

**BEYOND NIHILISM?
—
ONKRAJ NIHILIZMA?**

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THE EYE IN THE TRIANGLE AND THE THING ITSELF

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Alfredas BUIKO

Faculty of Creative Industries, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University,
Saulėtekio al. 11, LT-10223 Vilnius, Lithuania

alfredas.buiko@vilniustech.lt

Abstract

Conspiracy theories are frequently researched while trying to figure out, which conspiracy theories are false, and which might be possibly true, which means the concept of conspiracy theory itself gets lost and muddled. The phenomenological approach to conspiracy theories can solve this problem by focusing on the phenomenon itself. Since the phenomenon of a successful conspiracy cannot exist—because a successful conspiracy is held secret and can thus only be a kind of noumenon—, conspiracy

theories can only be caused by intuitions and by experiences of discrepancies between one's experiences. Accordingly, explanation by a conspiracy, while usually less practical than acquiring additional knowledge, still remains meaningful, both because of its simplicity, and because it allows one to explain something (a phenomenon) through a noumenon (conspiracy), instead of being caught in the infinite regression of explaining phenomena through phenomena.

Keywords: phenomenology, conspiracy theories, media, conspiracism.

Oko v trikotniku in stvar sama. Fenomenologija teorij zarote

Povzetek

302 Teorije zarote so pogosto obravnavane tako, da se poskuša ugotoviti, katere so napačne in katere bi utegnile biti resnične, kar pomeni, da se sam pojem teorije zarote zgubi in postane nejasen. Fenomenološki pristop k teorijam zarote lahko ta problem razreši z osredotočenjem na fenomen sam. Ker fenomen uspešne zarote ne more obstajati – kajti uspešna zarota je skrivna in je zato lahko samo nekakšen *noumenon* –, lahko teorije zarote povzročijo samo slutnje in izkustvo diskrepanc med lastnimi izkušnjami. V skladu s tem razlaga z zaroto, četudi je navadno manj priročna kakor pridobivanje dodatnega védenja, ostaja smiselna tako zaradi svoje enostavnosti kot zaradi tega, ker dopušča razlago nečesa (fenomena) s pomočjo *noumenona* (zarote), namesto da bi se človek ujel v neskončno regresijo razjasnjevanja fenomenov s pomočjo fenomenov.

Ključne besede: fenomenologija, teorije zarote, mediji, zarotništvo.

Introduction

One of the problems for researchers of conspiracy theories is the prevalence of research from the outside perspective. Such scholarship lacks research into conspiracy theories and conspiracy culture being employed from the internal point of view. On the one hand, this can be understandable: academic researchers consider themselves as members of the intellectual elite. The very terms “conspiracy theories” or “conspiracy theorist” are suffused with negative connotations, such as tinfoil hats and propensity for domestic terrorism. It is only natural that people who believe themselves to be “the elite” would look at people, whose whole identity is fighting against “the secret elite,” with skepticism and distrust. Nevertheless, this also means that certain inner workings of conspiracy theories (or conspiracist mind) stay hidden beyond the analytical gaze of the observer. That also causes certain basic misunderstandings with regard to conspiracy theory structure and conspiracism worldview. In 2012, Wood, Douglas, Sutton published the paper “Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories,” in which they argued that people who believe one conspiracy theory (e. g., that Princess Diana was murdered or that Osama bin Laden was already dead when Navy seals raided his compound) were also more likely to believe contradictory conspiracy theories (e. g., that Princess Diana or Osama bin Laden have faked their deaths and are still alive). In 2023, van Prooijen *et al.* published the paper entitled “Just Dead, Not Alive: Reconsidering Belief in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories,” in which the scholars argued that the findings of Wood *et al.* were faulty, and that during their preregistered studies correlation between contradictory conspiracy theory beliefs was inconsistent at best (they also noticed that in the cases of their study of conspiracy theory—that is, in the cases when in the set of two contradictory conspiracy theories one claimed that a famous person was murdered or dead and another claimed that the same famous person was still alive—the correlation was actually negative). Furthermore, Petrović’s and Žeželj’s 2022 study “Both a bioweapon and a hoax: the curious case of contradictory conspiracy theories about COVID-19” noticed that the same individual believing contradictory conspiracy theory claims is both possible and not that unusual (according to the researchers, across their three studies 40

to 42 percent of individuals endorsed at least one pair of contradictory claims). This leads to a paradoxical situation, when everyone (not only researchers, but the public as well) has an opinion concerning conspiracy theories (which ones are false, which ones might be real, and which ones are not conspiracy theories at all). At the same time, no one is actually quite sure what a conspiracy theory even is, or how one comes to believe in it.

In this paper, I argue that a phenomenological description of conspiracy theorist worldview could be useful for these and similar studies and might even provide a useful framework to explain and understand various “logical inconsistencies” one might find when researching conspiracy theories. Furthermore, this paper also claims that, when viewed from a phenomenological perspective, conspiracist worldview not only is not “illogical” or “irrational,” but is, as has been argued by Groh (1987, 4), both too logical and too rational, in fact, it outdoes reality in logical consistency (which also would help explaining resistance and longevity of conspiracist worldview and conspiracy theorist beliefs). The conspiracy theories are explained as a desire for the existence of a noumenon behind the boundary of experience (this noumenon—“the conspiracy”—is desired to explain the gaps and discrepancies in conspiracy theorists’ experiences). The first part of the paper discusses the concept of “conspiracy” and how a phenomenological approach can be used to better understand the concept, while in the second part both “conspiracy theories” as well as “conspiracist mind” are analyzed from the phenomenological perspective.

I. Conspiracy as a noumenon: The phenomenological problem

The present paper uses Edmund Husserl’s method of phenomenological reduction to explain two phenomena: the phenomenon of conspiracy and the phenomenon of conspiracy theory. Husserl notices that scientific, positivist explanations tend to be suffused with a surplus of thoughts, which then make the very understanding of the “natural” difficult (Husserl 2006, 24–25). This is extremely noticeable in the realm of social and political sciences, because we, as humanity, already are immersed in the realms of “the social” and “the political.” Thus, in this paper, we do not question the correctness of conspiracy

theories: the question “why” is here more important than asking, which conspiracy theories might be “right” and which might be “wrong.”

Paradoxically, when researching conspiracy theories, one can notice certain interesting parallels between the conspiracy theorists and the philosophers’ understanding of the world. Conspiracy theorists will gladly use philosophical metaphors and allegories, such as the cave from Plato’s *The Republic*. They will argue that they are seeking or have found the truth others are blind to, that they, the conspiracy theorist, are similar to the man who escaped from the cave and learned of the outside world, while the rest of society is still in the cave, chained and looking at the shadows on the wall. Maybe this is caused by the simple fact that both conspiracy theorists and philosophers are motivated by their search for a certain final answer, and because both groups frequently claim that there are other arguments that are superior to common sense, public and expert knowledge, or empirical observations. When analyzing both groups, one can observe a constant grasping beyond the current horizon of experience, a desire to go beyond the boundary. Or, in other words, both philosophers and conspiracy theorists are very seldom happy with simply experiencing, and prefer searching, analyzing, and conceptualizing what lies beyond the direct experiences instead.

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Furthermore, certain philosophical actions—such as Descartes’s methodological doubt, during which he willingly doubts the existence of everything, and argues that the world he experiences could be a dream or an illusion created by an evil demon—resemble specific conspiracy theorist worldviews. One might even argue that Descartes overcomes his doubts, while the conspiracy theorist is in a state of constant Cartesian doubt about everything except his or her own existence. This is because, as has been noticed by Casara, Suitner, Maas (2026), the beliefs in conspiracy theories are positively associated with insecure epistemic needs (in other words, people, who find incomplete information, ambiguity, lack of explanation, etc., harder to experience, are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than the ones, who are fine with ambiguity and lack of explanations). This is also something philosophers experience as well: Husserl’s personal anecdote about receiving a gift when he was a boy—a knife that was too blunt for his liking and was then sharpened until nothing but the handle was left—comes to mind. The same

goes for Socrates, who *could* have stopped asking people various, frequently uncomfortable questions, but *did not*, and was thus given the choice between exile and hemlock. If conspiracy theorists would *not care* about finding the conspiracy, they would stop being conspiracy theorists. If philosophers would *not care* about asking philosophical questions, they would become business majors. In both situations, we find a desire for answers, which the questioner already understands might never come, but continues to ask them anyway.

It may seem strange to use the Kantian term of noumenon in a phenomenology paper: after all, phenomenology is the research of phenomena and nothing else, and the first step is always the suspension or a bracketing of any additional, taken-for-granted knowledge, the *epoché*. Nevertheless, when one talks about certain matters that are not self-evident from the subjects' point of view, about the phenomenology of what is secret and hidden, of objects of consciousness that cannot be experienced the same way temporal and spatial objects are, the terms "noumenon" and "thing-in-itself" become, if not necessary, at least extremely useful. For Kant, the "thing-in-itself" was always first and foremost his own soul, which he cannot cognize neither through speculative reason nor through empirical observation, and the freedom of his own soul, something which cannot be experienced, but what can be thought (or, in other words, experienced only through thought; cf. 1998, 116). Other concepts could also be considered as "things-in-themselves," such as subconsciousness or perfect crimes, because, just as subjects, these are the things that we have no direct and complete experiences of, but that can still affect us in one way or another. For example, within a "perfect crime," the crime itself—"a murder in which there is no chance that the perpetrator will ever be caught" (Adams 2005, 162)—would not be a noumenon, but the perpetrator would be a noumenon. Observers would know there was a crime, and there had been a perpetrator, but they would have no idea who or what that perpetrator is. In cases where the crime was made to look like an accident (that is, in cases where the crime was committed, but was successfully disguised as something else) the crime itself could be considered a thing in itself (if the crime has actually happened; however, nobody uninvolved in the crime could ever tell whether there ever was a crime at all). In such a manner, conspiracies, perfect crimes, thoughts

of other people, and the like, can be differentiated from the “things” as the objects of the so-called experiential sciences (Husserl 2006, 12).

Conspiracy (or, more correctly, a successful conspiracy) fits the concept of noumenon, that is, of something that is not perceived, but still exists and affects the perceiver, something that is only experienced in the mind (if the conspiracy is successful and thus hidden), and, as with noumenon, one can never be sure whether a conspiracy exists for real or is merely an object of an intellect created to explain the perceived phenomena. It is something that exists right beyond the boundary of experience, right beyond the Heideggerian *Grenze*: “The boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins presencing*.” (Heidegger 1971.) Noumenon would thus be something right *beyond* the boundary, not something that is experienced, but something that is intuited by the one who experiences (only the intuition of something beyond the boundary is experienced, not an actual “something” beyond the boundary). As Dentith noticed, any successful (not even perfect, but merely successful) conspiracy should, just like any successful crime, leave no trace (or, in other words, no phenomena) of its existence. “A revealed conspiracy is a conspiracy that is unsuccessful, if we take that a successful conspiracy is one that no one other than the conspirators would ever know about.” (2014, 27). Or, in other words, only in some way unsuccessful crimes and conspiracies become objects of research. That does not mean all unsuccessful crimes and conspiracies are unsuccessful in the same way or on the same level: they can be unsuccessfully concealed (which means they failed in their goal of keeping either the crime or conspiracy secret), unsuccessful in accomplishing their goal (but still succeed in keeping their actions hidden), or both (in which case, the criminals or conspirators failed both to keep their activity secret and to achieve their goals they set for themselves; the four different kinds of conspiracies can be seen in table no. 1.). Out of these different types of conspiracies, only the conspiracies that failed in their secrecy objectives (that is failed the secrecy objectives in the narrative, an actually existing conspiracy in this case is not necessary for a conspiracy theory to exist) ever enter the *Lebenswelt*, in which we all live, because only those kinds of conspiracies that suffered a secrecy failure become known to people other than the conspirators themselves.

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An actual successful conspiracy will never become an object of phenomenological research without becoming an unsuccessful one (because even if a phenomenologist would become a member of a conspiracy, by publishing a paper on the experience of belonging to a conspiracy, he would uncover the conspiracy and turn it into a failed one). Furthermore, phenomenology is characterized by the activity of making that which is inapparent into that which is not inapparent anymore, or, in other words, uncovering that which is covered, while conspiracies, by their definition, can stay successful only while remaining covert and inapparent. Nevertheless, one can still research and talk about conspiracies and their element of secrecy from a phenomenological point of view while discussing one's understanding of what a conspiracy means (in other words, the phenomena). This means that two kinds of experiences concerning experiences related to the concept of "conspiracy" can be defined: the internal experiences and the external experiences. The external experiences are various kinds of sensory experiences that uncover the existence of the conspiracy to the observer: a sight of a procession of a robe-covered figures descending into the darkness of catacombs, or an audio record of several people planning a secret assassination of a public figure could be these kinds of external experiences of a conspiracy. Internal experiences are more complex and can be divided into two additional groups: internal logical experiences and internal intuitive experiences. Internal analytical experiences relating to a conspiracy arise when a subject uncovers and experiences a contradiction relating to their knowledge of the world. For example, a man who learns his wife and best friend were seen in an expensive restaurant while both had said to him that they will be travelling to different foreign countries or an accountant who finds that his company is getting very little revenue but does not seem to experience any kind of financial hardship would experience a completely logical suspicion. However, on their own, none of these sensory experiences are incriminating: only when all these experiences are put together, a gap, a glimmer of something hidden, or an experience of "puzzle pieces not fitting together" is experienced. Internal intuitive experiences are even more puzzling: they could be described as feelings or intuitions that something is not right or that there exists something hidden from the subject, even if there are no reasons to suspect anything (that does not mean these

kinds of experiences are “correct,” that there actually something is “hidden,” or that they are related to anything else besides themselves; paranoid delusions or excessive distrust of everyone would belong to this kind of internal intuitive experiences as well). However, this does not mean such experience must necessarily be “wrong.” Intuitive experiences, even the rather bizarre ones, can still be correct, even if by pure accident. The internal intuitive experience could then be considered the main cornerstone of phenomena one describes under the terms of “conspiracism” and “conspiracy theories.” However, the intuitions are most interesting, because, while they are the least grounded, they are also extremely motivating, since these intuitions are, in general, intuitions of something beyond die *Grenze*: it is the experience of the boundary, followed by the internal intuition that *something* must exist beyond the boundary, something that, while it cannot be seen or heard or touched, can still be *thought* about (however, they are still objects that belong to the transcendental subject, or, as Husserl states, “point to a structure, within the transcendental ego, that is governed by a rule”; 1960, 53). Such intuitions are still objects of consciousness, in fact, they are objects of nothing *but* consciousness.

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Conspiracies can thus be defined by their success (successful or failed) and by the status of their covertness (hidden or uncovered). This means that there are four types of conspiracies: fully successful conspiracies, both in goals and in secrecy (A); successful either in secrecy (B); or in their goals (C); and fully failed, both uncovered and unsuccessful in their plans (D). One can notice that the very act of empirical observation immediately makes conspiracy belong to either C or D category. Only C or D categories are objects of empirical observations: also, the same second there are empirical observations, intuitions and analytical observations become unnecessary. However, A and B type conspiracies are purely objects of intuition and thought experiments. They are objects of consciousness. Where exactly should analytical observations be placed? Analytical observations, as was noticed before, are observations of a gap or a disparity in knowledge. And since people have differing knowledge, one might see a discrepancy there where another, more knowledgeable or less knowledgeable person would not notice anything. For a person who is sure of their knowledge, an analytical observation of a discrepancy seems just as strong of evidence as an empirical observation. For a person who doubts their

own or the other person’s knowledge, such analytical observations might seem to be on the same level as personal intuitions. Here, one can begin to see the phenomenological problem of conspiracy theories.

	Conspiracies that achieved their objectives	Conspiracies that did not achieve their objectives
Conspiracies we do not know about	A. Fully successful conspiracies (secrecy maintained and goals achieved)	B. Failed hidden conspiracies (secrecy maintained, goals not achieved)
Conspiracies we know about	C. Uncovered successful conspiracies (goals achieved, but secrecy not maintained)	D. Fully failed conspiracies (neither secrecy nor goals achieved)

Table 1:
The four types of conspiracies.

II. The structure and the content: A phenomenological approach to conspiracism and conspiracy theories

After the concept of “conspiracy” has been defined, one can begin a phenomenological description of the conspiracy theories. One of the first elements that can be noticed about the so-called “conspiracy theories” is that they are narratives of explanation that do not, for one reason or another, have certain privileges other explanations have. This applies not only in comparison to scientific explanations, but to certain religious or spiritual explanations as well, even if from a purely neutral point of view it could be seen as very strange why the belief that God took the form of a Jewish carpenter two thousand years ago should be more respected than the belief that the U.S. government is secretly cooperating with human-abducting aliens. Michael Barkun, who elaborated Colin Campbell’s concept of “cultic milieu,” called this field of knowledge “stigmatized knowledge” (in other words, belief, opinions, ideas, and concepts that are not granted the same kind of privilege some other kinds of knowledge are granted; 2013, 24–29). A conspiracy theory is something that does not belong to the field of common and normal knowledge; in fact, psychological research has shown that people are more likely to label beliefs

they find less believable as conspiracy theories (however, labelling a statement a “conspiracy theory” does not in fact reduce the people’s belief in that statement; cf. Douglas 2021). However, they exist the same way as privileged explanations do, that is, as objects of consciousness. Furthermore, conspiracy theories are not banal or everyday explanations, they are always explanations of political or historical events. For example, a belief that an individual’s back and joint pain is caused by a nefarious organization using special long-range technologies is not a conspiracy theory, because the scope is too small. However, a belief that the same nefarious organization that causes joint and back pain secretly rules the world and is behind the pharmaceutical industry would be a conspiracy theory. Thirdly, conspiracy theories are explanations of political or historical events that posit that the events were caused by a group working in secret, and that the conspiracy theorist has successfully pierced this veil of secrecy, even if the rest of society has not. From a conspiracy theorist’s point of view, the conspiracy is type C (successful but no longer secret) or D (unsuccessful in their goals and no longer secret) to them, but type A (successful and secret) or B (unsuccessful in their goals but still secret) to most of humanity. Or, in other words, conspiracy theorists believe they know the truth, but the rest of society does not and does not believe they know the truth: they, the conspiracy theorist, find themselves both *exalted* by their special knowledge (because they are so much more knowledgeable than all the other people about the *true* nature of the world) and, at the same time, *isolated* by it (because thanks to that knowledge they are no longer living in the same world, in the same reality as other people). Their *Heimwelt*, the homeworld as the world of communal backgrounds and shared traditions (cf. Zahavi 2025), has shrunk for them to a minimum, and most of the *Lebenswelt* for them consists of a *Fremdwelt*, of an alien world that is controlled and based upon the noumenon of conspiracy that exists right beyond the boundary. At the same time, to the rest of society, conspiracy theorist has become a part of the *Fremdwelt*, of the weird, the eerie, and the strange.

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Conspiracy theories are intentional just as all other experiences are. However, conspiracy theories are different, because instead of intending some sort of a conspiracy (since it cannot be experienced as anything other than as a lack or a deprivation of a conspiracy), the theorist is intends the discrepancy

in their own field of knowledge. A dark spot, in which normality no longer functions, where dragons could be hiding—this is the heart of conspiracy theorist thinking. One could provide an example illustrating this intentionality: when a person believes a conspiracy theory, they always believe a conspiracy theory about something—whether that is an event (September 11), a system (pharmaceutical industry), a person (Elvis Presley), or a situation of the world (popularity of heavy metal music)—that causes extremely strong emotions to people. People create conspiracy theories about the death of Princess Diana or Michael Jackson, about kidnapped kids kept in cages in a dungeon beneath a pizzeria, about things and subjects that one has very strong emotional, psychological, and even existential response to. Now, if we would analyze a relatively benign and non-controversial conspiracy theory—say, for example, a conspiracy theory claiming that Elvis Presley faked his own death—, we might notice that the main object of the intentionality of this theory is not any image or concept of Elvis Presley. The intentional object of this conspiracy theory is a discrepancy between: a) Elvis Presley being young and desirable when he started his career (his existence as an American sex symbol); and b) his sad state of affairs just before his death (him being an obese, drunk performer in Las Vegas who died from a heart attack while on a toilet bowl). The discrepancy is not only psychological, but also existential. How could someone who achieved greatness have ended in such a miserable way? Here, we find the conspiracy theorist experiencing a logical contradiction (a famous and dignified person dying an undignified death) and also experiencing an intuition (*this* kind of death is *not right*). These experiences are what then motivate a person to start believing in conspiracy theory.

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However, conspiracy theory gives a different ending to the story of Elvis Presley: according to the conspiracy theory, he is still alive, and if he is still alive, he could have stopped drinking. He could have lost weight, found true love, and achieved other things he did not achieve. In other words, there could be a happy ending. The same can be said about the conspiracy theories regarding the death of Princess Diana, a princess as if from a fairytale who died during a car crash while chased by the paparazzi. When thinking about the death of Diana Spencer, a conspiracy theorists' consciousness intends not a kind of conspiracy to murder Diana, but the inevitability of death, the fragility of life, and the fact

that even important and idealized people can die in an abrupt manner. But if she was murdered by the Royal Family, it means her death was *not* accidental. And if she faked her death to escape somewhere else, it means that young and important people *do not* die just as abruptly as anyone else. In any case, the object the conspiracy theorists' consciousness intends is not the conspiracy as such, but a discrepancy in their field of experiences. Furthermore, a similar situation can be observed with other conspiracy theories, more critical of current reality and current society: a discrepancy between the belief that the world should be a good and safe place and the fact that horrible and disgusting things are happening in the world (what these horrible and disgusting things are, varies from conspiracy theorist to conspiracy theorist: they could be diseases, such as AIDS and COVID-19, the proliferation of pornography and alternative sexual lifestyles, the economic crises and natural disasters, the removal of religion from the public sphere, the rise of authoritarian populism, or anything else). One can fix this discrepancy by admitting the fact that the world is neither safe nor a good place: however, that might mean a complete and utter reformatting of a person's understanding of reality. One can just accept that we do not know anything and that there are limits to our experience and our understanding, which will also lead to a transformation of one's understanding. At the same time, there is a possibility of explaining this discrepancy in the *Lebenswelt*, without the reformatting and the transformation of that person's world: by claiming that there exists something hidden behind the world, something that causes all those bad things, but is not observed as a part of the world, as a part of the phenomena. A secret group. A group that is successfully hidden and thus nobody notices their responsibility. A conspiracy.

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This is the problem of conspiracy theories: they are more rational, more rigid, hyperrational by comparison to actual experiences of reality. They leave no place for accidents, contingencies, mistakes, or anything of the sort. Paradoxically, the world experienced through the prism of a conspiracy theory is safer than the world experienced without it, because the world of conspiracy theory is more structured. While the conspiracy theorist experiences various things, various phenomena that might push that subject toward conspiratorial thinking (for example, corruption, deceptions, lies, half-truths, simplifications, contingencies, accidents, or impersonal forces), such phenomena are

experienced by the conspiracy theorists as *die Grenze*, the boundary, which emanates from the phenomena and beyond which the noumenon of conspiracy (which causes all of those phenomena), according to the conspiracy theorist, hides. All in all, a conspiracy theorist always tries to go beyond the boundary, unaware, or perhaps willfully ignorant of the boundary as the place, from which experience emanates, and of our inability to grasp experience beyond the experience.

314 Of course, most people who believe in at least one conspiracy theory do not believe themselves to have uncovered a conspiracy. They resemble disciples far more than they resemble prophets. But they also experience a discrepancy in the *Lebenswelt*. To a person who does not experience the discrepancy (or is incapable of experiencing this discrepancy, this dark zone of the horizon), the conspiracy theory makes no sense, because for them, there is nothing to explain. However, if different people have an intentional experience of a discrepancy between two knowledges, a gap in the field of their experiences, they might seek explanations for themselves, because an explanation could turn this lack of knowledge, which might even be existentially dangerous, into some kind of knowledge (even if not necessarily knowledge one is happy with). They usually embrace and believe in statements of someone other from whom they learned of this conspiracy (for example, a radio host, an influencer, a writer, etc.), who themselves, in turn, usually promote and spread conspiracy theories created by another person, until we reach the starting point, where an emergence of a new conspiracy theory takes place: the person who can be claimed to be “the conspiracy theorist zero.” Now, when this “conspiracy theorist zero” proclaims the conspiracy theory, he or she claims to have uncovered a conspiracy. Before the proclamation, the conspiracy was not uncovered and was thus unknown, was not a part of the horizon of experiences, but suddenly it became a part of the *Lebenswelt*, which means that, to the conspiracy theorist zero, it started as A (fully successful) or B (failed and hidden), but, once “uncovered,” became C (successful and uncovered) or D (fully failed). They did not in fact uncover any kind of conspiracy, they merely experienced the boundary, and then, unhappy with the experience of the boundary, claimed the existence of mental experience of the noumenon beyond. But to a conspiracy theorist, this is the same thing. Conspiracy theorist zero will rarely claim to have empirical

experiences of conspiracy. Instead, they will base their arguments for the existence of a conspiracy on intuitions (*que bono?*) and analytical observations: that is, they will notice a gap or a logical inconsistency in experience, accept that others also have had experiences of this discrepancy, and will try to explain the existence of this gap through the existence of a noumenon that created this gap: a conspiracy.

Now, people can react to this explanation of an inconsistency in the conspiracy theorist zero's world in two ways: they can either agree with the conspiracy theorist zero or disagree with them. If they agree, this does not mean they necessarily agree on all the details, but they do agree at least on the existence of the noumenon ("the conspiracy") that caused a gap in the conspiracy theorist zero's world. They also agree that there is a discrepancy in their experiences, in their worlds too (thus, they all share a world, a homeworld defined by the discrepancies and the conspiracy theory). They might disagree on what exactly is the noumenon behind the discrepancy, but not on the fact of discrepancy and the necessity of a noumenon to explain it.¹ The skeptics

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1 For example, the supporters of a conspiracy theory might agree that event A was caused by a secret society, but they may disagree on which society: if the original version of history claimed the responsible party were the Jews, other supporters of conspiracy theory might later claim that the secret society was actually Freemasons, or Illuminati, or Jesuits, or Communists, or any other group. In fact, the very structure of conspiracy theories is shifting and malleable: at the very beginning of the conspiracy theorist's literary carrier, the main conspirators of his or her conspiracy narratives might be Templars or Rosicrucian Order, only for later works to reveal that the actuals grand masters of the conspiracy are aliens, or subterranean entities, or demons, or any other potential actors. Later still, the conspiracy theorist might recant their previous claims and argue, that, for example, Templars always were the main conspirators, or maybe remodel their narrative, stating that aliens or other entities were a ruse, a red herring by the "real" grand masters. Rephrasing a certain famous quote, it can be said: "Conspirators all the way down." The authors of these different layers do not have to be the same: for example, both William Milton Cooper and David Icke reinterpreted "The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Sion" in their works: Cooper argued that the Protocols are an authentic document, but it does not describe a Jewish conspiracy: in fact, it is a description of the Illuminati conspiracy (1991, 174–175). Icke on the other hand argued that the actual conspirators whose goals and methods were described in the Protocols are not Jewish, but lizard-like shape-shifting aliens who have infiltrated humanity (1994, 138–139). In both cases, they took an established and notorious conspiracy theory and reinterpreted it, thus creating a new layer.

or non-believers, though, disagree not on details, but on the existence of the noumenon as such, and instead can easily claim that the gap in zero's world is caused by lack of a certain specific knowledge: in other words, instead of trying to explain a gap in their world, the conspiracy theorist zero should expand their experience by acquiring and incorporating new knowledge and experience, and the gap would then disappear, making explanation for it, the conspiracy, unnecessary. The conspiracist is invited to join the rest in the *Heimwelt*. For the skeptics and the non-believers, the noumenon, "the conspiracy" does not exist, and various phenomena described by the conspiracy theory do not persuade them of its existence. They interpret the phenomena differently than the conspiracy theory supporters. In this way, this seems to be less of an epistemological conflict, and more of a conflict of faith, because neither of them have concrete evidence that the noumenon either exists or does not, and the main argument is whether a conspiracy explains the discrepancy in experiences. For the skeptics, the problem of the conspiracy theorist seems to be an epistemological one, which can be solved with acquisition of better, or
316 more, information. But to the conspiracy theorist, this is very frequently not an epistemological, but an existential problem: when they ask: "How could something like that have happened?", they do not want an explanation—they want support for their deeply held belief that such an event never should have happened.

Political scientists and sociologists use terms, such as "paranoid style" (Hofstadter 1965, 3–4) and "conspiracism" (Dentith 2014, 33–34), as a way of describing a specific worldview that uses and prefers conspiracy theories to other explanations of history and reality. Furthermore, the outlook of conspiracy theory researchers on this conspiracist worldview is largely negative and rests on the assumption (which we are currently, in this contribution, bracketing by the *epoché*) that conspiracy theories are largely wrong, and are largely believed without reason. The questions why people believe conspiracy theories are largely secondary to specific goals: once researchers find the reasons for the beliefs in conspiracy theories, they will be capable of "curing" the conspiracy theorists from said beliefs. Nevertheless, it is still true that conspiracy theories seem to be a part of, or belong to, a more complex, larger body of knowledge and that they are a symptom of a specific outlook toward reality. The fact that

people who believe at least one conspiracy theory are far more likely to believe other conspiracy theories (Williams 2022) seems to support this. People who subscribe to at least one conspiracy theory are also more likely to believe in supernatural phenomena, such as the existence of aliens, paranormal abilities like telepathy, cryptids, and various others (Dyrendal 2021). It seems that there exist certain qualities that make people more likely to choose conspiracy theories as an explanation of the knowledge gap they have experienced in the *Lebenswelt*. In this way, the propensity for conspiracy theories is a specific strategy of explanation that posits that events have causes and happen because someone willed them and that this manner of explaining events is preferable to explanations involving chance, impartial, blind forces, or the need for additional knowledge to better understand the event. One could also consider conspiracism to be a worldview that considers conspiracy theories a useful tool to explain reality.

As already noticed, conspiracy theories are explanations, and they explain events as caused by someone. In other words, they are meaningful explanations of events. They explain the world as defined by motives, causes, and effects. While these kinds of explanations might lack an aura of respect or be extremely convoluted and complex, they at the same time explain the events in meaningful ways. Why did an event occur? Because somebody wanted it to happen, and because somebody made sure it happened. And, from a conspiracy theorist's point of view, theirs is both a simpler and more logical than various other official explanations, because a conspiracy theorist does not want an explanation for the discrepancy in their experiences, they want the discrepancy to become meaningful. Conspiracy theories being "simpler" than various official explanations in no way implies they are more correct than official explanations (in fact, the very questions of "correctness" or "incorrectness" in this phenomenological research is meaningless). However, since various official, especially scientific explanations are simplified and dumbed down, because the public lack additional knowledge necessary to understand the full, complex explanation, a conspiracy theorist might find these official explanations lacking. They might feel either logical inconsistency caused by the simplification or have the intuition that the people in positions of power are providing them with purposefully incorrect information.

Furthermore, the skeptic's advice to acquire additional knowledge, in order to better understand the phenomenon that a conspiracy theorist is currently trying to explain through conspiracy, has a certain practical problem: it is not possible to obtain enough knowledge that gaps in the understanding of the *Lebenswelt* would never happen. In fact, the same skeptics might have gaps in the *Lebenswelt* and are explaining them, not through personal knowledge and experiences they understand, but by trusting experts who claim that no gap exists at all or that, if they would have as much knowledge as the experts, the gap in their horizon would disappear immediately. In other words, the skeptic believes themselves to be correct in relation to the conspiracy theorist, because he or she trusts the knowledge of someone else labelled an expert more than their personal experiences (or lack of these personal experiences). On the other hand, the conspiracy theorists then do not trust knowledge of someone else more than their personal experience.

318 This stance of the conspiracy theorist, while impractical, is not necessarily irrational or illogical. It might be too rational and too logical. In fact, it paradoxically resembles the methodological doubt of René Descartes. An enormous amount of specific and of contextual knowledge is usually necessary to fully grasp the "correct explanation" of one or another historical event or current local or global situation, and if one would always acquire more knowledge to understand concepts or events they currently do not understand, they possibly would not have the time to eat, sleep, or do much else. So, the conspiracy theorists use their internal experience (that there is a certain discrepancy, and that there *must* exist something beyond the boundary that would explain this discrepancy) and explain it by either postulating or by trusting someone else who postulates that there must exist a noumenon that caused that discrepancy (the conspiracy). By choosing a conspiracy theory as an explanation, they also choose one that is both simple and meaningful ("the event happened because someone willed it"), and does not require them to attain additional knowledge or believe some other experts they do not necessarily trust on the question.

By choosing to explain something by a conspiracy, the conspiracy theorist chooses an explanation that is meaningful to them; that has a simple and obvious cause (the conspiracy) and an effect (the something) at its core; that

does not require acquiring and understanding any more additional knowledge or trust knowledge of somebody they currently know nothing about; and that also makes their position special, because by having knowledge of the existence of the noumenon (the conspiracy) the conspiracy theorist then believes they now possess greater knowledge than the rest of humanity. Any “normal” explanation, an explanation based on empirical experience is bound to always use one phenomenon to explain another phenomenon. To understand A, you must understand B, but to understand B, you need to fully understand C. It is an infinite regression of phenomena being used to understand phenomena. The conspiracy answer does not have this problem: perhaps that is the main reason for the temptation of explaining everything through the actions of a conspiracy. Just as explanations by God, or by Devil, or by the Wheel of Karma explain the phenomenological reality by positioning a noumenon that is responsible for everything that exists, and all the things that the believer fails to or cannot understand, the conspiracy theory also stops the infinite regression of phenomena.

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Conclusion

In this paper, it has been argued that conspiracy theories can be analyzed and better understood through the phenomenological prism. The use of the *epoché* and phenomenological reduction allows one to analyze the phenomena of “conspiracy” and “conspiracy theories” as they are (instead of being bogged by the questions, which conspiracy theories are valuable and “might” be real, and which ones are obviously false and not worthy of our attention). The present contribution shows that a successful conspiracy, as viewed from the phenomenological perspective, is a noumenon (something that can only be thought, but not experienced empirically); since, by being uncovered, a successful conspiracy immediately becomes a failed conspiracy, only conspiracies non-conspirators can experience as phenomena are failed conspiracies. Conspiracy theories then are explanations of discrepancies between knowledge in one’s world, which do not require a person to: a) acquire more knowledge; or b) trust that someone else (an expert) has the necessary knowledge. Furthermore, because not only the first conspiracy theorist, but other subjects also can observe the discrepancy in the

Lebenswelt, people might be prone to embrace conspiracy theories and use them as explanations, even if they do not subscribe to them fully. In fact, people can agree with the general idea about the discrepancy (and that the discrepancy is caused by a conspiracy), while at the same time being utterly at odds about who the conspirators are. This is because the intentional object of a conspiracy theory is not the conspiracy, but the discrepancy in the experience of the conspiracy theorist. Instead of trying to explain the discrepancy through attaining more knowledge (and thus having to deal with infinite regression of phenomena used to explain phenomena), the conspiracy theorist explains the discrepancy in their field of experience through an existence of conspiracy that can be thought, but cannot be empirically observed, because it is a successful conspiracy. In other words, a discrepancy between phenomena that cause the conspiracy theorist distress is explained as a direct consequence of a specific noumenon, thus providing an easy-to-understand and meaningful explanation. And while these explanations by a conspiracy usually are not practically applicable, the practical applicability is not their main appeal. They do not require the transformation of someone's world; they do not force a person to go on a possibly never-ending quest for additional knowledge. They are there to explain a discrepancy and thus preserve the personal experience of the individual. And the fact that they are successful at this is one of the main reasons people are explaining things through conspiracies now, and why they will use explanations through conspiracies in the future.

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