* 24 (2014): 3, https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662514559891.

[17] Coady, "Anti-Rumor Campaigns and Conspiracy-Baiting as Propaganda," 178; Juha Räikkä, "Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction," *Argumenta*, no. 6 (2018): 1, https://doi.org/10.23811/51.arg2017.rai.

coined the term and described conspiracy theories as unwarranted because they tend to ascribe an intentionality to unintentional events.[18] In summary, it appears we have a situation in which one term describes two things: there exist both justified conspiracy theories and unwarranted, fantastical conspiracy theories.

The issue becomes more complicated because the two kinds of conspiracy theories demand a different response: On the one hand, the fantastical conspiracy theories are seen as problematic as they are often based on falsehoods, do not enjoy evidential support, but nonetheless motivate people to act in destructive ways (both socially and individually). On the other hand, the risk of disregarding *all* conspiracy theories can also be consequential. As Dentith et al. have argued in several of their chapters in *Taking Conspiracies Seriously*, it is important and necessary for a well-functioning democracy to develop, examine, and take conspiracy theories seriously as they may uncover *real* conspiracies.[19] Ignoring *all* conspiracy theories is hence considered "at least as dangerous as the belief in a false conspiracy theory".[20] They thus posit the question: "are we more concerned with false positives or false negatives?".[21] Philosopher Juha Räikkä brings this to the point when he writes:

> One can pass off fanciful explanations with a laugh but potentially correct explanations deserve serious attention, especially if failing to notice them may lead to grave social consequences. Conspiracy theories may have an important function in democratic societies, and conspiracy theorists and investigative journalists may help to maintain social openness and make potential conspirators think twice. However, it is important to notice that conspiracy theories may also have adverse effects when they are made public. Conspiracy theorizing can be harmful, given that a theory or theories (e.g., about vaccination or global warming) are accepted by many people and the acceptance influences their behavior.[22]

This acknowledgement demonstrates why it is important to be able to *distinguish* between (potentially) real conspiracy theories and those conspiracy theories that are absurd, have been consistently refuted, or are very unlikely to be true. *Those* latter ones are the theories many

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[18] Karl Popper, "Die Autonomie Der Soziologie (1945)," in *Karl Popper Lesebuch. Ausgewählte Texte Zur Erkenntnistheorie, Philosophie Der Naturwissenschaften, Metaphysik, Sozialphilosophie*, ed. David Miller (Tübingen: UTB für Wissenschaft: Uni-Taschenbücher, 2000), 345–46.

[19] Basham and Dentith, "The Psychologists' Conspiracy Panic," 81–82; Martin Orr and M R. X. Dentith, "Clearing Up Some Conceptual Confusions about Conspiracy Theory Theorizing," in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, ed. M R. X. Dentith (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 141; M R. X. Dentith, "Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously and Investigating Them," in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, ed. M R. X. Dentith (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 224.

[20] Orr and Dentith, "Clearing Up Some Conceptual Confusions about Conspiracy Theory Theorizing," 141.

[21] Orr and Dentith, 152.

[22] Räikkä, "Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction," 1.

have a problem with, not the former which we want to keep, assuming that they do, in fact, help uncover real conspiracies. The urgent need for such a distinction can be seen expressed in current debates about whether we should be referring to the fantastical conspiracy theories as "conspiracy myths" or "conspiracy narratives", indicating that they follow a different logic from falsifiable theories about conspiracies[23] and calling those conspiracy theories that are (potentially) true "conspiracy hypotheses"[24] and those proven "conspiracy facts".[25] However, the underlying issue of these two kinds of conspiracy theories is that it is not at all clear *how* to distinguish between the two.

1.2   The Difficulty of Distinguishing Between the Fantastical and the Potentially True Conspiracy Theories

Although we appear to intuitively make a distinction between bogus conspiracy theories and theories about conspiracies that may turn out to be true, it is not directly evident *what* the distinguishing criterion is. As Lee Basham and Matthew R. X. Dentith argue, it is not clear which conspiracy theories count as "obviously fantastical conspiracy theories":

> 'How do we make such a distinction unless we've already assumed those theories are false to begin with?' There is no mark of the incredible which tells you a theory is obviously false *before you investigate it*.[26]

It appears to be much more difficult than we may intuitively assume to pinpoint a demarcation criterion that will enable us to distinguish which conspiracy theories are "obviously fantastical." There does not seem to be a feature inherent in the theory itself that renders it to be warranted or not. The truth of a conspiracy theory depends on whether or not we succeed in providing convincing evidence for the claims it makes. However, as conspiracy theories fundamentally assume a *secret* conspiring, this validation is faced with a certain challenge. As

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[23] Nocun and Lamberty, *Fake Facts. Wie Verschwörungstheorien Unser Denken Bestimmen*, 21–22; Pia Lamberty, "Zwischen Theorien Und Mythen : Eine Kurze Begrifliche Einordnung," *Bundeszentrale Für Politische Bildung*, November 11, 2020.

[24] Nocun and Lamberty, *Fake Facts. Wie Verschwörungstheorien Unser Denken Bestimmen*, 43.

[25] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 18.

[26] Basham and Dentith, "The Psychologists' Conspiracy Panic," 81.

a consequence, there exists a large gray zone in which we do not know (yet) whether a postulated theory of a conspiracy will turn out to be a true or a false conspiracy theory.[27]

In addition to this difficulty of distinguishing between fantastical and (potentially) real conspiracy theories in terms of their content (the truth of the postulated conspiracy), there is a further issue of similarity: unwarranted conspiracy theories resemble, to a certain extent, respected philosophical and social sciences perspectives in their reasoning and argumentative stance (e.g., radical skepticism, social constructivism, sociology of science). The standpoints of some conspiracy theorists can even be seen to express scientific *virtues* (e.g., skepticism and critical thinking).[28] As Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers have observed in their qualitative studies of the Dutch conspiracy milieu, many of the conspiracy theorists they interviewed insist they are merely daring to "think out of the box" or "put question marks over nearly everything".[29] These respondents complain that accepted facts and scientific research are "always […] biased" and "never impartial"[30] because of the "different "social, political, and economic forces that impinge upon it".[31] Moreover, they maintain that "modern science is not scientific enough since it has lost the openness and skepticism that should inform the habitus of 'real' scientists".[32]

During one of my own interviews with someone who has found themselves attracted to conspiracy theories during the past few months of the Covid-19 pandemic, I was confronted with arguments very similar to those illustrated by Harambam and Aupers. For example, my interviewee criticized all of the information that s/he was seeing on the media to be pure "propaganda" as it only ever allowed for one perspective (e.g., on the Corona-lockdown). Furthermore s/he claimed that science *a priori* excludes any alternative perspective and thus is not representative of the different perspectives and approaches that might nonetheless have value (see footnote for English translation):

> Elke keer dat ik naar het nieuws keek of de TV aandeed zag ik alleen maar propaganda. Het neigt allemaal alléén naar één kant. [...] En de wetenschap is slechts eenzijdig naar dingen aan het kijken. De margins voor wat als waar mag tellen, die zijn erg nauw. Die worden vooraf al van de wetenschap gedefinieerd. Ik ben geen specialist. Maar mijn

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[27] Nunner-Winkler, "Wahrheit – Gefühlt Oder Geprüft?"

[28] Harambam and Aupers, "Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science," 4, 12.

[29] Harambam and Aupers, 6.

[30] Harambam and Aupers, 8.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

ervaring, die zegt wel dingen. En met trial en error kom je ook ergens. Maar dat is dan niet wetenschappelijk en telt dus niet.[33]

Such standpoints show a striking similarity to what many of us presumably think of as accepted and valued positions such as a critical stance towards powerful institutions and a sensitivity towards social, political, and economic factors in decision-making. They exemplify virtues like skepticism and critical thinking, as well as a pronounced devotion to their project of "uncovering the truth" which is commonly considered a "hallmark of intellectual virtue".[34] As Latour conceded: "these are our weapons nonetheless".[35] Similarly, Harambam and Aupers conclude:

> [The] epistemological considerations of radical skepticism have nowadays found their way from the ivory towers of science to everyday life. Conspiracy theorists, allegedly putting 'question marks over nearly everything,' exemplify this democratized form of skepticism and radical doubt.[36]

Of course, exemplifying certain epistemological virtues does not render a position less worthy of criticism. Similarly, "the recognition that scientific facts are socially constructed, and often contested, does not entail a licence to invent facts to one's own liking".[37] Nonetheless, the positions that conspiracy theorists defend demonstrate more similarities with scientific theories and philosophical positions than one may at first expect. It is thus especially remarkable how conspiracy theories are often regarded as the absolute *opposite* of reasonable, virtuous, or scientific thinking: they are deemed not only "un-scientific but, ultimately, the counterpoint of the 'rational' enterprise of science".[38]

Whether or not such a dismissal is justified may depend first and foremost on the specific conspiracy theory in question. However, we may be able to explain *why* conspiracy

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[33] English translation: "Every time I watched the news or turned on the television all I saw was propaganda. They only portray one side of the story. […] And science is looking at things from a one-sided manner. The margins for what is allowed to count as true are very narrow. They are defined beforehand by the scientific enterprise. I am not a specialist. But my experience also tells me something. And trial and error will also get you somewhere. But this does not qualify as scientific and therefore does not count."

[34] Keith Harris, "What's Epistemically Wrong with Conspiracy Theorising?," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 84 (2018): 242, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1358246118000619.

[35] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 230, https://doi.org/10.1086/421123.

[36] Harambam and Aupers, "Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science," 8.

[37] Stephan Lewandowsky, "Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Social Construction of Conspiracy Theorists," *PsyArXiv.*, 2020, 8, https://doi.org/doi:10.31234/osf.io/fm8yg.

[38] Harambam and Aupers, "Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science," 3.

theories are so often set aside in this manner. In the following section (1.3), I will elaborate on the motivations fueling the strong dichotomy that we perceive between conspiracy theories and "rational", "scientific", or "acceptable" explanations of the world.

1.3   Boundary Work and Discreditation: The Need to Distinguish

The difficulty of conclusively distinguishing fantastical conspiracy theories from (potentially) true conspiracy theories, philosophical accounts, and even science, poses an uncomfortable situation for many scholars who wish to set themselves and their work off from pseudoscience and fictional accounts. This is because conspiracy theories are feared to muddy the waters between fact and fiction.[39] According to several authors, conspiracy theories are therefore often rejected automatically, categorically, and *a priori*.[40] As my interviewee said, as soon as they even begin to address a critical question they are immediately dismissed as a "conspiracy theorist" ("*Als ik ook maar begin een kritische vraag te stellen word ik direct weggezet als een 'complotdenker'*").

Consequently, even justified accounts that point to historical or political conspiracies are regarded with great "intellectual resistance, hostility, and derision". Jeffrey Bale describes how such accounts immediately "set off an internal alarm bell that causes scholars to close their minds in order to avoid cognitive dissonance and possible unpleasantness".[41] Harambam and Aupers describe this reaction as an "effort to actively downplay the similarities and exaggerate the differences between conspiracy theories and (social) scientific explanations", which they refer to as *boundary work*.[42] Bale attributes this need for boundary work to the lack of being able to distinguish the problematic conspiracy theories:

> A number of complex cultural and historical factors contribute to this reflexive and
> unwarranted reaction, but it is perhaps most often the direct result of a simple failure to
> distinguish between 'conspiracy theories' in the strict sense of the term, which are
> essentially elaborate fables even though they may well be based on kernels of truth, and

[39] Harambam and Aupers, 2.

[40] Harambam and Aupers, 2; Bale, "Political Paranoia v. Political Realism: On Distinguishing between Bogus Conspiracy Theories and Genuine Conspiratorial Politics," 47–48; Basham and Dentith, "The Psychologists' Conspiracy Panic," 89, 91.

[41] Jeffrey M. Bale, "Political Paranoia v. Political Realism: On Distinguishing between Bogus Conspiracy Theories and Genuine Conspiratorial Politics," *Patterns of Prejudice* 41, no. 1 (2007): 45–60, 47, https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220601118751.

[42] Harambam and Aupers, "Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science," 4.

the activities of actual clandestine and covert political groups, which are a common feature of modern politics.[43]

In other words, due to the lack of distinctive signifiers for easily identifying *which* conspiracy theories are indeed unwarranted, many scholars generalize their dismissiveness to *all* conspiratorial explanations. Hardly any scholar would want to be identified with fantastical conspiracy theories. Thus, to stay on the safe side, anything that even remotely resembles conspiracy theories will be fervently rejected.

As a consequence, the terms "conspiracy theories" and "conspiracy theorist" carry with them a negative and pejorative connotation, often employed as a means to denounce and ridicule others. Believing in conspiracy theories is often disregarded as a "mental and social pathology"[44] or a "manifestation of the irrational and pathological".[45] In consequence, the accusation of being a conspiracy theorist can exclude and silence opinions from public debate *even* though they might be expressing a justified criticism.[46] This handling of conspiracy theories has hence been described as "effectively polic[ing] the boundaries of what is sayable, knowable, thinkable, and perhaps 'feelable'".[47]

Unfortunately, such a "blanket dismissal"[48] of conspiracy theories and all investigative and suspicious questions resembling these out of fear of "embarrassment"[49] can make it more likely that we will fail to discover *real* conspiracies and respond adequately to *justified* criticism. This is why Dentith et al. argue that taking conspiracy theories seriously is fundamentally necessary for a well-functioning democracy.[50] For example, Basham and Dentith remark how the intentional misleading by the USA in front of the UN during their advocacy of the invasion of Iraq was not recognized as such, because "this truth, well evidenced at the time of grave decision, was silenced as an 'outrageous conspiracy theory'".[51] Another example they provide is the dismissal of questions targeted at the covert actions of the NSA which were equally "dismissed as just a 'conspiracy theory'" before Edward Snowden proved

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[43] Bale, "Political Paranoia v. Political Realism: On Distinguishing between Bogus Conspiracy Theories and Genuine Conspiratorial Politics," 48.

[44] Basham and Dentith, "The Psychologists' Conspiracy Panic," 81.

[45] Basham and Dentith, 87.

[46] Harambam and Aupers, "Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science," 2; Nunner-Winkler, "Wahrheit – Gefühlt Oder Geprüft?"; Dentith, "Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously and Investigating Them," 218.

[47] Husting, "Governing with Feeling," 110.

[48] Basham and Dentith, "The Psychologists' Conspiracy Panic," 85.

[49] Basham and Dentith, 82.

[50] Dentith, "Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously and Investigating Them," 218, 224.

[51] Basham and Dentith, "The Psychologists' Conspiracy Panic," 82.

them correct.[52] Without denying the consequential influence that *false* conspiracy theories can have (e.g., by pointing out that the Holocaust started as a conspiracy theory[53]) they affirm:

> How can we assess the particulars of claims of conspiracy if we keep being told that conspiracy theories are unwarranted, "bunk," and irrational to believe? This is why we should focus, always, on the facts. We cannot resort to conspiracy "denialism."[54]

In other words, it is not enough to "flee the room" when we are confronted with (accounts that resemble) conspiracy theories. This only "stifles debate" and leads to important questions no longer being asked.[55] Instead, as Dentith et al. argue, we must engage in active "*contact and evidential interaction*" with each conspiracy theory individually to evaluate whether it is a flawed or justified allegation.[56]

In addition to these political consequences, categorically dismissing all conspiracy theories is also consequential for science. As Orr and Dentith argue, "we cannot produce value-neutral research on belief in conspiracy theories if we are working with value-laden definitions".[57] Nonetheless, the pejorative approach criticized by Dentith and his colleagues remains "prevalent in much of the social science literature".[58] Orr and Dentith take issue with this, arguing that social scientists cannot provide us with meaningful answers if the concept they wish to study is not defined appropriately: reducing conspiracy theories to "the flawed beliefs of defective people" does not account for the complexities that make up what constitutes a conspiracy theory.[59]

To sum up the core of this first section, there exists a certain tension surrounding conspiracy theories due to the difficulty in clearly distinguishing unwarranted conspiracy theories from (potentially) justified accounts and questions. As a response to this indistinctness, many scholars actively commit to boundary work, thus rejecting accounts reflexively that even resemble a conspiracy theory. Such a categorical dismissal and the negative connotation conspiracy theories carry are consequential for a critical democracy and a meaningful scientific study of the phenomenon. This renders the need to distinguish between conspiracy theories a pressing issue. While it may seem obvious that a fantastical theory (e.g., the theory of lizard politicians) is not equitable to a serious scientific endeavor, there is a large grey area in between

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[52] Basham and Dentith, 89.
[53] Basham and Dentith, 82.
[54] Basham and Dentith, 83.
[55] Basham and Dentith, 89.
[56] Basham and Dentith, 84.
[57] Orr and Dentith, "Clearing Up Some Conceptual Confusions about Conspiracy Theory Theorizing," 144.
[58] Basham and Dentith, "The Psychologists' Conspiracy Panic," 90.
[59] Orr and Dentith, "Clearing Up Some Conceptual Confusions about Conspiracy Theory Theorizing," 150–51.

where it is less clear that a conspiracy theory is indeed "obviously fantastical". We must not fall prey to the fallacy of conceptualizing all conspiracy theories "by pointing only toward weird and wacky conspiracy theories".[60]

While there is no doubt some truth in the hunch that many of us have, that many (of the unwarranted) conspiracy theories are, in some way, *more erroneous* than mainstream accounts, for example in their evidential support or their flawed reasoning, the question is how to pinpoint a criterium on the basis of which we can discern when a conspiracy theory is unwarranted. In the next section, I will introduce a recent proposal by philosopher Quassim Cassam who proposes specific criteria for identifying what makes fantastical conspiracy theories special and how we can distinguish them from (potentially) real conspiracy allegations.

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[60] Orr and Dentith, 150.

2 Cassam's Approach to Distinguishing Conspiracy Theories

2.1 Introduction to Cassam's Approach

In 2019, about a year before the Covid-19 outbreak and the rise in conspiracy theory popularity, philosopher Quassim Cassam published a book entitled *Conspiracy Theories*. In it, he offers an account of what constitutes conspiracy theories, why they pose a serious danger, and how we can distinguish the fantastical, problematic conspiracy theories from (potentially) real ones. To signify the distinction between these two kinds of conspiracy theories, he proposes referring to the former as "Conspiracy Theories" (with capitals):

> To avoid confusion, I'll call these extraordinary theories 'Conspiracy Theories' with a capital C and a capital T. A Conspiracy Theory isn't just a theory about a conspiracy. There is more to it than that. A Conspiracy Theorist, again with a capital C and a capital T, is a person who is 'into' Conspiracy Theories. […] I don't have a problem with conspiracy theories but I do have a problem with many Conspiracy Theories.[61]

As I find this distinction in writing style useful, I will adopt it for the remainder of this thesis: "Conspiracy Theories" (with capitals, abbreviated "CTs") thus serves as a signifier for what were considered "obviously fantastical" conspiracy theories in the previous section: the ones that are considered unwarranted, false, very unlikely to be true, and which many, like Cassam, consider problematic. In cases in which it is not (yet) clear whether or not the conspiracy theories in question are indeed unwarranted, as well as the cases in which I refer to *all* conspiracy theories (including CTs), I will continue with the lower case version ("conspiracy theories").

For Cassam's argumentation, the distinction between CTs and (potentially) real conspiracy theories is crucial: while he concedes that there are, and have been, numerous *real* conspiracies, and consequently many true conspiracy theories, he regards CTs as representing an altogether different category. The crucial point is that he is convinced that we *can* discern CTs as they "have a bunch of special features that make them different from accounts of conspiracies".[62] Before elaborating on these special features, it may be interesting to take note of Cassam's general apprehension of conspiracy theories, as it departs strongly from many of

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[61] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 6.
[62] Cassam, 6.

the positions discussed in the previous section. As I hope to show, this contrast has to do precisely with the assumption that we *can* make clear distinctions.

Cassam's position appears to be motivated by the general conviction that CTs are dangerous and need to be defeated and refuted wherever possible. His book may even be interpreted as a response to proposals that we ought to recognize some (positive) value in CTs. In the previous section, I mentioned a few of the authors of *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously* (e.g., Dentith, Coady, Orr, and Basham), who have argued in favor of this standpoint. Cassam does not refer to this work specifically (which was published a year before his own book), but takes issue directly with two of its authors (Coady and Pigden) and their position that conspiracy theories "are performing an important task".[63] Cassam refers to these authors, who he considers "make excuses for Conspiracy Theories and downplay the serious harms they do", as "conspiracy apologists".[64] For Cassam, such a position is unacceptable because CTs are considered immensely harmful as they "prevent us from knowing things we would otherwise know" by diverting attention away from the *real* social and political problems.[65] He thus writes:

> […] Conspiracy Theorists and apologists like to think of themselves as serious critics of the status quo, yet their activities divert public attention away from the deeper structural issues that ought to concern any serious critic. From this perspective, the questions to which Conspiracy Theories claim to provide answers are the wrong questions. […] They might occasionally get something right, but that is more a matter of luck than of judgement.[66]

As such, Cassam considers CTs to be counterproductive for uncovering *real* conspiracies. His view can thus be seen as antithetical to that of Dentith et al.: while the latter regarded it politically necessary to take conspiracy theories (including CTs) seriously (in order to uncover real conspiracies), Cassam maintains that paying attention to CTs has the opposite effect.

I would like to posit that the reason for Cassam and Dentith et al. disagreeing so fundamentally on how to evaluate conspiracy theories lies in the fact that Cassam is convinced we *can* distinguish Conspiracy Theories from (potentially) real conspiracy theories, which Dentith et al. explicitly deny. From the assumption that distinguishing is possible, it does indeed make sense to dismiss CTs. We may even suspect Dentith et al. to agree with this

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[63] Cassam, 63.
[64] Cassam, 65.
[65] Cassam, 68–69, 87.
[66] Cassam, 87–89.

approach if they were convinced by Cassam's criteria for conclusively distinguishing CTs. In the following section, I will explain the criteria Cassam proposes for what makes CTs special and how we can distinguish them from (potentially) true conspiracy theories.

2.2 Cassam's Five Special Features to Distinguish Conspiracy Theories

Cassam's conviction that CTs can be distinguished from (potentially) real conspiracy theories is based upon the supposition that CTs are "extraordinary"[67] and "implausible by design"[68] because they exhibit certain features that make them special. His argument can be categorized into two parts: first, he distills five features which render CTs unlikely to be true; second, he analyzes the function of CTs to be of a political nature, thus equating all CTs as a form of political propaganda. He applies his criteria to various (historical) examples, using them to demonstrate the difference between justified conspiracy theories and unwarranted CTs.

Cassam's five "special features" of CTs are that they are speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish, and premodern. The first feature, that CTs are *speculative*, describes CTs as being "based on conjecture rather than knowledge, educated (or not so educated) guesswork rather than solid evidence".[69] Cassam demonstrates the usefulness of this criterion by referring to real, historical conspiracies, where – according to him – it becomes clear rather quickly that the theory (of the conspiracy) is warranted because there is sufficient *evidence* to support it (e.g., "the plans are there in black and white […] in publicly available documents"[70]). In contrast, CTs do not enjoy this evidential proof and instead rely on Conspiracy Theorists interpreting "odd clues or anomalies" and "connecting the dots".[71] However, as Cassam points out: "even clever conspirators make mistakes" and "some things don't quite fit" with which he seems to point to the fact that even CTs constantly have to fit to the facts of reality and, if they are false, fail to do so. This aspect of CTs becomes especially evident when we examine the improbability of conspiracies being kept a secret for a longer period of time. This is due to the fact that conspiracies fundamentally rely on the conspirators keeping the conspiracy a secret. Statistically, the larger the group of conspirators get, the more unlikely it is for the conspiracy

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[67] Cassam, 6.
[68] Cassam, 7.
[69] Cassam, 16.
[70] Cassam, 18.
[71] Cassam, 16.

to remain a secret.[72] This is also the reason that many real conspiracies *have* been uncovered: someone spoke out (e.g., Edward Snowden). For Cassam, real and proven conspiracy theories are therefore no longer just *theories*, but rather amount to what he calls "conspiracy fact(s)".[73]

Cassam's second criterion is that CTs are "*contrarian* by nature".[74] There are two ways of understanding this criterion. For one, a theory can be contrary by merely being opposing to the official version of events (i.e., the view officially sanctioned by the government). Cassam concedes that this criterion would be an insufficient reason to dismiss a position (as even officially sanctioned views can, and have, included conspiratorial content). Instead, he specifies this criterion to describe CTs as being opposed to *apparent* explanations (thereby detaching the criterion "contrarian" from specific socio-political circumstances[75]):

> The thing that Conspiracy Theories are contrary to is *appearances* or the *obvious* explanation of events. The whole point of a false flag operation is to do one thing while making it appear that something else happened. So the starting point of a Conspiracy Theory is that things aren't as they seem.[76]

Cassam's claim is thus that CTs are contrarian because Conspiracy Theorists characteristically assume a "fundamental mismatch between how things look and how they are" and are "confident that things aren't as they seem".[77] Cassam remains rather diffuse on the specifics here and instead explains that the sources that are trusted by Conspiracy Theorists are not appropriate: "The question is, which experts should we trust? The only ones that Conspiracy Theorists are prepared to trust are other Conspiracy Theorists".[78] His point may thus be summed up as describing CTs as contrarian because they rely on the wrong sources (assuming that these alternative sources do not offer the "obvious explanations of events" but instead find contrarian, alternative explanations which are much less likely to be true).

Cassam's third criterion of CTs is that they are *esoteric* which follows from the rejection of the official view: "once the obvious is ruled out and the far from obvious is ruled

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[72] David Robert Grimes, "On the Viability of Conspiratorial Beliefs," *PLoS ONE* 11, no. 3 (2016), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0147905.

[73] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 18.

[74] Cassam, 19.

[75] This is a smart move due to another reason: Conspiracy Theories are often conceptualized in Western contexts as opposing the official narrative. However, as became clear in one of my conversations with an African Studies scholar conducting ethnographic research on conspiracy theories in Western and Northern Africa, this is an inherently Western conception as many societies in Africa do not have the kind of single official narrative that we are used to in the West.

[76] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 20.

[77] Cassam, 20–21.

[78] Cassam, 22.

in, the Conspiracy Theorist's imagination can and usually does run wild". Cassam further claims: "the more esoteric the theory, the greater its appeal to Conspiracy Theorists".[79] This criterion seems especially fitting when we consider CTs like those describing lizard politicians or the "real" function of Covid-19 vaccines to be population control. However, one may note that there are also CTs that are much less esoteric or do not even seem all that more esoteric than the official, or "true" version of events. This may be reason for Cassam to avoid going into depth with regard to this criterion.

The fourth criterion Cassam proposes it that CTs are *amateurish:* they rely on unfitting experts and sources. Cassam mentions several CT-defenders who are regarded as credible sources by other Conspiracy Theorists but who are entirely unqualified as experts for the specific testimony they are providing (e.g., a retired English or economics professor arguing for the 9/11 CT on the basis of mechanical engineering technicalities). These "experts" often do not hold a degree in the relevant subject and "turn out to be, for the most part, other Conspiracy Theorists".[80]

Cassam's final criterion describes CTs as *premodern.* CTs are seen to "embody a thoroughly outdated worldview and a perspective on the meaning of life that was more appropriate in the last century" as they explain complex events as "being controlled by a small number of people acting in secret, and this is what gives these events a deeper meaning".[81] This description is not dissimilar to what was already mentioned in section 2.1, namely that CTs interpret events in terms of *personal* instead of structural explanations. Cassam rejects the impulse he locates in Conspiracy Theorists to believe that things happen for a reason and that there are "all-powerful hidden conspirators pulling the strings".[82]

To conclude, Cassam is adamant that these five special features (speculative, contrary, esoteric, amateurish, and premodern) render CTs "unlikely to be true"[83] and "implausible by design".[84] Moreover, with these criteria, he sets CTs off from (potentially) real conspiracy theories as he is convinced that these five special features "make them different from many other theories about conspiracies".[85] In the following section, I will discuss his second claim, which consists of characterizing CTs as a form of political propaganda.

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[79] Cassam, 22–23.
[80] Cassam, 25.
[81] Cassam, 26.
[82] Cassam, 26.
[83] Cassam, 6–7.
[84] Cassam, 7.
[85] Cassam, 27.

2.3 Cassam's Proposal of Viewing Conspiracy Theories as Political Propaganda

Cassam's second claim is that CTs ought to be understood as a form of political propaganda. The propagandistic function of CTs explains – for Cassam – why they remain popular, even though they are – based on his five special features – unlikely to be true:

> If Conspiracy Theories are unlikely to be true and some of them – such as the theory that the Holocaust is a myth – have been conclusively refuted, then what's their point? What purpose do Conspiracy Theories serve, if not to tell the truth? And why do people continue to peddle Conspiracy Theories that have virtually no chance of being true? *Because Conspiracy Theories are first and foremost forms of political propaganda.* They are political gambits whose real function is to promote a political agenda. They aren't 'just theories' like any other.[86]

Cassam's conceptualization of CTs as propaganda rests on the conviction that, to understand what a phenomenon is, one must understand its "*function* or *purpose*".[87] And, as Cassam denies that the purpose of CTs is to uncover or "tell the truth"[88] (even if many Conspiracy Theorists vehemently claim that it is), he sees the function of CTs to lie in the manipulation of political opinions:

> The way to understand what they [CTs] are is to understand what they are for, to grasp their basic function. Their basic function is to advance a political or ideological objective, be it opposition to gun control anti-Semitism, hostility to the federal government or whatever. Conspiracy Theories advance a political objective in a special way: by advancing seductive explanations of major events that, objectively speaking, are unlikely to be true but *are* likely to influence public opinion in the preferred direction.[89]

Cassam hereby makes an interesting proposal: while many might think of CTs as merely some fantastical stories that get attention because they are so ridiculous, he places CTs in the middle of the political discourse and understands them as a medium for public opinion-making. Indeed, oftentimes CTs *do* line up with a certain political view, even if this is not always immediately

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[86] Cassam, 7.
[87] Cassam, 10.
[88] Cassam, 16.
[89] Cassam, 11.

obvious. In fact, many CTs are right-wing or anti-Semitic (although we can find CTs on both sides of the political spectrum – they are not limited to the right[90]). For example – as Cassam demonstrates – CTs claiming the Holocaust was faked are often motivated attempts to advance anti-Semitic causes. Another example: CTs about shootings being faked by the government have offered effective ways to deny the need for tighter gun control in the US.[91]

There are two issues with this characterization of CTs as propaganda which will be more extensively discussed in section 3. They are, however, important to introduce here already in order to understand Cassam's argumentation. First, we may be able to conjure up other CTs which appear to be entirely *unpolitical* or in which we simply cannot recognize such a propagandistic intention. Second, anyone who has had an honest and sincere conversation with a typical Conspiracy Theorist might have made the experience that this person was in fact entirely convinced of the *truth* of their CT. In the few encounters I have had over the past months, I have never had reason to doubt that the person I was talking to felt justified in believing a specific CT because they felt sure that it was true, not because of some political agenda. In fact, one person even stressed that they did not want to align with an anti-Semitic attitude, but nonetheless was convinced that their CTs (which voiced suspicions about very powerful and rich Jewish families) were *true*. These two points may appear to be somewhat difficult to reconcile with the equating of CTs with a form of political *propaganda*: while Cassam regards the intention of CTs to be the furthering of a political agenda, the way some Conspiracy Theorists describe it seems to be much more motivated by an epistemic quest for truth. Though I am not denying the existence of any and all political motives (surely, there will be a multitude of implicit and explicit background assumptions that play a role), they do seem to be much more implicit than Cassam's description lets us assume.

Cassam explicitly addresses both points. Regarding the issue of CTs that are, or appear to be, entirely unpolitical, Cassam forestalls the reader's potential doubts by explaining:

> Clearly there are Conspiracy Theories that have little or no political content. Perhaps theories about the death of Elvis are like that. To call them political propaganda would be silly. But that's not to deny that many of the most widely discussed Conspiracy Theories are overtly or covertly political. Even Conspiracy Theories about the moon landings are political. If the landings were faked, then who faked them? The government, presumably, or agents of the deep state, the Conspiracy Theorists' favourite multipurpose villain. Yet the minute one starts to talk about the secret, nefarious activities of the

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[90] Cassam, 14.
[91] Cassam, 7–8.

government or its agents, one is in the realm of politics and political propaganda. In the world of Conspiracy Theories politics is virtually inescapable.[92]

Cassam's argument seems to boil down to: even though *some* CTs might indeed be unpolitical, most CTs are political. Moreover, some of those CTs that don't appear to be political *are* in fact more political than we might assume. This does seem to be true: even the most unpolitical sounding CTs (e.g., the poisoning of Mozart by his fellow-composer Antonio Salieri) can still be tied back to some political motivation (e.g., anti-Semitic and anti-Freemason sentiments[93]). As such, we can concur with Cassam that, for CTs, the realm of politics is indeed inescapable. The question, however, remains whether being political is sufficient for being propaganda (I will discuss this question in section 3.2).

In response to the second issue, namely that many Conspiracy Theorists appear to be sincerely convinced of their CT, Cassam argues: "a claim can be propaganda even if the people making it believe that it's true" because "propaganda can be sincere".[94] Such sincerity, however, does not change the "actual function" of the CT. For Cassam it remains clear that, regardless of the *intentions* of the person believing in the CT, the CT acts as propaganda because it is a medium to spread "a bunch of seductive falsehoods".[95] In other words, CTs are political propaganda because they fulfill this function, not because the Conspiracy Theorists themselves necessarily see or use them as such (this disregard of intentions will be addressed in more detail in section 3.2).

In fact, Cassam even considers the fact that the Conspiracy Theorists sincerely believe the CTs to be an inherent component of what makes it so effective: "For propaganda to be effective, people need to believe it".[96] In wondering about *why* people believe CTs, Cassam posits that CTs often fit to people's "*broader* ideological or political commitments."[97] What he means by this is that people will more readily believe CTs that are "in line with their political outlook,"[98] for example conservative circles will be more likely to believe conservative CTs as a conservative "ideology" will already be in place in the general attitudes of these people. As a consequence, Cassam concludes, CTs will be both more attractive because of certain pre-existing political ideologies and at the same time will promote these same political ideologies

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[92] Cassam, 12–13.
[93] McConnachie and Tudge, *The Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories*, 11–14.
[94] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 10.
[95] Cassam, 11.
[96] Cassam, 49.
[97] Cassam, 48.
[98] Cassam, 49.

(as they are a form of political propaganda). This point is important to note because later in this thesis (part 4.2) I will apply Hannah Arendt's concept of *ideology* to understand how people hold on to their beliefs in CTs. This is, however an entirely different way of conceptualizing ideology and I will discuss it as an *alternative* to Cassam's approach.

To conclude, Cassam does not consider his conceptualization of CTs as propaganda in any way at risk by either the possibility that the Conspiracy Theorists sincerely believe their CTs, nor that some CTs are not (conspicuously) political. His full argument can be summarized as follows: CTs function as *political propaganda* and are furthermore *unlikely to be true* because they exhibit the five special features elaborated above. With these two claims, Cassam has presented defining characteristics of CTs with which he distinguishes CTs from (potentially) real conspiracy theories. His arguments are accompanied by several historical examples which illustrate the usefulness of his criteria in distinguishing between many of the actual conspiracies that *did* turn out to be true and some of the absurd ones that have been rebutted with sufficient counter-evidence. It is, I believe, precisely due to the conviction that we *can* conclusively distinguish which conspiracy theories are CTs that enables Cassam to vehemently reject CTs (without any concern about also dismissing important and real conspiracy theories). This approach may thus have a strong appeal. However, as I will argue in the following chapter, I do not find Cassam's criteria convincing for distinguishing CTs from (potentially) true conspiracy theories.

3 A Critical Response to Cassam's Conceptualization of Conspiracy Theories

Though Cassam's account works very well to illustrate differences between CTs and real conspiracies in the examples he uses to illustrate his point, I still do not find his criteria convincing enough for distinguishing CTs from (potentially) true conspiracy theories. In this chapter, I will discuss some issues with both Cassam's five special features as well as his main claim that CTs are a form of political propaganda. More specifically, I wish to show that "propaganda" is not a satisfactory distinguishing criterion for CTs as we can imagine cases of CTs that are *not* propaganda, and cases of true conspiracy theories that *are*.

3.1 Response to Cassam's Five Special Features

Cassam considers CTs as unlikely to be true ("implausible by design"[99]) because they are: 1. speculative, 2. contrary, 3. esoteric, 4. amateurish, and 5. premodern. My aim in this section is to point out some issues with each of these features to illustrate why it may not be as easy to set CTs aside as more unlikely to be true compared to other theories that we *do* value. Undoubtedly, my critic within this thesis cannot offer an exhaustive account of potential issues with each of the features. They are merely a sample of potential concerns and reasons why I find these features insufficient as criteria for conclusively distinguishing CTs .

3.1.1 Conspiracy Theories as Speculative

Cassam's first special feature is that CTs are *speculative* meaning that they are based on conjecture rather than "unambiguous documentary evidence".[100] He thus distinguishes CTs from *true* conspiracy theories (which Cassam calls "conspiracy facts") by reducing CTs to unproven hypotheses about the world, claiming: "That's why there are *theories*."[101] As such, this feature appears to rest on the assumption that we can categorize proven facts supported by

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[99] Cassam, 7.
[100] Cassam, 18.
[101] Cassam, 18.

evidence on the one hand, and speculative theories (which are assumed to be wrong, as they don't enjoy evidential support) on the other.

Of course, evidence is crucial: we want to be able to reject those theories that have been disproven. A good example of a CT being tested against evidence is the claim that the condensation trails of airplanes are purposely spread chemtrails in order to poison us. This CT has been seriously investigated by a group of 77 atmospheric scientists and conclusively rebutted.[102] However, any theory, *before* it has been (dis-)proven, will *always* be speculative. Like Cassam said, that's what makes them *theories*. But this is true for conspiracy theories as it is true for scientific theories. Thus, even in science we are not be principally dismissive of theories, *even* when these theories fail to be verified or cannot be tested at all (e.g., the multiverse theory in astrophysics).

Because conspiracy theories in general assume a *hidden* conspiracy, they might be expected to face an extra challenge of validation as the conspiracy they presume to exist will also be actively kept a secret by the conspirators. Hence, there were cases of *true* conspiracy theories which were ignored because they weren't easily confirmed (e.g., NSA espionage, weapons of mass destruction in Iraq). What follows from this realization is that we cannot distinguish *a priori* which conspiracy theories are unwarranted, only *a posteriori* when we assembled enough convincing evidence to decide whether they are true or false. Nonetheless, Cassam appears to disagree with this line of reasoning since he writes:

> […] saying Conspiracy Theories have not yet been proven is risky. It implies that they *could* yet be proven, but that can't be right if some Conspiracy Theories have already been disproved. The theory that the Holocaust was a myth is one that has been disproved about as conclusively as any theory could be. It's not a theory that 'may or may not be true'. So 'speculative' as I understand it is compatible with 'already disproved'.[103]

Possibly, what Cassam really means with "speculative" is not that CT oftentimes lack evidential supported, but that the Conspiracy Theorists are not interested in finding evidence to support or debunk their CTs. One indicator would be that they continue to believe in their CTs even though they have been "already disproved.". This argument was made by another CT-skeptic, Jan Skudlarek, who holds that CTs are an expression of a "love for speculation"

[102] Phil Plait, "Chemtrails Conspiracy Theory Gets Put to the Ultimate Test," *New Scientist*, August 18, 2016, https://www.newscientist.com/article/2101611-chemtrails-conspiracy-theory-gets-put-to-the-ultimate-test/.
[103] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 19.

(*Liebe zur Spekulation*)[104] where facts are entirely irrelevant as the CTs are never intended to be verified or falsified at all.[105] Based on the lengthy discussion provided in section 1, it should be clear that I cannot find myself agreeing to this claim. I believe both authors, Cassam and Skudlarek are too rash in drawing a line between what they suppose to be two distinct categories: speculative CTs on the one hand, and *true "conspiracy facts"* on the other. Though both authors do not address it, there remains too much of a grey area where it is not clear (yet) whether a conspiracy theory will turn out to be true or false, for this *a priori* dichotomy to be convincing.[106]

There is further issue with this special feature of CTs being speculative: it assumes that evidence – the observation of *facts* – translates directly into the proof or denial of a theory. However, as philosopher of science Alan Chalmers explains in his book *What Is Science?,* this assumption is faulty. For one, observation is never "objective" as one can only ever observe the world through the perspective one is bound to, which is necessarily theory-laden and tied to a conceptual framework. As Thomas Kuhn made irrevocably clear, "a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself. What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see."[107] In other words, we will always perceive evidence in light of the theoretical background assumptions we already have, even when we attempt to observe facts neutrally (a point tying back to Cassam's claim that CTs are attractive because of pre-existing political ideologies).[108] This lack of neutrality gains even more weight from the realization (sometimes called the Duhem-Quine thesis) that observable facts will always be able to match *several* theories. Orr and Dentith specify: "evidence does not determine the truth of theories, because there are a potentially infinite number of theories consistent with a limited set of data points".[109] In other words, we must concede that all "observation is guided by and presupposes theory".[110] From this realization, some philosophers of science (following Karl Popper's falsificationism) have concluded that *all* theories (including scientific theories) are *always* "speculative and tentative conjectures."[111]

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[104] Jan Skudlarek, *Wahrheit Und Verschwörung. Wie Wir Erkennen, Was Echt Und Wirklich Ist* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2019), 187.

[105] Skudlarek, 97.

[106] Nunner-Winkler, "Wahrheit – Gefühlt Oder Geprüft?"

[107] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second Edi (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 113.

[108] Alan Chalmers, *What Is This Thing Called Science?*, Fourth edi (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2013), 10–15.

[109] Orr and Dentith, "Clearing Up Some Conceptual Confusions about Conspiracy Theory Theorizing," 148.

[110] Chalmers, *What Is This Thing Called Science?*, 56.

[111] Chalmers, 56.

As such, Cassam's description of CTs being *speculative* is not very convincing as a criterion for dismissing them nor does it help us distinguish which conspiracy theories are CTs.

In addition, there is the issue of *which* observable facts to allow to count as evidence. Not only is the authority and assumed objectivity of the scientific community and experts being called more and more into question, but today it even seems as if we can find "evidence" for almost any claim, if only we search the internet long enough. In the current digital landscape, our access to "true" facts is continuously at jeopardy by profit and power hungry (fake) news industries with the result that it has become incredibly difficult to know which "evidence" is indeed trustworthy. Especially disconcerting is the exponential development of so-called *deepfakes.* As Nina Schick explained in her recent book, *Deepfakes and the Infocalypse,* we now live in a time where images, audio, and video can be "either manipulated or *wholly generated* by AI".[112] For example, a deepfake can be a shockingly realistic video of Obama calling Trump a "total and complete dipshit" which *looks* real, but is entirely fake. Thus, our observations have become less trustworthy as AI can produce virtual duplicates of any person that can be made to say and do things they never actually did.[113]

To conclude, there is reason for reluctance towards accepting Cassam's special feature that CTs are speculative, because it assumes that we can directly translate evidence into the proof or rebuttal of a theory, which is a problematic assumption. While it appears to work well for the specific example Cassam chose to include in his argument, it may be questioned whether "speculative" in any way helps us distinguish between CTs and (potentially) true conspiracy theories *before* investigating them at depth. In addition, we are forced to admit that it is not always clear which "facts" are truthful and can be trusted as evidence.

3.1.2 Conspiracy Theories as Contrarian

Cassam's second feature is that CTs are *contrarian*: Conspiracy Theorists believe that things are not only contrary to the official view but also different than how they appear. This feature is not surprising as the whole point of assuming a *conspiracy* is that one suspects there to be a group of people conspiring behind the scenes. Hence, we may be able to regard *all* conspiracy theories, even the true ones, as contrarian. But this is not a sufficient reason for such theories to be unlikely to be true and thus not a good criterion to discern CTs. As Coady posited,

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[112] Nina Schick, *Deep Fakes and the Infocalypse. What You Urgently Need to Know (Ebook Version)* (London: Monoray, 2020), 7–8.
[113] Schick, 6.

it would be naïve to assume that things *are* always as they seem and that the official version is indeed the true version. The example of the US lying about weapons of mass destruction in front of the UN illustrates that things indeed *weren't as they seemed*.

Moreover, even in science we have learned not to be categorically dismissive to theories that are contrary to the predominant or more apparent view: some essential scientific explanations about the world which we accept as true today (e.g., heliocentric worldview) were incredibly contrary to the then official worldview. Such scientific explanations illustrate the extent to which the world is not "as it seems" (i.e., not flat, not the center of the universe). Thus, this criterion of contrariness does not offer a convincing grounds for assuming a theory to be unlikely to be true nor dismissing it as unworthy of being taken seriously.

3.1.3 Conspiracy Theories as Esoteric

Cassam's third feature of CTs is that they are *esoteric*, bizarre, or wild. Even more pointedly, Cassam claims: "The more esoteric the theory, the greater its appeal to Conspiracy Theorists."[114] Indeed, if we look at some of the popular CTs today like those of lizard politicians or of the earth being flat, they do seem a bit outlandish. However, there are also CTs that do not postulate any humanoids or stand in opposition to the abundance of evidence of a round earth but instead assume very realistic series of events. For example, there are a lot of CTs surrounding the Covid-19 virus and the political responses to it which sound much more realistic (e.g., that politicians are using the pandemic for personal gains, a suspicion that was recently nourished when it came out that German parliamentarians had indeed manipulated the handlings of the FFP2 masks to earn a personal bonus[115]). While these examples are easily categorized as esoteric or realistic, it may not be all that clear where exactly to draw the line between these two categories. It is not at all obvious what makes something esoteric and where the point of a sufficient degree of esotericism is reached for a theory to be dismissed. Moreover, looking at some of our accepted scientific theories, must we not also admit that proposals such as the idea of a round earth flying through an endless universe at an unimaginable speed around the sun was – especially when this idea was first proposed – not also a bizarre and unimaginable proposal?

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[114] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 23.
[115] Katja Riedel, "Masken-Affäre. Immer Mehr Profiteure," *Tagesschau*, April 21, 2021, https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/ndr-wdr/maskenaffaere-107.html.

Potentially, the value of Cassam's point is that it may be justified to be *more* skeptical of theories that appear to be especially esoteric in the sense that they conflict with many of our intuitions and accepted knowledge of the world. However, without evidential investigation, it may be questioned whether this feature can be considered to offer a sufficient criterion for dismissing theories.

3.1.4 Conspiracy Theories as Amateurish

Cassam's fourth special feature describes CTs as *amateurish* based on the conviction that the sources used are inappropriate and the experts not educated or trained in the relevant field. We may indeed see it as problematic when, for example, David Icke, a former footballer and sports broadcaster, is assigned more authority and credibility than virologists or epidemiologists on specifics of the Covis-19 virus. Moreover, it is almost ironic how skeptical Conspiracy Theorists claim to be and how critical they indeed are towards mainstream information, while oftentimes not applying this same critical stance when taking in information from their own sources (other Conspiracy Theorists).[116] This double standard quickly becomes evident when Conspiracy Theorists speak of the mainstream media as "propaganda" while the potential political, economic, and other personal interests of someone like David Icke (who makes a living off of spreading CTs one may add) are not questioned as much.

Still, we must be careful not to run the risk of following a *dogma* that exclusively considers information coming from sources which we have accepted worthy as respectable expertise. From such a position it would be too easy to fall into the fallacy that *any* theory which runs against the status quo is to be rejected as false. Whatever opinion one may have of philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend's anarchistic *anything goes* approach, his criticism of how such dogma can prevent progress and the "growth of knowledge"[117] is still relevant and valuable today. Feyerabend claimed that a "variety of opinion is necessary for objective knowledge"[118] and demanded that we remain open-minded for new perspectives as any *a priori* dismissal would severely restrict our understanding of the world. This point ties back to the claims of many Conspiracy Theorists of merely wanting to see their alternative perspectives included in the discourse and not categorically rejected merely because it isn't stemming from

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[116] Nocun and Lamberty, *Fake Facts. Wie Verschwörungstheorien Unser Denken Bestimmen*, 80, 284–85.
[117] Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, Third edit (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 14, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315883540-8.
[118] Feyerabend, 32.

the scientific enterprise (see section 1). In other words, rejecting theories because they appear amateurish (e.g., because they come from outside those sources we have learned to accept) may be a risky and problematic step.

Notwithstanding, I do consider this special feature of being amateurish to have value in trying to figure out why CTs are special. This is because this feature points to the qualitative difference of sources used for information. As emphasized by Harmen Ghijsen and Jelle van Buuren in a recent lecture and discussion on the topic, the question of what we believe *is* often a matter of *which* specific sources we trust, especially when it comes to beliefs about the world which we cannot straightforwardly test and validate ourselves.[119] Even those who (are convinced that they) do not believe in any CTs trust (even blindly, at times) the information they receive from the sources they have deemed trustworthy. It is impossible to consistently fact-check all information processed. As Keith Harris recently pointed out, there *are* differences in the credibility of information sources with some justifiably enjoying more credibility. For example, the mere fact that mainstream media sources receive more attention (are apprehended by more people) than alternative news platforms, makes it less likely for mistakes, false information, and biased arguments to remain undetected.[120] Not to mention, the publicly funded scientific enterprise has actively implemented control mechanisms (e.g., peer-reviewing, double blind studies) in an attempt to reduce biased and partial accounts. In other words, there are *reasons* for certain sources to be considered more trustworthy than others. An equating of peer-reviewed studies and the statements by someone outside of the field does not do justice to the qualitative difference of these sources.

A final note regarding this feature is that it points to the fact that the category of knowledge that is under scrutiny here – factual truths (statements about what happened and who did what) – heavily depend on *testimony*. This is a fact already pointed out by Hannah Arendt: a factual truth is specifically vulnerable (compared to, for example mathematical truths, which exist independently of our debates on them). Because it "is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony".[121] As soon as one party begins to lie, it quickly becomes a question of *who to trust.*

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[119] Radboud Reflects, "Complotdenken: Niet Onredelijk? I Harmen Ghijsen En Jelle van Buuren," Youtube Video, September 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZx46D27D0A.

[120] Harris, "What's Epistemically Wrong with Conspiracy Theorising?," 254.

[121] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics (PDF Version)," 1968, 7, https://idanlandau.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/arendt-truth-and-politics.pdf.

3.1.5 Conspiracy Theories as Premodern

Cassam's fifth and final feature characterizes CTs as *premodern*: they are characterized as embodying an outdated worldview – in which "things always happen for a reason" – because they assume that "complex events are capable of being controlled by a small number of people acting in secret."[122] One might want to respond that sometimes things *do* happen for a reason – for example in precisely those situations where there is a conspiracy going on. However, Cassam appears to assume that the reasons conjectured in CTs are *always the wrong reasons.* He argues:

> It's true, of course, that things sometimes happen for a reason – but not the reasons cited by Conspiracy Theories. Kennedy died for a reason: Oswald decided to shoot him and had the skill or luck to do it. But why did Oswald decide to murder Kennedy in the first place? And why was Oswald himself shot by Jack Ruby while in police custody? From a modern (as distinct from premodern) perspective, all we can really say is: shit happens. People do crazy things and there are limits to our ability to make sense of their actions. In these cases, there is no deeper meaning to be found and there are no all-powerful hidden conspirators pulling the strings.[123]

I do not think Cassam is being fair here. Although he demonstrates the usefulness of his special features applying it to this specific historical case where it works (the case here being the rebutted CT of Kennedy's assassination), surely he must admit that in the cases of *real* conspiracies (which he admits have existed), the reasons assumed in the respective conspiracy theories were the *real* reasons, even if they rely on a premodern logic? For example the conspiracy theory about the US lying about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction at the UN *rightfully* assumed things to happen for a reason (namely, because the US had an interest in invading Iraq). While Cassam has a point that the world *usually* does not fit into a premodern logic, the cases of real conspiracies show that, sometimes, this is exactly what is happening. That *is* the whole point of conspiracy theories. And as there have been many real conspiracies, generally rejecting *a priori* any theory that relies on conspiratorial logic (which will necessarily rely somewhat on a "premodern" explanation of events) seems too generic.

Nonetheless, it may potentially make sense to generally be *more* suspicious towards premodern explanations as the world *usually* does not work this way. Especially those conspiracy theories that attribute an amount of power and omnipotence to the presumed

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[122] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 26.
[123] Cassam, 26.

conspirators that is much more fitting to a deity (or, rather to an evil demon not unlike the one René Descartes pondered about[124]) – one who can control and deceive us about absolutely everything – will be more likely to be false. This is simply not how human interactions – which are full of mistakes – work: even the most powerful conspirators cannot be omnipotent.

Similarly, some conspiracy theories can be described as attributing an excessive amount of meaning to random events, objects, or symbols and connecting these in a way that does not fit to how a real conspiracy would be uncovered in reality. As was pointed out most tellingly by game designer Reed Berkowitz, the underlying logic of fantastical CTs like Qanon often resemble that of fictional games more than reality because meaningless objects are interpreted as clues and, similarly, random events are connected in a purposeful way (e.g., all celebrities and politicians who ever made a similar hand gesture are assumed to belong to a secret cult). He points out that because it is so easy to interpret meaning in random data, it is "easy for people to forget that they are not discovering the story, but creating it from random data".[125] He further analyzes the dynamic of Qanon to rest fundamentally on followers actively piecing together ambiguous and hard to follow clues communicated in code by those who are in the loop of the conspiracy. This dynamic fits much more to fictional mystery stories and game plots than to the way real conspiracies are uncovered in reality:

> There is no reason for this in reality, but fictionally, this is what creates the whole plot, the sense of mystery, and everything entertaining that is to follow. This is the white rabbit. This is the breadcrumb trail out of the forest.
> It doesn't work for reality. Real people in the government with important information to disseminate deliver it as fast as possible usually all in one go. They don't make you solve things. They try to be as specific as possible. They are whistle blowers. Daniel Ellsberg (the Pentagon Papers). Edward Snowden. Chelsea Manning. Etc.[126]

In other words, it may be reasonable to be *more* suspicious about conspiracy theories which rely strongly on such a premodern logic (e.g., assuming omnipotent conspirators, relying on the slow and mysterious uncovering of ambiguous clues) are unlikely to be true.

An additional value of Cassam's premodern-feature is that it touches on the psychological aspects of believing CTs. For example, the fact that "shit [does indeed] happen" and that some enormously impactful events (e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic and all the

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[124] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy in Which Are Demonstrated the Existence of God and the Distinction between the Human Soul and the Body (Online Archive Version)*.
[125] Reed Berkowitz, "A Game Designer's Analysis of QAnon," *Medium*, September 30, 2020, https://medium.com/curiouserinstitute/a-game-designers-analysis-of-qanon-580972548be5.
[126] Berkowitz.

subsequent lockdown measures) can be caused by trivial, seemingly meaningless actions (e.g., the handling of bats or other wild animals in Wuhan), does tend to contradict our intuitions. As Katharina Nocun and Pia Lamberty, two authors of a recent book on conspiracy theories, describe, CTs are especially attractive because they offer an alternative explanation that fits better to our *proportionality bias*: the tendency to assume impactful events to have been brought about by spectacular causes.[127] Moreover, (as I will argue more extensively in section 4.2) CTs offer a consistent, all-encompassing narrative for making sense of a messy, contradictive world and provide explanations for felt adversities and injustices (e.g., establishing scape-goats or accusing the people in power of unjust manipulation).

To conclude, there is value in the premodern feature as it does point to theories that are potentially more likely to be false (as they assume a world following a premodern logic). However, this premodern logic may also be inherent in many (potentially) true conspiracy theories. It therefore does not offer a conclusive criterion for distinguishing the "obviously fantastical" ones from the warranted ones.

Summarizing section 3.1, it becomes clear that the five special features Cassam proposes make CTs special are not without certain issues. I have attempted to illustrate some of these problems, as well as values, for each of these features. What Cassam was able to do with his five features was to characterize the very fantastical and unrealistic CTs and explain why they are so fantastical. However, as Orr and Dentith claimed, "pointing only toward weird and wacky conspiracy theories"[128] is not very convincing for defining conspiracy theories (or even CTs) because there are too many cases of conspiracy theories that are not as easily categorized. Cassam's proposal attempted to create a homogenous group of wacky CTs to distinguish from the warranted and (potentially) real conspiracy theories. But this binary categorization does not do justice to the grey area in between the two categories (i.e., where it is not clear yet whether a conspiracy theory is warranted or not). Cassam's aim to provide criteria with which we may distinguish the fantastical from the warranted is not complete. It assumes that we can – on the basis of these features – classify which conspiracy theories are CTs. But this neglects the cases of conspiracy theories which may turn out to be CT but cannot be *a priori* classified as such yet (i.e., without evidential investigation). In other words, Cassam's proposal does not live up to the task he set himself, namely to distinguish between the two kinds of conspiracy theories. His proposal does not offer us two distinctive classes of

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[127] Nocun and Lamberty, *Fake Facts. Wie Verschwörungstheorien Unser Denken Bestimmen*, 73.
[128] Orr and Dentith, "Clearing Up Some Conceptual Confusions about Conspiracy Theory Theorizing," 150.

conspiracy theories but rather three: the proven "conspiracy facts", the wacky CTs, and the *still-to-be-decided conspiracy theories that might turn out to be true (or not).* The conspiracy theories of the last category cannot be dismissed as CTs but can also not be classified as conspiracy facts. Although Cassam's proposal seems to overlook the existence of this third category, it is precisely as a result of his claims that this third category becomes clear. In the following section (3.2) I will examine Cassam's second argument that CTs can be characterized as a form of *political propaganda.* I will demonstrate why I do not find this characterization unconvincing and why it does not offer further means for distinguishing CTs.

3.2 Response to Cassam's Definition of Conspiracy Theories as a Form of Political Propaganda

Cassam's main claim consists of the proposal that CTs need to understood as a form of political propaganda. Interestingly, the accusation of "propaganda" can be heard coming from *both* sides: Conspiracy Theorists often point to the mainstream media, politics, and official narrative as being nothing more than manipulative propaganda.[129] One of my interviewee's even argued that it was precisely this "realization", that the mainstream media were "pure propaganda", that made them start investigating (and believing) CTs in the first place. In this section, I will therefore examine what exactly makes something propaganda in order to develop a critical response to Cassam's characterization of CTs as propaganda (I will not go into the accusation by Conspiracy Theorists that the mainstream media is propaganda). More specifically, I attempt to make the case that "propaganda" is insufficient as a criterion for distinguishing CTs and justifying Cassam's categorical rejection of them.

The term "propaganda" comes from the Latin *propagare,* meaning "to propagate", and has religious roots dating back to the 17th century, where it was used to describe a Catholic organization established under the then current Pope to further missionary activities. The Meriam Webster dictionary entry reads:

> The first use of the word *propaganda* (without the rest of the Latin title) in English was in reference to this Catholic organization. It was not until the beginning of the 19th

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[129] Skudlarek, *Wahrheit Und Verschwörung. Wie Wir Erkennen, Was Echt Und Wirklich Ist*, 163.

century that it began to be used as a term denoting ideas or information that are of questionable accuracy as a means of advancing a cause.[130]

This entry further specifies "propaganda" as the "spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person." Similarly, "propaganda" has been characterized as the changing or influencing of behavior by means of communication with the underlying goal of furthering a political agenda.[131] It has also been described as "the deliberate misinforming of the public in order to sway opinions *en masse* and achieve popular support".[132] These three definitions of propaganda have in common that they ascribe propaganda to be intimately connected with the *intention* of achieving a certain (political) goal or cause. While the third definition describes "deliberate misinforming" and the first notes the "questionable accuracy", the authors of the second definition (Romy Jaster and David Lanius) question whether propaganda necessarily has to be false. Instead, they argue that propaganda can also include the depiction of *true* information in strongly emotional terms as well as depictions that do not contain any statements (that could be true of false) whatsoever (e.g., National socialist propaganda using images of marches or masses making the Hitler salute).[133] The point of propaganda is first and foremost the *intention* of influencing people out of political interest, regardless of the truth value.

From these three definitions I conclude the following working definition: "propaganda" in this paper will refer to the communication and spreading of content with the intention of achieving a certain political (in the broadest sense of the term) goal. This information is *oftentimes* false and misleading, but it must not necessarily be so. The important aspect is that certain information is being instrumentalized in a way to convince or manipulate people's political opinion. In other words, "propaganda" is basically *intentional advertisement for a specific political goal.*

With this working definition, it potentially becomes more clear why both sides (CT-opponents like Cassam as well as CT-supporters) accuse each other of being propagandistic (with misleading and false information especially). While Cassam is convinced that CTs

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[130] "Propaganda | Definition of Propaganda by Merriam-Webster," accessed March 31, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda.

[131] Romy Jaster and David Lanius, *Die Wahrheit Schafft Sich Ab (Ebook Version)* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2019).

[132] Josh Jones, "Hannah Arendt Explains How Propaganda Uses Lies to Erode All Truth & Morality: Insights from The Origins of Totalitarianism," *Open Culture*, January 24, 2017, https://www.openculture.com/2017/01/hannah-arendt-explains-how-propaganda-uses-lies-to-erode-all-truth-morality.html.

[133] Jaster and Lanius, *Die Wahrheit Schafft Sich Ab (Ebook Version)*, 22.

function as a means to influence public opinion towards a specific political viewpoint, Conspiracy Theorists likewise hold the view that mainstream media and politicians are manipulative and communicate only the information that directly furthers *their* political goal (including lies and falsehoods).[134] *Both* parties are convinced that the information coming from the other side is instrumentalized to further a certain political agenda. This assumption would also explain why both parties distrust one another and wish to dismiss everything the other party says. It is hence no wonder that both Cassam dismisses all CTs and that Conspiracy Theorists are equally quick to reject all information coming from mainstream news outlets: once you believe that certain information is merely instrumental, manipulative, and even misleading, you *cannot* but want to dispute it.

While I may carefully venture the position that there is *some truth in both claims*, as *both* CTs *and* official narratives will, to some extent, include the portrayal of (at least *some*) (mis-)information for the purpose of furthering a political goal, I do not consider this fact sufficient support for equating either side entirely with propaganda. Especially if we assume that we can find cases of propaganda on both sides, the description of "propaganda" is not helpful as a defining characteristic of CTs. Hence, while Cassam is convinced that CTs are first and foremost a form of political propaganda, I find this criterion not very powerful in distinguishing CTs, nor do I find it sufficient to justify Cassam's categorical rejection of CTs. In the following two subsections (3.2.1 and 3.2.2), I will introduce two arguments to back this intuition up. For the sake of this argument, I will make a temporary categorical distinction between CTs and (potentially) real conspiracy theories (i.e., using examples where it is evident that they are unwarranted CTs or true conspiratorial accounts).

3.2.1   Not all "Conspiracy Theories" are Propaganda

Cassam characterizes CTs as propaganda because of their *function* or *purpose*: CTs are a medium to influence public opinion and "promote a political agenda".[135] This function holds true for Cassam even if the CT is unpolitical or if the Conspiracy Theorists are sincere in their belief and thus do not have any intention of furthering a political goal (see section 2.3). In this section, I will take issue with both of these claims and argue that "propaganda" is a badly chosen description for CTs.

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[134] Skudlarek, *Wahrheit Und Verschwörung. Wie Wir Erkennen, Was Echt Und Wirklich Ist*, 30–31.

[135] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 11.

First, as Cassam explicitly points out, there are cases of CTs which appear not to be of a political nature. As already stated in section 2.3, Cassam argues that even though not all CTs are *obviously* political, in most cases CTs nonetheless touch upon some political content: "In the world of Conspiracy Theories politics is virtually inescapable.[136] However, even if we can pinpoint some political connection in every single CT, this is not necessarily proof for CTs being political *propaganda.* Subtle as it may be, Cassam's argument is that CTs are always political, which is not the same as arguing that they are all propagandistic. In other words, his claim that all CTs are somehow tied to politics, is not convincing as an argument for why CTs are a form of political propaganda.

Second, even if we accept that all CTs are somehow political, this does not necessarily imply a propagandistic *intention*. Let us consider a situation in which Conspiracy Theorists are utterly convinced of the truth of their specific CT, for example that the condensation trails of airplanes are in fact chemtrails or that the Covid-19 vaccine is used to control population growth. From *their* point of view, it makes perfect sense to spread the CT and attempt to inform as many other people as possible: assuming one *really* believes these CTs are true, who wouldn't feel the need to inform and warn other? In this case it seems that the intentions of the Conspiracy Theorists (the believers/consumers, not the initial producers) is to protect others, and not directly not to spread a political agenda. Although there will no doubt *be* potential political consequences of people believing the CT (for example a growing resistance towards vaccines or more anti-government movements), this does not mean that anyone following the CT had the *intention* of furthering this agenda (as the definition of propaganda implies). In other words, political *consequences* do not necessarily imply a propagandistic *intention.* To be clear, this is the point at which I disagree with Cassam, who posits that CTs need to be understood as propaganda, regardless of the intentions (see section 2.3 for his argument).

Here one may want to respond that, though many of the believers/consumer of the CTs might not have this intention, the *producers* surely must have had these political consequences in mind when they spread fake news supporting their CT. However, today we know that a large part of the fake news circulating the web in the past few years was produced not out of political motivation, but merely as part of a business model: because fake news is extremely profitable (oftentimes more profitable than true news), "fake-news-industries" have emerged, where, for example, teenagers in Macedonia made a living by creating as much fake news as they could and earning from the ad revenues. Based on interviews with these teenagers it has become very

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[136] Cassam, 12–13.

clear that their goal was never to mislead people towards any direction. In fact, the truth or falsehood of their news was regarded entirely *irrelevant*.[137] It was about nothing more than the creation of seductive news (or "bullshit"[138] as Harry Frankfurt put it so eloquently) motivated by economic interests.[139] If then, we assume a specific CT to have been created and continuously confirmed by such fake news industries, this leaves no one left to have any propagandistic intention at all. In other words, it becomes very difficult, based on my proposed working definition of propaganda (as intentional advertisement for a political goal), to make the case that such CTs should be understood as forms of propaganda.

Thus, while for Cassam the intention appears to be entirely irrelevant for CTs to function as propaganda, I cannot sympathize with this description because I consider propaganda to be *fundamentally tied to intentions*. I interpret Cassam as being mainly focused on the *consequences* of CTs (the changes in political opinions). It is because of these consequences that I believe Cassam understands CTs as "functioning" like propaganda. However, given that "propaganda" describes, fundamentally, an *intention*, I do not find it convincing to disregard intentionality and focus exclusively on consequences. Even *if* CTs may have the same effect as propaganda, I do not agree that CTs can be equated with propaganda.

Moreover, in trying to understand what *distinguishes* CTs from (potentially) true conspiracy theories, the disregard of intentions may even point to an important oversight: isn't the utter conviction of the Conspiracy Theorists in the truth of their CTs one of the most defining and startling characteristics we find when looking at how CTs are held as beliefs?[140] Isn't the fact that many people are so sincerely and utterly convinced of absolutely fantastical theories (which may even be based on "bullshit") the surprising and intriguing aspect that makes CTs such an interesting topic of research? Regarding CTs as propaganda – and thus dismissing the intentions of the believers – diverts the attention away from this aspect.

To conclude this section, Cassam's characterization of CTs as political propaganda appears to be a badly chosen description for CTs. I believe that understanding a phenomenon as propaganda doesn't make any sense if the intentions are considered irrelevant (because the

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[137] Jaster and Lanius, *Die Wahrheit Schafft Sich Ab (Ebook Version)*, 19.

[138] Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[139] Moreover, if one takes a look at the economic incentives of spreading and producing CTs, one may further question the necessity of a propagandistic intention. For example, when reading about products like "DNA Force Plus" (1499,50$) or Organit Cloudbuster Wolkenbrecher XXXL Königsklasse" (4.229€) (products that are claimed to be effective in protecting from Chemtrails and other poisons) it becomes clear that convincing people of CTs is an extremely lucrative business model.

[140] Michael A. Peters, "On the Epistemology of Conspiracy," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 2020, 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1741331.

intentions are the whole point of propaganda). It goes without saying that this argument in no way means that CTs *cannot* be propaganda. Evidently, CTs *can* be instrumentalized to further a specific political goal. This is when CTs are indeed propagandistic. But, as there are examples of CTs which appear to lack propagandistic intentions, the equating of CTs with propaganda, as Cassam proposes, is unconvincing. As I will argue in the next section, this equating is even less convincing when we recognize that even true accounts (of conspiracies) can also be – just like CTs – instrumentalized as propaganda.

3.2.2 True "conspiracy theories" can be Propaganda

To stress the point even further that "propaganda" is an unfitting criterion for distinguishing CTs, we can examine whether or not we can imagine (potentially) *true* conspiracy theories that function as propaganda. If investigative journalists share their suspicions about conspiracies happening in a certain political party, government branch or company with the intention of changing public opinion on the issue, then the sharing or this information can also be considered a conspiracy theory that is being used for propagandistic purposes.

Based on the view that propaganda does not necessarily have to be *false* information, we can even find very recent events to apply this logic to. For example, a few weeks ago, the question of whether Alexei Navalny was poisoned by the Russian authorities received a lot of media attention. The suspicion that the Russian authorities did indeed secretly plan to murder Navalny and act on this plan could be called a conspiracy theory. Moreover, if this suspicion is communicated in a certain way with the intention to foster anti-Russian affiliations in Europe, this could be, based on the definition proposed in section 3.2, considered a form of political propaganda. Whether or not the suspicion turns out to be true (currently, they have been validated by international agencies), the *theory* can be instrumentalized for the propagandistic goal of defaming Russia.

Another example may be found in documentaries and news coverages on conspiratorial actions of large companies. For example, the VW-scandal could be seen as an uncovered conspiracy: many high ranking managers were aware of manipulation but nonetheless kept it a secret out of personal interests. The news coverage of these actions *can* be used as a means of propaganda, for example influencing people not to buy a VW or a call at all. Similarly, recent documentaries illustrating the covert manipulation of big companies in the food industry (e.g.

Cowspiracy, Seaspiracy) may uncover real conspiratorial activities and instrumentalize this information to convince the public to eat less animal products, avoid certain companies, or become more aware of climate change. These documentaries tend to be full of very emotional imagery, thus acting as effective forms of influencing people's opinions. Regardless of whether we consider this influencing attempt good or bad, or whether or not we consider the content of such documentaries to be truthful, biased, or manipulative, the application of the term "propaganda" seems appropriate. These examples demonstrate that propaganda can be found not only in CTs, but also in (potentially) true conspiracy theories. Equating and characterizing CTs with propaganda, as Cassam proposes, is therefore not convincing. Instead, "propaganda" is something you *do* with information. It is an intentional instrumentalization of content for specific political purposes and thus constitutes a category that cannot be confined to either CTs, or conspiracy theories, or potentially any other kind of information.[141]

We may thus conclude from this chapter that Cassam's proposal does not enable us to distinguish between CTs and (potentially) real conspiracy theories. Neither his five special features, nor his characterization of CTs as propaganda offer conclusive criteria for distinguishing which conspiracy theories we may disregard as unwarranted and problematic CTs. From this conclusion, one may want to search for an alternative criterion that better distinguishes the two types of conspiracy theories. This has indeed been my endeavor. However, this lengthy analysis of proposed criteria may also stimulate the question of whether the real concern regarding conspiracy theories lies not in the theories themselves, but somewhere else entirely. By searching for a criterion *in the theories,* we may in fact be overlooking the real concern with conspiracy theories. In other words, the question that needs to be addressed may not be how to distinguish the fantastical CTs from (potentially) real conspiracy theories by looking at the theories. In the following chapter, I will discuss an alternative focus which looks for criteria within the theorists and their interaction with the theories (the *theorizing*).

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[141] Interestingly, Coady even describes the vehement rejection of any validity of conspiracy theories as propaganda. See his chapter: "Anti-Rumor Campaigns and Conspiracy-Baiting as Propaganda."

4 In Search of an Alternative Way to Address the Problem of Conspiracy Theories: Distinguishing Between Theories, Theorists, and Theorizing

In the previous section, I argued why Cassam's proposal – including the five special features and the characterization of CTs as propaganda – may not be sufficient for distinguishing CTs from (potentially) true conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, I consider the intuitions, that many of us have – that there is *something* about CTs that makes them more (likely to be) erroneous than (potentially) true conspiracy theories – worth investigating further. Based on the difficulty of conclusively finding criteria within the theory which allow us to distinguish between the two types of conspiracy theories, it may be permissible to wonder whether we are asking the wrong question. Potentially, being concerned with how to distinguish the two types is not the relevant issue that needs to be addressed as there may not be anything inherently special *in the theories* themselve*s.* Instead, we may be able to understand the problem of conspiracy theories better by looking, not at the theory*,* but at the *believers* of the theories and their *interaction* with their theories.

In this final chapter, I want to introduce an alternative way of understanding the problem of conspiracy theories which focuses on them as a *specific way of holding a belief.* I am thus departing from the question of whether (and how) we can distinguish CTs from (potentially) true conspiracy theories and instead want to emphasize the conspiracy *theorizing.* I want to argue that we may be better able to address the problem of conspiracy theories by more clearly separating between *Conspiracy Theories, Conspiracy Theorists,* and *Conspiracy Theorizing.* Cassam's approach focused on characterizing Conspiracy *Theories* and specifying what makes these theories different from warranted conspiratorial allegations. The approach by Dentith et al. denies that this is possible and places more emphasis on the Conspiracy *Theorists* because they vehemently argue that we ought not to pathologize those who believe in conspiracy theories (including the most wacky ones). In the following section, I want to focus on Conspiracy *Theorizing,* which I will explain is a specific way of believing in a conspiracy theory that we may consider faulty and problematic. In other words, the problem of conspiracy theories may be better pinpointed in the interaction between believers and theories than in either the theories or the theorists. I will abbreviate Conspiracy Theorizing with "CTing" and continue to use the established capitals ("CTs", "Conspiracy Theorists") when referring especially to fantastical conspiracy theories. Even though I have rejected the binary

categorization of CTs versus (potentially) true conspiracy theories, there are of course many cases there it is clear whether or not a conspiracy theory is fantastical (a CT). For the sake of better being able to make the following points, being able to refer to CTs and Conspiracy Theorists remains useful.

In section 4.1, I will introduce a recent proposal by philosopher Giulia Napolitano, who makes the compelling argument for understanding the belief in conspiracy theories as a very unique way of holding a belief, which she calls *self-insulating*. In section 4.2, I will examine the underlying dynamics that may explain *why* a belief is held in such a self-insulating manner in the first place. For this I will turn to Hannah Arendt, whose concept of *ideology* seems to offer an astonishingly fitting explanation. Finally, section 4.3 will examine whether the self-insulating property of CTs is equitable with the non-falsifiability of theories first criticized by Karl Popper.

4.1   Napolitano: Conspiracy Theories as Self-Insulating Beliefs

A persistent difficulty often described in analyses of CTs is that it appears almost impossible to convince a Conspiracy Theorist of the falsehood of their theory, regardless of which counterevidence one provides. As Jan Skudlarek describes it, there are no possible valid counterarguments for Conspiracy Theorists as they perceive all attempts to rebut the CT as part of the cover-up: as soon as you contradict the CT, you are yourself being accused of being part of the conspiracy.[142] Thus, "all conceivable evidence points toward the same conclusion"[143] as even "evidence that counters a theory is re-interpreted as evidence *for* that conspiracy."[144] Debunking, then, does not work and may lead to the opposite effect: the Conspiracy Theorist may, in their attempt to counter the rebuttal, become more strongly convinced of their CT, an effect coined the *boomerang* or *backfire effect*.[145] Nocun and Lamberty see this difficulty of rebuttal to be the most worrying aspect of CTs, because it makes it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to find common ground with someone who is adamant in their belief of a CT.[146] It can also make any attempt to have a sincere conversation with a Conspiracy Theorist incredibly

[142] Skudlarek, *Wahrheit Und Verschwörung. Wie Wir Erkennen, Was Echt Und Wirklich Ist*, 74–75.

[143] Harris, "What's Epistemically Wrong with Conspiracy Theorising?," 245.

[144] Lewandowsky, "Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Social Construction of Conspiracy Theorists," 11.

[145] Nocun and Lamberty, *Fake Facts. Wie Verschwörungstheorien Unser Denken Bestimmen*, 281; Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 98.

[146] Nocun and Lamberty, *Fake Facts. Wie Verschwörungstheorien Unser Denken Bestimmen*, 275–81.

frustrating and makes it easy to give up and simply ignore Conspiracy Theorists altogether.[147] Thus one often hears responses of the like: "I've learned to walk away".[148]

This difficulty of arguing with a Conspiracy Theorist is examined in Giulia Napolitano's recent work, which attempts to describe the problematic aspect of CTs by looking at the believers of these theories and the ways their attitudes towards the CTs: The specific ways Conspiracy Theorists tend to hold on to their beliefs in light of counterevidence is an attitude Napolitano calls *self-insulating*:

> Evidence that seems to contradict the conspiratorial belief is likely to be seen by the believer as evidence that has been planted as part of the cover-up. I take this to be the core feature of conspiracy theories. Belief in such theories seems to be completely immune to counter-evidence. […] I argue that we identify conspiracy theories with a distinctive way of holding the belief in the existence of a conspiracy, namely, one that is *self-insulated*.[149]

Napolitano's claim is that a Conspiracy Theory itself is not inherently irrational, as the content of the theory may or may not be true (i.e., the conspiracy may or may not exist, the suspicion of a conspiracy may or may not point to *real* conspiracies) but that the belief in a CT becomes irrational when this belief is held onto in a self-insulating manner. In other words, there is no mark in the theory itself, which sets it off as an unwarranted CT. If, however, this theory of a conspiracy is confronted with factual counterevidence and the believers hold onto their conspiratorial belief in a self-insulating manner, *then* we can demarcate this conspiracy theory as an irrationally held belief (or, as an unwarranted and problematic CT). An illustrative example of this self-insulating dynamic can be found in the documentary *Behind the Curve*, which follows the attempts of flat earthers who seek evidence in support of their flat earth CT but are continuously confronted with counterevidence (i.e., measurements indicating that the earth is round). Instead of questioning or doubting the CT, however, these people reinterpreted the findings in a way that protected their CT (e.g., by claiming that the device was broken, hacked, or manipulated (i.e., part of the conspiracy)).[150] This striking example demonstrates how a CT can be held onto in a self-insulating manner and thus integrate all possible counterevidence.

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[147] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 93.
[148] Plait, "Chemtrails Conspiracy Theory Gets Put to the Ultimate Test."
[149] Napolitano, "Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation," 7.
[150] Daniel J. Clark, *Behind the Curve* (Netflix, 2018).

It must be noted that Cassam shortly touches on this feature of self-insulation as well. In his final chapter on how to respond to CTs, he very briefly discusses the "*self-sealing quality*" of CTs, which describes this dynamic of CTs being able to construe contrary evidence as part of the presupposed conspiracy.[151] However, not only is this aspect only addressed in the final pages of Cassam's book and is not at all integrated in the chapter designated to defining what CTs are, but Cassam also regards this dynamic as a feature of the *theories*. In fact, he suggests this quality to be added to his list of five special features that makes CTs unlikely to be true. What makes Napolitano's approach so interesting is that she places the problematic feature on the side of the *believers*, not the theories. She explicitly states:

> […] the resistance to revision that many conspiracy theorists exhibit is better understood as a feature of the believers, as my account suggests, rather than of the theories. Conspiratorial beliefs may be resistant to revision for different reasons having to do both with the content of the theory and with the agent's epistemic flaws, extra-epistemic motives, and biases. In this section I have shown that the content of the theory *alone* cannot justify evidential insulation. […] we need to look at the individuals' beliefs.[152]

An important detail worth mentioning is that Napolitano's account – which "explains the irrationality of conspiracy theories" by pinpointing flaws on the side of the believers instead of the theories – may seem to encompass precisely what Dentith et al. vehemently object to, namely the pathologizing and pejorative approach which seeks to define CTs as an "epistemologically unsound belief held by a 'conspiracy theorist'".[153] They warn against such psychologizing[154] and reject explaining CTs by referring to a "manifestation of the irrational and pathological, the 'conspiracist mind'".[155] However, in one of Napolitano's footnotes, she clarifies:

> Being rational or irrational is a property of the agent who holds a certain belief in a certain way. However, I am not making any claims about the believer as an epistemic agent in general. The focus is on *individual beliefs* and whether they are rationally held. [emphasis added] […] My account of conspiracy theories is an account of beliefs in conspiracies that are held irrationally, and not an account of the people who hold these beliefs.[156]

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[151] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 97.
[152] Napolitano, "Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation," 21.
[153] Orr and Dentith, "Clearing Up Some Conceptual Confusions about Conspiracy Theory Theorizing," 142.
[154] Husting, "Governing with Feeling," 111; M R. X. Dentith, "The Conspiracy Theory Theorists and Their Attitude to Conspiracy Theory," in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, ed. M R. X. Dentith (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 75.
[155] Basham and Dentith, "The Psychologists' Conspiracy Panic," 87.
[156] Napolitano, "Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation," 11.

In other words, Napolitano's approach of pinpointing the irrationality of self-insulating CTs need not necessarily be considered as pathologizing towards Conspiracy Theorists. Although the criterium for what makes a CT problematic to believe in is located in the believers and not the theories, it does not generalize about the "mindedness" of the Conspiracy Theorists. It is a criterium with which one can pinpoint why one *specific belief* may be held in a way that is irrational. Likewise, Napolitano's approach cannot be accused of proposing a general dismissal of *all* conspiracy theories: any belief in a conspiracy that is not held in a self-insulating manner may be expected to respond adequately to counterevidence and thus must not be dismissed as irrational.

I find this proposal very convincing but want to argue that Napolitano's claim is not the right way of framing it. While I concur with Napolitano that there may not be a mark in the theory itself that allows us to demarcate whether or not it ought to be considered a CT and that the fault lies in the reasoning of the believers, I believe she is not consequential in where she places this faulty feature: although she explicitly states that the "irrationality" lies on the side of the believers, she nonetheless ends up drawing a conclusion about the *theories* (and how to define them):

> To summarize, a conspiracy theory is the belief in the existence of a conspiracy, where the existence of the conspiracy is taken to justify the dismissal of any seemingly disconfirming evidence that one could encounter under normal circumstances. Having defined conspiracy theories, […].[157]

She thus ends up understanding the self-insulating property as the "core feature"[158] of CTs, hereby nonetheless placing the criterion on the side of the theories.

Instead of understanding the self-insulating dynamic as a defining characteristic of the theories or the believers (both for which she argues in her paper), it may be better to conceptualize it as an aspect of the Conspiracy *Theorizing* (CTing). This is because it is not really a trait of the believers, nor is it an aspect inherent in the theories. Instead, it is within the *interaction* between the believers and the theories that this defective mode of reasoning occurs: it is not the content of the theories, nor the believers, nor their specific beliefs, but the *way in which they interact* with the specific beliefs (i.e., holding on to them in a self-insulating manner, responding inadequately to counterevidence). By making a conceptual distinction between Conspiracy Theories, Conspiracy Theorists, and Conspiracy Theorizing, I believe we can more

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[157] Napolitano, 10.
[158] Napolitano, 7.

precisely pinpoint where the flaws lie and what the problematic aspects of conspiracy theorizing are.

From this point one may wonder: when does a specific belief become self-insulating and can we explain why conspiracy allegations are so prone to self-insulation? The self-insulating quality may remind one of something ideological: in many political and religious ideologies we find a similar stubbornness in believing something despite available counterevidence, which we may also describe as self-insulating. In the following section, I will examine Hannah Arendt's concept of *ideology,* which proves to be surprisingly fitting to this analysis of CTing.

4.2   Arendt: Conspiracy Theorizing as Ideological

In 1951, Hannah Arendt published her book *Origins of Totalitarianism* in which she analyzes different components of totalitarian regimes like the Nazism and Stalinism of the 20th century. Presumably because of its sharp critique of repressive governments, it is rather popular even among some Conspiracy Theorists' discourses (given that many Conspiracy Theorists are suspicious of governmental oppression and manipulation). However, when reading it in light of an attempt to *understand* CTs and, more specifically, the self-insulating dynamics of CTing, it likewise seems to offer an astonishingly fitting and explanatory perspective. Specifically, her concept of 'ideology' may explain *why* CTs are so prone to being held onto as self-insulating beliefs.[159]

Arendt's describes an ideology to be a very simple and strict way of reasoning that is completely and utterly *logical.* Interestingly, this may seem counterintuitive as some might initially have regarded ideologies (and CTs) to be *illogical* theories. However, according to Arendt, they are hyper-logical as they follow a strict deductive logic. This extreme deductive

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[159] While I regard Arendt's specific definition of ideology as especially explanatory, some of the authors writing about conspiracy theories (e.g., Nocun and Lamberty, Skudlarek) have already described CTs as ideological. For example, Nocun and Lamberty even propose the term *conspiracy-ideologies* (*"Verschwörungsideologien"*) to describe the tendency (which they regard as characteristic of Conspiracy Theorists) to perceive of the world as being full of conspiracies. However, they define this term as describing a certain generalized mentality or personality trait that I do not find all too convincing (and expect would fall under what Dentith et al. called the pejorative and pathologizing approach). In contrast, Arendt's concept of ideology offers an explanatory analysis of how certain beliefs are held.

reasoning of ideologies may shed light on why CTs attract self-insulation. Arendt defines ideology in the following way:

> An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea. […] whatever happens, happens according to the logic of one 'idea'. […] As soon as logic […] is applied to an idea, this idea is transformed into a premise […] [allowing the] drawing [of] conclusions in the manner of mere argumentation. This argumentative process could be interrupted neither by a new idea (which would have been another premise with a different set of consequences) nor by a new experience. Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction.[160]

Applied to CTing, the basic "idea" that forms the premise for an ideology would be the supposition that there is a conspiracy taking place. This belief is not called into question, it is not even debatable. It is taken as the basic premise from which one can explain experiences and events, but which cannot be called into question by them. *All* experience can only be understood as deductive *from the premise that there is a conspiracy taking place.* As a consequence, no counterevidence or debunking will have any effect if it attempts to negate the premise. In this assumption, CTing can be said to resemble certain religious beliefs, where the existence of a deity is accepted as a fundamental truth (the first premise), which no possible experience could call into question. (This similarity in belief dynamics may explain recent empirical findings that CTs are more common in more religious societies.[161])

Another aspect of Arendt's ideology is the all-encompassing consistency it offers. Arendt describes how ideological thinking can be attractive because:

> Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it; that is, it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality. […] Once it has established its premise, its point of departure, experiences no longer interfere with ideological thinking, nor can it be taught by reality.[162]

In other words, because an ideology is based on such strict deductive reasoning, it yields a worldview that is more harmonious and comprehensive than reality. Arendt's analysis here

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[160] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Penguin Classics, 1951), 616–17.

[161] Till Haase and Mitja Back, "Ländervergleich. Verschwörungsglaube in Deutschland, Polen Und Jordanien [Radio Report]," *DeutschlandFunk Nova*, May 31, 2021, https://www.deutschlandfunknova.de/beitrag/verschwoerungserzaehlungen-unterschiede-in-deutschland-polen-und-jordanien.

[162] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 619.

resembles the way several contemporary authors have described CTs, namely as offering simple explanations of the world which can overcome the complexities and contingencies of reality (the "fortuitousness that pervades reality",[163] as Arendt called it).[164] Or, as Nocun and Lamberty describe it as the slogan of their book on conspiracy theories: simple truths for a complex world (*"Einfache Wahrheiten für eine komplizierte Welt"*). For example, in contrast to the continuously changing information coming from the scientific study on the effectiveness of masks and social distancing in the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, the accusation that the scientists were merely pretending and conspiring may provide a simpler explanation of a complex, continuously fluctuating reality.

This simplification of reality may explain why CTs are so "seductive"[165]: they offer all-encompassing narratives which explain the world in rather simple good-versus-evil ("Manichaean"[166]) terms. Such fictions may offer a validation and justification for (felt) negative life circumstances and provide coping mechanisms for dealing with adversity.[167] Moreover, they may even present those sincerely trying to figure out "the truth" a sense of meaning in life. This latter point is based on the psychological finding that meaning in life is intimately connected with a person's sense of understanding the world around them and being able to understand one's own life and the circumstances one is living in.[168] This explains the results of studies which have shown that a felt lack of control increases general belief in CTs.[169] Assuming these empirical findings to be true and generalizable, one may expect that CTs which provide an all-encompassing worldview offer those who believe in them a sense of meaning in life. In fact, Arendt, writing from an entirely different context 70 years ago, described the

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[163] Arendt, 460.

[164] Bale, "Political Paranoia v. Political Realism: On Distinguishing between Bogus Conspiracy Theories and Genuine Conspiratorial Politics," 50; Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 60; Nocun and Lamberty, *Fake Facts. Wie Verschwörungstheorien Unser Denken Bestimmen*, 54, 265.

[165] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 58.

[166] Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 73.

[167] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 54–60.

[168] Cf. e.g., Login George and Crystal L. Park, "Meaning in Life as Comprehension, Purpose, and Mattering: Toward Integration and New Research Questions," *Review of General Psychology* 20, no. 3 (2016): 205–20, https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000077; Steven J. Heine, Travis. Proulx, and Kathleen D. Vohs, "The Meaning Maintenance Model: On the Coherence of Social Motivations Steven," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10, no. 2 (2006): 88–110, http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.186.3711&rep=rep1&type=pdf; Frank Martela and Michael F. Steger, "The Three Meanings of Meaning in Life: Distinguishing Coherence, Purpose, and Significance," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 11, no. 5 (2016): 531–45, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2015.1137623.

[169] Cf. e.g., Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Michele Acker, "The Influence of Control on Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Conceptual and Applied Extensions," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 29, no. 5 (2015): 753–61, https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3161.

fundamental need for absolute consistency (the "ice-cold reasoning" of strict deduction[170]) as resulting from a felt lack of efficacy and self-worth, from "loneliness" and "uprootedness" in the world.[171]

This psychological component may help understand why specifically the conspiratorial premise ("there is a conspiracy going on") is so persistent: it may be the direct expression of a deep distrust towards the government and those in power. It simply fits much better to the intuitions and feelings of many people who "see themselves as being at the bottom of the social ladder"[172], suffer under circumstances of adversity (especially if these are considered unjust), or simply feel disillusioned by the political and social situation. Potentially, then, the reason the conspiratorial premise is not even considered to be in the realm of testable hypotheses is because it first and foremost expresses a deep-rooted intuition and (pre-)sentiment. Based on what some of my conversation partners have told me, this felt intuition and distrust is indeed what it ultimately comes down to: it is the reason for seriously engaging with CTs in the first place and it appears to be a strong factor for why many (continue to) believe and hold on to the CTs.

From this description one may even posit that the fundamental *function* of CTing is first and foremost a *psychological* one: a CT may have an immense value for its believers because it offers an *explanation* of the world that is consistent and meaningful. It provides an explanation for felt injustices and the adversity of one's life (which may also explain why CTs so often include scapegoats). Thus, in contrast to Cassam's characterization of the function of CTs to be a form of political propaganda, it may be more fruitful to examine the basic function to be of a psychological nature.

To conclude, Arendt's concept of ideology may offer some explanatory guidance for understanding why CTs are so often held onto in the self-insulating manner as described by Napolitano. The initial *premise* is that there is a conspiracy going on (a premise that may be based first and foremost in intuition and distrust) and this fundamental premise is itself never questioned. Given that this premise is not debatable, it makes sense that all possible counterevidence is integrated in a way that fits to the premise (i.e., that fits into the strict deductive reasoning that Arendt described as typical for ideologies). In this sense, then, CTing can be considered ideological. With Arendt's analysis of the dynamics of ideological thinking

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[170] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 628.
[171] Arendt, 461, 624, 627–28.
[172] Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories*, 56.

and its attractions, we may be better able to understand why CTing is so prone to be self-insulating.

When reading the above analysis of the self-insulating and ideological dynamic of CTing, one may wonder whether this is not simply a replay of Karl Popper's falsificationism. However, I believe the two concepts are distinct and that a closer look at the differences will again emphasize the value of making conceptual distinctions between CTs, Conspiracy Theorists, and CTing. In the following section, I will explain why the self-sealing quality of CTing is not equatable with Popper's principle of non-falsifiability.

4.3 Comparison of the Self-sealing and Ideological Quality of Conspiracy Theorizing with Karl Popper's Criterium of Non-Falsifiability

Several decades ago Karl Popper proposed the demarcation criterium of *falsifiability* for distinguishing pseudoscience and the empirical sciences.[173] Falsifiability is the quality of a theory or hypothesis that makes risky, empirical predictions, which *can be proven wrong* (falsified). With this criterium, Popper argued, it was possible to pinpoint the unscientific nature of the dogmas (or, sometimes also called ideologies) of his time (e.g., Marxism and Freudianism).[174] These theories, Popper claimed, are not falsifiable because they never make risky and specific predictions that can turn out to be false, but instead can encompass any possible observation as confirming evidence.[175] A theory is falsifiable if it makes hypotheses that *can* be irreconcilable with certain observations.[176] To develop a theory that is scientific, one is required to risk falsification ("*riskiere deinen Kopf!*"[177]) and abandon the theory once it has been falsified.[178] This constitutes what Popper calls scientific objectivity: the constant possibility of criticizing one another's position (trying to falsify them) and debate on which

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[173] Karl Popper, "Das Abgrenzungsproblem (1974)," in *Karl Popper Lesebuch. Ausgewählte Texte Zur Erkenntnistheorie, Philosophie Der Naturwissenschaften, Metaphysik, Sozialphilosophie*, ed. David Miller (Tübingen: UTB für Wissenschaft: Uni-Taschenbücher, 2000), 108.

[174] Karl Popper, "Wetenschap, Gissingen, En Weerleggingen," in *De Groei van Kennis. Hoofdstukken Uit Conjectures and Refutations: THe Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. Zeno Swijtink (transl.) (Amsterdam: Boom, 2002), 62–63.

[175] Chalmers, *What Is This Thing Called Science?*, 63.

[176] Popper, "Wetenschap, Gissingen, En Weerleggingen," 60.

[177] Popper, "Das Abgrenzungsproblem (1974)," 112.

[178] Popper, "Wetenschap, Gissingen, En Weerleggingen," 74.

theories are worth keeping or rejecting.[179] Today we still value "peer review and criticism from colleagues" as an incredibly "important corrective in science".[180]

The question that I want to address here is whether or not the self-insulating dynamic of CTing is not simply a different way of describing theories that do not hold up to Popper's criterium of falsifiability. While there are seeming similarities, I believe that the two cannot be equated as there are subtle differences which become clear when we make the conceptual distinction between CTs and CTing. This questions seems very relevant as many authors have in fact proposed Popper's criterium of falsifiability as a way to discern the CTs and a reason for dismissing them.[181] For example, Skudlarek holds that CTs are fundamentally resistant to falsification ("*falsifikationsresistent*"[182]) because they do not make any factual claims that can be tested but instead remain in the realm of vague allegations and feelings. Thus, according to Skudlarek, the reason Conspiracy Theorists do not respond adequately to counterevidence is because the CTs do not make any specific predictions or hypotheses at all: there cannot *be* any counterarguments to something as vague as feelings.[183] However, I do not find this categorization of CTs as non-falsifiable theories convincing and believe that here again the distinction between CTs and CTing proves fruitful to more precisely locate the problem of conspiracy theories.

The idea that CTs do not make any factually testable claims but remain on the level of vague feelings is simply wrong. We can find many examples of claims, predictions, and hypotheses put forward by Conspiracy Theorists. For example, during my analysis of Telegram group channels with QAnon followers, there was a constant discussion about future events (e.g., about the prevention of Biden's inauguration or the death that would inevitably follow from being vaccinated against Covid-19). In addition, some Conspiracy Theorists put a large amount of effort into developing experiments to prove their theory correct (see *Behind the*

[179] Popper, "Das Abgrenzungsproblem (1974)," 112; Karl Popper, "Gegen Die Wissenssoziologie (1945)," in *Karl Popper Lesebuch. Ausgewählte Texte Zur Erkenntnistheorie, Philosophie Der Naturwissenschaften, Metaphysik, Sozialphilosophie*, ed. D. Miller (Tübingen: UTB für Wissenschaft: Uni-Taschenbücher, 2000), 371.

[180] Philipp Hübl, "How Conspiracy Theorists Get the Scientific Method Wrong," *Digital Society Blog (Alexander von Humboldt: Institut Für Internet Und Gesellschaft)*, September 10, 2020, https://doi.org/doi:doi:10.5281/zenodo.3964396.

[181] Nocun and Lamberty, *Fake Facts. Wie Verschwörungstheorien Unser Denken Bestimmen*, 266–67; Hübl, "How Conspiracy Theorists Get the Scientific Method Wrong"; Skudlarek, *Wahrheit Und Verschwörung. Wie Wir Erkennen, Was Echt Und Wirklich Ist*, 96–98.

[182] Skudlarek, *Wahrheit Und Verschwörung. Wie Wir Erkennen, Was Echt Und Wirklich Ist*, 96.

[183] Skudlarek, 97–98.

Curve for an illustration of this). It simply isn't true that CTs generally do not make empirical claims that can be evidentially tested.[184] The problem lies elsewhere. As Keith Harris puts it:

> Conspiracy theories are empirical theories. Hence there ought to be, in principle, some observations that would be inconsistent with any given conspiracy theory. But conspiracy theories, unlike other empirical theories, can accommodate any observation.[185]

The crucial issue is not the lack of empirical claims but the specific way Conspiracy Theorists *respond* to falsifications of these claims (i.e., the self-insulating manner of CTing described in sections 4.1 and 4.2). While I concur with Harris that conspiracy theories (including CTs) make empirical claims, I do not agree with his conclusion that therefore "conspiracy theories are unfalsifiable."[186] Again, I propose that it may be more fruitful to regard this response to counterevidence as a feature in the *CTing*. As such, a CT *can* very well be falsifiable (given that it makes empirical claims and risky predictions) but the way that the Conspiracy Theorists hold on to their belief and respond to falsifications (the self-insulated CTing) is peculiar and problematic. To summarize, the claim, which many authors have made, that CTs can be dismissed because they are unfalsifiable therefore does not address the real problem at hand. Instead, we ought to conclude that CTs *are* oftentimes falsifiable, but the CTing prevents the appropriate response to any such falsification.

In addition, it seems as if there is something especially peculiar to be found in the specific way Conspiracy Theorists resist falsifications of their CTs and self-insulate them. The way they are forced to adjust their theory (in order to self-insulate) is actually a very venturesome move, as every modification that includes construing counterevidence as confirmative evidence, makes the entire CT *more unlikely to be true.* Although it was already mentioned, the following example illustrates this point very well: the Conspiracy Theorists in the documentary *Behind the Curve* attempted to prove the truth of their flat earth CT with

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[184] For a more nuanced examination see the paper by Napolitano (2021) in which she makes an interesting distinction between *general* and *specific* CTs. A *general* CT is vague and does not make any empirical predictions (e.g., "the attacks on 9/11 were part of a conspiracy of agents who are trying to hide the truth"). These kinds of CTs can accommodate any possible counterevidence and may therefore be considered unfalsifiable. *Specific* CTs, on the other hand include specifics (e.g., who did what, where does this become evident, what does this predict), are hereby "vulnerable to disconfirming evidence," and can be falsified. As such, we may conclude that there exist both falsifiable as well as unfalsifiable CTs.
Moreover, one might also want to take note of the fact that even scientific theories are, at times, protected from falsifications. This is a point philosopher of science Imre Lakatos made and it comes up in Keith Harris's argumentation as well. As such, the claim many authors have made, that CTs are to be dismissed because they are unfalsifiable (in contrast to scientific theories) is not very convincing in the first place.
[185] Harris, "What's Epistemically Wrong with Conspiracy Theorising?," 243.
[186] Harris, 243.

experiments. As one might expect, the results of these experiments turned out to *falsify* their CT (the instrument they used showed results fitting for a round earth). In response, the Conspiracy Theorists had to modify their theory, more specifically the auxiliary hypothesis (describing who is in on the conspiracy), in order to maintain their belief in it. One possibility for such modification is to assume that the instrument itself is unreliable because, for example, the producers of the instrument are themselves *part* of the conspiracy (of keeping it a secret that the earth is flat). However, such modifications make the likelihood of the existence of a conspiracy *more unlikely*. This is because, the larger a (real) conspiracy is, the more likely it is that such a secret will eventually be leaked. In other words, every self-insulating resistance to falsifications makes the CT continuously more unwarranted as the first (und undebatable) premise ("there is a conspiracy going on") becomes increasingly more unlikely to be true.[187]

This dynamic is interesting because it underlines the claim that the real problem of conspiracy theories is to be found in the self-insulating way in which the belief is held: it is this feature of the CTing that pinpoints what Conspiracy Theorists do wrong and what renders certain beliefs in conspiracies unwarranted and irrational. The self-insulating CTing is epistemically problematic not only because it resists counterevidence and falsifications but because each resistance makes the belief in the theory continuously more ungrounded. It even appears as if this specific dynamic is unique for beliefs in conspiracy theories, as the first premise (the existence of a conspiracy) allows for the incorporation of any and all kinds of (counter-)evidence: if one assumes a *secret* plotting to exist, it is extremely difficult to shake this belief (i.e., it is hard to verify the existence of something that attempts to remain a secret).

To conclude this chapter, while the self-insulating CTing may seemingly appear to resemble Popper's principle of non-falsifiability, there are differences between the two which render them non-equatable. These differences become clear when we make the conceptual distinction between CTs and CTing: while CTs may very well be falsifiable, it is the response of the believers to any such falsification that is problematic (the CTing). Moreover, such responses will continuously make the belief in the CT more unwarranted as each resistance to falsification based on extending the scope of the conspiracy will make the CT more unlikely to be true. As such, the fundamental problem of the CTing cannot be equated with non-falsifiability.

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[187] I thank Freek Oude Maatman for pointing this out to me.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to find criteria with which we may pinpoint what distinguishes the unwarranted, problematic conspiracy theories (CTs) from justified and potentially real conspiracy allegations. For this purpose, I examined the recent proposal by Quassim Cassam who argues that we can discern CTs because they are speculative, contrary, esoteric, amateurish, and premodern and furthermore function as a form of political propaganda. In my analysis of his claims, I argued that these criteria did not offer a convincing guidance for distinguishing CTs from (potentially) true conspiracy theories. While Cassam's proposal makes out two clear-cut categories (the proven conspiracy facts and the fantastical CTs) this dichotomy creates, but ignores, the existence of a third category, namely of the conspiracy theories where it is not clear (yet) to which of the two categories they belong.

An alternative approach, based on Giulia Napolitano's analysis of conspiracy theories as self-insulating beliefs, proved to be more convincing and shifted the focus from the theories to the believers, pointing at the self-insulating manner in which a belief in a CT is held. From here, I argued that instead of a criterium in the theories or in the believers, the problematic issue lies in the interaction between the two: in the Conspiracy *Theorizing* (CTing), i.e., the integration of all counterevidence as evidence in favor of the CT. The problem of CTs lies not in the content of the theory (they are not a specific kind of theory), but in what people *do* with the theory. The self-insulating way of holding on to beliefs is epistemologically problematic and can thus provide us with a criterion for judging which beliefs in conspiracy theories we may regard as unwarranted or problematic: namely those that are held onto in this self-insulating manner.

An explanation for why beliefs in CTs are so often prone to this epistemically problematic self-insulation can be found when one applies Hannah Arendt's analysis of *ideology* to the CTing: it is because there is an undebatable unquestionable first premise (namely: "there is a conspiracy going on") that *all* potential (counter-)evidence necessarily has to be adapted in a way that fits this premise. Potentially, this premise is accepted in this manner because it is a direct expression of intuitions and distrust rather than a testable hypothesis about the world. It is thus possible that the main function of CTs may first and foremost be a psychological one.

In the final section of this thesis, I compared the self-insulating CTing to Karl Popper's criterium of non-falsifiability. Though these two dynamics appear to be similar, I argued that the conceptual distinction between CTs and CTing illustrates why they are distinct. As such,

CTs ought not to be considered unfalsifiable theories because they do make empirical claims (and are, in fact, oftentimes falsified). Instead, it is the CTing that is epistemically problematic because any falsifications of the CT are resisted and reinterpreted. The basic premise remains untouched and the belief in the CT becomes continuously more irrational as every resistance to falsification makes the CT more unlikely to be true.

From this analysis, I conclude that to point out the problematic issue of conspiracy theories, a conceptual distinction between CTs, CTing, and Conspiracy Theorists is valuable. This is rarely done and the lack of this conceptual clarity explains why it is so hard to pinpoint where the problematic issues lie (and also, what exactly the different authors mean and how they (dis-)agree with one another). This thesis is an attempt at demonstrating why neither a focus on the theories (e.g., Cassam' approach, but also Napolitano's approach as it centers back to the theories), nor a focus on the theorists (e.g., Dentith et al. and Napolitano's approach) is sufficient for understanding where the real problem lies. Instead, as I have argued, the problem lies in the interaction of the two. I believe it would be fruitful for future examinations of conspiracy theories to be attentive towards these subtle, but relevant, distinctions. Potentially, much confusion and talking past one another can be avoided and will it become more clear why conspiracy theories are such a difficult and persistent topic.

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