Contrarian Conspiracy Theories and Higher-Order Evidence: A Modest Proposal

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Is it always epistemically irrational to believe a conspiracy theory? Not on principle. According to the standard definition in the philosophical literature, conspiracy theories are too wide and heterogenous a class for us to proffer any universal rules re their rationality. This does not mean, however, that we cannot offer any useful generalisations. This paper argues that one useful generalisation concerns the contrariness of some conspiracy theories. Whilst we cannot say that it is always irrational to believe a conspiracy theory, *ceteris paribus*, it is irrational to believe a contrarian conspiracy theory. A conspiracy theory is contrarian when recognised credible epistemic authorities reject that theory. When a conspiracy theory is contrarian the conspiracy theorist will, by default, possess negative higher-order evidence for the theory in question—that is, evidence that they may have made a mistake in the deliberations that led them to believe the relevant theory. In general, on acquiring negative higher-order evidence one acquires an undercutting defeater for whatever justification one otherwise has for the relevant beliefs. Therefore, absent a defeater-defeater, one will no longer be justified in holding the relevant beliefs. Applied to conspiracy theories, then, the consequences are simple enough. If a theory is contrarian, one will, by default, possess an undercutting defeater for whatever evidence on the basis of which one may have come to believe that theory. Absent a defeater-defeater for the relevant higher-order evidence, then, it is not rational for one to believe a conspiracy theory when that theory is contrarian.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, higher-order evidence, epistemology, disagreement, social epistemology

1. Introduction

Is it always epistemically irrational to believe a conspiracy theory? Not on principle. According to what is now the standard definition in the philosophical literature, conspiracy theories are too wide a class for us to proffer

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any universal rules regarding their rationality. This does not mean, however, that we cannot offer *any* useful generalisations. In this paper, I argue that one useful generalisation we might make concerns the "contrariness" of some conspiracy theories. Whilst we cannot say that it is always irrational to believe a conspiracy theory, *ceteris paribus*, it is irrational to believe a contrarian conspiracy theory.

A conspiracy theory is "contrarian" when "recognised credible epistemic authorities" reject that theory. When a conspiracy theory is contrarian the conspiracy theorist will, by default, possess negative "higher-order evidence" for the theory in question—that is, evidence that they may have made a mistake in the deliberations that led them to believe the relevant theory. In general, when one acquires negative higher-order evidence, one acquires an "undercutting defeater" for whatever justification one may otherwise have had for the relevant beliefs. Applied to conspiracy theories, then, the consequences are simple enough. If a theory is contrarian, the conspiracy theorist will, by default, possess an undercutting defeater for whatever evidence on the basis of which they may have come to believe that theory. Absent some kind of "defeater-defeater" for the relevant higher-order evidence, then it will not be rational for the conspiracy theorist to believe a conspiracy theory when that theory is contrarian.

Here is the structure of the paper: In section 2.1, I discuss the various philosophical questions we might ask about conspiracy theories. In section 2.2, I cover some background points about the notion of rationality employed in this paper. In section 2.3, I offer definitions of "conspiracy theory" and "contrarian conspiracy theory". In section 3, I introduce the concept of "higher-order evidence". In section 4, I bring together the discussions of contrarian conspiracy theories and higher-order evidence to argue that belief in contrarian conspiracy theories is, by default, irrational.

2. Questions and definitions

2.1 Questions

Conspiracy theories abound. For some, this is a matter of grave concern. The proliferation of conspiracy theories is a threat to law, order, and democracy; thus, it is of paramount importance that their spread be abated—or so the thought goes. So, for instance, Sunstein and Vermeule write:

> Some false conspiracy theories create serious risks. They do not merely undermine democratic debate; in extreme cases, they create or fuel violence. If government can dispel such theories, it should do so. (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 226)

For others, it is not the spread of conspiracy theories that is the problem, but rather efforts to delegitimise all such theories and theorising. For, so the thought goes, conspiracy theories and theorising represent a crucial part of a well-functioning democracy and efforts and entreaties to deter such thinking run counter to that. Dentith and Basham push this point with some vigour when they write:

> Political conspiracy theorizing in Western-style democracies should not be restricted, because to do so is a grave intellectual, ethical, and prudential error…Conspiracy theory saves lives, by the thousands, even millions, if we would let it. Its automatic dismissal leaves blood on our hands. (Basham and Dentith 2016, 15–16)

These two quotes represent different sides of what we might call the democratic question of conspiracy theories: i.e., are conspiracy theories and inquiry into them a threat to democracy or an important part of a well-functioning democracy? Arguably, the democratic question is at the heart of the current interest in conspiracy theories. However, it is not the only question that we might be interested in. Indeed, even for those who make the kind of claims above, much of the focus of debate has not so much been the democratic question but rather a pair of questions that concern different dimensions of epistemic rationality. We might label these as follows:

> The Strategic Question: Is it always irrational to *inquire* into a conspiracy theory?
>
> The Doxastic Question: Is it always irrational to *believe* a conspiracy theory?

The first thing to note about these questions is that—absent a theory of democracy—there is no special reason to think that the democratic question has any import when it comes to the two epistemic questions (or that the democratic question depends upon the answer to those questions). This is even whilst, as noted, the two epistemic questions are often the focus of work by those on both sides of the democratic question. The second thing to note is that—just as they reflect different dimensions of epistemic rationality—so the two epistemic questions are not necessarily fully dependent upon each other. It may be, for instance, that it is rational to *inquire* into a conspiracy theory, whilst that same theory cannot be rationally *believed*. This is because what is strategically rational can reflect practical issues—e.g., which theory it is rational to inquire into may depend upon the economic costs of pursuing competing lines of inquiry. As per standard accounts, however, practical matters are not relevant to what it is rational to believe. Thus, if practical matters are relevant to the strategic question, the fact that it is rational or

not to inquire into a particular theory need not tell us much about whether it is rational to *believe* that theory.

With this much said, this paper is concerned with the doxastic question, i.e., is it always irrational to believe a conspiracy theory?

To answer this question, two preliminaries are important:

1. What do we mean by rational?
2. What do we mean by a conspiracy theory?

2.2 Rationality

How should we understand rationality when discussing the doxastic question? For the purpose of the paper, I presume that the rationality of belief is a matter of the evidence available to an agent. Thus, the question of whether it is ever rational to believe a conspiracy theory is the question of whether one's "total evidence" can ever support believing that theory. To differentiate from strategic rationality, from here on, I shall use the term "justification" to refer to this kind of rationality.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which one might *fail* to be justified in believing a conspiracy theory: First, one's total evidence may not justify believing that theory because it lacks evidence supporting the theory. Second, one's total evidence may not justify believing that theory because it contains an "undefeated defeater" relative to that theory. Before moving on, it will be worth expounding upon the idea of defeaters in more detail.

Defeaters are considerations by way of which one would not be justified in holding a particular belief on the basis of evidence that would otherwise support that belief. Defeaters come in two kinds: "rebutting" and "undercutting".[1] "Rebutting defeaters" can be understood simply as counter-evidence to the evidence one already has. Rebutting defeaters work by shifting the balance of one's total evidence away from one's belief toward the opposite conclusion. Importantly, rebutting defeaters leave the connection between one's original evidence and belief intact. Sometimes, though, we acquire evidence that alters the bearing of our total evidence by undermining those connections—such are undercutting defeaters. Undercutting defeaters do not work by shifting the balance of one's evidence. Instead, they work by casting doubt upon the connection between evidence and belief. To use Pollock's classic example, under normal circumstances, if I have a veridical experience of a red table in front of me, I will be justified in believing "there is a red table in front of me" on that basis. If, however, a friend I trust tells me that the table is under a red light, then I will lose that justification precisely

[1] See (Pollock 1986) for the origin of this distinction.

because, given my friend's testimony, I am put in a position where I should doubt that my visual experience of a red table is in fact evidence that there is a red table.

There are two further points concerning defeaters that are important in the current context. Firstly, it is important to note that defeaters can be misleading. Crucially, though, misleading defeaters—as the name suggests—are still defeaters. Second, just as one can acquire a defeater for the evidence on which one has based one's belief, so one can acquire a defeater for those defeaters. Such are "defeater-defeaters". (E.g., in the table example, if I acquire good evidence that my friend was lying, I will have a defeater-defeater for their testimony.) Properly speaking, then, we can say that it is not enough to have a defeater for (otherwise good) evidence for one's belief for it to be so that one's belief is not justified—that defeater must itself be undefeated.

We shall return to the matter of defeaters later. For the moment, it is enough to note how what has been said so far can help us further precisify the doxastic question. Thus, when we ask whether conspiracy theories can be rationally believed, we are interested in two questions:

1. Are conspiracy theories such that, for any conspiracy theory CT and agent S, there will *never* be evidence sufficient that S could justifiably believe CT

2. Are conspiracy theories such that, for any conspiracy theory CT and agent S, there will always be a *default* defeater for any evidence S has by which they could otherwise justifiably believe CT

In the first case, a conspiracy theory could never be justifiably believed. Thus we could say belief in conspiracy theories is always unjustified *ultima facie*. In the second, a conspiracy theory could only be justifiably believed if one has an undefeated defeater-defeater for the default defeater one has because of the nature of conspiracy theories. Thus we could say that belief in such theories is *prima facie* unjustified. Or, to put it otherwise, we might say that justified belief in conspiracy theories, though possible, is *hard to come by*.

This brings us to the second of our preliminaries: i.e., what do we mean by a conspiracy theory?

2.3 Defining conspiracy theories

Although the term conspiracy theory is often used as a pejorative, one trend in recent philosophical literature has been to put aside any pejorative sense of the term in favour of a minimal definition that leaves open the two epistemic questions listed above. For the purposes of this paper, I shall follow this

trend. In that light, adapting the definition provided by Dentith and Keeley (2018), let us first describe what it is for something to be a "conspiracy" in the following way:

> Conspiracy: A plan C is a conspiracy *iff* (i) there exists or existed some set of agents with C, (ii) steps have been taken by the agents to minimise public awareness of C, and (iii) some end is (or was) desired by the agents

And let us define what it is for something to be a "conspiracy theory" as follows:

> Conspiracy theory (CT): CT is a conspiracy theory *iff* it is an explanation of an event or events that attributes those events to the existence of a conspiracy C

A conspiracy theory defined this way is nothing more than a theory that some conspiracy exists. On this definition, the class of conspiracy theories is wide and heterogenous. It encompasses everything from the wild idea that the world is governed by shape-shifting lizards, the less fantastical yet ungrounded theory that there is a cover-up amongst scientists to hide from the public that the MMR vaccine causes autism in children, to historically accepted "theories" such as that Caesar's assassination was the result of a conspiracy. Indeed, on this definition, something as mundane as the theory that my friend is organising me a surprise birthday party will count as a conspiracy theory. Since it is clearly the case that there can be conditions in which it would be rational to believe, for example, that "there was a conspiracy to assassinate Caesar", or "my friend is organising me a surprise birthday party"—on this minimal definition, we already have an answer to the doxastic question as originally formulated. I.e., no, it is not always irrational to believe a conspiracy theory; indeed, we will *often* be justified in believing conspiracy theories.

Whilst, on the minimal definition, we cannot offer a blanket judgement of the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories, we might wonder whether there are any narrower classes of theory for which justified belief is either impossible or, at best, hard to come by. The literature offers a variety of candidates. So, for example, Räikkä and Basham suggest that some theories "make claims so fantastical that they go beyond what most people can accept as true" (Räikkä and Basham 2018, 180). Dentith suggests that we may have *prima facie* reason to be "suspicious" of a particular conspiracy when it "resemble[s] a theory we already have reason to think of as suspicious" (Dentith 2022, 243). Cassam suggests that there is a class of Big-C conspiracy theories that can be rejected because they are "speculative, contrarian,

esoteric, amateurish and premodern" (Cassam 2019, 28). Pidgen argues that "defectibility" is a black mark against some theories, where a theory is defectible if "the costs of defection [by conspirators] are low and the rewards of defection are high" (Pigden 2018, 209). And Keeley suggests that the rationality of a theory is inversely tied to its "maturity", where "as a conspiracy matures, attempt after attempt to falsify [the] theory appears to succeed, and this apparent success must be explained as the nefarious work of the conspirators" (Keeley 1999, 122).

All of these, it seems to me, pick out viable subsets of conspiracy theories for which justified belief is, at the least, hard to come by. Rather than assess these in more detail, however, I want to focus on another feature of some conspiracy theories that gains attention in the literature. That is that at least some theories are explicitly opposed to accounts endorsed by relevant "epistemic authorities" (see, for example, Cassam 2019; Harris 2022; Levy 2007). More specifically, I want to focus on theories that are opposed to accounts endorsed by what we might call relevant and "recognised credible epistemic authorities" (RCEAs). For example, the thesis that climate change is a hoax is contrary to the position taken by the vast majority of climate scientists—who are recognised as credible authorities in domains relevant to that theory. The theory that condensation trails from plains are "chemtrails" sprayed onto the population for nefarious purposes is contrary to the position taken by atmospheric scientists and aviation experts—both of whom are recognised as credible authorities in domains relevant to the theory. And, the theory that there is an army of "Cultural Marxists" who continue the legacy of the Frankfurt School in efforts to subvert and destabilise Western Culture runs counter to the accounts of historians, philosophers, and those working in the history of ideas—all of whom are recognised as credible authorities in domains relevant to the theory.

At least some theories, then, are opposed to positions held by the relevant RCEAs. Let us call such theories "contrarian conspiracy theories" (CCTs). Given this description, what we can say about the nature of CCTs boils down to what we are talking about when we talk about "epistemic authority", "credibility", and "recognised". Let us start with epistemic authority.

2.3.1 Epistemic authority

Let us say first that an agent has "expertise" relevant to a domain if they possess the kinds of competency and background knowledge that will enable them to reliably carry out rational inquiry, produce rational theories, develop understanding, and generate knowledge with respect to the domain in question. As I use the term, an agent is an "epistemic authority" with respect to a conspiracy theory if they bear a significant measure of expertise

in some domain of inquiry relevant to the content of that theory. So, for example, climate scientists are epistemic authorities relevant to the theory that climate change is a hoax just because they have expertise in the domain of climate science, which is a relevant domain of inquiry to the content of the climate hoax theory. Historians are a group with expertise in the study, understanding, and development of knowledge about history. Thus, since history (of a certain period and intellectual tradition) is relevant to the content of the Cultural Marxism theory, historians working on the relevant area of history are epistemic authorities with respect to the Cultural Marxism theory. And so on.

Note that the "epistemic" authorities with respect to a conspiracy theory are not necessarily the "official" authorities in domains relevant to that theory, nor vice-versa. Officialdom will sometimes reside with the relevant epistemic authorities. But it may also reside, for instance, with government institutions or state media, irrespective of their epistemic merits. In this case, the official and epistemic authorities may diverge. As Coady (2007, 199) points out, since an official authority may not be an epistemic authority, the bare fact that a position or theory is endorsed or rejected by the official authorities is epistemically neutral with respect to the justificatory status of any belief in that theory.

So much for epistemic authority, this brings us to "credibility".

2.3.2 Credibility

In the sense I have in mind, to say that some epistemic authority is "credible" with respect to some conspiracy theory is to say that it can be trusted to accurately and honestly disseminate the epistemic outputs that come from the exercise of the kind of expertise in respect to which it is an epistemic authority. So, for instance, climate scientists can, as a general rule, be trusted to disseminate the epistemic outputs that come from the exercise of their expertise in climate science. Thus, climate scientists are credible epistemic authorities with respect to the climate change hoax theory. Historians can be trusted to disseminate the findings of their studies in history. Thus, historians (of the relevant kind) are credible epistemic authorities with respect to the Cultural Marxism theory.

Notice that, on this understanding, not all epistemic authorities will be credible, whilst, by definition, if an agent is credible, they will also be an epistemic authority. For example, the NSA was both the *official* and *epistemic* authority with respect to their massive and secret surveillance capabilities exposed by Edward Snowden in 2013 (and published by The Guardian, Der Spiegel, The Washington Post, and others). However, the NSA were not credible in respect to any theory about the existence of those capabilities just

because it was they who conspired to keep the existence of those capabilities secret and, thus, were not in the business of accurately and honestly disseminating information about any such surveillance programmes.

2.3.3 Recognised as credible

So much for credibility. This brings us finally to what it is for an epistemic authority to be "recognised".

Let us say first that "publicly available evidence" of P is evidence that a person who is reasonably informed about the world would be expected to (i) be familiar with and (ii) be capable of competently assessing. What I suggest is that an agent is "recognised" as a credible epistemic authority simply when there is publicly available evidence that that agent is a credible epistemic authority. For instance, there is ample evidence in the form of the activity and endorsement from climate-literate scientists in other disciplines and science-literate journalists that climate scientists are credible epistemic authorities with respect to climate science. Moreover, it takes no special expertise to (i) identify such evidence or (ii) judge whether climate scientists are credible on the basis of that evidence. Thus, relative to the domain of climate science and the theory that climate change is a hoax, there is publicly available evidence of the kind described, and so climate scientists are recognised epistemic authorities relative to the climate hoax theory.

Before moving on, there are two things to note about what it is to be recognised so defined. First, as that term is used here, the status of being recognised is *not* factive in the sense that there could be publicly available evidence that some agent is a credible epistemic authority even if they are *not* credible. In such cases, the relevant evidence would be misleading—but, to echo a point from earlier, misleading evidence that a proposition is true is still evidence that that proposition is true.

Second, it is not the case that all credible epistemic authorities will be recognised as such. For instance, we might presume that Western war correspondents working in Ukraine are credible epistemic authorities when it comes to the events in the Ukraine war. By all accounts, however, residents of Russia are subject to an extensive culture of mis- and disinformation with respect to the war in Ukraine. In this context, even if they are credible epistemic authorities with respect to the events of the war (and any relevant conspiracy theories), the Western war correspondents will not be recognised as epistemic authorities in Russia in the way described. (This last example highlights a further feature of what it is to be an RCEA. That is, given that it depends upon the availability of evidence, whether or not an agent is an RCEA will depend on context—just because the evidence that is readily available in one context may not be available in another).

2.3.4 Contrarian conspiracy theories

This covers the preliminaries. With this much said, we can lay out systematically what it is for a conspiracy theory to be a contrarian conspiracy theory:

First, let us restate the definitions of "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory":

> Conspiracy: C is a conspiracy *iff* (i) there exists or existed some set of agents with a plan C, (ii) steps have been taken by the agents to minimise public awareness of C, and (iii) some end is (or was) desired by the agents
>
> Conspiracy theory (CT): CT is a conspiracy theory *iff* it is an explanation of an event or events that attributes those events to the existence of a conspiracy C

Second, let us lay out more systematically what it is for something to be a "recognised credible epistemic authority":

> Recognised Credible Epistemic Authority (RCEA): An agent G is an RCEA relative to CT *iff*:
>
> > (Recognised) There is publicly available evidence which indicates that G is a *credible epistemic authority*
> >
> > Whereby:
> >
> > (Epistemic Authority) G is an epistemic authority relative to CT *iff* G bears a significant measure of expertise in some domain of inquiry relevant to the content of CT
> > (Credibility) G is a credible epistemic authority relative to CT *iff* G can be trusted to accurately and honestly disseminate the epistemic outputs that come from the exercise of expertise in some domain of inquiry relevant to the content of CT

Finally, building on the previous three definitions, we can state what it is for a conspiracy theory to be a "contrarian conspiracy theory" as follows:

> Contrarian Conspiracy Theory (CCT): CT is a CCT *iff* there is publicly available evidence that a relevant RCEA rejects CT.

(The public evidence component is important, given the thought that CCTs are explicitly opposed to what the apparent epistemic authorities say.)

With this laid out, then, I want to consider the doxastic question as applied to CCTs. I.e., to reflect the earlier distinction:

1. Are CCTs such that, for any CCT, CT, and agent S, there will never be evidence sufficient that S could justifiably believe CT?

2. Are CCTs such that, for any CCT, CT, and agent S, there will always be a "default defeater" for any evidence S has by which they could otherwise justifiably believe CT?

Echoing the earlier discussion, one way we might think it *impossible* to justifiably believe a CCT is if we think CCTs are such that there will never be evidence sufficient that an agent could justifiably believe such a theory. Which would be to say that one's total evidence—when including evidence that an RCEA rejects the theory—could never support believing a CCT. However, it is important to note here that the definition of CCTs is neutral to the content of that theory—just as was the more general definition of conspiracy theories. Thus, any conspiracy theory—from climate hoax or chemtrail theories to the theory that someone is throwing me a surprise party—could, under the right conditions class as a CCT (just so long as relevant RCEAs reject that theory). This being so, then, were it the case that belief in CCTs is irrational *ultima facie*, then we would have the strange result that it would always be irrational to believe, for instance, that someone was organising a surprise party for me—at least until the guests turn the light on and jump out of the cupboards. Yet, whilst it is one thing to think that, say, belief in the chemtrail theory or the theory that the world is governed by shape-shifting lizards will always be irrational, surely it can, at least sometimes, be rational to believe someone is organising a surprise party *before* the "AHAH!" moment, so to speak. If that is so, however, then, just as for conspiracy theories in general, it will not be the case that it is *impossible* to justifiably believe a CCT. This leads us to the second possibility (echoing the second possibility from earlier): perhaps there is something about the defining feature of CCTs—i.e., that there is publicly available evidence that they are rejected by RCEAs—such that those who believe such theories will *by default* have a defeater for any evidence on the basis of which they came to believe the relevant theories (even if that evidence would otherwise justify belief in that theory). In other words, to use the earlier term, perhaps CCTs are such that justified belief in those theories is *hard to come by*. In the following two sections, I shall argue that it is. More specifically, I will suggest that when a conspiracy theory is apparently rejected by relevant RCEAs, then the agent who believes that theory will have (negative) "higher-order evidence" (HOE) that they may have made a mistake in the reasoning that led them to believe the conspiracy theory in question. However, or so the argument goes, negative higher-order evidence functions as a kind of undercutting defeater with respect to whatever belief one may have come to

hold via the reasoning that is so impugned. Thus, absent a defeater-defeater, an agent who believes a CCT will not be justified in believing the relevant theory.

To make this argument, it will first be important to say something about the nature of higher-order evidence. I do so in the next section.

3. Higher-order evidence

What is higher-order evidence? To illustrate the idea, consider the following case:

> BROWNIES
> Bones is a forensic anthropologist tasked with determining the sex of a decomposed body. Bones measures and records the structure of the skull and pelvis and then takes a break before analysing the information collected. On break, Bones eats a brownie left to her by her trusted colleague Brer. Later, Bones continues with the analysis. On the basis of the information collected before, Bones concludes that the deceased was male. A little later, Brer explains that the secret ingredient to her recipe is a liberal dose of a mind-altering drug. Annoyed, Bones abandons her conclusion that the body was male and decides to re-conduct the analysis part of her examination the next day (when the effects of the drug will have worn off). As it happens, the deceased was male; what is more and unbeknownst to all, Bones is strongly resistant to the psychotropic agent in the recipe.

That Bones ate the spiked brownie has no bearing on the facts as to the sex of the body on her examining table. It is, though, evidence that Bones may have been at greater risk of error when deliberating upon the bearing of her original evidence than she might otherwise expect. Bones would appear, at first blush, to respect that evidence by reducing her confidence in her original conclusions—this is so, even whilst, as a matter of fact, Bones's competence is unaffected by the agent in the brownie.

The kind of evidence Bones acquires in this case has come to be called (negative) "higher-order evidence" (HOE).[2] (Let us call the evidence on which one initially bases the relevant belief "first order evidence" (FOE)). Unsurprisingly, characterisations of HOE differ, but the common thread is that higher-order evidence somehow pertains to the practices that led the agent to form a certain belief and only indirectly to the facts. So, Christensen suggests that we call evidence that "constrains one's credence on some

[2] Generally the discussion has focused on the nature and significance of negative higher-order evidence of the sort Bones receives. In principle, there is no reason why one could not acquire positive higher-order evidence. However, given the focus of the literature the tendency has been to use the unqualified term "higher-order evidence" to refer specifically to negative evidence. From here on, I follow that convention.

subject-matter via bearing on the reliability of one's thinking about that subject-matter—higher-order evidence." (Christensen 2016, 397); Lasonen-Aarnio that "higher-order evidence…works by inducing doubts that one's doxastic state is the result of a flawed process" (Lasonen-Aarnio 2014, 314); and King that "higher-order evidence…is, evidence about our grounds for belief, our dispositions for responding rationally to those grounds, and our performance in responding to those grounds" (King 2016, 133). Which of these characterisations is best is not central to the current argument, so can be put aside. The important point is that in cases like the one above—even when misleading—the higher-order evidence appears to defeat the support that the individual in question would otherwise have for their belief. The question is what kind of defeat is in play.

Earlier, we saw that defeaters come in two kinds: rebutting and undercutting. Rebutting defeaters can be thought of simply enough as counter-evidence—as such, they bear directly upon the content of the belief in question. Importantly, rebutting defeaters leave the connection between one's original evidence and belief intact. Undercutting defeaters, in contrast, work just because they cast doubt upon the connection between one's evidence and one's belief. Clearly, the HOE that Bones acquires in BROWNIES is not a rebutting defeater—for it does not bear directly upon the matter of the sex of the body on Bones's operating table. If the HOE in this case is a defeater at all, then it is an undercutting defeater. Why think it is a defeater at all? Because the evidence that Bones acquires from Brer's testimony is evidence that Bones may not have been in a state of mind to competently assess the bearing of her measurements on the matter of the sex of the body on her operating table. But, if Bones cannot be sure that she competently assessed that evidence, then it seems she also has reason to doubt that the evidence from her measurements is—as she judged it to be—evidence that the body is male. And, if Bones should doubt that the evidence is evidence that the body is male, then she should not conclude on the basis of that evidence that the body is male.

As per the initial suggestion, then, it seems Bones does indeed respond correctly to the HOE acquired from Brer's testimony when she lowers her confidence in her original conclusion that the body on the table was male. Now we have an explanation why—i.e., in giving her reason to doubt her original assessment of the relevant measurements, that HOE affords Bones an undercutting defeater for whatever justification her belief previously had. In the next section, I shall suggest that the way in which HOE can undercut one's justification for believing as one does is crucial to the doxastic question as concerns CCTs. Before doing so, however, we need to consider another kind of case in which it has been suggested agents acquire a defeater by way

of HOE. These are certain cases of disagreement. To illustrate, consider the following case, much discussed in the literature on the epistemological significance of so-called "peer disagreement":

> DINERS
> Jack and Jill go to dinner with a group of friends. At the end of the dinner, the group agree to split the bill evenly, including a 20% tip. They leave it to Jill to work out what each owes. Having calculated the share, Jill states that "Each of us owes $45". To her surprise, Jack responds: "Wrong! Each of us owes $43". Jack and Jill have dined together many times in the past and always split the bill. In the majority of past cases, they have agreed on the total, and in the cases where they have not, neither has a better track record than the other. Each diner owes $45. On learning of their disagreement, Jill lowers her confidence that each diner owes $45.

The first thing to note about this case is that Jack and Jill disagree. The second is that the pair are "epistemic peers"—where to say that two disputants are epistemic peers is to say that they are (roughly) on equal epistemic standing vis-á-vis the substance of their disagreement. In this case, the pair are peers because (i) their dinner history suggests that they are about equally as good as each other at bill calculations and (ii) they are equally familiar with the evidence relevant to the current calculation (i.e., they have both seen the bill, and they are both aware of the agreed upon tip). The second thing to note is that, at first blush, in lowering her confidence that each diner owes $45, Jill appears to respond as she should to the realisation that Jack disagrees with her.[3]

Echoing the previous cases, then, we can say that the evidence that Jill acquires on discovering that Jack disagrees with her appears to defeat the justification that she would otherwise have as a result of her competent and correct judgement of the bearing of the evidence. The question then is what kind of defeater Jill acquires. Where this case clearly differs from the previous is that on realising the disagreement, Jill *does* gain evidence that bears directly upon the matter of how much each diner owes. I.e., she acquires testimony from someone she has reason to think is generally competent at the relevant kinds of calculation and that she knows has considered the evidence relevant to the current calculation. Indeed, if Jill was not familiar with the

[3] At least this conclusion is the most widely endorsed for this specific case. The literature on peer disagreement can be divided into "conciliationists" (e.g., Christensen 2011; Elga 2007; Matheson 2015) who argue that belief-revision is the appropriate response in all cases of peer disagreement, and "anti-conciliationists" who deny this (e.g., Kelly 2010; Lackey 2010; Schafer 2015). As far as I am aware, even anti-conciliationists about peer disagreement generally accept that belief-revision is the appropriate response in this *specific* case (or other very similar cases).

evidence herself, though she would be misled, it seems Jill would be justified in believing "each diner owes $43" on the basis of Jack's testimony. Given, then, that (i) Jill believes "each diner owes $45" and (ii) Jack's testimony is evidence that "each diner owes $43", it may seem at first blush that Jill acquires a rebutting defeater. However, this cannot be the case. There are two key points. First, to reiterate, when one acquires a rebutting defeater for one's original evidence for believing as one does, the connection between evidence and belief remains intact. Thus, one *need not doubt* that one's original evidence is evidence for believing as one does. Second, in this case, Jill is aware that Jack has based his opinion on the *same* evidence as she has. But if that is the case and if the evidence from Jack's testimony gives Jill no reason to doubt that her original evidence supports believing "each diner owes $45", Jill can simply conclude that Jack has made a mistake in his assessment of the evidence *via* an argument along the lines of the following:

(i) If the bill total is X and the tip amount is 20%, then each diner owes $45

(ii) The bill total is X and the tip amount is 20%

(iii) Each diner owes $45

(iv) Jack based his calculations in respect to how much each diner owes on the bill total (X) and tip amount (20%)

(v) Jack believes each diner owes $43

(vi) Jack made a mistake in his calculations

Presuming that Jill's realisation of the disagreement does afford her a defeater in this case, then that defeater is not a rebutting defeater. Given the options, then, Jill's realisation of the disagreement must—if anything—afford her an undercutting defeater. The question, then, is how does the realisation of disagreement undercut that evidence? And in short, it does so because, on realising that her peer disagrees with her based on evidence they share, Jill acquires HOE that she may have made a mistake in her original reasoning as to the bearing of that evidence. After all, Jill has evidence that Jack is just about as competent as her when it comes to such calculations—so how can she be sure that it is him and not her that has made a mistake in coming to hold the relevant belief? In light of that evidence, then—similarly to Bones in BROWNIES—it seems Jill has reason to doubt that the evidence is in fact—as she judged it to be—evidence that each diner owes $45. And, if Jill should doubt that, then, it seems, she should no longer conclude on the basis of that evidence that each diner owes $45.

As per the initial suggestion, then, it seems Jill does indeed respond correctly to the realisation of disagreement when she lowers her confidence in her original conclusion. Now we have an explanation why: i.e., on realising that she disagrees with an epistemic peer, Jill acquires HOE of the kind that affords her an undercutting defeater for whatever justification her belief previously had.

Notice here that similar points would apply even if Jill had reason to believe Jack was *better* than her at the kind of calculations in question. In such a case, it seems to me the intuition that Jill acquires a defeater is yet stronger than in the peer disagreement case. However, if Jill does not acquire an undercutting defeater, she could run the same argument in her favour as described above—in which case Jill would not acquire a defeater at all. Presuming, then, that Jill would acquire a defeater if she disagreed with Jack and he was her "epistemic superior", that defeater must be an undercutting defeater—just as if he were her epistemic peer.[4] How best to explain this? Similarly to before: i.e., on realising that her epistemic superior disagrees with her about the bill calculation, Jill would acquire HOE that she may have made a mistake in her reasoning. And, as in the peer disagreement case, this HOE would afford her an undercutting defeater for the evidence on which she based her conclusion that each diner owes $45.

Generally, then, we can say the following: when one acquires HOE of the type described, then one acquires an undercutting defeater. In such cases, *absent a defeater-defeater*, one will not be justified in believing as one did before acquiring the HOE. Notably, this applies (i) even when the HOE is misleading and (ii) under certain conditions of disagreement—i.e., when one has evidence that the agent/s one disagrees with are *at least* as competent as oneself and *at least* as familiar with the relevant evidence.

These are the main points about HOE relevant to the doxastic question about conspiracy theories. So let us return to that topic.

4. Contrarian conspiracy theories and HOE

In section 2, I introduced the notion of a contrarian conspiracy theory—where a conspiracy theory is contrarian just if there is publicly available evidence that a credible epistemic authority relative to the content of the theory rejects that theory. In section 3, I introduced the concept of higher-order evidence and discussed how such evidence can constitute an undercutting defeater for the first-order evidence on which one has based some belief or

[4] Arguably, in such a case Jill should move her belief further in the direction of Jack's, possibly so far as to accept that he is correct. For reasons of space, I will not try to give an analysis of that consequence here.

other. In this section, I bring these two concepts together to argue for the modest claim that:

> Defeat and contrarian conspiracy theories (DCCT): *Ceteris paribus*, someone who believes a contrarian conspiracy theory will not be justified in believing that theory

(Where the *ceteris paribus* clause refers to the possibility that one could acquire a defeater-defeater for the relevant HOE)

The argument to this conclusion is simple. Drawing on the definitions given, it can be stated as follows:

(i) If S believes a CCT, CT, S will have evidence that a relevant and credible epistemic authority disagrees with them about CT.[5]

(ii) If S has evidence that a relevant and credible epistemic authority disagrees with them about CT, S will have HOE that they may have made a mistake in the reasoning that led them to believe CT.

(iii) If S has HOE that they may have made a mistake in the reasoning that led them to believe CT, S will have an undercutting defeater for the FOE on which they based their belief in CT.

(iv) Ceteris paribus, if S believes a CCT, CT, S will not be justified in believing CT.

What can we say about this argument: (i) follows from the way that contrarian conspiracy theories were defined; (iii) and (iv) follow from (i) and (ii). The only question, then, is whether we should grant (ii). All (ii) says, however, is that evidence a relevant and credible epistemic authority disagrees constitutes HOE of the kind we have discussed. But HOE is simply evidence that one may have made a mistake in the reasoning that led one to believe as one does. And it seems to me that if there is ever a disagreement in which one gets that kind of evidence, it is when one disagrees with someone one has reason to believe is a credible epistemic authority on the matter under dispute! And, if that intuition is correct, then the argument goes through.

That is it. Simple as the argument is, let us move to consider some of its limitations (i.e., why it is an exceedingly modest claim) and two objections to the argument. Firstly the limitations.

[5] At least if S is reasonably informed about the world in ways relevant to the content of CT. If S is not reasonably informed in such a way, S may not have this kind of evidence—but, then again, if S is not reasonably informed about the world in ways relevant to CT, it hardly seems that S could be justified in believing CT to start with.

4.1 Limitations: A modest claim indeed

There are three ways with respect to which I suggest DCCT is exceedingly modest:

Firstly, DCCT states only that, in the relevant conditions, the conspiracy theorist is no longer justified in believing CT. Thus, though this might often be the case, the core claim is not that the conspiracy theorist should believe the relevant epistemic authorities—only that they should suspend judgement on the relevant issues. Just as in DINERS, Jill should suspend judgement, not shift her belief the whole way in the direction of Jack's.

Secondly, DCCT only states that the person who believes a contrarian conspiracy theory will, by default, have a defeater for their view. As noted earlier, however, it is possible to have defeater-defeaters. Thus, it is not in principle impossible for someone to be justified in believing a contrarian conspiracy theory. Namely, someone may be justified in believing a CCT if (i) they have good FOE for that theory and (ii) a rebutting or undercutting defeater-defeater for the HOE they acquire via the publicly available evidence that an RCEA disagrees with them.

Third, as per the discussion of the various questions we might ask about conspiracy theories, DCCT does not entail any particular view on whether it is (i) ever rational to *investigate* conspiracy theories—or indeed contrarian conspiracy theories or (ii) whether conspiracy theories—including contrarian ones—are good or bad for society. This is important in the sense that one might think that DCCT is an invitation to both gullibility and complacency about possible conspiracies. However, since it leaves open the possibility that it could be rational to investigate a contrarian conspiracy theory—and indeed that it could be rational to do so out of concern for the good of society—DCCT is not an invitation to gullibility and complacency.

So much for the limitations. I will wrap up by considering two objections to DCCT

4.2 Objections and replies

4.2.1 Same evidence and idealisation

The first objection runs as follows: The argument re contrarian conspiracy theories depends, in part, upon the analogy with DINERS. A key feature of DINERS, however, is that the disputants base their beliefs upon the *same evidence*. In many cases, in the real world, disputants will not have the same evidence or else not be in a position to be confident that they have the same evidence. Plausibly, this will include some instances where a person believes a contrarian conspiracy theory. So, the objection goes, the analogy between

DINERS and cases of belief in CCTs does not hold, and so DCCT is unfounded.

There is some weight to this objection. For, indeed, the kind of conditions described in DINERS are highly idealised and will often not obtain in real-world cases. So, is there an answer to this concern? The short version is that similar points *can* be made about cases in which disputants have *different* evidence. For those who are not convinced by vague gestures to further arguments, however, there are still a few moves to be made. First of all, in so far as they have evidence of the expertise of those they disagree with (i.e., relevant RCEAs), those who believe contrarian conspiracy theories *should* presume that their opponents are familiar with any publicly available evidence relative to the relevant conspiracy theories. Second, in so far as they have evidence of the expertise of the relevant RCEAs, those who believe contrarian conspiracy theories *should* presume that their opponents are familiar with much evidence that is *not* publicly available in the way described (call the latter "expert evidence").

If the contrarian conspiracy theorist is not to acquire the kind of HOE we have been discussing, then I suggest that they will need to have evidence for the theory that is (i) not publicly available *and* which (ii) can be presumed to defeat any expert evidence the RCEAs might have based their rejection of the relevant conspiracy theory upon. This is a high standard to meet, and I would hazard a guess, one that is often not met.

A further point here is that it is often the case that conspiracy theorists aim to *publicise* their theories, including the evidence they have for those theories—e.g., just so as to publicly uncover the conspirators. But once their evidence is publicly available, the conspiracy theorist should presume that the relevant RCEAs will at some point become aware of that evidence. If the relevant RCEAs still uphold their original position after the conspiracy theorist has publicised their evidence, then the contrarian conspiracy theorist will acquire HOE of the type described. Not only is the evidential standard high to start with, then, it may yet be undermined if the conspiracy theorist successfully publicises their own theory!

4.2.2 Really contrarian theories and independence

A second concern comes when we consider what we might call "really contrarian theories". Let us say that a conspiracy theory is "really contrarian" when not only is there evidence that the relevant RCEAs reject the theory, but when the theory has it that the RCEAs doing so is evidence that they are part of the conspiracy themselves. I think it goes without saying that quite a few conspiracy theories are really contrarian in this way (e.g., climate hoax conspiracies, anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, and so on). In

these cases, we might think, the conspiracy theorist may remain justified in believing their theory because it comes with a defeater-defeater for the relevant HOE built in—i.e., the so-seeming RCEAs are not credible *just because* their rejecting the relevant theory implicates them in the conspiracy itself. However, it would be a mistake to think this way. The key point comes from an important feature of defeaters. That is that defeaters—*of any kind*—can only be defeated by evidence that is independent of the source of justification impugned by the relevant defeater. Crucially, this general point about defeaters applies equally to cases in which one acquires a defeater via undercutting HOE. That is to say, in so far as undercutting HOE works by casting doubt upon the reasoning that led one to believe p, undercutting HOE can only be defeated by evidence that is independent of the reasoning that is so impugned.

To see why, imagine that Bones, in BROWNIES, argues in the following way:

(i) Brer tells me that the brownies were spiked.

(ii) If the brownies were spiked, then my assessment of the evidence would not have been competent.

(iii) (But) The evidence indicates that the body is male, and I concluded that the body is male.

(iv) Therefore my assessment of the evidence was competent.

(v) Therefore Brer lied to me about the brownies.[6]

Were Bones able to justifiably argue like this, then she would indeed have a defeater-defeater for Brer's testimony as HOE against her original view. I.e., she would have reason to believe that Brer was trying to deceive her all along! But clearly, Bones cannot justifiably argue like this. Why? Just because the argument given *presupposes* that Bones competently judged the evidence all along—which is just what is called into doubt by Brer's testimony. If Bones is going to deny Brer's testimony on the grounds of lying, then it is not enough that she can construct an argument of this kind. What she needs is evidence of Brer's insincerity that is *independent* of the reasoning that Brer's testimony about the brownies should otherwise call into doubt. (E.g. if a trusted colleague told her that Brer was just boasting in the break-room about hoodwinking Bones). The same point applies to the "really contrarian conspiracy theory". I.e., if the really contrarian conspiracy theorist is going to deny the relevance of the RCEA's view on the theory in question, it is not enough

[6] This argument clearly parallels the one that we saw Jill should not be able to run in DINERS.

to simply argue that the RCEAs must be part of the conspiracy themselves. Why not? Just because that argument would *presuppose* that the conspiracy theorist correctly judged the evidence all along—which is just what is called into doubt by the evidence that the RCEAs disagree. Instead, just as with Bones, what the conspiracy theorist needs is evidence of the RCEAs insincerity that is *independent* of the reasoning that the RCEAs views otherwise call into doubt. Such evidence is not impossible to acquire (e.g., the testimony of an independently vetted whistle-blower might function as such), but it cannot be had simply by referencing the details of the conspiracy theory itself.

It is worth making clear that this point is related to but does not depend upon the truth of the principle of "Independence" taken by some to be at the heart of the debate on peer disagreement.[7] The standard formulation of "Independence" comes from Christensen, who defines it as follows:

> In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another's expressed belief about P [where we disagree about P], in order to determine how (or whether) to modify my own belief about P, I should do so in a way that doesn't rely on the reasoning behind my initial belief about P. (Christensen 2011, 1–2)

If "Independence" is true, Christensen suggests, conciliation is the correct response to peer disagreement. This seems correct. Moreover, if "Independence" is true, then the point about really contrarian conspiracy theories also holds. Crucially, however, the point about really contrarian conspiracy theories and HOE does not *depend* upon the truth of "Independence". This is crucial since the truth of "Independence" is disputed in the literature on peer disagreement (e.g., by Kelly 2013; Lackey 2010; Lord 2014).

What is important to note is that "Independence", if true, tells us something *substantive* about how to respond to *all* disagreements. I.e., according to Christensen's formulation, whether a disagreement is with one's epistemic peer, superior, or inferior, one should not rely on the reasoning behind one's initial belief about P when determining how to respond to the disagreement. This is controversial. In contrast, the principle underlying the current argument—that defeaters can only be defeated by evidence that is independent of the source of justification impugned by the relevant defeater—should not be. This is because it tells us nothing substantive about what we should believe in specific circumstances, disagreement or otherwise. Rather, it tells us something basic about how epistemic defeat works. And, indeed, to deny this principle is tantamount to denying that there can be such things as defeaters. (Why? Because in any case where one can rely on one's original

[7] Thanks to an anonymous referee and the editors for pushing me to explain this point.

source of justification without independent support, one can run an argument along the lines of the above. Thus, in any such case, one's original source of justification would remain undefeated. But then, if one can *always* rely on one's original source of justification in that way, there will not be *any* cases in which one's original source of justification can be defeated. Thus, either there are some cases in which independent support is needed, or there are, in effect, no such things as defeaters.)

When it comes to the current discussion, then, the question of substance is not whether Christensen's "Independence" is true. Rather, what we want to ask is whether the person who believes a really contrarian conspiracy theory is afforded a defeater by way of their having evidence that an RCEA rejects that theory. If they are, then, as I have suggested, they will need evidence independent of the relevant theory if they are to have a defeater-defeater. If they are not, they will retain whatever justification for believing the theory they may otherwise have had. When it comes to that question, though, it is not obvious to me why we should think the answer is any different to cases in which the conspiracy theorist believes only a mere contrarian conspiracy theory. After all, the really contrarian conspiracy theorist has evidence that relevant RCEAs reject the theory in question—just as does the merely contrarian theorist—and simply concluding that the relevant person or group is not to be trusted does not change that. But, that being so, the conspiracy theorist who believes a really contrarian conspiracy theory will have HOE of just the same kind as if they believed a mere contrarian one. Thus, we might conclude that the really contrarian conspiracy theorist does acquire a defeater—and so, they will only have a defeater-defeater if they have evidence in their favour that is independent of the content of the relevant theory. Again, such evidence is not impossible to acquire, but it cannot be had simply by referencing the details of the conspiracy theory itself.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that there is a certain kind of conspiracy theory—contrarian conspiracy theories—which are such that those who believe such theories will, by default, have an undercutting defeater for any evidence on the basis of which they came to believe the relevant theories. This defeater comes in the form of the higher-order evidence of error that the contrarian conspiracy theorist acquires *via* publicly available evidence that credible epistemic authorities disagree with them as to the truth of the relevant theory. As I have tried to show, this claim is a modest one, implying neither that justified belief in contrarian theories is impossible nor that the theorist should simply concede the matter to the relevant authorities nor that they should not investigate the theory in question. Nonetheless, in so far as many

conspiracy theories will be contrarian, the fact that justified belief in those theories is, at the least, hard to come by is not without significance.

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