



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

“They” are Back (and still want to cure everyone): Psychologists’ Latest Bid to Curtail Public Epistemology

Lee Basham, South Texas College, University of Texas, Rio Grande,
labasham@southtexascollege.edu

Basham, Lee. 2019. “‘They’ are Back (and still want to cure everyone): Psychologists’ Latest Bid to Curtail Public Epistemology.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (7): 23-33. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4gu>.

Abstract

Wagner-Egger et al. (2019) continue to defend a project of pathologizing and “curing” the public of doubts about the reliability of government, media and corporate statements and actions. They envision a mass psychological engineering project to curtail rational social epistemology, one particularly, but not limited to, targeting children in public schools. The project was originally brought to public attention when their bid for public funding appeared the prestigious French daily, *Le Monde*. Their project was widely critiqued in *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* (SERRC) and elsewhere. Their first defense in *SERRC* only heightened skepticism. Their newest defense remains as epistemically unsound and politically dangerous.

Social epistemology has a strong political element. Our political concerns and inferences are often based on social epistemic processes. When social scientists contrive to artificially manipulate our beliefs and belief formation on a society-wide scale, this should be of extreme interest and concern to social epistemologists. A perfect test case is suspicion and belief contrary to the dominant sources of social-political information. Perhaps the most important and salient form are suspicions and accusations of intentionally organized deception of the public by governments, mainstream media and corporations. These are accusations and suspicions of conspiracy, conspiracy theories.

Our Present Context

Like most today, I am reasonably confident a small but prominent group within the executive and military of the United States government intentionally organized post-9/11 to deceive and manipulate hundreds of millions of people into believing Iraq must be invaded and conquered. Strong evidence was before us then, but their efforts prevailed. This conspiracy theory, in most circles now widely acknowledged to be true, today helps restrain future abuses. We collectively owe it, and its theorists, our thanks.

But a small, increasingly influential and ambitious group of social scientists and social psychologists would have it and anything like it rendered progressively unthinkable by the use of sophisticated psychological techniques. They wish to “target” our children. This is the *pathologizing project* within a faction of psychology and related studies. The goal is to pathologize “conspiracy ideation,” categorize it as a mass-mental illness, and begin an “effective,” sophisticated society-wide course of treatment. This will, of necessity, run for decades, or, well, forever. They aim to reestablish a general, naïve trust in government, mainstream media and economic powers. Whether that trust is merited or not matters not, if the ability to distrust has been scientifically ablated. They envision a sort of irresistible, mass epistemic/behavioral brain-alteration.¹

What is critical for social epistemologists is that similar programs of epistemic-psychological disabling, targeting most *any* feature of reasoned, social belief, discussion, concern or political dissent, could be envisioned and enacted by the power of the state. It is the old totalitarian dream.

The *Le Monde* group’s intentions were announced in the influential French daily *Le Monde* as a group-declaration. They have repeated these numerous times since then, including recent articles found in *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective (SERRC)*. When the *Le Monde* declaration came to the attention of epistemologists, it was strongly criticized in *SERRC* and elsewhere. Recently an anthology appeared in the *SERRC* book series, edited by Matthew R. X. Dentith, that showcases all this, *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*.² Regrettably, but

¹ Basham, Lee and Matthew R. X. Dentith. 2016. “Social Science’s Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5 (10): 12-19.

² Matthew R. X. Dentith, ed., Rowman and Littlefield, 2018.

perhaps revealingly, the *Le Monde* group steadfastly refused permission to reprint their original declaration.³

Now, Wagner-Egger et al. (2019) present a brand-new defense of the *Le Monde* declaration, “Why ‘Healthy Conspiracy Theories’ Are (Oxy)morons: Statistical, Epistemological, and Psychological Reasons in Favor of the (Ir)Rational View” (hereafter, “(Oxy)moron”).⁴ Here, they contrast their “Unhealthy” view of conspiracy theories with the “Healthy” view, one that sees conspiracy theories as frequently rational and necessary for functioning democracies. Their defense of the well-named “Unhealthy view” gets off to a rocky start. With characteristic charm, the title labels conspiracy theorists (all reasonable humans) and their supporters as “unhealthy” and “morons.” But with a new lead editor, the piece is more coherent, far less strange, and more professional than its predecessor.⁵

It is important to recall that psychology, tempted and misled by a small minority, has a long history of extremely oppressive social-political projects and of justifying these with facile, poorly thought-out arguments and assumptions. These projects included attempts to explain human intelligence and justify genocide by studying the shapes of skulls (the Nazis were fond of this), forced sterilization eugenics programs, many driven by the same racist background theories, also psychological, in both the US and Europe (again, attractive to the Nazi party), the strange doctrines of Freud that deeply abused and damaged millions of patients for decades, and doctrinaire Behaviorism which sought to eliminate our conception of people as rational, autonomous persons, and substitute a society-wide program of “behavioral shaping” that aimed to train whole human populations the way you might a hapless lab rat.

Fortunately, wiser psychologists, philosophers, scientists, social critics and others came to the rescue of our democratic societies. But there were many close calls and some nations briefly drifted into these cultish errors. Now the psychologists are coming for a fundamental safeguard of our democracies, conspiracy theorizing.

Today the role of philosophy in the form of epistemology and ethics is to help keep this list from getting any longer.

³ Surprising, since it first appeared in a widely read, well-reputed international newspaper and the basis, including their defenses of it, for the book.

⁴ *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (3): 50-67, 2019.

⁵ For instance, in the first reply Dieguez et al. habitually referred to themselves with quote marks around the word “they:” It was “They” throughout, as in: “They” believe that ...“they” conclude ...what “they” stand for ... this bizarre device went on for pages. It certainly was entertaining, though, and one never quite shook the thought the whole piece was, in many ways, a good-spirited, intentional self-satire. To her credit, Karen Douglas, leading social psychologist of conspiracy theories, and a co-author of the original *Le Monde* declaration, declined to sign Dieguez et al.’s awkward reply. Several others vanished, too. See “‘They’ Respond: Comments on Basham et al.’s ‘Social Science’s Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone.’” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5 (12): 20-39, 2016.

Four Definitions

Conspiracy: The intentional cooperation by two or more persons to deceive others, either by omission of information, or the promulgation of false information and other misleading evidence, or by both.

The standard accepted meaning.

Conspiracy Explanation/Theory: A conspiracy theory is any explanation that makes reference to a conspiracy as a causal factor in past, present or future events.

This “basic definition” is a non-pejorative definition that epistemologists and others have arrived at over the last two decades. Many other theorists, including sociologists, cultural theorists and experimental psychologists, have adopted some version of it. In epistemology its main architects and advocates include Charles Pigden, Brian Keeley, David Coady, Matthew R. X. Dentith, Kurtis Hagen, me and others. Any difference between these analysts’ definitions is quite small. None are pejorative.⁶ I am pleased to find myself in good company.

Its main epistemic virtue is that it does not *beg the question* against conspiracy theories, presupposing a certain negative evaluation in the category itself. Such judgements will have to be argued for separately. As logicians and epistemologists (inseparable studies, really) we have no difficulty that conspiracy theories are simply conspiracy explanations of whatever degree of evidential merit. because the meaning of “theory” here is exactly that, “explanation”.

Another advantage: It is consistent with common sense, non-pejorative usage. With the new renaissance of popular conspiracy theories, whose development and adoption are facilitated by the internet, the phrase “conspiracy theory” has no functional pejorative connotation in most of the population. Even recent work in social psychology has grasp that there is no significant pejorative effect to labeling an explanation a “conspiracy theory” (Among the general populace, I suspect there never really was). Michael Wood demonstrates this in, “Some Dare Call it Conspiracy: Labeling Something a Conspiracy Does Not Reduce Belief in it.”⁷ A convincing, elegant study, it is also perfectly consistent with our ordinary

⁶ For a well-reasoned and comprehensive explication of the issue, see Matthew R. X. Dentith’s insightful book, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories* (Ashgate, 2014). The motive for some psychologists to adopt a negatively connotated definition is this is their starting assumption in their pathologizing project. Conspiracy theories somehow *must* be “bad.” Such an assumption is not available if we wish an honest evaluation of that very assumption.

⁷ Michael Wood, *Political Psychology* 37 (5): 695-705, 2016. A gifted researcher, trained by Karen Douglas as a second generation pathologizer, Wood has gone through a number of complex and understandable maneuvers, professional and public, to reconcile his observations with the pathologizing project he was trained to operate within. I have had no problem replicating similar versions of Wood’s study in the US. Also, in large student-surveys conducted before any discussion of the issue, only an insignificant fraction answer “agree” or anything like it (Likert 7-point scale) to, “If an explanation a ‘conspiracy theory’ that tells you it is probably false”, “...

experience. Strangely, Wagner-Egger, et al. still believe that “conspiracy theory” is now “very negatively connotated.”⁸ The image of an ivory tower flashes before us. They are mistaken.

This reality-disconnected claim also makes one wonder why they wish the state to pay them to combat what they view as a new plague of conspiracy theories. These seem rather popular, do they not? The truth is much more encouraging for epistemically functional democracy: Any pejorative connotation, also now vanishing within epistemology, appears to linger only among a small group of academics, political elites and corporations attempting to leverage this effect for their own defense. These, and mainstream media when facing competition with conspiracy explanations they did not themselves already promulgate.

Particularism: Because there is nothing inherently irrational or otherwise logically or epistemically flawed about conspiracy explanations, these cannot be dismissed out of hand but instead must be judged, like any other explanations, on the basis of evidence. Either acceptance of the explanation, rejection of the explanation, or a studied agnosticism about it, result.

The work of the last decade in epistemology shows that *particularism* appears the only epistemically sound response to accusations of organized deception and conspiracy.⁹

The opposite of *particularism* is *generalism*: The belief, and arguably political superstition, that merely by being an explanation that posits organized deception—conspiracy—the explanation can rationally be dismissed as almost certainly false. No recourse to evidence is required.

The current *Le Monde* group still clings to generalism and where they were disingenuous before, now they openly advocate for a state-sponsored *pathologizing project*. After their earlier arguments disserved them, now they offer a new defense of their proposal. With a new lead author, the piece is more coherent, far less strange¹⁰ and more professional than its predecessor.

crazy” “... a lie” and so on. The dominant response is a fairly strong level of “disagree”. They readily accept the “basic definition” in their classes, too. This helps explain how conspiracy theories *could* be so popular.

⁸ “(Oxy)moron,” 60.

⁹ The list of authors converging on this conclusion is lengthy and it borders on literal consensus, even among those who dislike conspiracy explanations. This has forced a turn among critics from epistemology to moral critiques. See Patrick Stokes’ insightful contributions to the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* in recent years as well as in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*.

¹⁰ For instance, in the first reply Dieguez et al. habitually refer to themselves with quote marks around the word “they:” It was “They” throughout, as in: “They” believe that ... “they” conclude ... what “they” stand for ... this bizarre device went on for pages. It certainly was entertaining, though, and one never quite shook the thought the whole piece was, in many ways, a good-spirited, intentional self-satire. To her credit, Karen Douglas, leading social psychologist of conspiracy theories, and a co-author of the original *Le Monde* declaration, declined to sign Dieguez et al.’s awkward reply. Several others vanished, too. See ““They” Respond: Comments on Basham et al.’s ‘Social Science’s Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone’” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5 (12): 20-39, 2016.

In what follows I will outline and reply to the items on the *Le Monde* group's new list of justifications for their pathologizing project. Then I supply a brief conclusion. I hope this will help the *Le Monde* group understand the real complexities involved in this pressing, timely and timeless topic and attract the interest of further social epistemologists.

The “Statistical Argument”¹¹

The authors assert that 99 percent of conspiracy theories are false. The assertion and its mathematical precision are curious. Particularly for those who style themselves mathematically guided empiricists. They cite no data from their own studies or any others that support this claim. The claim would require that out of 1000 conspiracy theories (see definition), 990 were false. The claim is quite false, especially when we reflect on personal experience. We consistently form conspiracy theories about our personal lives, most minor and of little consequence. A good percentage of them turn out to be true over time.

For instance, people routinely organize to keep secrets, both damaging and benevolent, from ourselves and others for any number of reasons; business, sexual, familial and so on.¹² We do the same to others. It is entirely normal and rational. The common question, “why didn't you guys tell me?” is common for the first reason; it happens all the time. It would be historically illiterate and naïve to think what we learned how to do and do well when we were ten does not thrive at the highest levels of political, economic and media power. At what point did our elites discard the simplest abilities of childhood? History, unfolding now as before, shows again and again they never did. I suspect they never will.

The over-generalization is also flawed. Conspiracy theories diverge radically in development and evidence. Wanger-Egger et al. make no notice of this; unusual for the statistically literate. 99% of mammals cannot type. We can infer that, with a 95% confidence, that humans cannot type. The same argument applies to scientific theories: 99% are false. And so on. Their argument is the very same.

The application is also flawed. We can hope that at the national and global level the “99% of conspiracy theories are false” rule is correct. But that alone is of no consequence. Here is the problem: Imagine within this flock of a thousand, ten harrowing ruling-elite conspiratorial abuses a year are true (10 out of 1000). That is what matters (and it does seem to be a modest estimate of the average over a year).

¹¹ “(Oxy)moron,” 51.

¹² It is interesting and amusing that the popular series 21st century *Toy Story* is overtly a fantasy conspiracy theory. It consists of a vast conspiracy of somehow possessed, benevolent toys. One to deceive their “owners” about the fact that toys are conscious, scheming, manipulative and yet deeply caring. The latter two facets sound like cooperative, good parenting, as virtually all good parents know. Brian Keeley makes a similar observation about the vast, well-organized and benevolent conspiracy to deceive our children about the existence of Santa. When we realize that we are being lied to, we quickly form a true conspiracy theory, albeit about a benign conspiracy.

Similarly, one accused cannot present themselves before a rational judge and argue that 99% of the accusations made in this world are false, and then conclude the state's behavior of making accusations is certainly, above a 95% confidence, irrational and demand acquittal. But that is exactly the argument of our psychologists. The issue instead is of *particular evidence* in each *particular* case; "particularism". It is interesting such a fallacious argument as their "statistical" one could tempt and seduce them. Especially among those trained in the meaningful application of statistics. Confirmation bias?

The Night of the Long Razors ¹³

The *Le Monde* group believes that conspiracy explanations are (1) of necessity inordinately complex and (2) somehow obnoxious in a way that forces us to always prefer explanations based on stupidity and incompetence.

The *Le Monde* group then invokes two "razors" in order to short cut our attention to evidence. The first is an old pied piper, Occam's "razor", a Medieval heuristic which distresses over complexity. The second, one more novel and ambitious, is Hanlon's or Heinlein's "razor". Both are rather dull in this context.

Occam's razor is irrelevant to making the generalist case against conspiracy theories because a great many official stories are *far* more complex in the entities and processes. Moreover, they routinely propose conspiracy theories of the same events. So, any appeal to Occam's razor to undercut conspiracy explanations as such is a non-starter. We would have to dismiss both accounts if we followed Wagner-Egger et al.'s flawed reasoning.

9/11 is a good example of both problems. The official account of 9/11 is far more convoluted than the alternative 9/11 accounts; those that assert the US government either let 9/11 happen on purpose or made it happen on purpose. In contrast, the official account invokes innumerable accidents and an inordinate amount of coincidences to enable the disaster, and only then adds the relatively simple claim that the actual attacks were perpetrated by a very small and very lucky group of Arab co-conspirators. The official account of 9/11 is also, no surprise, a conspiracy theory: These terrorists conspired to enter the US on false pretexts, take control of civilian jetliners and use them as suicide weapons against high-value targets.

Moreover, conspiracies can be remarkably simple in inception. It is easy to show a small group can wield vast resources because almost all of the persons below do not understand the real goals and nature of what they are doing. Stunning powers can be brought to bear when the real reasons are privy to a small, well-placed number. Gulf of Tonkin is now an established example,¹⁴ as is, arguably, the apparent US allowance of the Japanese attack on

¹³ "(Oxy)moron," 52-3.

¹⁴ Hanyok, Robert J. 1998. "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2 - 4 August 1964." *Cryptologic Quarterly*, 19 (4): 20.1, 1-50 (derived from NSA/CSSM 123-2, redacted, approved for release by NSA, 11-03- 2005).

Pearl harbor on December 7, 1941, as a pretext for entering WWII. Today, this is a well-established position among academic historians.¹⁵

On Occam's razor we will, therefore, opt for either some variant of alternative 9/11 theory, "let it happen on purpose" or "made it happen on purpose" or some combination. This is the far simpler explanation. So, given Occam's "short cut" this would elevate the alternative, government-accusing 9/11 conspiracy theory to *epistemic superiority*. Something has gone terribly wrong with Wagner-Egger et al.'s invocation of Occam.

A Dull Razor

Next, Wagner-Egger et al. turn to another, even duller "razor," Hanlon's or Heinlein's (depending on who you ask). An amorphism, the idea is that we must not attribute to malice anything we can adequately attribute to stupidity. In this case, to malicious conspiracy. But as it happens, all people conspire at times and rationally suspect the same, at times, from others. So why embrace a radically biased preference to explanations based on stupidity? Whatever the answer, it could not be epistemic or particularly intelligent. No surprise, Hanlon's one-sided "razor" is never show-cased in epistemology or logic. The fallacy is just too transparent. It would have it we must be irrationally biased to those explanations (no matter how convoluted, complex and speculative) that do not attribute malice, dishonesty or malicious conspiracy, but only attribute events to the good intentions but stupidity of their animating actors.¹⁶ Never to bad intentions and cunning. All the more so whenever explaining the actions of powerful people and institutions; say, the CIA and its director? Odd.¹⁷

We should also notice that Hanlon's razor is inconsistent with Occam's. It often gives us the opposite diagnosis of Occam's. Often malice and cooperative malice, not blundering stupidities, are the simpler explanations of events.¹⁸

That Wagner-Egger et al. would invoke a standard as anti-evidential and irrelevant to the facts as Hanlon's razor appears only to speak to the wonders that confirmation bias works in the minds of establishmentarian psychologists and in the context of powerful political institutions, to which they rely on for their careers and vision of the world. Hanlon's razor emerges as a strain of political piety: Conspiracy theories can only be accepted when *no* version of stupidity is ever available. No matter what, no matter how unlikely.

¹⁵ Here the main concern, as documents now show, was not the Japanese, but by leveraging the Axis treaty of mutual support, to enter into the war in Europe against Nazi Germany.

¹⁶ True, intentions matter, both good and bad, and should and can be evidentially discerned. Neither discernment is easier than the other without such evidence of whatever nature.

¹⁷ David Coady notes that there is a form of what I would call "political piety". In contrast to "conspiracy theory" he terms it "coincidence theory". Coady contrasts the accusation that all conspiracy theories are irrational with the claim that the preferred explanation must always be an improbable series of coincidences, "coincidence theory"; which is actually is manifestly irrational. Wagner-Egger et al.'s use of "Hanlon's razor" looks to be a narrow variant of irrational "coincidence theory." See David Coady *What to Believe Now*, Wiley-Blackwell, 196-7, 2012.

¹⁸ This emerges as a larger pattern in Wagner-Egger et al.'s logical treatment. It continually trips over itself.

Burdens of Proof¹⁹

Echoing the above, Wagner-Egger et al. invoke burden of proof arguments. This is unusual for scientists. Rather un-Galilean. These arguments have a poor track record, not just in science but particularly where institutions of power are being questioned. The West's "Middle Ages" are evidence enough. Establishmentarian reactions slowed science and philosophy for centuries, they even imprisoned and executed informed skeptics.

In science, as in philosophy and all of rational life, the received view must defend itself if challenged. Challenge can appear in two ways. Imagine some people approach proponents of the received view: 1. We want you to explain the evidence for your account? The proponents of the received view must provide. They cannot reject the question on mere authority and be epistemically and intellectually honest. In the same way, "We have evidence your view is false." The proponent must reply, "Please present such falsifying evidence", not denounce the challenge with *ad hominem* arguments. The "burden" cuts equally in both directions. There is no epistemic deferential. Symmetry is complete.

So, there is no epistemic privilege in honest science, no unique bias that favors the "received" view in the face of evidential challenge. The challenge succeeds or it does not. Consider the ordinary understanding of the perihelion of Mercury test, which ushered in Einstein's Theory of General Relativity. In one observation, GR replaced Newtonian physics. This is the epistemology of science. Surely one they accept in other contexts. Wagner-Egger et al.'s is the fallacy of special pleading.²⁰ Not an attempt at jury-rigged appeals to "burden of proof". The evidential challenge must be responded to in either direction.

Let us switch to a political or economic context. If there is some sort of burden of proof, it is certainly against high-placed groups within our political and economic hierarchies. They have powerful and numerous opportunities and inducements for public deception and manipulation and availed these in the past. That reality is the first premise of democracies: *The salvation of the state lies in watchfulness of the citizen.*

When there is evidence of government etc. wrong doing, they must establish its innocence. Primarily this is because of the vast *differential* of power favoring power elites over citizens, especially in today's modern states. The reverse should be true, when the powerful state attacks citizens with criminal accusations. The burden of proof is reversed, because the power differential is. The state must prove beyond a "reasonable doubt" the citizen is guilty. This is to curtail conspiratorial and other abuses by the state. This is elementary civics; both legal and political. Such a "burden of proof" is not epistemic but instead an ethical/political one in nature. A very different animal, but it carries a special proof-burden, just the same. Citizen researchers should be accorded the same respect, *contra* the *Le Monde* declaration.

¹⁹ "(Oxy)moron," 53-55.

²⁰ Exploiting differing standards in relevantly similar cases.

Conspiracy Theorists in the Pathologizers' Own Literature

The picture here is not pretty. This body of research-literature has been criticized on many occasions by a number of epistemologists. Frequented with transparent fallacies in the results-interpretation sections, it becomes rather numbing. Space limitations prevent anything like a complete catalogue. Kurtis Hagen provides a powerful and convincing critique of the whole enterprise.²¹ Reviewing the studies that claim to have uncovered new and more disturbing facets to the irrationality, immorality and paranoia of conspiracy theorists suggests to an objective observer that only an obsessive attachment to an *a priori* assumption that conspiracy theorists are all these things and worse can explain them. A self-insulating, self-perpetuating, pathologizing “monological belief system,” spiked with a Chernobyl-level dose of confirmation bias, seems the best explanation.

Wagner-Egger et al. concede that there are serious methodological problems in many of the pathologizing studies, as pointed out by Dentith, Hagen, me and others. But they then demand *we* reconduct *their* studies.²² Remarkable. Their demand is like someone who crashes his own car then demands you fix it. Their theoretical sustenance, as it stands, is tainted. They tainted it. So, replacement with responsible studies is their job. “You break it, you buy it.” We look forward to a more responsible research culture in the future.

Logic and Definition

Le Monde group moves on, claiming that *real* conspiracy theories consist only of errant data. Again, the image of an ivory tower might flash before us. Here is a surprising lack of empirical acquaintance with conspiracy theories, even the fledgling, particularly for those who professionally study the phenomenon. It ignores all the mature, popular flagship theories like JFK, Alternative 9/11, Sandy Hook, Moon Landing Hoax and even, for that matter, the less popular and radical theories, like Flat Earth (which has made a new and sophisticated resurgence, apparently as a segue to Theism).²³ All are richly populated with positive data.

Flushed with ambition, our colleagues declare, contrary to a number of previous statements,²⁴ that warranted conspiracy theories, “do simply not exist, because conspiracy theories may in our view be defined as irrational *suspicious* of conspiracy based on errant data

²¹ See our several critiques in the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, and Kurtis Hagen “Conspiracy Theorists and Monological Belief Systems” in *Argumenta* 3 (2): 303-26, 2018, and in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*.

²² “(Oxy)moron,” fn, 57.

²³ See Eric Dubay’s, “200 reasons why the earth is not a spinning ball,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUpkL5pdcQ>, retrieved on March 22, 2018. An enjoyable, if a bit repetitive, unconvincing mixture of both errant data and positive evidence. It is an excellent workout in logic and the physics of light. A number of late 19th century scientific attempts at demonstration populate their arguments, mainly appealing to long distance horizon viability observations and civil engineering principles that *appear* to violate the curvature of the earth. Atmospheric deflection effects were not well understood at the time (which, of course, can still be contested, but only on evidence).

²⁴ Their “Statistical” and “Burden of Proof” arguments, among others.

about the official version...”²⁵ Well yes, you may so define; you may just as well define them as croissants. But as your grounds for wholesale rejection are systematically flawed, your definition now only serves as a premise in an obviously circular argument, one that assumes the conclusion in the premise, points to any particular conspiracy theory, and derives the desired conclusion.²⁶ The group’s definition is also empirically false. Rational, evidentially justified conspiracy theories are legion. As most any historian is willing to point out.

Wagner-Egger et al.’s final proposal is that we commit ourselves as epistemologists to the very epistemic blindness and generalism they wish to engineer into the general population. We will only listen to those who are government judges, commissions and committees or members of the mainstream media, and on occasion, the “whistle blower” or a rare “non-professional” these institutions opt (for whatever reason, in whatever manner) to bring to our attention, “[We]...support only the results (and not the announcement) of serious journalistic or judicial inquiries bringing positive proofs of the conspiracy... Hence, our proposition could be an epistemic solution to the long-lasting problem of defining warranted *versus* unwarranted [conspiracy theories].”²⁷ No, this just reinstates the question. Then it begs the question: These are the very institutions that conspiracy theorizing justifiably brings under constant examination and often, justified retort.

All these institutions have a long and continuing history of catastrophic failure, and all, given this, are properly subject to conspiratorial doubts, as they often are.²⁸ Unfortunately the conspiracy theorist has history on her side. Nor is there any “long-lasting problem” concerning warrant here. It was solved long, long ago. Our normal methods of unbiased handling of evidence in a contested human context are well established and sufficient for the task, in daily life, civil discourse and in our courts.

Wagner-Egger et. al.’s appeal to a monopoly of politically sanctioned authorities is as pointless as perilous. An act of amnesia.²⁹ It is vacuous: What counts as “serious”, “journalist”, reliable “judicial” reports, etc. and how do we discern these in any instance? It is politically dangerous, as it routinely shelters elites in powerful institutions from accountability they do not choose to provide and have the power to easily, covertly deny.

A Healthy View and an Unhealthy View

The Healthy view of public vigilance is the healthy one, *contra* Wagner-Egger et al. The healthy view is that vigilant suspicion and an unbiased, openness to accusations of high

²⁵ “(Oxy)moron,” 60. Whether suspicion or belief is not relevant, either. Both can properly serve as propositional attitudes to a conspiracy explanation.

²⁶ This definition is also question-begging, as the majority of analysts share a definition that is true to human and historical experience, some version of the “basic definition” introduced in our introduction.

²⁷ “(Oxy)moron,” 60.

²⁸ The standard is known as the “public trust approach” and has long ago been recognized as hopeful yet quite inadequate. See Lee Basham “Joining the Conspiracy [Special Issue]” *Argumenta* 3 (2): 271-290, 2018 for a recent restatement.

²⁹ Charles Pigden presses this point in his several writings on the subject, beginning with “Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 25 (1): 3-34, 1995.

placed, organized deception and conspiracy is rational, practical and prudent. As is the unprejudiced development and exploration of evidence. This is entirely reasonable. It is a proven, necessary technique for the maintenance of a functional democracy and the preservation of rational public life. It need not and should not be interfered with by self-appointed and seemingly historically illiterate social scientists.

The Unhealthy view is the unhealthy one, *contra* Wagner-Egger et al. This is the view that vigilant suspicion and an unbiased openness to accusations of high placed, organized deception and conspiracy within government and corporations is almost certainly the result of mental disorders, one destructive of the largely politically pious, submissive lives the *Le Monde* group wishes us all to lead.³⁰

³⁰ By extension, the *Le Monde* group ought to also declare that the development and exploration of evidence against their Unhealthy view is *prima facie* irrational and mentally disordered, too. It is neither bent on pathologizing nor generalist in its manner and on occasion its practitioners publicly endorse conspiracy theories.