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Conspiracy Theory and the “Bodyguard of Lies”: The Bennewitz Matter

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Joseph Uscinski and Adam Enders (2022) describe “conspiracy theory” as a pejorative term, one employed in what they see as our “post-truth” era to indict official explanations for historical events. Conspiracy theories involve answers for why things happened that conflict with official explanations and which involve powerful bodies operating in secret.

Following David Coady (2003), I define a conspiracy theory as an explanation of a historical event involving secret, influential agents, often conflicting with official history. Conspiracy theories are often conceptually linked to misinformation and resistance to disconfirming evidence, termed by Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2008) ‘evidential self-insulation.’ Regardless, some conspiracy theories are true, which suggests that a generalist approach to understanding conspiracy theories cannot stand. The fact that some critical conspiracy theories (MKULTRA, the Gulf of Tonkin) have been true suggests that conspiracy theories should be taken on their evidentiary merit since it is not true that ‘official stories’ are more reliable than ‘conspiracy theories’ in all cases of national import. Further, Uscinski and Enders propose that the argument that conspiracy theories contain “obvious falsity,” makes subjectivity part and parcel of the definition of such theories, which is an epistemic vice.

The assumption that something is “patently untrue” implies that an appeal to “common knowledge” can prematurely halt the procedure of justification. As Katherine Puddifoot (2014) argues, recourse to evidence is a necessary aspect of epistemic responsibility. Therefore, the rejection of a conspiracy theory merely because it runs counter to an official or common explanation is an epistemic vice. Thus, the generalist approach is an example of epistemic hubris, contrasting with the epistemic virtue of intellectual humility in which only evidence-based assessment of conspiracy theories is seen as sufficing for justified acceptance or rejection of explanatory models.

As an example of the need for evidence-based assessment of conspiracy theories, I discuss the UFO ‘conspiracy theories’ of Paul Bennewitz, a 1980s ‘flying saucer’ enthusiast. Bennewitz, who introduced concepts like underground UFO bases to the ‘flying saucer’ community, was deceived by the U.S. Air Force Office of Special Investigations, who conducted a disinformation campaign against him. Despite uncovering evidence of ‘stealth’ technology development, the governmental conspiracy misled Bennewitz into believing in another imaginary conspiracy.

The ‘Bennewitz matter’ is complex; the conspiracy theory he promulgated was without foundation since it was generated by the U.S. Air Force as a disinformation campaign intended to conceal actual information about the development of then-secret technology Bennewitz had uncovered. He thought Bennewitz was indeed the victim of a conspiracy, but it was not the conspiracy. Further, the material given to Bennewitz became enduring components of UFO lore, leading conspiracy entrepreneurs to elaborate on that material. The ‘bodyguard of lies’ surrounding the Bennewitz matter suggests that even the most outlandish conspiracy theories deserve attention because of the actual conspiracies that may lie behind them.

Considering the Epistemology of Conspiracy Theories

Coady (2003) argues that a conspiracy theory is “a proposed explanation of a historical event, in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event which it purports to explain.” According to Juha Räikkä (2018), conspiracy theories are explanations that usually satisfy two conditions:

- (1) The conflict criterion, i.e., an explanation is a conspiracy theory only if it conflicts with a received explanation of the same event, and;
- (2) The conspiracy criterion, i.e., an explanation is a conspiracy theory only if it refers to a conspiracy or plot.

Much of the current academic and public discussion portrays conspiracy theories as a negative phenomenon linked to misinformation, mistrust in experts and institutions, and political propaganda. Scholarly efforts to understand conspiracy theories have grown in recent years, and there is now broad literature across disciplines (Enders et al. 2020). M. Giulia Napolitano gives a standard view of conspiracy theories in “Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation” (2021), in which she describes conspiracy theories as arising through a process of “evidential self-insulation.” Napolitano argues that conspiracy theories are not theories or explanations at all but rather a way of holding a belief regarding a conspiracy in which believers ignore disconfirming evidence. As a result, she argues, conspiracy theories often exhibit a characteristic resistance to disconfirming evidence. The author argues that the evidential self-insulation typical of conspiracy theories makes them epistemically problematic, insulation that makes these beliefs immune to disconfirmation by counterevidence that the believer could encounter in normal circumstances. The author argues that this self-insulation makes conspiracy theories epistemically irrational, thereby accusing them of an epistemic vice (Cassam 2019). Such vices, including but not limited to closed-mindedness, intellectual arrogance, and negligence, impede gaining, maintaining, or disseminating knowledge.

While most authors do not go as far as Napolitano in overtly accusing conspiracy theorists of engaging in epistemic vice, many maintain the epistemically negative connotation that characterizes the current meaning of ‘conspiracy theory.’ Douglas, Uscinski et al. (2019) conclude that belief in conspiracy theories results from a range of psychological, political, and social factors, almost all of which involve motivations other than a search for justified true belief; they suggest that individuals may be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories if they feel powerless or if they have a general mistrust of authority. They list epistemic motivations (individuals may be drawn to conspiracy theories because they promise to provide understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty about the world), existential motivations (individuals may be drawn to conspiracy theories because such theories promise to provide a sense of control and security in an uncertain world) and social motivations (individuals may be drawn to conspiracy theories because they promise to sustain a positive image of the social group or of the self) for belief in conspiracy theories.

Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton and Aleksandra Cichocka (2017) argue that the appeal of conspiracy theories lies in their ability to provide simple explanations for complex events, make sense of uncertain situations, and provide a sense of control and security. The authors conclude that while conspiracy theories may appeal to people because they promise to satisfy these motives, there is little evidence to suggest that they do so, making conspiracy belief may be more appealing than satisfying.

Sunstein and Vermeule (2008) take a similarly negative view of conspiracy theories, which they argue are often initiated and spread by “conspiracy entrepreneurs,” individuals who profit in some manner from propagating their theories, that they suggest that the government could undermine these groups by planting doubts about their theories and the stylized facts that circulate within. They propose a program by which the government should engage in “cognitive infiltration,” a program “whereby government agents or their allies (acting either virtually or in real space, and either openly or anonymously) will undermine the crippled epistemology of believers by planting doubts about the theories and stylized facts that circulate within such groups.” of groups that produce conspiracy theories.

Coady (2018), in response to Sunstein and Vermeule, argues that their position reflects a widespread assumption that conspiracy theories are false, unjustified, and harmful; as a result, they argue that governmental intervention is required in what amounts to epistemic paternalism. Coady, in turn, argues that this assumption is both unjustified and harmful. There are many justified conspiracy theories; there is often evidence for conspiracies, and likewise often benefit to the public in exposing such conspiracies. Further, the sort of epistemic paternalism proposed by Sunstein and Vermeule is surely self-contradictory; a conspiracy of truth, so to speak, is nevertheless a conspiracy.

Coady further suggests that Sunstein and Vermeule’s proposed ‘cure’ for conspiracy theories is unlikely to work and is inconsistent with the values of liberal democracy. Coady suggests that Sunstein and Vermeule’s focus on conspiracy theories that are false, harmful, and unjustified implies that all conspiracy theories are objectionable in these ways, in particular implying that conspiracy theories about the U.S. government are usually unjustified and false —when common knowledge suggests that at least some —Project Sunshine, MKULTRA, Operation Northwoods, Iran-Contra, COINTELPRO, and the Gulf of Tonkin incident — can be demonstrated to have been confirmed, with some (MKULTRA, the Tuskegee experiments) to have presented substantial moral hazards.

Matthew Shields (2022) similarly argues that this generalist strategy for a critique of conspiracy theories, in which all such theories are held to be epistemically defective, is false. Shields posits a distinction between conspiracy theories that arise from governmental institutions and those generated by amateurs; he argues that conspiracy theories that governmental actors create tend to be the most pernicious. The theory that elements within the U.S. government carried out the 9/11 attacks is not endorsed by any mainstream media outlets, government agencies, or academic institutions and is generally considered to be outside the mainstream; in general, as a conspiracy theory coming from amateurs, it has had no large-scale effect on society. However, the theory that Iraq had weapons of mass

destruction prior to the 2003 invasion by the US-led coalition was repeated frequently, with the Bush administration saying unequivocally on at least 532 occasions that Iraq had WMDs or was otherwise trying to obtain or produce them; this led to the invasion of Iraq, which has had far-reaching consequences.

Napolitano (2023) defines a conspiracy theory as an individual or group belief in a conspiracy resistant to disconfirmation by evidence, linked to misinformation, mistrust in experts and institutions, and political propaganda. We might contrast this view to that of Tim Hayward (2023), who questions whether it is rational to defer to official stories, often presumed to be generated by experts. Hayward argues that sociological studies reveal the epistemic potential of citizens' collaboratives, which may include or advocate for hearing dissident experts. These groups' epistemic position is arguably analogous to the 'other institutions of civil society' that underwrite the authority of official stories; Hayward argues that any presumption of deference to official stories is defeasible and describes official stories as strategic communications, stories authorities promote to move a given point of view forward in public awareness. This promotion can involve extensive coordination by organizations committed primarily to persuasion rather than truth-seeking and can sometimes include blocking dissidents' deliberative challenges.

In conclusion, the author suggests that an appropriate attitude towards official stories is critical receptiveness, citing research by the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda, and Media, which he says has mounted significant challenges to some of the West's official stories, particularly in its revelations concerning Timber Sycamore, which was a covert program run by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to provide weapons and training to Syrian opposition forces fighting against President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war. The program began in 2012 or 2013 and was supported by several Arab intelligence services, including that of Saudi Arabia. It provided funding, weapons, and training to militias associated with the Free Syrian Army. The program, which was not successful, resulted in a flood of U.S. weapons into the Middle East's black market and was accompanied by official denials.

M Dentith (2017) similarly argues that critics often dismiss conspiracy theories as unwarranted beliefs supported by dubious evidence. However, they suggest that provisional belief in conspiracy theories is supportable in the light of actual conspiracies like MKULTRA and Timber Sycamore (Al-Kassimi 2021). As Dentith argues, conspiracies do indeed occur. They suggest an evidential approach in which individual conspiracy theories are judged on their individual merits. We can support such theories when the data offers the support we would ask of any other data that supports a theory. Dentith argues that there is no *prima facie* case for skepticism of conspiracy theories based purely on the stigma against conspiracy theories in popular discourse due to a bias in favor of official sources. Such a stigma represents an epistemic vice; we should assess conspiracy theories on their evidential merits like any theory.

What might be the source of that stigma? Jesse Walker (2023) notes that the term "conspiracy theory" has been increasingly used to deride ideas that have cultural cachet,

provided that this cachet is limited to some out-group. He observes that during Donald Trump’s presidency, occurrences of the term proliferated due to the airing of numerous conspiracy theories, making it more challenging than ever to maintain the illusion that mainstream elites are immune to conspiratorial thinking. This denigratory characterization is echoed by Basham’s (2023b) observation that “conspiracy theory” has become a synonym in public discourse for “fringe,” which itself primarily means non-majoritarian.

Interestingly, Walker points out a shift in language where the word “conspiracy” is being used as shorthand for “conspiracy theory.” This shift has led to situations where statements, taken literally, mean almost the opposite of what their authors intended. He provides several examples of this phenomenon, including an article by Sacha Baron Cohen titled “We Must Save Democracy From Conspiracies,” which was about conspiracy theories, not literal conspiracies. Walker suggests this linguistic shift could be due to the increasing number of stories that posit a conspiracy behind the spread of conspiracy theories. He also speculates that we might observe a natural progression in which “conspiracy” starts to mean “fringe.” Walker argues that despite the need for a consensus on definitions, the scholarly literature on conspiracy theories need not be mired in the same conceptual confusion as the widespread usage of the term. He emphasizes the need for clarity in distinguishing between beliefs and actual plots against the public.

The article “The *Le Monde* Declaration: Can Suppression of Conspiracy Theory be Conspiratorial?” by Lee Basham (2023a) further explores the complex dynamics of conspiracy theories and their suppression in a discussion of the *Le Monde* Declaration, which calls for suppressing conspiracy theories. Basham critically examines the declaration and its implications, arguing that the suppression of conspiracy theories can itself be seen as a form of conspiracy, arguing that the media and the state shape public opinion about conspiracy theories based on their vested interests in suppressing information. Like Dentith (2022), Basham sees the scholarship on conspiracy theory as divided between two opposing perspectives: the ‘particularists,’ who believe each conspiracy theory should be individually assessed, and the ‘generalists,’ who argue that such theories universally pose epistemic challenges.

Dentith argues that there are indeed fantastical conspiracy theories that extend far beyond acceptable evidence, often clashing with widely accepted worldviews. Such conspiracy theories, like ‘hollow earth theories,’ are so at odds with what is widely accepted about the world that their credibility must be questioned; others, as Dentith suggests, involve alleged conspiracies that, if real, should have been exposed because so many individuals would have been involved or the payoff in exposure would be so great; here might fall the claims of a stolen U.S. election in 2020 might land. The lack of whistleblowers, despite the potential benefits outweighing the costs of such action, leads to questions about the veracity of such a theory. Even so, as Dentith suggests, while these characteristics may provoke suspicion, leading one to deem a theory unwarranted, this does not substantiate its falsehood. Dentith urges a thoughtful approach to evaluate the reliability of conspiracy theories in which the assertions which make up the theory are evaluated.

As Räikkä suggests, a conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation for a historical event in which conspiracy has a significant causal role. This non-generalist definition contrasts with generalist arguments like those of Sunstein and Vermeule, who further propose a paternalistic solution to the problem of conspiracy theories that run contrary to governmental ideas; they suggest that the government should engage in cognitive infiltration to undermine conspiracy theories. Instead, as Coady argues, bad conspiracy theories are an acceptable price for good conspiracy theories. Some conspiracy theories, as Shields (2022) argues, arise from governmental institutions, and it is those conspiracy theories that are the most pernicious; the sorts of deference to official stories Napolitano and Hayward discuss are pernicious and antithetical to the pursuit of democracy, and Hayward’s critical attitude towards official stories is appropriate rather than automatic deference. That deference to official stories, as Walker (2023) suggests, often makes itself known in mass-media derision; Walker notes that the term “conspiracy theory” is being used to deride ideas that have cultural cachet, especially during the Trump presidency.

None of this is meant, as Dentith (2022) suggests, to recommend the indiscriminate extrapolation of critique about the dismissal of specific conspiracy theories to an argument for the credibility of conspiracy theories in general; instead, critical evaluation of conspiracy theories is preferable to either automatic deference to official or mainstream information sources or to the wholesale acceptance of conspiracy theories. Dentith offers an appropriate caution; they note that some conspiracy theories are fantastical on their face, yet even if they possess absurd characteristics, provoking suspicion, this does not substantiate a theory’s falsehood.

Further, some conspiracy theories may, as the example to be presented next will suggest, prove to be more complex than just ‘true’ or ‘false.’ Winston Churchill is reputed to have said that “truth is so precious that a bodyguard of lies should always attend her,” and in that manner, a defeasible conspiracy theory may be an aspect of a larger conspiracy. As an example of such, we consider the conspiracy attendant upon Paul Bennewitz and his assertions about his UFO observations in the late 1980s.

The Bennewitz Conspiracy

According to multiple sources, a former special agent for the U.S. Air Force Office of Special Investigations, Richard Doty, said that in the 1980s, he was given the assignment to create fake documents and give false information to UFO researchers, including a scientist and entrepreneur named Paul Bennewitz.¹

¹ Sources used to create the above narrative regarding Bennewitz include Greg Bishop (2005) *Project Beta: The Story of Paul Bennewitz, National Security, and the Creation of a Modern UFO Myth* (Simon and Schuster) in which Bishop makes a closely-argued case for Doty’s role in the AFOSI disinformation campaign against Bennewitz and Linda Moulton Howe, a reporter who has written extensively about the role of ‘aliens’ in cattle mutilations; and Robert M. Collins (2005) *Exempt from Disclosure* (Peregrine Communications), in which Doty discusses his role in the Bennewitz matter but continues to discuss items such as the alleged difficulties U.S. scientists are having in duplicating alien materials in its possession—thereby, one assumes, continuing his role in the AFOSI disinformation process. Also of interest is William Moore’s speech at the MUFON Symposium in July 1989, of

In early 1980, Bennewitz became involved in observing and filming objects which he had sighted on the ground and in the air near Kirtland Air Force Base and the Manzano mountain range near Albuquerque, New Mexico. Bennewitz, by dint of documents provided by a man named Richard Doty, came to believe that he had stumbled upon a conspiracy by the government to keep secret knowledge they had of alien contact in which they were engaged, including technology transfers, the construction of UFO bases, and governmental acquiescence in alien abduction of humans; these stories were widely distributed within the UFO community and became part of the lore of that group, finding widespread distribution in popular media. The conspiracy in which Bennewitz was actually embroiled was a disinformation campaign by the AFOSI and Doty, their agent, to conceal the development of secret technologies at a nearby base by providing counterfactual information to Bennewitz; that information drove Bennewitz to a nervous breakdown. Despite Doty's admission of the AFOSI conspiracy, the tales concocted by Doty and others in the AFOSI have come to serve as the basis for a variety of broadly-reported UFO 'contactee' stories up to the current day.

Bennewitz reportedly began filming strange lights and recording unusual radio signals over Kirtland Air Force Base. Doty, who was working for the Air Force Office of Special Investigations at the time, allegedly fed Bennewitz false information about the signals, leading him to believe that he had intercepted communications from an alien spacecraft. This disinformation campaign ultimately led to Bennewitz's mental breakdown and hospitalization.

Greg Bishop (2005) offers a thorough timeline of Bennewitz's attempts to film aerial objects near Kirtland Air Force Base, the pursuant disinformation efforts by Richard Doty and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, and Bennewitz's ultimate mental breakdown and hospitalization.

Bennewitz started a small company in 1969 to manufacture specialized temperature and humidity instruments for high-profile clients such as NASA and the U.S. Air Force. His company, Thunder Scientific, was located such that he could observe lights darting around the wilds of Kirtland Air Force Base. He compiled hundreds of photographs and shot thousands of feet of 8-millimeter film of these objects. He submitted these images, and recordings of unusual electrical activity, to defense agencies; those agencies turned that material over to the Air Force, whose Office of Special Investigations created a disinformation campaign to discredit him and suppress public awareness of these events.

The disinformation campaign against Bennewitz, spearheaded by an agent named Richard Doty, was primarily aimed at reinforcing the more bizarre aspects of what he came to believe, undermining Bennewitz's credibility. Bishop suggests that the disinformation provided to Bennewitz, which eventually led him to believe in the existence of alien bases

which incomplete footage is available. During this, Moore admitted to his involvement in the Bennewitz affair alongside Richard Doty and several others. An excellent overview of the Bennewitz matter, and other disinformation efforts involving aerial phenomena, is Anton and Vugrin (2022).

underground at the Archuleta Mesa near Dulce, a threatened alien invasion, the presence of multiple alien species with which the U.S. government had secret treaties, and the like, has passed into UFO lore and continues to influence UFO believers despite the public admission of Doty regarding his involvement in the creation of that disinformation. All this, Bishop contends, was done in service of the Air Force's goal of keeping the development of then-secret aircraft like the Stealth fighter jet out of public awareness.

One such instance occurred when Bennewitz returned to Albuquerque after trips out to Dulce. He told his Air Force contacts, including Richard Doty, about his suspicions that the "alien base" he had learned about in hypnotic regressions of a UFO contactee, who was well known in the UFO community, was probably located there. Doty and his colleagues capitalized on this since it meant Bennewitz's attention turned away from Kirtland. They began to devise a far-reaching plan that would keep him looking permanently at the location of the supposed underground base near the Colorado border and away from the actual scene of covert activity at Kirtland.

Doty also claims that fake air vents were positioned around Dulce Mountain to further Bennewitz's suspicions about the "underground base." He also claims that the AFOSI created a system to project "flying saucer"-like shapes on clouds in the area.

Perhaps unfortunately for Bennewitz, he also became involved with William Moore, a UFO researcher and author. Moore was well known in the UFO community, having popularized both the 'Philadelphia experiment' and the supposed UFO crash in Roswell, New Mexico, in books written with Charles Berlitz in the late 1970s. The Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO) sent Moore to investigate Bennewitz's claims. However, Moore revealed in 1989 that he had at the same time been working with Doty to feed false information to Bennewitz.

One such item of misinformation Moore gave to Bennewitz at Doty's behest was a redacted version of a document; this document was riddled with changes, and when Moore asked why, he was told it had to be "sanitized" to protect sensitive projects. This was the first time Moore had been asked to lie to a fellow researcher. Moore was told that Bennewitz was expected to wave this document to the press and others as proof of what he was saying about an alien invasion; at this point, the document would be denounced as counterfeit, and Bennewitz would be further discredited.

Moore also visited Bennewitz during one of the peaks of Bennewitz's emotional roller coaster. Moore, who was still giving limited briefings to the Air Force, watched as Bennewitz became more emotionally unstable, trying to assimilate what was happening to him. By this point, Bennewitz had guns and knives all over the house, had installed extra locks on his doors, and swore that the aliens were coming through his walls at night and injecting him with chemicals. Bennewitz, by this point, had come to expect an alien invasion due to the information from Moore and Doty. Moore later visited Bennewitz during his hospitalization and tried to confess that the information he had provided was disinformation.

Unfortunately for Bennewitz, he considered Doty a trusted friend and confidante; in turn, Doty led Bennewitz to believe that the extraterrestrials were interested in our military establishments and, more specifically, in disarming or crippling our weapons of mass destruction. Doty claimed to have actually seen a bright light over a disused corner of Ellsworth Air Force Base while out on patrol, but apart from a couple of frightened guards under his command who had gotten close to the thing, no weapons were melted, and no beings were seen. Doty later insisted that he had nothing to do with a letter to the National Enquirer in which those claims were detailed.

Perhaps most damaging to Bennewitz, he was provided with a long narrative that purported to describe the history of alien involvement and intervention with humans. According to the narrative provided to Bennewitz, the “Ebans” were extraterrestrial beings who originated from a “green planet” and created two races of humanity: Homo Sapiens and “Sweads.” Both of these races were very similar in external appearance, the major difference being their mental composition; Homo Sapiens tended more toward emotion, and the Sweads tended more toward pragmatism. Humans were established in our solar system, and the Sweads were established in the solar system of Zeta Reticuli. The Ebans monitored their creations, occasionally interceding to avoid their destruction. About 300 years ago, the Sweads attained a level of technical competence that enabled them, for the first time, to challenge their creators, the Ebans. The limited war between the Ebans and Sweads has continued to this day, the document claimed.

The made-up terms “Ebans” and “Sweads” were a convenience for signal analysts; if these terms showed up in NSA intercepts, agents would know who was talking. The term “Sweads” seems to be derived from the old “space brother” jargon of the 1950s, when many individuals claimed to have met tall, blond, blue-eyed beings whom they referred to for convenience’s sake as “Swedes.” “Ebans” appears to be a bastardization of “EBE” or “Extraterrestrial Biological Entities,” a moniker that was popularized in the late 1980s when stories of government contacts with aliens began to flood the rumor mill after the use of the acronym in the controversial “MJ-12 Documents” mailed anonymously to the same William Moore who was a party to the deception campaign against Bennewitz—and whom Doty access to important secret documents if he cooperated in the disinformation effort. These same “MJ-12 Documents” are currently a significant component of UFO folklore.

The disinformation campaign against Bennewitz was a complex and multifaceted effort aimed at discrediting him and diverting attention away from the evidence he had gathered about unusual aerial objects near the Sandia Military Reservation. That much is clear. And if we follow Keeley’s definition of a conspiracy theory—“a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret”—the Bennewitz matter certainly can be explained by a conspiracy theory.

But there’s a problem. If we assume that Richard Doty and William Moore have told the truth in their admissions of responsibility for providing disinformation to Paul Bennewitz, then the conspiracy theory in which Bennewitz himself believed is false. If we assume that

Moore and Doty are lying, then does that mean that what Bennewitz was asserting was true? Even if we do not assume that anything Bennewitz said or thought was correct, can we take anything Doty said was true? Or anything Moore said? There seems to be some conspiracy involved in the flow of information in this matter, but the pertinent question —when does the disinformation end?—has no clear answer.

Conclusion

According to philosopher Ian James Kidd (2016), epistemic humility is a virtue that emerges from recognizing the fragility of epistemic confidence—that is, “the confidence invested in activities aimed at the acquisition, assessment, and application of knowledge and other epistemic goods.” Kidd argues that the virtue of epistemic humility registers an appreciation for the complexity and contingency of this web of conditions required to make assertions, particularly scientific ones. Similarly, Fulvio Mazzocchi (2021) discusses the role of scientific experts during the COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of their epistemic stance in such circumstances. The author emphasizes the need for experts to embrace epistemic humility, which involves recognizing the uncertainty that might accompany their claims and adjusting their epistemic conduct and communication accordingly.

Epistemic humility, Mazzocchi contends, is a two-fold intellectual virtue. The first aspect involves accurately evaluating one’s own epistemic condition, recognizing both its strengths and weaknesses. This includes being aware of the intrinsic limitations of human cognitive capacity and the conditional nature of knowledge, including scientific knowledge. The second aspect corresponds to the ability to translate the recognition of one’s partiality into a way of regulating one’s epistemic behavior. This involves behaving with epistemic virtue when interacting with other epistemic agents, such as acknowledging one’s biases when engaging in debates with peers, especially when such debates turn into public quarrels.

Nancy Nyquist Potter (2022), in the context of medical care, argues that ethics and epistemology are intertwined because our ethical behavior is influenced by our beliefs and knowledge. As such, were disagreements among scientific experts during the pandemic morally hazardous? While disagreement can be epistemically good and contribute to a healthy epistemic community, the way something like medical debates are conducted should, Mazzocchi (2021) argues, be determined by reference to the situation in which they are conducted.

Mazzocchi suggests that experts should put disagreement in proper context, highlighting the standard body of understanding and evidential basis, and feature uncertainty and unknowns as integral to the situation. This would make the debates more productive, limit the ability of political actors to take isolated items from the scientific debate and turn them to partisan use, and help people trust the scientific process. And, as Charles Pidgen (2012) argues, following the conventional wisdom concerning a number of conspiracy theories has proven to be unwise; both the scientific method and common sense would seem to urge that theories, whether they come from mainstream or fringe, be given appropriate examination.

A consideration of one’s implicit biases, as Joseph Gurrola (2023) suggests, is an important aspect of epistemic humility. Epistemic humility, as defined by Gurrola, is humility about the accuracy, reliability, consistency, or rationality of one’s epistemic practices. It involves taking a critical stance towards one’s epistemic practices to determine their accuracy, reliability, consistency, or rationality, with an eye toward one’s implicit biases—which almost certainly include a preference for official sources and prevailing societal attitudes. As Puddifoot (2014) argues, reference to evidence is a necessary requisite of epistemic responsibility, and thus pejorative dismissal of a conspiracy theory is epistemically vicious. To be epistemically virtuous, then, we should ideally consider that even the most outré claims of a conspiracy theory may have some basis in fact; and that we should set aside our biases toward official sources and commonplace explanations to consider what is true.

In the case of Bennewitz, the outlandish claims of underground alien bases, impending alien invasions, and secret treaties with various alien species are no doubt ridiculous enough to trigger doubt about any consideration of the matter at hand. But an approach of epistemic humility, which involves recognizing the limitations of one’s own knowledge and being open to revising one’s beliefs in the light of new evidence, can help us critically evaluate conspiracy theories—even one as convoluted and bizarre as the Bennewitz matter. Instead of uncritically dismissing a conspiracy theory because it fails to align with one’s pre-existing beliefs or biases, an individual practicing epistemic humility would consider the quality of the evidence supporting the theory, the reliability of the sources, and the plausibility of alternative explanations. In that light, what emerges from the Bennewitz matter is a complex, and perhaps ultimately irresolvable, story of a conspiracy against Bennewitz, operating with the assistance of some number of conspiracy entrepreneurs (Harambam 2020); the outcome was personally tragic for Bennewitz, with long-lasting effects on the UFO community and more current debates on the reality of unidentified aerial phenomena.

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