

# Understanding Conspiracism

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## **Abstract**

While conspiracy theories are often considered epistemologically suspect, this work endeavors to provide a neutral assessment of these theories on epistemological grounds, and then examining the phenomenon that underlies the pejorative understanding. Beginning with a broad definition, conspiracy theories are assessed within the context of inquiry, and connections are drawn to similar types of theory present throughout history, such as a superstition and myths.

Then, conspiracy theories are considered within the context of epistemic attitudes, and a distinction is drawn between conspiracy theorists, individuals who hold to at least one conspiracy theory, and conspiracists, individuals who demonstrate an attachment to conspiracy theories beyond their epistemological warrant. Conspiracism is then evaluated in the context of inquiry and the epistemic attitudes in order to identify where it errs, why individuals subscribe to it, and how it harms those individuals and those connected to them. By investigating conspiracism, this work seeks to set the stage for possible means of addressing this phenomenon.

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## §1. Introduction

On a dark night outside an urban center in North America, a science experiment is being conducted. There is a camera on a tripod facing a flat board with a hole cut in it a short distance away. Beyond that, another board with another hole cut in it. The camera, and each hole, is measured to be 17 feet above the water level. On one end, an individual is manning the camera and speaking through a walkie-talkie. On the other end, his partner is holding up a flashlight attached to a measuring stick. If the flashlight is held at 17 feet above water level, and the light can be seen by the camera through both holes, hundreds of years of science will be called into question. Indeed, this would indicate that the Earth has no curvature. However, if the camera cannot see the light until the flashlight is held at 23 feet above water level, then this result will match the current scientific consensus; namely, that the Earth is a globe.<sup>1</sup>

Jeran Campbell, the man at the camera, is expecting the former result. He asks his partner for the measurement on the flashlight. They reply that it is currently at 17 feet above water level. However, the camera cannot see the light. He asks that his partner raise the flashlight slowly and tells him to stop when the light can finally be seen by the camera. He asks for the current measurement, and his partner replies that the flashlight is 23 feet above water level. Jeran replies, "Interesting."

This is a description of a scene from a documentary titled *Behind the Curve*, which follows several proponents of the 'Flat Earth Theory'.<sup>2</sup> This theory posits that there is a global conspiracy which aims to convince the populace that the Earth is a globe, rather than being a flat circle surrounded by an ice wall. While this theory is considered absurd by many, it is not its absurdity that I find intriguing. What I find most interesting is not the theory itself, but the adherents who believe it and their actions in the face of contrary evidence. In the case of the Flat-Earthers, these are individuals who are following the scientific method: they encounter a

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<sup>1</sup> A diagram of this experiment can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> (Clark, 2018)

question, formulate a hypothesis, and test that hypothesis with an experiment that results in empirical data. Yet, when the results do not support their conclusion, they simply reply “Interesting,” and continue to believe a hypothesis that has been falsified. What exactly is happening here? How can one follow the scientific method and conduct an experiment correctly, yet ignore its results? Quite paradoxically, these individuals demonstrate both dogmatism (unwillingness or inability to question one’s belief(s)) and skepticism (withholding judgment regarding one’s belief(s)).

My intention is to explore conspiracy theories, and those who subscribe to them, to understand how and why this paradox is maintained. In this work, I will argue that conspiracy theories are a kind of theory which is actually very common, and moreover, is the proper result of human inquiry. I will also argue that the pejorative sense of the term ‘conspiracy theorist’ is a description of a particular subset of those who subscribe to conspiracy theories, and that these individuals can be understood as demonstrating certain epistemic attitudes and failing the process of inquiry. To distinguish between these two groups, I will use the term ‘conspiracy theorist’ for *anyone* who believes in a conspiracy theory, and ‘conspiracist’ for those who over-value conspiracy theories. I will argue that conspiracists, while seeming to benefit from their adherence to these theories, are actually harming themselves and others.

To facilitate this, I will be appealing to two prominent philosophers within epistemology, Sir Karl Popper and John Dewey, to understand the process of inquiry. Along with these figures, I will also draw upon the works of skeptics, such as David Hume, to describe the epistemic attitudes which act as the foundations for this process. Finally, I will draw a connection between conspiracy theories and the notion of ‘Bullshit’ from Harry Frankfurt.

I will begin in §2 with an analysis of conspiracy theories, provide a concrete definition, and consider their history in §3. In addition, various terminology (such as inquiry and epistemic attitude) will be introduced as needed. Then, in §4 I will evaluate conspiracism and argue where

and how it errs. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of the various harms caused by conspiracism.

## §2. Conspiracy Theories

While conspiracy theories have gained significant attention recently, in both the public consciousness and academic investigations, conspiracy theories in general are not new. This is because, simply put, a conspiracy theory is a theory that holds that a conspiracy is a significant causal factor for an event, and conspiracies *have* occurred to this effect. For example, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, an event often credited as inciting World War I, was the result of a conspiracy by a student revolutionary group. However, conspiracy theories have existed for far longer. For example, consider Homer's *Odyssey*, dating back to the 8<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC, which follows the Greek hero Odysseus and his journey home after the Trojan War. What incites this story? A conspiracy between Athena and Zeus who, against Poseidon's wishes, seek to reunite Odysseus with his family.

The point here is that conspiracies, and theories about them, are not recent aberrations which demand explanation. Instead, conspiracy theories are a particular *kind* of theory which have featured prominently throughout human history and will continue to do so. I will argue that this is because these theories can be the natural results of inquiry done correctly. Yet, there is also a pejorative sense that accompanies the term 'conspiracy theory'. Indeed, labelling a theory as a 'conspiracy theory' often serves as a form of dismissal, with the implication that it is not to be considered seriously. However, as my aim is to understand *all* conspiracy theories: this includes those largely taken as true, those referenced in the pejorative sense, and even those which, at first glance, do not seem related to conspiracies at all. First, I will introduce a formal definition of 'conspiracy theory' and defend against potential objections. Then, I will argue that even in its broadest sense, conspiracy theories can be the appropriate outputs of inquiry.

## §2.1 A Broad Definition of Conspiracy Theory

I'll follow the recent philosophical consensus in giving a neutral, inclusive definition which avoids the assumption that conspiracy theories are inherently incorrect or epistemologically suspect.<sup>3</sup> For example, a “bare-bones” definition given by Brian Keeley (as cited in Hayward, 2022): “A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret.”<sup>4</sup> However, I feel that this definition fails to capture something important; namely, that a conspiracy theory is one which supposes the involvement of multiple people *by necessity*. This is because conspiracy theories carry an implicit assumption; this assumption is that the event it seeks to explain can only occur through the efforts of multiple people. This assumption, in turn, rests on an implicit understanding of how much a single person is capable of. Thus, when one posits a conspiracy theory to explain an event, it is because one is implicitly assuming that the event could only happen through the efforts of multiple people.

Therefore, in order to capture this notion, I will be using the term ‘conspiracy theory’ in its broadest sense; to wit, a ‘conspiracy theory’ is any theory that posits i) an ostensibly hidden or secret effort, which is ii) directed towards a specific (explicit or implicit) end, and iii) is beyond the apparent capacities of a single person. It may seem odd to suggest, in (i), that a conspiracy theory is ‘ostensibly’ secret; however, consider how many conspiracy theories are posited as occurring within full view of the public. For all the awareness that exists about a particular theory, whether in the niche community that subscribes to it or the larger public that surrounds it, it is not considered a conspiracy unless the conspirators are considered to be working to keep it secret. Whether that is simply preventing the theory from being widely accepted by the general populace (by intervening against those working to prove it), or keeping certain details hidden from everyone. For example, awareness of the Flat Earth theory has spread significantly in the

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<sup>3</sup> Tim Hayward’s article (2022) provides some excellent discussion concerning this in §3.

<sup>4</sup> (Hayward, 2022, p. 153)

past decade, which has bolstered the number of its proponents, as well as the number of people in the general public who are conscious of it. However, despite these increased numbers, there has been no increase in evidence, no further indications that the conspiracy exists. Indeed, it remains shrouded in secrecy.

This also relates to (ii), the effort is directed towards a specific end; a conspiracy theory is not simply an explanation for events that occur as a coincidence; indeed, an important element of these theories is that they posit the *cause(s)* for an event. Of course, it matters little whether the end the conspiracy is directed towards is achieved. In some cases, the conspiracy might be planned to perfection, seemingly orchestrated by master architects capable of planning every move 10 steps in advance. In others, the conspirators are seen as blunderers, whose efforts more often result in overt failures which *would* be seen as the evidence they are, if only the public would realize. Paradoxically, it can sometimes be claimed as both; for example, the theory which asserts that the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks on the US were, in fact, orchestrated by the US government, while also leaving clues which pointed to this effect. How an organization can be both capable and inept, at the same time, is irrelevant; instead, all that matters is that the conspiracy is directed towards an end.

Criterion (iii) represents the most significant departure from the typical definition but is meant to capture that a conspiracy does not need to be the result of an explicit agreement between the supposed conspirators. This is because these theories, in seeking to sufficiently explain an effect, attribute a corresponding amount of power to the cause which is considered beyond the means of a single person. In other words, it is irrelevant whether multiple people are explicitly or implicitly conspiring; all that matters is that multiple people are *assumed* to be conspiring.

Now, there may be concerns that this definition is too broad; first of all, it seems to suggest that the actions of any group, provided they are done with the barest level of secrecy, would qualify. Frankly, I do not consider this to be problematic. If a theory posits that a group

acts, in secret, to achieve a goal, then it is appropriate to consider it a conspiracy theory. For example, if a theory suggests that a department in a state's government, acting in secret to further that state's international interests, causes an environmental catastrophe, then this should be considered a conspiracy theory because it is a theory which posits a conspiracy as the cause of the event in question. It does not matter that the actions of those involved are sanctioned by the government, nor does it matter if other causes were incidental to the event.

Another objection is that my definition results in the possibility for conspiracies without an explicit agreement by the perpetrators. This is apt; however, a conspiracy theory is a conjectural hypothesis concerning the *existence* of a conspiracy, it matters little how unlikely it is. To illustrate why my definition should be preferred, despite its broad connotations, consider the Borg from *Star Trek*.

The Borg are organisms linked to a hive mind; this means that, while seeming to be individual life forms, replete with their own self interests and motivations, they are more accurately understood as extensions of a singular entity. Indeed, a pertinent analogy would be the relationship between an octopus and its tentacles. Each individual Borg is like a tentacle, it can operate independently but it exists as an appendage to a larger consciousness; in other words, it lacks its own motivations and internal states. Now, imagine that a life form similar to the Borg arrived on Earth with intentions of taking over the planet.<sup>5</sup> We might observe these seemingly distinct individuals operating towards a uniform aim and assume that they are involved in some kind of conspiracy; however, in this case there are not *multiple individuals* involved. In fact, there is only a single entity. The upshot of my definition, then, is that it would successfully capture a theory describing this scenario as a conspiracy because, from the perspective of the theorists, *it is*. The point is that a theory should be considered a conspiracy

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<sup>5</sup> The Borg do this by 'assimilating' all the other life forms. This essentially replaces the consciousness of the individual with the shared consciousness of the hive mind.



theory if it purports a conspiracy between multiple individuals, regardless of the accuracy of the description.

## §2.2 Conspiracy Theories and Inquiry

With conspiracy theories properly defined, we can now investigate their epistemic status. To do this, I will appeal to the works of Popper and Dewey, two philosophers who wrote on science and inquiry, respectively. After discussing their views, I will argue that conspiracy theories should be understood as rational theories, even if they occasionally fail at accurately representing the world.

Dewey and Popper both discuss the process of inquiry, albeit in slightly different ways. Dewey, in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, argues for inquiry in its broadest sense. There, he defines inquiry as: “the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to connect the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, inquiry is a process that transforms ‘indeterminate situations’ (situations which lack an understood causal explanation) into situations that are fully understood within their causal context, even on their most fundamental level. Popper, in *Conjectures and Refutations*, focusses specifically on science and its aims, suggesting that: “a scientific theory – an explanatory theory – is, if anything, an attempt to solve a scientific problem, that is to say, a problem concerned or connected with the discovery of an explanation.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, when we inquire, we are interested primarily in *causal* connections; in other words, we seek to understand *why* a particular state of affairs resulted, as opposed to a different state of affairs.

Two considerations warrant particular attention: first, inquiry necessarily has a temporal nature; and second, in connection with the first, is that inquiry is a process that is never truly

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<sup>6</sup> (Dewey, 1938, p. 108) Of note, this is only his preliminary definition, but it serves well as a starting point for my own discussion.

<sup>7</sup> (Popper, 2002, p. 301)

satisfied. The first consideration should be obvious, but it is worth explaining explicitly. In short, because inquiry involves causal explanations, it must therefore be located within a causal chain, and causal chains can only be understood within a temporal context.<sup>8</sup> In other words, because we understand causality as relating events that occur in a sequence of time, the process of investigating that causality must also occur in a sequence of time.

The second consideration follows from the first consideration insofar as we can never truly isolate a causal chain. This is because any causal chain will continue infinitely in either direction. Therefore, the idea that we have isolated a particular part of that chain is merely our interpretation. Popper argues along these lines when discussing a causal theory of naming; he suggests that while our interpretation of a particular causal chain (in considering the 'beginning' and 'end') may be useful for a particular analysis, it does not mean that our interpretation constitutes an 'objective' description of the situation.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, any output from an inquiry, while understood as a 'fully determinate and unified whole', does not necessarily mean it is the truth.

Indeed, even if one believes they have arrived at a complete understanding of a particular situation, confirming that it is the objective truth of the matter is impossible. Unlike a student who can refer to solutions at the end of their textbook, there is no answer key available to us when we inquire into the world. As Popper suggests, "there is no criterion of truth at our disposal,"<sup>10</sup> However, while this may paint a pessimistic picture regarding the possibility of knowledge, things are not as dire as they seem. This is because although we lack a criterion of truth, we do not lack a criterion of falsity. In other words, although we cannot determine whether our explanation for an event is true, we can determine whether our explanation is false. This is because we can *test* our explanations; we can conduct an experiment that pits our explanation

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<sup>8</sup> This is true for humans and other like organisms whose experience has a temporal nature. I leave the possibility of non-temporal creatures as an open question which is outside the scope of this work.

<sup>9</sup> (Popper, 2002, p. 401)

<sup>10</sup> (Popper, 2002, p. 36)

against our observations, and if our observations do not match with those we expect, we have grounds to question our explanation. This is why the output of inquiry, a 'theory', is best understood as an *attempt* at an explanation. It is, as Popper suggests, merely conjecture.<sup>11</sup>

How do conspiracy theories fare in light of these considerations? First, I will argue that conspiracy theories satisfy the most important aspect of inquiry and play an important role in inquiry as a temporal process. Then, I will argue that, beyond this, conspiracy theories are rational.

The most important aspect of inquiry is how it relates to *causal explanations*. The purpose of a theory, the result of inquiry, is to provide an explanation for the cause of an event. A conspiracy theory does this by positing a conspiracy as being the main causal factor. However, while we encounter events in our lives and inquire into their causes due to our understanding of the world as one of cause and effect, there are some instances where the true cause is simply beyond our capacity to understand. This may be because of ignorance, a lack of required experiences, sensory or technical limitations, etc. Regardless, even in such cases, the event in question will nonetheless demand an explanation that can be understood. In other words, it will demand a *satisfying* explanation. Indeed, it is important to realize that the value of an explanation is not necessarily how correct it is, but for how adequately it accounts for the observed situation. The adoption of a conspiracy theory, then, satisfies this requirement quite handily; it will not only offer a causal explanation for the event in question, but its simplicity leads to easier adoption.

That conspiracy theories are simple is straightforward and is related to the difference between a complete explanation and a sufficient one. Put simply, when attempting to understand an event, we search for a sufficient explanation. We are less interested in a full understanding of the myriad of causal factors that may lead to an event's occurrence, and more

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<sup>11</sup> (Popper, 2002, pp. 60-61)

focused on the *simplest* explanation which can account for the event in question. For example, imagine a boulder on a hill. If a single individual can push the boulder until it begins to roll down the hill, then that individual's efforts can be considered as a sufficient explanation. However, perhaps more than one individual is required. This complicates our explanation; not only are there now two (or more) distinct efforts to be aware of, but it also raises another question about the *relation* between these efforts. In other words, we must also understand how much of the boulder's movement might be attributed to each of them (for example, 45%:55%). The upshot is that, all things being equal, we will gravitate towards the explanation which is the simplest. Indeed, Popper even argues that one of the requirements for the growth of knowledge is that our theories have a certain simplicity.<sup>12</sup> Conspiracy theories, with their single causal factor<sup>13</sup>, easily satisfy this.

Of course, there may be concerns that this argument is exactly why conspiracy theories should be considered epistemically suspect. After all, the world often is more complicated than our simplest explanations can account for, and the notion that complex explanations should be avoided on principle would stymie advances in knowledge. However, if the most important aspect inquiry is to provide causal explanations, the second is to provide the grounds for further criticism and construction. In other words, even a theory happens to be incorrect or inadequate, it can nonetheless serve an important function in the growth by knowledge by being the grounds upon which further inquiry can be conducted.

This is why students learning about physics and chemistry for the first time will be told that atoms can be understood with the Bohr model, in which protons and neutrons form the nucleus and electrons are placed (in pairs) along various orbits of increasing energy levels.

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<sup>12</sup> (Popper, 2002, pp. 326-327) This is more nuanced than "ideal theories are simple theories"; however, it nonetheless points to the idea that conspiracy theories are on the right track as far as growing knowledge is concerned.

<sup>13</sup> I recognize that the causal factor in question is, in fact, a conspiracy involving multiple individuals; however, it is the reduction of multiple efforts into a single unified one.

Although this is no longer understood as an accurate representation of the atom, it presents a satisfying explanation from which further instruction can be based. In other words, once one can understand a simple (albeit incorrect) explanation, they are prepared to understand a more complex one. For example, it was mentioned at the top of §2 that a conspiracy caused the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand which was, in turn, recognized as the catalyst for the first World War. However, even this explanation is not wholly accurate; the geopolitical situation at the time was becoming increasingly volatile and an armed conflict was almost inevitable. Yet, understanding this simple causal chain allows for more nuanced investigations; scholars can delve further into what caused the conspiracy, why alliances formed as they did, how economic tensions led to increasing militarism, etc. The upshot is that conspiracy theories, along with any simple explanation that relies on magic, divine intervention, the occult, etc., can be easily understood and thus furnish the ground upon which further inquiry can proceed.<sup>14</sup>

For these reasons, conspiracy theories should be understood playing the same role as any other theory; they provide a causal explanation and provide the material for further inquiry. However, while these support conspiracy theories as being epistemically rational, I believe it is important to highlight their instrumental rationality as well. The term 'rational' has varied usage, so I will explain how I take it. In my view, rational is not strictly equivalent with logical; when we say that human beings are rational creatures, it is not because they act entirely in accordance with logic, but because their actions have *reasons*. These reasons may be *epistemic*, in which one wishes to believe in proportion to evidence, or *instrumental*, in which one wishes to believe in proportion with how these beliefs factor into their overall goals.<sup>15</sup> As a result, when I suggest that conspiracy theories are rational, it is not because they are strictly logical, but because there

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<sup>14</sup> This is why Popper says, "science must begin with myths, and with the criticism of myths;" (2002, p. 66)

<sup>15</sup> I am here appealing to Thomas Kelly's article which distinguishes between these two terms. (Kelly, 2003).

are reasons for their adoption. While these reasons may be epistemic, they may also be instrumental.

Consider the words that may be given to a parent grieving the recent death of a child; they might be told that this event was “all apart of God’s plan.” This message is intended to provide comfort by alleviating the distress caused by lacking an adequate explanation, especially one which relates to a traumatic experience. If said another way, it might be: “Do not worry any further about your child’s death, it occurred for reasons beyond our understanding.” While such an explanation might not be epistemically satisfying, it can nonetheless be instrumental for quelling one’s grief. By satisfying this emotional need, it can enable one to turn their attention to more fruitful endeavors. Interestingly, this can indirectly benefit inquiry as well; if inquiry were forever warped by obsessing over emotional disaster, then it’s difficult to see how the growth of knowledge could proceed at all given the constant trials and tribulations of life.

To expand on this, theories can not only satisfy a specific emotional crisis point but can provide a sense of relief for an ongoing situation. In other words, theories can provide a form of coping. When one does not understand their situation, it is all too easy to become overwhelmed and to resign oneself to ignorance. However, a simple explanation which reduces this complicated picture into easily understood terms can reduce this stress and enable one to persevere. As a result, the appeal of conspiracy theories, with their simplicity and explanatory power, should be obvious. Simply put, they recast the complex world into simpler terms; indeed, it accomplishes a similar reduction as that of tribalism, which divides the world into friend and foe. Although not necessarily the best theories from the perspective of epistemic rationality, they can nonetheless be considered as rational from an instrumental perspective because they are adopted for a reason. Even if this reason is to understand a complicated world, people will strive to have an explanation they can understand (even if it is incorrect) over no explanation at all.

In light of this, it should be no surprise that conspiracy theories have existed throughout human history. Not only because they serve epistemic purposes, but because they are useful

instrumentally. However, it might be objected that while conspiracy theories certainly existed throughout history, they have grown increasingly prevalent in recent decades and their utility do not explain why that is. Indeed, I would not argue with this assertion; however, I think this points to an important element that ties conspiracy theories together with other kinds of explanatory theories. As a result, in the next section I will argue that the increasing prevalence of conspiracy theories makes perfect sense when we understand the role that they serve in relation to other kinds of theories which have been decreasing in recent years.

### **§3. Understanding Theories**

For as long as humans have existed, we have made efforts to understand the world around us. This stems from our understanding of the world as being one of cause and effect; in seeking to become masters of our environment, we inquire into the causes of events to actualize those we desire and prevent or mitigate those which we do not. Of course, while in the modern day we benefit from a wealth of recorded information, ancient humans were not so fortunate. As a result, it should be no surprise that mystical, spiritual, or metaphysical explanations were often posited. For example, in seeking to explain a drought, a culture might conclude that their actions had angered a deity with the power to manipulate the weather. Without any other adequate explanation, their actions will then be guided by the best available theory. As a result, in our modern period we find evidence for religious ceremonies involving prayers, offerings, sacrifices, etc.<sup>16</sup>

My contention is that conspiracy theories in the modern day occupy the same position as myths in ancient history. Their increasingly prevalence is the result of the decreasing relevance that myths have in contemporary society. I will argue for this by discussing the striking similarities between conspiracy theories and superstitions. Then, I will highlight the relationship

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, even these are simply our current theories which provide a satisfying explanation for the material evidence we find. It is possible that we make mistakes, but until a more satisfying explanation can be produced, we make do with what we have, just as the ancients did.

between the number of conspiracy theories and supernatural theories in history. Finally, I will discuss the epistemic attitudes which underlie all theories in order to explain how these attitudes relate to the adoption of these theories in history and to the modern day.

### §3.1 Conspiracy Theories, Superstition, and Myths

Luck is ubiquitous across cultures<sup>17</sup> and is often classified as a 'superstition'. A superstition is a belief about a particular object, action, or circumstance, which purports to factor into a causal explanation. Thus, while luck is sometimes opposed to the order of cause and effect, even in this opposition it can be understood as usurping another cause and taking its place.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of how it is understood, the upshot is that luck is related to the *causal explanation* of an event. Indeed, luck itself factors into causal chains. Thus, we might say that a particular event will *cause* good luck or bad luck. For example, some see spilling salt as causing bad luck and as a result this event should be avoided. Of course, this belief also prescribes remedial action; by taking a pinch of the spilled salt and throwing it over one's shoulder (be mindful which one, of course), one can remove this consequence.

The connection between luck and conspiracy theories, however, is more subtle. This is because a conspiracy assumes multiple individuals and, in the case of luck, these individuals will need to be imbued with enough power to cause the event in question. Therefore, examples of this connection will often rely on mystical elements, such as the Fates from Greek mythology. The Fates are depicted as three sisters (often called Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos) who decide the course of every mortal life. Consider how they fit the definition of conspiracy theory from §2: first, the Fates operate in secret, especially from mortals; second, they direct their efforts towards a particular end (*i.e.*: shaping the destiny of each life); third, they are attributed with enough power to accomplish this task. Thus, one's luck in life can be seen as the direct result of

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, 'beliefs about fortune and misfortune' can be found in Donald E. Brown's list of 'Human Universals' (Brown, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Hume (1993, §VIII) argues along these lines in his discussion of Necessity and Liberty.



a conspiracy by the Fates; if you are lucky or unlucky, it was decided by a conspiracy kept hidden from you.

Of course, a contemporary example can demonstrate this connection as well. For example, consider a very successful poker player. When asked to explain their success, they might claim that “Lady Luck was on my side.” However, observers might posit that the player is cheating. While this could be accomplished solely by the individual by sneaking in their own cards, a conspiracy between the individual and an accomplice is another viable theory to this effect. Perhaps the cards of the other players are being communicated to them, or they are given information about the upcoming cards of the deck. Regardless, the point here is that while luck can be explained as a superstition involving a metaphysical cause, it can just as easily be explained by a conspiracy.

That luck can be attributed to either a superstition or a conspiracy suggests that there are some mutual characteristics between them. Indeed, both appeal to certain features which are hidden or secret: in the case of superstitions, they rely on a hidden abstract concept which is nonetheless attributed with significant causal power; in the case of conspiracy theories, they rely on a secret plot as the sufficient cause of an event. Relatedly, both have the same function: they fill explanatory gaps. When we seek to explain an event and lack a satisfying explanation, we can appeal to these kinds of theories specifically because they provide a sufficient explanation. Indeed, it is this latter function which not only connects conspiracy theories with superstitions, but with myths at large.

As a result of this connection, I consider it no surprise that the number of posited conspiracy theories has an inverse relationship with the number of posited supernatural ones. This is because if one can rely on a supernatural theory to explain an event, one has no need of a conspiracy theory at the same time, and vice versa. Even further, I consider this connection to be the driving force for the increasingly prevalence of conspiracy theories in the modern day. This inverse relationship comes to light when we see how historical theories which occurred

during periods of low information tend to be supernatural in nature, while periods with more available information tend to be conspiratorial.<sup>19</sup>

Homer's works, which became incredibly influential after the Greek Dark Ages<sup>20</sup>, were filled with supernatural explanations. The Ancient Greeks had lost their history, and thus deities provided a sufficient explanation to fill the gaps. Thus, while the results of the Trojan War may have been known, Homer's gods explained *why* those results occurred. These supernatural explanations then declined in importance as philosophy flourished. Indeed, as Ancient Greece was overtaken by Romans and the latter began to embrace philosophy as well, the supernatural explanations continued to diminish. By the time of the Roman Empire, while religion certainly played an important part in society, it was no longer the all-encompassing force that it had been. Indeed, it is quite telling that when the Roman Emperor Nero died and the empire was plunged into chaos, popular theories were not supernatural, but instead posited that Nero had faked his death as apart of a grand conspiracy.<sup>21</sup>

As Christianity rose to prominence during the reign of Constantine and became the dominant religion, so too did supernatural explanations become more dominant as well. Indeed, the so-called 'Dark Ages'<sup>22</sup> after the fall of the Western Roman Empire was typified by a lack of record-keeping and an expansion of religious sentiments. While the lack of records means that it is difficult to draw conclusions about the prevalence of conspiracy theories, I would argue that, given the widespread power of Christianity, supernatural explanations were more dominant. To demonstrate, consider the use of supernatural explanations in fields such as medicine. Instead

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<sup>19</sup> While the ensuing discussion will be limited to western history, this is because a comprehensive world history is beyond my scope and this discussion only serves to highlight the relationship between conspiracy theories and supernatural ones.

<sup>20</sup> Often denoted as the period from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.

<sup>21</sup> Known as the Nero Redivivus legend, this popular belief held that Nero would return after his death to reclaim the throne.

<sup>22</sup> The term 'Dark Ages' is no longer supported by scholars due to its negative connotations, but it remains the case that many records were destroyed or lost during this period.

of appealing to natural causes, illness was instead attributed to supernatural entities like demons and treated through religious procedures.

It was not until the re-introduction of western philosophy by the Islamic world that Christianity's power began to weaken. What followed was the period known as The Enlightenment, which saw an explosion in scholarship and, accordingly, a decreasing prevalence of supernatural explanation which has continued into the modern day. Indeed, as society has become increasingly secularized, supernatural explanations have decreased as a result. Hume, writing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, remarks on this very phenomenon when discussing miracles.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, attested supernatural phenomenon saw a decrease after the popularization of photography, only to see a resurgence after methods for doctoring photos became popular as well. Conspiracy theories also followed this pattern and saw a corresponding rise.

The upshot of this brief historical discussion is meant to show that supernatural explanations are often favoured because of their simplicity and explanatory in a similar manner to conspiracy theories; however, these similarities mean that only one is required at a given time. Correspondingly, as acceptance of supernatural elements decline, we see an increase in conspiracy theories. Indeed, Popper summarizes this best when he argues that after humanity abandons God and asks who replaces Him, that it will be filled by none other than people themselves.<sup>24</sup> Even further, given that a single individual is only capable of so much, a large enough event will necessitate multiple individuals working in concert. If this group of people is not known, but is nonetheless posited as being the primary cause, then it must be because they are acting in secret. Hence, a conspiracy theory.

Thus, conspiracy theories occupy the same role as supernatural theories. Not only because of their similar applications and functions, but because the adoption of one is related to

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<sup>23</sup> "But as [miracles] grow thinner every page, in proportion as we advance nearer the enlightened ages, we soon learn, that there is nothing mysterious or supernatural in the case," (Hume, 1993, p. 80)

<sup>24</sup> (Popper, 2002, p. 166)

the other. However, it is also the case that the dramatic increase in scientific knowledge since The Enlightenment has drastically reduced the need for these kinds of explanations. In other words, as humanity gains an expanded understanding of the world, there is less of a requirement for theories whose main appeal is to account for explanatory gaps. Yet, there are nonetheless many who persist in gravitating towards these kinds of explanations. An easy solution is to simply dismiss these individuals as prioritizing their instrumental needs over their epistemic ones. However, it has already been shown that adopting conspiracy theories can serve epistemic purposes as well. Thus, to better understand why these theories are adopted, a more robust understanding of the epistemic attitudes with which we approach theories is required.

### **§3.2 Epistemic Attitudes**

Epistemology is the study of knowledge, and an attitude is the mental state one takes towards something. Thus, an epistemic attitude is the mental state one has towards knowledge. In the simplest conception, there are two epistemic attitudes: Dogmatism and Skepticism. In short, if we consider a particular proposition,  $p$ , one can either be: Dogmatic, and assert  $p$  or not- $p$ ; or Skeptical, and assert neither  $p$  nor not- $p$ . However, I will argue that there are, in fact, four epistemic attitudes worthy of our attention. This is because Skepticism can be divided into 'Pyrrhonic Skepticism' and 'Critical Skepticism'. The fourth attitude, however, exists outside the dichotomy of belief and suspension of judgment, and is appropriately called 'Bullshittism'. I will describe each of these attitudes, argue that they are best distinguished by how they understand the relationship between belief and doubt, and then explain how conspiracy theories relate to them.

#### **§3.2.1 Dogmatism**

Dogmatism is, simply put, an attitude towards belief that is unable or unwilling to question it. This term often has a negative connotation, and it is no surprise that an accusation of being 'dogmatic' is often understood as being pejorative. However, Popper argues that

'dogmatic thinking' is, in fact, necessary to a certain extent.<sup>25</sup> This is for a few reasons: first, a dogmatic attitude is the first one we can be expected to have; second, it fulfills an important role in our theorizing.

That a dogmatic attitude is the first one we can expect to have is due to our propensity for induction. Consider a child who touches a hot stove and burns their hand. From a single instance, they will hold to the belief that touching hot stoves will result in pain. Indeed, it would be rather difficult to convince them otherwise, and any further repetitions (with similar consequences) will only solidify this belief. Likewise, this also explains why the dogmatic attitude will be more prevalent in children or those who lack a certain breadth of experience (in other words, the naïve). Our understanding of the world as being a constant ordering of cause and effect, and the basic assumption that like causes will *always* have like effects, suggests a dogmatic attitude is our default attitude.

However, dogmatic thinking also plays an important role in our theorizing; in particular, it is what motivates us to approach experiments with conviction. For example, imagine a child who sees another person playing with a bouncy ball. Later, they are attempting the same kind of activity with their own ball; however, in this case it is a tiny medicine ball and thus does not produce the same bouncing effect. In virtue of the dogmatic attitude, the child will cling to the belief that a bouncy ball (similar to the one they witnessed) exists and will pursue it. They may explain to their parents what they are interested in, and their parents may provide them with the kind of ball they were searching for. If not for a dogmatic pursuit, they may have simply given up and decided that the ball they witnessed was an aberration, a unique item they would never see again.

Yet, there is a reason that philosophers like Dewey and Popper are critical of this attitude. Indeed, Dewey suggests that dogmatism is "the great enemy of free and continued

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<sup>25</sup> (Popper, 2002, pp. 64-65)

inquiry.”<sup>26</sup> This is because dogmatism, an inability or unwillingness to question and criticize one’s beliefs, inevitably results in the arrest of inquiry. It is an implicit rejection of inquiry’s nature as a continuously unfolding process (*i.e.*: one without end) and, indeed, of our existence as temporal beings. Even further, given that inquiry is interested in *solutions*, it follows that an end to inquiry is to assert that one has no further need of any more solutions. In other words, it suggests that one is content with the explanations that one currently has, with no desire or need for others. This is problematic for two reasons: first, it implies that one’s current explanations are *absolutely* true; second, it accomplishes this by denying a core component of inquiry, doubt.

As to the first, it was already mentioned in §2.2 that assertions to the *absolute truth* are impossible. We have no ‘criterion of truth’, and thus when we are presented with a theory, we can only confirm through experimentation that it does not imply a contradiction or result in inconsistencies. Yet even this confirmation is only *tentative*. One need only look at the constant disruptions to long-held scientific theories to see that even the most ‘confirmed’ theories can be disproven with a single experiment to the contrary.<sup>27</sup>

Second, doubt is integral to inquiry. If we do not doubt our explanation, we have no reason to search for a better one. Yet, this is essentially what dogmatism attempts to block. This is because to the Dogmatic, doubt is *anathematic*. In other words, it is something that is abhorred, detested, avoided, and ignored as far as possible. Indeed, Hume describes the Dogmatic’s reaction to doubt as such: “they think, that they can never remove themselves far enough from it, by the violence of their affirmations and obstinacy of their belief.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, the Dogmatic believes they can resist doubt by an effort of *sheer will*.

However, resisting doubt is counterproductive; in virtue of our existence as temporal beings and our lack of a criterion of truth, we will inevitably encounter new situations

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<sup>26</sup> (Dewey, 1938, p. 171)

<sup>27</sup> One example of this being Barry Marshall, who proved that peptic ulcers could be caused by a bacterium by *giving themselves an ulcer* and curing it.

<sup>28</sup> (Hume, 1993, p. 111)

characterized by a unique kind of doubtfulness. One might try to deny this and stick to their already accepted explanations; however, doing this is simply to ignore the problem, and an ignored problem is an *unresolved* problem. In some circumstances, this is not particularly debilitating; for example, the difference between the explanations for rain, either as resulting from meteorological conditions or from a deity's actions, is not very impactful given how insignificant an individual's actions are in affecting that phenomenon. Yet, believing that sickness is caused by evil spirits instead of germs will lead to actions which undermine the individual's health.

In short, Dogmatism is an epistemological attitude that sees belief as *incompatible* with doubt. This is apparent not only through their refusal to engage with doubt but is demonstrated by how they approach the very notion of theories. For the Dogmatic, the 'theory of gravity' is oxymoronic; after all, why is it a 'theory' if gravity is self-evident? However, this is not the only epistemic attitude with this approach. As we'll see, 'Pyrrhonic Skepticism' shares a similar foundation, and it should be no surprise that it originated in opposition to *all* assertions, even conjectural ones.

### **§3.2.2 Pyrrhonic Skepticism**

If Dogmatism is the first epistemic attitude, skepticism immediately follows it. After all, one need only imagine someone who makes a dogmatic assertion, and someone else voicing their doubts about it. Indeed, it could be argued that 'Ancient Skepticism' contains the very roots of philosophy. The root of 'skepticism', the Greek word *skepsis*, means 'investigation'; therefore, to be a skeptic in the original sense of the word was to be an individual who inquires.<sup>29</sup> However, my focus here will be on one specific and problematic form; Pyrrhonic Skepticism stymies inquiry because it is concerned with the *existence* (or lack thereof) of knowledge. Thus, in their interest to avoid falsehood, they argued that the ideal life is one lived without belief.

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<sup>29</sup> (Vogt, 2022, §0)

It may seem odd to suggest this ideal; indeed, it is difficult to imagine how such a life is even possible. However, this was (ostensibly) achieved by this strain's founder, Pyrrho of Elis (360-270 BCE). Indeed, while he did not produce any written works, there is evidence from the fragments of his student, Timon (325/320-235/230 BCE), that Pyrrho did prescribe a life without opinions or beliefs. The reason for this is that the unstable and indeterminate nature of things bars us from making positive statements (or their negations). The requirement that we put forward no positions of any kind results in speechlessness (*aphasia*), but further leads to a freedom from worry (*ataraxia*).<sup>30</sup> In other words, our lack of a criterion of truth means that no belief can ever be certain and, as a result, we should avoid making assertions at all. The promise being, of course, that this will lend itself to a better life without the worry of being wrong. Indeed, the fact that Pyrrho wrote nothing is an example of him sticking to this principle.

Yet, one might rightly question how, if no formalized description of this attitude was propounded, we can even know of its existence. The answer is that most of the writing attributed to this school of thought can be traced to a single individual: Sextus Empiricus (160-210 CE).<sup>31</sup> Sextus not only wrote extensively of his own philosophy, but it is through his works that the exigent fragments attributed to Timon and other skeptics (Arcesilaus, Carneades, and Agrippa the Skeptic) were preserved.

Now, it was mentioned above that Pyrrhonic Skepticism is opposed to belief. This is because, to the Pyrrhonic, putting forward *any* position (or its negation) is an expression of dogmatism. Thus, the attitude one has towards the proposition  $p$ , either as belief ( $p$ ) or disbelief ( $\sim p$ ), is to make an assertion of some kind. This, in turn, is to be open to falsehood. Indeed, this is why the Pyrrhonic advocates for only one attitude: suspension of judgment (belief). As we lack a criterion of truth, we can never be certain of the veracity of any claim we make. Therefore, if one endeavors to avoid falsehood, one's only option is to suspend judgment.

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<sup>30</sup> (Vogt, 2022, §4.1)

<sup>31</sup> (Vogt, 2022, §4.4)



However, I will argue that this indicates two things: first, the Pyrrhonic attitude displays the same perspective as the Dogmatic when it comes to the compatibility between belief and doubt; and second, that the Pyrrhonic attitude is as self-defeating as the Dogmatic attitude in how it relates to inquiry.

It was discussed in §3.2.1 that the Dogmatic abhors doubt; they seek to avoid or ignore it and this manifests as an inability or unwillingness to question their beliefs. By contrast, the Pyrrhonic can be seen as being *infatuated* with doubt. Indeed, doubt is the *only possible answer* to any question that we might ask. However, the Pyrrhonic's total embrace of doubt and rejection of belief suggests the same underlying perspective as the Dogmatic; namely, it indicates that they cannot accept belief as being compatible with doubt. Indeed, this is also displayed by the arguments they've used to counter the most common objection raised against their perspective.

This objection is that if one follows the ideal of Pyrrhonic Skepticism, a life without belief, then their actions are unintelligible. For example, if one is thirsty, and drinks a glass of water to sate their thirst, then we can assert that the reason *why* they drank the glass of water is because they *believe* that it will satisfy the desire they have (thirst). However, Sextus (like many skeptics before him) will argue that their actions are not based on beliefs, but appearances (or the 'reasonable', or the 'persuasive'<sup>32</sup>). Of course, even when they substitute terms like 'assent' or 'approval' instead of 'belief', it is the same stratagem; namely, to avoid saying the word 'belief' while making use of its meaning through semantic shell-games. Ignoring for the moment how this demonstrates a lack of intellectual honesty, I also consider it indicative that their position is unable to admit that belief, and the all-encompassing doubt they espouse, are compatible. Indeed, this is because to do so would be to admit that doubt is, in fact, *not* the only acceptable answer to every question.

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<sup>32</sup> These come from Arcesilaus (Vogt, 2022, §3.1.iii.) and Carneades (Vogt, 2022, §3.2.ii.), respectively.

Indeed, this is also connected to the second point raised above; namely, that Pyrrhonic Skepticism is self-defeating. There are several reasons for this: first, it involves a logical contradiction; second, it has a similar effect to the process of inquiry as Dogmatism; and third, it can only be taken seriously by the intellectually dishonest. The first is the simplest and can be demonstrated as follows. Take the Pyrrhonic position as *X*: one should suspend judgment towards any proposition, *p*. As *p* can stand for *any* proposition, this includes *X* as well. Therefore, one should suspend judgment towards *X*. Thus, Pyrrhonic Skepticism can only exist in temporal isolation; in other words, it can only be held if it is prevented from iteration.<sup>33</sup>

This also relates to the second reason. While Dogmatism arrests inquiry by rejecting doubt, Pyrrhonic Skepticism arrests inquiry by rejecting *solutions*. Indeed, it is all too ready to admit doubt, but the consequence is that they are prevented from making any kind of progress. Like Buridan's Ass<sup>34</sup>, at some point we need to simply *make a decision*, even if it is not the correct one. This is also why Hume is correct when he says: "The great subverter of *Pyrrhonism* [...] is action."<sup>35</sup> For all their pretensions to the contrary, Pyrrhonics are forced, *by necessity*, to have beliefs and act on them; their existence as temporal, living beings simply cannot be sidestepped by semantic arguments.

Indeed, this is because Pyrrhonic Skepticism demonstrates a lack of intellectual honesty. This is evidenced not only by their constant use of semantic arguments, in which they engage with words rather than meanings, but because to make an assertion regarding this attitude, either in writing or speech, is to betray their ostensible guiding ideal. While Pyrrho, to his credit, did follow this ideal and did not make assertions (hence his lack of written works), Sextus (and many others) demonstrated no such scruples. Ultimately, the Pyrrhonic Attitude, when taken to

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<sup>33</sup> Comesaña and Klein (2019) discuss this in detail in §2. While it is suggested that Pyrrhonism can avoid this by simply denying that iteration is required, this strikes me as impossible given our temporal nature.

<sup>34</sup> Buridan's Ass is a thought-experiment in which a donkey who is equally thirsty and hungry is placed exactly midway between food and water and dies as a result of their indecision.

<sup>35</sup> (Hume, 1993, p. 109)

its logical conclusion, can only result in two things: i) its own defeat (logically, necessarily); or ii) Bullshit. We will return to this latter term in due course, but for now we can further distinguish Dogmatism and Pyrrhonic Skepticism by contrasting both of them with Critical Skepticism.

### **§3.2.3 Critical Skepticism**

'Critical Skepticism'<sup>36</sup> is the attitude most favoured by the philosophers I've referenced so far. Popper argues for it under the name of the 'Critical Attitude'<sup>37</sup>, and Hume does so as well by considering it a kind of *mitigated skepticism*.<sup>38</sup> This attitude can be distinguished from the attitudes discussed thus far along three lines: first, it recognizes that belief and doubt are compatible; second, it is correctly aligned with inquiry; and third, it is the only avenue by which knowledge can be acquired and advanced.

In contrast with the Dogmatic and the Pyrrhonic, the Critic can accept that beliefs can have a *conjectural* nature. In other words, the Critical Attitude recognizes that any theory is tentative and remains open to refutation. Even further, this attitude is the only one which accepts our existence as temporal beings. Indeed, this acceptance informs why belief can be understood as compatible with doubt; it is in virtue of one's *temporal nature* that one's belief(s) can be modified, refuted, or strengthened through repetition. Similarly, as inquiry is a temporal process, one which continuously evolves and is never satisfied, so too for the theories which result from it. The Critical Attitude is therefore the only epistemic attitude aligned with inquiry, and as a result is the only attitude which does not impede it.

Finally, while the Pyrrhonic might claim to be seeking knowledge by avoiding the truth, the Critical Attitude is the only reliable means of actually securing it. The inability of the Pyrrhonic to make assertions and put forward solutions bars them from ever arriving at

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<sup>36</sup> It can also be labelled as 'Academic', 'Cartesian', 'Modern', or 'Mitigated' skepticism. However, I prefer 'Critical Skepticism' because 'Academic' can be confusing (on account of the 'Academic Skeptics' found in Ancient Greece), 'Cartesian' overstates its connection with Descartes, 'Modern' incorrectly suggests that its counterpart, Pyrrhonism, no longer exists in modern day, and 'Mitigated' obscures the goal it has.

<sup>37</sup> (Popper, 2002, pp. 66-69)

<sup>38</sup> (Hume, 1993, pp. 111-112)

knowledge. Now, while it is certainly possible that the Dogmatic might cling to a true explanation through coincidence, the problem is that, in the event that they do not arrive at it through sheer luck, they never will.

Both the Pyrrhonic and the Dogmatic are stuck, they arrest inquiry and refuse movement of any kind out of fear of being wrong. However, the last epistemic attitude has no such concerns. Indeed, that it is because it is barely an epistemic attitude at all. Although it is not precisely an attitude towards knowledge, it is included because it is an attitude that one can expect to encounter, and which relates to the other attitudes discussed thus far.

#### **§3.2.4 'Bullshittism'**

'Bullshit' is a notion discussed by Harry Frankfurt in *On Bullshit*. There, Frankfurt endeavors to describe bullshit, especially in how it is to be distinguished from lying.<sup>39</sup> He argues that what separates bullshitting from lying is that the liar is interested in misleading their listener, they are intentionally providing them with information they believe to be false. The Bullshitter, by contrast, has no interest in truth or falsehood; instead, they merely say whatever suits them. Now, I have included this attitude, if it can be called that, because it represents a stance that one can encounter from an interlocuter. In other words, it is less important how we understand holding this attitude on a personal level compared to how it can expect to be encountered. This may seem odd, but it stems from the way in which bullshit is fundamentally *directed at others*. Thus, it does need to be logically coherent (as it likely won't be). All that matters is that it can be encountered as an attitude along with the others already discussed.

The primary feature of Bullshittism (to coin a term) is that, while dogmatism and skepticism of all stripes presuppose that the notions of true and false exist, the Bullshitter stands outside this binary and declares it irrelevant. Even the liar, although they lie, betrays their

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<sup>39</sup> (Frankfurt, 1988)

assumption that there is *something to lie about*.<sup>40</sup> However, it should also be stressed that this lack of concern for the truth does not necessarily result in falsehood; indeed, as Frankfurt says regarding the essential nature of bullshit: “although it is produced without concern for the truth, it need not be false.”<sup>41</sup> This is partly why it can be difficult to address; if an individual is bullshitting, but they also happen to be right (even in some things), an accusation of bullshit can be dismissed on the grounds that it is a kind of *ad hominem*<sup>42</sup> attack.

While Frankfurt suggests that “bullshit is a greater enemy of truth than lies”<sup>43</sup>; my concern is with how it impacts knowledge rather than truth. In my view, Bullshittism represents a significant enemy to knowledge because of how it affects inquiry, how it abuses the belief-doubt dichotomy which characterizes the other attitudes, and how this combination threatens argument. It affects inquiry because of its concern with subjective solutions. Dewey, when outlining the steps of inquiry, argues that when an ‘indeterminate situation’ arises (*i.e.*: the one requiring a solution and motivating the entire process), its problematic nature is one which cannot be dismissed through “merely ‘mental’ processes.”<sup>44</sup> This is because a problem situation is not simply a problem for a single subject, therefore it cannot be addressed in that way either.

However, that is exactly what the Bullshitter intends. As their speech is directed entirely at serving their own ends, it follows that they are interested *exclusively* in subjective problems and subjective solutions. Yet, as with its concern for the truth, this is not to say that they cannot occasionally recognize a non-subjective one either.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, this is also why Bullshittism presents a different threat to inquiry than Dogmatism or Pyrrhonism; while those can be described as *failing* inquiry, Bullshittism *corrupts it*. Dewey provides a specific caution regarding

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<sup>40</sup> Frankfurt puts it rather eloquently: “A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it.” (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 131)

<sup>41</sup> (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 130)

<sup>42</sup> A fallacious argument that attacks the person’s character or identity.

<sup>43</sup> (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 132)

<sup>44</sup> (Dewey, 1938, p. 111)

<sup>45</sup> If a person is selfish, it does not necessarily mean that all their actions will only further their own interests. This is because sometimes an action motivated entirely by self-interest can happen to align with the interests of others.

inquiry and the institution of a problem; namely, one must avoid setting up a problem that does not actually connect to the situation.<sup>46</sup> Bullshittism corrupts inquiry because it can lead to this exact issue. As the Bullshitter is essentially *uninterested* in whether a problem (and an accompanying solution) is subjective or not, they will have no issue pursuing either. Compare this with the Dogmatic and Pyrrhonic attitudes; while these attitudes can be guilty of *stopping* inquiry, Bullshittism is more likely to *misguide* it, resulting in courses of “dead work”<sup>47</sup>.

Unfortunately, this corrupting effect extends to the belief-doubt dichotomy.

While Dogmatism, Pyrrhonic Skepticism, and Critical Skepticism are distinguished by their relationships with this dichotomy, Bullshittism exists outside of it. Or, perhaps more accurately, has a special connection to it. While the other attitudes take different views on belief, doubt, and their compatibility, Bullshittism engages in a similar activity, but only with regards to others.<sup>48</sup> In other words, they are interested in this dichotomy insofar as belief and doubt can be used to their own purpose. This is because, as a consequence of their relationship to truth, their beliefs are more ‘fluid’. As their communicative activity is truth agnostic, it can be difficult to pin down a Bullshitter’s beliefs. Indeed, I would argue that this is partially why one’s actions should be considered as a better indicator of their true beliefs, rather than their stated ones. As with the Pyrrhonic who claims to have a life without belief, yet makes assertions nonetheless<sup>49</sup>, their actions tell more than their words.

However, while both issues are disruptive on their own, their combination poses a significant threat to knowledge. This is because knowledge progresses largely by argument. Indeed, it is why the Critical Attitude found in Ancient Greece was so significant.<sup>50</sup> However, Bullshittism’s uninterest in truth, the resulting hollow nature of its belief, and its predilection for

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<sup>46</sup> (Dewey, 1938, p. 112-113)

<sup>47</sup> (Dewey, 1938, p. 113)

<sup>48</sup> Hence why it should be considered as ‘others-directed’.

<sup>49</sup> Recall the end of §3.2.2; Pyrrhonism results in nothing, or bullshit.

<sup>50</sup> Popper says that this tradition, in Western philosophy at least, can be traced to the school of Thales. (Popper, 2002, p. 67)

pursuing misguided problems and solutions, means that it strikes directly at argument itself. This is because an uninterest in truth and hollow beliefs results in bullshit lacking meaning. In other words, when a Bullshitter communicates, their words have no actual connection<sup>51</sup> with their beliefs, they are merely tools to achieve a particular end. This, combined with the potential for addressing a misguided problem, means that any argument with a Bullshitter results in one grappling with a potentially fictitious problem and responding to words with no meaning. This is debilitating to the growth of knowledge, not the least because it might be a course of dead work, but because it can be impossible to make any forward progress at all. Like Heracles and the hydra, engaging with words that have no meaning is a battle that cannot be won conventionally.

Finally, it might be objected that all speech is bullshit because we all say things for our own reasons; however, this objection ultimately falls flat. We argue with others *because* we take their words to have meaning and consider them to be responsive to reasons. Even further, this is, for the most part, accurate. Indeed, the Bullshitter demonstrates this themselves when they use their speech to bullshit: if these presuppositions did not exist (and have merit), their bullshit would not *convince anyone*. This is also why Bullshittism is fundamentally an others-directed attitude. Although their words have no meaning, they are taken to have meaning *to others*. Simply put, the Bullshitter knows that others have beliefs, doubts, and an interest in inquiry, and they use these assumptions to their advantage.

### **§3.3 Conspiracy Theories and Epistemic Attitudes**

It was mentioned in §1 that conspiracy theorists often display a paradoxical mixture of dogmatism and skepticism. With the epistemic attitudes just discussed, we now have the resources to better investigate this. However, given the broad definition of conspiracy theory outlined in §2.1, it follows that anyone who believes that a conspiracy theory is the most apt explanation for any event, historical or lived, should be appropriately labelled as a conspiracy

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<sup>51</sup> They might align incidentally of course, but in the same way that a broken clock can be correct twice a day.

theorist. One might object and say that I am making a distinction without a difference; however, there are plenty of people who, either through a lack of acquaintance or understanding (such as the very young), do not fall under this definition. Indeed, the point I wish to draw out here is that there should be *nothing wrong* with subscribing to a conspiracy theory and it could be arrived at through Critical Skepticism.

In some cases, it truly is the case that conspiracy is the sufficient cause for an event. For example, the United States Public Health Service engaged in a conspiracy when they conducted the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, in which a group of African American men with syphilis were given fake vaccines in order to observe the effects of the disease when untreated. The study was conducted from 1932 until it was leaked to the press in 1972. If this leak had simply been rejected on the grounds that it was a conspiracy theory, it would not only be a moral failure, but an epistemic one. Contrast this with conspiracy theories surrounding the moon landing in 1969; these theories posit that the US government managed to fake the moon landing in order to triumph over the USSR in the 'Space Race'. Now while these theories are epistemically suspect, it is *not* because they are conspiracy theories. Rather, they are epistemically suspect because they are simply not the best available theories. Indeed, the TV show *MythBusters* demonstrated that it would have been more difficult *to fake* the moon landing instead of simply *doing it*.<sup>52</sup>

If one takes a Dogmatic's attitude towards these various theories (either dogmatically believing them or disbelieving them), then one can easily miss out on the best theories. Similarly, adopting the Pyrrhonic Skeptic's attitude would have us disbelieve all these theories, in which case we are left with nothing. In some cases, such as the moon landing, the consequences for abstaining from belief is not particularly detrimental. However, consider the harm that would have continued unabated if we took this same attitude towards the vaccine

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<sup>52</sup> (Hyneman & Savage, 2008)



study. If we dismissed the leak because it was a conspiracy theory, it might have continued and lead to even more deaths, more infections, and more children born with syphilis. This is why the Critical Skeptic's attitude is the most epistemically well-grounded; any theory can be accepted on a tentative basis, with room for criticism and change. Thus, it is entirely possible to embrace a conspiracy theory and be epistemically warranted in doing so, provided one does so in the correct way. This involves embracing a conspiracy theory only if it is the *best available theory*, in consideration of the evidence which supports it, and the evidence that acts against it.

Yet, there is nonetheless a pejorative sense of the term 'conspiracy theorist' which persists. If one can embrace a conspiracy theory and be epistemically warranted in doing so, why do conspiracy theories nonetheless carry this association with the epistemically suspect? In my view, it is because of the role that conspiracy theories share with other supernatural theories. In the same manner that some individuals refuse the Earth being billions of years old and favour their religious teachings which suggest it is only 6000 years old<sup>53</sup>, some individuals will prefer conspiracy theories over others, all other things being equal. Thus, there is need of a distinction between those who embrace a conspiracy theory (and thus should be appropriately considered a conspiracy theorist), and those who seem to favour conspiracy theories specifically over other competing theories.

Therefore, I will join those in the contemporary literature and suggest that those individuals who seem to over-value conspiracy theories should be seen as subscribing to 'conspiracism'.<sup>54</sup> In short, 'conspiracism' (and the individuals it describes, 'conspiracists') designates an attachment to conspiratorial explanations.<sup>55</sup> For example, an individual who believes that oil conglomerates engaged in a conspiracy to downplay climate change should be distinguished from one who believes that the United States government faked the moon landing

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<sup>53</sup> I speak here of Young Earth Creationism.

<sup>54</sup> (Hayward, 2022, p. 149)

<sup>55</sup> While Hayward describes it as 'fallacious' and suggests it involves an improper investigation of evidence, my use will be more neutral.

in 1969; the former could be appropriately called a conspiracy theorist, whereas the latter is *also* a ‘conspiracist’.

#### **§4. Understanding Conspiracism**

While I have endeavored to show that conspiracy theories themselves are not inherently epistemically suspect, I believe that conspiracism does constitute a problem worthy of investigation. And as Dewey suggests, understanding a problem “is to be well along in inquiry.”<sup>56</sup> Therefore, if we are to make any progress regarding conspiracism, it will behoove us to fully understand it. This involves not only recognizing its particular features, but evaluating exactly where it errs and how it is maintained.

Of course, one might object that this is even a problem to begin with. It might be suggested that we should take a “live and let live” approach, and that the theories of others do not warrant significant consideration or deterrence. However, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the wave of vaccine misinformation that accompanied it, it should be clear that the beliefs of others can have negative effects.<sup>57</sup> These effects might be direct, such as those individuals who believed the virus was fiction and infected others, or indirect, such as those who spread anti-vaccination propaganda and lead to reduced vaccination rates. The point here is that due to our level of interconnectedness, the beliefs of others affect us, and thus we have a vested interest in their beliefs as well. Even further, if those beliefs are formed due to certain epistemic failures, then there is a possibility that those failures can be corrected or prevented, and that is my intention.

I will begin by further distinguishing conspiracists from conspiracy theorists through a review of how conspiracists engage with inquiry and the epistemic attitudes discussed in the preceding sections. Then, I will argue that although conspiracism seems to have benefits for

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<sup>56</sup> (Dewey, 1938, p. 113)

<sup>57</sup> For example, the Brown University estimates that 319,000 deaths in the US from 2021 to 2022 could have been prevented through vaccinations. (Brown University School of Public Health, 2022).

those who choose it, these benefits are hollow and in fact detrimental to them and those they care about.

#### **§4.1 Conspiracism and Inquiry**

Recall from §2.2 that inquiry is a constantly evolving process that seeks causal explanations for events and results in theories which can then be subjected to further criticism and inquiry. Now, let us consider how conspiracism engages with this process, and evaluate whether it constitutes 'proper inquiry'.

Both Dewey and Popper argue that inquiry is a process which is interested in causal explanations: we encounter a situation or phenomena that our current explanations fail to account for, the gap between our explanation and our observations raises doubts, and we inquire further in order to address these doubts. Of course, even if we conduct our inquiry in the most rigorous fashion, and even if our explanatory theory perfectly addresses the doubts we had, we can never be sure that we have actually found the truth of the matter (owing to our lack of a criterion of truth). This friction, between our chosen theory and the truth, is best confronted by adopting Critical Skepticism; our chosen theory, although we consider it the best, is simply a work-in-progress, a conjecture that may be displaced if a better one should arise. It is for this reason that inquiry is never truly satisfied, and for this reason that one must always be open to asking questions.

At first glance, conspiracists seem to meet this demand; they display very skeptical attitudes towards given explanations and seem interested in uncovering answers. However, it has often been noted that, regardless of their seeming to be interested in proper inquiry, they are nonetheless extremely dogmatic. Indeed, criticisms of their theories will often be met with a mixture of incredulity and a dismissive "do your own research". The implication, of course, is that the truth of their theory is simply self-evident to anyone who puts in enough effort into their own inquiry. It is no different from the teacher who, upon meeting a student's incredulous reaction to the idea that *anything* multiplied by 0 will equal 0, would respond by saying: "You

understand the process of multiplication, work it out for yourself!" However, unlike the teacher, conspiracists are not particularly interested in the kind of rigorous inquiry that respects truth and accepts criticism. I will argue that, as far as inquiry is concerned, conspiracists fail this process by abusing ad-hoc hypotheses and focusing on subjective solutions.

Simply put, an ad-hoc hypothesis is a hypothesis which is added to an initial theory in order to save it from being falsified. Now, while ad-hoc hypotheses do not necessarily make a theory false, they do increase the likelihood of it being false.<sup>58</sup> As a result, if one is interested in the truth, one should strive to minimize their use of ad-hoc hypotheses, or at the very least avoid adding them on-top of each other. However, this does not mean ignoring them entirely. After all, ad-hoc hypotheses have resulted in significant discoveries in the past.

To illustrate, the consider the following examples: the discovery of Neptune and Einstein's theory of relativity. In the former, scientists had noticed discrepancies between the observed movement of Uranus and the motion predicted by Newtonian physics. Rather than dismissing the Newtonian model, they instead invented an ad-hoc hypothesis to 'save' it: they conjectured that there was another planet in our solar system and its gravity resulted in the observed deviations. In fact, their conjecture was accurate; they modeled this previously unseen celestial body based on its requirements (as observed by Uranus' deviations), predicted its location, and discovered Neptune.

In the latter example, a similar situation had emerged. There were discrepancies between the predicted and observed movement of Mercury, and so scientists made a similar conjecture, they posited that there was another hidden planet which would account for these deviations. They followed the same process but found nothing. How did they react? They added another ad-hoc hypothesis and claimed that this hidden planet is obscured by gas. When no evidence of this gas was found, they added yet another ad-hoc hypothesis and claimed that this

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<sup>58</sup> For an illustrative example, please see Appendix B.

gas could not be found because of technical limitations. This may have continued indefinitely, until a young scientist, named Albert Einstein, emerged on the scene with a radical theory: the theory of general relativity. Indeed, this theory *did* account for Mercury's movement, with the additional benefit of not completely overturning Newtonian physics.

Now, to be clear, I do not mean to suggest that these scientists were engaging in conspiracism or that the use of ad-hoc hypotheses is inherently epistemically suspect. Rather, I merely want to draw attention to how the use of ad-hoc hypotheses differed in each situation. In the former, scientists constructed an ad-hoc hypothesis, tested it, and achieved success. In the latter, scientists constructed an ad-hoc hypothesis, tested it, added another ad-hoc hypothesis, tested it, added another one, etc., until they concluded that it was beyond their current technology. Although the scientists in question were not themselves engaging in conspiracism, it should seem familiar to those well acquainted with conspiracy theories because it is how conspiracists often conduct themselves.

Indeed, while Jeran Campbell has already been mentioned, there are multiple individuals in *Behind the Curve* who engage in the same activity. Every time that an experiment returns with the result that the Earth is, in fact, not flat, we see them immediately pivot to ad-hoc hypotheses. They will claim that their instruments are defective, they read the figures wrong, or some unforeseen complication arose (only in hindsight, of course) which invalidates that test. Of course, this behaviour is not isolated to Flat-Earthers. Indeed, it is a common approach from all conspiracists. However, the examples mentioned above can be used to demonstrate exactly where conspiracists falter with regards to ad-hoc hypotheses.

Consider how ad-hoc hypotheses were used in those examples. In the former, they proposed a single ad-hoc hypothesis, tested it, and were met with success. In the latter, they proposed one ad-hoc hypothesis, tested it, and then continued to add successive layers when their tests were falsified. I will not argue that it is *impossible* to find success in this way; however, it does fail on Popper's requirements of what constitutes a 'proper' theory. For Popper,

any new theory should: i) proceed from a simple and unifying idea<sup>59</sup>; ii) be independently testable via its success in prediction(s); and iii) should pass new and severe tests.<sup>60</sup> We can see that the Neptune example fits these criteria: it was simple and reconciled disparate observations, was able to predict the location and existence of the celestial body it posited, and led to additional tests (*i.e.*: was Neptune the predicted size, have the correct orbit, etc.). By contrast, the other example fails to meet these requirements, and each successive ad-hoc addition merely worsens its overall scientific character. The upshot is not that ad-hoc hypotheses are wrong, but instead that each one should be tested and, outside of extenuating circumstances<sup>61</sup>, falsification of the ad-hoc addition should return us back to the initial theory. In other words, the continuous saving of hypotheses through ad-hoc modifications indicates a failure to follow in the kind of rigorous and directed inquiry which is crucial to science and the expansion of knowledge.

Indeed, my contention is that conspiracists are guilty of exactly this. Whenever their theory is threatened by falsification (if they even deign to test it, of course), they will continuously add ad-hoc hypotheses to rescue it. However, this attempt to explain away discrepancies is more far-reaching than experimental data; indeed, it extends to the way in which conspiracists treat their theories in its larger contexts. For example, when an individual posits that the moon landing was fake, one can rightly question *why* such a conspiracy might exist. After all, if we are interested in causal explanations, it follows that the intentions which motivated a conspiracy are worthy of investigation as well. Yet, for all their posturing as honest inquirers, these questions will never be adequately addressed. Instead, they will be met with vague answers, such as 'control', or 'power'. This too is an ad-hoc hypothesis; however, it

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<sup>59</sup> Popper acknowledges that this "requirement of simplicity" is a bit vague; however, it is based on the notion that the best theories mesh with other theories in a satisfying way, without relying on additional 'hidden' elements that warrant further explanation. (Popper, 2002, pp. 326-327)

<sup>60</sup> (Popper, 2002, pp. 326-330)

<sup>61</sup> In some cases, there really are technological limitations. Crucially, however, this does not mean the theory is safeguarded from refutation, so much as its falsification is simply postponed.

demonstrates even less investigative integrity than the example about Mercury. Indeed, this is because conspiracists are fundamentally motivated by a search for subjective solutions instead of objective ones.

As mentioned in §3.2.4, Dewey has a specific caution regarding the institution of a given problem situation; namely, that one should avoid approaching problems subjectively. When one encounters a problematic situation, it is not problematic only for that individual, but *everyone*. As Dewey suggests: “It is the *situation* that [is disturbed, troubled, ambiguous, confused, full of conflicting tendencies, obscure, etc.]”<sup>62</sup> For example, a student who attempts to solve a mathematical exercise, such as arriving at the correct formula for a straight line, is not engaged with a problematic situation. They might be challenged in attempting to apply a particular mathematical theory; however, there is no situation demanding causal explanation here. By contrast, the ‘Hierarchy problem’<sup>63</sup> in contemporary physics is a problematic situation. One cannot simply resolve this problem through a kind of mental dismissal; to do so would be to withdraw oneself from reality. My contention is that the conspiracist, like the Bullshitter, fails inquiry at this same point.

Dewey argues that the first step in the process of inquiry, its “antecedent conditions”, is when an indeterminate situation arises.<sup>64</sup> By this, he means a situation for which we lack a sufficient causal explanation. Importantly, however, is that this situation is *existential*; it exists outside of a single subject. It is problematic because it has *consequences* for us. Indeed, it is this existential character which motivates our search; it behooves us to find an adequate solution because it will affect us in some way. Following this, we attempt to determine the problem. The first step only alerts us to the existence of a situation, it is in the second step that we formulate exactly what problem that situation constitutes. In fact, this step goes a long way

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<sup>62</sup> (Dewey, 1938, p. 110)

<sup>63</sup> The ‘Hierarchy problem’ comes from particle physics; in short, it seeks an explanation as to why the weak force is  $10^{24}$  times as strong as gravity.

<sup>64</sup> (Dewey, 1938, pp. 110-111)

to solving a problem; if one understands a problem, one can readily identify exactly *what* is at issue and gain clues as to how those issues can be addressed. However, as Dewey cautions: “To mistake the problem involved is to cause subsequent inquiry to be irrelevant or go astray.”<sup>65</sup> If one is confronted with a situation, but dismisses it as not constituting a problem, then that situation will not be resolved. Alternatively, if one is confronted with a situation but incorrectly characterizes the problem, then possible solutions will be dismissed and incorrect solutions will be preferred.

It is here where conspiracists commit their crucial mistake. They find themselves in an indeterminate situation and, to their credit, do recognize that a problem exists. However, they arrive at an incorrect construction of the problem. They do exactly as Dewey cautions against; by setting up a problem which is not actually connected to the situation, they set themselves upon a path to “dead work”. Indeed, Dewey even predicts how conspiracists would project themselves as being investigators, but only as a pretense for the appearance of engaging in proper inquiry. Thus, he says: “Problems that are self-set are mere excuses for seeming to do something intellectual, something that has the semblance but not the substance of scientific activity.”<sup>66</sup> Their lack of desire to truly follow through and investigate their theories (as just mentioned regarding their use of ad-hoc hypotheses) demonstrates this clearly enough, and thus I am confident in saying that this is where they ultimately fail in their inquiry. However, I believe there is more to be said about *why* they do this, and this requires an investigation of their attitude towards inquiry.

#### **§4.2 Conspiracism and the Epistemic Attitudes**

To answer the question of why conspiracists operate as they do, it will be useful to understand their approach to inquiry. To do this, I will appeal to the epistemic attitudes discussed in §3.2. It has already been suggested that conspiracists display a paradoxical

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<sup>65</sup> (Dewey, 1938, p. 113)

<sup>66</sup> (Dewey, 1938, p. 113)



mixture of dogmatism and skepticism: on the one hand, they will be incredibly doubtful of any evidence that is presented to them; yet, on the other hand, will refuse any criticism of their favoured theory. While they will contend with contradictory evidence by abusing ad-hoc hypotheses, I will argue that this inclination is a manifestation of their underlying dogmatism. Even further, I will argue that this dogmatism is arrived at via two routes: the first is simple and, in fact, common to all who embrace a dogmatic attitude; the second, by contrast, is more nuanced and has a special relationship with bullshit.

#### ***§4.2.1 The Common Path to Dogmatism***

As discussed in §3.2.1, Dogmatism is the first epistemic attitude that people (and other similar creatures) can be expected to have. Indeed, this is handily demonstrated by the fact that even infants and animals will make ample use of induction. Even a lesson taught by a single instance can be extrapolated into the future and a dogmatic perspective facilitates actions performed with conviction. However, while a dogmatic attitude is our first one, it can be difficult to hold onto it. This is because, put simply, the world rarely conforms to our dogmatic expectations.

To illustrate, consider the child who, in learning to play, realizes that it can be quite amusing to descend a slope on a toboggan. The sense of speed, only heightened by the wind rushing past, can be quite exhilarating. Then, the child sees an even steeper slope, along with others whose descent is faster than their own. The child endeavors to amuse themselves on this slope as well; however, while their initial foray was not problematic in the least, their first encounter with the steeper slope results in unexpected pain. This is because an increased speed comes at a cost; if one does not properly manage themselves, they might careen off course, fall off their sled, or even come to an abrupt, and painful, stop. What was once an enjoyable experience has now introduced doubt. As a result, the child might refuse to engage in sledding at all or perhaps they will simply be more cautious. The upshot is that, even from a

very young age, one's expectations will often be frustrated, and doubt induced. In other words, it is unlikely that any adult will avoid encountering doubt at some point in their lives.

Now, how one reacts to the doubt they encounter will, of course, differ from person to person. In my view, these reactions reduce to one of two options, an individual can: a) conclude that one *can* be wrong; or b) reject this conclusion. If one accepts (a), they are well on their way to moving beyond the Dogmatic Attitude. However, one can rightly question how anyone could possibly choose (b). After all, if one is confronted with a situation that induces doubt, it is because one's expectations were not satisfied and thus one's expectations *were wrong*. Thus, to reject the conclusion that one can be wrong implies a logical contradiction. However, recall from the discussion in §2.2; people are not strictly logical, they are *rational*. Thus, one might have very good reasons for choosing (b). Indeed, this is also why the specialized nature of this reaction is important; in some cases, accepting the conclusion that we can be wrong is simply beyond us. There are some instances where to give up a belief, or admit doubt into it, is unacceptable because we *need* it to have solidity. For example, consider the notion that the world only began existing five minutes ago, with the implication that one's memories to the contrary are entirely fabricated.<sup>67</sup> This idea *could* be paralyzing; however, most will simply reject it because to act as if this is the truth is more disruptive than to act that it is not. In other words, we have good reasons to reject it and act accordingly, even if it cannot be disproven.

In any case, this is the 'Common Path to Dogmatism'; when we encounter a doubtful situation and are unable to accept the doubt it induces, we are embracing a dogmatic attitude.<sup>68</sup> However, there is a more subtle avenue to this attitude as well.

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<sup>67</sup> This is a thought experiment proposed by Bertrand Russell.

<sup>68</sup> Of course, this inability might actually be *unwillingness*; however, untangling this distinction is beyond the current scope of this work, at present.

#### **§4.2.1 The Bullshit Path to Dogmatism**

While option (b) above is to reject the conclusion that we can be wrong and adopt Dogmatism, option (a) can lead to further choices. This is because, when one accepts the conclusion that they *can* be wrong, one accepts skepticism. Thus, there is then the matter of how to understand this. One avenue will take us to Critical Skepticism; this will be the attitude that, while one's understanding *can* be incorrect, this does mean that it *always will be*. By contrast, the other avenue leads to Pyrrhonic Skepticism. Similar to how the Dogmatic rejects the conclusion that they can be incorrect, the Pyrrhonic rejects the conclusion that we can *ever be correct*.

However, this places the Pyrrhonic in a quandary. As Pyrrhonism is unstable, due to its inherent impracticality, one cannot sustain this attitude for very long (if at all). If one denies that we can ever be correct, then how do we direct our actions? Do we rely on sheer coincidence, as if we are buffeted about by the winds of circumstance? The answer is that one cannot deny our ability to be correct if they are conducting themselves with intellectual honesty. Indeed, as argued in §3.2.2, Pyrrhonism has only two options: they can remain silent (and perish), or embrace bullshit and, in doing so, adopt a covert Dogmatism.

Now, perhaps it could be objected that I am being too harsh; however, the Pyrrhonic embrace of bullshit to justify their own Dogmatism is, in fact, a longstanding tradition. Indeed, the paradigmatic Pyrrhonic, Sextus Empiricus, demonstrates this handily by simultaneously arguing that any assertion is dogmatic, and that they remain a skeptic despite doing this very thing themselves. If anything, the Pyrrhonic could argue that this move is acceptable because, while their actions are not informed by beliefs, they *can* be informed by tradition and custom!<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the semantic shell-games can be found in any of the arguments that a Pyrrhonic submits, and that is because, in virtue of this very act, they are betraying their own position. One

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<sup>69</sup> (Vogt, 2022, §4.4) Never mind that an assertion of a tradition implies a corresponding belief about that tradition, of course.

cannot dismantle argument with argument, yet that is what the Pyrrhonic intends. The consequence of this, however, is that any Pyrrhonic who puts forth an argument can only be acting with intellectual dishonesty. As their statements are not concerned with the truth, it follows that they are simply tools to suit their purposes; in other words, they are bullshit.

This is the 'Bullshit Path to Dogmatism'<sup>70</sup> and it is the path favoured by the conspiracist. This is because their pretensions at skepticism are only Pyrrhonic, and they only serve as a means of justifying their bullshit. As will be seen, this adoption of Dogmatism through bullshit shines through in their actions and lays the foundation for why they act as they do.

#### **§4.3 Choosing Conspiracism**

There is an implicit consideration in the prior discussion about the paths to Dogmatism I wish to highlight. This is that, at any point, one can alter their decision. Indeed, let us return to the child and their toboggan. Perhaps, after their painful experience, they refuse to go sledding out of fear. Does this mean that they will forever be committed to this position? No, of course not. They might return to sledding again after bolstering their self-esteem through other ventures, or after encouragement from their friends or family. Ultimately, it is *their* choice. This applies to the child just as well as it applies to the adult conspiracist. While there may be good reasons for their continued choice, it is nonetheless important that we recognize that it is, at base, a choice that they maintain.

With this understood, we can now bring together the elements of these varied discussions and propose an answer to the question of *why* conspiracists act as they do. In other words, why does the conspiracist choose and maintain conspiracism? I will argue that they do this for the following reasons: first, conspiracism is an appealing response to inquiry; second, it requires minimal action; third, it supports a victim mentality; and fourth, these elements combine to enable a coping mechanism which can be used for every facet of life.

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<sup>70</sup> A diagram of these paths can be found in Appendix C.

While the appeal and epistemic warrant of conspiracy theories have already been discussed in §2 and §3, I believe that conspiracism is especially drawn to them because of their *irrefutable nature*. While it was already mentioned that conspiracy theories, like superstitions, can fill explanatory gaps in virtue of their 'hidden' elements, I would argue that these elements can be pushed even further. Indeed, in combination with ad-hoc hypotheses, conspiracy theories can be safeguarded against any refutation.

Essentially, because conspiracy theories are inherently secret, one can simply extend the intensity of this secrecy further and further with ad-hoc hypotheses. With each iteration, the theory becomes increasingly tenuous, but it will always be able to avoid refutation by positing that the conspiracy goes 'even deeper still'. For example, if one confronts a Flat-Earther and asks how they contend with pictures from the International Space Station, they will argue that the conspiracy is an international affair; in other words, every nation in the world is keen on maintaining it. One might press them further and ask why no one mounts an attempt at finding the fabled ice wall; in response, they might claim that any such attempt will be met with overwhelming military force, regardless of the location and jurisdiction. This can continue indefinitely; regardless of the absurdities involved<sup>71</sup>, the conspiracist will always be able to postpone their theory's refutation.

Now, while the conspiracist takes this irrefutability to be an advantage of their theory, Popper addresses this very situation explicitly after introducing his 'criterion of refutability' as the mark of a scientific theory.<sup>72</sup> According to Popper, if we say that something is irrefutable, it is because it cannot be refuted through i) logical or ii) empirical means. For (i), this is typically understood by how *consistent* a particular theory or set of propositions is. For example, if I say, "It is snowing," and "It is not snowing," then this implies a logical contradiction; in other words,

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<sup>71</sup> Such as how this level of international cooperation is not only possible, but maintained in complete secret, while issues such as climate change remain unaddressed.

<sup>72</sup> (Popper, 2002, pp. 261-271)

these two statements are not consistent. However, in some cases, we must rely on empirical observations. For example, the statement “Today is Christmas Eve,” and its negation, “Today is not Christmas Eve,” imply a logical contradiction if stated together; however, if we want to determine which statement is true and which is false, we cannot simply use logic. The statement, “Today is Christmas Eve,” by itself can only be refuted by observing whether the day in question *is* Christmas Eve.

Of course, this statement is also what Popper calls a “*restricted* existential statement.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, it is a statement which posits the existence of something but restricts it to a particular point in space and time. For this reason, it *can* be refuted through empirical means. However, there are some statements which, although they imply the possibility of an empirical refutation, cannot be refuted due to their *unrestricted* nature. For example, consider this statement: “A teapot, undetectable by our current or future technology and capable of causing intrusive thoughts to people on Earth, exists in our solar system.”<sup>74</sup> This kind of statement simply cannot be refuted; it does not imply a logical contradiction (i), nor can we refute it through empirical observation (ii).

In light of this, Popper argues that theories should be divided into three kinds: a) logical or mathematical, b) empirical or scientific, and c) philosophical or metaphysical. Distinguishing between true and false theories is relatively straightforward for (a) and (b). In the case of (a), we subject a theory to tests that seek to refute it, followed by tests that seek to prove it or refute its negation. Given that such theories are operating within the strict bounds of mathematics or logic, such tests will follow from the axioms upon which those systems are constructed. In the case of (b), a similar procedure is followed. We examine the expected consequences of a theory and test whether the observations it predicts are accurate. If they are not, the theory is considered false. Theories in (c) require a more subtle procedure. As these theories are

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<sup>73</sup> (Popper, 2002, p. 265)

<sup>74</sup> This is an allusion to Bertrand Russell’s Teapot.

irrefutable by definition, they are beyond the reach of logical or empirical testing.<sup>75</sup> However, although a theory might be beyond direct refutation in this way, it is not beyond criticism. Thus, Popper argues that any theory which is irrefutable can nonetheless be subjected to the test of how capably it can *solve certain problems*.<sup>76</sup>

A conspiracy theory, whether it is irrefutable by definition or through the addition of ad-hoc hypotheses, can be addressed similarly. However, it is here that we cut to the heart of why conspiracism is so appealing. This is because, insofar as a conspiracy theory can be made irrefutable, the problem it constitutes also becomes *insurmountable*. This would be worrisome if one was actually interested in solving it; however, recall that conspiracism is interested in subjective solutions. Thus, the more insurmountable a conspiracy theory is, the more capable it is of stopping inquiry altogether. After all, if the problem is impossible to overthrow, or is at least conceived as such, then further investigation is fruitless. Indeed, this also connects with the epistemic attitude that underlies conspiracism; the consequence of Dogmatism can only be an end to inquiry, and this is conspiracism's true aim. Of course, this even extends further, because conspiracism also handily sidesteps the great subverter of Pyrrhonism as well.

Conspiracism, in virtue of the potential irrefutability of conspiracy theories and the corresponding insurmountable nature of their problems, is also insulated from *action*. This makes it more resilient than commonplace Dogmatism because it is the connection between beliefs and actions which normally prevents the Dogmatic from holding beliefs which are absurd or dangerous. For example, if I hold to a dogmatic belief that I am immune to sickness of any kind, I am unlikely to live very long if I act accordingly.<sup>77</sup> By contrast, conspiracy theories do not mandate action at the same level as other beliefs. Indeed, this is only exaggerated the further

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<sup>75</sup> Any theory that is irrefutable through logical or empirical means falls into this category. Examples might be the teapot statement above or metaphysical theories that posit existence outside of reality (such as the notion that we exist within a computer simulation).

<sup>76</sup> (Popper, 2002, pp. 266-268)

<sup>77</sup> One need only look at the many people who died of COVID-19 while believing it was a hoax.

the theory in question is insulated from refutation. The upshot is that, for the conspiracist, these theories constitute a problem to which the only required solution is *being aware of it*. After all, what else can an individual do against the might of a global conspiracy?

Even further, while the conspiracist enjoys a fully explanatory theory that requires no concrete action on their part, they can also reap the 'benefits' of victimization. Indeed, their victimization is akin to intersectionality, where an individual's identity can result in overlapping oppression. However, whereas intersectionality is often focused on social structures, the victimization of conspiracists is from multiple layers of oppression that all relate to their identity as a conspiracy theorist.

Thus, a conspiracist might claim that they are a victim on three levels: first, they are victimized by the conspiracy; second, they are victimized by the public who paints them as absurd; third, they are victimized by the conspiracy (again) as a form of retaliation (in some cases, the public's reaction is taken as evidence of this). Conveniently, this victimization allows for more and more of their personal responsibility to be absolved. They cannot be held accountable for addressing the situation, because it is unresolvable; they cannot be held accountable for their social ostracization, because that is the fault of the public and its ignorance; and they cannot be held accountable for their inability to persuade others to rally to their cause, because the conspiracy is also actively working against them.

Therefore, I believe that the tenacity of conspiracism is due, in large part, to how these notions combine and the corresponding function that this combination fulfills. To summarize, conspiracism enables individuals to have a fully explanatory conception of the world, one in which further inquiry is not needed, no action is required, and which absolves the conspiracist of personal responsibility. This, in turn, allows the conspiracist to cope with a world that they cannot understand, but also one in which they are *suffering*. Conspiracy theories, like superstitions, are where we can turn when we have *no other options*, and it makes sense that these can provide a significant amount of comfort to people who are suffering and yet *do not*



*understand why*. Indeed, this is why I am confident in suggesting that conspiracism should be considered as a kind of learned helplessness. ‘Learned helplessness’ is a behavioural phenomenon that occurs when a subject perceives themselves as no longer having control over their situation, and results in their resignation. In other words, when people are suffering and feel they have no agency to oppose it, they will simply submit to it and cope as best they can. Thus, conspiracism should be considered as a very sophisticated form of coping mechanism.

Of course, I do not think this should be particularly surprising. Conspiracism is simply a more modern iteration of the kind of coping that superstition and other supernatural theories facilitated prior to the recent explosion of human knowledge. Whereas a serf in feudal Europe may have coped with life’s trials by painting themselves as suffering unjustly under malicious spirits, now a politically disenfranchised worker can do the same by positing they are the victim of a malicious conspiracy. In both cases, the theory satisfies the driving force behind inquiry and alleviates one’s concern for the cause(s) of their suffering and requires nothing from the individual who holds it. Even further, these theories will often contain a social element which allows individuals to band together against a common foe. This sense of community not only bolsters belief in the theory but provides a relieving sense of camaraderie. However, all the benefits mentioned thus far are hollow. This is because the advantages of embracing conspiracism are merely a balm, a means of alleviating the symptoms without addressing the disease.

#### **§4.4 The Harms of Conspiracism**

While conspiracism seems to have its benefits, I will argue that these benefits evaporate when we understand how they impact the conspiracist, those they care about, and their larger social context. I will begin by showing that conspiracism’s predilection for subjective problems and solutions results in endeavors which, at best, derail progress towards addressing their actual concerns and, at worst, cause them direct harm. Then, I will discuss how the

consumption and practice of bullshit erodes trust in oneself and others which threatens the growth of knowledge.

When an individual is suffering, it follows that they will inquire into the cause of their suffering in order to alleviate it or prevent its reoccurrence in the future. However, if one is suffering and does not correctly recognize this, they will not embark on the process of inquiry at all. If they do recognize that a problem exists, but they mistake its constitution and work to address a problem that does not, in fact, result from the situation causing their suffering, their suffering will continue. While they may gain the momentary satisfaction of committing themselves to a task and achieving a sense of progression, it will be for naught when their problem continues or returns. In some cases, the longer a problem remains unaddressed, such as an illness or injury, the larger it grows.<sup>78</sup> Conspiracism falls prey to this exact situation. While it is certainly convenient to have one's suffering explained by a conspiracy, it is detrimental if the source of one's suffering is, in fact, not due to a conspiracy. Not the least because the actual source of the issue will remain unaddressed. This is frustratingly compounded by a predilection for the sunk cost fallacy, in which the more an individual commits to a particular course of action, the more difficult it is to abandon it. Thus, not only can one incur costs in time and effort on "dead work", but these costs make it even more difficult to adjust and focus on the actual problem. Even further, these pursuits do not only cost time and effort, but often have hidden costs as well.

It is a common occurrence for those in a cult to become estranged from anyone else who is not in the cult. Likewise, conspiracists who adhere to their chosen theory will often face social ostracization as a result. This can lead to an even stronger embrace of the theory and the community of its adherents, which results in a negative feedback loop. In brief, the conspiracist becomes ostracized from their existing community due to the pursuit of their theory and will

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<sup>78</sup> Cancer, for example, can be dealt with while incurring minimal cost if it is caught early enough.

embrace their 'new community' which is constituted by those who share their views. This increasing reliance on a community with a single-minded focus (as opposed to the kind one might expect in a municipality, nation, or culture) further insulates them from opposing theories and reduces their ability to engage critically with their own theory. This culminates when, deprived of the means of reaching beyond their insular community at all, they are left with no other choice but to remain entrenched in their outlook, lest they lose the only community they have. In other words, embracing a conspiracy theory with the kind of dogmatic zeal demonstrated by conspiracists will not only prevent a meaningful solution, but can actively harm the individual by reducing their ability to engage in critical thinking and prevent them from escaping it.

Indeed, the former consequence is also related to the consumption and use of bullshit. Bullshit, with its truth-agnostic nature, is immune to criticism. One cannot confront bullshit with notions of true or false, because it exists outside them. The bullshitter does not care if their statements contradict, they do not care if their beliefs are true or false; all that the bullshitter cares about is furthering their own self-interest. However, the more that one engages in a particular activity, the easier it becomes. Thus, Frankfurt suggests that "excessive indulgence in [bullshitting], which involves making assertions without paying attention to anything except what it suits one to say, [means] that a person's normal habit of attending to the ways things are may become attenuated or lost."<sup>79</sup> In other words, the more one bullshits, the more likely they will bullshit again. The issue that arises from this is that if one loses the ability to properly attend to the world around them, they lose the ability to inquire at all. This is because an understanding of the world as being a constant relation of cause and effect, the very basis upon which we inquire, becomes meaningless if we lose half of the equation. Yet, if one cannot attend to the effects, how can one ever hope to inquire into their causes? Even further, if an individual no longer

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<sup>79</sup> (Frankfurt, 1988, p.132)

believes it is possible to do this, what confidence could they have in the abilities of others to do this?

It is these questions which point to the erosion of trust that results from bullshit and that threaten the growth of knowledge. In the same way that the Pyrrhonics scoffed at the very existence of knowledge, so too did they demonstrate their inability or unwillingness to trust themselves and others. Pyrrhonism, bullshit, conspiracism, all of these are related, and they all suggest a pessimistic attitude concerning the existence of knowledge and the ability for humans to achieve it. However, if one takes these positions too seriously, by refusing that knowledge can exist and that we can find it, by using speech only to further self-interest and thus undermining the criticism so necessary for knowledge to grow, then one is contributing to a problem that not only has negative effects for themselves, but everyone.

## **§5. Conclusion**

In this work, I have argued that conspiracy theories are not a recent phenomenon, and in fact should be considered as the outputs of inquiry conducted correctly. I argued that conspiracy theories have historically occupied a similar role as supernatural theories because they can be relied upon when no other theory satisfies. Then, I outlined the epistemic attitudes of Dogmatism, Pyrrhonic Skepticism, Critical Skepticism, and Bullshittism in order to show how adopting conspiracy theories can be epistemically warranted. I distinguished between conspiracy theorists and conspiracists to further home in on what I consider to be a particular problem, with conspiracists demonstrating failures in inquiry and an adoption of Dogmatism by using bullshit. I then argued that conspiracism, while appealing, was a choice that has significant harms despite its illusory advantages.

Unfortunately, while I have endeavored to correctly identify the problem of conspiracism, I will admit that short of convincing the conspiracist of my claims, a more concrete solution remains elusive. However, I will conclude this work by arguing against a potential objection that may have occurred to the reader. Namely, that the elements of conspiracism that I have

identified (its dogmatism, insulation from criticism, communal isolation, etc.), could be argued as being present in the communities of any theory. Indeed, proponents of feminism, for example, might be accused of acting similarly. They too could be considered as having a dogmatic approach to the notions that motivate their actions (such as the existence and harms of patriarchy), and they too could be seen as having an insular community (insofar as they might reject alliance with men or those who are not considered 'feminist enough').

Although an ideal counterargument to this objection would be some explicit and unchanging guidelines by which one could protect against the same dangers as conspiracism, I would argue that even this desire runs contrary to the Critical Skepticism I advocate. Indeed, the only tincture is to maintain an open-mind and a willingness to criticize and test our own theories, regardless of tightly we wish to hold them. The simple truth of the matter is that *no* theory should ever be immune to criticism; however, some theories are less deserving of criticism than others. Although mounting evidence does not result in certainty, it does render it less worthy of criticism. This is because any theory can be falsified with a single experiment, but the force required will increase in proportion with the evidence it must topple.

Therefore, the feminist who advocates for increased awareness and reduction of gender inequality should not be threatened by an individual who intends on dismantling this project by pointing out the ignorance inherent in the human condition. Similarly, the physicist who endeavors to learn the truth of the physical universe should not be dismayed by the possibility that they may never succeed. That we lack a criterion of truth and yet seek answers in the dark does not mean that we are condemned to absolute ignorance. Even if our progress is only incremental, and accomplished through great toil, it is naïve to argue that knowledge itself is impossible. Thus, while Hume suggests that "A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence,"<sup>80</sup> I would say that the wise proportion their belief to their arguments. The feminist,

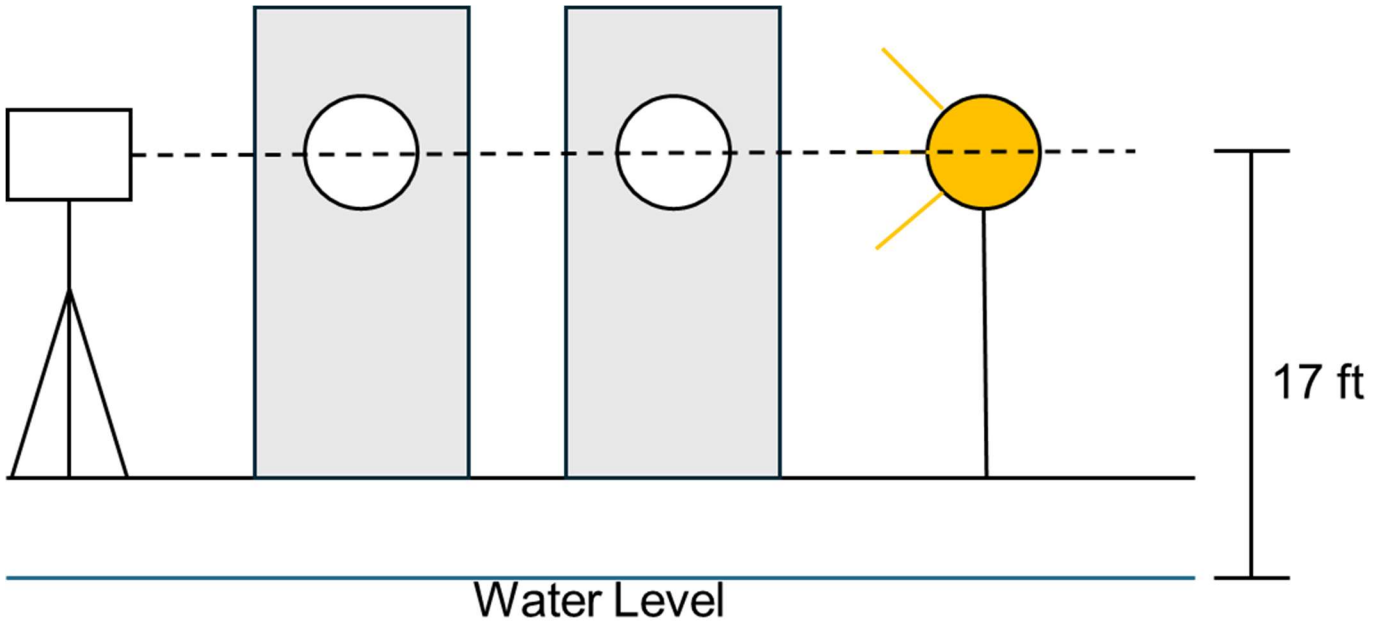
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<sup>80</sup> (Hume, 1993, p. 73)

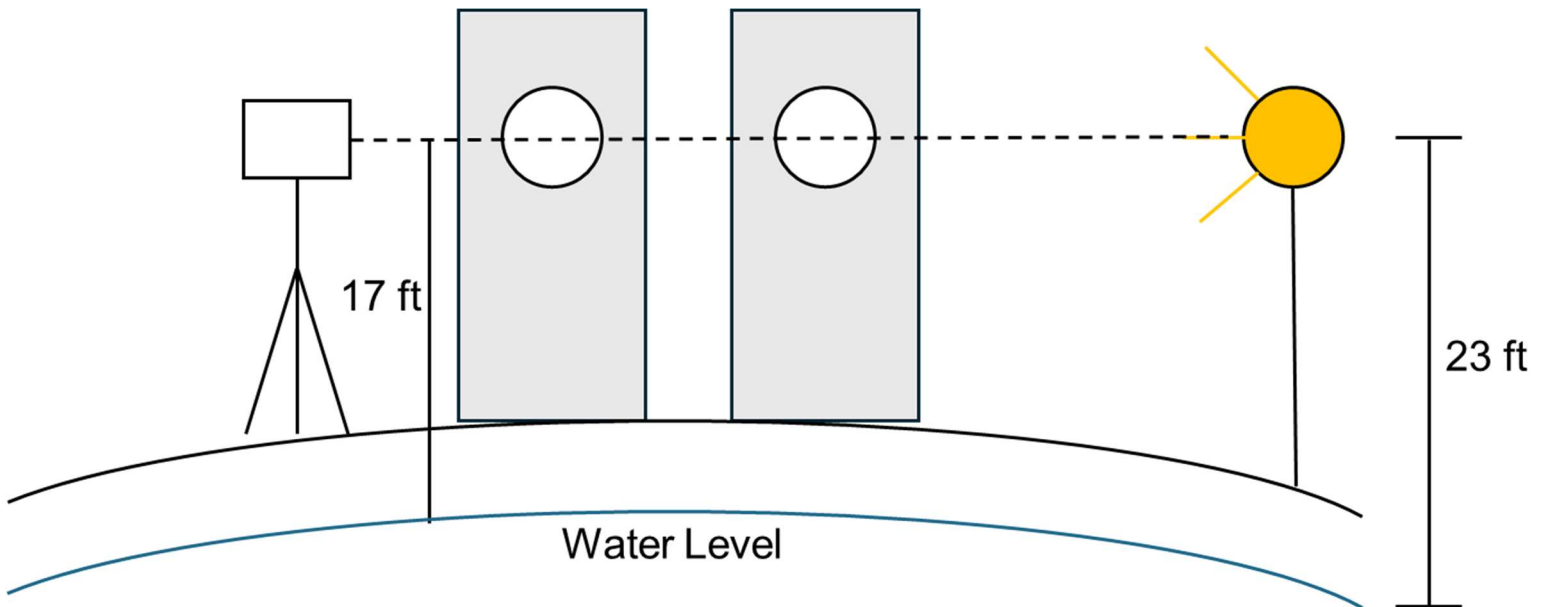
with their wealth of evidence and theory, should thus be willing to engage in argument to support their view (after all, they could be wrong), but without fear that those without sufficient arguments will topple them.

## Appendix A: Diagrams of Jeran Campbell's Experiment

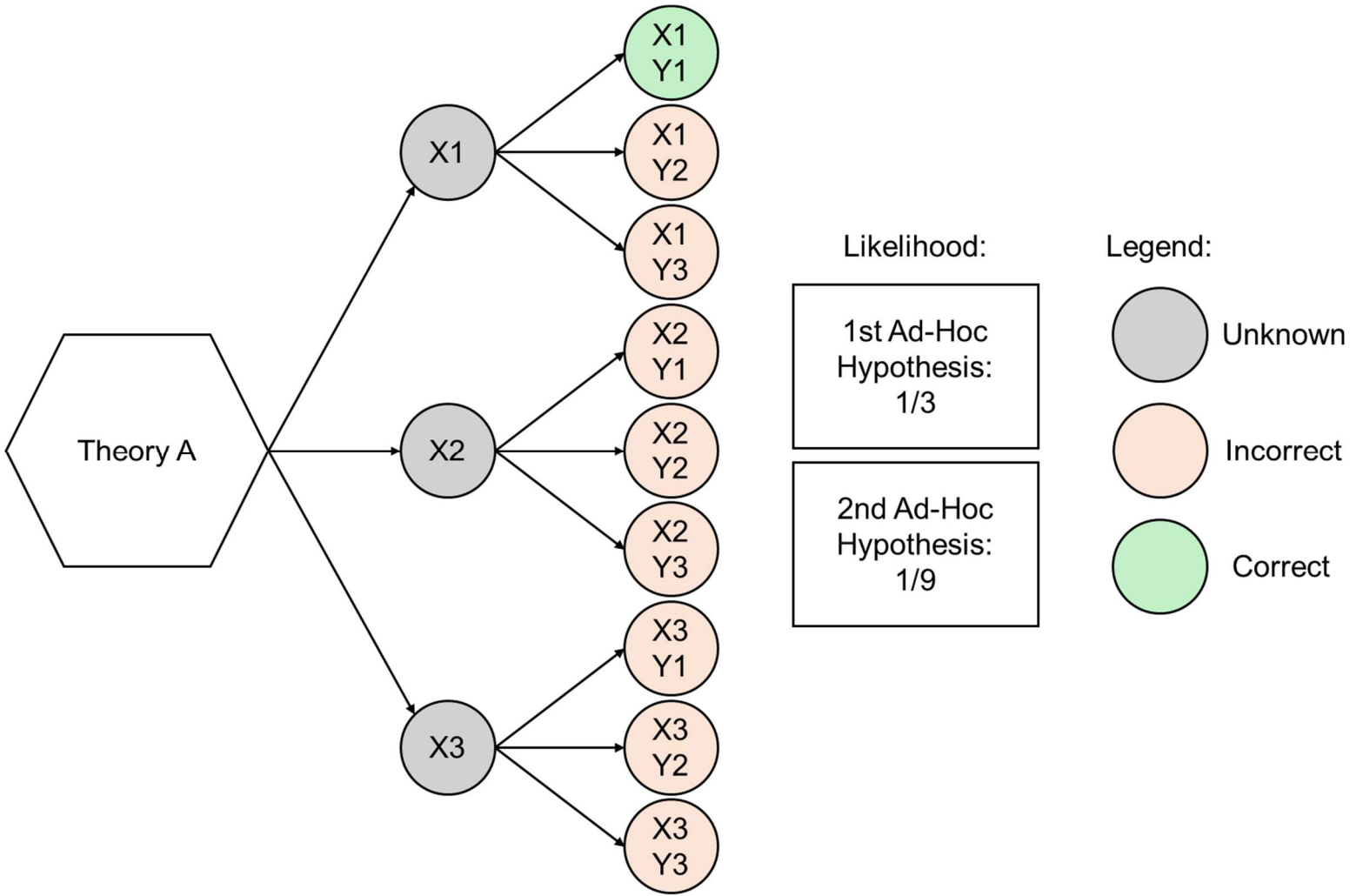
If the Earth is flat:



If the Earth is not flat:

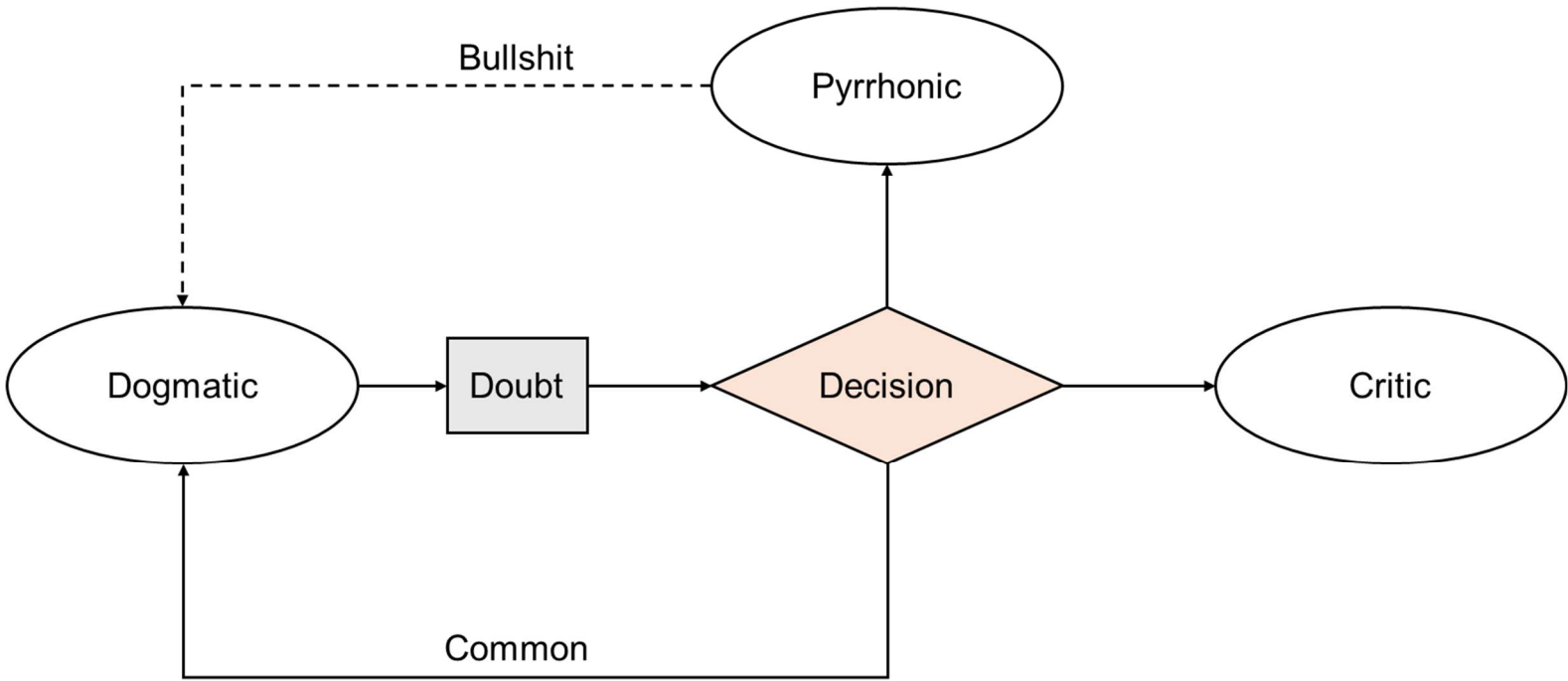


**Appendix B: Increasing Odds of Falsity with Ad-Hoc Hypothesis Additions**





### Appendix C: Paths to Dogmatism



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