Cynicism, Denialism, and Fatalism: The Triple Pandemism of Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v11i2.4

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Abstract
Humanity is under siege with Covid-19. Whilst the crisis aggravates, the world is also grappling with yet another challenge - a global misinformation conundrum. This arises from the spread of contagious conspiracy theories that obfuscate understanding the pandemic at best. Incidentally, the conspiracy theories have gone as viral as Covid-19 itself, spreading just as swiftly digitally as the virus does physically. The outcome has been a spectrum of attitudinal patterns, ranging from cynicism and skepticism to outright denialism and fatalism. Using a conversational analysis that is predicated on extant literature and personal insights, the paper examines the import of conspiracy theories as a major complication of the Covid-19 challenge. The paper posits that the theories have produced narratives and attitudinal outcomes that not only misrepresent the pandemic but also complicate its mitigation.
Keywords: Covid-19, conspiracy theory, cynicism, denialism, fatalism, pandemism.

Introduction

The global coronavirus pandemic has been an existential threat to humanity since its outbreak in late 2019. It has been associated with an unprecedented level of humanitarian crisis and systemic disruptions across nations of the world. Throughout 2020, the global scourge occasioned a dire global emergency situation instantiated by the varying degrees of lockdown regimes implemented in many countries and regions. As of early 2021, the pandemic has resulted in an alarming rate of human mortality, causing the death of more than two million of the over 100 million people infected in over 210 countries (WANG et al 2021). Even as of the present, the threat of the pandemic has prevailed relentlessly amidst the emergence of new variants and complications.

In addition to its disruptive humanitarian and social impacts, the pandemic has been associated with sundry narratives and counter-narratives about the probable causes of the disease, which have essentially complicated its comprehension and mitigation.While some narratives hold that it is caused by the 5G network, others suggest that it was manufactured in a laboratory and leaked either intentionally (as a bioweapon) or unintentionally (by accident) (SULE 2020). However, the received scientific view is that the virus is of a natural, bat, or zoonotic origin. Whereas the former views have all been classified or rejected as conspiracy theories, the latter is often projected as the only valid position, though its conclusion is yet to be fully established.This is because, while there appears to be a consensus that bats are the reservoir of SARS-CoV-2, there is equally a general agreement that the virus isolated from bats lacks the capacity to directly bind to a human host. In other words, the Angiotensin-Converting Enzyme 2 (ACE2) of the virus, which makes binding to the host possible, cannot directly bind or jump onto human cells; it requires an intermediate host. Some scientists believe such intermediaries to be Pangolins because they possess *Receptor Binding Domains* (RBDs) very similar to the ones found in SARS-CoV-2.To this end, the scientific argument goes, SARS-CoV-2 is a result of a *probable* chimera or recombination of two virusesin bats and Pangolin, two animals often sold in the Wuhan food market and the likely cradle of the pandemic (see SULE 2020; HASSANIN 2020; ANDERSON et al 2020). This inconclusiveness of the bat origin of Covid-19 gives impetus to alternative narratives of origin often dubbed conspiratorial. Other theories of this nomenclature hold that the virus was created by or is being manipulated by Bill Gates, his accomplices, or 'Big Pharma' to microchip people through vaccines in line with ID2020 and vaccine profiteering, respectively (SULE, 2020). Whether these conspiracy theories are true or false is an unwavering investigation issue.

The foregoing narratives are significant because they have shaped people's appreciation of not only the existence of the pandemic but also its threat import. Whilst there has been a plethora of scientific and socio-philosophical studies on the various facets of the Covid-19 epidemiology (MALINYERNI & BRIGAGAO 2020; SULE 2020; OLADIMEJI et al 2020; WANG et al 2021), research on the conspiracist narratives that have attended its origin and prevalence has been slim and scant. A relevant recent study by Amara Chimakonam (2021) considers, among others, the implications of religious conspiracy theories associated with Covid-19. The study argues that such theories "pose serious challenges to Covid-19 prevention by encouraging non-compliance to Covid-19 preventive measures and refusal to take Covid-19 vaccination" (191). Peter Sule's (2020) work on Covid-19 and the depopulation narrative interrogates the cynical claim that Covid-19 and its vaccination are designed to reduce the rising population and demographic prolificity of the global populace. These studies have made salient contributions on the nature and import of the Covid-19 conspiracy discourse.

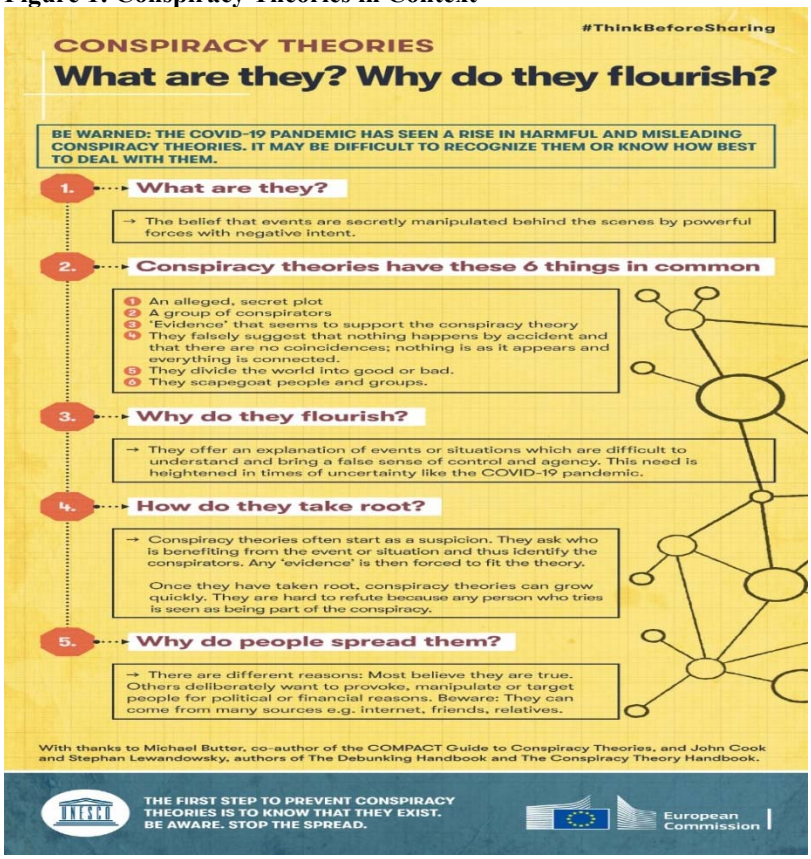
The present study builds on the aforementioned studies and attempts to further engage the significance of the prevailing Covid-19 narratives to situate their practical and epistemic implications more generally. The paper posits that the conspiracy theories tend to have conflated the understanding of and response to the pandemic by bringing about idiosyncratic cum attitudinal patterns designated herewith as cynicism, fatalism, and denialism. The cynicists are inclined to suspect that Covid-19 is a hoax; the skeptists doubt the pandemic's mortal incidence and threat implications; the denialists deny or disbelieve its existence and prevalence; and the fatalists tend to resign fatalistically to its consequences. These tendencies have engendered bevavioural outcomes that have accentuated the Covid-19 threat to a sort of aggravated pandemism.

The remainder of the paper is organized into four thematic sections. What comes after the foregoing introduction is general perspectives on conspiracy theories. This is followed by a consideration of the thrust of the Covid-19 conspiracy theories.The last two sections deal, in turn, with the existential and epistemic implications ofthe conspiracy theories, and the conclusion.

Perspectives on Conspiracy Theory

Generally, the phrase 'conspiracy theory' is often employed nowadays as an epistemic label of falsehood. In fact, "of all the ways an idea can be discredited, the label 'conspiracy' ranks among the most effective" as it raises images of delusion and irrationality on the part of conspiracy theorists (AISTROPE 2016, 1). It is noteworthy to stress that conspiracy theory is a tag not only of the epistemically sneering kind but of discursive, political, and propagandist, among other kinds. These perspectives are possible due to their widespread historical antecedents. That is, the veiled activities of powerful elites and secret societies together with their role in instigating socio-political events and historical developments are well-established. Research about conspiracy theories dealing with such "phenomena as witchcraft beliefs and apocalyptic religions suggests that modern-day conspiracy theories have even broader historic (sic) and cross-cultural precedents" (MAMURA 2014, 2377). For this reason, we shall be analyzing, in this section, the varying perspectives on conspiracy theories, their interrelatedness and the targeted subjects or claims to which they are applied. It would suffice to note that the essence of a conspiracy theory is to propagate anxiety, fear, doubt, suspicion, superstition, disbelief, or deliberate misinformation in an effort to advance sinister political, ideological, religious, or idiosyncratic motives (cf. Figure1). The ultimate motive of a conspiracy theory is not just to propagate falsehood or misinformation; rather, it seeks to engender a counter narrative aimed at negating, undermining or eroding mainstream perspective or knowledge, especially on an emerging phenomenon.

Figure 1: Conspiracy Theories in Context



Source: Unesco (2020)[1].

Conspiracy Theory as Critical Discourse

As a critical discourse, conspiracy theory is a form of social practice in that it deals with how people represent the world, including themselves and especially their epistemic orientations. Scholars like NormanFairclough, and Ruth Wodak, among others, have popularized the notion of critical discourse or what is generally referred to as *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA). For these thinkers, discourse is 'a form of social practice' (FAIRCLOUGH and WODAK 1997, 258), and different discourses are various ways of representing diverse positions (FAICLOUGH 2000, 170). To this end, critical discourse is not only concerned with language use but also the thoughts, beliefs, and ideas within a social context. In other words, the core concepts

[1]https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/09/conspiracy-theories-prevent-spread-covid-19-unesco/

in critical discourse, with particular reference to conspiracy theories, are the thoughts and beliefs of individuals and how they are expressed. The challenge, however, is that such thoughts and beliefs are not easy to decipher. For instance, someone may believe that some powerful group, globalists, or state actors are plotting against the public (as with the conspiracy theories about Covid-19), but if that belief (whether true or false) is not expressed in some way, it would be socially meaningless. Thus, "c*onspiracy talk* or *conspiracy discourse* expresses ideas through speaking, writing, or other means and seeks to discuss or spread conspiracy theories" (DOUGLAS et al 2019, 5).

The term 'conspiracy theory' is often used pejoratively. While most conspiracy theories are untrue, not all conspiracy theories are false. At what point, therefore, does a conspiracy theory, which happens to be true, ceases to be a conspiracy theory? In addressing this question, philosophers have established the fact that conspiracy theories possess 'truth values' in that they can be true or false and the criteria for distinguishing true from false conspiracy theory rests on the strength of evidence for a conspiracist claim and the epistemic mentality of its actors (both the conspiracy theorist and believers of a conspiracy theory). We shall discuss the thematic and epistemic characteristics that distinguish conspiracy theory as a particular kind of discourse (social, political, cultural, etc.) in section six (6) of this paper.

Conspiracy Theory as Propaganda

There is no doubt that conspiracy theories can be effectively used as a discursive device in propaganda, especially political propaganda. Propaganda is a divisive tool aimed at splitting people into opposing identities or the ingroup/outgroup divide for galvanizing support from the one (ingroup) against the other (outgroup/enemy). It is "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (JOWETT and O'DONNELL 2012, 7). Propagandists exploit and manipulate people's fears and build their rhetoric around Xenophobia, ideologies, or populist sentiments. Propaganda takes the form of a conspiracy theory to achieve its objectives.

Two types of propaganda have been identified, namely integration propaganda [IP] and agitation propaganda [AP] (MAMURA 2014). Whereas *IP*, which provides a central basis of social integration, denotes the dominant and most significant type of propaganda in modern societies, it is *AP* that has the longest track record as it predates the modern state. *AP* has historically been connected with political agitators, especially those aiming to incite the masses into overthrowing unpopular rulers. It may be employed by social actors from any social strata or political persuasion to provoke public anger toward a supposed internal or external enemy. However, *AP* today is "arguably most visible and also at its most effective when invoked by political leaders to rally public support for wars, or more commonly in the case of the United States, for foreign invasions or "humanitarian

interventions" (MAMURA 2014, 2382). The 2016 presidential elections in the United States were rife with conspiratorial accusations and showed how constituents were stirred up via conspiracy theories. Of particular note was Donald Trump, who triumphed in the skillful use of conspiracy theories: "from accusing his rival Ted Cruz that his father was connected to the assassination of JFK, to the various conspiratorial attacks on Hillary Clinton that were meant to unsettle people's beliefs about her health, integrity and connections" (HARAMBAM 2020, 2).

Another model example of the foregoing, particularly *AP,* includes the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' that were circulated by professional instigators in Russia in the late 1800s. The protocols were fake documents alleging to expose a plot by Jews across the world to control the world's governments and major financial institutions. They were meant to incite pogroms against Russia's Jewish population, which lasted from 1881 to 1920. Another related example of conspiracist propaganda is the attempt to deny the reality of the Holocaust by socio-political actors (BILLIG 1988). In the books titled *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century* and *Did Six Million Really Die?* The authors– Arthur Butz and Richard Harwood – respectively denied the Holocaust ever occurred. They presented a conspiracy theory by arguing that the Holocaust was a deliberate lie spread by Zionists to achieve their plan to completely dominate the minds of Gentile populations (BILLIG 1988, 24). A more recent and widespread conspiracy theory as political propaganda is the belief that the European Union supports migration into Europe to Islamize it. In 2015, the war in Syria and other push factors led more than a million migrants into Europe from Africa and the Middle East in what was described as a migration crisis. This crisis has awoken the fears of many Europeans, leading to various interpretations of the scenario by political and media subjects. One of such interpretations was that 'the European Union (EU) organizes this migration to Islamize Europe.' According to Štefan Ižák (2020, 76), this argument fits the narrative concept of conspiracy theory, which is still widespread today.

Conspiracy Theory as Counter-Securitization

Conspiracy theories occupy a central locus in the counter-security measures of many nations of the world. They abound in the discursive rhetoric of looming threats found in several nations' national security and foreign policy documents. Some state actors even feed on conspiracy theories to clamp down on political opponents. According to Aistrope (2016, 1), states are not immune to conspiracy as they conspire together and against each other in secret. There are undercover surveillance, execution, and assassination programs carried out on a global scale by Intelligence agencies. Also, terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda are conspiratorial in essence and nature. These account for some of the reasons why the threat of conspiracies often loomed large in security and foreign policy discourses. In the US, for instance, foreign policy analysts have argued that conspiracy theories about American power in the Middle East were at the heart of the Arab-Muslim paranoia that is motivating Al-Qaeda's attacks on America while, at the same time, providing a continued moral justification and ready stream of recruits to the terrorist organization. This rendering of the nexus between

Arab-Muslim anti-Americanism and conspiracy theory became a matter of national security and foreign policy issues in the US. The US National Security Strategy (NSS) 2006 succinctly captures it thus:

> …terrorism springs from … subcultures of conspiracy and misinformation. Terrorists recruit most effectively from populations whose information about the world is contaminated by falsehoods and corrupted by conspiracy theories. The distortions keep alive grievances and filter out facts that would challenge popular prejudices and self-serving propaganda. (cited in AISTROPE 2016, 2)

From the foregoing, it is evident that the threat posed by conspiracy theories, real or imagined, is taken seriously as a national policy subject and influences counter-securitization actions. States adopt it either as a productive tool to spur security responses or to delegitimize a claim that falls short of acceptable political situations or valid ways of reasoning.

Conspiracy Theory as Neo-Millennialism

Many scholars have described the relationship that exists between conspiracism and millennialism as complex. Although mutually exclusive, their interrelatedness is symbiotic in that conspiracy theories and millennialist discourses feed and sustain each other. Understood as a belief, religious or secular, about a radical transformation of society or the end of the world by virtue of a great catastrophe or revolutionary event, millennialism (Millerism) as a concept was named after Baptist preacher William Miller, whose interpretation of Biblical prophecies predicted that Christ's second coming would be between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. When these predictions passed without an end-time occurrence, he was persuaded by his followers to accept a revised deadline of October 22, 1844. This date also passed without any cataclysm in what has now been described as the "Great Disappointment" (BARKUN 2013, 9). Millennialism has religious, secular, and what Barkun (2013) designates as 'improvisational' variants. Its religious (Christian) notion derives from Revelation 20:4, which states that at the end of time or world history, the saved will "reign with Christ a thousand years" until the Last Judgment. Secular millennialism, on the other hand, consists of visions of a perfect future occasioned by the forces of human reason, science, or history. It is closely associated with political ideologies about nationality, class and race, prominent among which are Marxism and Nazism. Like religious millennialism, secular millennialism "linked the end-times with a great battle between the forces of good and evil—not a literal, biblical Armageddon, but a struggle of comparably cosmic importance" (BARKUN 2013, 16). On its part, improvisational millennialism consists of indiscriminate borrowings and idiosyncratic combinations of conspiracy theory as well as religious and secular millennialisms (see BARKUN 2013, 18).

These varieties of millennialism – religious, secular and improvisational – have been integrated by the wide acceptance of a unifying conspiracy theory popularly known as the *New World Order* (NWO), which holds that all past and present occurrences, Covid-19 inclusive, must be viewed as upshots of sinister actions by a very powerful and clandestine group to seize and control the world. Some theories associated with the grand NWO conspiracy consist of the following:

> The implantation of microchips and other advanced technology for surveillance and mind control; the replacement of Christianity with a New Age world religion; and, finally, the manipulation of the entire apparatus by a hidden hierarchy of conspirators operating through secret societies." (BARKUN 2013, 40)

One of the most persistent conspiracy theories since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is linked with the *New World Order* theory of microchipping and controlling humans. Specifically, this theory claims that the pandemic is a ploy to implant trackable microchips on the human population, with the Microsoft co-founder, Bill Gates, fingered as the major culprit. The implantation, the theory claims, is to be achieved through Covid-19 vaccination, thus explicating people's scepticism about the vaccine. A *YouGov* poll of 1,640 people indicates that "28% of Americans believe that Bill Gates wants to use vaccines to implant microchips in people - with the figure rising to 44% among Republicans" (GOODMAN and CARMICHAEL 2020)**.**

Although there exists a relationship between conspiracism and millennialism, such a relation is not linear. According to Barkun (2013, 9), conspiracism is neither necessary nor sufficient for millennialism because some millenarian movements, like the Millerite Second Adventism in the 1840s, lack significant conspiracist components. Aside from imposing a dualism of good and evil on the world, conspiracism does not necessarily guarantee the triumph of good or predict that such a triumph will translate into a perfect world. Barkun adds that "conspiracism can sometimes lead to an antimillenarian conclusion, in which the evil cabal is depicted as virtually invincible" (2013, 10). Notwithstanding the nonexistence of a logical connection between conspiracism and millennialism, there are instances of asymmetrical links. This is because many millenarian movements, like conspiracism, are dualistic in nature and associate evil with a powerful force believed to operate conspiratorially. In other words, they both contain benign forms of dualism or the potential for fueling divisive and extreme views about society. This dualism is found in conspiracy theories' division between 'us' (the conspired against) and 'them' (the conspirators) and in millennialism's identification of 'the chosen people 'and the 'remnant' (those outside the chosen community) (WILSON 2020, 1). Another coalescing feature is that whereas conspiracy theories' dualism appears to uncover and describe evil, millennialism explicates the mechanism for its ultimate defeat. To this end, therefore, both theories can be said to exist in a symbiotic, mutually reinforcing relationship in which "conspiracism predisposes

believers to be millennialists and vice versa, though each can exist independently" (BARKUN 2013, 10).

The aforementioned perspectives indicate, among other things, that conspiracy theories are counter-scientific, anti-establishment and eccentric, often with a disregard to the conventional episteme and belief. Although they usually lack scientific authority and validity, they tend to have widespread popular (if not populist) credibility and appeal. Underlying such theories are subtle narratives designed to disrupt the public's sense of reality. Also associated with the theories is the willful propagation of messages and meanings that undermine vital interests in the corporate, political, ideological, religious, or scientific realms. With regard to the Covid-19 conspiracy theories, it is clear and certain whose interests are at stake, and how. However, it is evident that some of the narratives have emanated from disgruntled or misguided global religious, industrial and scientific interest groups driven by some sinister motives.

The Thrust of Covid-19 Conspiracy Narratives

The crux of Covid-19 conspiracy theorizing is the effect that there is more to the pandemic than meets the eyes. This is instantiated by both popular and populist myths, narratives, rhetoric, and perspectives that seek to propagate global apprehension, misgivings, suspicion, and doubts about the epidemiology of Covid-19 and its emergency responses. These vagaries of thoughts and feelings aim at negating the World Health Organization's [WHO's] consensus on Covid-19 through counter-narratives that are arguably controversial and unconventional. The narratives have been essentially spread through popular culture platforms and social media, yielding immense global buying-in. Behind the narratives are anti-vaccine, anti-Big Pharma activists, advocates, pundits, and celebrities that command a widespread international following. Table 2 highlights the most prominent strands of such narratives.

Table 2: Important Strands of Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories

Strand	Underlying narrative
The 5Gconnection	That Covid-19 is associated with the emergence of 5G telecommunications technology which is alleged to be spreading a kind of electromagnetic radiation that predispose humans to the pandemic.
Bill Gates' and the Big Pharma's scapegoatism	That Covid-19 is a grand design by Bill Gates and his global pharmaceutical industrial interest to vaccinate, and probably de-populate, the world.
The Chinese lab hypothesis	That the SARS-CoV-2 escaped from a Chinese laboratory in Wuhan city as a result of scientific default.
Chinese biological warfare hypothesis	That the virus was created by the Chinese as an instrument of biological warfare with the West.

US Military culpability narrative	That the virus was imported into China by the US military as a geopolitical ploy, apparently to undermine the growing Chinese global ascendancy and hegemony.
GMOs hypothesis	That the pandemic is a consequence of genetic pollution caused by Genetically Modified Crops (GMCs) that allow viruses to proliferate due to the resulting environmental 'imbalance'.
The denialist claim	That Covid-19 does not actually exist; it is all a hoax.
The deep state narrative	That the pandemic is a secret plot of the deep state agents to undermine the presidency and regime of Donald Trump.
End-time eschatology perspective	That the pandemic is one of the eschatological signs marking the gradual onset of the end of the world.
Securitization narrative	That the pandemic and its lockdown regime are designed to rationalize and justify exceptionalist security measures aimed at perpetrating the vested interest of the incumbent political establishment.

Source: Adapted from Lynas, M. (2020)[2].

The various strands of narratives highlighted above tie up to a premise forming the antithesis of the Covid-19 conspiracist discourse (see Figure 1). Although the specific motivations of individual proponents of the theories are not clearly known, it is arguable that some of them are driven by ideological, political, corporatist, moralist, or anachronistic agenda. Similar tendencies have resonated variously with nihilists, anarchists, terrorists, and millennialists in various contexts over the years.

Covid-19 and Conspiracy Theories: Some Existential and Epistemic Implications

The foregoing narratives obfuscate the facts about the origin of Covid-19, suggesting that it is still shrouded in a mystery of some sort. While the scientifically valid narrative has been given as the bat/zoonotic theory of origin (which we have noted as inconclusive), all others have been broadly labeledor rejected as *conspiracy theories*. And as we observed earlier in this paper, whether these conspiracy theories are true or false is a matter determined by concerned authorities. But this is the crux of the matter. Once a theory is characterized as conspiratorial, it ceases to be a rational theory and becomes a bad epistemic practice to either believe it or expend

[2]https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2020/04/covid-top-10-current-conspiracy-theories/

energy and resources investigating it. As we shall see shortly, to choose not to investigate a conspiracy theory is as bad an epistemic practice as creating or believing one.

There are harmful and non-harmful conspiracy theories. To believe a conspiracy stating that all past and present presidents of Nigeria belong to a particular secret cult is as harmless as believing that president Buhari died and has been replaced by Jubril, an impostor from Sudan. These theories have little or no harmful consequences as no life is endangered, so to speak. They are simply to be viewed as trifling notions believed only by a handful of people and, therefore, constitute no significant danger. The problem here would not be whether one believes in such theories; rather it is in refusing to believe because failure to believe will not lead to an investigation, especially of the latter. Notwithstanding, there are harmful conspiracy theories regardless of whether they are investigated or not. Most, if not all, Covid-19 related conspiracies fall within the domain of dangerous conspiracy theories, given their potentially significant impact on people's social and health decisions. Covid-19 conspiracies, which claim the pandemic is a hoax – there's no Covid-19 – have the tendencyto induce people against observing safety protocols of socio-physical distancing, mask-wearing, testing, getting vaccinated, etc. Such conspiracy theories have been linked to harmful health choices, which fuel the virus's continuous spread. Although this, sadly, is the case, our argument in this section is that it *ought* not to be – you can adhere to the safety protocols while still believing at least a conspiracy theory about the pandemic. This is because, as we shall see shortly, we all hold one form of conspiracy theory or another.

A national probability survey conducted by Romer and Jamieson (2020, 1) on US adults (1050 persons in March 2020) and a follow-up of 840 people (in July 2020) found that Covid-19 conspiracy theories circulating in mainstream and social media negatively impacted the uptake of preventive behaviours and disposition towards vaccination. They argued that it is "critical to confront both conspiracy theories and vaccination misinformation to prevent further spread of the virus" (ROMER and JAMIESON 2020, 1). Further evidence of the potentially harmful consequences of people's health decisions and behaviours arising from conspiracy theories comes from experimental social psychology. Health-related conspiracy theories and many other harmful conspiracism thrive on and are sustained through people's mistrust of medical professionals, governments, and pharmaceutical companies. Thus, it has been argued that there are often valid reasons why groups may be suspicious of health interventions and that "whilst it may be important to address the effects of conspiracy theorising on people's attitudes and health behaviours, it is also important to consider the historical contexts of particular problems and to address the underlying issues that make conspiracy theories plausible or convincing" (DOUGLAS et al 2019, 31). Also, there are degrees of disposition about conspiracy theories. People who grow up in societies where dishonesty and cover-ups are endemic are more likely to believe covert plots are occurring.

Essentially, Covid-19 conspiracy theories and the beliefs allied to them have been associated with three attitudinal tendencies among the populace, which bear salient implications for the fight against the pandemic. There are cynics who tend to believe that Covid-19 is a hoax. Among them are religious and opinion leaders who propagate the notion that the pandemic is a sign of the End-Time prophesied in the holy books. A strand of this narrative holds that the pandemic is a ploy to 'demonize' the world to entrench the Apocalyptic Beast's reign. A South African pastor and jury claimed that Covid-19 was part of the devil's grand design to propagate his kingdom on earth, plus that its vaccination was aimed at injecting humankind with the mark of the beast (cf. CHIMAKONAM 2021, 197). The cynics are not only skeptical but also suspicious about the pandemic and the measures aimed at mitigating it. Some denialists tend to disbelieve or deny the existence of the pandemic. For them, the pandemic does not exist; if there is any threat, it must be a misconception. A prominent Nigerian pastor, David Ibiyeomie[3], once averred that the so-called Covid-19 was merely a symptom of malaria. Furthermore, there are fatalists, who see the pandemic as a curse and scourge of sin that the world cannot help. They, therefore, assume a defeatist stance towards the pandemic and its fatality.The aforementioned narratives have caused a great deal of nonchalance and outright defiance among people in respect of Covid-19 curtailment measures, making them more vulnerable to the pandemic.

In effect, Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs have been associated with a variety of health choices with existential consequences. In what follows, hereafter, we shall be analyzing the cognitive attributes of conspiracy theorists or, more generally, the epistemic implications. The question guiding this analysis is given thus: is it epistemically irrational to be a conspiracy theorist? Most people believe or reject conspiracy theories for *epistemic* reasons. Sometimes understood as an accusatory opinion about a phenomenon that may or may not be true, philosophers are divided about where to draw the epistemic lines. While some believe that it is completely irrational to believe in conspiracy theories (KEELEY 1999; CASSAM 2015), others are of the persuasion that conspiracy theories are not *prima facie* wrong and that not to believe in them is to commit intellectual suicide (PIGDEN 2017; DENTHIT 2017; RAIKKA 2014).

The phrase 'conspiracy theory (theorist)' is often invoked pejoratively as a stigmatizing and delegitimizing label. Such invocation often carries with it an *ad hominem* of gullibility or other epistemic vices against either the theorist or believer of a conspiracy theory. To dismiss a claim as incorrect, sometimes it is enough to label it as a conspiracy theory. Consequently, some authors often defend their positions in advance by arguing that they are not conspiracy theories. This is because "conspiracy theorists are widely derided as crazy, stupid, or irrational, so much so that many conspiracy theorists are anxious to avoid the label even if they are, rather obviously, propounding a conspiracy theory" (PIGDEN 2017, 120).

[3] Pastor Ibiyeomie is a televangelist and the founder and General overseer of the Salvation Ministries, based in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Brian Keeley's argument (1999, 126), modelled after the style of Hume's rejection of miracles, is that although conspiracies do sometimes occur, it is *usually* irrational to believe them (also see PIGDEN 2006, 142). Closely associated with this claim of irrationality is the notion that the vast majority of conspiracy theories are too silly to believe and investigate. Cassam was far more brutal as his theory signifies an *ad hominem* against conspiracy theorists. For him, they are not just bad thinkers, their disposition towards believing a conspiracy clearly lets off something about their epistemic or intellectual character. Cassam invents an imaginary conspiracy theorist, Oliver, as a stand-in for all other real-life conspiracy theorists with questionable intellectual capacities. According to him, Oliver believes that 9/11 was an inside job (CASSAM 2015). For Cassam, therefore, belief in conspiracy theories is a matter of intellectual character, and that is to be taken derogatively. This thought pattern resonates with all those who believe in the zoonotic, supposedly scientific, origin of Covid-19. All other narratives of origin that deviate from this are scornfully dismissed as conspiratorial. Is this an entirely positive epistemic outlook?

Contemporary research in Philosophy shows that provisional belief in conspiracy theories is permissible given that conspiracies do occur and that they all possess truth values and can either be true or false. There are many pieces of evidence of conspiracy theories that turned out to be true. The fact of this entails that we need to adopt an evidential approach where individual conspiracy theory is judged based on its particular merits. What this means is that we cannot and must not treat conspiracy theories as a class of stigmatized or illegitimate claims. Rather, we must undertake such an analysis on a case-by-case basis and on their evidential merits. This is because "the prima facie suspicion of conspiracy theories generally, before assessing the particulars of individual theories, gets things back-to-front" (DENTITH 2017, 2). The argument here is that it is wrong, as some scholars demand of us, to reject a conspiracy theory simply because it has been labeleda conspiracy theory. To do that is to be a bad epistemologist. Such thinkers, as highlighted above, believe that conspiracy theories should neither be believed nor investigated because it is so*irrational* to do so. It is permissible to believe and to investigate conspiracy theories if that is what the evidence recommends.

Our argument for the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories is anchored on the thesis that they possess truth value. And this is clear in the fact that some so-called conspiracy theories have turned out to be, in fact, true. For example, the Watergate hotel conspiracy theory involving President Nixon of the United States has been investigated and confirmed as true – Republican officials truly bugged the room used by the Democratic National Committee in the hotel at the behest of the White House (PIGDEM 2017, 127).

The Nixon administration also perpetrated innumerable conspiracies abroad, chief among which was the Menu program, where Nixon and Kissinger organized a series of secret and illegal bombing raids in Cambodia and carefully kept them secret from Congress, the press, and even parts of the military. "This

helped to destabilize the Sihanouk regime, leading to the rise of Pol Pot and the deaths of millions of people" (PIGDEN 2017, 127). As we noted earlier, there are conspiracies everywhere by nations, government agents or their associates, powerful people, globalists, corporations,[4] etc. If conspiracies do occur, and some are, in fact, true, it, therefore, follows that "it is not necessarily always, or even usually, vicious to be a conspiracy theorist. Indeed, it is sometimes virtuous since many conspiracy theories are not only established historical truths but *salient* truths" (PIGDEN 2017, 130).

The rationality of believing conspiracy theories is further explicated by what kind of definition we adopt. If we analyze conspiracy theory down to its constituent parts, it becomes clear that it is just a theory about two or more people plotting together in secret towards specific goals. This general, non-pejorative, definition has been endorsed by philosophers like Charles Pigden (2017), David Coady (2012), and Mathew Dentith (2017). And if this is correct, it then follows that we are all conspiracy theorists in one form or another. This is valid because all group crimes are products of conspiracies. Coups, assassinations, acts of torture, terrorism, disappearances, corruption, tax avoidance, espionage, organized crime, etc., are conspiratorial by their very nature. Also, since both historical sources and news coverage are full of these stories, Pigden (2017: 130) argues, we cannot believe these sources without being some kind of conspiracy theorists ourselves. Nevertheless, if on the contrary, we think these sources are incorrect because their contents may have been doctored, then we are expressing our belief in the existence of some sort of covert plot (conspiracy) to cover up actual realities, which, in itself, is holding onto a form of conspiracy theory. Thus, while we are all conspiracy theorists, we are only conspiracy theorists in relation to specific conspiracy theories. That is, "the label is relativised to some theory, rather than being a general appellation of pejorative character" (DENTITH 2017, 3). Thus, unless we view conspiracy theories "as somehow suspect or unbelievable" (PIGDEN 2017: 121), there is nothing *inherently* wrong about believing or being disposed to believing conspiracy theories. In fact, we are epistemically justified to believe as this would lead to further discussion and investigation. To believe in a conspiracy theory is not an end in itself, rather, it is to give room for the expression of its epistemic status as a proposition with truth values. To not believe in it at all (even though we have shown above that this is impossible: we are all conspiracy theorists of one kind or another) is to commit epistemic suicide, for such disposition forecloses any chance of ever knowing whether the conspiracy is true. Any intellectual outlook that blinds us to the possibility of truth is an epistemic vice that must be eschewed. In other words, conspiracy theorists are not epistemically bunkum, rather "it *is*

[4]It has been found that the executives of Exxon had conspired to conceal the results of the research that they commissioned confirming the reality of global warming. This truth has been known by them since 1977, yet the company spent decades organizing campaigns of disinformation and denial, which has slowed and halted the planet's response to global warming. Another example is of Volkswagenexecutives, who had conspired to elude restrictions on emissions by installing software in some of their vehicles to cause them to release fewer pollutants when being tested (see Pigden 2017, 128).

intellectually vicious to be a consistent conspiracy sceptic" (PIGDEN 2017, 131).

Conclusion

If Covid-19 is a fatal threat to nations, then its sundry conspiracy theories constitute a mortal threat! This is in view of the fact that the theories have produced narratives and beliefs which undermine the efforts at mitigating the pandemic. Although we have made a case for the rationality of holding onto at least some form of conspiracy theory to decipher its truth value, nothing in these arguments says that all conspiracy theories are true or that the theorists themselves are exceptional thinkers. We do not in any way deny that some conspiracy theories contain spurious and incredible claims. Our argument, instead, is that since some conspiracy theories have turned out to be true, we must be careful about dismissing any claim labelled as a conspiracy theory as false. That would never give us the chance to investigate or ever know the truth if the conspiracy is, in fact, true. Also, if we are to investigate specific conspiracy theories, we cannot start from a position of assuming that conspiracy theorists are always incredible or that their theories are always, necessarily, *prima facie* wrong. What is the implication of this position for Covid-19 conspiracy theories and the spread of the virus? Even though we have shown that belief in health-related conspiracy theories leads to some dangerous health choices, nothing in this claim states that this must inevitably be the case. There is nothing inconsistent in accepting that conspiracy theories possess truth values (thereby reserving the probability that they can be true) and also maintaining positive health choices like, in the case of Covid-19: socio-physical distancing, wearing of face masks, intermittent sanitising of hands, etc. Many people believe that Covid-19 is a hoax, thereby living recklessly; what if it is not? Thus, it is possible to adhere to all Covid-19 safety measures, while also believing, for instance, that it might be true that the virus was created in a laboratory and leaked either intentionally or accidentally. While the former is a clear case of personal responsibility, the latter is entirely a matter of further investigation.

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