

‘It’s all a cover up!’ An Examination of Epistemic Vices and Conspiracy Theories in the Internet Age

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
award Master by Research.

September 2021

I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Dan O' Brien, for allowing me to remain open-minded in my thesis and for all the encouragement and dedication in finalising this piece of work.

I would also like to thank my mother and father, for giving me the opportunities in life, so that I may be virtuous in all aspects of my life.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
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Part 1

I. NORMATIVE VICE EPISTEMOLOGY	6
i. Jemima's Holocaust Denial and what is an 'Epistemic Vice'	10
II. EPISTEMIC VICE-CHARGING	13
i. Robust v Rhetorical Vice-charging	14
ii. Charging Someone Feeding into their Stealthy Vices: Acquisition and Revision Responsibility	17
ii. Critic Credibility in Kidd's 'Vice-charging'	20
III. CAPITAL VICE(S).....	23
IV. EPISTEMIC CLUSTER VICE THEORY	29
i. Understanding the Clusters	31
ii. Epistemic Vice Cluster Connections.....	35
iii. Connection to Capital Vice (Kidd, 2017), 'Closed- Mindedness' and 'Dogmatism'	40
V. HOW THE EPISTEMIC CLUSTER VICE THEORY TIES INTO THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE	44

Part 2

I.	CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS A SUBSET OF FAKE- NEWS: WHAT ARE THEY, THE DIFFERENT TYPES, AND THEIR MAIN PURPOSE	47
i.	Understanding Fake- News.....	48
ii.	Frankfurtian Bullshit	53
II.	THE CONSPIRACY THEORY PHENOMENON TODAY	54
i.	Cassam's Six Characteristics	58
ii.	The Old and New Conspiracism.....	61
III.	Preventing the Proliferations and Dissemination of Conspiracy Theories: Rebuttal v Retraction and Censorship v Education: What is the Solution?.....	67
i.	Rebuttal	67
ii.	Retraction and Censorship	68
iii.	Education	69
iv.	Conclusion	70
	Bibliography	71

Abstract

Conspiracy theories and fake news can be found in both off and online discourse. With COVID-19 still mutating, the same can be said for disinformation. At the beginning there were conspiracies that COVID- 19 was engineered to prevent global population growth, and now on vaccine hesitancy, with some conspiracies pointing to embryos being used as an ingredient to the vaccines. In this paper, I aim to address the era of digitality in which we live, asking and answering fundamental questions such as: what is fake news? How harmful are conspiracy theories? Has there been a shift in the conspiracy theory paradigm? And is there a way to prevent conspiracy theory growth? To answer such questions, I will focus on the philosophical discipline of vice epistemology: vicious intellectual characteristics that can give way to a loss of knowledge i.e., closed- mindedness, lack of thoroughness, dogmatism and more. Moreover, I will introduce my theory ‘Epistemic Cluster Vices’ to categorise each recognised vice into their respective groups and assess whether other epistemic vices can offshoot from the is a central/ capital vice. It must be stated that my theory is in its embryonic stage and further academic examination is necessary to cement this idea into vice epistemology.

Introduction

The year 2016 has been referred to as the ‘true *annus horribilis*’ (Cassam, 2019). We have seen a shift in the political dimension of the West: the election of the 43rd President of the USA; the growing populism and far-right ideologies in Hungary and Poland; and the UK’s vote in the UK/ EU referendum. Such changes have not been isolated to Western world. The world also witnessed the turmoil and warfare in the Middle East: ISIL (eventually becoming ISIS); the clashes in Libya; and the years of under-development and corruption in Yemen.

Now, five years on, we have witnessed Donald Trump’s presidency in the White House; the UK results showed a 52% majority in favour of leaving the EU and the warfare in the Middle East is now fought by-proxy with an ever-pressing issue in Afghanistan. Not only has there been a political shift, with the partisan line being severed in both the US and the UK, but the social paradigm has shifted: society has become digital, and our e-footprint is forever expanding. In today’s era of digitality, we see that the globalisation of information has aided the acquisition of knowledge. Yet the number of ways to acquire information can prove

detrimental to one's own cognitive makeup. Recent developments in vice epistemology identify that both misinformation and disinformation can lead to the loss of knowledge (Cassam, 2016). Studies into the psychological appeal of fake news (Axt, Landau, Kay, 2020) provide empirical evidence to this growing philosophical discipline. Whilst science can prove to be a useful tool in assessing the appeal to fake news, an inter-disciplinary examination into the appeal to fake news is an essential area that must be addressed as fake news is a multifaceted phenomenon.

The events of 2016 coupled with the undermining of science, has led to the post-truth society we experience today. We see that fake news has become politically charged, used as a tool for personal gain: 'Populist leader Jair Bolsonaro rejects Anthropogenic Climate Change' (Anderson, 2019) and 1 in 3 French citizens refusing to have the COVID-19 vaccination (Lorenzo, 2020). Not only this, but conspiracy theories that were once on the fringes of our intellectual economy have now become more prevalent than ever, and can be used as a political device to undermine one's opponent i.e., the US Democratic party's child-trafficking conspiracy, QAnon (formerly known as 'Pizzagate').

These are only a select few compared to the insurmountable number of fake news articles on the internet. In this thesis I will argue that there are two items which create a melting pot for fake- news:

1. The epistemic division of society
2. Globalisation of information

Society has been dissected into different epistemic tribes. People are hostile to outside information that challenges their belief system, positioning them in a social epistemic structure that either actively discredits outside information and their sources (echo-chambers) or places people in a state where they are unaware of opposing information to their belief system (epistemic bubbles). These pieces of (dis)information generate a disparity of trust between members of said groups and 'outsiders' (Nguyen, 2018; 142). I shall explore this epistemic division by focusing on a new area of philosophy known as vice epistemology. This examination will pertain to the individual rather than institutions that govern our society. I believe it is of the utmost importance to examine this growing phenomenon, and one must understand how individuals can prevent the acquisition of knowledge but also lose existing

knowledge. Two questions I will focus on shall be: why are people hostile to such information that challenges their beliefs or belief system? How are agents unaware that the information they acquire is deeply misleading? As leading vice-epistemologist Quassim Cassam states, ‘being alert to the influence of such [epistemic] vices may improve human enquiry’ (Cassam, 2016; 161). It is with this statement that I shall also introduce my theory of ‘Epistemic Cluster Vices’. Being aware of what Cassam describes, may enable individuals to correctly identify what epistemic vices exist; how epistemic vices can prevent knowledge acquisition and to correctly charge those feeding into their epistemic vices (Kidd, 2016).

My theory is an extension of the works of other vice-epistemologists. I shall go into more detail later in the first section of the paper. Additionally, I must stress that my theory is in its developmental stages. Further work is necessary to develop the theory. The purpose of my theory is to demonstrate how it can be utilised in other disciplines such as education, politics, information technology and more.

Whilst (1) focuses on the acquisition and utilisation of epistemic vices, (2) concerns the dissemination and proliferation of such disinformation founded on false pretences. Even those diligent news consumers who are epistemically virtuous in character can be trapped by fake news online (Rose, 2019). Our digital footprint can be monitored by items such as ‘cookies’, where visiting websites allows the creators to track your interests across the internet thus tailoring advertisements to the individual. Limiting one’s exposure to only a single line of argumentation. As a result, this can feed back into an already existing belief system creating a self-perpetuating cycle of information that is agreeable to only the agent. I will touch upon how to combat the issue of fake news and disinformation later in part 2 of the thesis. In doing so, I will offer three ways to prevent such spreading of fake- news: rebuttal, retraction and censorship, and education. Whilst I offer three solutions, I believe education is the only viable option to preventing the spread of disinformation in our age of digitality. It is necessary to educate those on navigating the internet correctly and to understand that the internet is an extension of mankind rather than a separate entity we interact with.

Vice epistemology is a growing philosophical discipline, yet it is still in its embryonic stages. To contextualise what vice-epistemology is, how it operates and its purpose it is best to understand vice epistemology’s counterpart: Virtue Epistemology. This is where I shall begin my enquiry.

I. Normative Vice-Epistemology

I have the belief that the sky is blue. I arrive at this belief by looking out my window and seeing, on a clear summer's day with my eyes, that the sky is in fact blue. On previous occasions I have reliably witnessed the sky as being the colour blue and Rayleigh scattering provides empirical evidence to support my perception. Given such empirical evidence my belief would seem to be justified and therefore I can claim to have knowledge that the sky is blue.

The above example is what epistemologists call, 'belief-based epistemology'. As Battaly writes, the cornerstone to belief-based epistemology is that 'beliefs are the primary objects of epistemic evaluation, and knowledge and justification...are evaluations of beliefs' (2008; Battaly, 640). In using the example above, we can take the statement 'the sky is blue' to be true: the evaluation is supported with evidence (Conee and Feldman, 2004); the belief is based on sufficient grounds (Alston, 1989) e.g., scientific evidence to support the belief, and finally, the belief is derived from reliable processes, namely my sight (Goldman, 1986). This type of epistemology is based on the belief itself, how it can be justified, and thus can amount to knowledge. Another strand of epistemology assesses the agent's intellectual traits and how these are involved in arriving at the belief 'the sky is blue' rather than the belief itself. This has been referred to as 'virtue epistemology'. Epistemic virtues and vices act as agential evaluators, which, it is claimed by both virtue and vice epistemologists, are more epistemically fundamental than knowledge and justified belief.

Virtue epistemology is the centre piece to normative epistemology. Different virtue epistemologists agree that virtues are cognitive excellences but disagree as to what they are. Virtue Reliabilism (Greco, Sosa, Goldman) maintains that epistemic virtues are reliable faculties. Reliabilism derives from process-reliabilism which argues that 'a belief is justified if and only if it is produced by a reliable belief-forming process' (Battaly, 2008; 645)¹.

Whilst it is one thing for a belief to be formed; it is another for it to be justified. The reliabilist contends that 'a belief can be justified if formed as the result of a reliable process, even if the believer is unaware of what makes it justified' (Honderich, 2005; 465). Direct

¹ For more information on process reliabilism see Battaly, H. (2008)

memory, perception, induction, deduction, and intuition are those reliable processes (or cognitive faculties) that lead to a justified belief. In developing the reliabilist account, it is best to focus on the work of Ernest Sosa.

Similar to Battaly, Sosa writes, ‘a belief *B* is justified if and only if it is the outcome of a process of belief acquisition or retention which is reliable or leads to a sufficiently high preponderance of true beliefs over false beliefs’ (Sosa, 1992; 79). Sosa goes further claiming that a belief qualifies as knowledge if it is both true and apt: ‘when a belief is apt it would not likely be false as long as the conditions and one’s competence is preserved’ (Sosa, 2010; 132). The conditions are suitable when (a) the subject is guided or (b) the conditions are normal to exercise competence (Sosa, 2010; 132)².

Taking the aforementioned, and applying it to my hypothetical example, the belief ‘the sky is blue’ is justified as it is the result of reliable faculties, namely perception and memory. The agent has identified previous occasions where they know the sky to be blue but not only that, they perceive the sky to be blue. The agent has no reason to doubt their perceptive faculties as they have arrived, on several occasions, at more true than false beliefs through utilising such faculties. Now, as Cartesian scepticism places doubt on perception, the sceptic could argue that our perceptions sometimes may deceive us. I could be looking at a rectangular building in the distance, but upon closer inspection it is in fact cylindrical. Yet Sosa quickly dismisses this argument. The reliable faculty of perception is not undermined when perceiving items from too far out, or in the dark. For Sosa: ‘[Pure] perception requires normal conditions internal and external and hence precludes the presence of abnormalities responsible for such illusion or hallucination’ (Sosa, 1985; 231)³. Similar to Sosa, Greco also cuts off the sceptic’s argument at the root. Greco posits the idea that ‘epistemic justification requires *de facto* reliability rather than vindicated reliability: ‘knowledge...is grounded in cognitive processes that are in fact reliable in this world’ (Greco, 2002; 292). Suppose the Cartesian sceptic held a piece of paper in their hand. If the Cartesian sceptic has reliable cognitive faculties, then they can know that the sheet of paper they are holding is in their

² Being apt is a single part in Sosa’s AAA theory where performances are judged on how accurate or successful; adroit, skilful; and apt said performances are. See, Sosa (2010) for more information.

³ See Sosa, E. (1985).

hand. This is regardless of the sceptic's scenario of the external world being dream-induced or controlled by a demon.

The second branch of virtue epistemology is Virtue Responsibilism. Responsibilism (Code, Zagzebski, Montmarquet) derives from Aristotelian virtue ethics. The idea being that 'virtues are character traits for which we are responsible' (O'Brien, 2012; 1). It is, for example, the scientist's choice concerning how they conduct their experiment and how they gather their information for the test. The precision taken to answer these sorts of questions is crucial to producing a reliable hypothesis, experiment, and results. If the scientists' investigation requires a survey, they must be open-minded in the questions they ask to avoid any ethical conflicts. Moreover, they cannot be rash in their results and so must complete multiple tests to determine if there are any anomalies. I shall come later to discuss those intellectual character traits that can hinder knowledge acquisition and encourage a loss of knowledge, those being epistemic vices such as 'closed- mindedness', 'carelessness', 'epistemic laziness' and others. For now, I shall continue developing an understanding into Virtue Responsibilism.

Hilary Kornblith recognises that a 'justified belief is a belief which is the product of epistemically responsible action; an epistemically responsible action is action guided by a desire to have true beliefs' (Kornblith, 1983; 47). The responsible action that Kornblith alludes to, derives from intellectual character virtues which aid the process of acquiring a true belief. Though simply possessing such virtuous character traits is not sufficient grounds for an agent to be virtuous, exercising when and how to use such virtues, signifies the agent's virtuous character.

Whilst Kornblith focus on the phenomenology of epistemic virtue, Zagzebski (1996) provides a list of such virtuous cognitive faculties or processes that aid knowledge acquisition e.g., intellectual courage, conscientiousness, creativity and open- mindedness⁴ and epistemic responsibility. For Code, epistemic responsibility is central to her philosophy. The epistemic virtues Code identifies, is what allows all other virtues to radiate from⁵. Code goes one step

⁴ These are only a select few intellectual virtues. For putative examples of intellectual virtues and more information on epistemic responsibilism see Zagzebski, L. (1996); Kornblith, H. (1983); Chisholm, R. (1977).

⁵ See Code, L. (2020). Code's work here will prove useful later in the thesis when identifying if there are connections between the epistemic clusters or certain vices that I shall present.

further, claiming that epistemologists should pay closer attention to active, personal, and social dimensions of our cognitive life (Code, 2020).

By providing information concerning virtue epistemology, I now feel it is necessary to move onto virtue's counterpart: vice epistemology. In doing this, I will be able to provide contextual information to a growing discipline before introducing my 'Epistemic Cluster Vice' theory.

Vice epistemology is a relatively new area that is growing within contemporary normative epistemology. The main proponents of the area are Linda Zagzebski (1996), Ian James Kidd (2016, 2017), Quassim Cassam (2016, 2019), and Heather Battaly (2019), to name a few. The area of vice epistemology I gravitate towards uses these intellectual character traits as tools to determine the vicious nature of some epistemic enquiry. To argue that vice epistemology isn't a prominent area of epistemology is itself epistemically vicious in nature. Dismissing this area undermines the nature of effective responsible enquiry. Without investigation into vice epistemology, there would be little hope of one being aware of their epistemological faculties, as there is no way to determine if such faculties are vicious or virtuous. If this is the case, how can one correctly identify what an epistemic vice is? More importantly, how can one epistemically charge someone of feeding into their vices? (Kidd, 2017).

To understand vice epistemology and analyse the area clearly, I shall be using a hypothetical scenario throughout the paper of Jemima and her belief in Holocaust Denial.

i. Jemima's Holocaust Denial and what is an 'Epistemic vice'?

Jemima rejects the received account of the Holocaust. This belief has been perpetuated since her childhood, being surrounded by those who deny Auschwitz being the scene of mass genocide, arguing the operation of gas-chambers didn't happen, and offering other ways of exonerating the Nazis. These people in Jemima's life are active in their enquiry. They ask questions such as 'why are the number of deaths exaggerated in the Holocaust? And 'did the Holocaust truly take place?' They

also carry out research to fuel their claims with online forums being a place for exchanging information.

Being surrounded by Holocaust deniers has opened a new interest for Jemima. Her interest has grown exponentially in Holocaust denial that she follows prominent public figures such as David Icke and David Irving and surrounds herself with different modes of information: unreliable websites, conspiracy theory podcasts, various texts and other modes of fake news. It provides instant gratification and brings her joy knowing that her family are proud of her. Being surrounded by these role-models and showing great interest in key writers on the issue, Jemima now believes that the Holocaust was either exaggerated, or that it didn't truly take place.

To an outsider observing Jemima, such questions indicate that Jemima could be both ignorant and prejudiced in her enquiry. Cassam's hypothetical example of Oliver (2014, 2016) is useful here in understanding why Jemima's enquiry is vicious in nature. For Oliver, he has an unhealthy obsession with 9/11. Alike many of his friends, Oliver considers himself an expert on 9/11 and holds the position that the attack was orchestrated by the US Government. It must be noted that Oliver isn't mad or stupid, but 'his beliefs about 9/11 are the result of the peculiarities of his intellectual constitution' (Cassam, 2015). Oliver's friends know that Oliver is easily duped and that he does not understand the difference between evidence and unsubstantiated belief.

What links both Jemima and Oliver's cases, is the unhealthy obsessions they have: Jemima only searching for evidence that fits her belief system⁶ and Oliver's gullible attitude towards 9/11. Oliver's gullible nature is what leads him to believe that 9/11 was an inside job⁷. Some psychologists would label this as the 'conspiracy mentality'.⁸

The reasons why Jemima believes in Holocaust denial can be determined by analysing (i) what epistemic vices are. From this, one can (ii) correctly indict Jemima of utilising certain vices in her epistemic enquiry (vice- charging), allowing one to go further than Jemima's

⁶ It is Jemima's lack of consideration for alternate evidence that is vicious. Her consideration only lies with what fits her belief system and not a holistic engagement on which account of the holocaust is correct.

⁷See Cassam (2015).

⁸ More information on Oliver and the 9/11 conspiracy can be found in Cassam, Q. (2016).

case and consider (iii) if there are any vices which are interconnected or is there a main vice from which all others radiate? To answer why Jemima has such beliefs, it is best to begin examining (i) what is an epistemic vice?

Cassam puts it succinctly, ‘intellectual virtues are cognitive excellences’ whereas ‘intellectual vices are cognitive defects’ (Cassam, 2016; 160). I would go further to say that the four stages of negligence are applicable to understanding how one can be intellectually vicious if they are not considerate of their knowledge acquisition: the *duty* in our epistemic endeavours is to acquire knowledge and information. This duty can be *breached* by failing to exercise knowledge acquisition; *causing* the individual to lack knowledge. The *damage* caused to the individual is the lack of efficacy in acquiring information or knowledge. These four characteristics (duty, breach, causation, and damage) combine when carrying out our epistemic endeavours. Suppose one has an assignment on the founding of the United Nations. Their duty is to acquire knowledge on the task they have been given: when was it founded; who were the founding members; where it was founded etc. However, failing to concern oneself with these questions breaches the duty of acquiring the necessary knowledge for the assignment. From this the individual is caused to lack knowledge on the task which can eventually damage their school credentials, for example they could fail the module as a consequence of not completing the task.

This is an epistemically vicious perspective to hold. Epistemic vices have been argued to do two things: (1) obstruct the acquisition, retention and transmission of knowledge whilst (2) promoting the loss of knowledge (Cassam, 2019; 7). This is Cassam’s idea of Obstructivism (Cassam, 2019), that epistemic vices get in the way of knowledge (Cassam, 2019; ix). Epistemic vices are systematically harmful ways of thinking, and this is visible in both the case just listed and Jemima’s case of Holocaust Denial.

Alike Oliver and his obsession with the 9/11 conspiracy in Cassam’s work (2016), Jemima’s belief system is both baseless and false. Jemima surrounds herself with pieces of information that already uphold her current belief system. The modes of information that Jemima epistemically relies on act as confirmation biases. She has not acquired any *new* information, but only information that strengthens her belief on Holocaust Denial. Jemima is therefore prejudiced in her enquiry. In placing her trust in these modes of information, she becomes gullible and prejudiced towards her account of Holocaust denial. For Cassam, ‘genuine

prejudice impedes on our enquiries because it blocks the acquisition of knowledge and weakens the connection between what we do believe and what we have reason to believe' (Cassam, 2016; 168). It must also be noted that epistemic vices not only hinder knowledge acquisition but disrupt innovation and worsen public discourse. Such vices have impeded on our interaction with those who hold opposing beliefs to ourselves.

In the 2016 UK/ EU referendum, the 'Leave Campaign' wanted to persuade the British people that leaving the EU would be a greater benefit to the UK. Their goal could be considered epistemically virtuous. Through careful consideration of the economic factors, they aim to acquire socio-economic knowledge, and informing the public of why the UK would benefit in leaving the EU fulfils this virtuous goal. Yet the '£350 million bus'⁹ used by the Leave Campaign is a prime example of how epistemic vices have worsened public discourse. Used as a tool for personal gain, the bus has become synonymous with falsity and undermining public opinion. Yet, this piece of advertisement proved beneficial for the Leave Campaign since the UK in turn left the EU. However, the referendum has led to a partisan polarisation: a 'divided Britain'—a phrase cemented in everyday discourse. This is simply carelessness and a lack of thoroughness on the part of the Leave Campaign in their attempts to portray how the UK doesn't need the EU¹⁰. The Leave campaign knew that the slogan was a lie, but they lied in this way because they knew that it would bring them votes thus levying the result in their favour. This is much like when parents tell lies to their children to help them in one way or another¹¹. The lie is intended to benefit the target (the child) but this is under the assumption that the deceiver has the best interests of the target.

Prejudice, carelessness, and a lack of thoroughness are a few examples of epistemic vices. Zagzebski's work provides a fuller account of the various putative epistemic vices:

'Intellectual pride; negligence; idleness; cowardice; conformity; carelessness; rigidity; prejudice; wishful thinking; closed- mindedness; insensitivity to detail; obtuseness and the lack of thoroughness' (Zagzebski, 1996; 152)

⁹ The full message printed on the bus reads, 'We send the EU £350 million a week lets fund our NHS instead'. A study by FullFact.org, found that it was £250 million. For information on the true figure see: FullFact Team, (2017). For Boris Johnson's article see Johnson, B. (2017).

¹⁰ More information on the UK partisan division can be found in Duffy, B. Hewlett, K.A. McCrae, J & Hall, J (2019).

¹¹ This type of information, or lack thereof, is referred to as 'paternalistic lies'. See Dworkin, G. (2020).

I have begun to identify what vice epistemology is; the epistemic vices themselves and how they are vicious in nature. Identifying the different vices is useful in the foundations of vice-epistemology. But how can we recognise which vices are active in one's epistemic endeavours and when? What about calling someone out on feeding into their epistemic vices? What if Jemima were to be confronted by an individual who identified flaws in her epistemic enquiry? How can we be aware of when someone is being epistemically vicious? Ian Kidd's (2016) 'Charging Others with Epistemic Vice' is a plausible theory on answering these persisting questions.

II. Epistemic Vice-charging

Epistemic vice-charging is the critical practice of calling out someone on their epistemic downfalls (Kidd, 2016). In Kidd's theory, there are two types of vice-charge: robust and rhetorical (Kidd, 2016; 183)—one is passive; the other is active. There are three mutually dependent parties involved in carrying out a correct vice-charge: the target (individual feeding into their vices); the critic (the one to vice-charge) and the audience. Whilst Kidd identifies there to be several desiderata in vice-charging, I am concerned with two items: the correct way to carry out a robust vice-charge and the mutual involvement of the three parties (critic, target, and audience) in vice-charging someone. It is best first to establish the difference between a robust and rhetorical vice-charge.

i. Robust v Rhetorical Vice-charging

A 'Rhetorical' vice-charge 'involves an agent expressing a negative attitude, opinion or evaluation of some other agent' (Kidd, 2016; 183). Suppose that you (the critic) are in a group of people who believe that the Amazon rainforest fires were started by NGOs¹² (the target). A simple tut, eye- roll, shoulder shrug, wave of the hand, rolling of the eyes etc., only shows one's 'allegiances, sympathies, values' (Kidd, 2016: 183). This is a passive response from the agent. A 'Robust' vice-charge, in contrast, 'involves primarily an active and intentional attempt to persuade others for ultimately the ameliorative reason' (Kidd,

¹² See, Watts, J. (2019)

2016; 184). Suppose that I confront someone who believes that depression doesn't exist. That it is just a label applied to those teenagers who are simply 'moody'. Rather than simply uttering 'depression is real and exists' I offer different modes of evidence to support my charge. I compare two neurological scans of someone who has been diagnosed with depression and someone who doesn't. I offer the different medication that is used to treat depression such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs). These examples are scientific, but the target could be inclined to disagree with the scientific evidence presented. In response I could offer testimonies from celebrities that they 'follow' on social media such as Stephen Fry and J. K. Rowling who have openly discussed their battles with depression. With this example there are three ways I have implemented to charge the target: (1) I am careful in my argumentation which is supported by the fact that (2) I offer scientific evidence. Yet, as the scientific evidence has been rejected by the target, I therefore have offered (3) evidence from key social figures such as J.K Rowling and Stephen Fry providing further support to the claim that clinical depression exists. Whilst this example pertains to Kidd's robust charge criteria—offering evidence, careful argumentation, psychological appeal to the target—what if the critic calls out the target but doesn't offer sufficient evidence to back up the claim?

Returning to the example of the Amazon rainforest fires being started by NGOs, one is active in condemning this belief. You are active in your reception of the claims, deeming them as false and lacking sufficient evidence to back up the claims. As a result, you call out the group for feeding into the vices of being 'insensitive to detail' and 'epistemically lazy'. On the part of the critic, this vice-charge is sound. However, when asked to present opposing arguments and evidence on the matter, the critic cannot do so. Instead, they simply argue that the argument is beyond the bounds of possibility, thus must be false. Granted the critic in this vice-charge is active, yet the charge made is baseless, providing no supporting evidence. Thus, the group disregard the vice-charge made. In fact, the group can overturn the charge and accuse the critic of being both 'insensitive to detail' and 'epistemically lazy' themselves. With this example, there is an 'intentional attempt to persuade others for the ultimately ameliorative reasoning' (Kidd, 2016; 184). Yet, as the charge is baseless and lacks supporting evidence, the charge itself proves ineffective.

Let it be mentioned, that in these examples there is a difference between correctly vice-charging an agent and labelling the agent as 'stupid'. With the example of the NGO groups

starting fires in the Amazon rainforest, we are aware they lack thoroughness in their enquiry. They also lack supporting evidence to suggest such claims are true; yet have unfounded positiveness in their opinion. In the critic calling out the group (the targets of the vice-charge) I am not suggesting that they lack the mental capacity to understand the opposing argument (namely, that the Amazon fires were a result of naturally occurring weather alterations). The group in fact lack holistic understanding of the argument due to the insufficiency of their research. The group have only familiarised themselves with information on their beliefs- a single line of argument. This creates a vacuum where the same pieces of disinformation are passed around. Consequently, it is this that enables them to stick to one line of enquiry: that NGOs started the fire in the Amazon Rainforest.

In vice-charging, a good critic should 'strive to ensure that their criticisms are fair, reasoned, and as transparent as possible (Kidd, 2016; 185). A vice-charge that is 'ill-formed, poorly reasoned, or evidentially empty... lacks critical efficacy' which, as illustrated with the above example, can reflect badly on the critic (Kidd, 2016; 185). Certain occupations such as academia and science require robust vice-charging. These disciplines 'should be held to higher epistemic standards and so be expected to forswear the use of cheap and easy rhetorical vice-charges' (Kidd, 2016; 185). It is only through the 'division of critical labour' (Kidd, 2016; 186) that disciplines such as psychology and philosophy can cooperate to further gain understanding of vices and vice-charging.

Taking Kidd's understanding of robust and rhetorical vice-charges, let us now use this information and apply it to Jemima's enquiry and see the result yielded if one was to vice-charge Jemima. To recap: Jemima has inflated views and a strong belief that her investigation into Holocaust Denial is competent and truthful. The sources from which Jemima gains her information act as confirmation biases. Jemima's investigation only follows information that adheres to her current belief system on The Holocaust. Jemima has (1) come to accept that the sources of information she uses (as illustrated in section II.i) are truthful and exoteric in nature, combined with the belief that (2) outside agents and their information are false. From this, we can conclude that Jemima is dogmatic in her enquiry.

Whilst this might be an extreme case, such dogmatic enquiries can still take place. I use 'dogmatism' here as it is closely related to 'closed- mindedness', which is considered a 'stealthy vice' (Cassam, 2019) meaning that 'a person can be highly dogmatic without

knowing what dogmatism is' (Cassam, 2019; 148)¹³. Simply put, stealthy vices 'obstruct their detection and are inherently hard to detect' (Cassam, 2019; 145). This same principle can be applied to closed-mindedness: to be aware of closed-mindedness, one must have a degree of open-mindedness. Now, let us propose that the critic in calling out Jemima has offered a robust vice-charge. The critic has offered several pieces of information on the received account of The Holocaust, through various modes: photographs, first-hand accounts, newsletters etc. They have submitted evidence to show how David Icke and David Irving are wrong. Yet still, Jemima rejects this information. Trying to dissuade Jemima from her belief in Holocaust Denial would be unsuccessful. As Jemima is attached to her own line of enquiry, she has no possibility of knowing about her dogmatism or closed-mindedness as they evade her detection. To Jemima, she believes that her investigation has yielded a discovery that the Holocaust was faked. The critic has been active in their robust vice-charge but the approval of the charge here is on the part of the target, not the critic. The critic has provided a clear robust vice-charge with evidence to support the charge. Yet, Jemima cannot accept the charge on the grounds that her epistemic vices are stealthy by nature: her dogmatism evades her detection.

At the beginning of this section, I mention three desiderata: critic, target and audience. Up to this point, there has only been a brief mention of stealthy vices (Cassam, 2019). Whilst I have touched upon the duties of the critic and the reception of the vice-charge on the target, I have not mentioned the audience. The audience's role is of equal importance to the other desideratum. I want to discuss the audience's duty in a correct vice-charge in the following section. I do this because stealthy vices obstruct detection by the agent harbouring the vice and those who view it. To search and become conscious of these vices is more difficult for the critic and so this raises the opportunity for the audience to become active in the charge. However, it does introduce questions that must be answered: if someone is closed-minded, how can the individual be made aware of what vice they possess? Moreover, does this mean that closed-mindedness can be considered a capital vice—a vice from which all others radiate?

ii. Charging Someone Feeding into their Stealthy Vices: Acquisition and Revision Responsibility

¹³ For more information on dogmatism, see Cassam, (2019).

As a recap, Jemima exhibits stealthy vices in her enquiry. These stealthy vices evade detection not just by those who view them, but those who have them (Cassam, 2019). As expressed, closed-mindedness is a prime example of a stealthy vice. Closed-mindedness goes undetected as to be aware of the vice, one must have a degree of open-mindedness (Cassam, 2019; 147). As Jemima's belief in Holocaust Denial proves dissatisfactory for the critic, how can we correctly vice-charge Jemima of the vices she is unconscious of? How can we make Jemima aware of the closed-minded nature of her investigations? To combat this, Cassam turns to 'acquisition responsibility' and revision responsibility'.

The acquisition responsibility solution can be defined as 'person S being held accountable for vice V to the extent that S's past actions, omissions, choices, or decisions resulted in acquiring or developing V' (Cassam, 2019; 124). For revision responsibility, 'an epistemic vice which S is accountable for is one that S has the ability to control or revise' (Cassam, 2019; 124). Applying this to an epistemically vicious agent (one that feeds into their vices): where person S is a member of a closed off social epistemic structure, can S be held responsible for exhibiting their vices? If not, then who can be held accountable?

To answer such pressing questions, let us suppose that Jemima has a friend (Anton). They are friends as they share commonalities in their beliefs. The major difference though is that Anton is a member of a closed social epistemic structure (e.g., a cult). I raise cult membership here solely for the fact that cults are vicious social epistemic structures that provide esoteric information, damaging to one's epistemic endeavours. Additionally, cults have been compared to echo-chambers: 'an epistemic community which creates significant disparity in trust between members and non-members' (Nguyen, 2018; 151). Both cult membership and echo- chambers can lead to the furthering of epistemic vices such as arrogance, hubris and vanity to name a few. The hypothetical example can be found below.

Jemima and Anton believe in the same pieces of information found and spend hours both sharing and discussing their information with each other. Unbeknown to Jemima, Anton is part of a cult. Anton introduces Jemima to a few cult members in separate social settings, thus concealing the fact he is part of this cult. In Jemima's discussions with Anton's friends, Jemima's beliefs are understood and accepted by the people she is introduced to. Some beliefs shared pertain to the Holocaust being a myth created by the allies during WWII for their own ends, and the belief of state-supported Holocaust

denial in Iran¹⁴. All interactions made with Anton and his friends, plus the commonalities in beliefs lead Jemima to have unfounded trust in Anton. There are no grounds for Jemima not to believe in Anton. As time progresses, both Jemima and Anton share more information whilst simultaneously rejecting outside information, the sources of the information, and the agents that provide said information. A consequence of Jemima's unfounded trust in Anton has led to her unofficially joining the cult that she is still unconscious of. Jemima's closed-minded and dogmatic nature has enabled her to remain true to her belief in Holocaust denial and share such information with people she has trusted, namely Anton. This prompts the question: can Jemima be held revision or acquisition responsible for falling victim to joining a cult via her stealthy epistemic vices?

It cannot be the case that Jemima is revision responsible for joining the cult. Jemima's stealthy epistemic vices of dogmatism and closed-mindedness cannot be controlled nor can they be revised due to their evasive nature. Rather, Jemima could be held acquisition responsible. Jemima chose to trust Anton. The correspondence of Holocaust denial in Jemima and Anton's belief system, is where such trust stemmed from. The combined decision to omit opposing information to their beliefs and to act upon, share and discuss information they believe to be true, resulted in the strengthening of Jemima's stealthy epistemic vices. In this respect Jemima can also be blamed for her subscription to the cult, even though it may have been subconscious as she has the power to choose whether to believe in Anton and to trust him. Nevertheless, it is one thing for an outsider to be aware of Jemima's epistemic vices and consider her responsible for her closed-mindedness and dogmatism; it is another thing for Jemima to accept it.

If it is the case the individual is neither revision nor acquisition responsible, there are degrees of blameworthiness (Cassam, 2019). As Jemima cannot be blamed as she is unaware of the epistemically vicious nature of her enquiry as exhibited through her stealthy vices. Even though Jemima cannot be blamed, this does not mean that someone should not be blamed for Jemima's cult membership as a by-product of her vices. Jemima cannot exercise voluntary control over vice V as V's responsibility belongs to another agent. If Jemima

¹⁴ Examples of Holocaust Denial can be found on the online source United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (n.d.). See bibliography for details.

cannot be blamed, the next candidate held accountable is Jemima's trustworthy source and member of the cult, Anton. Now, Anton can be held responsible due to the exchanging of information ultimately upholding his and Jemima's belief system, but he can only be partially blamed. Anton would have been recruited in a similar way to Jemima but through a different individual. In turn, Anton's trust is placed on this individual.

So far, Jemima and Anton cannot be blamed for their epistemically vicious enquiry, but Anton can be held partially responsible. Despite this, it doesn't mean that someone cannot be held responsible. The individual that can be held entirely responsible for both Jemima and Anton's cult membership is the cult leader, who acts as a kingpin for the group. The cult leader is the mouthpiece for the cult to a filtered outside world. The leader enables the cult to become vicious in their enquiry by actively discrediting sources of information. Actively discrediting information that goes against the cult, in turn, reinforces the group members to be epistemically vicious in their endeavours—in this case, Holocaust denial. It is the cult leader who allows this disinformation to spread through the cult.

For now, I want to return to one of Kidd's desiderata for epistemic vice-charging: the audience. Without critic credibility, there is no need for the audience to engage in critical reflection of their own vices (stealthy or not) from the charge made.

iii. Critic Credibility in Kidd's 'Vice-charging'

It is important that the audience is recognised in a vice-charge. If the target does not accept the testimony of the critic, the audience must be prepared to step in to either accept the charge posed or question the charge of the critic (Kidd, 2016; 184). The critic's credibility is also necessary to consider. Cassam writes that if there is no credibility awarded to the critic, then the target has no reason to engage in critical reflection (Cassam, 2019). Nevertheless, as all three parties of the vice-charge are of equal importance, I go further to argue that without critic credibility the audience need not engage in critical reflection.

Fricker's work on epistemic injustice provides a deeper look into critic credibility in vice-charging someone and exhibiting their epistemic vices. In Fricker's theory (2007) she touches upon two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical

injustice. I intend to focus solely on testimonial injustice as it is relevant to assessment of Kidd's theory of vice-charging and the difficulty in vice- charging an individual.¹⁵

For Fricker, testimonial practices pertaining to prejudicial dysfunction result in the knower/speaker either having credibility excess or deficit (Fricker, 2007; 17). Testimonial injustices wrong the knower/speaker, as the applied credibility excess/deficit derives from concerns that aren't relevant to discussion (Fricker, 2007;17). Such prejudices include sexual, political, educational, racial, and more (Fricker, 2007; 27). Fricker labels such items as 'tracker prejudices' (Fricker, 2007; 27). These prejudices follow individuals through different dimensions of social activity. Fricker takes the racial prejudice in the prosecution of Tom Robinson from *To Kill a Mockingbird* to exemplify this issue¹⁶. In Tom Robinson's testimony, he suffers from 'identity prejudicial credibility deficit' (Fricker, 2007; 28) which takes place in four stages:

1. Tom Robinson's (knower/speaker) report conveys knowledge
2. Tom's audience, the courtroom, do not believe his testimony
3. Non-acceptance of the testimony is due to the audience harbouring racial prejudice against Tom
4. The relationship between Tom and his audience is one of social power, in which the audience have control.

The critics' testimony from the vice-charge is received 'in virtue of the perceptual deliverances of well-trained testimonial sensibility' (Fricker, 2007; 71). If the critic is a reliable source and carries out a successful robust epistemic vice-charge, then this is an active critical reception. Those familiar with the text know that Tom Robinson did not commit the crime he is punished for. The critic (jury), however, isn't a reliable source, hence the identity prejudicial credibility deficit placed on Tom.

¹⁵ As a side- note, testimonial injustice can lead to hermeneutical injustice, that is, when 'testimonial injustices structurally affect what is included in a collective pool of knowledge it leads to the underrepresentation of marginalised groups' (Byskov, 2021). A contemporary example is the misrepresentation and undermining of the trans community. Transphobic commentary usually follows that 'those who menstruate' and 'women' are synonymous with one another--that gender and sex are both one and the same. Similarly, the pretence of class-analysis (Class- Reductionism) as a way to dismiss the concerns of marginalised groups, in this case, those of the trans community, merely undermines the greater issue at hand. That class disparity will not end the issue of transphobia or eradicate Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) ideology. For more information on epistemic injustices, see Fricker (2007). For a feminist reading of gender politics, see Elliot (2009).

¹⁶ Fricker (2007; 23)

Having introduced Fricker's account (2007) and Kidd's epistemic vice-charging, I want to return to Jemima's dogmatism and closed-mindedness in Holocaust Denial and apply this to a vice-charge. Suppose the critic is vice-charging Jemima on feeding into her epistemic vices, obstructing knowledge acquisition on the received account of the Holocaust. Remember, that for a correct vice-charge there must be a critical reception of the audience and all parties must be present: the target of the vice-charge (Jemima), the critic (the individual vice-charging Jemima) and the audience. The critic confronts Jemima with different forms of documentation, showcasing that the Holocaust took place during the Second World War. Such forms of evidence include photographs, first-hand accounts, texts written on the event and artifacts (shoes, jewellery, clothing, ID cards and more). However, whilst the critic has brought forth pieces of evidence, Jemima and the audience reject the critics vice-charge. To the audience, the evidence is plausible, yet they deem it as fake news labelling all pieces of evidence as forms of propaganda, used to dissuade the audience and Jemima from what Jemima believes to be the truth—Holocaust Denial.

In this example there are separate outcomes for both the audience and Jemima. On the one hand, we know that Jemima is epistemically dogmatic, making it extremely difficult for her to be aware of her closed-mindedness. For the audience, the non-acceptance of the critic's testimony is driven through educational ability (via political motive). The audience believe that the critic lacks education on the whole argument on the Holocaust as the critic does not consider the audience's side of the argument. However, to the critic, they know that the information is false. Yet, to the audience, they believe the critic is blinded, and so the charge is politically motivated rather than it having something to do with Jemima's stealthy vices, which is why they label all the information presented by the critic as fake news.

Furthermore, whilst the critic is well-versed on the Holocaust; from the prejudice in play, the audience believe the critic lacks holistic understanding of the Holocaust. Jemima and the audience have power over the critic's testimony. Whilst the reader is aware that Jemima and the audience are in fact false (the audience being false here as they see the vice-charge as politically motivated); the hypothetical scenario signifies how the critic's testimony is rejected. Testimony in vice-charging requires active critical reception, as Cassam expresses:

‘A natural thought is that when one is told something by another person, one has to work out whether to believe them. Relevant questions include ‘Are you trustworthy?’, ‘Are they likely to know what they are talking about in this case?’, ‘Does what they’re telling me fly in the face of things that I already know?’’ (Cassam, 2019; 156)

If there is prejudicial credibility excess/deficit, such questions could be damaging to knowledge claims: they uphold a vicious belief system as opposed to a virtuous one.

Thus far I have established what makes a stealthy vice and certain methods of detection. Moreover, I have assessed Kidd’s three desiderata on correctly vice-charging someone and the application of epistemic injustices of testimony applied to vice-charging. In reading Cassam’s, *Vices of the Mind* (2019), there proves to be a substantial amount of information as to the nature of the stealthy vices, dogmatism and closed- mindedness. I want to now take this information and move forward to consider whether there is a certain vice, or a collection of vices that precede all others—a ‘capital vice’ (Kidd, 2017).

III. Capital Vice(s)

As mentioned, Cassam focuses on the idea of vices that evade detection by the agent and their audience. One vice that is a central stealthy vice is that of closed-mindedness. Kidd’s (2017) paper *Capital Epistemic Vices* focuses on three specific questions creating a taxonomy for a capital vice:

1. What is a capital vice?
2. Which vices are capital vices?
3. How do capital vices relate to off-shoot vices?

Rather than assuming closed-mindedness is a capital vice, it is best to answer the aforementioned questions, in hope of identifying if there is a central vice from which all others radiate from. To firstly understand said ‘capital vices’ I believe it is best to make

sense of its counterpart—‘cardinal virtues’—and also to examine the claim that pride is a capital moral vice.

In the *Summa*, Aquinas argued that cardinal virtues are chief virtues (Bejczy, 2011). Taken from Ancient Greek philosophy, Aquinas incorporates four virtues into the Early Christian Tradition: prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice (Emsley, 2005).

- Prudence perfects reason.
- Justice is the doing good virtue (*boni factiva*)
- Fortitude and temperance protect one from the passions (*conservativae huius boni*)

- (Bejczy, 2011; 154)

These four virtues are ascribed the title, ‘cardinal virtues’, as they are the foundations for living a virtuous life. Whilst this idea has remained, ‘pride’ has become an interesting topic of discussion between theologians and philosophers. The early Christian tradition considered pride to be vicious, but some Humean philosophers now argue that pride is virtuous with ‘humility’ being an epistemic vice. As Lorenzo Greco (2019) highlights, ‘pride is identified in the Christian Tradition as the cardinal sin rather than it being a virtuous character trait’ (Greco, 2019; 101). Evidence of Greco’s claim can be traced back to Ben Sira (200- 175 BCE) in The Book of Sirach, where it is expressed plainly that ‘...pride is the beginning of sin’. (Sirach 10: 13- 23). Similarly, Pope Gregory I identified pride as being opposed to all virtues that exist within the tradition: ‘pride by no means is content with the destruction of one virtue; it raises itself up against all the powers of the soul, and like an all-pervading and poisonous disease corrupts the body’ (Gregory I, 2019).

Moving from the Early Christian tradition, Bernard Mandeville presents a morally neutral analysis of pride. For Mandeville, pride is distinguished from what he labels as ‘self-liking’—the notion being that we are all born with a passion for self-adoration: ‘[it] excites in us the Love of Praise, and a Desire to be thought well of by others’ (Mandeville, 2005; 53). Once self-liking is corrupted by excessive overuse and becomes offensive to others, this is where it is labelled as ‘pride’, for it ‘renders us odious’ (Mandeville, 2005; 53).

For Hume on the other hand, pride is positive whilst humility provides the negative impression on the agent (Hume, 2011). As Hume says: ‘as our idea of ourself is more or less advantageous, we feel either of those opposite affections, and are elated by pride, or dejected with humility’ (Hume, 2011; 243). Additionally, ‘the beauty of our person, of itself, and by its very appearance gives pleasure, as well as pride; and its deformity, pain as well as humility (Hume, 2011; 249). The Humean argument here displays pride as being virtuous and humility as being vicious. This line of argument is further developed through Greco’s consideration, as he identifies that ‘when the idea of a certain thing that we find pleasant is related to the idea of ourselves, it causes in us an agreeable impression, the impression of pride’ (Greco, 2019; 107). The type of examples that pertain to Hume and Greco’s understanding, could involve the agent being praised for their intellectual abilities such as clear argumentation, delivery, ability to understand and interpret etc. Greco’s conclusion on humility is again in agreement with the Humean concept: ‘[humility provokes] a disagreeable impression when related to ourselves’ (Greco, 2019; 108).

Morally speaking, being too humble can lead to a lack of self-confidence. Even though a business manager might be wanting the best out of their team in a project, by lacking this self-confidence the team will lose direction and turn to the manager. Although, as the manager lacks confidence, they turn to the team for guidance, thus making it a vicious cycle. Even though humility can be viewed as virtuous, it can be a trait that is self-deprecating. Similarly, being too humble can be epistemically vicious paving the way for gullibility to take place. If one is overly intellectually humble, one will assume that the other person is always correct. Without critical self-reflection, accepting all pieces of information can cause conflicts in one’s belief system on what to believe and what information can be disregarded, for example becoming a smoker even after being informed on the adverse effects of tobacco¹⁷.

The moral status of pride and humility have been debated through the ages arousing both positive and negative connotations. This was discussed here since pride has been seen by some as a capital vice, although this is a claim denied by Hume. I now, though, wish to focus solely on the epistemic nature of capital vices which will allow for a succinct examination of my epistemic cluster vice theory.

¹⁷ This is known as cognitive dissonance where there is a conflict in one’s belief, attitudes, or opinions. For information on cognitive dissonance see Velleman (2000).

In contemporary philosophical literature, Rebecca DeYoung's piece, 'Glittering Vices' (2009) has proven essential in relaying the history of vice epistemology. DeYoung provides the first account of capital vices and their relevance to one's spiritual and ethical well-being. The crucial and subsequent development of capital vices didn't come about until Pope Gregory I filtered down all recognised vices to seven: pride, envy, anger, avarice, sadness, gluttony and lust (DeYoung, 2009: 32). One might recognise that these are regarded as the 7 deadly sins in traditional Christian theology¹⁸. DeYoung's enquiry centred upon her confusion on which were included and why some remained excluded (DeYoung, 2009). In turn, this brought about a re- evaluation of what a capital vice is.

To DeYoung, a capital vice is something that is self-proliferating (DeYoung, 2009: 32). A capital vice is the source of all vices that others can 'off-shoot' (DeYoung, 2009: 33). The importance of recognising capital vices is that in finding the root of one's epistemic downfall, eventually all other vices would *die off* as a consequence. Kidd's epistemic vice theory is a response to Cassam's stealthy vices (Cassam, 2015). For Kidd, closed-mindedness is considered a plausible capital vice, for closed-mindedness is the root for other *sub-vices*: 'Built into the idea of capital vices, is the principle that to possess an off-shoot vice is always to possess, even if only a subspecific form, a capital vice' (Kidd, 2017; 14)¹⁹. Battaly describes closed-mindedness as involving an 'unwillingness or inability to engage seriously with relevant intellectual options' (Battaly cited in Kidd, 2017), placing agents at an epistemic disadvantage. It must be mentioned, whilst one might not agree with Kidd's capital vice theory, there are connections amongst certain vices. Some vices may have a stronger connection with other vices. Only through further applied epistemology will theorists be able to identify why there are greater connections between some vices and not others, and whether there is a central vice.

One connection that can be noted is that of closed-mindedness being the root for dogmatism, as referenced by Cassam (2019) in the hypothetical scenario of Oliver and his 9/11 conspiracies; Battaly's case of Paul (2018) (who believes that those who commit crimes are

¹⁸ Whilst some of the vices aren't the same as one might recognise today, Kidd addresses when the alterations took place. See Kidd (2017).

²⁴It must be noted that I have reserved any examples of how closed-mindedness relates to other vices for when I present my theory and diagrams below.

broken people and Paul is unwilling to change his belief on the matter) and my example of Jemima and Holocaust Denial, earlier in the paper. Yet, it must be mentioned that one can be closed-minded without being dogmatic, but not the other way around. As Kidd observes: ‘...to be closed-minded about alternatives to one’s beliefs or views just is to be closed-minded within and about a doxastic domain’ (Kidd, 2017; 14). If Jemima was only dogmatic in her belief of Holocaust Denial, she would be aware of the counterarguments and choose to reject such. Yet as my argument alludes to Jemima’s unconscious membership of a cult, all her information is filtered through a single individual, namely the leader of the group. It is through this filtration which makes Jemima closed-minded.

Previously, I mentioned the duty of vice epistemology and now we can aim to identify if there are any connections between certain vices and whether they can relate to a capital vice. Vice epistemology as a discipline is a relatively new area in the broader scope of normative epistemology, and so there is little study into capital epistemic vices. Yet Zagzebski (1996), DeYoung (2009), Cassam (2014, 2019), Kidd (2017) and Battaly’s (2017) work provides strong foundations for further investigation. They are foundations for which the study can continue providing analysis into the various connections between vices and more importantly, to fully identify those epistemic vices that are connected. Throughout this thesis, closed-mindedness and its relationship to dogmatism is one that remains of great concern. The question remains though: is there an overlap between stealthy and epistemic vices and does this mean that capital vices can be stealthy?

Closed-mindedness, as previously mentioned, has already been identified as a stealthy vice. Additionally, Kidd’s (2017) work into capital epistemic vices identifies that closed-mindedness is a potential candidate to be a capital epistemic vice. For closed-mindedness, it can be argued that there is an overlap between a stealthy vice being a capital vice. I shall therefore further explore whether a capital epistemic vice can be a stealthy vice. To examine this, let us look at epistemic laziness.

Using epistemic laziness, consider the following two scenarios that focus on providing information on climate change to a climate denier.

Scenario *a* (epistemically lazy with respect to testimonial transmission): Agent *a* is lazy in their epistemic enquiries. The agent conscientiously searches for information but lacks the

motivation to write up the information gathered. For example, they find information on how the great barrier reef is being destroyed through climate change and know this through different modes of information (i.e., photo comparison over the last 30 years and testimonies to support their argument). However, when they are asked to present this information (written/orally) they become lazy. The agent *cannot be bothered* and so shrugs off all comments and does not engage with the argument. Here the agent is driven (as they have found the correct information from different sources and modes) but are lazy when asked to present it.

Scenario *b* (epistemically lazy with respect to evidence acquisition): agent *b* is the opposite of agent *a*. When asked to present information they are concise and succinct in their arguments on climate change destroying The Great Barrier Reef. However, once they find a single line of argumentation, they do not search any further. They do not want to look further as the examples they have found are sufficient evidence for them to present their argument.

In both scenarios we can see how such epistemic laziness can feed into closed-mindedness. For agent *a*, even though they have the evidence in front of them they do not want to present it. By not presenting this information, they are disengaging with a debate/conversation and de facto will not listen to opposing arguments. For agent *b*, their closed-mindedness is easier to examine: *b* has a single line of argument and does not deem it necessary to find other pieces of information. In turn, they have their line of argument and evidence to support the belief that climate change is altering The Great Barrier Reef. That is all that matters to agent *b*. In both scenarios, we can see that *a*, and *b*'s epistemic laziness feeds into closed-mindedness.

In my analysis, I have argued that closed-mindedness could be the root from which all other vices off-shoot. However, to go one step further I have argued there to be connections between epistemic vices, stealthy or not, and that some epistemic vices have greater connections to some than others. For example, there is a strong relationship between intellectual pride, hubris, vanity, and arrogance. This I argue is an epistemic vice cluster that leads to a lack of effective enquiry on the part of the agent. The relationship between vanity and arrogance is stronger than that between carelessness and vanity. Even though there may be a degree of carelessness in one's enquiry, vanity and ignorance are synonymous with the

agent believing their enquiry is above all others. This is determined by the fact that the agent believes they have a deeper understanding of the area they are researching to their peers.

As previously mentioned, vice epistemology is in its embryonic stages and so there is not a breadth of information out there. The epistemic vice cluster theory I shall present is my own theory devised as an extension of the works of Zagzebski (1996), Battaly (2016), Kidd (2017) and Cassam (2019). The theory offers further insight into vice epistemology and investigation into authority and knowledge in our post-truth society. I shall go into more detail in the following section. The ‘Epistemic Cluster Vice Theory’ and further theoretical examination in vice epistemology, would promote links between clusters leading to a more refined theory. Yet for now, I shall present three parts to the theory: (i) offering the theory itself, (ii) the interconnectivity of the clusters and (iii) an illustration of how Kidd’s capital vice of closed-mindedness is correct through my epistemic cluster vice theory.

IV. Epistemic Cluster Vice Theory

The tenet of Cassam’s obstructivism is that epistemic vices obstruct the gaining, retention, and transmission of knowledge (Cassam, 2019). Such epistemic vices also promote the loss of knowledge. It is with this idea that my enquiry lies.

In my investigation I have identified that some vices are represented in their respective groups. What I will present are three diagrams. The first will illustrate the different epistemic vice clusters. This will provide a clearer presentation of what my theory will show, namely that certain vices are clustered together. For example, ‘intellectual pride’: intellectual pride has a greater connection to the vices of arrogance, hubris, and vanity. To understand this connection, take the hypothetical example of rejecting climate change on the Great Barrier Reef. Suppose the agent does not accept that climate change is real and thus is not having adverse effects on the Reef. The agent has a plethora of information to support their claim whether this be articles, books, photos, and graphs. Now, the agent believes that the information they acquire is superior to that of their peers. This alone is a sense of arrogance evoked through their intellectual pride. The fact they believe the information they have acquired is superior to others is arrogant. Each of these vices fortifies their belief in their

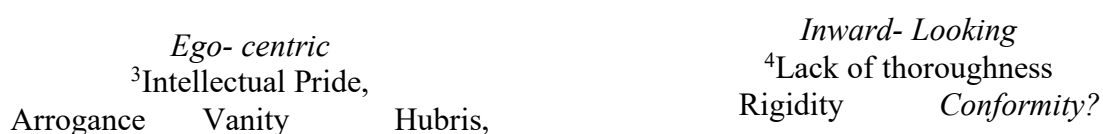
epistemic abilities and endeavours—even if such endeavours are wrong. To group intellectual pride with idleness would not produce such a strong connection. To be intellectually proud of one’s epistemic endeavours, one would have to be active in their enquiry. Being idle is passive: they take no notice of the truth value of statements.

My second diagram will represent how these clusters can feed into others. In some cases, an agent utilising one vice can invoke another vice, causally. For example, a lack of thoroughness in one’s enquiry can lead to epistemic carelessness. The agent has not been thoughtful in gathering their information. On the other hand, utilising one vice could provide a conceptual connection to another vice. To be intellectually prideful just means to be epistemically negligent as the agent has no care for other enquiry than their own as it could disrupt the agent’s belief system. I shall come to elaborate on this later. The final diagram will present the levels of obstruction to knowledge acquisition. Not only this, but how it can promote the loss of knowledge. Alike the aforementioned, I will come to discuss this shortly.

I must mention, I shall not be focusing on motivational vices e.g., the vice of ‘sloth’ that DeYoung (2009) offers, as the epistemic vice of ‘sloth’ would be ‘epistemic laziness.’ In Kidd’s capital vice paper, he states: ‘built into the idea of capital vices is a principle that to possess an off-shoot vice is always to possess, even if only a subspecific form, a capital vice’ (Kidd, 2017;14). Additionally, ‘further features are needed. If the early theorists are right, we would also need to show that closed-mindedness admits of *other* sub-vices’ (Kidd, 2017; 15). My theory will dictate how closed-mindedness fosters other vices in their respective clusters. The epistemic vices I shall focus on in my theory are as follows:

Epistemic laziness, hubris, vanity, intellectual pride, arrogance, lack of thoroughness, rigidity, epistemic laziness, negligence, prejudice, closed- mindedness, dogmatism, insensitivity to detail, idleness, obtuseness, and conformity.²⁰

Below is an illustration of the six epistemic vice clusters and the central cluster:



²⁰ These vices are collected from three texts: Bishop and Trout (2004); Cassam (2019) and Zagzebski (1996).

Closed- Mindedness,
Dogmatism

Injustice
¹Prejudice
30

Oblivious

i. Understanding the Clusters

a. Injustice Cluster

The name for this cluster is taken from Miranda Fricker's (2007) piece, 'Epistemic Injustice'. Fricker presents injustices through prejudices that can be tracked through different social dimensions i.e., political, sexual, racial, educational, and more.

The courtroom scene from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 2010) is a perfect example of the racial prejudice that Tom Robinson faces in the case of raping Mayella Ewell. With the racial disparity harboured by the jury, they hold Tom accountable. This racial prejudice is evident upon reading Atticus Finch's (Tom's lawyer) internal monologue:

'The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in the courtroom, be he any colour of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box...' (Lee, 2010; 295- 297)

As the reader may notice, the tracker cluster only contains the vice of prejudice. My reasoning for such is that all other vices listed are character vices. Prejudice is not just a vice, but an attitude. Prejudice is invoked through an individual's disapproval of someone's membership in a social group. A prejudice cannot be changed whereas traits such as carelessness, rigidity, and idleness can be changed—however difficult it may be. To make an epistemically idle agent active would only change a single part of their cognitive faculties.

To change one's prejudice would mean an alteration of one's whole character rather than a single cognitive function.

b. Non- Motivating Cluster

To be epistemically responsible is to 'display the virtue(s) epistemic internalists take to be central to justification (e.g., coherence, having good reason, fitting the evidence)' (Bishop, 2000; 179). To be epistemically lazy/irresponsible is the direct oppose of this. Its link with idleness is a simple one as to be idle means to be lazy.

Suppose one is looking for information on how the UK Government operates: understanding the House of Commons and Lords; how laws are passed; who is in charge etc. Rather than seeking information for themselves, the agent asks an individual. The individual then tells the agent that they must 'search for themselves'. Rather than having the information *handed* to them, the agent has to be active in their search for UK Government operations. The agent considers this to be 'too much effort' and so their question is never fully answered. This is an instance of epistemic laziness. Even though the agent has chosen to acquire information, their chosen source (the individual consulted) doesn't prove helpful: the agent presents a lazy attitude in their epistemic endeavours.²¹

Generally speaking, the terms laziness and idleness are used interchangeably to denote an individual who is in a state of inactivity. This understanding is transferable epistemically, as epistemic laziness and idleness both prohibit the acquisition of knowledge. Both laziness and idleness are used interchangeably to describe one's character. The same can be said about these character traits when applied epistemically, hence their grouping in the non- motivating cluster. It is only when they are applied to other clusters, do the vices provoke other epistemic vices. Later in the paper, my second illustration will demonstrate how epistemic

²⁸ Whilst one might consider holding the source accountable, it is the agent's decision to ask an individual rather than searching for themselves or for an expert in this specific field. That being said, when it comes to searching for information that one isn't educated in a specific discipline, be it medicine, psychology, law, biomechanics and others, then it is best for the agent to ask an individual who is well-educated in this area. Once such information is acquired, then the agent takes this information as a foundation to search for others. For example, an agent wants to understand law and how it operates yet doesn't understand the meaning of Jurisprudence. With this being a difficult area to conceptualise it is best if an expert is consulted in order to explain it in layman's terms, namely that jurisprudence is the philosophy of law. Once they have the foundational knowledge, then the agent can search for other pieces of information as they are equipped with the necessary foundational knowledge, prior to their initial investigation.

laziness links with epistemic negligence. Similarly, I will show how epistemic idleness can lead to an insensitivity to detail when conducting an epistemic enquiry.

c. Ego- centric vices

Intellectual pride, hubris, arrogance, and vanity all correlate to a notion of superiority in the agent and/or their enquiry. If one vice is visible, it influences the other vices. Let us suggest that Jemima is feeding into the vice of intellectual pride. She believes her enquiry is of greater epistemic quality than others. Jemima is not only aware of the fact she has knowledge on the subject, but she is over-confident. Her wider reading only strengthens her confidence. Not only this, but she surrounds herself with like-minded individuals, especially those in her family who have influenced her and friends. Similarly, her intellectual pride and hubris have enabled both her arrogance and vanity to come into play. She considers herself an *expert* on Holocaust Denial. In Jemima simply believing her enquiries are better than all others, this shows a level of arrogance and vanity about her search for knowledge. In turn, for Jemima she sees her enquiry as above her peers and those who disagree with her.

It is important to recognise that the arrogance and vanity that Jemima harbours reinforces her idea that her expertise outweighs any argument posed to her. If one was to vice-charge Jemima and offer evidence to support this charge, she would simply *shrug it off*, condemning the evidence as fake news or another form of disinformation.

Upon reaching the conspiracy theory section (part 2.II) of my thesis, I shall come to identify why this is damaging to the acquisition of knowledge and the effect it has on social and political discourse.

d. Inward- looking

In one's search for information, it is argued that branching outwards, exploring other entry points, and looking for information regardless of whether it fits one's belief system is epistemically virtuous. The agent needs to accept that pieces of information they search for might not correlate with their belief system. This isn't the case for the inward-looking cluster. A lack of thoroughness provides ways for one to be rigid in their enquiry. In this, the agent is only concerned with a single-entry point into gaining information and knowledge of a specific area, namely their own.

Person *a* has belief *b*. *A* searches to find information that upholds *b* but does not know where to begin searching or what pieces of information to look for. *A* then decides that plugging keywords into a search engine could prove beneficial. To their surprise, this works, and *a* is able to acquire knowledge on *b*. However, *a* is now only concerned with this line of thought. They have found information that reinforces their belief, thus there is no need to search for any different lines of thought. The agent has found an entry point into a line of enquiry that answers the agent's question. Whilst it can be seen as beneficial as *a* has specialised knowledge; they don't branch out beyond their belief system. Everything they search for only reinforces their argument and one side of the enquiry. With this description, we can see how a lack of thoroughness can lead to rigidity in an individual's search for information.

e. Oblivious vices

Simply put, to be insensitive to detail means to be careless in one's enquiry. Negligence can be considered a similar case to carelessness. For Smith in actions that can be considered negligent, 'the agent knowingly acts in a manner than falls below the standard of care applicable to such activities' (Smith, 2013; 1). Negligence in law can aid in understanding epistemic negligence as a vice. In law, there are four stages to understanding negligence: duty, breach, causality, and damage. Each of these sections are applicable to epistemology:

One could argue that it is the *duty* of Jemima's epistemic endeavours to acquire knowledge and information on Holocaust Denial. Jemima can *breach* this duty by failing to exercise knowledge acquisition on her topic, namely Holocaust Denial. Jemima deciding to refrain from taking in knowledge on the area she was researching *causes* Jemima to lack knowledge. The *damage* caused to Jemima is the lack of efficacy in acquiring information or knowledge. Her negligent behaviour has left her with no solid foundations for engaging in debates on the Holocaust and for Jemima to offer her opinions. I must state, though, my theory requires further examination. Only through further examination could I prove that there are more connections between epistemic vices, or there are more vices altogether.

Thus far, I have argued there are five clusters encircling the central cluster. I have decided to leave closed-mindedness and dogmatism until the end as I consider them to be the capital vice cluster in my epistemic cluster theory. I recognise the central cluster to be the main cluster: whilst both closed-mindedness and dogmatism can feed into some of the other vices within their clusters, all other clusters can feed into the central cluster (in)directly.

Having examined the connections between vices in their clusters, I will now present my second diagram on the connections made between different clusters. In this upcoming section I will do two things. This should allow for a clearer understanding of why the vices are in clusters. Moreover, I will examine the ways these clusters feed into the central cluster. This can be done ‘directly’ or ‘indirectly’, but I shall elaborate on this momentarily.

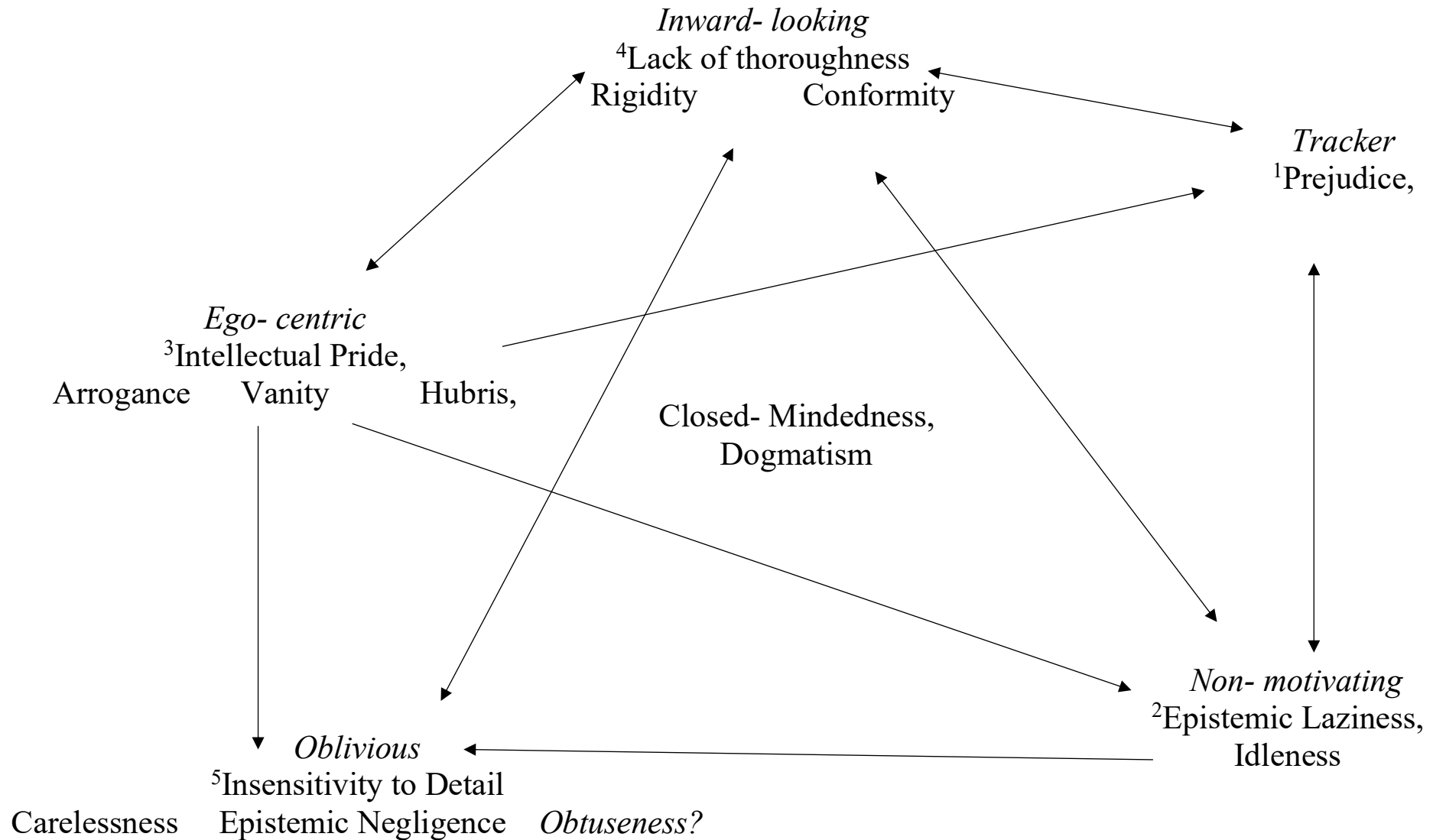
Key:

Cluster number: $X...$

Single connection: $\longrightarrow$

Reverse connection: $\longleftrightarrow$

ii. Epistemic Vice Cluster Connections



As the diagram's key dictates, clusters can have two possible kinds of links: single or reverse connection. Certain clusters can link to another cluster which feeds back into itself. I shall make this clear momentarily. For now, it is necessary to mention that the connections made are either causal or conceptual. To illustrate this, take the notion of vanity. If one was vain in their epistemic endeavours, there is no need for the agent to go searching for more information. They are not just content but overly confident that the information acquired is the truth and perceptive. Resulting from this it can lead to an insensitivity to detail or to an insensitivity to detail. This is a causal connection: one brings about the other.

A conceptual connection is more deep-rooted. Take the traditional example of a 'bachelor'. Being unmarried has a connection with being a bachelor. It's not that being unmarried *causes* one to be a bachelor, they are tied together conceptually: to be an unmarried man, is to be a bachelor. If we take the notion of prejudice, this can be conceptually tied to closed-mindedness: the agent isn't concerned with a certain line of thought/argument due to their prejudices (sex, race, gender, age etc) and so this means they have a degree of closed-minded. If the agent did not listen to people who were a different colour to them, this prejudice invokes the closed-minded nature of their belief systems. To be prejudiced is to be closed-minded. Again, it must be stated that my theory is in its embryonic stages and further investigation will be needed at a higher level to cement this idea in vice epistemology²².

I must state that in exploring the clusters, the inward-looking cluster can be closely related with the ego-centric cluster. I shall express how momentarily. Let us now, though, look at some consequences of my cluster theory.

Tracker Cluster Connection

As seen with Tom Robinson's case, prejudices cannot sway an individual in their beliefs. If prejudices precede our enquiry, when they come into play, we become rigid in our enquiry. Opposing pieces of information and other entry points to the same issue will not be touched upon or even considered. Let us say for example the agent searching for knowledge is sexist. From this single prejudice the agent may believe they are of a greater level of intelligence

²⁹ The purpose of this theory not only adds to an exponentially growing discipline in philosophy, but I hope that it can provide an interdisciplinary examination in areas such as law, education, philosophy, and Information Technology.

simply because of gender, rather than epistemic ability. The sexist agenda held by the agent undermines the information, beliefs, sources and, more importantly, the integrity of the opposing gender.

Non- Motivating Cluster

Cluster two leads directly to cluster five as epistemic laziness can lead to epistemic negligence, obstructing our epistemic endeavours. Epistemic negligence is a lack of concern in the interest of others. These beliefs lack sufficient concern for others and aren't well founded. For example, the belief that the world was created in seven days does not put others at risk. However, the belief that science is funded by the wealthy for their own agenda can cause the belief that vaccines cause autism²³, and puts others at risk. This is an example of epistemic negligence. If this information is sufficient for the agent, then they need not search further. From this it can be considered that the agent is epistemically lazy as they require no further knowledge or information. The connection between epistemic laziness and epistemic negligence is not a necessary one, but one that is sufficient to cause epistemic negligence. There are two *desiderata* for epistemic laziness evoking epistemic negligence:

1. If the information sought is harmful to others
2. The agent who acquired the information, searches no further.

In the same cluster, idleness simply means to be careless and being epistemically lazy can lead to insensitivity to detail. Similarly, the non-motivating cluster links with the inward-looking cluster: to be epistemically lazy prohibits a thorough and effective enquiry. If I am lazy in my search for information and knowledge, how can one have an effective and thorough enquiry?

Ego- Centric Cluster

This cluster is different from the rest as it feeds into all other clusters. In the ego-centric cluster, the individual harbours the notion that their enquiries and points of view are superior to all others e.g., vanity can place too much trust on oneself. When placing too much trust on

²³ The Case of Andrew Wakefield test on the MMR vaccine causing autism was rejected as it was founded on false information, with results and test being fabricated. See: Rao, T. S. Andrade, C. (2011)

oneself, it invites the individual to believe they are searching effectively for information and knowledge. Whilst this might be vainglorious, it can also be identified as a sense of intellectual pride in their enquiry. Their intellectual pride means there is no need for the individual to familiarise themselves with different entry points to the enquiry.

The ego-centric cluster can also feed into the inward-looking cluster. Following from the same argument, if the agent reaches the conclusion that their enquiry is superior to that of others, this can be established as pride. Yet this indirectly links with the epistemic vice of 'lack of thoroughness'. The agent knowingly looks no further for information as they know their enquiry to be above all others (pride); this means that there could be other pieces of vital information which remain untouched/ examined/ analysed (lack of thoroughness). Through the agent's prideful nature, this has led to a lack of thoroughness in their enquiry. In turn, this makes their whole argumentation and research rigid. Through their pride the agent decides their argumentation is above all others. Therefore, their enquiry is rigid. Their pride is what prevents them exploring further and doing deeper research. From this, the individual is then left with a rigid enquiry with limited scope all through their ego-centric vices. (This contrasts with the Humean view above that pride is a virtue.)

Oblivious Cluster

I have placed this cluster last, as there aren't many connections that branch outwards from the oblivious cluster. The main one that stands out is the connection to the inward-looking cluster, specifically a lack of thoroughness. Being insensitive to detail makes for a superficial enquiry. It only aids the agent in the peripheries of their investigation. Say an individual wants to learn about the Wall Street Crash. In historical research, there are many key figures that need researching: years, times, people/ organisations involved, economic influence and more. These are all essential to a thorough enquiry. Now, the agent does their research but is insensitive to such detail. They know that the Wall Street Crash happened in the USA in 1929. However, they do not follow up with how the process happened. The agent does not know that 29th October 1929 is referred to as 'Black Tuesday'. They are unaware that \$16 billion were traded with prices plummeting and how this consequently led to The Great Depression in the 1930s. In this the agent is thoughtless in conducting their research. They only have a limited understanding and have a rough idea that 'too much money was traded, and the stock prices plummeted with no buyers'. It is clear to see that this superficial enquiry presents a lack of thoroughness. From the agent's insensitivity to detail

(dates, people, economic values, times) they lack a thorough enquiry on how, when and why the Wall Street Crash took place.

Whilst connections have been made between the clusters, all clusters can be linked back to closed-mindedness and dogmatism. I place both dogmatism and closed-mindedness at the centre of all other clusters, as I take Kidd's capital epistemic vice theory using closed-mindedness to be correct. I have stated that all clusters have a link to the centre cluster, though some clusters do not have a direct link to closed-mindedness and dogmatism, e.g., carelessness. Nonetheless, through connections to other vices it creates a causal chain whereby the agent feeds into the centre cluster via separate vices. Let's take the non-motivating cluster to exemplify such. As mentioned, to be epistemically lazy/ epistemically idle, doesn't necessarily lead to closed-mindedness and dogmatism as these epistemic vices are motivational, which can easily be altered. However, there is a possibility that being epistemically lazy can lead to a lack of thoroughness (inward-looking cluster vice) in one's enquiry. This lack of thoroughness can then be used by the agent in their enquiry in which vital pieces of information and/or lines of argumentation can be unexamined or not even found by the agent. The connection made between the two clusters means that the non-motivating cluster can indirectly feed into closed-mindedness and dogmatism.

This understanding of how clusters can link together particular vices is essential for the next part of my theory. Below is an illustration of which clusters link both directly/ indirectly into the central cluster.

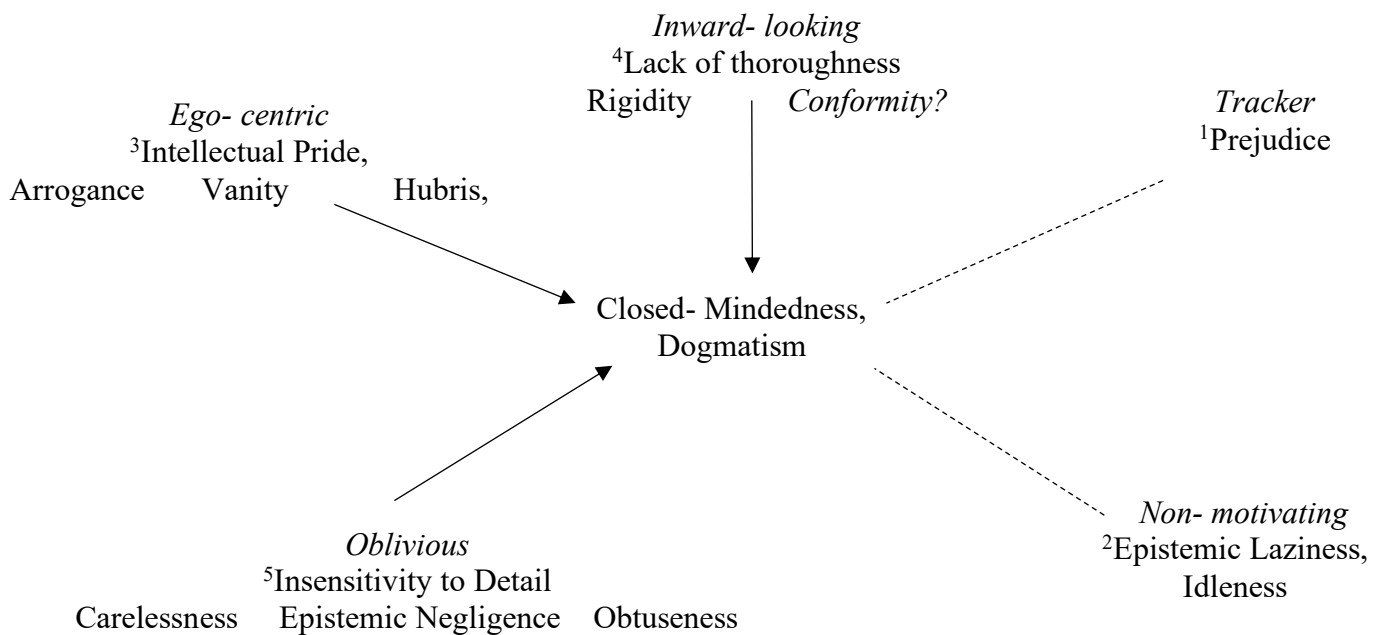
iii. Connection to Capital Vice (Kidd, 2017), ‘Closed- Mindedness’ and ‘Dogmatism’

Key:

Cluster number: ^X...

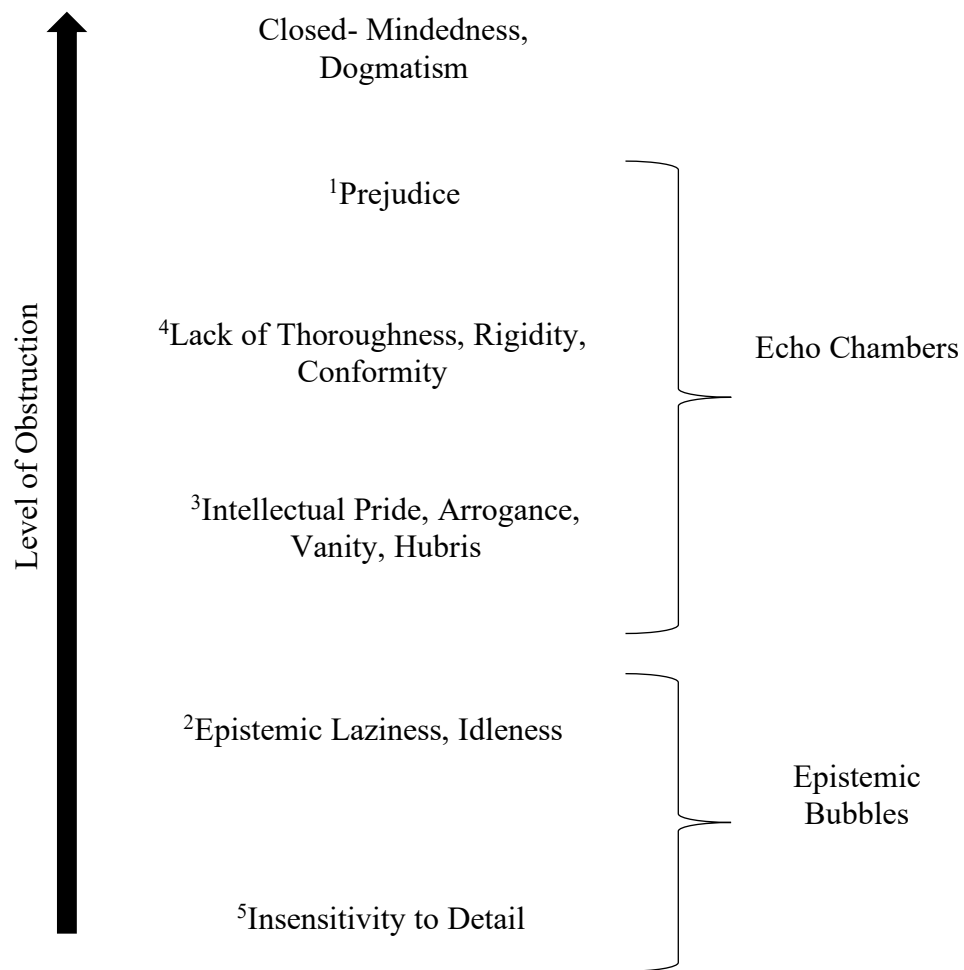
Direct connection: —————>

Indirect connection: - - - - -



The purpose of the previous diagram, as stated, illustrates which clusters feed directly/ indirectly into the central cluster. Without the examination of the first diagram (how the clusters link, and in turn lead to the central cluster) the above diagram would prove futile. For now, I feel a re- examination of the vices I have mentioned is unnecessary. Instead, I will show how the clusters that I have theorised can be ordered with respect to how much they obstruct knowledge. This is an extension of Cassam’s (2015) theory of Obstructivism. I will identify which vices I deem as providing a stronger obstruction to the acquisition, retention and transmission of knowledge. A final diagram is necessary to illustrate this point.

Epistemic Cluster Vice (ECV)
Categorisation



I will now work my way up through the levels of obstruction, starting with epistemic bubbles followed by echo chambers. I only provide a brief explanation here as I intend to go further into Nguyen's theory (2018) in the following section, pertaining to conspiracy theories and the undermining of science.

Before going further, it must be mentioned that the central cluster (closed-mindedness and dogmatism) are not featured within either echo chambers or epistemic bubbles. As all other clusters feed into the central vice cluster, take prejudice as an example. If an agent is prejudiced in their epistemic endeavours, it can be difficult to change this prejudice as it is part of their character. Once this prejudice is linked with the central cluster, this is where it becomes the most obstructive to knowledge as the agent's prejudice is tied with closed-mindedness in rejecting a certain social group. The agent's unwillingness to change their

ideas on certain groups is what makes the agent's enquiry more obstructive. It is not that the sexist agent cannot listen to key pieces of information voiced by a woman; the sexist agent chooses willingly not to. In this, they are closed-minded, and this prejudice will continue (dogmatism). As a result, their prejudice has influenced the central cluster. I will now return to analysing the clusters and consider how they link to epistemic bubbles and echo chambers.

Epistemic bubbles are less dangerous to knowledge than their counterpart, echo chambers. Nguyen argues that epistemic bubbles are easier to escape from. If we take the non-motivating cluster vices of epistemic laziness and idleness, how can we prevent the agent from feeding into such vices? Epistemic bubbles can be formed through 'no ill-intent' (Nguyen, 2018; 2). When a person is part of an epistemic bubble, they tend to follow like-minded individuals in their quest for knowledge, utilising the same informational networks, whether this be social-media or select news sources. In doing so, this can lead to contrary views and illegitimately inflates one's epistemic self-confidence. In order to prevent/eradicate such isolated epistemic endeavours, exposing the agent to alternate arguments from different sources can burst such bubbles, as Nguyen writes: 'friends make for good parties, but poor information networks (Nguyen, 2018; 6).

The former three clusters (Injustice, Inward- Looking and Ego- Centric) are difficult to eliminate in making an epistemically virtuous agent. As many have argued, and I concur with the sentiment, we are living in a post-truth society, where facts are of little importance. Simple exposure to facts doesn't prove a useful tool in removing agents from echo-chambers. In fact, exposure may do more harm than good. Suppose that I believe that anthropogenic climate change is a tool used by environmental activists for personal gain. To receive information from an outside source on an idea I have already decided on would only build on my pre-existing knowledge. I could go further and even suggest that the individual presenting such knowledge is a tool used by social activists to discredit my belief(s). This in turn strengthens my belief on anthropogenic climate change. Nguyen (2018) labels this as intellectual judo: redirecting opposing claims to support one's belief system. In looking back at the three clusters, they can all link into echo- chambers.

Tracker Cluster

As analysed, prejudice is excluding in nature, to the agent and/or the information posited. Let us say that the agent in question is politically prejudiced. The agent wouldn't accept the

views of an individual who has a different political stance. Without hesitation, the agent would reject any information offered by the individual, for example, the agent deems the opposing party of creating contempt through propaganda or conspiracy i.e., Pizzagate/QAnon conspiracy.

Non- Motivating Cluster

Being epistemically lazy means that the agent isn't concerned with different viewpoints, or modes of information. If they are content in their belief system, branching out to other sources wouldn't make a difference and wouldn't change the agents' viewpoint. They have found the information required and now nothing more is needed of them. For idleness, this feeds directly into epistemic laziness, and one becomes narrow-minded in their enquiry.

Ego- Centric Cluster

It can be argued that all the other clusters relate to one's lack-of-ability in acquiring knowledge. The ego- centric cluster pertains to this same idea of character. The vices of arrogance, hubris, vanity, and intellectual pride can be applied to other areas of one's life. Suppose that you are a strong football player. You not only have exceptional ability in both attacking and defending, but you are more mindful in the game. You see passes, shot opportunities, oppositional movements that your teammates do not notice. It is one thing to be modest in having this ability, yet you make it known that you are better than everyone. This can be seen as you being vain in your ability. Now, for this reason your vanity can be applied to other areas of knowledge. Whilst you know and maintain you are an exceptional football player because you use your mind, you believe that you have exceptional ability when learning any new piece of information.

How prejudice tracks individuals through different social dimensions, the ego- centric cluster does the same because it relates closely to character, yet not entirely: 'if I know I am good at playing football because I use my mind; why shouldn't I be good at learning in the classroom?' It is because of this mindset that if the agent acquired information on a certain topic, they believe themselves to be right, whether or not this is the case. The agent's vanity influences their intellectual pride and so, if outside information was offered to the agent, their intellectual pride would presuppose that information offered isn't as *good* as the agent themselves. In essence, the multi-faceted nature of this cluster is why it ranks higher than other clusters in relation to Cassam's 'obstructivism'.

V. How the Epistemic Cluster Vice Theory ties into the Digital Landscape

During the 2016 Trump campaign, Donald Trump visited Columbus, Ohio. In this visit, Trump alleged that the election was going to be rigged in favour of Hilary Clinton. In the 43rd President's visit, it is cited that Trump stated, 'I'm afraid the election is going to be rigged, I have to be honest' (Shane, 2017). Trump's statement was pure conjecture, as no evidence was offered: an empty allegation based on a hunch. A similar situation has been replicated in the 2020 US Presidential election. The Trump campaign once again claimed that the election was fraudulent. There have been arguments from Trump condemning the counting of mail-in ballots in an attempt to call a recount in the swing states, namely Pennsylvania and Georgia—all of which were Republican prior to the election. However, this was all false information. For the case of Pennsylvania, Republican state legislators passed a motion through the Pennsylvanian General Assembly, stating that mail-in ballots are to be counted after in person votes have been counted (Siegel and Hosenball 2020). Additionally, Trump 'shot himself in the foot' in the state of Oregon, where post boxes were removed, and postal depots had been closed leading up to the 2020 Election. The former president's 140-character method of communication has been flagged by Twitter sources stating that some of the information provided may be misleading.

Since 2016, the term fake news has been the keystone of research among academics, journalists and politicians. Fake news refers to pieces of information that are deliberately misleading. Such mis- and dis-information can damage one's reputation. It has become apparent that since the political and social events of 2016, the term 'fake news' has become synonymous with Donald Trump and the Trump Administration, often being used to slander CNN, The New York Times, The Washington Post and other US media outlets. The election of Donald Trump saw a division along partisan lines. It has brought to the surface hidden prejudices and tensions that have further polarised America e.g., the *tour de force* of the Black Lives Matter movement, as a response to the innocent killing of black individuals, ignited through the murder of George Floyd. This has left America more divided than United. Such polarisation has led to people forming a number of opinions through different sources of information online. Why I mentioned a variety of modes of information online in Jemima's case of Holocaust Denial is that this reflects how individuals acquire and lose knowledge. Today, we live in a world where

the current media landscape is growing exponentially. Being an online consumer, it can be difficult to navigate between true and false information. The difficulty is when online consumers ‘attempt to seek knowledge in a fake news environment’ (Rose, 2019; 203). This is because the online consumer is attempting to find truths and knowledge in an area where this does not exist. This proves detrimental to knowledge acquisition unknowingly as to repeat this process would erode away one’s knowledge.

The advent of the internet has globalised communication and information. What was once considered a utopia by cyberlibertarian John Parry Barlow, is now used as a tool for capital–hijacked by corporations and politicians (Barlow, 1996). We are living in a society with a wealth of information. Free-lance journalism, vlogging, and blogging are just a few examples of how technological advancement is creating information that is increasingly exoteric. And so, with the abundance of information out there, it can place people at different epistemic entry points to the same topic or idea. This is where it becomes interesting. As shown, Jemima believes in Holocaust Denial. Her reason for such is through her belief that the Holocaust was either invented or exaggerated by the Jewish people as a plot to advance Jewish interests (US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2020). Moreover, the different modes of information Jemima has gathered act as confirmation biases which feed into her perception bias. As a summary: the contemporary media landscape in which we live places individuals at different epistemic entry points to topics of interest. From this, people can form different opinions, having different perceptions of the world. The items of information they digest act as confirmation biases to uphold their current belief system. But, given the vast amount of information available, relevant voices have been left out in enquiry, perhaps accidentally. Consequently, this places people in epistemic bubbles (Nguyen, 2018) through a lack of exposure to certain thoughts or argumentation (as exemplified in IV.iii). However, as discussed earlier, Epistemic bubbles themselves aren’t as difficult to burst as one might first think. It is their counterpart, echo-chambers, that prove more difficult to escape from and are more epistemically vicious as they can lead to other social structures e.g., cults.

Now, given I have established the meaning of epistemic vices, I would like to apply such information to the current era of digitality in which we live. Specifically, how such epistemic vices can lead to a great dissemination and proliferation of conspiracy theories and undermine gatekeepers of truth.

Part 2

In the first part of the thesis, I examined epistemic vices, how to charge those feeding into their vices and the testimonial injustices placed upon agents. The section acted as a foundation for an epistemological examination into why people are hostile towards information that challenges their belief systems, such as Jemima and Holocaust Denial. Part 2 of the thesis will pertain to a deeper epistemic issue: the undermining of expert knowledge and trust in an era of digitality.

The current public rhetoric is dictated by the belief that certain disciplines, such as science are too closely associated with the political sphere. As the current justice secretary at the time of the EU/UK Referendum, Michael Gove stated: ‘people in this country [UK] have had enough of experts’ (Mance, 2016). There is a belief that people are blinded by such experts that Gove mentioned, and this sentiment remains the same, 5 years on. This prompts the question: who can one trust if there are no gatekeepers of truth? The loss of trust in expert testimony and institutions is the catalyst for the exponential increase in the production and subscription of disinformation such as conspiracy theories.

In this section of the thesis, I shall focus on three items:

- I. Conspiracy theories as a subset of fake news: what they are and their main purpose.
- II. The Conspiracy Theory Phenomenon
- III. Preventing the proliferation of conspiracy theories—Rebuttal v Retraction v Education: what is the solution?

Before continuing into the main body of the section, I must mention that the type of conspiracy theories I shall be focusing on are those that are ‘not just a theory about a conspiracy’ (Cassam, 2019). What Cassam is highlighting is that conspiracy theories have certain qualities (speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish, premodern, and self-sealing) that make them different to conspiracies such as The Gunpowder Plot. I shall come to discuss these qualities later in this section. Similarly, there is a deliberate motivation in conspiracy theories to dissuade individuals from the facts for their own personal gain. For

example, following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, photos of Trump's inauguration speech were compared with those of his predecessor's, Barack Obama. There has been some controversy surrounding the pictures, with the idea being that Trump's photo had been edited to show less people. This led to the common understanding among Trump supporters that the US media are biased and dishonest. This example illustrates how purveyors of disinformation deliberately misreport beliefs in a way that expresses allegiance to an individual or a political cause, in this case Trumpites condemning the US national media. Such conspiracy theories that I shall come to discuss are those that are means of political propaganda. For now, I shall move onto the initial part of this section.

I. Conspiracy Theories as a Subset of Fake- News: what they are, the different types and their main purpose

To begin with, 'fake news' is a multifaceted term that is used in everyday conversation to suggest that a piece of media has ulterior motives other than to tell the truth. To go a step further, fake news is politically charged, with the *Cambridge Dictionary* citing that fake news consists of 'false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views...' (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2021). Given that fake news is closely attached to the political sphere, in this section of the thesis, I shall be focusing on two equally significant and pressing items:

- (1) The severing of the partisan line caused by conspiracy theories and,
- (2) The effect the fake news phenomenon has had on other disciplines i.e., epistemic, social, science and health as well as environmental.

As stated above, conspiracy theories are a form of fake news. The purpose of a conspiracy theory could be to unearth information, hidden from the public sphere; to push for a certain political agenda; to undermine an institution or an expert's work or to simply gain recognition by society, thus generating a celebrity status. To understand and examine what it means to be a conspiracy theorist or corroborator, it is best to closely examine fake news in our current media landscape. Providing this examination will enable a clearer understanding

as to the phenomenon of conspiracy theories: what a conspiracy theory is; the different types of conspiracy theory and their main purpose.

i. Understanding Fake news

During 2016 and 2017, Russia was at the epicentre of most political conversations in the West, surrounding allegations of interference in the UK/EU Referendum, the US Presidential election and the 2017 French Presidential election. Methods of cyber-warfare, hacking and fake news remind us of the propaganda machine that Russia has developed following the Soviet Union and the work of ‘Putin’s Rasputin’—Vladislav Surkov. Alike conspiracy theories, fake news isn’t a new phenomenon created at the turn of the century. It is the globalisation of information that has allowed an easier proliferation and dissemination of disinformation. As Michiko Kakutani writes,

‘Since the 1960s, there has been a snowballing loss of faith in the institutions. Some of the scepticism has been a necessary corrective—a rational response to the calamities of Vietnam and Iraq, to Westgate and the financial crisis of 2008...But the liberating democratisation of information, made possible by the internet not only spurred breath-taking innovation and entrepreneurship; it also led to a cascade of misinformation on relativism, as evidenced by today’s fake- news epidemic’.

- (Kakutani, 2018; 46).

To understand the role fake news has in the ‘loss of faith’ that Kakutani refers to, take the following example of using the internet as a means of diagnosis.

Suppose that you have been waking up for the past few days experiencing aches and pains in your legs. In the first few days, you are able to complete daily tasks with only a few minor setbacks, yet the pain doesn’t subside. After a week you notice that the aches and pains have become worse, and it now affects your day-to-day activities. To assess what the pain could be you think back to previous occasions where you have suffered similar sensations from sports injuries, correlating to muscle pain. Yet you’ve determined that the pain isn’t the same as that sustained during sports and so cannot be the muscles but something deeper— the

bones. Rather than reaching out to a local physician, you decide to search the symptoms you're experiencing through an online search engine. After reading up on the symptoms, the results show that there is a possibility that the pain experienced is linked to bone cancer which requires immediate attention.

Through the proliferation and dissemination of political and scientific fake news, people are no longer concerned with expert analysis (as the above example provides). In turn, this gives way to 'factual relativism'. The idea that truth is relative and subjective to the perspective of the individual who is making a proposition. There are two interlinking issues with this mindset involving the institution and the individual. When using a search engine to self-diagnose, the individual may not be concerned with the type of website or source they use. There are online consultations you can have with doctors through a virtual experience. In this case it allows a clearer examination from an expert physician. However, given the current discourse on expertise I argue this is rare. In this example if the pain is hindering daily activities the diagnosis needs to be immediate. Simply because there is an online consultation, doesn't necessarily mean that there isn't a wait time for patients to be seen. In this hypothetical case, the individual would want the answer to their problems immediately. But through searching online there is more harm done as the aches and pains mentioned could simply be a trapped nerve. Not only has the expert been undermined, in this example the doctor, but the diagnosis has been conducted incorrectly. A Harvard study concluded that symptom checkers advised an appropriate examination on only half of the cases that were studied (Semigran, et al; 2015) and a recent study conducted in Australia showed that 36% of first-time diagnosis checks were correct, but often recommended 'more urgent care than appropriate' (Hill, Sim, Mills 2020). What's more, employees in the UK (40%), the USA (49%) and the UAE (46%) are less likely to visit their doctors (Aetna International, 2020), suggesting that the globalisation of information has shown how search engines act as a means of diagnosis rather than seeking professional medical care.

Gatekeepers of truth (scientists, academics and journalists to name a few) have been cast aside. What has replaced them is epistemic endeavours to uncover those *real truths* hidden from the public eye, which seems contradictory as the purpose of these institutions is to better society on both a micro and macro scale. Ultimately, those awarded the appellations of Dr., MSc., QC., PhD., are less likely to be viewed as trusted sources of information.

Not only has the globalisation of information provided an easier means of answering ever-pressing questions, but it has blurred the lines between the truth and the false. Hannah Arendt wrote in the previous century that the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not determined by the devout Communist or the Nazi. It is for those where the distinction between ‘fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between the truth and the false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist’ (Arendt, 2017). What revives Arendt’s sentiment here is the marrying between populist regimes and digitality: Prime Minister Modi spreading propaganda and his alteration of the laws for farmers (where Modi’s government would monopolise grain markets under the news laws passed); Donald Trump’s presidency and the recent insurrection at the Capitol Building (as spread through Twitter); President Netanyahu’s allegiance to the Orthodox community as a means of sustaining a majority government. These are a select few examples yet similar populist regimes are growing again displaying the multifaceted nature of fake news. Yet with fake news being passed around as a bare assertion, it can be difficult to determine what is disinformation and bad journalism. To portray this distinction, I shall provide three examples. These examples will enable a clearer assessment of what is fake news and how to identify such disinformation.

Example 1: Funding the Clinton Foundation

In the run up to the 2016 US Presidential election, Associated Press published a tweet stating that Presidential candidate Clinton had received funding to her foundation. The tweet read that ‘more than half of those who met Clinton as Cabinet Secretary gave money to the Clinton Foundation’ (Politico, 2016). As a consequence, many politicians and media critics—including Clinton’s own team—condemned her actions. In this example, it is an instance of bad journalism where the journalist has hyped the story to gain publicity. Executive editor of Associated Press, Kathleen Carroll admitted herself that the tweet ‘was sloppy’ (Koppelman, 2016). In their reporting, Associated Press failed to mention in their analysis that they solely focused on discretionary meetings with non-Federal Government officials or foreign representatives. Further evidence showed that 85 people out of 154 donated or pledged to the Clinton Foundation (Daniszewski, 2016). Two weeks after the tweet was published, the company edited their statement on twitter which read: ‘many of the discretionary meetings Clinton had as State were with people who gave to the Clinton foundation’ (The Associated Press, 2016). Vice President for Standards of the company, John Daniszewski stated, ‘We

[Associated Press] are revising our practices to require removal and correction of any tweet that... contain information that is incorrect, misleading or unclear' (Daniszewski, 2016).

Fake news is deliberately misleading with no concern for the truth. In this example, it cannot be argued that there is no concern for the truth. Whilst Associated Press were misleading, there is an active pursuit to present both truthful and transparent journalism. This is determined through their retraction of the original tweet and the publishing of one that meets the standards the company have set out. In this instance it is only bad journalism and not fake news.

Example 2: Trump tweet on homicide rates

Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, a tweet published in 2015 began recirculating on the social media platform. The tweet contained an illustration of an alleged study into homicide rates among both white and black Americans. The source cited was that of the 'Crime Statistics bureau of San Francisco'. In the illustration there were six statistics presented, as follows:

'Blacks killed by whites	2%'
'Blacks killed by police	1%'
'Whites killed by Police	3%'
'Whites killed by Whites	16%'
'Whites killed by Blacks	81%'
'Blacks killed by Blacks	97%'

- Bump, 2015

Unlike the previous example, this is an instance of fake news and is deliberately misleading. None of the numbers shown above correlate to official statistics and are wildly inaccurate. A study conducted into homicide rates among black and white Americans by the FBI²⁴ found four of the statistics to be incorrect²⁵. In the case of white-on-white homicide, there is a

²⁴ See, Federal Bureau of Investigation, (2015)

²⁵ I say four out of six here as there is no official report published by the FBI on the number of 'whites killed by police' or 'blacks killed by police'. However, in a study released by The Counted (2015), showed that the death

fivefold increase (81%) according to the FBI. Notably with white on black homicide, there is a fourfold increase from 2% in the source used by Trump to 8% in the FBI's reporting.

In this example there is no consideration for the truth. Unlike in the previous example, where there was a review of the publication and an amendment was made as a result. These results are false and exaggerated. One explanation for the resurfacing of this tweet is through racial motives. With the murder of George Floyd by three US police officers in Alabama this started the 'Black Lives Matter' movement (BLM). For both Trump and his administration to suggest that black-on-black crime is at an all-time high compared to black individuals killed by police is no more than conjecture.

Example 3: (Hydroxy)chloroquine as a treatment for SARS COV- 2 (COVID19)

Due to their anti-inflammatory properties, the drug hydroxychloroquine and its cousin, chloroquine, are used as effective treatment for those with malaria (CDC, 2021). In May 2020, a small French study tested the use of both drugs as a treatment for those with COVID-19 pneumonia. The result of the study shows that the drug was effective only on a small scale (Mahévas, *et al*; 2020)²⁶. Initially the FDA commissioned trials and studies into both drugs yet all trials were halted in June 2020 with studies citing that the drugs can leave patients with cardiac arrhythmia and other side-effects (DAIC, 2020). Donald Trump still, however, touted both drugs even though the FDA removed all trials, and they were condemned by several governing bodies (National Institute of Health and the World Health Organisation), along with Oxford University studies showing its ineffectiveness and Dr Fauci's condemnation. Building on from this, a video released showed Trump and Texan physician, Dr. Immanuel Stella, promoting the use of hydroxychloroquine²⁷.

Even with several scientific experts and institutions stating both hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine as ineffective, Trump did not consider searching for the truth and continued pressing with his agenda. Whilst the trials may have started as a scientific endeavour for a

of black individuals by police (7.69) was more than double the number of white individuals (2.95). For the statistics see The Guardian (2015)

²⁶ France was the first to test the drug, whilst studies in different countries also advocated the use of hydroxychloroquine as a COVID-19 treatment. See, Gao, J. Tian, Z. Yang, X. (2020)

²⁷ Pastor and Dr Immanuel Stella has previously been cited as claiming that alien DNA had been used in treatments and that demons cause medical conditions by having sex with their hosts. See, Dr Immanuel Stella, (2013)

vaccine against COVID- 19, its political hijacking and continued use in New York, Iran, China and Spain showed how the story that aimed at finding a cure, progressed into fake news.

To clarify, the first example was a story that was hyped for publicity. As having been caught out for lying and misleading the public, Associated Press released a statement apologising for the tweet and made a correction to their original tweet. On the other hand, both the second and third example show how there is no responsibility taken for these claims that were published. It is with this that I argue both examples two and three are forms of disinformation—they are deliberately misleading and thus can not only be considered fake-news but examples of Frankfurtian bullshit.

ii. Frankfurtian Bullshit

Bullshit is an idiosyncratic term used in identifying a claim that has no regard for its truth value. Bullshit is different from lying as ‘it is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks they know the truth’ (Frankfurt, 2009). For the liar is inescapably concerned with truth-values (ibid, p55). For the bullshitter however, their only concern is their enterprise: ‘he is neither on the side of the truth nor the false’ (ibid, p56)—the bullshitter need not be concerned with the truth for the simple reason that the truth is not their aim in presenting information. To fully understand Frankfurtian bullshit, consider the following hypothetical scenario.

Suppose there is a state where there is no regulation on advertising. There is an advertisement for a cleaning powder stating that it is ‘100% effective and will clean any and every mark on all items of clothing’. This is an instance of bullshit. The advertiser isn’t concerned whether the cleaning powder is 100% effective and cleans any and every mark on all items of clothing. Their only motive is financial gain. As written in the second example, the truth doesn’t concern Trump. In this instance, one could argue that there is racial motivation behind the publishing of this information especially considering the fabrication of the results is cited as taken from the Crime Statistics Bureau of San Francisco as it does not exist.

In the third example, the motive here could be for political ends: Trump wants to indicate to other governments that the USA is beginning all trials on drugs to treat COVID-19 faster than any other country. This is in line with the previous ‘soap’ example: Trump isn’t concerned with the drug’s efficacy. It is with these examples that I argue for there being more bullshit than lies circulating through society as people aren’t concerned with the views of the expert or their enterprise (who are considered as the traditional truth verifiers). Consequently, bullshit is able to thrive today due to the balkanised state of social media and high internet immersion (MacKenzie & Bhatt, 2020). It is because of this that the truth-trust dialectic is being attacked and at the forefront of this attack is a damaging subset of fake news conspiracy theories.

Alike fake news, the intention of conspiracy theories is to ‘parody or satirise real events in order to force deception... of the truth into the public’ (MacKenzie and Bhatt, 2020; 11). Yet these real events are considered cover-ups themselves by the conspiracists, hiding away the truth that Lee Harvey Oswald wasn’t a lone gunman in the assassination of JFK or that Hitler did truly flee Nazi Germany and live out the rest of his days in Argentina. As we see the lexicon ‘fake news’ being thrown around today, the same can be said of ‘conspiracy theory’. My intention of explaining fake news is to provide a foundation for the current discourse in our post-truth society. In providing such information, I now wish to examine conspiracy theories as a subset of fake news that are potent and damaging to knowledge and truth.

II. The Conspiracy Theory Phenomenon Today

Conspiracy theory is a term that a majority of people will have come across, yet few know of what it truly pertains to. Even though conspiracy theories date back to the Middle-Ages, it is only since the turn of the 21st century that there has been an interdisciplinary examination from philosophy, clinical psychology and politics in the assessment of what conspiracy theories are; how conspirators operate; the purpose(s) of conspiracy theories and if there are cognitive predispositions to believe such theories. Such examinations have allowed for new studies into key events in history. For example: the belief in the Islamisation of Europe has been cited as a potential motive for Andreas Breivik, following the 2011 massacre in Norway (Gardell, 2014; Uenal, 2006). The belief in American government authorities conspiring to

alter and remove federal rights has been recognised as a cause for the Oklahoma Bombing (Knight, 2009).

I need not remind the reader that both 2020 and 2021 have become synonymous with the COVID-19 pandemic. From another angle there proves to be hope, given the necessary measures of self-isolation and the positive roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines worldwide. Following President Joe Biden's election, Biden and his staff introduced a new 'National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness' (The White House, 2021). The strategy set out 7 major goals, with the first titled 'Restore Trust with the American People' (2021, p6). The goal states that the federal government should be a source of truth for the public in reliance upon attaining 'clear, accessible and scientifically reliable information about COVID-19' (The White House, 2021; 7).

That being said, it is one thing to engineer a vaccine and another for it to be received and administered in a climate dominated by vaccine hesitancy. It seems that where society must stand and act in solidarity—during these trying times—there is more division and polarisation than previously thought. Vaccine hesitancy isn't a new phenomenon, nor for that matter are conspiracy theories pertaining to vaccines. The earliest examples of conspiracy theories date back to 16th Century Europe with an outbreak of the Plague in Geneva, Switzerland. It was believed at the time that carers and housecleaners deliberately spread the plague via smearing grease made of putrefied limbs and excretion on the doorknobs of houses (Naphy, 2002)²⁸. Going further into the Middle-Ages, a common conspiracy was that of the demonology treatise—the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches)—written in 1486 by clergyman, Heinrich Kramer. The text was published as a manual to educate people in both the hunting and the persecution of witches.

The only difference between the aforementioned and contemporary conspiracy theories is the paradigmatic shift: the notion of self-publication. If one was to unlock any device that has access to the internet and search for *conspiracy theories*, they would be greeted by a plethora of examples. These examples range from high-profile theories: the assassination of JFK; 9/11 being an inside job by the US Government or Alien lifeforms in area 51²⁹. To those on

²⁸ See Naphy, W.G. (2002).

²⁹ For a comprehensive list of high-profile conspiracy theories cases can be found in TIME (2014)

a smaller scale: Paul McCartney being replaced by a doppelganger or Kim Kardashian, Kanye West and other celebrities being part of a Satanic, Hollywood cult.

The technological advancement of the 21st century has led to the globalisation and democratisation of information. It has allowed an easier access to information on conspiracy theories and an exponential rise in the proliferation and dissemination of disinformation. It has further given individuals the necessary tools to write and publish their own theories on several (social) media platforms i.e., Alex Jones' website, 'Infowars'³⁰. In turn, as conspiracy theories were once considered on the fringes of the intellectual economy, where those who endorsed such theories were undermined, this cannot be argued for today.

It must be noted that those theories which go against received accounts of events are not all conspiracy theories per se. As aforementioned, *conspiracy theory* is used colloquially rather than strictly referring to a theory that can be recognised as a conspiracy theory. Take for example the 1975 UK referendum on joining the Common Market. With over a 2/3 majority vote for remaining within the European Economic Community (EEC), the remaining Bennites, who voted to leave, did so on the grounds that the EEC was a 'capitalist cartel and therefore a conspiracy against the poor' (Hare, 2021). This is an example on the colloquial use of the term but isn't a conspiracy theory. At the time of the referendum, labelling the Common Market as a 'capitalist cartel' was common rhetoric. As leading historian, Robert Saunders mentions, Labour's Euroscepticism was built on the exact ideas that David Hare writes about: The Common Market was a capitalist club which betrayed and detracted from both the Commonwealth and domestic priorities (Saunders, 2016). A combination of the term's colloquial use and the left's Euroscepticism, this is simply an argument against continued membership of the EEC. It cannot be considered a conspiracy theory. It is the official rhetoric on the left during the 1975 referendum.

Rob Brotherton illustrates, as cited by Cassam (2019), 'they [conspiracy theories] have a bunch of special features that make them different from accounts of conspiracy theories like the Gunpowder Plot' (ibid; p6). These extraordinary features are where definitions are useful

³⁰ One conspiracy theory posited by Alex Jones was that of the Sandy Hook Massacre of 2012 in which Jones argued that the shooting was a government plot to enforce gun control. As a result, Jones was not only taken to court but his popular YouTube channel, 'InfoWars' was removed from the platform. More information can be found in Coaston, J. (2018).

in citing the difference between theories that are considered conspiracies and conspiracy theories themselves. In nearly all definitions of the term ‘conspiracy theory’, they pertain to some form of secrecy from a higher power, usually politicians (Mandik, 2007; Dentith, 2019; Brotherton, 2015; Uscinski and Parent, 2014). However, to say that theorists themselves only work in secrecy, banished to the edges of society is an idea from a past millennium. Conspiracy theories are the modern zeitgeist and cannot be on the periphery of the intellectual economy, as they once were. Likewise, if a conspiracy theorist did work in secret, then it would undermine their aim to provide the public with their vision of reality—their *true* accounts of certain historical events. For isn’t the purpose of a conspiracy theory to ‘wake up’ individuals to the truth hiding from the public eye? Surely then, if the conspiracy theory was secret this would be self-defeating.

Whilst we observe that such theories undermine expertise and erode knowledge, the theories themselves are not the issue per se, but the growing subscription to them is. A rise in the subscription to conspiracy theories has prompted an interdisciplinary examination on the proliferation of these theories in attempting to assess why there is a growing distrust, delegitimization of democracy and the undermining of scientific expertise. A popular assumption concerning the dissemination of conspiracy theories is that once a theory is placed online, they spread from person to person infiltrating several groups. This is not the case. Rather, conspiracy theories are concentrated within a certain group (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Finn & Metaxes, 2017)³¹. I argue that those familiar with the Facebook page ‘Vaccines Exposed’ are only made aware of the page through wider reading rather than the page *creeping* onto one’s social media platform. It is only through this wider reading that conspiracy theories and theorists can infiltrate users. By simply clicking on ‘Vaccines Exposed’ this immediately drops cookies³² onto the person’s web browser or social media platforms. Cookies are a single means by which complex algorithms enable individuals to view similar pieces of information. (I shall discuss the growing subscription to conspiracy theories and the dangers produced, later in this section of the thesis.)

³¹ See, Sunstein, C. Vermeule, A. (2009).

See also, Finn, S. Metaxes, P (2017).

³² A ‘cookie’ (or ‘HTTP Cookie’) is a piece of data stored on one’s computer or web- browser. When visiting a webpage, if one is to accept the cookies from that site it tailors that webpage specifically for you. This is only an example of a single type of cookie (targeting cookies) but there are others which can affect the performance of the page, or the functionality of the webpage you are visiting. For more information see HTML.com (n.d)

Having analysed how conspiracy theories operate in our post-truth society, it is necessary to examine what extraordinary features determine what can be labelled a conspiracy theory.

i. Cassam's Six Characteristics

Quassim Cassam (2019) has identified that there are six key characteristics that are of great importance to make sense of and to understand what conspiracy theories are. For Cassam, conspiracy theories are speculative, contrarian, amateurish, self-sealing, esoteric and premodern (ibid, p28). It is easy to see how they are considered speculative and contrarian: conspiracy theories are engineered to reveal the *truth* hidden from the public: 'The theory that government agents somehow managed to plant explosives in the Twin Towers in advance of 9/11 and to detonate them just when the planes hit, is speculative by anyone's light, contrarian in every reasonable sense, and highly esoteric' (ibid, p29). The esoteric nature of conspiracy theories I shall come back to as I wish to discuss this characteristic in more detail, as I argue that conspiracy theories are the direct opposite: they are exoteric. As to the amateurish nature of conspiracy theories, conspirators can usually work alone or in a group, acting as an authoritative figure in both situations, such as 'Q' (from 'QAnon')—an alleged high ranking American military officer who would leave messages on the imageboards '4chan' and '8chan'³³ in an attempt to leak intelligence of Trump's war against the leftist, demonic cabal. The true identity of Q is yet to be discovered.

Most of those who write on such conspiracy theories are usually considered amateurs. Alike the hypothetical scenario of Jemima in the first section, and her epistemic endeavours for the *truth* show how such investigations can be completed through the use of any online search engine. A conspirator doesn't need to be qualified in a certain profession in order to be considered a 'conspirator' or a 'conspiracy theorist' on a particular idea. Yet there are those who use their qualifications to provide detailed information towards a conspiracy theory. Take Richard Popkin—Popkin was a well- established philosopher at the University of California. Whilst his academic focus was on the history of the Enlightenment period, Popkin's text, 'The Second Oswald' (1966), discusses ballistics, forensics, and bullet trajectory. As Cassam writes, 'if one were looking for a single word to describe the nature of

³³ '4chan' and '8chan' (or '8kun') are both imageboard websites (NSFW). They enable interactions between other users where images, usually followed by text, act as a way of communication.

Popkin's interest in the Kennedy assassination it would be 'amateur' (ibid, p23). Popkin's reputation precedes him as a well-established figure in the philosophical community, yet he doesn't have the necessary information to be labelled as being well-versed on the ideas of forensics and ballistics. I shall refer back to this example later, in arguing who should be trusted: the expert or the novice (Goldman, 2011).

Cassam also talks of conspiracy theories being akin to premodern thinking. For conspiracy theorists, there is no reliance upon fact or evidence. Instead, they make sense of the world through pure conjecture. With modern philosophy came the separation between science and faith; religion and politics and theory from practice (Grier, 2000)³⁴. Even though historical accounts dictate that the Holocaust in fact took place with the death of over 6 million Jews and the persecution of other ethnic and religious groups, there are those who still argue against this figure. Such arguments cite that the figure was exaggerated, or the belief that the Holocaust was a myth³⁵. With conspiracy theories displaying no distinction between reasoning and science, and faith and conjecture, it is easy to see why they are considered modes of premodern thinking.

The last of the six characteristics that Cassam identifies is that conspiracy theories are self-sealing. Conspiracy theories are self-sealing in the respect that any arguments offered to sway a corroborator in a conspiracy theory would not work. To make sense of this, let's take the hypothetical scenario from the first section on vice-charging Jemima's belief in Holocaust denial. In vice-charging the aim is to call out an individual for feeding into their epistemic vices when offering an idea or belief i.e., Jemima's gullible and prejudice nature in searching for evidence that fits her belief on Holocaust denial. Now, using Jemima's Holocaust denial, I want to show what would happen in applying it to conspiracy theory. Specifically if one was trying to persuade Jemima that the Holocaust really did take place.

If one was trying to argue for the received account of the Holocaust, the received argument wouldn't simply be disregarded, as would the individual—'cognitive infiltration will almost certainly result in the infiltrator [the person offering a rebuttal to the conspiracy theory] being ostracised' (Cassam, 2019; 96). Not only this, but no evidence or logical argumentation is

³⁴ See Grier, N., (2000).

³⁵ A comprehensive state-wide US survey on Holocaust comprehension and awareness expresses evidence from the comments above. See Claims Conference (2018).

necessary. A simple utterance of ‘fake news’, ‘it’s a lie’, is all that is necessary to counteract all arguments against the belief. For one to say to Jemima that her information is wrong and what she believes in is a conspiracy theory, would be a futile epistemic endeavour. As is the case in the US Presidential election where Donald Trump declared that the election was ‘stolen’ and has commonly referred to the election itself being ‘rigged’ by the Democrats. No evidence has been found to support these claims. It shows that mere assertions are adequate rebuttals in a conspiracy theorist’s argumentation.

Throughout this thesis, there has been close consideration of the current media landscape we live in, particularly the internet enabling the globalisation of information. Given this I return to my previous idea that conspiracy theories aren’t esoteric but exoteric. Prior to the internet’s creation, I would argue that conspiracy theories were esoteric. Those theories which go against received accounts of events would only be known to a few individuals who would only have spread such theories through print information or through oral transmission. The advent of the internet has enabled the democratisation of information enabling simple means of self-publication. In our era of digitality, conspiracy theories filter in and out of people’s media profiles and platforms, and ‘cookies’ aren’t the sole means by which such information can travel. In viewing various pieces of media, there are several ways to interact with creators. If one was to watch a YouTube video and enjoyed the content, there is the option to ‘thumbs up/ down’ the video. Another form of showing appreciation for a post is through ‘liking’. If one enjoys the creator themselves and their brand image, then viewers can ‘subscribe’ to their page. This is similar to how one would subscribe to a magazine online, which would be delivered. Instead, the individual who you are subscribed to online would appear above all other recommended pieces of content that the website has offered as you To go a step further, if one wanted to be reminded on when a video would be published, they could ‘turn on notifications’. This would allow them to receive an update on when the video would be published without constantly checking the creators page’. These examples are forms of online endorsement. The various tools of interaction enable individuals to easily access information but also to view pieces of information that their followers/friends have interacted with, whether this is by liking, subscribing, sharing or reposting. These interactions, done at the click of a button, have brought about a new wave of conspiracy theories: The New Conspiracism (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2020). To fully examine why conspiracy theories are exoteric, it is best to assess the new conspiracism that Muirhead and

Rosenblum discuss. Whilst the traditional or old conspiracisms that one is familiar with are still prevalent, they act as a foundation for the new conspiracism.

ii. The Old and New Conspiracism

Area 51; Holocaust Denial; The Protocols of the Elders of Zion; the assassination of JFK; 9/11 orchestrated by the US government; faked moon landings; flat earthers and climate denial...I could go on listing the number of conspiracy theories that remain both on and off the internet. Reasoning to support these conspiracy theories varies from ideas of photo manipulation, to the establishment of organisations in their pursuit for uncovering *truths* i.e., The Flat Earth Society. I argue that prior to the events of 2016 (the UK/EU Referendum and the US Election), people had a direct belief in conspiracy theories themselves as the theories were doxastic: ‘a person who supports a conspiracy theory believes that the theory is (likely to be) true, or equally as plausible as the ‘official explanation’ (Ichino and Räikkä, 2020). Individuals such as David Icke and David Irving would search for reasoning to support their claims e.g., that Hitler couldn’t have killed the Jewish people during the Holocaust as he wasn’t aware of it, or that the US government are hiding alien lifeforms in Area 51. These doxastic theories pertain to the traditional or old conspiracy theory mentality: the beliefs in cover-ups by government officials or other authoritative figures. Those traditional conspirators adopt a free-lance detective attitude. Post-2016 elections in the UK and US, conspiracy theories are now less doxastic and do not pertain to a direct belief in the theory itself. I argue that this is determined through the notion of ‘populism’. Boris Johnson was not elected on his policies but rather he entertained people’s emotions. The same can be applied to Donald Trump who hailed the quality of ‘truthful hyperbole’ which played into ‘people’s fantasies’ (Lozada, 2015).³⁶

The purpose remains the same (to uncover the hidden meanings behind mass events, propped up by the notion that ‘world changing events cannot happen because of the actions of a single obscure person or a string of senseless accidents’ [Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2020]); yet direct belief cannot be considered an integral part in conspiracy theory belief. In turn there

³⁶ See Osborne, P (2021) who mentions Lozada’s (2015) work for more information.

are now two types of conspiracy theory: the doxastic and direct belief (traditional conspiracy theories) and the non- doxastic (the new conspiracy theory phenomenon).

That being said, there are three motivations for conspiracy beliefs cited by Karen Douglas, Joseph Uscinski and colleagues: epistemic, existential and social³⁷ (2019). These characteristics do not discriminate as to which strand they are applied to. To illustrate the work of Douglas and colleagues, take the case of Lee H. Oswald's assassination of President John F. Kennedy (JFK). Many argue that JFK could not have been shot by a lone gunman. There must have been another figure, or more, involved. Those who seek meaning in their environments will have a greater tendency towards belief in conspiracy theories (Douglas & Uscinski et al, 2019; 7). In searching for this meaning, it provides cognitive closure where events lack clear explanation. There are those who could use more than one conspiracy theory, yet they can agree that any official account of an event is misleading and false to the general public. Existentially, those who lack socio-political standing will use such theories as a means for self-reassurance with conspiracy beliefs creating a triad of 'powerlessness', 'anxious attachment style' and 'existential anxiety' (Douglas & Uscinski et al, 2019; p8). In accepting and researching such theories, it provides the conspirator with a sense of validation³⁸ and inflated ideas of uniqueness—'I know what you don't know!', 'I have a secret', 'I've uncovered something hidden from us all!' The social aspect of conspiracy theory belief is interlinked between the motives listed. In knowing *information* that others do not, the conspirator gains a sense of validation. One argument is perhaps that conspiracy theorists believe they are in possession of rare information in turn boosting their self-esteem and narcissistic nature (Douglas & Uscinski et al, 2019; p9).

The information on the old conspiracism pertains to the time before 2016. Another angle to the debate suggests that post-2016 was the introduction of the 'New Conspiracism' (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2020). As argued, traditional conspiracy theories are based on 'detective-esque' work with a direct belief (doxastic) in the conspiracy theory. The new conspiracism doesn't necessarily involve direct belief. What validates this school of conspiracy theories is the constant repetition, or 'bare assertions; (ibid; p3): 'fake- news!', 'Rigged!'. For Muirhead and Rosenblum, conspiracy theories are now conspiracies without

³⁷ It must be noted that the conspirator or the corroborators need not be aware of the characteristics, yet they do play a vital role in conspiratorial beliefs. For more see: Douglas, K. Uscinski, P et al (2019)

³⁸ More information see Imhoff, R. Lamberty, K. (2017), Lantian, A. Muller, D. Nurra, C. Douglas, K. (2017).

the theory. As the purpose of traditional conspiracy theories is to reveal *hidden truths*; the sole purpose of the new conspiracism is to delegitimize democracy (ibid; p2).

An example of Muirhead and Rosenblum's new conspiracism is the growing conspiracy theory, QAnon. Contextually, QAnon is a conspiracy theory based on the idea of Donald Trump allegedly waging a secret war against a cabal of elite Satan-worshipping, paedophilic government officials. The conspiracy theory itself is borrowed from the previous 'Pizzagate' conspiracy—that democratic officials (including Hilary Clinton) were using Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington as a paedophilic ring. As the identity of Q is still unknown, there is a sense of comradery between its members³⁹.

Unlike traditional conspiracy theories, with QAnon and the new conspiracism, there is no sense of 'detective work'. One can argue that the purpose of the QAnon conspiracy is to hold the US government accountable for the wrongdoings against society, ultimately dictating that the US is anti-democratic. Whilst this can be argued to be the purpose of QAnon, this is merely conjecture. There is no evidence to show that it's true that the US is anti-democratic, as the truth value itself isn't considered: it is mere repetition that provides validation rather than evidence. One might use the QAnon conspiracy theory as a means of communicating that the US government is anti-democratic and by heckling 'fake news!', 'it's a hoax!' allows for validation of the theory⁴⁰. This example is what Ichino and Räikkä label as the 'communication process' in their theory on non-doxastic conspiracy theories (Ichino and Räikkä, 2020). Ichino and Räikkä argue there doesn't need to be a direct belief in a conspiracy theory, as the conspiracy is used as a means for 'expressing agreement rather than establishing truth' (ibid; p9). Using the QAnon conspiracy theory, in the communication process the conspirator wants to express support and commitment for QAnon. The dissemination of claims that the US government is anti-democratic or that Democrats run a paedophile ring acts as a means of support for the conspiracy.

³⁹ Determined through the use of their slogan 'Where We Go One; We Go All', commonly abbreviated to 'WWG1 WGA'

⁴⁸ It is worth mentioning that the self-sealing criteria of Cassam's classification changes when applied to the new conspiracism. To try and rebuttal one's belief in a conspiracy theory, such as QAnon, the individual would simply reject all cognitive infiltration through uttering such bare assertions as 'fake-news!', 'brainwashed!'

To fully understand the communication process, take the current anti-vax movement in light of COVID-19. Some anti-vax conspiracy theories pertain to ideas of microchips being planted in vaccines to enable human tracking, the use of foetuses in the engineering of COVID-19 vaccinations⁴¹ or that the vaccine will alter one's DNA completely. All of these theories increase vaccine hesitancy, whilst simultaneously lowering vaccine uptake. On the one hand you have conspiracists, arguing for their theories as mentioned. On the other, you have those who are hesitant of newly engineered vaccines. A common argument used is that the COVID-19 vaccine has teething problems. One might use the conspiracy theories against COVID-19 vaccinations as a means to communicate a belief that vaccinations do indeed have teething problems, i.e., the causation of rare blood clots in younger patients through the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine⁴². However, the individual expressing such doubt as to the vaccine's efficacy doesn't necessarily need to be concerned with the truth value of the conspiracy. If the individual isn't concerned with the truth-value, they might reason as follows:

- (P1) I believe newly engineered vaccines cause problems to our bodies.
- (P2) Some conspiracy theories against COVID-19 are directly against vaccines.
- (C) Therefore, I use these theories as a means of communicating (P1).

Here there is no direct belief in the conspiracy theory, but the theory acts as a means of communicating the individual's belief, namely that the COVID-19 vaccine has teething problems.

The second characteristic Ichino and Räikkä touch upon is the 'hope process' (Ichino and Räikkä, 2020; 6). Rather than using conspiracy theories as a means of communicating one's belief; one might hold the same conspiracy theory for a different motive. A common motive in Western social discourse is that the establishment, experts and authorities cannot be trusted. Media, science, politics and other institutions are all false and untrustworthy. What cements this idea in one's belief system is 'poor social conditions' and an 'overall unsatisfaction' with one's life (ibid; p7). This notion of powerlessness has been married to

⁴¹ Both the Pfizer and the Moderna vaccines do not contain foetal cells. The AstraZeneca vaccination programme used cell HEK 293 which originated from legally aborted foetuses in 1973 but not for the purpose of vaccines. The common conspiracy theory on the vaccine is that new abortions were used as a sole means for the engineering of the vaccines from separate organisations. More information see Kasprak, A. (2020).

⁴² Read more at Boseley, S. (2021).

other cognitive factors such as existential anxiety and low socio-economic standing (Parent and Uscinski, 2014; Pratt, 2003; Newheiser, Farias, Tausch, 2011). Placing the blame on untrustworthy organisations provides the individual with a sense of comfort (2020; p7). If the conspiracy theory is shown to be false, rather than the motive being a lost cause, they simply shift to another. They use conspiracy theories as a means to justify their belief rather than the truth- value of the conspiracy itself. It is this key element which sets apart the notion of belief—an epistemic factor—from hoping, as to *believe* is not the same as to *hope*. I may believe the conspiracy theory on the COVID-19 vaccine containing microchips for tracking as I have a direct focus on the epistemic nature of such a theory. However, to hope for this conspiracy theory implies a level of uncertainty to the agent. As Ichino and Räikkä state: ‘a person who hopes that a conspiracy theory is true does not believe that it is impossible that it is true’ (Ichino and Räikkä, 2020; 7).⁴³

As emphasised, traditional conspiracy theories pertain to doxastic belief whereas those non-doxastic theories are coupled with the new conspiracism. The non-doxastic beliefs, globalisation and democratisation of information, the undermining of experts and institutions combined with the new-conspiracism create a two-pronged outcome: ‘delegitimation and disorientation’ (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2020). The two identifiable targets delegitimised by the new conspiracism are ‘political parties and knowledge producing institutions’ (ibid; p82). From the new conspiracism seeking to impose a new global identity, in which things aren’t what they claim to be, there is a rift between what is information, misleading information (misinformation) and what is deliberately misleading information (disinformation). ‘The new conspiracism politicises the process by which facts are produced and shrouds facts themselves in a conspiracy theory cloud’. (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2020; 102). This is the disorientation that can be identified in our current climate such as the (hydroxy)chloroquine treatment touted by politicians, or the false reporting from a fabricated database on the US homicide ratings in 2015. Distinctions between the truth and the false easily becomes blurred: who can we trust? What can we trust? It is with these questions that such delegitimation festers and spreads.

⁴³ This links closely to the philosophical notion of ‘self- deception’. See Boyd- Deweese, J. (2021).

Simply put, the marrying of epistemic institutions and politics is what enabled such delegitimation. The Tuskegee trial⁴⁴ and Abbottabad's faux hepatitis program⁴⁵ are a select few examples where politically driven science has failed. The partisan line is now severed with people choosing sides combined with the ostracising of friends, family and colleagues who hold opposing political beliefs. The idea of the loyal opposition as a democratic foundation gives way to an anti-pluralist regime: populism. This opens a gap where there are no gatekeepers of truth or any epistemic authorities. If epistemic institutions have no authority in a populist regime, then this gap is filled with scepticism towards both the institutions and the experts: scientists, policy makers and professors. This examination alludes to Alvin Goldman's (2001) question concerning who can be trusted: the experts (traditional gatekeepers of truth who are well versed and qualified in their particular domain) or the novice (the conspiracist who doubts the current political regime and insists there is a veil of ignorance placed upon society)?⁴⁶ Believing and following one, however, ultimately undermines the other.

Diagnosing and assessing the issues that polarise our society is a step in the right direction. Yet what are the solutions? Finding potential solutions to halt the proliferation and dissemination of conspiracy theories online and re-examining one's cognitive belief system proves extremely difficult, if not impossible. Earlier in this part of the thesis, I introduced another type of conspiracy theory against the traditional, doxastic theories that most people are well-acquainted with. Through an examination of both conspiracy theory variants, and the reasons as to why people believe such theories, I identify three solutions in tackling the growing scepticism in society: rebuttal, retraction and censorship, and education. However, I believe that education is the best way of tackling the growing scepticism in our post-truth society.

⁴⁴ An unethical study conducted by the United States Public Health Service and the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, on African black males to study the progression of venereal diseases.

⁴⁵ Faux vaccination clinics for those with hepatitis were setup in the city of Abbottabad, Pakistan. However, this was used as a decoy by the CIA to trace back Osama Bin Laden's lineage in a hope of finding him.

⁴⁶ See Goldman, A. (2001)

III. Preventing the Proliferation and Dissemination of Conspiracy Theories: Rebuttal v Retraction and Censorship v Education: What is the Solution?

i. Rebuttal

Simply put, with conspiracy theories being self-sealing any form of cognitive infiltration would prove futile. To dissuade someone from the belief in COVID-19 vaccines being manufactured from aborted foetuses would produce a ‘backfire effect’ whereby ‘cognitive infiltration will almost certainly result in the infiltrator being ostracised and ejected from the bubble’ (Cassam, 2019; 28). A different method of rejecting cognitive infiltration can be found in Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan’s ‘The Dragon in my Garage’⁴⁷.

As a brief overview, take the hypothetical example that one has a dragon in their garage, and you wish to explore this possibility. There have been claims of dragons, but no real evidence has proved this claim. You are led to a garage where you see a few random items yet no dragon. You ask, ‘where is the dragon’ to which the reply is ‘she is right there’, waving vaguely and failing to mention that the dragon is in fact invisible. You proceed to throw flour on the floor in a hope that this would reveal the dragon’s footprints. However, you are told the dragon floats. Again, you suggest using an infrared camera to show the dragon’s invisible fire. Again, you are told this won’t work as the dragon’s fiery breath is heatless. The final suggestion is to use a coloured aerosol, thus making the dragon visible. But this fails as you are informed that the dragon is incorporeal. And so, you are left with the question: what is the difference between an invisible, incorporeal floating dragon who spits heatless fire and no dragon at all? The inability to validate this hypothesis is not at all the same as proving it is true. This same principle can be applied to disproving that the COVID-19 vaccines contained aborted foetuses or that 5G causes COVID-19. No matter what questions are asked, and the solutions offered, the fact that the conspirator can move the metaphorical goalposts signifies the self-sealing nature in accepting conspiracy theories. Moreover, the bare assertions that Muirhead and Rosenblum identify show that no arguments

⁴⁷ See Sagan, C. Druyan, A. (1995), ‘The Demon- Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark’. Random House Publishing: New York City. 2nd edn.

are necessary in trying to disprove the conspiracist. Simple utterances, such as ‘rigged!’, ‘fake news!’, ‘I know something you don’t’ are justified means of rebuttal to those trying to provide evidence against such conspiracy theories.

ii. Retraction and Censorship

A common argument in conspiracy theory discourse is that social-media has exacerbated the issue, allowing for such theories to gain traction. As of July 2020, Twitter announced that there would be a crackdown on both accounts and content linked with the QAnon conspiracy theory (Wong, 2020). Following the insurrection on the Capitol building in January 2021, over 70,000 Twitter accounts were suspended because of their link to QAnon (Hart, 2021). Even though this is a positive outcome in the response to conspiracy theories, there are two key problems in the use of retraction as a method of preventing the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories: (1) impingement on the freedom of speech and (2) undermining the problem itself.

The major problem with (1) is that retraction is passive rather than active. By removing accounts, censoring posts this people will be able to find other ways of disseminating their ideas online. For example, if one was to post false information on COVID- 19 vaccinations, on Twitter, even though an account can be removed it is equally as simple to create another account. Thus, the individual is not stopped entirely, but experiencing a minor setback. Similarly, it opens up the debate as to the ethical principles concerning freedom of speech and whether the promulgating and perpetuating of conspiracy theories is harmful to others. By removing social-media accounts and content linked to forms of disinformation, can this be considered an infringement on freedom of speech? Likewise, could censorship lead to a more volatile means of spreading fake news? As seen with QAnon, not only did it lead to an insurrection on Capitol Hill, it also means that QAnon acted through the ‘unlawful use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims’⁴⁸. This is an act of domestic terrorism. Whether such actions warrant online censorship on the freedom of expression is still up for debate. John Stuart Mill draws on a strong defence on the freedom of speech stating that any doctrine, regardless of how immoral it is regarded, it should be employed in

⁴⁸ The Oxford definition for ‘Terrorism’

public discourse⁴⁹. But if there is such a breach on the liberty of freedom and expression, as to expel certain topics of conversation does this lead to some form of ‘intellectual pacification’? (Hume, 2011). A simple example draws on the idea of political correctness restraining what can and cannot be said in safe and controlled discussions. These are a few questions that should be considered and also warrant further analysis.

With regards to (2), whilst retraction and censorship is a viable option in the fight against fake news and conspiracy theories, this isn’t an effective solution. As I argue, this undermines the problem even though it is an active pursuit against such modes of disinformation. We need to be able to observe society’s battle of ideas on a macro-scale and then introduce methods by which we can work towards truth and understanding. It is at this point that I feel education is a necessary and active pursuit in addressing the aforementioned.

iii. Education

I have discussed two of the three ways to respond to the current post-truth climate. The final and viable solution I believe is education. This process I believe is the way to prevent greater dissemination of mis and disinformation online. In society, we see the internet as a separate entity rather than an extension of mankind. Navigating the web, understanding terminology, and deciphering codes are difficult concept to grasp in a world that was once without such advanced technology. One must understand that if Facebook was to shut down and be removed from the internet this isn’t the end of social networking but the end of a particular application to social network on. Those users of Facebook would simply set up another social networking app which would be similar to that of Facebook, yet a different company heading. Once one is able to grasp a clear understanding of how the internet operates (cookies, algorithms, search engines, databases and how the network connections operate when *going online*), this will allow for an easier identification of understanding how one is interacting with pieces of information and to be mindful in disseminating and proliferating fake news and other forms of false information.

⁴⁹ See Mill, J.S. (1978; 16)

In future projects I wish to elaborate on this section more, particularly analysing and explaining the rhizomatic structure of the internet which is an extension on the works of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's philosophy of the Rhizome (2013).

IV. Conclusion

In my thesis, I have explored the phenomenon of fake news in our post-truth society. Whilst the internet has exacerbated the dissemination and proliferation of fake news, conspiracy theories are no longer on the periphery of our intellectual economy. This, combined with the democratisation and globalisation of information that the internet has brought, means there are several ways to acquire both information and disinformation. It has become apparent that truth, and its gatekeepers, are no longer a priority in public discourse. Instead, it has become a race to the finish line. Whether this is in Donald Trump's touting of hydroxychloroquine, to prove the US is the dominant global power; the misinformation on Hilary Clinton receiving donations in her run up to the 2016 election as a political attack on the Democrats or the current Johnson cabinet in the UK fabricating their policies without taking accountability for such.

It is important to note that tackling this issue must be completed on a micro level before progressing to the larger scale. This can only start with the individual. In developing this approach, I have introduced my theory on how to address fake news in its simplest form: recognising one's epistemic vices and drawing connections between these vices. Once an individual is aware of their epistemic vices, they will be able to draw connections between others, whether these be conceptual or causal. This self-evaluation will hopefully lead to a re-evaluation of one's belief system. Not only this, but it will equip the agent with abilities that enable them to identify pieces of disinformation that can be found both on and offline. It must be clarified that my theory is only in its embryonic stages and further analysis is necessary to discover (1) if there are any other epistemic vices, and (2) whether the connections between the clusters are causal or conceptual connections which could lead to further epistemic vice connections and discovering more epistemic vices. Only then can the theory be applied to other disciplines such as education, psychology, politics, and information technology.

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