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Are Conspiracy Theories Problematically Self-Sealing?

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Abstract

Many scholars have characterized conspiracy theories as self-sealing. That is, they are immune to disconfirmation, since conspiracy can always explain away counterevidence. This is thought to make belief in them irrational. However, the potential to escape disconfirmation by modification of a theory, or of related auxiliary hypotheses, is a feature common to all theories, including scientific theories. Further, attempts to rescue theories from disconfirmation often come at an epistemic cost. More specifically, such attempts, to the degree they seem ad hoc, tend to lower the theory's credibility. Those who characterize conspiracy theories as "self-sealing" tend to ignore the implication of this. Namely, the fact that conspiracy theories may theoretically resist refutation (a fact shared by all theories) does not mean that they are immune to all standards of evaluation. Individual conspiracy theories should be evaluated on their various individual qualities. This includes the degree to which a particular conspiracy theory depends on positing an implausible cover-up. Such a dependence is, indeed, a consideration that may potentially weigh heavily against that individual theory. But such a judgment will need to take into account the reasons given in support of the particular postulated cover-up, as well as other relevant considerations.

Keywords: Conspiracy theory; self-sealing; self-insulating; unfalsifiability; particularism; counterevidence

1. Introduction

A prominent recurring claim in the social science and philosophy literature on conspiracy theory is that conspiracy theories are "self-sealing" or "self-insulating." It is generally strongly implied, if not explicitly stated, that this constitutes a serious problem for conspiracy theories. (Examples include: Sunstein and Vermeule 2009;[1]

[1]Regarding the ostensible self-sealing nature of conspiracy theories, I have previously responded to Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) (see Hagen 2010) and to Cassam 2019 (see Hagen 2022a, pp. 339–340). Other philosophical critiques of Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) include Hagen (2011); Pigden (2017); and Coady (2018).

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Brotherton 2013, p. 9; Cassam 2019, 2023; Napolitano 2021; Schönbaumsfeld 2024; Lewandowsky, Lloyd, and Brophy 2018, p. 222). Such critiques of conspiracy theories are attempts to undermine "particularism," the view that each particular conspiracy theory ought to be evaluated on its own particular merits and faults.

In this essay, I defend particularism, arguing that critiques of conspiracy theories based on their purportedly self-sealing nature are ill-founded. I will most specifically address the arguments of M. Giulia Napolitano and Maarten Boudry, but similar remarks could be made regarding others as well. I will begin, however, with a discussion of Brian Keeley, who introduced this idea and is commonly cited in support of it but who never actually endorsed it.

2. Falsificationism rebranded

Philosophical consideration of the idea that conspiracy theories may be problematically resistant to disconfirmation seems to start with Keeley's 1999 reflections. Since evidence that seems to disconfirm a conspiracy theory can be accommodated by postulating a cover-up, conspiracy theories are in some sense unfalsifiable (1999, p. 120). As Keeley explains, "The worry is that given a situation where all potentially falsifying evidence can be construed as supporting,[2] or at worst neutral evidence, then conspiracy theories are by definition unfalsifiable" (Keeley 1999, p. 121; cf. 2019, p. 429). And yet, regarding cases like Watergate and Iran-Contra, Keeley also notes: "Strictly hewing to the dogma of falsifiability in these cases would have led to a rejection of conspiracy theories at too early a point in the investigations, and may have left the conspiracies undiscovered" (1999, p. 121). In other words, if we reject conspiracy theories due to their unfalsifiability, we risk failing to discover genuine conspiracies that might otherwise have been discovered.

Although Keeley is often cited by those who argue that conspiracy theories are problematically self-sealing, Keeley ultimately refrains from drawing this conclusion as a reliable generality. Instead, he points out that it is not necessarily problematic for conspiracy theories to be resistant to counterevidence. After all, if there is a conspiracy, at least *some* effort to cover it up might reasonably be expected of the conspirators. As Keeley puts it, "[W]e have a reason to believe that there exist forces with both motive and capacity to carry out effective disinformation campaigns" (Keeley 1999, p. 121; cf. Basham 2003, p. 93).[3] In the end, Keeley reasons, "The best that we can do is track the evaluation of given theories over time and come to some consensus as to when belief in the theory entails more skepticism than we can stomach" (1999, p. 126). This will involve attention to the particulars of each case.

Further, at a more general level, it is normal for theories of all kinds to be resistant, to some degree, to disconfirmation. This applies to scientific theories as well as conspiracy theories. As Nina Poth and Krzysztof Dolega point out in a recent article on evaluating conspiracy theories through a Bayesian framework: "[R]esistance to counter evidence is principally compatible with Bayesian norms of rationality and, in and of itself, need not

[2]I think this often-repeated claim is overstated. Potentially falsifying evidence is only construed as positively supporting, as opposed to merely weak or of negligible value, when it seems particularly "fishy," constituting what Buenting and Taylor (2010) call "fortuitous data." They give the example of al-Sugami's unscathed passport found at the base of the World Trade Center on 9/11 (2010, p. 574).

[3]Lee Basham also emphasizes this point. He writes, "[W]hile nature does not, presumably, fake the data essential to our physical theories, in the case of our social theories, *people do*" (Basham 2006, p. 136).

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be a reasoning flaw" (Poth and Dolega 2023, p. 7).[4] This is because hypotheses are not tested in isolation from background assumptions, or "auxiliary hypotheses." To put it in simple terms, if one's observations do not meet theoretical expectations, it might be that the theory is wrong, but it might instead be that the equipment malfunctioned, or that the object of study was improperly prepared, or that the data was recorded incorrectly, or it might be that the core of the theory was correct but some auxiliary hypothesis needs adjusting.

It is possible, nonetheless, for such resilience to disconfirmation to be problematic – and this is a danger that both scientific theories and conspiracy theories share. Poth and Dolega distinguish between "desperate rescues" and "glorious rescues," following Michael Strevens. If the theory has a low prior probability and every attempt at rescue seems *ad hoc* (i.e., smacks of motivated reasoning), it may be viewed as "desperate." They argue that conspiracy theories become irrational when the attempts to rescue them become too desperate (cf. Clarke 2002). In a glorious rescue, by contrast, a seemingly disconfirmed or unlikely theory is ultimately vindicated. Poth and Dolega appeal here to Watergate and to the discovery of Neptune. However, there is no clear line, even in the abstract, differentiating beliefs that should be abandoned (judged as too desperate) from those that should be maintained even in the face of seemingly disconfirming evidence (judged to have a sufficient probability of becoming glorious).

Poth and Dolega acknowledge that "the distinction between 'glorious' and 'desperate' rescues might itself be a matter of degree" (2023, p. 16) and "many of the glorious rescues in science might have at one point in time seemed desperate" (2023, p. 22). And so, for example, their analysis "does not clearly adjudicate whether the belief in CIA's involvement in the US crack epidemic is a case of glorious or desperate rescue" (2023, p. 19). So, the fact that conspiracy theories are resistant to counterevidence is not, in itself, a strike against them. Whether or not there is something problematic will depend on the particular case and circumstances. Individual cases will often be controversial in this regard, as people will differ in the weight they put on various considerations. Even in cases that are not especially controversial, the judgment must be based on the particulars of the case. One cannot simply declare all conspiracy theories to be desperate.

Indeed, it is for reasons like these that simplistic falsificationism has been out of vogue in the philosophy of science for half a century. And philosophers were aware of problems with this sort of thinking well before that. As Steve Clarke explains:

> According to Quine (1951), and Duhem (1914) before him, theories are never tested directly by evidence. Rather, combinations of theories, auxiliary hypotheses and assumed initial conditions, are jointly tested by evidence, and a legitimate response to the presentation of countervailing evidence to a theory is to revise one's auxiliary hypotheses and/or initial conditions rather than abandon one's

[4]In a *National Geographic* documentary on 9/11 conspiracy theories, conspiracy theorists found ostensibly powerful counterevidence to their theory to be unconvincing. In this case, they didn't need to expand the scope of a cover-up to account for the "evidence." Rather, they found the evidence itself unconvincing and contrived in a biased way. While they were portrayed as stubbornly clinging to their view in spite of clearly refuting evidence, subsequent evidence emerged that suggested that they were right to remain unconvinced (even if their theory is false). The counterevidence was the result of an experiment performed by ostensible "experts," but it was simply poorly conceived. Indeed, it was farcical. See Hagen (2022b), pp. 251–253, for pertinent details.

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> theoretical commitments. (Clarke 2024, p. 2856; Quine 1951 and Duhem 1914 as cited by Clarke)

Clarke further notes that, "According to the 'Duhem-Quine thesis', the process of adding auxiliary hypotheses to theories can go on indefinitely, so theories are never actually refuted (the 'Duhem-Quine problem')" (Clarke 2024, p. 2857).

If there is a problem, according to Clarke, it is not with conspiracy theories but with conspiracy theorists – or, to be more precise, *some* of them. All theories are potentially self-sealing. That fact is not a problem with any theory. What can be problematic is when people continue to hold on to theories, depending on more and more desperate auxiliary hypotheses to salvage their theory from data that would otherwise conflict with it. As Clarke puts it, "every theory can be regarded as self-sealing, or not, depending on the attitudes and behaviour of the people who promulgate that theory" (Clarke 2024, p. 2857).

It may be that conspiracy theorists tend to hold on to theories that should be let go. But even if that is true as a generality, we would still need to consider the particulars in evaluating individual conspiracy theories to determine in which cases this applies. While considering whether a particular conspiracy ought to be regarded as degenerating or progressing can be a useful way of evaluating it, making such judgments is not easy, and there will often be room for disagreement. As Lee Basham emphasized in a response to an earlier version of Clarke's point, Clarke "offers no usable standard of when a research program has become truly 'degenerate'. This is not his fault. It is a limitation of Lakatos' general approach" (Basham 2006, p. 136). Reasonable people can disagree about when a theoretical approach ought to be abandoned, and in the sciences, they often do. But those who think that a particular approach (a particular research program, or a particular conspiracy theory) ought to be abandoned, need to provide specific reasons to think that *that particular* approach should be abandoned. They cannot simply appeal to the general notion that it is the kind of theory that is unfalsifiable.

Some critics of conspiracy theories have acknowledged this. For example, Keith Harris writes, "If there is an epistemic problem with conspiracy theories, and belief in them, it is not that such theories are unfalsifiable" (Harris 2018, p. 246). He explains, "[R]esilience to falsification is hardly unique to conspiracy theories. Scientific theories in general are resistant to falsification. This point is emphasized by Imre Lakatos, among others" (Harris 2018, p. 245).[5]

Despite all this, many critics of conspiracy theories have, in recent years, rebranded the falsificationist critique under the rubric of "self-sealing" or "self-insulating" theories, arguing that conspiracy theories are somehow especially and problematically "immune to challenge," "immune to refutation by counterevidence," or "invulnerable to any potential counterevidence." Consider the following examples:

> In an article published in the *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule claim that conspiracy theories: "have a self-sealing quality, rendering them particularly immune to challenge" (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009,

[5]Harris elaborates: "The need to conjoin theories to auxiliary hypotheses to derive testable predictions ensures that scientific theories are not straightforwardly falsifiable" (Harris 2018, p. 245). And in a 2022 paper, Harris reaffirms this stance: "falsification may not be an appropriate standard by which to judge theories that allege conspiracies" (Harris 2022, p. 19).

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p. 204, cf. p. 207, 210, 223). They leverage this claim to try to justify "cognitive infiltration" of groups that espouse conspiracy theories.

Stephan Lewandowsky, a cognitive scientist, together with philosophers Elisabeth A. Lloyd and Scott Brophy, write, "conspiracist cognition is inherently self-sealing: that is, evidence that counters a theory is re-interpreted as evidence for a conspiracy" (Lewandowsky, Lloyd, and Brophy 2018, p. 222).[6]

Under the heading "Immune to evidence," Lewandowsky and John Cook write, "Conspiracy theories are inherently self-sealing—evidence that counters a theory is re-interpreted as originating from the conspiracy" (Lewandowsky & Cook 2020, p. 7).

Citing both Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) and Lewandowsky and Cook (2020), philosopher Quassim Cassam writes, "The absence of evidence for a conspiracy is re-interpreted by the conspiracy theorist as evidence of the conspirators' ingenuity and success in covering their tracks. In the same way, contrary evidence is interpreted as a false trail laid by conspirators who want us to believe their version of events. By these means, conspiracy theories become immune to refutation by counterevidence" (Cassam 2023, p. 3; cf. Cassam 2019, pp. 97–98).

Regarding "people who defend conspiracy theories," the philosopher M. Giulia Napolitano writes, "It seems to be the case that, no matter what evidence we present to them against their theory, they'll find a way to dismiss it. I take this to be a central characteristic of conspiracy theories; they give rise to this dismissive epistemic behavior" (Napolitano 2021, p. 83). With no sense of irony, she implies that we may safely dismiss conspiracy theories for this reason, since their self-sealing nature makes them "always irrational" (p. 102).

The psychologist Robert Brotherton includes self-insulation as one of the defining features of conspiracy theories: "I define conspiracy theory as an unverified claim of conspiracy which is not the most plausible account of an event or situation, and with sensationalistic subject matter or implications. In addition, the claim will typically postulate unusually sinister and competent conspirators. Finally, the claim is based on weak kinds of evidence, and is *epistemically self-insulating against disconfirmation*" (Brotherton 2013, p. 9, emphasis added).

This list is by no means exhaustive. But it is sufficient to show that "the self-sealing critique" of conspiracy theories is a significant theme in both the philosophical and social science literature on conspiracy theories. However, the critique trades on an equivocation. The concept "self-sealing" is often given an extreme interpretation such that it does not accurately describe the way most conspiracy theorists treat most conspiracy theories (or, at least, it has not been convincingly shown to accurately describe this). In order to make it fit, "self-sealing" must be interpreted more moderately. But a moderate interpretation fails to distinguish conspiracy theories from other kinds of theories and thus does not reveal them to be epistemically problematic. In other

[6]Strictly speaking, Lewandowsky, Lloyd, and Brophy were discussing "conspiracist cognition" or "conspiracist ideation." See Hagen (2022b), Chapter 3, for a response to them.

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words, the claim that conspiracy theories are self-sealing only has undermining power if interpreted in a very strong way. But if interpreted in this way, it is questionable whether it is a fair characterization of how conspiracy theorists think, or so I will argue.

3. Three senses of "self-sealing"

Critics of conspiracy theories who appeal to the notion that they are self-sealing seem to equivocate between three senses of what it means to be self-sealing. The *first sense* is unproblematic when understood properly. According to this meaning, conspiracy theories are resistant to disconfirmation in actual practice *to some degree*. The *second sense* is that they are *completely* resistant to counter-evidence in actual practice. This is the problematic sense, to which I will return later.

According to the *third sense*, conspiracy theories are *theoretically* completely self-sealing. Like the first sense, this sense does not distinguish conspiracy theories from other theories. For one can *always* postulate some reason for a theory's apparent failures. For this reason, theories are never *decisively* refuted. So, all theories are completely resistant to counterevidence in a narrow theoretical sense. As for the actual practice of putting forth a reason to resist counterevidence, this is sometimes and to some degree reasonable, as explained in the section above.

However, rescuing a theory from disconfirmation comes at an epistemic price. It often lowers the theory's prior probability.[7] At some point, continued adherence to the theory constitutes sticking with a "degenerating research program" and is criticizable on this account (see Clarke 2002). So, while any theory can be thought of as completely self-sealing if one ignores prior probability considerations, it is not reasonable to do so. And yet, *some* resistance to disconfirmation can be reasonable.

Now, while scientific theories and conspiracy theories can resist disconfirmation by counterevidence, the difference between the two is that conspiracy theorists can posit intentional efforts to distort the data *more plausibly* than scientists usually can. Critics of conspiracy theories often frame this as an epistemic problem with conspiracy theories. But the elevated plausibility of this move is not inherently a problem. What can become a problem is appealing to coverups that seem too extensive and lack sufficient justification – coverups that seem implausible. But this must be evaluated case-by-case, and sometimes reasonable people may disagree. For instance, there is much about the JFK autopsy that raises legitimate questions. It is not entirely unreasonable, for example, to question the reliability of the extant version of Dr. Humes's autopsy notes, knowing that he destroyed the original draft by burning it in his fireplace. The bottom line is that being resistant to counterevidence in the way that conspiracy theorists often are is not *inherently* epistemically problematic.

Let's return to the *second sense* of self-sealing, which involves a theorist treating the theory in a completely self-sealing way *in practice*, making the theory, in effect, immune to counterevidence in a strong sense. Many of the quotations above seem to imply this view,

[7]For other discussions of prior probability in the assessment of conspiracy theories, see Dentith (2016) (pp. 583–587), Hagen (2022b) (pp. 3–7, 176–178), and Poth and Dolega (2023). More specifically, Dentith argues that "people either underestimate or underplay both historical and contemporary accounts of events which cite conspiracies as salient causes" (2016, p. 584). Hagen (2022b) emphasizes that the prior probability of conspiracy theories is not so low that they can be safely dismissed without further consideration, and that prior probability and explanatory power must both be weighed when evaluating individual conspiracy theories. And Poth and Dolega (2023) discuss the prior probability of conspiracy theories in the context of Bayesian analysis.

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which Napolitano and Boudry also more explicitly do, as shown below. Such a resilience can become epistemically problematic. If one is unrestrained in one's willingness to expand the scope of a postulated conspiracy, that does seem problematic. Such a person, in effect, refuses to take into consideration the prior probability implications of this expansion. And this would be irrational. They may think they are reasoning to the best explanation, but they are not doing it properly, because the argument to the best explanation includes considerations of prior probability. Ignoring prior probability considerations such that one maintains their theory in the light of any counterevidence would indeed be irrational.

However, it is doubtful that conspiracy theorists are as uniformly resistant to counterevidence as their critics allege. Indeed, one group of researchers started with the generous hypothesis that "failures in correcting conspiracy beliefs may be due to counterevidence being insufficiently compelling and tailored" (Costello et al. 2024, p. 1). They found that short evidence-based dialogs with AI reduced conspiracy belief by about twenty percent, that this reduction was durable, and that the reduction of belief occurred even among those whose belief was deeply entrenched. They conclude: "[M] any conspiracy theory believers can revise their views if presented with sufficiently compelling evidence" (Costello et al. 2024, p. 1; cf. Costello et al. 2025). This shouldn't be too surprising. People are generally resistant to changing their views, and the perception of one's interlocutor being obstinate is hardly limited to conversations with conspiracy theorists. But such experiences do not prove that such people are actually completely impervious to reason. And there is variation between individuals. Further, the mere fact that a conspiracy theorist *could* appeal to a conspiracy to explain absolutely anything was never a strong reason to think that they actually do so in an unrestrained manner.

In sum, there are a couple of innocuous versions of the claim that conspiracy theories are self-sealing. While they may superficially *sound* bad, there is really nothing problematic about them, and conspiracy theories (and theorists) are not different from other types of theories (and theorists) in being resistant to counterevidence in these senses. After all, reinterpretation of data and modifying one's theory, or adding auxiliary hypotheses, are legitimate epistemic moves. Although this can be problematic if taken too far, that is a judgment that requires attention to the details and context. There is also a genuinely problematic sense in which a theory can be self-sealing: when it is in practice *completely impervious* to seemingly disconfirming evidence. This involves the theorist giving absolutely no regard to such things as the plausibility of the scope of the conspiracy one ends up alleging, or the power and intelligence of the conspirators. Though epistemically problematic, it has not been persuasively demonstrated that this fairly characterizes the way most conspiracy theorists operate. Indeed, there is some scientific evidence against it (cited above), while the evidence for it is weak (as explained below), and the burden of proof rests on those making demeaning depictions of others.

4. Argument from anecdote

While many scholars have claimed that conspiracy theories are problematically self-insulating, little evidence is presented beyond anecdotes (such as Schönbaumsfeld 2024, p. 2) or contrived cases (such as Harris 2018, pp. 245–247).[8] Consider M. Giulia Napolitano's justification for her position. She takes the (purported) "self-insulated" quality of conspiracy theories to be their defining feature. Her view is rather extreme,

[8]While such hypothetical cases can be helpful for *describing* potential dynamics, they do nothing to show that such dynamics *actually occur* in the way described.

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characterizing conspiracy theories (or theorists) as being "totally insensitive to contradicting information" (Napolitano 2021, p. 96). She claims that "the extreme resistance to counter-evidence as a distinctive feature of conspiracy theorizing neatly fits with the ordinary meaning of 'conspiracy theory'" (Napolitano 2021, p. 96). She supports this with a story that panders to those who already agree:

> Anyone who has ever met a conspiracy theorist will be familiar with the frustrating experience of trying to debunk the relevant belief. No matter what evidence we present to the conspiracy theorist, their confidence seems to remain intact. Evidence that seems to contradict the conspiratorial belief is likely to be seen by the believer as evidence that has been planted as part of the cover-up. I take this to be the core feature of conspiracy theories. (Napolitano 2021, p. 86)

She concludes, based on this, "Belief in such theories seems to be completely immune to counter-evidence" (Napolitano 2021, p. 86). Of course, one person's frustration with another is not proof of complete immunity to counterevidence.

While Napolitano's story may resonate with some people, it is little more than an unsubstantiated caricature, even if there is *some* truth recognizable in it. Yes, *some* conspiracy theorists will *sometimes* be (or at least appear to be) insensitive to contradicting information.[9] But we don't really know what is going on in their heads, and it seems likely that, in most cases, the situation is not so simple.[10] Conspiracy theorists are probably often equally frustrated by those who (from their perspective) fail to connect incriminating dots. In other words, they can tell similar anecdotal stories of seemingly irrational imperviousness to evidence. Indeed, such frustration is common in disagreements of all types and on all sides.

In addition, while conspiracy theorists do sometimes appeal to alleged cover-ups in response to evidence that might otherwise seem to disconfirm the conspiracy theory, often they provide relevant *evidence* in support of that move, evidence that suggests or establishes that some degree of cover-up has occurred or is incentivized to occur. This evidence can either be general or specific to a particular case. They might, for example, point out relevant conflicts of interest, or a history of fraud – such as the FBI Crime Lab Scandal of the 1990s, in which whistleblower Frederic Whitehurst revealed that the FBI crime lab had engaged in evidence fabrication and misrepresentation as well as convenient methodological bias. Or a conspiracy theorist might draw attention to specific indications of bias, conflicts of interest, or evidence of intent to cover up pertinent to a specific case. For example, regarding the JFK assassination, they might appeal to the Katzenbach memo, to Earl Warren's noble motivations to make sure not to discover a conspiracy, and to FBI agent Hosty's flushing a note from Oswald down the toilet at the request of his superior.[11] Supporters of official stories often seem either ignorant of such

[9]Dentith (2023) discusses various ways in which critiques of conspiracy theories only really apply to *some* of them. See pp. 526–527 of that article for a discussion of Napolitano's view of conspiracy theories as self-insulating.

[10]Consider this analogous phenomenon: Conspiracy theorists are often depicted by social scientists as being irrationally inclined to simultaneously believe mutually contradictory theories (see Hagen 2018). But when one interviews them to find out what they are really thinking, it turns out that they "are not as irrational as sometimes portrayed" (Lukić, Žeželjab, and Stanković 2019, p. 94).

[11]In a memo to President Johnson recommending the creation of a commission to investigate the JFK assassination, Deputy US Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach stressed that the public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin and that he had no confederates. Earl Warren was persuaded by President Johnson that evidence favoring conspiracy would seem to implicate the Soviets and that would result in

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matters or else refuse to allow them to influence their thinking. Regarding medical conspiracy theories, for example, conspiracy theorists probably wonder the following: "Have the incredulous conspiracy critics forgotten the billions of dollars big pharma has paid out in settlements for various kinds of fraud, bribery, and suppression of safety data?" They might reasonably think that anyone who treats pharmaceutical companies as worthy of trust must be impervious to evidence.

Some appeals to cover-up are more reasonable than others. And the reasonableness of such an appeal in any given case can only be judged by considering the relevant particulars. In any case, it is understandable that those who believe a theory is false and trust the authorities vouching for disconfirming evidence will find the conspiracy theorists' resistance to the evidence frustrating. But arguing with anybody about *anything* can lead to similar frustration at the other party's reluctance to concede points that one believes should be compelling. This is a ubiquitous phenomenon.[12]

Often, two interlocutors are equally frustrated with the other's apparent obstinance and apparent imperviousness to evidence. Again, any conspiracy theorist is likely to be familiar with the frustrating experience of discussing a conspiracy theory with debunkers who appear blind to the history of unreliability or even deceit on the part of the institutions they seem to trust too much. This mutual frustration doesn't tell us who is right. And distrust in the relevant authorities isn't in principle an epistemic mistake. Determining the degree to which such distrust is reasonable in a particular case requires empirical argumentation, perhaps extensive argumentation, and the most reasonable answers may vary from case to case.

5. Napolitano: conspiracy theories as self-insulated conspiratorial beliefs

Now let's consider Napolitano's position in more detail. She takes complete self-insulation to be so characteristic of "absurd" conspiratorial hypotheses that she proposes *re-defining* "conspiracy theories" as beliefs about conspiracies that are held in a completely self-sealing way. In one formulation, she writes, "Conspiracy theories are beliefs that are insulated because the evidence is dismissed by appeal to the conspirators' attempt to hide the truth" (2021, p. 91).

Let's first sort out some imprecision in some of her characterizations of her proposal. She claims to "take 'conspiracy theory' to refer to *a particular way of holding a belief* in the existence of a conspiracy" (2021, p. 82, emphasis added). But the term "conspiracy theory" seems to be an odd way to refer to a *way of doing* something. In other formulations, Napolitano characterizes conspiracy theories as "self-insulated beliefs in the existence of conspiracies" (2021, p. 102; cf. p. 83). And she stresses that "conspiracy theories are only those conspiracy-beliefs that are self-insulated (p. 87). She also says, "Roughly, we can say that conspiracy theories are conspiracy-beliefs (beliefs in the existence of a conspiracy) that are self-insulated" (Napolitano 2021, p. 86). According to these formulations, conspiracy theories are not particular *ways of believing;* they are *beliefs that are maintained in particular ways*. So, it is *the belief* that constitutes the

pressure to retaliate, which would risk nuclear war. See Olmsted (2009), pp. 117–120, and Hagen (2022b), pp. 212–215, for more details.

[12]Brian Martin offers a useful summary of various reasons why people resist the evidence offered by their adversaries: confirmation bias, differences in assumptions about who has the burden of proof, differing paradigms or worldviews, group allegiances, vested interests, and differences in values. All of these apply to *both* sides of conspiracy theory debates, and pretty much everything else. See Martin (2014).

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conspiracy theory, but it is *being held in a certain way* that makes a particular instance of belief count as a conspiracy theory. However, even on this formulation, what makes a belief a "conspiracy theory" is not the *content* of what is believed (other than the fact that it involves a conspiracy). According to her definition, she explains, "The attitude of the believer, rather than any feature of the theory, determines whether a person's belief in a conspiracy is a conspiracy theory or not" (p. 82). And that means that the same content believed by different people could count as a conspiracy theory for one of them and not for the other, depending on whether the person was open to counterevidence regarding the belief. Acknowledging this, Napolitano writes, "[O]n my view, the same theory could count as a conspiracy theory in some cases but not in others, according to the way in which each individual believer holds the conspiracy-belief (if it is evidentially insulated or not)" (2021, p. 95). This suggests that if self-insulating belief in conspiracy theories is a problem, it is a problem with *some people*, not a problem with a class of ideas.

Based on considerations such as these, J. C. M. Duetz argues that "Napolitano's conception of 'conspiracy theory' is concerned with conspiracy beliefs rather than the content of the explanation appealing to conspiratorial activity, and conspiracy believers rather than conspiracy beliefs" (Duetz 2024, p. 2109), and that therefore "[Napolitano's] account should be regarded as explicating the epistemic problems of 'conspiracy belief', not 'conspiracy theory'" (2024, p. 2111).[13] While in some sense I agree, in what follows I shall offer a slightly different critique. Namely, I argue that Napolitano's account is equivocal. While she claims to be talking about *how beliefs are held*, she gives numerous indications that she is thinking about particular kinds of *theories*. For example, she lists several specific theories that she regards as conspiracy theories, including the belief that "9/11 was an inside job" (p. 82, cf. p. 92). By referencing these *particular views or theories* – she seems to suggest that it really is the content that matters after all. Further, she suggests that the term "conspiracy theories" applies to (purportedly) "outlandish" theories or beliefs (pp. 84–85, 96), which she describes as "seemingly absurd opinions" (p. 102) or "absurd theories about conspiracies" (p. 83). She seems to assume that "outlandish" views and "absurd opinions" must be held in a self-insulating way, though this need not be true. A person's evidentiary environment might be so polluted that counterevidence is offset by other "evidence" or by (what seem to be) reasons to doubt the counterevidence. Or, to put the point in a more neutral way: the evidence, taken as a whole, may be complex and confusing, and different people may be exposed to different lines of it, leading some to beliefs that others regard as outlandish or absurd. The counterevidence that a conspiracy theorist is exposed to is only part of their perceived evidence base. It may not be that they are unresponsive, but rather that they respond differently than their interlocutor thinks they should. Further, it is also quite possible for people to believe official accounts, whether conspiratorial or not, such as a belief that Oswald was the lone gunman, in a self-insulating way.[14]

[13]Duetz's critique of Napolitano is an effort to defend the minimalist definition of conspiracy theories. She favors interdisciplinary fruitfulness over ordinary language intuitions as a guide for how the term should be defined. I find the debate between Napolitano's definition and the minimalist one to misleadingly suggest a false dichotomy between the two. It ignores, for instance, alternative definitions such as relatively narrow descriptive definitions that take conspiracy theories to be in some sense contrarian.

[14]David Coady describes another case that can serve as an example: "The official non-conspiratorial explanation of the [Iraq] war exhibits precisely these symptoms [those of a "degenerating research programme"]. Until recently, it typically began with the claim that the weapons may yet be found, and that 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.' As this position has become increasingly untenable, it is sometimes suggested that Saddam Hussein destroyed his weapons of mass destruction along with all

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Most of these considerations also apply to the idea that "9/11 was an inside job," and "The moon landing was faked," which are two of the examples with which Napolitano begins her essay. But what counts as outlandish is often rationally contestable. For example, is the belief that JFK was assassinated because of a conspiracy, or that 9/11 was allowed to happen, absurd and outlandish? Some may think so. But the evidence is so complex that reasonable people may disagree. Indeed, in the JFK case, roughly half the US population for over six decades has believed that there was probably a conspiracy. And the House Select Committee on Assassinations also concluded that there was a conspiracy, one that involved more than a single shooter. But it is nevertheless still considered a "conspiracy theory." Indeed, it is arguably the canonical example.

Napolitano makes her theory seem plausible by assuming that "when we talk about conspiracy theories, we have in mind outlandish theories" (Napolitano 2021, p. 84), offering a few particularly extreme examples, such as "the fake moon landing, flat earth, or the Illuminati controlling the world" (Napolitano 2021, p. 83). But when people use the phrase "conspiracy theory," they often use it to refer to theories that are not so outlandish: the CIA, FBI, or police were involved in an assassination or some other morally dubious activity; the U.S. was behind a coup or used bogus evidence to support a war; a large pharmaceutical company fudged data and the FDA enabled them to get away with it; SARS-CoV-2 leaked from a lab and prominent scientists with conflicts of interest tried to cover it up; the U.S. government is colluding with Big Tech to censor disapproved ideas; "they" are intercepting all of our communications. These are also called "conspiracy theories." Importantly, I am not appealing to the broad definition of conspiracy theories as theories that posit conspiracies. I am appealing to theories that are typically thought to count as "conspiracy theories." Many of these theories may be wrong (I don't take a stand on that here), but they are not outlandish. At the very least, whether or not a so-called "conspiracy theory" is absurd or outlandish is often rationally contestable, even in relatively paradigmatic cases. And sometimes theories castigated as "conspiracy theories" turn out to be true. However, Napolitano is not entirely off-base in seeing a connection between conspiracy theories and outlandish views. Calling something a "conspiracy theory" is often *an attempt to frame it* as outlandish or in some similar way unacceptable, *whether this is fair or not for the particular case* (Husting and Orr 2007; Hauswald 2023; Hagen 2025). Following Napolitano's suggestion would serve to facilitate this potentially deceptive move.

Napolitano recognizes that some resistance to disconfirmation may be unproblematic. "[I]t is true," she acknowledges, "that belief in a conspiracy warrants a certain type of resistance to counter-evidence" (2021, p. 83). Nevertheless, she argues, "the evidential *insulation* typical of conspiracy theories makes them epistemically problematic" (p. 83, emphasis in original). Yet the degree of insulation that she is talking about is extreme, and it is not clear that it is really typical of conspiracy theories (in the ordinary, non-question-begging sense).

evidence of them as the invasion began, or that he tricked the governments of the coalition of the willing into believing he had such weapons. As these positions became increasingly untenable, blame was placed on cock-ups by intelligence agencies. Evidence of whistleblowers from those agencies that appears to conflict with this position is dismissed with vague references to the whistleblower's alleged personal problems. The greater predictive success of conspiracy theory in this case should be obvious. Defenders of the official explanation seem willing to modify almost any part of their web of belief rather than consider the possibility that they have been lied to" (Coady 2006, p. 9).

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This is the level of self-insulation she attributes to conspiracy theories:

> What I mean by 'self-insulated' is that the believers take the conspiracy to neutralize the relevant counter-evidence. No evidence could be presented to them that would cause them to change their minds, because any counter-evidence would be dismissed as a fabrication of the conspirators to steer the public away from the truth. (Napolitano 2021, p. 87)

However, there is little reason to think that most beliefs that are called "conspiracy theories" are believed in the perfectly self-insulating manner she describes. While a conspiracy theorist always has an option to question counterevidence by saying "the conspirators manufactured it," it does not seem true that they in fact generally do this in a completely *ad hoc* manner, and that they are not sensitive to critiques of the reasonableness of the cover-up they might seem to imply.[15]

In contrast to (fully self-insulated) conspiracy theories as she defines them, Napolitano acknowledges that what she calls "conspiracy-belief" is not necessarily self-insulating. She uses the example of a belief that acupuncture can cure most diseases combined with the notion that pharmaceutical companies are hiding the relevant evidence (Napolitano 2021, p. 87). But this seems like an example of what is generally referred to as a "conspiracy theory." I share her intuition about such cases; people can and do change their beliefs about such things. They are *not* completely self-sealing. To show that a theory is problematically self-sealing, it is not enough to call it a "conspiracy theory." One would have to show that that particular belief is being held in an unreasonably uncompromising way. And that would require saying something about the particular theory (if it is based on the theory's purported outlandishness) or about the way a particular theorist held fast to it.

Despite all this, perhaps there is an interesting category of self-insulated theories worthy of study. Indeed, rather than conspiracy theories *per se*, Napolitano seems particularly interested in *the phenomenon of self-insulated beliefs*. But that is a topic that would better be studied under the rubric of "self-insulated beliefs," independent of whether the self-insulated beliefs happened to involve conspiracies or to be among ideas commonly labeled "conspiracy theories" for at least the following reasons:

(1) Theories that neither posit a conspiracy, nor are among the views typically called "conspiracy theories" can be held in self-insulating ways.
(2) Even official accounts that *contrast* with conspiracy theories can be held in self-insulating ways.
(3) Any particular conspiracy theory may, at least theoretically, be believed by some people in a self-insulating way and believed by others in a way that is not self-insulating.
(4) In fact, at least some theories often called "conspiracy theories" don't seem to be held primarily in self-insulating ways – such as those Napolitano calls

[15]As Juha Räikkä notes: "Anyone who thinks that the most favored 'explanatory stratagem' of conspiracy theorists is to expand and expand their theories [adding auxiliary hypotheses to account for disconfirming evidence] should read at least one book—there are many of them—that describes various conspiracy theories. Expanding one's theory has been only one strategy among many, and it has not been very popular. The relatively common view that a runaway expansion 'is characteristic to many conspiracy theories' is simply false" (Räikkä 2009, p. 195).

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"conspiracy-beliefs," but most people would call "conspiracy theories." That is an understatement sufficient to problematize Napolitano's view. Actually, while it is a characteristic of human nature to be reluctant to change a firmly held belief, clinging to beliefs in a *completely* self-insulated manner seems pretty rare. By all appearances, most conspiracy theorists (in the ordinary sense) do seem to be responsive to counterevidence to their beliefs, at least to some degree, even if they don't respond in ways that their critics would like.

(5) Which instances of beliefs in conspiracies are instances of self-insulated beliefs is difficult to determine objectively. While sometimes it might be possible to make an adequately justified assessment, the standards for adequacy will be contestable. And often establishing an objective determination will be impracticable. The all-too-common "I-know-it-when-I-see-it" approach, I would argue, is not an adequate standard. (cf. Dentith 2024)

On the one hand, if self-insulation *is a defining feature* of conspiracy theories, then much of what are called "conspiracy theories" are not actually conspiracy theories at all. On the other hand, if extreme self-insulation is *not* a defining feature, but rather is supposed to be a contingent fact about theories that are called "conspiracy theories," then, at best, it only applies to some instances of belief in these theories and can only be expected to be typical of belief in *some* of these theories. For this reason, individual conspiracy theories (in the ordinary sense) should be judged individually, as recommended by particularism.

6. Boudry's and Harris's fixation on compatibility with the evidence

Let's briefly consider another case. Maarten Boudry claims, "Because of the self-sealing logic of CTs, it is extremely difficult to settle disputes about the identity of the conspirators, or about the nature of the plot" (Boudry 2023, p. 625). It may indeed be extremely difficult to settle such matters. But such difficulties do not constitute a reason to reject conspiracy theories. Nobody said practical epistemology was going to be easy. In any case, what I want to stress in the following paragraphs is that the reasoning underlying Boudry's claim is faulty.

Boudry assumes that "it is always possible to come up with a rival CT that posits a different plot with different perpetrators and that explains the available evidence equally well" (Boudry 2023, p. 624). While true, this is misleading. When there is a complex set of data ("the available evidence"), different theories explain different parts of the data to variable degrees. And competing theories don't generally end up, on balance, equal. But even if adjustments are made to assure that two competing theories do *explain* the data equally well, they will generally not be equal in plausibility or prior probability. Still further, as I've stressed, any theory *of any kind* can be adjusted to accommodate the data in this way. So, this is not something that uniquely applies to conspiracy theories. And, regardless of the kind of theory it is, there will be an epistemic price to pay for adjustments that lower the plausibility or prior probability, of the theory or its auxiliary hypotheses. It is not always possible to come up with a rival theory that is equally good, all things considered.

Let's dive a bit deeper. Boudry claims, "[F]or any given historical event, multiple and contradictory CTs can be constructed, all equally compatible with the evidence" (Boudry 2023, p. 622). Boudry cites Keith Harris, who argues, "any number of conspiratorial explanations will fit the data, and hence will be equally supported" (Boudry 2023, p. 624;

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citing Harris 2018, p. 256). But this is wrong.[16] They are conflating being "equally *compatible* with the evidence" (Boudry 2023, p. 622) with being "equally *supported*" by it (Boudry 2023, p. 624). The problem is that there is more to epistemic support than compatibility with evidence, and fitting the data is a complex, multi-dimensional matter involving degrees. Their error is similar to judging a theory according to its explanatory power while ignoring prior probability. Determining the best explanation requires, at least, weighing both explanatory power and the prior probability of the assumptions necessary to achieve the explanatory power.

7. Are critics of conspiracy theories only criticizing rare and extreme cases?

Boudry contends that "if at some point your conspiracy hypothesis can only be rescued from refutation by making the alleged conspirators preternaturally intelligent and powerful, then you have entered the realm of unfounded CTs" (Boudry 2023, p. 628). That sounds reasonable enough. But for this to hold, "preternaturally intelligent and powerful" must be interpreted in a strong enough sense to render any theory that posits such actors unfounded. But to how many theories does this apply? Boudry answers, "I believe almost all popular beliefs widely labeled as 'conspiracy theories' fall foul of this criterion" (Boudry 2023, p. 628). To put it another way, his critique is supposed to apply to "virtually all unofficial conspiratorial explanations of history" (p. 628). Those are pretty strong claims. Two conditions must apply for this to hold. First, the degree of intelligence and power postulated or implied by the conspiracy theory must be so high that the theory can be judged to be unfounded on that basis alone. Second, at least *this* degree of intelligence and power must be necessary for the conspiracy in question to work for almost all conspiracy theories.

Suppose, for example, Jane thinks that Bill Gates's billions afford him significant levers of power and also access to more and better information than most people. Should Jane be thought of as attributing to Gates' preternatural intelligence and power? That is too weak an interpretation of preternatural intelligence and power to do the work that Boudry's position requires. It is too weak to justify dismissing Jane's concerns, especially if she has arguments and evidence to proffer. So, in order for Boudry's claim to hold up, the phrase "preternaturally intelligent and powerful" must be understood as meaning something significantly stronger than just that. However, in that case, Boudry's claim that this applies to "virtually all unofficial conspiratorial explanations" (p. 628) seems clearly false. After all, many unofficial conspiratorial explanations have turned out to be true and well documented: COINTELPRO, MK-Ultra, the Tuskegee Study, early Watergate allegations, early Iran-Contra allegations, NSA spying, and the coordinated campaign of deceit to support the Iraq war. Many other unofficial conspiratorial explanations that remain unestablished do not require preternatural intelligence and power, at least not in the required strong sense. Or, at least, this matter is reasonably disputable. Many critics rather flippantly accuse conspiracy theories of necessitating a vast army of supermen to pull it off. But conspiracy theorists typically deny that this is required.[17]

[16]See Hagen (2022c), pp. 214–215, for a response to Harris regarding the evaluation of competing theories that both "fit the data."

[17]As Dentith and Orr explain, "A conspiracy can look big, yet only feature a small number of people who know the full extent or aim of the conspiracy. Some members of the conspiracy will be lackeys, goons, useful idiots, or even unwitting conspirators. It is even possible to be involved in a conspiracy without realizing you are conspiring; not everyone in the NSA need necessarily know that the data they are collecting and

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In one extreme case, David Grimes, who had published a paper arguing that large conspiracies tend to fail (Grimes 2016),[18] claims to have shown that a conspiracy theory supported by Andrew Wakefield would require twenty-five to fifty thousand people. To this, Wakefield replied, "It took five people to conspire to produce fraudulent data in this case."[19] Grimes' position, which is to count everyone employed by the major pharmaceutical companies as being involved in the conspiracy, is an absurd exaggeration (Grimes 2016, p. 8; cf. Hagen 2023, p. 439). Wakefield, for his part, is downplaying the role of additional people, beyond the five original conspirators, who must be regarded as having circled the wagons to defend these five scientists by arguing that this was just a scientific disagreement blown out of proportion rather than fraud. If such a conspiracy theory were true, and a small group of scientists perversely produced fraudulent research, the institutional defense of these researchers would presumably have become part of the conspiracy. But how much of the cover-up would be witting, and how much would be a matter of following directives while believing the official account based on biased assumptions? That is not an easy thing to determine. But a reasonable assessment of the plausibility of the purported cover-up depends on it.

Conspiracy theorists (and some particularists who insist that conspiracy theories should be treated fairly) will point to the work that can be done by institutional imperatives (Basham 2001, p. 272; Dentith and Orr 2018, pp. 439–440; Hagen 2022b, pp. 186–190), and confluences of interest, lessening the need to posit explicit conspiracy and direct control. They also point to nuances such as compartmentalization, which facilitates the unwitting participation of people who fulfill necessary tasks but are not fully conspirators themselves. In addition, there are certain types of situations in which, as Lee Basham emphasizes, "Cover-up by intentional neglect, not descending control, is the easily predictable consequence" (2018, p. 271).

Boudry's argument depends on an equivocation. His conclusion is true in the weak and moot sense described above – it is true in extreme cases, but there are few cases that truly qualify. And no serious argument is needed for those cases. But he seems to imply something stronger. He writes, "I intend to rescue the widespread intuitions undergirding the pejorative meaning of 'conspiracy theory' and its derogatory use in the public arena" (Boudry 2023, p. 612). And yet, if his argument only undermines theories involving the "preternaturally intelligent and powerful" (in a strong enough sense to thereby render the theory "unfounded"), then it fails to rescue the pejorative intuitions. This is because the derogatory public use of the phrase "conspiracy theories" is not limited to theories that involve preternaturally intelligent and powerful people and groups.

The proper conclusion is this: Those conspiracy theorists who support obviously wrong conspiracy theories ought to either abandon those theories completely or else

processing has been illegally obtained, and FBI agents who are using forensic evidence to secure convictions may not have been informed by senior personnel that the evidence they are using is of dubious merit" (2018, p. 440). See also Hagen (2022b), pp. 186–190, for a discussion of the supposed vastness of the conspiracies alleged by conspiracy theories.

[18]For responses to Grimes's arguments, see Dentith and Orr (2018), p. 440; Dentith (2019), pp. 2255–2258; and Hagen (2023).

[19]See "96fm Vaxxed Debate with Andy Wakefield." Fiona O'Leary. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = sVzMcZzqC5E. The most relevant portion starts at 00:19:00. See also Hagen (2023), pp. 442–443. Grimes in no way demonstrated that Wakefield's conspiracy theory required such a large conspiracy. Indeed, Grimes's assumption underlying that conclusion – that everyone working for pharmaceutical companies would have to actively participate in such a conspiracy – was itself ludicrous.

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develop more sophisticated versions that are not so obviously wrong. This would be fair enough. But such a conclusion is of little value. It tells us nothing that wasn't already obvious. And it is certainly not a reason to reject particularism. After all, it is the particulars that make some particular theories obviously wrong.

There is one more way that Boudry appeals to an implicit equivocation. He concludes that "an intellectual presumption against CTs" is justified (Boudry 2023, p. 628). That sounds significant. But is it? The phrase "intellectual presumption against" is so vague as to be practically meaningless. We could plausibly say that we should have, to some degree, an intellectual presumption against all new ideas. Perhaps we should always be doubtful until we are given at least *some reason* to believe any new idea. If "intellectual presumption against" is understood in such a weak sense, we can accept it, but it is not nearly as damning as it sounds. Of course, we shouldn't accept a conspiracy theory for which there is, to our knowledge, no reason to believe. But if someone proposes a reason to believe it, that point about an "intellectual presumption" immediately becomes moot. Something this weak can't really be what Boudry means. He seems to suggest a statistical argument underlies some sort of stronger judgment. But one shouldn't judge an individual theory (or person, or anything else) based on what is statistically true of the category to which it belongs. After all, one could always define a different category in which the target theory also belongs that has a different set of statistical associations. Why aren't *those* the associations that one should judge the theory by? The answer is: because individuals of all kinds should be judged by their individual merits.

Boudry also puts the point this way: "I hope to show that a prima facie suspicion of CTs, suitably defined, is indeed epistemically justified" (Boudry 2023, p. 612). Others have argued for similar positions, leveraging the clear defeasibility inherent in the phrase "prima facie." But that defeasibility, which is necessary for its plausibility, renders the point moot as soon as evidence and argumentation in support of the conspiracy theory begin. One must consider the evidence and arguments to determine whether or not the generalization has been defeated in the case at hand. And even if conspiracy theories *often* have general features that make them seem implausible, one would nevertheless need to assess whether those features are actually present in any particular theory one was evaluating. After all, as M Dentith (2023) has argued, the qualities that are thought to make conspiracy theories as a class prima facie problematic only apply to *some* (even if that means "many") of them (cf. Dentith 2022; and Hagen, Dentith, and Pigden 2025, pp. 4–6).

So, these significant-sounding claims amount to nothing in contexts where evidence and arguments are offered. Even if the arguments are bad ones, that must be adjudicated based on the particulars; it can't be derived from the "prima facie suspicion" or the "intellectual presumption against." And yet Boudry has said that he is supporting the derogatory use of the term "conspiracy theory" and that almost all popular contrarian conspiracy theories are of the "unfounded" variety. But a mere "prima facie suspicion" or "intellectual presumption against" of the kind that might be warranted can't justify the indiscriminate use of derogatory terms for theories which might not deserve them.

8. Conclusion

So, what are we to make of the critique of conspiracy theories based on the notion that they are problematically self-sealing? The critique does not stick as a generality. All theories can be rescued from counterevidence in some manner. And a great number of theorists of all kinds exhibit resistance to counter-evidence. And it is not problematic to

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be resistant to counterevidence, to some degree, especially if there is some reason for doubt. But there are limits to the reasonableness of this resistance. Theories can be judged not only by the evidence but also by the plausibility of the assumptions that must be made for them to explain or at least achieve compatibility with the evidence. While some theories seem to stretch credulity too far, and some people may hold on to theories that should be abandoned, this is a problem for all types of theories. And determining when the line has been crossed will often be difficult. In any case, such a judgment can only be applied to *some* conspiracy theories and *some* conspiracy theorists. Whether it applies to individual conspiracy theories must be judged on a case-by-case basis.[20]

Competing interests. I have a book on the philosophy of conspiracy theories for which I receive royalties.

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