

We Are All Conspiracy Theorists

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Ksenia Filatov and Michaila Peters offer an astute analysis of interactive webpage *The Philosophy Garden* in their article “Facing Epistemic Uncertainty: A Response to The Philosophy Garden’s Pedagogical Approach to Conspiracy Theorizing.”¹ They rightfully caution those engaging with this curriculum to consider how this exploration of conspiracy theories misses some important aspects of reasoning, history, scale, and the role of power in conspiratorial thinking. I want to begin by acknowledging that the collaboration between philosophers at the University of Birmingham and the Philosophy Museum in Milan offers a unique opportunity for expanding the reach of philosophy. The engagement of philosophers, philosophers of education, those who practice philosophy for and with children, and museum studies is an exciting opportunity for academics to move beyond the academy. However, after reading Filatov and Peters critique and reviewing *The Philosophy Garden* myself, I too am left feeling apprehensive about the webpage’s present form and content.

In preparation for responding to this paper, I reviewed the webpage and videos prior to reading Filatov and Peters’ analysis. Based on the topic and my own background in critical pedagogy and critical media literacy I was excited to see a curriculum tackling such a complicated and important phenomenon. As I reviewed the videos and materials, I was quickly met with uneasiness wondering why the authors decided to explicitly link the project’s focus to the conspiracy theories that arose during the Trump Presidential era. This choice significantly limits the project’s potential by foreclosing the breadth and depth of conspiracy theories across time and space. In the video *The Hungry Caterpillar*, a sinister voiced caterpillar walks across the screen taking bites of disparate information—graphic representations of QAnon and Trump, the 5G conspiracy, irresponsible scientists in Wuhan, miscounted votes, and a lost election—once full, the caterpillar becomes a chrysalis and is transformed into a butterfly representing a fully formed conspiracy theory.

Upon watching, I immediately hypothesized if educators and school leaders in the U.S. would ever access this curriculum and show it to their students

and parents? The answer is *very* unlikely. Although some of these conspiracies are on the fringe, others are not so fringe, and a great many parents ascribe to these narratives inside *all* U.S. schools. Educators are always grappling with the reality that their students are the heirs to their parents' thinking rather than independently formed ideas. I had hoped the curriculum would have been more stealth-like and able to engage in teaching critical inquiry, fact finding skills, the many facets of reasoning, and even a dose of logical fallacies would have served similar ends. Matthew Dentith's essential text *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories* reminds readers that we must take conspiracy theories seriously and resist using the phrase pejoratively.² In sum, *The Philosophy Garden* lacks an analysis that takes conspiracy theories seriously at the point of belief and instead focuses on the serious consequences to others who have to live amongst those who believe in Trump era conspiracies.

The pedagogical choices taken by the authors of *The Philosophy Garden* left me disappointed in what could have been a nuanced exploration. Knowledge and curriculum are never politically neutral, but this felt unnecessarily partisan, polarizing, and politicized, and thus easily dismissed within diverse political spaces such as a school or a classroom. In addition, the visual representations seemed appropriate for early elementary school (if memory serves, the butterfly unit is often completed in second grade when students are 7 or 8 years of age), and yet the material seemed well beyond the cognitive and intellectual capacities of 2nd graders. And finally, why were the animals so sinister and behaving so badly towards each other? A daddy deer not believing his child when they were afraid of a mountain lion, a scape-goated beetle who was blamed for stealing all the seeds, and a smug fox who jumps to pejorative conclusions. I'm left with questions regarding the anthropomorphism in these images and wondering how this would be received by children.

Moving beyond *The Philosophy Garden* itself, Filatov and Peters' remind readers that the trouble with conspiracy theories is that many are, in fact, true. I suspect a great many of the Trump era conspiracies may not be true, but the historical record is not so clear regarding such theories over time. Drawing on the examples of Wikileaks and Julian Assange, as well as the war in Iraq and weapons of mass destruction, Filatov and Peters' remind us that the creation of

citizens who do not question narratives and facts framed as “official knowledge” is a dangerous precedent. They argue that unfairly pathologizing those who ascribe to conspiracy theories, neglects taking seriously the epistemic injustices that often prompt citizens to find alternative explanations. Moreover, conspiracy theories can be born out of rational, logical thought patterns based on the available facts offered to citizens at any given time. QAnon likely does not fall into this category, but legacies of subjugation and oppression have offered a great many alternative explanations that are now fully explained by the original conspiracy theory. Those of us situated in the U.S. must keep ever-present that our constitution enshrined into law that some of us were not fully human—that was official knowledge written by the governing experts. Consequently, in this case, remaining skeptical of official knowledge and expertise should be understood as virtuous.

In this short response, I want to extend Filatov and Peters’ discussion of practices that could unravel conspiratorial thinking and move away from an analysis that centers the individual citizen sitting in their living room, scrolling endlessly on their phone, ingesting chaotic narratives brought to them by corporate, for-profit, algorithms designed to distract and manipulate. Given what we know about digital media and forms of official knowledge and facts, many of the critiques against those who believe in Trump era conspiracy theories border on “blaming the victim,” or just unchecked elitist superiority. And, I might add, it does feel good to know you were not on the side duped by a man dressed in a horned fur hat and that you did not succumb to the theory that a pedophilia ring was run by members of the Democratic Party and organized in a Washington D.C. pizzeria. Taking conspiracy theories seriously requires what Matthew Dentith describe as a community of inquiry made up of “diverse people not just with respect to expertise or interest, but also with respect to their attitudes towards these things called conspiracy theories.”³ On this count, I am fairly certain that *The Philosophy Garden* will not invite such diverse parties within the U.S. context into dialogue to carry out a collaborative investigation of the known facts.

In addition, Filatov and Peters hint at the issue of power throughout their paper as a means through which we might read conspiracy theories. What

does power offer to the analysis of conspiracy theories? Italian philosopher Donatella DiCesare's recent book *Conspiracy and Power* describes the golden age of conspiracism brought about by our modes of communications and media.⁴ She asks readers to think about the following: "environmental disasters, terrorist attacks, unstoppable waves of migration, economic meltdowns, explosive conflicts, political reversals. Amidst the confusion, the indignation, panic breaks out and the conspiracist fever grows. Who is behind all this? Who is pulling the strings? Who has hatched the plot?"⁵ She too, like Dentith, and Filatov and Peters argues that we must resist the conclusion that "cognitive re-education is [needed] to correct the distortions" in knowledge. DeCesare argues that "police-style castigation of thought, [or] the denunciation by an inquisitor, serves little purpose" and is counter-productive given the current landscape.⁶ She continues: "Conspiracism is neither an intellectual barrier nor a fallacious argument. Rather, it is a political problem. It is not so much about truth as it is about power. It is strange that, despite the wide-ranging reflection on this problem, this decisive tangle has not been unraveled: the one that ties power to the work of the plot."⁷ DeCesare asks philosophers, educators, and citizens alike to consider that the age of conspiracism serves political ends that often remain faceless and nameless, and the "golden age of conspiracism" is the consequence not the cause of what we are currently inhabiting.

To avoid furthering the many plots of division and unrest that already exist, might we all recognize that we are *all* conspiracy theorists, or at least susceptible to the relief that comes from constructing conspiratorial answers to the madness of felt difficulties. Certainly, the theories differ and the degree to which we are entrenched may not be similar, but, within us all is likely a preoccupation with our own private theories about why this or that has occurred in our own lives or community. Many of these theories are not uttered out loud so as to avoid the "I don't mean to sound like a conspiracy theorist, but..." statements amongst friends. However, an honest critical interrogation of our own private conspiratorial thinking patterns to explain the chaos of contemporary life quickly reveals that re-education and official knowledge claims by experts are likely not the road to recovering truthful truth-claims. Finally, any curricular interventions need to take seriously the complexity of combatting the means

and ends of conspiratorial thinking through diverse communities of inquiry.

REFERENCES

- 1 Ksenia Filatov and Michaila Peters, “Facing Epistemic Uncertainty: A Response to *The Philosophy Garden’s* Pedagogical Approach to Conspiracy Theorizing,” *Philosophy of Education* 80, no. 1, <https://doi.org/10.47925/80.1.157>
- 2 Matthew, R. X. Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014). <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137363169>
- 3 Matthew, R. X. Dentith, “Expertise and Conspiracy Theories.” *Social Epistemology* 32, no. 3 (2018): 205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2018.1440021>.
- 4 “Conspiracism is the “belief in the primacy of conspiracies in the unfolding of history...Conspiracism serves the needs of diverse political and social groups in America and elsewhere. It identifies elites, blames them for economic and social catastrophes, and assumes that things will be better once popular action can remove them from positions of power. As such, conspiracy theories do not typify a particular epoch or ideology.” Frank P. Mintz, *The Liberty Lobby and the American Right: Race, Conspiracy, and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985).
- 5 Donatella Di Cesare, *Conspiracy and Power*. Trans. David Broder (New York: Polity, 2024), 1.
- 6 Di Cesare, *Conspiracy and Power*. 3.
- 7 Di Cesare, *Conspiracy and Power*. 6.