

The epistemology of conspiracy theories

Summer Semester 2019

University of Cologne

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Class meetings: Tuesdays 12.00-14.00, 100/EG/4.011

Office Hours: Tuesdays 14.00-16.00 or by appointment

COURSE OVERVIEW

In this class, we will analyze the problem of conspiracy theories with the tools of epistemology. We will discuss issues regarding what conspiracy theories are, whether they are necessarily irrational, and how the problem of conspiracy theorizing interacts with other issues in social epistemology—such as testimony, expertise, epistemic authority, paternalism, belief polarization, and new media technologies.

CLASS STRUCTURE

The meetings will be structured in two parts. We will start with an introduction to the readings for each week (led by a different group of students every week), after which we will work together to reconstruct the main argument in the text. In the second part of the meeting we will have a discussion of the material.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

We will discuss the topic of conspiracy theories from an epistemological perspective and relate it to several issues in social epistemology. The course is aimed at providing a concrete example of how insights in epistemology can be employed to investigate phenomena of public relevance, such as the problem of conspiracy theorizing.

At the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Critically engage with philosophical papers, understanding how philosophical analysis can be applied to themes they are familiar with (such as conspiracy theories, trust in experts, and polarization on social media)
- Formulate their thoughts and criticisms in a clear, concise, and understandable fashion, and support their ideas with arguments in discussion
- Present a philosophical text to their peers, identifying the main points of the paper, the structure of the argument, and possible objections

ASSESSMENT

We will read one or two papers every week, and discuss them together in class. All the papers will be made available on Blackboard in advance.

In order to PASS the course:

1. **ACTIVE PARTICIPATION:** Students are expected to read the papers in advance, attend the seminars, and actively participate to the discussions. A maximum of two unjustified absences are allowed.
2. **WEEKLY QUESTION:** Every week (by Monday at 15.00), each student should formulate and send me via email at least one discussion question regarding the paper we are reading that week. The questions will serve as a basis for discussion in class, and should be elaborated enough to show that the text has been read carefully. A maximum of two unjustified missed questions are allowed.

3. **PRESENTATION:** groups of students will introduce one of the papers during each sessions, in a 15 minute presentation.

Those students who are taking this course but are unable to attend the seminars will be assessed on the basis of (1) short critical summaries of the readings (about 400 words) that will be assigned every week. Moreover, (2) the students should send me their weekly discussion questions. I will respond to them after class. Please get in touch with me during the first week of the semester if you are planning to take this seminar without attending.

In order to receive a GRADE for this course:

In addition to the three points above, students are expected to write a 2000-3000 word paper which will be due in week 14. Paper topics will be discussed with me by the end of week 6. I am happy to provide feedback on paper outlines at any point during the semester (tip: the sooner the better!). Please get in touch with me at the beginning of the semester if you are planning to take this course for a grade.

Grading:

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION 20%

WEEKLY QUESTIONS 30%

FINAL PAPER 50%

PRE-REQUISITES

There are no pre-requisites for taking this course. General familiarity with epistemology is helpful, but not required.

COURSE POLICIES AND EXPECTATIONS

Preparation

For the class format to be successful, your contribution is crucial. I expect students to read the materials carefully before our session each week. This way, the understanding portion of our weekly schedule—as well as the discussion—can take the form of a joint effort, rather than a lecture. This makes it more enjoyable and instructive for everyone involved.

Classroom Climate

Everyone is expected to actively and respectfully participate in our sessions. For some of us this will mean making an effort to share our thoughts, even though we'd rather listen. For some others, this will mean keeping some thoughts in, in an effort to leave some empty space so that other can speak. Try to be mindful of our differences in an effort to create a balanced, positive discussion environment.

In this class, we will be touching upon controversial issues, about which we might have strong feelings. Some of us might be particularly sensitive to some of these issues due to personal experience. Each of us comes into the classroom with valuable insights and perspectives. This course supports an inclusive learning environment where diverse perspectives are recognized, respected, and seen as a source of strength. Please, always keep in mind different people when contributing to the discussion, and always—always—be respectful when stating your opinion.

Emails

Please feel free to reach out via email with any issues, questions, or concerns. During the week, I tend to answer emails within a day, but please allow me up to 48 hours before reaching out again. Please note that I don't typically check my inbox after 6 pm and during weekends.

Office Hours

I will hold office hours weekly on Monday after class in my office in the Hauptgebäude 4.206. Feel free to drop by with any questions, or just for a chat! I will be there until 16.00. If this time does not work for you, please send me an email to schedule a meeting at a different time.

Course Schedule

DATE	TOPIC	REQUIRED READING	DESCRIPTION
Week 1 - 02/04/19	Introduction	<p>Not required, but interesting article about the problem of conspiracy theories: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/23/conspiracy-theories-internet-survivors-truth?fbclid=IwAR3Ay-IHYtWi_WkNFvaF0buL3v6Z41VAUz1gAZm3ymMWI0tAWus3HZ9E5QY</p> <p>Not required, but very fun to watch as an introduction: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2jlc fz</p>	<p>We will go through the syllabus, discuss practicalities and introduce each other. I'll give a short introduction to the topic of the course, and we'll have a little discussion (also on the basis of the article I linked, and the video).</p>
Week 2 - 09/04/19	The problem of conspiracy theories? & Epistemology primer (belief and knowledge)	<p>Basham & Dentith (2016) <i>Social science's conspiracy theory panic: Now they want to cure everyone.</i></p> <p>Epistemology primer handout 1</p>	<p>This paper presents a peculiar view about conspiracy theories: conspiracy theories are not seen as problematic, rather they are considered to be a positive element contributing to the healthy functioning of open societies.</p> <p>In addition to this, we will start our review of core notions in epistemology which we'll encounter throughout the course.</p>

<p>Week 3 - 16/04/19</p>	<p>Are conspiracy theories irrational? & Epistemology primer (justification)</p>	<p>Keeley (2009) <i>Of Conspiracy Theories</i> Epistemology primer handout 2</p>	<p>This week we will discuss whether conspiracy theories are irrational. We will do so on the basis of Keeley's paper, in which he argues that conspiracy theories, as explanation types, are not prima facie irrational. We will also continue our epistemology review.</p>
<p>Week 4 - 23/04/19</p>	<p>Are conspiracy theories irrational? & Epistemology primer (defeaters)</p>	<p>Feldman (2011) <i>Counterfact Conspiracy Theories</i> Epistemology primer handout 3</p>	<p>This week we will continue discussing the rationality of believing conspiracy theories with a paper by Susan Feldman, where she argues for the irrationality of what she calls 'counterfact conspiracy theories'. We will finish our epistemology review this week.</p>
<p>Week 5 - 30/04/19</p>	<p>Trust & Testimony</p>	<p>Hardwig (1991) <i>The Role of Trust in Knowledge</i> Lackey (2011) <i>Testimony: acquiring knowledge from others</i></p>	<p>This week we will start reflecting on two related topics that are closely tied to conspiracy theories: the role of epistemic trust in our knowledge of the world, and testimonial knowledge.</p>
<p>Week 6 - 07/05/19</p> <p>Paper topics to be discussed before the end of this week!</p>	<p>Conspiracy theories and epistemic virtues</p>	<p>Cassam (2016) <i>Vice Epistemology</i> Battaly (2008) <i>Virtue Epistemology</i></p>	<p>Are conspiracy theories an expression of intellectual vice? We'll discuss this question in light of these two papers about intellectual virtues and vices.</p>

Week 7 - 14/05/19	Conspiracy theories and injustice	<p>Coady (2007) <i>Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational?</i></p> <p>Selected readings from Fricker (2007) <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> ch.1-2</p>	<p>In this paper, David Coady defends conspiracy theorists against charges of irrationality. Coady argues that our treatment of conspiracy theorists is a form of epistemic injustice.</p> <p>We will also discuss Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice.</p>
Week 8 - 21/05/19	Conspiracy theories and epistemic authority	<p>Zagzebski (2013) <i>A Defense of Epistemic Authority</i>.</p> <p>Levy (2007) <i>Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories</i></p>	<p>Conspiracy theories are often proposed as counter-narratives to official theories, and are typically anti-authoritarian. During this class we'll discuss the notion of epistemic authority and the rationality of forming beliefs on authority.</p> <p>Levy (2007) explains the problem of conspiracy theories in terms of their relation to epistemic authorities.</p>
Week 9 - 28/05/19	Expertise and intellectual autonomy	<p>Nguyen (2018) <i>Expertise and the fragmentation of intellectual autonomy</i></p>	<p>This week we'll keep talking about epistemic authority, and its relation with intellectual autonomy.</p>

<p>Week 10 - 04/06/19</p>	<p>How to address conspiracy theories & Epistemic paternalism</p>	<p>Sunstein & Vermeule (2009) <i>Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures</i></p> <p>Goldman (2001) <i>Epistemic paternalism: Communication control in law and society</i></p>	<p>Sunstein and Vermeule discuss different strategies for addressing the problem of conspiracy theories.</p> <p>The Goldman paper is about epistemic paternalism, in relation to transparency in communication.</p>
<p>Week 11 - 18/06/19</p>	<p>Social media and conspiracy theories</p>	<p>Nguyen (forthcoming) <i>Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles</i></p>	<p>In this paper, Nguyen offers an analysis of the epistemic implications of two social epistemic phenomena related to social media and the internet: echo chambers and epistemic bubbles.</p>
<p>Week 12 - 25/06/19</p>	<p>Rumour-based beliefs & Coverage-reliability</p>	<p>Gelfert (2013) <i>Coverage-Reliability, Epistemic Dependence, and the Problem of Rumor-Based Belief</i></p> <p>Goldberg (2010) <i>If That Were True I Would Have Heard About it by Now</i></p>	<p>This week we'll discuss two themes that are related to conspiracy theories: rumours, and coverage-reliability (i.e. the idea that our epistemic environments sometimes put us in a position to disbelieve a certain thing, on the basis that 'if that were true we would have heard about it by now')</p>

