Facing Epistemic Uncertainty: A Response to *The Philosophy Garden*'s Pedagogical Approach to Conspiracy Theorizing

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Today's fraught media landscape presents new pedagogical challenges. New forms of critical media literacy are necessitated in response to the dawn of algorithmic, AI-driven, information dissemination, the convergence of corporate and government interests in the media, decreasing press freedoms, and a decline in truly independent journalism. How can we help people navigate this landscape with discernment? This is the question at the heart of Birmingham University's *The Philosophy Garden* project, henceforth referred to as *TPG*.[1] This project is a repository of resources dedicated to understanding the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, aimed at children and the general public. *TPG* is doing important work in critical media literacy. We fear however, that by certain omissions, it is not only compromising on the goal of critical media literacy but has the potential to cause harm.

TPG has some impressive endorsements and high potential for uptake in schools. Their series of films, "The Path to Conspiracies," have already been screened at the conference of the Association for Philosophy Teachers, and to groups of 10th and 12th graders in the UK.[2] There are plans to have more school and public screenings in the coming months. The films have been featured at the Philosophy Museum in Milan as part of an exhibition on conspiracism and misinformation in February 2024.[3] The simple script and accessible examples in the cartoons have wide appeal, and we can foresee them being readily taken up in schools. This quality, alongside the illustrious list of sponsors, such as the British Academy, and the Royal Institute of Philosophy, is why we think a critical assessment and urgent response are warranted.

Our response will be focused on the "The Path to Conspiracies." We undertake a pedagogical assessment of these animated films, framed by three central inquiries:

1. What is the pedagogical aim of *TPG*?

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2. What problems of truth-finding do the three films address? Is their representation of the problems adequate?
3. What kind of citizen do the authors of the films hope to form? Is this vision consistent with the ideal of a pluralistic and truth-valuing society?

We found that while the three animated films serve the noble purpose of making us aware of cognitive biases in the process of finding truth, their overall approach unfairly pathologizes conspiracy theorizing. The films suggest that the only reason for questioning mainstream information is emotional distress. They fail to represent the complexity of access to information and the full range of reasoning modes at our disposal. Thereby, they fail to acknowledge that seeking alternative explanations can sometimes be warranted, conspiracy theories can turn out to be true, and that sometimes conspiracy theories are developed in response to epistemic injustice as a strategy for achieving political visibility and saliency. We conclude with suggestions for how this project can be taken into more productive directions that critically engage with the complexity of our information landscape, and ethically engage with the perspectives of epistemically marginalized others.

THE PEDAGOGICAL AIM OF *TPG*

As Nobel Laureate Filipino-American journalist Maria Ressa repeatedly points out, lies and disinformation spread faster than truths on social media.[4] Over the last few years especially, we have seen how these platforms amplify certain kinds of untruths, including false conspiracy theories. This not only exacerbated political polarization but compromised public health initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The three animated films are designed to stimulate exploration of psychological motivations for believing and spreading misguided explanations for events. *TPG's* website also includes videos of experts discussing different dimensions of this issue, in generally nuanced ways, as well as external links to TEDx talks, and online games, like conspiracy theory generators and simulators that show how disinformation can spread on social media.

Among the voices represented in *TPG* is Matthew Dentith's. His work on the philosophy of conspiracy theories advocates for a non-pejorative

definition of a conspiracy theory as "any explanation that cites a conspiracy as a salient cause."[5] On his account, each conspiracy theory must be assessed on its merits, and not dismissed from the outset simply because it is a "conspiracy theory." Only this approach, argues Dentith, will account for the facts that 1) conspiracies are sometimes the most rational explanation for an event, and 2) suspicion of officially endorsed accounts in our day is justified. *TPG's* animated films in "The Path to Conspiracies" series, the central resource of the project, however, do not take Dentith's approach. They treat conspiracy theories as inherently problematic and irrational. Their overall aim appears to be to prevent the target audience from forming or believing conspiracy theories, by giving them the means to diagnose cognitive and psychological biases in others and in themselves.

REPRESENTATION OF TRUTH-FINDING IN THE FILMS

REASONING IN THE CARTOONS

Only two sources of potential "truth" are represented in the cartoons: 1) evidence gathered directly by observation and pieced together to make a coherent story: *abductive reasoning*; and 2) "mainstream information." Jumping to conclusions from insufficient clues, or poor abductive reasoning, is challenged with suggestions of more evidence gathering: for example, looking at the fallen leaves and nests on the ground as evidence of wind, or asking more witnesses of goings on at the edge of the forest. The animals have access to immediate evidence around them, and simply choose to ignore some of it to satisfy their psychological needs. Within the parameters of abductive reasoning, the films demonstrate how our truth-seeking efforts can be compromised by certain biases.

Abductive reasoning, much like detective work, relies on piecing direct evidence into a plausible explanation for what happened or why. Abduction was coined by Pierce to capture the "process of forming an explanatory hypothesis"; the products of abduction are "suggestions," to be tested by further means.[6] Explanations can be more or less plausible, there can be rival explanations, and some observations may be irrelevant to solving the overall puzzle. Abductive reasoning can never guarantee a completely truthful account. Deciding what facts may be relevant or mere coincidence is a matter of our

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judgment, which can suffer from prejudice. As pointed out in *TPG* resources, cognitive biases like intentionality, proportionality, confirmation, and causality can impact how we form explanations, and the kinds of questions we ask in making observations.

In "The Ant and the Grasshopper," we see an example of how Ant and Spider selectively piece together some observations, while failing to notice other potentially relevant facts.[7]
Here is Grasshopper's reasoning:

- Our supply of seeds is gone
- The trail of seeds leads to Beetle
- Beetle must have taken them

Spider adds further evidence that she believes points to the same explanation:

- Yesterday I saw Beetle ogling your seeds
- Now Beetle is fast asleep

Ant offers a rival explanation, which she suggests is more plausible, based on additional observations:

- There are leaves, branches, and nests strewn around, isn't it more likely that the strong winds last night scattered our seeds?

In this case, the fact that Beetle may have ogled the seeds, or that there is a trail of seeds leading to his resting place, may well be coincidences. The intentionality bias seems to be at play here: the desire to find an intentional act behind the missing seeds. However, the film does not delve into these matters in any depth. It is implicit that some facts have more immediate relevance to the case, but how do we exercise better judgment in this regard?

An even cruder form of abductive reasoning is presented in "The Fox and the Owl."[8] Fox reasons:

- The river is drying up
- Lots of trees fall and die
- There are strange noises coming from the edge of the forest
- A big scary monster must be drinking all of the water and stomping

on our trees

In this case, Fox is arrogantly refusing to gather more evidence or collect the observations of creatures who live on the forest's edge, which is explained by the psychological need to feel superior. But are there vantage points from which Fox's explanation is reasonable? We will take up this issue later. For now, we can emphasize that abductive reasoning not only has limits—it is premised on having access to direct evidence, which is only possible at smaller scales—but it does not reflect the full range of reasoning tools at our disposal.

THE LIMITED SPATIO-TEMPORAL SCALE IN THE FILMS

We now want to examine the limitation of the small spatio-temporal scale within these allegories. When it comes to processes at the national or global scale, as acknowledged in the emerging project on non-ideal epistemology, citizens have limited access to direct evidence. A person could therefore uphold epistemic virtues in evaluating the evidence available to them, and still not be able to form a true belief.[9] Thus the films, relying on traditional, over-idealized epistemological theory, present an unfair analogy for how citizens might reason in response to complex phenomena, indirect evidence, and historical precedents. As a result, their tools fail to appropriately support real-world knowers in navigating serious informational complexity.

It is only in rare cases that knowers are directly responsible for gathering evidence and forming a coherent explanation. Outside of this, they rely on intermediaries in their truth-finding efforts, which limits their culpability.[10] Citizens have neither time nor resources to conduct their own independent inquiries and gather evidence about national and global events.[11] We rely on organizations, some of which are impartial and some of which aren't, to carry out this task, which presupposes our trust. Indeed, the issue of mistrust is broached at the start of "The Hungry Caterpillar," however it is only treated as an unfortunate condition of subsequent cognitive biases.[12] Without such access to direct evidence, purely abductive reasoning becomes impossible. We will examine other modes of reasoning in the next section.

The fact that mistrust in public institutions is at an all-time high, and a mistrust that may be warranted, is a critical issue. The only response among

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TPG resources is the suggestion that we need to build public institutions we can trust.[13] While this suggestion is noble, neither the films nor *TPG* website as whole help us to discern when we can trust public institutions and when there may be rational ground for skepticism. Additionally, the profit-driven, algorithmic media landscape, with its shifting conceptions of "newsworthiness," further complicates our access to information and capacity to make sense of it. The pedagogical challenge is helping young people navigate, and hopefully, transform this status quo. *TPG* does not engage with this complexity, and, therefore, compromises its media literacy program.

Accessing direct evidence about national and global events is not only practically difficult and complicated by warranted mistrust in institutions, but such access has also been actively blocked by nation states in the interests of maintaining their power. Unlike for the animals in these allegories, historical precedents feature in our reasoning about complex phenomena. There is a distinct a-temporality to the cartoon animals' world, in contrast to the historicity of the human world. One recent example of deliberate truth-obtrusion can be seen in the case of *Wikileaks*.

Wikileaks is a repository of direct evidence about actual military and political conspiracies and other wrongdoings on a global scale.[14] The founder of *Wikileaks*, Julian Assange, has been persecuted by the U.S. government for publishing inconvenient evidence of U.S. war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Amnesty International's assessment of this case is that "much of the conduct" that the U.S. government's indictment of Assange "describes is conduct that journalists and publishers engage in on a daily basis. Were his extradition to be allowed it would set a precedent that would effectively criminalize common journalistic practices."[15]

In the section that follows, we show in more detail how the precedent set by Assange's persecution has consequences for our stance toward "mainstream information." Continuous threats to press freedoms, historically observed in both so-called democracies and authoritarian states, are also part of the reality of the information landscape. Given this reality, does it make sense to try and inoculate children against being suspicious of those in power? We think that this type of inoculation, or fostering a general intolerance

against skepticism, conspiracy theorizing, or seeking alternative explanations, can have harmful consequences: chiefly, turning off critical faculties in citizens, resulting in close-mindedness, epistemic arrogance, and laziness.[16]

WHAT ABOUT INDUCTIVE AND DEDUCTIVE REASONING?

As mentioned earlier, the films do not reflect the full set of reasoning tools at our disposal. We can compare *abductive reasoning*, inferring to the best explanation, to *inductive reasoning*, a much more common form, where we generalize from patterns. Note that generalizing from patterns can involve observations that extend far back in time. We rely on inductive reasoning to make generalizations about what is going on or the intentions of those who wield power from past and current events. This type of reasoning is not represented in the films, and thus, we get an incomplete picture about how citizens might theorize about events at larger scales.

Here are examples of strong inductive reasoning that we might expect of a citizen, based on the points we made in the previous section:

1. Assange published the truth about unlawful U.S. military action.
2. If Assange (not a U.S. citizen) is at risk of imprisonment in the U.S. under the Espionage Act,
3. Then, anyone who publishes the truth about unlawful U.S. military action is at risk of being imprisoned in the U.S.

Given the above, it is but a small leap to the following inductive argument:

1. The risk of imprisonment deters the publication of truth about unlawful U.S. military action.
2. Anyone who publishes the truth about unlawful US military action is at risk of being imprisoned in the US.
3. There has been and is a lot of U.S. military action going on in the world.
4. Therefore, it is likely that there is unlawful U.S. military action that we don't know about.

Unlike induction, where the conclusion can only be more or less likely, depending on the truth of the premises, in *deductive reasoning*, the conclusion is logically necessitated by the truth of the premises. Induction and deduction

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are mutually supportive. Induction is involved in forming generalizations that can act as premises in a deductive argument. Such premises, of course, are contestable.

Historical precedents allow us to make generalizations from patterns of events. Any historically literate person knows that propaganda has been deployed by democratic and authoritarian nations alike, especially during wartime. Citizens in any nation state can use the following premise in their reasoning: all governments sometimes lie to their citizens. From there, we have rational ground to be on the alert for propaganda through official media channels:

- All governments sometimes lie to their citizens
- The U.S. is a government
- The U.S. sometimes lies to its citizens

We need only look as far back as the US conspiracy to invade Iraq under the false precedent of WMDs to find confirmatory evidence. Another example might be the generalization or collective wisdom, based on patterns observed throughout human history— for example, "power corrupts." From there, we can deduce that any concentration of power might be inherently suspect:

- Power corrupts
- This institution wields a great deal of power
- This institution is corrupt

We can see from the above examples, that inductive and deductive reasoning give citizens a *rational basis* for questioning official narratives. Such reasoning, of course, can be flawed, and it is important to understand its limitations. However, it is not merely psychological needs that motivate citizens' skepticism of "mainstream media" or official accounts of events, as the animations represent. When there is a rational basis for rejecting an official narrative, it is reasonable for citizens to look for alternative explanations. This secondary process is, of course, more fraught with potential for error.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS RESPONSES TO INJUSTICE

One final limitation of the films' representation of truth-finding is

their treatment of emotion only as a source of bias. We argue, instead, that emotionally-motivated alternative theorizing may be an apt response to epistemic injustice. The failure to consider this alternative explanation before attributing epistemic culpability could itself be an act of epistemic injustice—specifically, contributory injustice. According to Kristie Dotson, building on Miranda Fricker's species of epistemic injustices, contributory injustice occurs when a dominant group refuses to acknowledge and engage with a set of hermeneutic resources employed by a marginalized group, due to prejudice.[17] When excluded by the dominant epistemic community, one may seek an alternative epistemic community in order to gain recognition as a knower.

TPG appears to frame emotionally-motivated conspiracy theorizing as merely psychological, which risks perpetuating the epistemic exclusion of certain citizens, exacerbating the proliferation of conspiracies and rifts between information environments. "The Hungry Caterpillar" clearly represents one particular kind of marginalized citizen: the Trump-voter. A significant part of the Trump base susceptible to believing conspiracies about the 2020 election and COVID-19 is from rural communities. These communities faced persistent poverty and were ignored by decades of leaders and policy "experts" in sweeping economic reforms that "left them behind."[18] The film acknowledges that those drawn to conspiracy theories may be "in situations of stress, marginalization and injustice," facing poor access to health care, and a lost election. This stress leads to them becoming "angry and suspicious" towards the "mainstream information."

However, another way of reading things like a "lack of access to healthcare" is that they are symptomatic of that group's, in this case, Trump voters', epistemic exclusion and political invisibility. Their marginalization was partly because they account for a politically insignificant proportion of the nation's population, and partly due to their cultural-geographic isolation from political leadership. Due to the exploitation of these vulnerable conditions by Republican campaign narratives and the profit motives for division in mainstream media, rural communities frequently "made sense of" their plight through overtly bigoted narratives, casting immigration, gender equality, racial integration, and the like, as the scapegoats of rural, white poverty.

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These conspiracy theories deepened historically sedimented racist attitudes in these communities. The justifiably angry reaction towards these hateful ideologies meant that liberal, urban leaders further dismissed rural poverty concerns. Thus, rural communities remained politically invisible. From here the feedback loop began again, with more extreme reactions against the felt injustice, including further conspiracy theories.

So, in more general terms, I, the mainstream epistemic community resident, ignore the entire discourse by which marginalized others try to articulate their concerns. Because I do not involve myself in their "epistemic world," I am also not fluent in their "hermeneutic resources." Even if they force the visibility of their concerns through national media streams or public protest, I won't take it seriously enough to try to understand it, having already dismissed them as not credible. Thus, there will be a sustained rift between our projects of knowledge-building, including knowledge of ongoing political injustices. We suggest that this compounding of epistemic injustice can explain the rise of conspiracy theories, and the attitudes toward them by experts, like the creators of *TPG*. For *TPG*'s resources to achieve their pedagogical aims, they need to address this live dynamic, rather than playing into it.

In such cases, suspicion towards the dominant narrative may be justified, although the proposed alternative narratives may not be. This isn't to say that all perceptions of injustice are correct or rational, but rather, that conspiracy theories frequently arise in real situations of injustice, and therefore, ought not to be dismissed out of hand. We endorse the suggestion by scholars like Nguyen, Begby, and Medina that we ought to reject a "total irrationality" thesis with respect to those engaged in alternative theorizing.[19] Medina urges us to see cases of epistemic friction, wherein others' positions appear irrational, as opportunities to engage in a process of context-sensitive hermeneutic recognition.[20] This requires us to actively seek out alternative explanations and take up differing viewpoints, moving back and forth between different perspectives and sensibilities, so as to not unfairly disregard their contributions. Medina, here, seems to be inviting us to take up what Lugones calls "world-traveling," where one imagines themselves or puts themselves

into a different hermeneutic space than they typically occupy, much like "code switching."[21]

Let us return to Fox's conspiracy theory about the monster from the standpoint of contributory injustice. The actions of the humans and their machines that are felling trees and building something on the edge of the forest may as well be as arbitrary, from the standpoint of the animals, as the actions of a malevolent monster. Coming to a more accurate characterization of the form of this "monster" could be beneficial if you want to negotiate with it or resist it, perhaps. But when a destructive force over which we seem to have no control at the local scale wreaks havoc on human lives, isn't it somewhat akin to an indiscriminate evil monster? The "evil monster" explanation can make more sense when we engage in some world-traveling. Instead of dismissing the monster theory as irrational, we need to build a bridge from the felt injustice that may be at the basis of Fox's perspective, towards a truthful account that integrates the other perspectives.

Recently *TPG* has added a new series of films devoted to exploring epistemic injustice, called "The Valley of the Unheard."[22] They have added a new animated film, "The Fawn and the Mountain Lion," which explains the contributory injustices we are concerned with, employing the examples of adults discounting the epistemic credibility of children, and police discounting the epistemic credibility of Black folks.[23] One more film is forthcoming. We argue, however, that due to the common prejudices of academic elites, *TPG* creators are blind to their having committed the same injustice towards a political community, whose deeper concerns may be opaque to them.

CITIZEN FORMATION THROUGH *TPG*

We now turn to the pedagogical questions: What can the audience of these films come to understand about better and worse methods of truth-finding? What does this imply about the kinds of citizens the creators of the films hope to form? Is this vision consistent with the ideal of a pluralistic and truth-valuing society? The films warn viewers to be aware of biases that may affect their reasoning. It is shown that we might jump to conclusions from insufficient or purely coincidental, but irrelevant facts. The better methods include more careful observation and gathering of different perspectives.

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Finding truth is generally presented as a collaborative process that gestures at triangulating multiple perspectives in gathering evidence, and awareness of biases, which are commendable. As we have pointed out, however, these strategies are limited by the small spatiotemporal scale of the animals' world, only one form of reasoning, and reliance on "mainstream information." The examples of mainstream information serve several functions in this series:

1. They give an account of the sources of a phenomenon: *how the pandemic started*;
2. They provide expert opinions: *vaccines are the best way to combat this virus*;
3. They report on events: *votes have been recounted and results are unequivocal.*

These functions are not equivalent and presuppose different methods of truth-finding. Evaluating the plausibility of each of those statements requires us to understand these methods and the potential for errors at various steps of each process. What the films seem to imply however is that "mainstream information" is truthful, while "alternative explanations" are inherently suspect.

We acknowledge that the films are designed to stimulate conversation, rather than be the final word. In this sense their efficacy may well depend on how they are used in a dialogical-pedagogical context. However, there are didactical dimensions to their script and in the audio-visual elements that send implicit normative messages that trusting mainstream information is epistemically virtuous. For example, the lullaby-like quality to the melody in the background of the stories, the soft, hypnotic movements of the animals' limbs, and the placating, patronizing tone of voice employed by the narrator communicate the subliminal message "trust-us-and-everything-will-be-okay." We worry that the implicit message that citizens ought to accept information from authorities at face value (when access to direct evidence is often impossible) contradicts the more noble intention of fostering intellectual agency behind this project. This tension runs dangerously close to increasingly popular positions like McKenna's, who believes that because we are so bad at exercising epistemic virtues, it is justifiable to "nudge" adults in a democratic context into accepting the "right" view by manipulating their psychological, non-rational tendencies.[24]

These films, in simplifying the problem of truth-finding in today's complex information landscape, and downplaying the value of epistemic autonomy, exercised in part by alternative explanations, are adding to existing contributory injustices. The real-world examples of the pandemic and the 2020 election are the only exceptions in the otherwise fictional world of the animals and clearly target one political community: Trump's base. Singling out this community may result in more, not less distrust, of experts, thus exacerbating polarization. Viewers are shown how certain beliefs are irrational, which rules out building bridges to the perspectives of people who hold them. Classrooms in which these films are shown may well have children, whose parents hold some of these beliefs. There is a potential for harming relationships between children and their parents, and parents and educators.

We propose that the resources of *TPG* need to be modified to prepare citizens to confront, rather than fear or dismiss the inevitable uncertainty that accompanies truth-seeking, especially in today's hyperpolarized mediascape. This means finding a way to work towards truth within an information landscape wherein we must traverse multiple sets of hermeneutic resources. For example, we have an epistemic responsibility to understand the real concerns underlying even what seem to be the most irrational conspiracy theories.

One remedy is to encourage more dialogical discussions of the motivations behind conspiracy theorizing, encouraging world-traveling across perspectives, to retrieve the experiences underlying "irrational" narratives. Discussion prompts that invite the sharing of real cases of epistemic uncertainty and different perspectives on how to navigate them are one starting point. Open-ended, live conversation will better capture the dilemmas faced by knowers in the real world, such as adjudicating between competing claims of expertise, or coping with our dependence on institutions for information when their trustworthiness has been compromised.

Fricker frames epistemic *justice* as a project of Aristotelian virtue ethics, wherein epistemic virtues, including hermeneutic sensibilities, can only be cultivated through embodied experience.[25] The over-idealization of *TPG's* resources offers limited efficacy for forming epistemic virtues. Furthermore,

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the creators of *TPG*, in emphasizing their "epistemological expertise," but offering only partial and simplistic explanations of epistemic failures, effectively gaslight viewers as knowers. The sensibilities developed through viewers' lived experiences and reasoning from historical precedents are delegitimized—recast as psychological distortions. By acknowledging the non-ideal complexity that has shaped the sensibilities dismissed by *TPG,* our pedagogical adjustments allow for more bridge building *at the same time* as critical awareness of cognitive biases, amidst our polarizing conditions. This dual commitment to rational, autonomous sensibility with appropriate intellectual humility is more suitable to our ideal of maintaining a pluralistic, truth-seeking society.

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