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On the Ethics of the New Conspiracism

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Conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing have raised various ethical questions. Following many other authors, we distinguish between traditional conspiracy theories and the new conspiracism. This paper poses the question, What is the ethical status of the new conspiracism? We argue that the new conspiracism faces specific ethical problems. The new conspiracism has two forms: (1) the doubt-sowing branch and (2) the agitating branch. We argue that the doubt-sowing new conspiracists are culpably ignorant and can thus be morally blamed. The agitating new conspiracists have additional problems, as they take privileges they should not take and degrade political debates. We argue that people who participate in public political debates and blame others should make assertions and nothing else, as their audience has not consented to lax talk that does not assert anything. The speakers determine the illocutionary status of their sayings, and when they make wrong choices, they are morally responsible for those choices. The agitating new conspiracists are free-riders; they are responsible for speech acts that are not genuine assertions and whose main function is to signal one's political side.

Keywords: New conspiracism; ethics; assertions; politics.

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories have raised a number of questions, some of which are philosophical. They include the question of the appropriate definition of "conspiracy theory" and epistemic questions about the acceptability of conspiratorial beliefs. Some questions are ethical, and many authors have found conspiracy theories morally problematic (Räikkä and Ritola 2020). Most of the concerns are related to the possible ad-

verse consequences of the actions of people who develop, disseminate, or believe in conspiracy theories. At worst, conspiracy theories are said to lead to violence against certain groups (Parent and Uscinski 2016). Other ethical concerns are related not so much to the consequences of theories but rather to the moral character of the people who are willing to disseminate rubbish and accept libels that clearly do not have any grounds.

While there has been a longstanding debate over the ethics of traditional conspiracy theories and theorizing, there is much less discourse on the ethical status of the *new conspiracism*. The notion of a new conspiracism was introduced in Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum's book *A Lot of People Are Saying* (2019). This term refers to a politics in which claims about alleged conspiracies are made mainly because they are thought to be politically useful. The new conspiracism consists of conspiracy theories without theory—that is, without detailed grounds that tell people why they should believe in those conspiratorial allegations. Examples include the following wild claims: Some politicians are space lizards, Barack Obama's actual birthplace was Kenya, vaccines contain microchips, the federal government has a secret plan to forbid access to guns, Hillary "Killary" Clinton leads a vast pedophile ring, and so on.

In what follows, we will briefly analyze the ethics of the new conspiracism. Obviously, many ethical problems raised by traditional conspiracy theories—such as those regarding the John F. Kennedy (JFK) assassination, the moon landing, Princess Diana, and the World Trade Center (WTC) attack—are present in the new conspiracism as well. For instance, regardless of whether the conspiratorial charges are traditional or new, they tend to increase distrust in knowledge-producing institutions, such as mainstream media, public authorities, and universities (although it must be admitted that part of the reason why there are so many conspiracy theories is the already existing lack of trust in such institutions). However, it is likely that the new conspiracism includes morally disturbing features that are *specific* to some claims of the new conspiracists. We distinguish between (1) doubt-sowing new conspiracism and (2) agitating new conspiracism. We claim that the doubt-sowing new conspiracists are culpably ignorant and can be morally blamed. We then argue that representatives of the agitating new conspiracism do not respect certain moral *speech act-related obligations* they have as members of public discussions. In particular, we argue that agitating new conspiracy theorists do not make genuine *assertions* when they should do so.

We will proceed as follows. First, we briefly characterize traditional conspiracy theories and point out their usual qualities. We then introduce key features of the new conspiracism and distinguish between its two forms. We follow Muirhead and Rosenblum and refer to their discussion, but we do not claim that our description of the new con-

spiracism is exactly what they had in mind. In particular, Muirhead and Rosenblum do not think that the new conspiracism comes in two forms. Finally, we will introduce reasons why the new conspiracism and groundless conspiratorial allegations prompts moral worries. Our starting point here is that both forms of the new conspiracism are indeed ethically problematic. We are aware that millions of people do not share this presumption and find conspiratorial charges an appropriate part of contemporary politics, not only in the United States but also in Europe.

2. Traditional conspiracy theories

Historical explanations that refer to conspiracies, such as those pertaining to the assassination of Julius Caesar, are not conspiracy theories. They are ordinary historical explanations.[1] An example of a traditional conspiracy theory is the claim that the destruction of the WTC in 2001 was an "inside job." To say that a theory is traditional is not to say that it no longer has supporters. WTC conspiracy theories, for instance, have many supporters, and new arguments in support of these theories continue to emerge (see, e.g., Basham 2024).

In this paper, conspiracy theories are understood as explanations of an event or phenomenon that (a) refer to an actual or alleged conspiracy; (b) conflict with the generally accepted explanation of the event (if there is one), providing an alternative to the "official" expert view; and (c) offer insufficient evidence in support of the alternative explanation, so that it is not considered an interesting competing theory. In ordinary language, the claim that the first moon landing was faked is called a "conspiracy theory." According to the (explicitly pejorative) definition above, this description is correct. The theory (a) refers to a conspiracy; (b) conflicts with the official view of epistemic authorities, such as researchers; and (c) is poorly supported by evidence (according to the relevant epistemic authorities)[2] (Ichino and Räikkä 2021; Räikkä 2023a).

It is sometimes suggested that the third criterion is unnecessary, and it suffices to say that conspiracy theories are explanations that refer to alleged conspiracies and conflict with the received, official view. However, this is not true. The third criterion (which says that conspir-

[1] Some philosophers have defended the view that *all* explanations that refer to conspiracies are "conspiracy theories". See e.g. Dentith 2018; Dentith 2019. The issue of the definition is still open. See also Hagen 2023.

[2] The claim that conspiracy theories conflict with the "official view" does not refer to a view defended by political authorities but to the shared view of the epistemic authorities whose view should be independent. In principle, a conspiracy theory (which is presently rejected by the research community) can turn out to be the official expert view when time goes by. Should this happen, the theory would not be and would not be called a "conspiracy theory" anymore. Some people say that this is what happened in Watergate. Arguably, however, the investigative journalists' theory was never a conspiracy theory, as their claims were well supported by the evidence.

acy theories are supported by poor evidence) is important if we want to do justice to the ordinary usage of the term "conspiracy theory." To say that the pharaoh Tutankhamen was killed by conspirators is not to support a conspiracy theory, although the claim refers to a conspiracy and is not presently the "official" view of historians. The claim that Tutankhamen was assassinated is (or at least was) a competing historical explanation. Similarly, to say that Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin was killed by the British intelligence service is not considered (or is not always considered) a conspiracy theory, although the claim refers to a conspiracy and is not presently the received and "official" view of the event. The claim that British intelligence helped Felix Yusupov and other conspirators kill Rasputin is a competing historical theory about the death of Rasputin. The two kinds of theories—conspiracy theories and "rival theories" that refer to conspiracies—differ with respect to the quality of the evidence they provide. Conspiracy theories offer relatively little high-quality evidence in support of the conspiracies to which they refer. Competing historical theories, in contrast, offer a good amount of high-quality evidence in support of their claims, even if the relevant experts do not generally accept them (cf. Räikkä 2023b).

Traditional conspiracy theories are usually developed because they are supposed to be *true*. The ordinary assumption has been that the "truth is out there," although the mainstream media, public authorities, and researchers are unable or unwilling to confess it. Of course, there have always been conspiracy theories that are not developed because they are considered true. Conspiracy theories concerning climate change that are developed and disseminated by the oil industry are not considered true, although some of the people who have learned about these theories have indeed started to believe in them. Many climate change-related conspiracy theories have been developed and disseminated merely for political reasons. Furthermore, some conspiracy theories are developed for fun. The conspiracy theory that Finland does not really exist belongs to this category. In general, however, traditional conspiracy theories are developed as claims meant to be taken seriously. Conspiracy theorists consider conspiracy theorizing to be an important part of social criticism. In their own view, they are the watchdogs of democracy—a role the mainstream media fails to fulfill (cf. Lantian et al. 2017).

A common feature of traditional conspiracy theories is that they are based on lengthy and detailed *reasoning*. Anyone who wants to get acquainted with JFK conspiracy theories should prepare to read hundreds of pages about bullets, rifles, and a black umbrella that was closed just before shooting. If you want to argue with a supporter of a particular WTC conspiracy theory, set aside plenty of time, because she will have innumerable details to tell—for instance, that Building Seven (i.e., WTC-7) burned down even if it was *not* hit by a plane. Of course, the reasons presented in traditional conspiracies are not convincing,

as far as the relevant experts can tell. If the reasons were convincing, we would not be talking about conspiracy theories in the first place. In any case, traditional conspiracy theories are based on reasons, and sometimes, they sound reasonable to laypersons. If there is no wind on the moon, how is America's flag moving? Is the first moon landing a big hoax?

The purpose of traditional conspiracy theories is to influence people's *beliefs*. Usually, the goal is to change people's views about the correct explanation of some tragic or extraordinary event. Many empirical studies have examined how many people believe in this or that conspiracy theory. It is advisable to read these studies cautiously, as it is possible that people *say* they believe in some theory only because they think that the issue is important. In a sense, they support the theory, although they do not literally believe (or reject) it. Older conspiracy theories concerning vaccines are good examples. They tell detailed stories about the catastrophic consequences of vaccination, and many people disseminate these stories on social media and elsewhere. However, they need not believe these theories (Ichino and Räikkä 2021). Indeed, some of the disseminators are not even familiar with the theories but send them to their friends just to convey that the issue of vaccine safety is, in their view, important. In general, however, many people do believe in the conspiracy theories they propound. The theories are created to influence beliefs—and they often do. These beliefs then affect people's behavior, often in an undesirable way. A person who believes in a conspiracy theory about climate change might stop caring about her carbon footprint, and so on (Douglas and Sutton 2015).

Traditional conspiracy theories are usually created and disseminated through the implication that the creators and disseminators *themselves* believe in their theories. Even when conspiracy theorists do *not* believe in their theories, these theories are presented as if the responsible creators were serious. That is, traditional theories are not presented merely as lashes or retorts. The audience is supposed to think that the theories are presented in earnest and not merely because someone wants to be nasty and revile one's opponents. When conspiracy theories are used in propaganda (as traditional conspiracy theories often are), it is important that people think they are developed in good faith and not merely for propaganda purposes. Usually, traditional conspiracy theories consist of *assertions*.

3. New conspiracism

Let us now turn to the new conspiracism. It consists of conspiratorial allegations, such as the claim that Michelle Obama is actually male (but conspirators hide the fact), or that conspirators—specifically, Democrats—stole the 2020 election. The new conspiracism consists of the repetition of false claims that often seem to *work* in the sense of producing political results that are then further pursued.

The idea that there are two groups of conspiracy theories—traditional and new—is a strong claim, and some authors have denied the tenability of such a classification (see e.g. Grant 2020; Clarke 2022). Clearly, skepticism about the distinction between traditional conspiracy theories and a new conspiracism is valid in at least two respects. First, there is a large gray area in which it is hard to say whether a theory is traditional or of a new sort. Second, conspiracy theorists still develop theories that are similar to traditional theories, and some of the old theories sound like the claims of the new conspiracists. Nevertheless, it seems likely that there is indeed a phenomenon that can be called a *new* conspiracism.[3] Muirhead and Rosenblum's book *A Lot of People Are Saying* (2019) has prompted much discussion (see e.g. Morone 2020; Warren 2024; Bonotti and Zech 2024; Nwokora 2024). Our goal here is not to defend their approach. However, we make explicit use of their characterization of the new conspiracism, although we do not claim that the details of our description match their initial picture of this phenomenon. The key features of the new conspiracism (as this concept is understood in this paper) include the following three elements.

First, as opposed to those attached to traditional conspiracy theories, new conspiracists' claims are developed and disseminated primarily for political reasons. Of course, many traditional conspiracy theories also have (or had) a political dimension, but typically, they are developed and disseminated because they are supposed to be warranted *explanations*. The point of the new conspiracism is not to change people's views about the correct explanations of important or dramatic events. To claim that Joe Biden is a space lizard is not supposed to be a novel explanation of anything. Therefore, we can say that the conspiratorial charges of the new conspiracism are conspiracy *claims* rather than conspiracy *theories* proper (cf. Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019: 2).

Second, detailed "evidence" and lengthy arguments in support of conspiratorial allegations do not play a major role in the new conspiracism. The new conspiracists are not engaged in an effort to ground their claims in complex reasoning (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019: 3). As opposed to traditional conspiracy theories, one need not read dozens of pages in order to understand the content of a conspiracy claim made by a new conspiracist. In the new conspiracism, the claim that Barack Obama comes from Kenya (but he and his fellow conspirators lie about the issue) need not be supported in any way. Of course, these kinds of bare conspiracy claims can somehow be *linked* to a larger conspiratorial worldview (Grant 2020: 1152), but this does not change the fact that the new conspiracism lacks reasoning and arguments.

Third, the claims of new conspiracists are repeated here and there—for instance, in political speeches, and especially on social media. Con-

[3] The distinction between "old" and "new" conspiracism is not categorical. In the real world we might only talk about tendencies.

spiracy claims (such as the claim that Hillary Clinton leads a pedophile ring) are "good" if they sprawl all over. The new conspiracists "call for repeating and spreading their claims – 'liking', tweeting, and forwarding" (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019: 32). Although some traditional conspiracy theories (such as the claim that the first moon landing was faked) have been proposed repeatedly over the years, other theories have only one main source and are not very popular. The claims of the new conspiracists are always widely circulated. Otherwise, the claims do not represent the new conspiracism in the first place.

Now, for the purposes of ethical analysis, it is important to distinguish between two forms or branches of the new conspiracism. Naturally, both serve political aims, as the claims of new conspiracists are developed and disseminated for political reasons. However, the two forms differ with respect to their methods of seeking political influence. (1) *Doubt-sowing new conspiracism* aims to make people believe that certain conspiracies propounded by their political opponents are possible or even likely. (2) *Agitating new conspiracism* tries to strengthen the enemy image and make people feel like they belong to a strong political community. Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) do not distinguish between the two forms of the new conspiracism, and these forms undoubtedly go together in real life.[4] However, they have important differences. Let us consider both forms more closely.

1. DOUBT-SOWING NEW CONSPIRACISM. An example of a doubt-sowing conspiratorial claim is that "Barack Obama was born in Kenya." When a new conspiracist makes this claim, she usually means that, in her view, it is not impossible that Obama was not born in Kenya. The US Presidents should come from the United States, the implication goes—but perhaps Obama did not? Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019: 43) write that "new conspiracists do not necessarily believe what they say. But they do not disbelieve it either."[5] According to them (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019: 43), the claims that are "not disproved and are not impossible" are therefore "true enough" for the new conspiracists. If "one cannot be certain that a belief is entirely false, with the emphasis on *entirely*, then it might be true – and that's true enough" (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019: 43). It is true enough to deserve to be presented publicly as a more or less serious *suspicion*.

The doubt-sowing new conspiracists do not take responsibility for their literal claims, such as the claim about Obama's birthplace. New conspiracy theorists use the "just asking questions" tactic very

[4] Furthermore, it is often difficult to say whether a specific conspiracy charge represents the doubt-sowing branch rather than the agitating branch.

[5] Muirhead and Rosenblum's (2019: 51–52) approach is not entirely clear, since they also write that the new conspiracists "*assent to the proposition* that Obama was born in Kenya because it might have been the case, however remote the likelihood. They then assert that he was born in Kenya" (our italics). To assent to a proposition is to believe it, right?

often, and as Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019: 27) point out, "just asking questions" evades ownership of the claim being made.[6] They write (2019: 39) that "[r]egardless of whether conspiracists identify themselves or remain anonymous, a charge levelled without evidence that takes the form of vague innuendo avoids responsibility for what it asserts." The new conspiracists take responsibility merely for the weaker claim, namely, that there is a real (and not only logical) possibility that Obama was born in Africa. Of course, this weaker claim is false too. However, in a good many cases, the claim is presented seriously. Perhaps actor Jennifer Aniston and Barack Obama have an affair? It is possible.

Why would anyone take seriously suspicions and conspiracy charges whose likelihood is very remote? According to Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019: 49), "the bar for assenting to conspiracy charges can be set very low," and in the "new conspiracism, this low bar is the standard: if something could have happened, even if there is no evidence for it at all, then it is true enough." This means, then, that the *possibility* is there. From the point of view of a new conspiracist, the possibility may very well look tenable, as so many people are repeating it. "A lot of people are saying…" This verbal gesture provides a sort of *testimonial evidence* for the doubt-sowing new conspiracists. "[V]alidation comes from repetition by those in the relevant community" (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019: 51). The result may be that millions of people have "their doubts." Consequently, such doubts may affect their political behavior, including voting behavior.

2. AGITATING NEW CONSPIRACISM. An example of agitating conspiracy claim is that "Michelle Obama is actually a man."[7] Usually, the function of the claim is not to spread implausible suspicions (as far as we know) but rather to say something strange about a political opponent and her allies. Another example is the claim that "the real reason for Biden's resignation from the campaign in 2024 was that he was already dead" (cf. Bond 2024). It is suitably nasty to call someone dead when he is actually alive. It suits the purposes of the agitating new conspiracists, who do not think that their claims are true, or even that they are possibly true.[8] The agitating new conspiracists flag their political views by spreading odd conspiracy claims, and, as Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019: 50) write, one aim of "assenting to conspiracist fabulations is to communicate belonging." Conspiracy claims resemble animals' mating displays, as they invite like-minded actors to get to-

[6] "The 'just asking questions tactic' substitutes for arguments, evidence, and explanation" (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019: 20).

[7] Here, the claim of her being a man was a case of racism and misogyny combined.

[8] Cf. Warren's (2024: 289) description of the new conspiracism: "These discourses are expressive rather than discursive: they cannot be refuted because they signal fears and discontents rather than positions within public arguments".

gether. Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019: 51) compare new conspiracy allegations to claims of the fans of a sport team. It is *tribalism*:

> Assent to a conspiracy claim means the claim resonates with one's sense of the political world. A tribal belief is akin to Boston Red Sox fans' belief that the "Yankees suck." Such an assertion is not an affirmation of a proposition that is meant to correspond to facts in the world. Even if the Yankees were the best team in the world, for Red Sox fans, the statement "Yankees suck" remains valid because it reflects fans' identification with their team and each other. With respect to the Yankees, the question of justified belief does not arise for Red Sox fans, at least not in a philosophical or scientific way.

When a Red Sox fan says "the Yankees suck," the point is not to say that they do suck, or that it is not impossible that they suck. The claim has content, of course, but to state the claim is not meant to say something about reality. The point is to say something like, "I don't like the Yankees, you should not like them either, and we are together." This is a loyalty declaration. When this is shouted often enough, it offers feelings of pleasure and power to those who belong to the relevant group. The same holds for agitating new conspiracism. Because of their content, the claims convey scorn and disrespect, but they are not supposed to describe (correctly or incorrectly) the issues they concern (such as Michelle Obama's gender). In Muirhead and Rosenblum's (2019: 38) words, the "new conspiracism delivers dark claims," and "[f]or angry minds it offers the immediate gratification of lashing out, of throwing verbal stones". (See also Lynch 2020; Galeotti and Liveriero 2025.)"

The result could be that millions of people feel that they belong to a strong political community of righteous people. This feeling, in turn, may affect their political behavior.

4. Ethical issues of new conspiracism

What is the ethical status of the new conspiracism? We assume that many people find groundless conspiratorial accusations disturbing, depending partly on the targets of the accusations. The reason why people are irritated is probably the simple fact that the claims and questions of the new conspiracists are somewhat arrogant. However, an interesting question here is what might *justify* our (possible) moral condemnation of the new conspiracism, and not only what explains the irritation.[9] Obviously, some ethical problems raised by the new conspiracism are familiar issues that pertain to traditional conspiracy theorizing as well. For instance, they may lead to both adverse behavior and general distrust in social institutions—specifically in institutions that are supposed to produce knowledge (cf. Melo-Martín and Intemann

[9] Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019: 27, 34–35, 164) argue that the new conspiracists are responsible for the *delegitimation process*, understood as an attempt to increase disrespect for public institutions.

2018). Additionally, they both include libels. To ask whether Hilary Clinton is a pedophile is to suggest that, perhaps, she is.

The new conspiracism has two forms, as we argued above. The doubt-sowing new conspiracism raises further ethical questions, as the suspicions that their proponents voice are especially implausible. The traditional conspiracy theory that British intelligence murdered Princess Diana may be implausible, but surely, it is even more implausible to seriously claim that Hillary Clinton may be a pedophile. The fact that people have accepted such conspiracy charges as serious possibilities far too easily, partly because they hear about these suspicions from so many sources, is epistemically worrisome. Perhaps we could say that they have *epistemic vices* (cf. Cassam 2016: 169; Piazza 2024: 217). However, these epistemic vices signal *moral vices* as well. Even if people cannot easily disengage themselves from those vices—not anytime soon, at least—they can be morally criticized for the behavior caused by those vices. We could say that their ignorance is *culpable*, as they *should know better*. The exceptional implausibility of the claims should ring the bell. The issue is complicated, but here the epistemic mistakes seem too obvious and harmful to be morally innocent.

The agitating new conspiracism raises further moral questions as well. Intuitively, it is likely that the agitating new conspiracism includes morally disturbing features *specific* to these conspiracy claims. What are they?

One option is that the claims of the agitating new conspiracists are simply outright lies. Lying is *prima facie* wrong; therefore, the agitating new conspiracism is *prima facie* wrong. This reasoning comes easily to mind, but it is implausible. First, the point of the agitating new conspiracism is not to change people's beliefs but rather to gather forces together and give credence to the enemy image. Although there is much discussion about the appropriate definition of "lying," it is usual to assume that a person who lies is trying to influence the beliefs of another person or other people (Carson 2010). After the 2020 elections in the US, the new conspiracists spread baseless claims of election fraud and said that Venezuelans—in particular, the company Smartmatic—were behind the fraud. When the new conspiracists were accused of lying, they replied that their claim was so ridiculous that it was not lying, for only insane people would have believed the claim. The fraud claim was not meant to mislead anyone (although it did). Second, when people lie, they try to convey the impression that they themselves believe what they are saying. However, this is usually not the case in the agitating new conspiracism. Therefore, lying is not the key ethical problem raised by the agitating new conspiracism.

Another option is that the specific ethical problem of the agitating new conspiracism is that it represents what Harry G. Frankfurt calls "bullshit." As Frankfurt (2005: 55–56) points out, bullshitters are not liars:

> It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction. A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it. When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all the bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.

Bullshit comes close to the agitating new conspiracism, as the claims made are used for purposes other than saying what the speaker thinks is true or false. When someone says that Joe Biden is possibly a lizard, she is probably advertising her political views and inviting others to join the group. However, the new conspiracy theorists are not bullshitters *in Frankfurt's sense*. Bullshit is common when circumstances require a person to talk about issues she does not really know anything about (Frankfurt 2005: 63). If others notice that her claims are not true, they can notify her of her mistakes. This should make the bullshitter feel uncomfortable, for the notification is likely to complicate her objectives, whatever they are. However, the same does not hold for the agitating new conspiracists. To tell an agitating new conspiracist that her claims are false is pointless and futile. The reply is that she never claimed that they were true. She said what she said—but she certainly did not imply that what she said accurately describes reality.

This brings us to the third option. The problem is not that the agitating new conspiracists make false assertions. The core ethical problem is that they *do not make assertions*, even though they should, given that they want to express their disrespect in words.

At least since Charles Sanders Pierce (1839–1914), it has been common knowledge that to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth. Asserting a proposition necessarily involves undertaking a commitment to the truth of that proposition (Marsili 2023). In Richard Moran's (2005: 11) words, "the speaker, in presenting his utterance as an *assertion*, one with the force of *telling* the audience something, presents himself as *accountable* for the truth of what he says, and in doing so he offers a kind of guarantee for this truth."

Moreover, it is up to the speaker whether she makes an assertion or does something else. As Moran (2005: 21) writes, the "speaker's authority to determine the illocutionary status of his utterance is the authority he has to present himself as accountable for the performance of some speech act." *If* a person decides to put forward an assertion (rather than something else), *then* she is responsible for its truth. "Assertion is a way of speaking seriously, more so than in play-acting, sleep-talk, or speculation" (Hawley 2019: 50).

As many philosophers have pointed out, assertions resemble promises (see e.g. Hinchman 2005: 587). Although assertions can be true or false, while promises cannot, stating either an assertion or a promise makes oneself responsible and accountable. A person who breaks her promise is an appropriate target of criticism, assuming that there are no sufficient excuses. Similarly, a person who says something untrue is *prima facie* an acceptable object of blame or notification. As Gary Watson (2003: 58) points out, "[t]o assert that *p* is, among other things, to endorse *p*, to authorize others to assume that *p*, to commit oneself to defending p, thereby (typically) giving others standing to criticize or challenge what one says."

Both promises and assertions make guarantees. Their aim is to *assure* another person or persons.[10] Suppose that a person says, "I promise, but I might change my mind." This is an incoherent or self-defeating promise. Indeed, it is not a promise at all, as the person who hears it does not receive any assurance from the person who says that she promises (Moran 2005: 24). Similarly, it is incoherent or self-defeating to assert that "Michelle Obama is actually a man, although I do not think so." The claim is not a genuine assertation, as the audience does not get any assurance from the person speaking about the issue.

Assertions are made to an *audience*. The speaker decides who belongs to the audience. Additionally, assertions involve an attempt to tell others something. If the assertions are false, the target audience may ask why the teller tried to mislead them. This question is not available to others beyond the relevant audience, for if the speaker tried to mislead anyone, it was her audience, not others. Of course, outsiders can blame the speaker, but not for trying to mislead *them*, because the speaker has not spoken to them in the first place (cf. Moran 2005: 22). The upshot of all this is that asserting involves "making a commitment of some kind, or offering something to the audience," as Katherine Hawley (2019: 50) puts it.

Let us consider an example. Suppose that a work team of ten people has a meeting. Someone defends the idea that the team should cut expenses and assures that this is the case. Her audience is the other members of the team. They are in a unique position to criticize the view because the assertion is made for *them*. If someone decides to criticize the suggestion, she is free to do so, but her views now also become possible targets of criticism, as she has made a critical assertion. We can say that the criticism has a *price*: making oneself responsible. Suppose, however, that one member of the team is (1) willing to blame the original suggestion about cutting expenses but (2) unwilling to pay the price. So, instead of *telling* what is, in her view, wrong about the suggestion, she rolls her eyes, laughs, shakes her head, and says

[10] To say that assertions aim to assure the audience is not to commit oneself to the so-called assurance view of testimonial knowledge. The topic of this paper is not the nature of testimony.

something so stupid that it should be obvious that she does not mean what she says. This is bad behavior, and the problem here is primarily moral rather than epistemic. The problem is not that the person asserts something that is not based on proper evidence. The problem is that she decides *not to assert anything at all* and instead takes the privilege of criticizing the view without making herself a possible target of counter-criticism. She is a kind of free-rider and, among other things, her behavior harms the cohesion of the team and complicates the team's working. However, she manages to announce her side, and her behavior may encourage like-minded members of the team to join the performance and express their disrespect as well.

Something similar is happening in the agitating new conspiracism. Those who develop and disseminate agitating conspiracy allegations take privileges. Public discussion consists largely of arrogant *noise* and baseless accusations that are not presented seriously as assertions (although, every now and then, some people take the slurs seriously). Free-riders cause a problem that is not epistemic but moral. Public discussions and political arenas become more and more belligerent.[11] Agitating conspiracy allegations are immune to rational evaluation, as there is nothing to evaluate, but the agitating new conspiracism is not immune to *moral* criticism. The agitating new conspiracist can be criticized morally because of the unjustified privileges and deconstructive consequences of their actions. They should present arguments, but they do not.

Of course, the audience may know what the true opinion of the person probably is. The audience may evaluate an argument they *presume* to be supported by an agitating new conspiracist. However, this does not negate the unfairness of the situation. The agitating new conspiracist can simply refuse to reveal what she presently has in mind.

Notice that making assertion-like statements that are not genuine assertions is not morally problematic *per se*. They are problematic only if they are presented without implicit or explicit permission and acceptance from the audience. There are events at which it is fine to say this or that without really meaning anything at all—student parties after midnight come to mind. People say things that sound like assertions but are not. At late-night parties, nobody takes privileges, as everyone is free to say what she happens to want to say at that moment, and all the participants understand and consent to what is going on. In his book, Frankfurt (2005: 35–37) describes events that he calls "bull sessions" in the following way:

> The characteristic topics of a bull session have to do with very personal and emotion-laden aspects of life – for instance, religion, politics, or sex. People

[11] Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019: 38) write that "[c]onspiracist accusations leave the rest of us, officials and citizens alike, baffled, our sense of reality threatened, our responses tentative and, it feels, inadequate. Disorientation is one of the dangerous effects of conspiracism, and producing this reaction is one of the new conspiracists' declared pleasures."

> are generally reluctant to speak altogether openly about these topics if they expect that they might be taken too seriously. What tends to go on in a bull session is that the participants try out various thoughts and attitudes in order to see how it feels to hear themselves saying such things and in order to discover how others respond, without its being assumed that they are committed to what they say: it is understood by everyone in a bull session that the statements people make do not necessarily reveal what they really believe or how they really feel. The main point is to make possible a high level of candor and an experimental or adventuresome approach to the subjects under discussion. Therefore provision is made for enjoying a certain irresponsibility, so that people will be encouraged to convey what is on their minds without too much anxiety that they will be held to it.
>
> Each of the contributors to a bull session relies, in other words, upon a general recognition that what he expresses or says is not to be understood as being what he means wholeheartedly or believes unequivocally to be true. The purpose of the conversation is not to communicate beliefs. Accordingly, the usual assumptions about the connection between what people say and what they believe are suspended.

However, important political forums of democratic countries are not "bull sessions." Public political discussions do not belong to events in which anything goes. To behave as though political arenas are "bull sessions" and present conspiracy allegations without really asserting anything is to act wrongly.[12]

Our claim here is not that politically active individuals have a general obligation to make assertions. They are free to participate in demonstrations, wave flags, and so on, without making explicit assertions. Furthermore, loose talk and jokes are certainly acceptable in public discourse, whether or not they qualify as proper assertions. The idea that participants of the political debates should take responsibility for their claims should not be interpreted too restrictively. If democratic discussion is to be inclusive, it cannot follow the rigid format of a debating competition, where everything is strictly regulated. However, the fact remains that, from an ethical point of view, not everything is permissible.

5. Concluding remarks

We have argued that traditional conspiracy theories and the new conspiracism can be distinguished, even if the distinction is not clear in all cases. We have pointed out that traditional conspiracy theories and the new conspiracism share many ethical problems. However, we have argued that the new conspiracism has ethical problems of its own.

The new conspiracism has two forms: (1) the doubt-sowing branch and (2) the agitating branch. We argued that the doubt-sowing new conspiracists are culpably ignorant and can be morally blamed. The

[12] The same holds for disinformation and modern populism in general. The ethical problems listed here does not concern merely new conspiracism.

agitating new conspiracism has additional problems, as the new conspiracy theorists take privileges they should not take. There has been much discussion about the norms that should govern the assertions we make (Hawley 2019: 50). Lying is wrong, and so on. However, much less has been said about the norms that govern *when we should make assertions*. We have argued that people who participate in public political debates and blame others should make assertions and nothing else, as their audience has not consented to lax talk that does not assert anything. The speakers determine the illocutionary status of their sayings, and when they make wrong choices, they are morally responsible for those choices. The agitating new conspiracists are responsible for the speech acts that are not genuine assertions and whose main function is to signal one's political side and encourage others to join a group of scorners.

The phenomenon we have tried to analyze is not solely an American problem, although the examples we have used come from the US, and Muirhead and Rosenblum's book concerns politics in the States. Baseless conspiracy talk has already emerged in Europe, as Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019: 168) predicted in 2019. In many European countries, we have politicians and social media actors who are ready to repeat allegations of this and that crime without worrying too much about not having any evidence of the alleged crimes. We have left European examples aside to keep our focus on the topic of this paper, which is the ethics of the new conspiracism. The moral problems of the new conspiracism are similar, regardless of where it takes place.

The ethical issues raised by the new conspiracism prompt the question of what can be done. Perhaps not much, but let us conclude our discussion by outlining some possible responses. There has been some debate on how to respond to classical conspiracy theories (Compact 2020; Räikkä and Ritola 2020), and much of what has been said in that context also applies to the doubt-sowing branch of new conspiracism. For instance, people can be educated, and their epistemic and logical skills can be improved. Additionally, the epistemic environment can be enhanced. It may be possible to reform the architecture of the most commonly used social media platforms to promote more trustworthy information (cf. Piazza 2025: 213). Explicit warnings could also be mandated on certain websites (Compact 2020: 12). Clearly, there is no single solution or universally "right" strategy, as doubt-sowing conspiracists come from diverse backgrounds.

The rise of agitating new conspiracism presents an even more complex challenge. It is unlikely that people will change their behavior simply by being kindly asked. Of course, it is both possible and advisable to encourage citizens to engage "with opposite views in respectful and civil ways," as recently suggested by Elisabetta Galeotti and Federica Liveriero (2025). There is also room for educating people, including politicians, about the value of rational debate and the far-reaching

negative consequences of inflammatory speech acts, not only on the democratic public sphere but ultimately on themselves and their loved ones. However, something more concrete and radical is likely needed. Regulation, prohibitions, and platform rules are already in use in many regions, and their application can certainly be expanded.[13] Ultimately, what is needed is general trust in social institutions and sense of belonging to the broader community – one that includes both like-minded people and those with differing views. How can these ideals be achieved? It is a difficult question, but it is well known that trust levels tend to be higher in countries where the citizens enjoy a reasonable degree of social, political, and economic equality.

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[13] The United Nations sets certain restrictions. Article 20 (2) of the Covenant requires that propaganda for war or advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence be prohibited by law. https://www.un.org/en/countering-disinformation

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