

Non-Doxastic Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract

To a large extent, recent debates on conspiracy theories have been based on what we call the “doxastic assumption”. According to that assumption, a person who supports a conspiracy theory *believes* that the theory is (likely to be) true, or at least equally plausible as the “official explanation”. In this paper we argue that the doxastic assumption does not always hold. There are, indeed, “non-doxastic conspiracy theories”: theories that have many supporters who do not really believe in their truth or likelihood. One implication of this view is that some debunking strategies that have been suggested to fight conspiracy theories are doomed to fail, since they are based on the false view that supporting a conspiracy theory means, *ipso facto*, believing in it—while they don’t have grip in non-doxastic contexts.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, Belief, Non-doxastic attitudes, Hope, Communication, Debunking strategies.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a lot of discussion on why so many people support conspiracy theories, and on what, if anything, should be done to restrain the spread of conspiracist beliefs. Both the empirical debate on the possible causes of the popularity of conspiracy theories and the normative debate on how to deal with conspiracy theorists are usually based on what can be called the “doxastic assumption”. According to that assumption, a person who supports a conspiracy theory *believes* that the theory is (likely to be) true or at least equally plausible as the “official explanation”. This assumption is “doxastic”, as it claims that *supporting* a conspiracy theory amounts to *believing* that the theory is (likely to be) true. According to the doxastic assumption, for instance, a person who supports the conspiracy theory that Princess Diana was murdered by the British Intelligence believes that this is so, or that it may very well be so. Her attitude towards the theory is doxastic in nature. (See e.g. Goertzel 1994; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009; Swami and Coles 2010; Wood, Douglas and Sutton 2012; Brotherton and French 2014; Coady 2012; Van Prooijen 2012; Van Prooijen and Acker 2015; Dentith 2016; Imhof and Lamberry 2017; Hagen 2018; Van Prooijen 2019.)

The doxastic assumption is natural and gets *prima facie* support from what people say and do. For instance, if a person openly defends the claim that the U.S. authorities must have known in advance that WTC towers would have been destroyed by referring to evidence concerning the normal practices of the U.S. Intelligence, it seems reasonable to ascribe her a belief in the 9/11 conspiracy theory. However, we will argue that in some cases such belief ascription is questionable. That is, we will argue that there are what we call “non-doxastic conspiracy theories”—theories that have many supporters who do not really believe that their main claims are true or likely, as they have not considered the truth of those claims in the first place. The said theories are supported on non-doxastic bases.¹

The view that supporters of conspiracy theories need not always believe in the theories they support is not completely new; it has been defended here and there (Ichino 2018; Hristov 2019). However, our discussion of the phenomenon is meant to be novel and revealing, in that it will examine in detail some of the psychological mechanisms underlying non-doxastic support for conspiracy theories, as well as the implications of the non-doxastic approach for practical interventions on those theories. In the first part of the paper, we will argue that (1) in some cases supporters of conspiracy theories merely *hope* that the theories they endorse are true, and that (2) in some other cases, by openly supporting those theories, they merely mean to *communicate* their support for the creators and the other supporters of those theories. We acknowledge that the evidence for these two models is not conclusive, and more empirical research is needed; but our argument shows that the two models deserve serious attention. On this basis, in the second part of the paper we will argue that those who are willing to debunk conspiracy theories should take the existence of non-doxastic conspiracy theories into account.

Importantly, our argument is not based on any especially controversial understanding of the nature of belief. We assume a minimal characterization of “belief” as a cognitive attitude involving the acceptance of some proposition as true—something that, at the functional level, amounts to displaying *at least some degrees* of sensitivity to evidence, holistic inferential integration with other doxastic states of the subject, and action-guidance. In so doing, we reject a “purely behavioral” (or “purely motivational”) view according to which behavioral dispositions are not only necessary, but also sufficient for belief ascription. The characterization we adopt is widely accepted.²

¹ In epistemology, the notion of “doxastic theory” often refers to a theory according to which only beliefs can serve to justify beliefs; a “non-doxastic theory” is then simply a theory which denies that (Lyons 2009: 20). Our notion of “non-doxastic theory” is different. Our usage of the terms “doxastic” and “non-doxastic” is borrowed from debates in the philosophy of mind about the nature of phenomena like, for instance, delusions or confabulations (see e.g. Bortolotti and Miyazono 2015; Ichino 2018). In these debates, a doxastic theory is a theory according to which the phenomena in question involve a doxastic commitment (i.e. a *belief*) on the part of the subject—while non-doxastic theories deny that (arguing that subjects do not—or not always—believe the contents of their delusions and confabulations). In line with this usage of the terms, here we call “non-doxastic” those conspiracy theories that are not believed by the subjects who profess them.

² See e.g., among many others, Armstrong 1973, Velleman 2000, Williamson 2000, Bortolotti 2010, Ichino 2019. The specification ‘at least to some degrees’ is important,

Although the notion of belief is far from unproblematic in various other respects—which are at the center of lively debates in philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and elsewhere—we remain neutral with regard to many current controversies about it. For instance, we do not assume any particular stance on the debate on whether beliefs (as “on-or-off” attitudes) can be reduced to *credences* (that have degrees and correlate with the subjective probability that some proposition is true), or not (Jackson 2019; Levinstein 2019; Carter *et al.* 2019). Both belief and credence are doxastic attitudes, and in what follows we aim to show that such attitudes do not always play the role that they are commonly supposed to play in conspiracy theorizing. Similarly, we will not take any stance on the debate concerning *permissivism*—the view that the same body of evidence can justify more than one response, and that some beliefs can be merely permissible (rather than obligatory) in the face of evidence (Ballantyne 2018; Schultheis 2018; Axtell 2019). Permissivism is a normative doctrine, and our point here is mostly descriptive: we aim to describe the mechanisms underlying support for conspiracy theories.³

To begin, let us start by defining the notion of conspiracy theory.

2. What Are Conspiracy Theories?

The definition that follows is meant to clarify the discussion; we do not mean to suggest that it is the only appropriate way to use the concept. By “conspiracy theory” we indicate an explanation of a given event that: (1) refers to actual or alleged conspiracies or plots (*Conspiracy Criterion*); (2) conflicts with the received explanation of the said event, providing an alternative to the “official view” of that event (*Conflict Criterion*); and (3) offers insufficient evidence in support of the alternative explanation, so that it is not considered as a competitive scientific theory or anything like that (*Evidence Criterion*). These criteria are meant to be necessary and jointly sufficient for something to count as a conspiracy theory.

So, for instance, the claim that there was a Cuban plot behind the murder of President John F. Kennedy is a conspiracy theory as it explains a political event by referring to a conspiracy and offers an alternative to the official view. The theory blames one group for conspiring (Cubans) and another group for failing to notice it (the U.S. authorities). In many cases, the group that is accused of hatching a conspiracy consists at least partly of the people who should know and tell the truth. For instance, the claim that genetically modified food kills people and the authorities know it (but do not tell it), is a conspiracy theory that blames authorities both for scheming and concealment. The theory is supposed to explain why some business secrets are kept as such.

since we all know that in limited cognitive agents like us, belief’s sensitivity to evidence, inferential integration, and action-guidance might not be perfect. Note also that, on the characterization we are proposing, believing something does not imply that the person is aware of her belief; conversely, a person’s conviction that she has a certain belief does not imply that she actually has it.

³ Our discussion concerns *sincere* supporters of conspiracy theories. Some people may disseminate conspiracy theories just because they benefit from the large acceptance of such theories, although they are aware that they do not believe in such theories at all, and do not sincerely support them in any way. These are not the sort of people we are concerned with.

Let us look at the *Conspiracy Criterion*, the *Conflict Criterion* and the *Evidence Criterion* more closely.

The *Conspiracy Criterion* is based on the idea that reference to a conspiracy is a necessary condition for an explanation to count as a conspiracy theory. If an alternative explanation of a given event does not refer to a plot or a conspiracy, then it is not a conspiracy theory, however denialist the explanation may otherwise be. This raises the question of what counts as a “conspiracy”. For the sake of this discussion, “conspiracy” can be defined as a concealed collective activity whose aim or nature conflicts with the so-called positive morality (which reflects our present moral commitments) or with *prima facie* duties, especially if the goal of the activity differs from the goals that its promoters are authorized to pursue.⁴ Secret plans to organize birthday parties are not conspiracies, as their aim does not conflict with morality. Secret military operations are not usually called conspiracies, as far as they have an authorized goal. An example of a conspiracy is the Volkswagen Group’s decision to lie about the emissions of their cars and deceive their customers. It was a carefully designed secret plan (that was collectively realized) which clearly conflicted with *prima facie* duties, including a duty not to (plan to) deceive people. The Group was not authorized to cheat on the consumers.

The *Conflict Criterion* is meant to separate conspiracy theories from other sorts of theories that refer to conspiracies. There are hundreds of historical accounts that mention “conspiracy” as a part of the explanation of a historical event, but they do not count as conspiracy theories on our view, as far as they represent the received view of history (Keeley 1999: 116; Levy 2007: 187; Räikkä 2018: 211). The claim that Bolivian authorities conspired with the CIA to kill Ernesto Che Guevara in 1967 is not a conspiracy theory, but the “official” truth about Che Guevara’s death. An explanation that refers to a conspiracy is a conspiracy theory only if the relevant epistemic authorities, more or less unanimously, find the conspiracy claim strikingly implausible, or would find it strikingly implausible in case they considered it. The view that vaccines will kill millions of people and health authorities know it (but do not confess it) is a conspiracy theory, as it is strikingly implausible according to the epistemic authorities on which we normally rely—such as the scientific community, mainstream media, investigative journalists, various state authorities and agencies, and so on.

The *Evidence Criterion* helps to distinguish between conspiracy theories and some historical theories that may also refer to conspiracies and conflict with the received view. For instance, the claim that Rasputin was killed by the British intelligence service is not considered (or is not always considered) to be a conspiracy theory, but a competitive historical theory about the death of Rasputin. Those two kinds of theories—conspiracy theories and (what we can call) “minoritarian” theories that refer to conspiracies—differ with respect to the quality of the evidence they provide. Conspiracy theories offer relatively little (good quality) evidence in support of the conspiracies they talk about; while minoritarian scientific or historical theories, which may likewise make claims about con-

⁴ The second disjunct is needed because it is easy to imagine cases in which conspiring is morally acceptable, all things considered. There are many historical examples of morally acceptable conspiracies. Operation Valkyrie (the secret plan to kill Hitler) is an obvious example here.

spiracies, offer a good amount of good quality evidence in support of their claims. They may not convince most of the experts, but they are taken seriously, because of the evidence they provide. The quality of the sources that are used in conspiracy theories is not as good (cf. Harris 2018: 243; Levy 2019: 70).⁵

This definition of the notion of conspiracy theory has several merits. First, the definition reflects relatively well the ordinary usage of the term and seems to be extensionally adequate. When people talk about “conspiracy theories”, they usually refer to claims that blame a given group of people for conspiring and that go strongly against the received view. And the examples we can think of theories that are commonly classified as conspiracy theories would count as such according to our definition. Second, our definition does not imply that conspiracy theories must be false. Epistemic authorities make mistakes—although it is important to notice that usually we know about such mistakes because epistemic authorities themselves have produced the information that helps us to notice them. Third, the definition does not imply that those who represent epistemic authorities could not be conspiracy theorists. A biologist, a journalist or a historian, may well present an explanation which refers to an alleged conspiracy, but which is pure non-sense according to most others.⁶ Fifth, by virtue of the *Conflict Criterion*, our definition makes the notion of conspiracy theory a relative one (i.e., relative to different historical contexts) given that epistemic authorities may change their views over time, and so also what conflicts with such views will change accordingly. This is an advantage, because something that counts as a conspiracy theory today may turn out not to be such anymore, in the light of new evidence that might emerge.⁷ Finally, our definition does *not* imply that new theories that are not (or have not yet been) evaluated by the relevant epistemic authorities cannot be genuine “conspiracy theories”. On our view, a new theory that refers to a conspiracy is a conspiracy theory, if the epistemic authorities *would* find the conspiracy claim strikingly implausible, *after considering it*.

3. Non-Doxastic Support for Conspiracy Theories

As we acknowledged, there are *prima facie* reasons to take people’s attitude towards conspiracy theories to be doxastic: after all, people often give sincere verbal assent to such theories—and we generally take sincere verbal expressions of assent as a guide to belief ascription. On closer inspection, however, there are also reasons that speak *against* belief ascription here. Alleged beliefs in conspiracy theories are commonly taken to be irrational to relevant degrees, due to their weird contents that conflict with the views of widely recognized epistemic authorities. Surely, we should avoid ascribing irrational or epistemically irrespon-

⁵ Importantly, the claim that conspiracy theories are weakly supported by evidence does not imply that they are false: poor evidential support is compatible with truth—and some conspiracy theories do indeed turn out to be true.

⁶ Obviously, epistemic authorities do not form a monolithic body, and may well disagree with each other on various issues.

⁷ The view according to which there was a Jewish conspiracy against Christians was an official truth in Germany during World War II, and those who endorsed that view were not (always) taken to support a conspiracy theory. However, now we can say that many Germans at that time supported a conspiracy theory concerning the Jews. The reason why we can say this is that today the claim conflicts with the received view of history. This is why we now count it as a conspiracy theory (Räikkä 2018: 211).

sible beliefs to each other, if there are alternative mental states ascriptions available that make sense of each other's behavior without involving irrationality or irresponsibility (or involving less of them). This suggests that we should take the non-doxastic option seriously, and consider possible mechanisms that may lead one to express support for a conspiracy theory while actually *not believing* that the theory itself is correct or likely.

Here we will identify two such mechanisms—mechanisms of non-doxastic endorsement—and we will consider empirical studies that support the idea that such mechanisms are indeed at play in a number of cases of conspiracy theories advocacy. We will call the first mechanism the “Hope Process” and the second mechanism the “Communication Process”. We will introduce both of them by describing imaginary examples that are not directly related to conspiracy theories. Then we will argue that something similar to what happens in such examples may happen when a person endorses a conspiracy theory without really believing it. Notice that our point here is programmatic: we sketch two models that, if proven true, would have important implications. But we also provide some initial evidence for their truth, thereby indicating avenues for future research.

3.1. *The Hope Process*

Consider a high-school drama. There is a lucky guy in the school who gets relatively good grades, is good at sports, and gets attention from his colleagues. There is another guy in the school who is not as lucky as the lucky guy, and who envies the lucky guy, although he does not realize it, because of his poor self-knowledge. One day the lucky guy does not say “hello” to the unlucky guy, even if they know each other well enough. Not saying “hello” is an accident, but the envious unlucky guy has a different explanation. At first, he is just angry; but after a couple of days he is sure that the lucky guy is a selfish, arrogant, and untrustworthy person. That is why the lucky guy does not even say “hello” to him. However, the unlucky guy deceives himself. The belief that there is something seriously wrong with the lucky guy helps him psychologically. The evidence in favor of such belief is weak and inconclusive—what really supports it are motivational mechanisms of self-enhancement: now he can think that, actually, he, and not the other boy, is the clever guy. The unlucky guy starts to disseminate strange claims—whenever it is possible and fits the social situation. For instance, he claims that the lucky guy typically does not keep his promises, and that the lucky guy often lies. Given the unlucky guy's view of the lucky guy, these claims make sense. Untrustworthy people do not always keep their promises and they can lie every now and then.

Then one day someone from the school tells the unlucky guy that actually the lucky guy usually keeps his promises. She has a plenty of evidence for that. The unlucky guy does not really question the said evidence, but he simply replies that, in any case, the lucky guy is a liar. For him, it is not important to insist that any *particular* dismissive claim about the lucky guy is true. It is enough that some, or at least one, of them is true. He believes that the lucky guy is selfish, arrogant, and untrustworthy; and it is psychologically important for him that this belief is correct. This belief predicts that at least one dismissive claim is true, and therefore he really *hopes* that they are not all false. Whenever he considers one of them, he hopes that it is true. But he does not truly *believe* any of

them, although he does not think that they are false either. When he says what he says, he is not lying.⁸

Now, in some cases something similar may be going on when a person supports a conspiracy theory. It need not be the case that the person really believes in the theory. It may be that she merely hopes that the theory holds, as the theory supports some more general view which she is motivated to believe—such as, for instance, the general view that the “authorities” or “establishment” (i.e. the State, the scientific community, the business companies, the media, and so on) are, in general, seriously unreliable and untrustworthy. Her motivations to believe this general view may be rooted in her poor social conditions and overall dissatisfaction with her life. She may be unemployed, down and out, badly disappointed by the “system”, and lacking sense of control over her life (cf. Abalakina-Paap *et al.* 1999; Uscinski and Parant 2014). Believing that the “system” itself is untrustworthy might well provide some comfort to her: meaning that her problems are largely caused by others rather than by herself. Due to her motivation to hold a belief in this general view, she may hope that the conspiracy theories that support this view are true.⁹ When a conspiracy theory she supports is shown to be rubbish, she does not care about the issue too much, but simply shifts to another conspiracy theory, since some (or at least one) of them *must be true*. This is psychologically important. When she disseminates those conspiracy theories, she is not lying, as she does not consider them to be false. She has simply not considered them from an epistemic point of view. What she has considered, albeit in a motivationally biased way, is the general view that all main institutions are untrustworthy. When she disseminates the conspiracy theories predicted by this general view, she may think that she is doing something important.

Hoping and believing are different—and typically incompatible—things. If a person consciously and openly believes that something is the case, arguably she cannot hope for that thing (anymore), since hope is accompanied with uncertainty. Hoping and wishing, too, are different things. A person can wish that she could jump into the moon even if she thinks that it is impossible. But she cannot hope it, if she thinks that it is impossible. Thus, a person who hopes that a conspiracy theory is true does not believe that it is impossible that it is true.¹⁰

⁸ This might be an instance of what Harry Frankfurt (2005: 55-56) calls “bullshit”. As he writes: “It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction. A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it. When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false”. Notice, however, that a person who expresses her support for a conspiracy theory says something that has (for her) a clear *function*. Her sentences are not irrelevant, although their truthfulness is not crucial for her.

⁹ The argument here is not that people have a motivation to believe in conspiracy theories. Our claim is that there is a basic motivation to think that main social institutions are not reliable. This “thinking”, in turn, may or may not be doxastic: it can take the form of a *belief*—like the belief that “the establishment is untrustworthy”, but also the (purely) affective form of a *distrust* towards the “establishment”.

¹⁰ See Bovens 1999; Meirav 2009; Miceli and Castelfranchi 2010; Govier 2011; Martin 2011; Kadlac 2015.

Importantly, a person who does not believe in a conspiracy theory but merely hopes that it is true would not typically say that she is only hoping, if asked. She would rather say that she really believes in the theory. What is at stake here, on our view, is a special sort of meta-cognitive mistake. She does not believe, but rather merely hopes, that the theory is true; but she mistakenly takes her hope to be a belief.¹¹ There may be various reasons why she makes this mistake. For one thing, hoping that a conspiracy theory is true would be an instance of hoping something *bad*, and hoping something arguably involves wanting that thing. But most of us think that wanting bad things to be true is not appropriate—so, hoping them would not be appropriate, either. Moreover, psychologically speaking, it seems important for her to believe that she *believes* the conspiracy theory, rather than merely *hoping* it—given that belief is the appropriate attitude towards things that are true, and she does indeed hope the conspiracy theory to be true. Hence the mistaken belief self-ascription.

This model of the mechanisms underlying the commitment to conspiracy theories is non-doxastic in that it denies that such commitment amounts to believing the theories in question. On this model, supporting a conspiracy theory amounts to hoping, rather than believing, that the theory is true. On the other hand, the model credits conspiracy theories' supporters with some other more general *beliefs*—namely, beliefs about the untrustworthiness of the “system”—which, in turn, explain their hopeful commitment to the conspiracy theories themselves. Supporting a specific conspiracy theory may then be seen as an indirect way to express a deeper more general conviction.¹²

Empirical studies on conspiracy theories suggest that something like the Hope Process just described is not unlikely. There is a good amount of empirical evidence that people who support conspiracy theories do not trust the “authorities” and the “establishment” as much as those who are not eager to endorse conspiracy theories (Swami and Coles 2010; Swami 2012). There is also some evidence that people who support conspiracy theories sometimes have “personal reasons” (that is, a motivation) to adopt the general claim that the main social institutions are untrustworthy and unreliable (Goertzel 1994; Douglas and Sutton 2011).¹³ Furthermore, there is empirical evidence that if a person supports one conspiracy theory, this increases the probability that she will adopt another conspiracy theory as well (Swami and Coles 2010; Lewandowsky 2013). This result is well in line with the dynamics of the Hope Process.

Finally, there is empirical evidence that people are willing to support conspiracy theories whose claims conflict with each other and that cannot all be true at the same time (Wood, Douglas and Sutton 2012). These findings are due to Karen Douglas and her group, who interpret them within a doxastic frame-

¹¹ It is not uncommon that a person ascribes herself beliefs that she does not actually have, or that she does not ascribe herself beliefs that she actually has (Räikkä and Smilansky 2012).

¹² In fact, as we noted, we are open to the possibility that also such a general conviction might take non-doxastic forms – involving an affective attitude of distrust, rather than a full-fledged doxastic attitude of belief (see footnote 9 above). Our point here is that, *even granting* that a subject's general conviction about the untrustworthiness of the ‘establishment’ is a belief, her attitude towards the specific conspiracy theories that she endorses as a result of that general conviction might well be a non-doxastic attitude, instead.

¹³ According to Goertzel (1994: 731), “belief in conspiracies was correlated with anomia, lack of interpersonal trust, and insecurity about employment”.

work according to which conspiracy theories supporters hold openly contradictory beliefs, thereby incurring in blatant irrationality. As some authors have pointed out, however, this interpretation is strikingly uncharitable.¹⁴ The Hope Process provides a much more charitable interpretation: a person can certainly adopt conflicting conspiracy theories when she does not actually *believe* in them, but merely *hopes* that some, or at least one, of them is true. Having such hopes does not involve any contradiction, and there are no psychological mysteries here—nor indeed irrationality.¹⁵ While granting that the empirical data just mentioned *might* be explained also within a doxastic framework, we observe that the non-doxastic framework provided by the Hope Model has some clear advantages here.

3.2. The Communication Process

Suppose that a young person would like to identify herself as a part of the growing popular movement that opposes the use of plastic products. She is deeply concerned about environmental issues and would like to flag her attitude by supporting the anti-plastic movement. The leaders of this movement disseminate their message in their websites and in social media. The person who would like to be involved forwards these messages, although often she does not really understand their content. After all, they include rather complex claims about chemistry and biology—claims that are not common knowledge.¹⁶ Sometimes it happens that a claim of the movement is publicly shown to be false (by the relevant experts). But that does not really perturb the person who continues to disseminate the movement's newsletters. The key issue for her is expressing agreement rather than establishing truth. She would like to show that she supports the movement, and disseminating the messages is her way to *communicate* that. By disseminating the claims of the movement, she does not aim to say that the claims are true. She merely wants to express her participation and commitment to the movement's general agenda, which she takes to be important and admirable. Her support for the messages is basically an indirect way to show this more general commitment.

Now, it may be that in some cases something similar happens when a person expresses her support for a conspiracy theory. She needs not believe the theory at all; simply, since she admires the people who support that theory, she

¹⁴ According to Basham (2017: 64): “Wood et al.’s interpretive mistake is so surprising because it is so clear. Simply, the researchers conflate participants’ reports of strong suspicions with settled beliefs”.

¹⁵ One here might wonder whether hoping mutually inconsistent propositions isn’t actually irrational, just like believing mutually inconsistent propositions is. But this doesn’t seem to be the case. Although the question of what precisely makes one’s hope that *p* rational is complex and debated, indeed, it seems clear that hope undergoes different (and arguably looser) rationality constraints than belief. According to Meirav (2009), for instance, the rationality of one’s hope about a given outcome depends on the rationality of her belief about the “goodness” of an external factor upon which the realization of that outcome causally depends. On a view like this, given that the same external factor may be responsible for the realization of mutually inconsistent outcomes, hoping for mutually inconsistent outcomes would not be *ipso facto* irrational. We are grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

¹⁶ An interesting question here is in what sense one can “believe” propositions that she does not (or not fully) understand (see Recanati 1997).

might want to express her support for them by disseminating their claims. A person who is concerned about the risks of vaccination may very well support a conspiracy theory developed by a group who thinks that vaccination is riskier than it is commonly taken to be, and much riskier than the relevant epistemic authorities publicly admit. By expressing support for that particular conspiracy theory, a person needs not really believe it, as her point is merely to flag the opinion that the group has an important agenda and that she therefore stands by them.

When she disseminates the conspiracy theory on social media, she thinks that she is doing something important—namely, pointing out that the issue of vaccination safety is worth attention. But her relation to the content of that theory does not involve a doxastic commitment. She supports it merely because of pragmatic reasons. In so doing, she does not lie, for she does not think that the theory is false. Its truthfulness is not an issue that concerns her. If the theory turns out to be false, this would not be the end of the world. The relevant group may have another conspiracy theory or some other radical claim to which she can shift to communicate her agreement with them. Here again, as in the Hope Process, a person who supports a conspiracy in this way might not be aware that she does not really *believe* in the theory; she might simply lack a clear view about what her attitude towards the theory she disseminates is.

Empirical research on conspirating theories suggests that conspiracy theorizing and support for conspiracy theories are often politically motivated (Fenster 1991; Knight 2002; Uscinski and Parent 2014; Cassam 2019). Both psychological and historical studies show that a person's political views are clearly connected to conspiracy theorizing, in particular, to the contents of the relevant theories (Olmsted 2009; Douglas and Sutton 2015).¹⁷ Jaron Harambam (2017: 185) has observed that the “activism of the conspiracy milieu can be understood as a form of ‘subpolitics’—a bottom-up form of politics outside of the formal political arena”. These results are well in line with the dynamics of the Communication Process. When the aim of the person who disseminates and defends a conspiracy theory is merely to communicate her more general political identity, she needs not believe in the specific details of the theory (although of course she *might* believe in them). If a person supports a conspiracy theory in this way—i.e. merely as a mean to express her broader political views—again, the doxastic assumption does not hold.

Suppose that someone disseminates a no-vax conspiracy theory only in order to communicate that in her view vaccination safety needs more attention, and those who seek to defend the “right to choose” are good people. The person who disseminates the theory is part of the social process in which false claims spread.¹⁸ Of course, it is possible that the person's audience understands that she

¹⁷ Douglas and Sutton (2015: 101) argue that a feature of “climate change conspiracy theories is that they appear to be politically loaded, dividing opinion according to people's position on the spectrum between right and left. With the right wing emphasizing the production of wealth rather than its redistribution, and opposing governmental regulation and interference, it is not surprising that right-wing political identification is associated with disbelief in climate change”.

¹⁸ We say “false” here given that conspiracy theories conflict with the views that the relevant epistemic authorities more or less unanimously accept, so generally there is good reason to take them to be false. Still, as we noted, they might *at least in principle* be true—since bad justification is compatible with truth (see footnote 5 above).

cannot really mean what she says (about the alleged conspiracy), and she is just trying to make the point that some issues concerning vaccination should be more seriously discussed. In a case like this, the audience would know that the person does not truly believe the conspiracy theory, but expresses her support for it merely for communicative reasons; hence less harm would result. But presumably this is not, as a matter of fact, what typically happens most of the time.

Importantly, the two processes just sketched—Hope and Communication—must not be alternative to each other, but may also work in conjunction. *Hoping* that a certain conspiracy theory is true and seeking to *communicate* your support for the advocates of such theory may well go hand in hand. And, indeed, we can observe the same basic structure in both processes: the apparent belief in a given conspiracy theory actually amounts to endorsing something else.

Our argument for the psychological reality of those non-doxastic processes so far has been mainly abductive: we have argued that assuming those processes to be at play can explain a range of empirical data—and it can do that more charitably than some popular alternative explanations do. We now turn to some implications of our non-doxastic approach—implications which, as we shall see, provide a critical testing ground for the approach itself.

4. Implications for Debunking Strategies

We have argued that there are *non-doxastic* conspiracy theories—conspiracy theories that are not really *believed* by all of those who support them. The fact that someone expresses support for a conspiracy theory is not a sufficient reason to attribute to her a *belief* that the theory is true or likely. We have argued that in some cases supporters of the conspiracy theories merely *hope* that the theories they endorse are true (the Hope Process); and that in some cases they simply mean to *communicate* their support for the other supporters and disseminators of those theories (the Communication Process). Our claims get support from various empirical and historical studies, the results of which are nicely understood in the light of non-doxastic theory acceptance.

We will now consider some implications of our argument for possible debunking strategies. Those who are willing to debunk conspiracy theories, we will argue, should take the possibility of non-doxastic conspiracy theories into account when designing their practical interventions. Our point here is not to argue that debunking is a good idea.¹⁹ We only argue that if someone finds the idea attractive, then she should understand what she opposes. If belief is not the attitude that is involved in supporting conspiracy theories, the game changes. Let us consider two examples of debunking suggestions. They are both problematic, if applied to non-doxastic conspiracy theories.

4.1. First Debunking Strategy: Adding Cognitive Diversity

It is often argued that one of the factors that make some people believe in conspiracy theories is their imperfect epistemic environment. Most people live in “epistemic bubbles” and, unfortunately, some bubbles tend to be conspiracy theory friendly to a considerable degree. In order to fight against the spreading

¹⁹ The view that conspiracy theories require counter action is rather common. For a public defense of such view, see e.g. Bronner *et al.* (2016: 29).

of conspiracy theories, on this view, people should therefore try to increase the *cognitive diversity* of the groups who suffer from one-sided information that favors conspiracy theories.

This idea can take extreme forms. So, for instance, Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009: 219-220) famously argued that “cognitive infiltration of extremist groups” would “undermine the crippled epistemology of believers by planting doubts about the theories and stylized facts that circulate within such groups, thereby introducing beneficial cognitive diversity”. The “limited informational environment” of conspiracy theorizers should be made more open and diverse—if necessary, by means of secret governmental operations (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 210, 218).²⁰ In his book on *Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas* Sunstein (2014: 32) stresses the point once again: if necessary, the state should conspire against citizens. The idea of fighting against conspiracy theories by adding cognitive diversity needs not take these extreme forms, though. Surely one can try to improve people’s epistemic environments by various means, including means that are consistent with democratic values (and more likely to achieve their end).

But the strategy of increasing cognitive diversity is based on a doxastic assumption. And, as we have argued, this assumption is not always correct: there are likely to be non-doxastic conspiracy theories that are not *believed* by their supporters. Increasing cognitive diversity is unlikely to influence a person who supports a conspiracy theory only in the sense that she hopes that the theory is true (the Hope Process). Even if her epistemic environment were more or less perfect in terms of having a diversity of points of views, she could still *hope* that the conspiracy theory she supports is true. On our model, the relevant hope is grounded in a more general motivated belief—and increasing cognitive diversity is not likely to shake that general belief. Similarly, increasing cognitive diversity is unlikely to influence a person who endorses a conspiracy theory just in order to express her support for some group or movement (the Communication Process). Expressing support is a pragmatic reason that will not be displaced by increased cognitive diversity. Thus, if a person would like to debunk conspiracy theories and considers the policy of increasing cognitive diversity as a mean, she should first make sure that she is not dealing with a non-doxastic conspiracy theory. For if she is, the strategy might not be very effective.

4.2. Second Debunking Strategy: Teaching Logical Thinking

It has been argued that people who support conspiracy theories have defective logical competences and fall prey of various formal and non-formal fallacies. Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French (2014: 246), for instance, argued that “conspiracy theories, similarly to other anomalous beliefs, are associated with reasoning biases and heuristics”. An example here is the conjunction fallacy, to which people who endorse conspiracy theories seem to be “particularly susceptible” (Brotherton and French 2014: 246). A person who commits the conjunction fallacy thinks that the probability of two events occurring together is larger than the probability of either of them occurring alone—which, of course, cannot be true. A person who believes that there is 20% likelihood that “It rains tomorrow” should not believe that there is 30% likelihood that “It rains and

²⁰ For a criticism, see e.g. Hagen 2010; Hagen 2011; Coady 2018.

winds tomorrow”. If conspiracy theorizing arises from bad reasoning, then those who would like to fight against the spread of conspiracy theories should try to improve people’s logical skills, or their critical and scientific thinking more generally.

This suggestion, however, may have limited validity. Although the policy of educating people sounds good in general and would most probably have some desirable effects, this strategy is not likely to work in the context of non-doxastic conspiracy theories. As per the Hope Process, a person who hopes that a particular conspiracy theory is true (as its truth would strengthen her overall worldview) may not be that interested in the logical grounds of the theory. Indeed, hoping does not undergo the same normative constraints as believing. While the propositions we believe ought (at least ideally) to be integrated with each other into a logically consistent whole, there is nothing wrong in hoping that a given proposition is true even if it is not logically connected to other propositions that we take to be true. Hoping is possible until its object is considered demonstrably impossible.

Similarly, in the Communication Process, a person who uses a conspiracy theory merely as a means to communicate her ideological stance needs not be too much concerned about the logical grounds of the theory she refers to. So, improving her logical skills will not help much in fighting her penchant for conspiracist thinking. Again, all this suggests that if we would like to debunk conspiracy theories, we should first check whether we are dealing with theories that are supported non-doxastically. A person can support a conspiracy theory non-doxastically even if her logical skills are more or less perfect.

Of course, although many debunking strategies are based on a doxastic assumption, the view that the dissemination of conspiracy theories should be opposed must not, in itself, be based on that assumption. Indeed, one might argue that even if people’s attitudes towards conspiracy theories are non-doxastic, insofar as those attitudes influence people’s actions and reactions, leading to potentially dangerous behavior, they should be somehow “debunked”. Although most philosophers think that people are free to speculate about possible conspiracies and to disseminate such speculations, the issue of whether and how the said speculations should be restrained becomes more and more pressing. In relation to the approach we defended here, then, the question arises of what should be done if a clearly harmful and mistaken conspiracy theory (say, an anti-Semitic theory) is supported mainly on non-doxastic grounds. What we have argued suggests that a promising way to oppose such theories might pass through policies aimed at enhancing people’s trust in major social institutions—perhaps with the help of political programs that make the institutions more transparent and accountable. While a proper development of this suggestion goes beyond the scope of our present discussion, however, our aim here was more general: we meant to show that *whatever one might want to do* of conspiracy theories, she should first get clear on the mechanisms that underlie them.

Importantly, as we noted, the implications of our non-doxastic account for different debunking strategies may also provide a critical testing ground for the account itself. Insofar as the account predicts the failure of a given debunking strategy, indeed, once that strategy is put into place it will be possible to check whether or not the prediction is confirmed. Although successes and failures in this area are not always easy to assess, then, the non-doxastic model that we defended in this paper is, at least in principle, susceptible of empirical confirmation.

5. Concluding Remarks

To a large extent, the academic discussion on conspiracy theories has been based on the doxastic assumption. According to that assumption, a person who supports a conspiracy theory has a *belief* concerning it. We have argued that the doxastic assumption does not always hold, and that the results of empirical studies support the suggestion that there are “non-doxastic conspiracy theories”—theories that are not really believed by their supporters. We introduced two ways in which a person may support a conspiracy theory without really having the relevant beliefs about it. First, she may hope that the theory is true, as its truth would strengthen a more general worldview that is psychologically important for her. Second, she may express her support for the theory in order to express her political and ideological commitments, even if she has not really considered whether the theory is true. Many debunking strategies assume that people who support conspiracy theories have *beliefs* about them, and such beliefs should therefore be the targets of the relevant debunking interventions. But if what is at stake are not actually false beliefs and defective epistemic environments, then the relevant interventions should be redirected.

It is worth emphasizing again some implications of the view we defended for the assessment of the rationality of people’s attitudes towards conspiracy theories. The charge of irrationality that is generally raised against such attitudes is based on the doxastic assumption—the point being that it is irrational to believe in conspiracy theories which are badly supported by the relevant epistemic authorities. But insofar as the doxastic assumption is questioned, the charge of irrationality may be reconsidered as well. As we noted, hope is not governed by the same epistemic norms that govern belief. And one may have good reasons to hope that a given conspiracy theory is true. Similarly, there is nothing especially irrational in communicating one’s position by saying something different from what one wants to communicate: that sort of use of language is indeed common, although it may and does lead to confusions.²¹

This said, it is also worth noting that conspiracy theories supporters are likely to display some sort of irrationality at least at a meta-cognitive level—due to their unawareness about the non-doxastic status of their own attitudes. Indeed, we have seen that those who support conspiracy theories non-doxastically are often unaware that they do not really believe those theories: their self-knowledge is somewhat faulty, in the motivationally biased way we described—which is a far from ideal epistemic situation.

Last but not least, note that saying that attitudes towards conspiracy theories might be less *epistemically* irrational than they are often taken to be does not amount to saying that there is *nothing whatsoever* wrong with them. At the very least, such attitudes can be *morally* problematic, insofar as they involve accusations which are not well-supported by evidence. People who disseminate conspiracy theories without really believing them seem disturbingly unconcerned about truth and somewhat immune to normal evidential criteria. Surely, one

²¹ The claim that people’s attitudes towards conspiracy theories might not be irrational after all—or, anyway, that they might be less irrational than we commonly think—has recently been defended also by Levy 2019, within a doxastic framework where the relevant attitudes are taken to be beliefs.

should worry about truth and evidence if she is going to spread blame and accusations against other people.²²

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