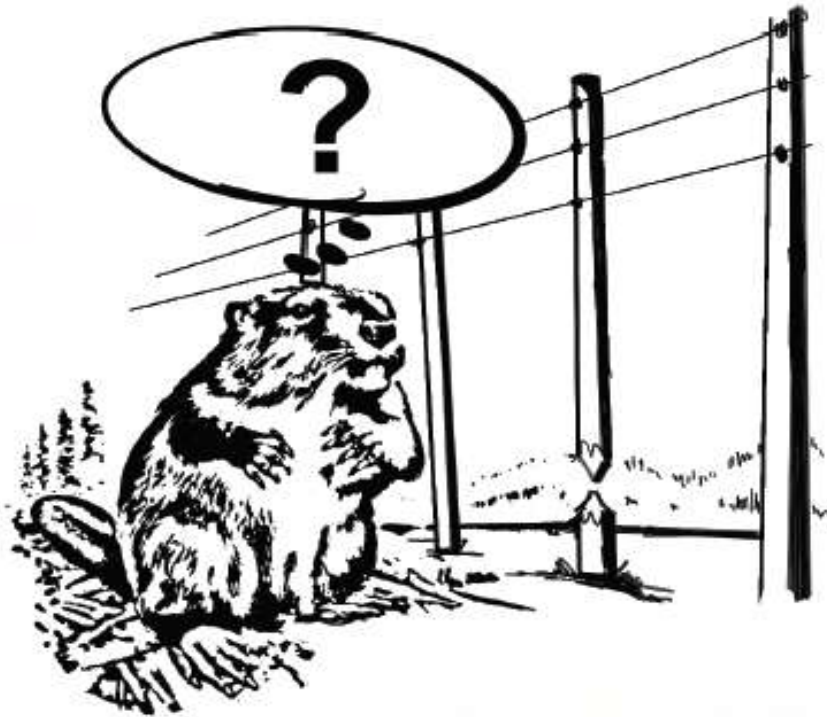


Conspiracy of the Mind

Conspiracy theories and truth-seeking in a disintegrated world

How not to get lost in the process of truth-seeking



Seeking truth in a complex world

By
Alex Riel
MA. Philosophy

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www.metamening.com

Author

Alex Riel

MA. Philosophy

Denmark

metamening@gmail.com

www.metamening.com

The cause is hidden; the effect is
visible to all.

- Ovid

A philosophical essay

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The need for truth

People engaged in conspiracy theories are truth seekers who are not satisfied with the most common explanations in their culture on some particular subject. This is the closest one can come to a definition of conspiracy theories, and my point is that they are to be understood within the process of truth-seeking itself. My title *The conspiracy of the mind* refers to conspiracy theories for which there is no reliable documentation with weak interpretations while true conspiracy theories are well documented and supported by strong interpretations. This is of course the battlefield where pros and cons disagree and they seem to live in different realities maybe because many are not educated in the process of truth-seeking.

Many of the current conspiracy theories illustrate the pitfalls in truth-seeking, and my viewpoint is that there is a safer road towards the truth. These conspiracy theories teach us what happens when we do not follow this road.

Humans have always had a need for truth, but why is conspiracy theories flourishing so much in modern societies today? Aren't we supposed to be the most educated ones in the world? I think it has a lot to do with how we manage to live with uncertainties, but there is not one single answer to this question because the conspiracy of the mind is complex and interacts with many different psychological, cultural and social factors.

This writing is an attempt to describe a roadmap of the mind behind conspiracy theories and not an insight into all the different conspiracy theories themselves, because there are already a lot of those out there. I will present an integrated model with both vertical and horizontal perspectives, and to my knowledge, such a holistic approach has not been presented before.

This will also help us to understand why some become engaged in conspiracy theories and others don't. Many conspiracy theorists certainly aren't lacking intelligence. What exactly is it that distinguishes a mind caught up in conspiracy theories from a mind seeking the truth in our daily relations, when we work, read the news or listen to other people's opinion? How can you be sure that your worldview is not captured by a conspiracy of your mind? If we cannot give a clear answer to this question, how can we, with any rights, dare to call someone a conspiracy theorist? Is it just because they believe in something else? It is my hope and aim that this essay will clarify these questions and help the reader not to get caught in a mind of conspiracies. In a global society where people with many

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different worldviews interact, it is becoming more and more urgent to know the difference between truth-finding and being caught in a conspiracy trap of the mind.

Vertical perspectives

This investigation starts with focusing on how adults grow up. We are all growing up and living our life in worldviews. Their function is to understand reality. We have been on a long evolutionary journey where we have learned to survive by distinguishing truth from falsehood. These perspectives are my frame of understanding in this presentation.

There are many different ways you can become engaged in conspiracy theories, depending on how you grow up, especially after you become an adult. We start growing up physically and mentally from childhood, but we keep growing mentally for the rest of our life. My point is that most followers of conspiracy theories get stuck or regress in their development in adulthood. In our process from childhood to adulthood we view the truth from many levels as our interpretations and mental abilities grow and become more complex. We become more experienced and understand ourselves, other people and the world better. This process can be described in general by some stages of adult development derived from developmental psychology and supported by some observations from the social sciences. The following description is a simplified model based on these findings, and from these I will try to distinguish between different conspiracy theories and why some get stuck in their process looking for the truth.

The family stage

The function of families as a survival unit are rooted in our biology, but the family as a metaphysical unit is a later idea which can be traced back to the earliest Homo Sapiens. Her family bonds are spiritual and in many cases exist into the afterlife. Most conspiracy theories are grounded in this stage, because it's purpose is to provide security and identity. The family and its offspring the tribe is our nest, and threats from strangers must be dealt with in order to survive. Here we find conspiracies based on fear from enemies in the environment, but also within the family. At this level the understanding of other people's minds are not very complex and it is common to project one's own needs onto others. When we feel the

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government or any other organization threatens our local life conditions, they can become demons and evil spirits.

At the family stage humans originally lived in a world of hidden forces in nature with a need to understand them in order to survive. This idea lives on in modern families in conspiracy theories related to everything that influences the family. I think most people have experienced this in family slander of all kinds. From the perspective of the family stage the modern world is often viewed as overwhelming and chaotic where traditions are outdated faster than one can comprehend. Fear of the future is a general theme, and truth is found by going back to the roots.

An unsafe childhood can create insecurity and make it difficult to fully trust anyone later in life. Mistrust is the fuel and the name of the game in conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories on the family stage are actually a symptom of a need to find a safe base in an unsafe world by knowing who to trust and not to trust. The government or big corporations become the evil mother or father and my group of likeminded become my new trustees and family. At the family stage conspiracy theories offer the same as a family; a safe nest that simplifies the world.

The egocentric stage

This is the rebel stage where teenagers break the family bonds and choose their own path of life, but many hang on to this level of perceiving the world for the rest of their lives.

Everything is focused on I, me and mine and anyone who gets in my way better be sorry. The truth is what suits me best, and egocentric leaders often create conspiracy theories just to get followers. Their viewpoints are often full of aggressive projections toward a chosen enemy. The ones with the most power get the right to tell what is truth and falsehood. The real truth is that only the tough ones survive, and any story that can get me to the top of the hierarchy of power is the truth.

The competition to stay at the top of power is tough because no one can really be trusted and you are therefore surrounded by conspiracies from near and far to overthrow your position.

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) was the first to address conspiracy theory in a systematic philosophical way in order to help the ruler to stay in power.

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Machiavelli's suggestion in his work *The Prince* (1532) was that the ruler needed to use his power without moral consideration in a political environment full of deception, treachery and crime. Machiavelli considered this as political realism, and the ruler needed to know everything he could about conspiracies in order to stay in power because without this ability he wouldn't be able to benefit the society and do good. "*The ends justify the means*", and political idealism will not get you anywhere. This mindset fits in with the egocentric stage even though Machiavelli warns the ruler to engage in conspiracy theories because they rarely achieve what they desire to do.

The egocentric self cannot show weakness, and mistakes are always somebody else's fault. Someone needs to be blamed, and a good conspiracy theory explaining why it went so wrong can maintain the position and honor of the egocentric self. We find a lot of egocentric conspiracy theories in the Roman Empire, and they thrive well in today's societies making their way in social media's echo chambers, where they can grow without being challenged. Anything that doesn't go my way has the potential to become a conspiracy theory at the egocentric stage. It is not a surprise to see that conspiracy theories are widespread in individualistic societies with social media where anyone can tell everyone what they like and what they want.

This is the price for freedom.

The egocentric self learns about freedom the hard way by discovering; *how truth is not a tool for freedom, but freedom is a tool for seeking the truth.*

The mythology stage

On this stage we find conspiracy theories based on religious and nationalistic ideologies. Religious conspiracies on competing religions have a long tradition, and today nationalistic states often create their own telling about each other, e.g. the Russians' fear the West and the West's fear of the Russian invasion. The Chinese tried to tell their story on where the corona virus originated before any investigation had reached a conclusion.

In mythology thinking there are good and evil forces and often ideas from religion have immersed with the idea of the state. This can promote the idea of better and lesser people and that God is with us, and that the other nations are devilish. Here the truth is located in an authoritative person, group or book from where the history

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is interpreted. Often this is not viewed as an interpretation, but the plain truth. Anyone who dares to question the authorities can be viewed as followers of a conspiracy against the regime. Dogmatic religions and strong nationalistic states can't handle more than one truth.

The mindset of people at the mythology stage is open to transcendental causes behind nature. The idea of a hidden truth behind the creation of the world opens up to the idea of other unseen hidden truths whether they are good or bad. In the mythology mindset the world is divided between good and evil. Conspiracy is the way evil forces act against the good forces, and elements of evil must be located in order to be defeated. We are the good guys surrounded by evil conspiracies and the meaning of life is to overcome them.

Many conspiracy theories derive from this duality in the mythology mind, and they are considered as fact if they fit with the coherence of the mythology told by the authorities. In an uncertain world with no clear authorities to tell the truth conspiracy theories can flourish among those who seek a simple answer to where evil exists in the world. Conspiracy theories are very powerful because they create meaningful worldviews, and at the mythology stage meaning becomes more important than personal survival. Here meaning is about doing God's work or protecting the state against deteriorating counter forces. Life is all about being on the right path and conspiracies are lurking everywhere trying to prevent you from doing the right thing. Justice is meaning and the deep surge for justice in most conspiracy theories can be interpreted as a need for a more orderly and just world.

The modernist stage

At the modernistic level the mind is dominated by intelligence and scientific observations. One is no longer exposed to bias from family, ego or mythology thinking or at least has sufficient control over them, but new forms of conspiracy theories emerge threatening to capture the mind.

If the modernistic self becomes unbalanced whereby intelligent cognition regards itself as the only way to the truth, other ways to knowledge can become suppressed. Persons with high IQ and low EQ (emotional intelligence) often favorite this kind of thinking. Lacking emotional abilities can lead to misinterpretation of other people's intentions. If an intelligent person lacks insight into his or her own

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emotional state, the intelligent mind can spin off into unrealistic projections without discovering one's own subjective bias. A depressed and unbalanced intelligent mind can seek the reason for its own state of mind in some depressing conspiracy theory corresponding to one's own state of mind, instead of facing one's own painful problems in life. This is why it is not uncommon to find technicians and some scientists subscribing to conspiracy theories of the wilder kind. Low EQ and high IQ can also lead to loneliness finding the world more and more incomprehensible and chaotic wishing to control the world instead of understanding the emotional aspects of one's own mind.

This unbalance can be found within technicians, scientists, businessmen and among liberal capitalists who try to control the world around them and their life with rationality. They are very good at understanding causality, but don't understand intentionality as well. Understanding causality makes us good at understanding the *how*, *where* and *when* of an event while understanding intentionality enables us to understand the *why* of an event (causality versus teleology or in biology teleonomy). Many intelligent people will view religions as conspiracy theories and most of the conspiracy theories around today have all the classic features of religion. Some view all religions as viruses spreading like memes and capturing the mind in conspiracy theories where God or spiritual dimensions intervene and direct human actions making us like poppies in a theater (Dawkins 2006).

Personal freedom is a universal principle at this stage and it must be protected against conspiracies from dictators, dogmatic religion and governmental institutions. If a modernist feels that the freedom to think, speak or act is violated or threatened it can likewise lead to engagement in conspiracy theories or become an activist against them. The famous whistleblower, Edward Snowden is an example of a protector of personal freedom when he leaked highly classified information from the National Security Agency (NSA) in 2013. Snowden showed a conspiracy between telecommunication companies and governments in global surveillance programs violating individual privacy.

The rational mind is fundamentally a neutral mind seeking the truth as it is. This neutrality in thinking is a new level in evolution, and a strong force against undocumented conspiracy theories, but people at the earlier stages of consciousness also use rational thinking to some degree to support their biases.

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At the surface most conspiracy theories appear rational and backed by some science, and this is why some intelligent people believe in them. Neutral investigation is for the most part an ideal rather than what is actually happening when we seek the truth with rationality and science, but it takes a new level of thinking to discover that even the rational and scientific mind is a biased mind.

The humanistic stage

While modernists have a tendency to focus too much on causality derived from natural science, humanists focus more on intentionality. Intentionality is a product of our ability to think and to feel, and therefore the neutral mind does not exist. One has to put oneself in the minds of others by empathy in order to feel how a person experiences the world. To understand followers of conspiracy theories one needs to put oneself in the other persons' 'shoes' emotionally and culturally.

From the humanistic viewpoint conspiracy theories are not primary about specific events, but about feelings and relations. They are subjective reactions to personal traumas or cultural blockades, and need to be integrated by empathy and heartfelt relations.

At the humanistic stage the principle of equality governs everything, and in a close-minded humanist this could lead to a radical relativism where anyone's viewpoint is just as good as everyone else's. There is no truth, just interpretations. This viewpoint is expressed in different degrees in postmodernism, deconstructivism and social constructivism among others.

Because humanists are very good at understanding the intentions of others they are not exposed to many of the earlier conspiracy theories, but a new Achilles' heel appears at this stage of consciousness.

The humanist is sensitive to all kinds of unjust in the world, and this can spiral into a conspiracy theory where a hidden minority of rich, powerful and greedy persons exploits a poor and socially weak majority. The humanists have no evolutionary patience because the poor are suffering now and something needs to be done now. If humanists get the impression that the world in general is moving in a more inhumane direction this can also drive one towards conspiracy theories.

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Just like the modernist can lack EQ the humanist can lack IQ, but if these are in balance and integrated the self need not to worry getting caught in conspiracies of the mind.

The integral stage

The stages we have seen so far have one thing in common, they can't fully accept viewpoints from the other stages even though they learn to live with them. They identify their personality with one or few of these stages and the stages become who they are.

From the integrated stage one sees how conspiracy theories often are misinterpretations derived from limitation in one's own perspective and level of consciousness. Any disintegration on these former stages opens a door to a variety of different conspiracy theories.

If you feel disintegrated in any way the chances are that you also view the world as disintegrated in some sense. The world is disintegrated, but it doesn't mean that it corresponds to your feeling of disintegration or is caused by conspiracies of some sort. Because the disintegrated mind needs to find a simple reason fast, and need to know who's to blame, and who's to stand up against, the self never gets the chance to doubt one's own view and limitations. It never gets a chance to look inwards or take the other person's view. This can be learned within the stages we have seen so far, but this new integral stage brings in a new holistic and evolutionary viewpoint founded on the development of consciousness. This evolutionary perspective dissolves much of the local and absolutistic mindset of these stages because nobody is at the highest stage in an evolutionary world of consciousness. The road to truth could be never-ending, and we are all still evolving. This enables the integral self to view all the stages as important in the evolutionary journey we are travelling, but yet another new experiential feature appears.

The integrated self's evolutionary perspective enables it to view whole stages of consciousness in its mind while most people only manage to view single thoughts and feelings from their minds eye. This loosens the self's identity from stages of consciousness in general, but it also brings forth a quest for knowing who or what it is that perceives these stages. The perceiver seems to be the constant while stages of consciousness are relative to the perceiver. The experience of the sameness of

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the perceiver behind perceptions of the physical and the mental world becomes a new research area for the integrated self. The philosopher Jean Gebser (1905-1973) called this experience for *aperspective* and viewed it as the key element of the integral stage. Gebser also founded the name for this stage (Gebser 1986).

Who is the I or Self behind our perceptions?

The integral stage is still in its infancy and there are many who use the term in different ways, but there is a central crossroad between those who investigate it strictly phenomenological as something existing behind or together with the physical world, and those who engage in a spiritual quest viewing the I or Self as a soul or a spark of God.

From this viewpoint conspiracy theories are a phenomenon of a wider problem with understanding the conspiracy of the mind in a much broader sense where our senses conspire against our mind to make us believe that the physical world is the only reality. Taking an *aperspective* enables the self to take control over its conscious and unconscious faculties in the mind, and this makes it immune to personal biases and overidentification with a particular stage in life.

The phenomenon of today's conspiracy theories is a symptom of a culture without a science of consciousness. We are lacking insights to what consciousness is and how it evolves.

The integrated self contributes with two features to avoid conspiracies of the mind. The first one is a comprehensive understanding of human evolution of consciousness enabling the self to view whole stages of consciousness in its mind, avoiding overidentification and regression.

The second one is an experience of the I or the Self as being the one who perceives, and this enables the self to distinguish between relative and absolute truths.

Absolute truths are constants that never change, and at the integral stage one seeks a new being and identity with the perceiver behind our perceptions. From this perspective conspiracies appear and disappear, and they teach us about the proper use of consciousness, but we should not engage in them as absolute truths.

Followers of many of the widespread conspiracy theories don't make this distinction and view history and the physical world as a place for absolute truths. This makes it difficult for them to compromise and forgive because there is no common identity between them and the conspirators. When my absolute truth comes in conflict with

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your absolute truth there is no middle ground. The integrated self finds such a collective middle ground in the depth of the self of any sentient being.

Until we have had such an experience and have developed a high level of IQ and EQ we are all exposed to conspiracies of the mind on many levels. The common conspiracy theories in our time show a disintegration from a common human cause and from our own self.

The truth will set you free, but only for a moment if it is a relative truth. Searching for the absolute truth in our own self is a much longer journey with its own labyrinth of pitfalls, but that is another story that I am all too inexperienced to tell you anything about.

Three ways to deal with truth

The level of conscious awareness at these stages shows what kind of conspiracy theory a person is inclined to adapt when one's challenges in daily life become overwhelming or existential problems are not solved. We are creatures with survival needs, but also with a need to find meaning in our life. Conspiracy theories are a product of problems in our daily life or existential needs at different stages in the evolution of consciousness.

Why do some get caught in conspiracy theories in their search for the truth while others don't? It probably has something to do with the way we identify with truth on each stage, and there seems to be three ways one can exist on each stage of consciousness in the form of *close-minded*, *moderate* or *open-minded*.

This represents three ways to deal with truth.

Close-minded have not a shadow of doubt - no doubt, but a lot of shadows. They can't view anything from any other level of consciousness than their own. They are the truth. Moderates have some doubt which enables them to acknowledge others' level of understanding. They have the truth and can be very convinced, but to have the truth imply that you know it is a perspective among others. Open-minded seek the truth and know that their way of living or believing in something is just one possibility among many others. On each stage of consciousness you can *be the truth*, *have the truth* or *seek the truth* (close-minded, moderate, open-minded).

To understand followers of conspiracy theories we first have to locate on which stage or stages the theory is functioning and then pay attention to how the person

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identifies with the theory on the continuum from close-mindedness to open-mindedness. One can *be* a conspiracy theory, *have* it or *seek* it. Followers of conspiracy theories deal with their beliefs in the same way they deal with truth in general.

A close-minded follower of a conspiracy theory is dedicated to a mission and all debates are meant to convince others. A moderate person is debatable and open to change if the reasons are convincing enough while an open-minded person has taken a stand, but are still seeking if there is something better out there. They perceive conspiracy theories as open-ended investigations.

Be wary of statements such as '*the truth shall set you free*', it might do the exact opposite because it's not a view from nowhere, but from a particular stage in life that one can identify with based on our ability to handle complexity intelligently and emotionally. On each stage in life one feels strongly that the truth is revealed, but it is only a temporary nest, and if truth-seekers identify too much on a given stage they get stuck in the evolution of consciousness.

Followers of conspiracy theories are often victims of overidentification with a certain stage or stages in life in their attempt to cope with challenges in daily life and fulfilling existential needs. Overidentification leads to disintegration and the need for someone to blame. Conspiracy theories is often an attempt to do something about the unbearable feeling of disintegration without noticing the real enemy within. It's an unconscious cry for help. Projecting instead of accepting. Disintegrating means that something cannot be accepted in any meaningful way. Integrating means accepting by empathic understanding the unfolding drama of the evolution of consciousness. Accepting evolves from experiences of feeling disintegrated on our evolutionary journey. You accept because you have been there or experienced something similar.

We shall see how psychology and philosophy offer a way out after life has taken its toll on the individual.

Conspiracy theories can divide families and friends, and this viewpoint might help to judge how one should approach a given situation, but there is more to come.

Horizontal triggers

Horizontal triggers represent the particularizations on each stage of consciousness. We go through each stage a bit different as individuals in different cultures. Each of these six stages manifest through different horizontal aspects; a *psychological*, a *cultural* and a *social* aspect. Together they interact and their dynamics manifest a person's level of consciousness at a particular stage. Evolution of consciousness is therefore not one-dimensionally moving up a ladder, but spread out over many horizontal lines. These three central aspects serve as activators promoting the particular conspiracy theory, and it is usually a combination of psychological, cultural and social reasons that trigger the interest for a particular conspiracy theory. In the literature they are for the most part described as the root causes that explain the phenomena of conspiracy theories leaving out the stages of consciousness.

Stages and their manifestation psychologically, culturally and socially show a comprehensive and integrated understanding of conspiracy theories as symptoms of disintegration on our journey of life in relation to cultural traditions and social systems.

Let's take a closer look into these three central horizontal triggers in regard to conspiracy theories.

Psychological triggers

The psychology in conspiracy theories can be triggered by many factors in an unbalanced psyche. Shadows, projections, lack of love, low self esteem, envy, revenge, regression, depression, egocentrism, just to mention a few. These biases unconsciously drive a person's mind and its need for meaning. They are hard to address because the bias is in here (mind) and not out there (world). If the conspiracy theory is solely a product of a psychological bias then it represents the person's own problems illustrated in a story that is linked to an interpretation of an event in the world. This is how the mind of the earlier stages often work.

The mind feeds on meaningful stories and the stages of consciousness gathers such stories. Conspiracy theories are likewise attempts to create meaningful stories, but why is meaning so important for us? Because we strive to live the best possible life.

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We try to create our own notion of paradise. When followers of conspiracy theories advocate so strongly for their interpretation they are actually saying that the common view goes against their notion of paradise. The purpose of meaning making is a paradise and the stages of consciousness represent different notions of paradises. The problem occurs because one's paradise becomes another person's hell. Look for the paradises hidden in conspiracy theories and you will get access to the person's most meaningful story.

Followers who engage in conspiracy theories as their primary meaningful story are often getting lost on the road to paradise at their particular stage in life, and they have to react against it to maintain their meaning making process. Some of the wilder conspiracy theories show how desperate people can get when their road to paradise is blocked. Disintegration between an unbalanced psyche and a culture is often the cornerstone in conspiracy theories.

Cultural triggers

Science has shown how many people's personal convictions are governed by cultural cognition in the sense that it is more important who says something than what data and scientific investigations reveal. Cultural values are more important than income, gender, race, education and political ideology when it comes to evaluating the truth (Kahan 2010). Many people find someone they trust and regard everything they say as the truth despite what other sources claim. Local tribalism thrives in our global information age where many get their news through social media's many echo chambers.

We create meaning by our cultural stories and these ideas are closely linked to stages of consciousness and often more than one. In our evolutionary journey some stages clump together naturally and become a strong cultural force with global power. I call those *metaparadigms*. One such metaparadigm consists of the family stage, the egocentric stage and the mythology stage. I call this one for the *absolutistic metaparadigm* because it often creates an absolutistic thinking where we and our way of life is the right one. This metaparadigm can be found all over the world in nationalistic states and in dogmatic religions though this way of thinking goes beyond borders it promotes resistance against the idea of cultural globalization.

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It's counterpart is the democratic metaparadigm consisting of modernists and humanists who find it natural to identify with all people relentlessly of their beliefs and they are strong advocates of science. This creates a diversity and a borderline in the minds of people which in some sense could be viewed as a third world war. We are in a mist of a world war between the absolutistic metaparadigm and the democratic metaparadigm manifesting in battles in many places around the world right now. The riot at Capitol Hill in Washington was just one of many battles between these two metaparadigms. It is a cultural war that can drag on for decades. These are the two main counterforce's in understanding culture today, and from them major conspiracy tendencies and some theories sprang relating to the idea of cultural globalization.

This is a disintegration that can only be fully understood by introducing the knowledge from adult human development on its journey through evolutionary stages of consciousness. From this perspective we need both metaparadigms to work together towards a more integrated world culture where families, ego and national states are worshiped together with democracy, science, human rights and global empathy. When these metaparadigm only see the worst in each other they risk sliding into conspiracy tendencies or theories. It is a job for Integrals to help them see the good sides and the necessity of each metaparadigm (McIntosh 2020). Conspiracy theories connecting to cultural metaparadigm can create a lot of tumult in the world today, and they are difficult to avoid because they offer a new identity to many who feel lost in the transition from national identity to global identity.

Social triggers

As we are becoming more dependent on social systems instead of family structures much mistrust is being directed towards institutions or the state itself. The state has become our ecosystem where unemployment and lack of opportunities create conspiracy theories in the category of Big Brother-is-watching-you. Because the social system serves as a distributor of goods, someone always feels neglected. Here we find conspiracy theories between different social classes and employers and employees. These conspiracy theories usually focus on social justice. In history we find a lot of conspiracy going on socially in distributing the goods in societies.

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Because modern states are loaded with bureaucracy there's a lot of room for conspiracy theories when others make decisions in over our heads.

The need for a more comprehensive global cooperation against climate change and pandemics are followed by new conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories do play an important social role in representing alternative views, but only as long as they are open-minded investigations and not fueled by personal biases.

Every time humans have to adapt to a new level of social systems feelings of fear and mistrust come along, and the demands for us to adapt to a new planetary level of organization are no exception. With the coming of 8-10 billion people learning to coexist in a limited planetary system within this century there's a need for change to a global social system rapidly, and without an understanding of human adult development this will be difficult because we need a new global identity. If we do not educate people in the process of truth-seeking this could trigger conspiracy theories like never before. This is where philosophy comes in.

With a little help from philosophy

Seeking the truth is closely related to philosophy at least if one wishes to make an argument. Most of the well known conspiracy theories are weak arguments because they lack some basic insights from philosophy. Many conspiracy theories fall short on three elementary tenets of philosophy, and this lead to three major fallacies in conspiracy theories:

1. Problems with distinguishing between reality and interpretation
2. Problems with distinguishing between different criteria for truth
3. The limitation of logic

Distinguishing between reality and interpretation (ontology and epistemology as the philosophers call it) is a cornerstone in western philosophy focusing on how we can know anything with certainty. How do our experiences relate to the reality out there around us?

Because we only view the world from a personal perspective we never know if this is the truth. In conspiracy theories this problem of cognition is often more or less overlooked. If I have seen an UFO it is most certain a super intelligent entity from

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another place in the universe. If we do not distinguish between our perception of reality and the real reality out there the risk is that we transfer our favorite interpretations uncritical to reality. Being aware of all the problems in the gap between interpretation and reality is the first tenet to avoid fallacies of cognition. The second tenet is to distinguish between six different criteria for truth and acknowledge their limitations. They are:

1. The correspondence theory
2. The coherence theory
3. The pragmatic theory
4. The consensus theory
5. The subjective theory
6. The mystical theory

Philosophers often refer to the first four, but to understand truth-finding in conspiracy theories we need six. These are theories with their own criteria for truth. Let's take a closer look at them and how they are used in conspiracy theories.

The truth is out there

The correspondence theory tells us that in order for something to be true, it must correspond to a thing or event out there in reality. This is often used in natural science or among people referring to events in an objective manner (when, where and what happened). In conspiracy theories this is the source or documentation that is open to third person confirmation. If it can be shown by physical facts that the fall of the buildings at 9/11-2001 was the result of a controlled demolition rather than structural failure due to impact and fire, or that mankind never landed on the moon, then most people would acknowledge that there is strong evidence for these theories. They would correspond to reality. The reason most people don't believe in these is because attempting to do so has not been convincing. This criteria for truth are very strong, but it is also vulnerable to criticism because it often ignores the explanatory gap between reality and our interpretations. The truth is out there, but the problem is that you are in here and never out there. "*But I can see it and it is clear and obvious*". No you can only see what your senses tell you and from a limited

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perspective because your senses are in here and not out there. This is why scientific experiments need to be controlled, repeated and peer reviewed in order to document the level of correspondence and it is never 100 %.

Conspiracy theories often interpret weak correspondence as strong correspondence, and this can lead to *the fallacy of naive science* when we forget all the pitfalls of interpretation.

Truth is when it all fits together

Another view is that the criteria for truth is a set of coherent thoughts and ideas. We can never get a view of reality clear of our interpretations and therefore the truth is what fits together logically in a theory. Many conspiracy theories are based on very little data, but full of interpretations that fit together to form a convincing theory. When a lot of different interpretations support each other the theory ends up looking very impressive, and it almost has to be true because everything fits so well together. Here the observations become less important. Now we have moved on to the meaning of the event, and if a conspiracy theory is more coherent than its alternatives, it is viewed as the most probable truth. Coherence is a strong force because it creates meaning by understanding what lies behind the observations, and this is what many conspiracy theories try to offer. Being in a state of coherence we resonate with the world and attach deep emotions to our favorite interpretation, and no observation will make us change our minds.

Truth is when it actually works

Instead of getting caught in thoughts about how we really can know what is out there or building up theories we should be pragmatic and focus on what actually works in our daily life. Make life simple and usable. The truth is utility. If my life gets better believing in God than not believing in God, then I should believe in God (Pascal 1995).

Many people use conspiracy theories to create a more meaningful life without the need to immerse into deeper investigations. Conspiracy theories can be exciting and entertaining compared to a more dull life.

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Conspiracy theories live and breathe in the twilight zone between meaning-making and entertainment, and in this sense they work well as a pragmatic truth-theory. Here science and arguments are no longer needed, but these theories of truth don't exist in isolation, and many are getting into conspiracy theories by first using the correspondence theory then the coherence theory and finally ending in a pragmatic theory without the need for the others anymore. As long as it supports one's lifestyle, one will hold on to this view.

Truth is what we can agree on

The consensus theory of truth is often used in social settings and in politics. The truth is what a group of informed rational beings can agree on. This is of course a big step away from absolutistic truth, but since we cannot get to this anyway we might as well settle for what we can agree on. Most conspiracy theories are based on having access to the truth by correspondence and coherence theories and will argue that a consensus approach to the truth is what leads to conspiracies where a small group of smart and greedy people rule without the public knowing it. And who are really the most informed and rational beings qualified to decide what is best for you and me? Followers of conspiracy theories often think they are the best informed and most rational beings because they know what you and I don't know or don't want to know.

This perspective on truth is weakened by the fact that many followers of conspiracy theories get their information from the social media's many isolated echo chambers. How can a society agree on any general consensus in a world with so much disintegrated information? On the other hand we need decision makers and consensus for societies to work and followers of conspiracy theories hold alternative views to many of societies consensus making institutions.

Truth is my experiences

This is the subjective theory of truth and here it is my experiences which are the only way to really know the truth. It is often used in psychology and therapy, but also the famous Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) subscribed to this theory of truth (Kierkegaard 1846). It is Kierkegaard's viewpoint that when it

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comes to understanding life no one can tell us the truth. Life is a journey of our own selves, and we must live and learn by our personal experiences to know who we are and what life is all about.

When many followers of conspiracy theories are confident in their interpretations it is because the theory is in alignment with their personal experiences. In this way any kind of personal experience of mistrust or dissatisfaction with life seeks resonance with the content of a suitable conspiracy theory. In this way I know I am right because I have had some similar experiences, and you cannot argue with personal experiences because they are de facto true. In our individualistic society such subjective judgments are very common in dealing with a changing and complex world.

This generalization from personal experiences to general events can of course not be sustained by argumentation. It's a feeling of being right no matter what other people say, and yet this is the way most people make their choices in everyday life. This is an important criterion for truth when it comes to knowing oneself psychologically, and being aware of one's personal biases is the first step to avoid being captured by conspiracies of the mind. Most people just don't know themselves very well, and this is an important reason why some indulge in conspiracy theories without much documentation to support it.

This theory of truth tells us how important it is to be aware of the intertwinement of personal psychology and truth in general, and that the subjective truth can be important in understanding other people's psychology by similarity, but that there will always be a difference between one's own subjective experiences and others'. Some followers of conspiracy theories overlook this and jump to the conclusion that others' subjective viewpoint is exactly the same as mine.

Well grounded conspiracy theories often consist of a combination of these five theories of truth, but often the theory also has a religious or spiritual aspect, and this leads us to the last theory of truth - the mystical truth.

Truth is a mystical experience

Most religions and spiritual paths are founded on a single person's experience with the divine. They are usually called mystic in the sense of someone who has knowledge from within. Here truth is a correspondence and unification with a

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deeper reality within. Meditation, yoga, prayer and contemplation are some of the methodologies to achieve this truth. Such truths are experienced as infallible and therefore need to be communicated and implemented in our world by followers. Only very few people have had such experiences, and subscribers to this criterion for truth mostly believe in another person's mystical experience. There are many problems with this kind of criterion for truth. How can an experience be infallible? How can followers of others' experiences know if another person's experience is infallible? How do we distinguish which experience is the truth when different mystics claim infallibility to truth with contradictory content?

Mystical experiences play a major role in many conspiracy theories guided by spiritual leaders. If one already is inclined to believe in an unseen realm then it might be easy to believe in other hidden conspiracies behind the world we perceive. It can also help to explain why our story of the world hasn't gained more support. It might be because most people are caught in a conspiracy by the majority (e.g. materialistic science, our leaders, pharmaceutical industries or hidden lodges within business), and they are being suppressed not to know who they really are. The idea that you are being controlled by some outer forces not to look within because it benefits a small group of manipulators is widespread in the landscape of conspiracy theories.

Today new stories are sold not with money, but with meaning. Who wouldn't like to think that they have complete access to the truth within and are among the few pioneers of truth on earth. The feeling of coming home and being integrated with the whole of reality is probably the most meaningful story ever told, and leaders of religious conspiracy theories take advantage of our disintegrated souls by integrating the mystical experience in their story of who we are, where we come from and where we are going. Who can argue with God or supreme beings?

You can't handle the truth!

The truth is difficult to handle for most people because one has to know when to use the right criterion for truth that fits the particular event and avoid involving personal biases. The whole idea is to be neutral, but we never are, and the criterion for truth serves to help us from falling into the common pitfalls in truth-seeking.

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When we investigate something we have to know which criteria are relevant and it depends on the subject. If it is a conspiracy there must be some event that serves as observations of someone doing something. How well is the observation documented and how does it correspond to an obvious interpretation? This is where most conspiracy theories are falling short. Often the observation of an event is open to multiple interpretations and not given by the observation itself. Many conspiracy theorists act as if only one obvious interpretation exists or they are not aware that they interpret the event. We don't see the world as it is, but as we are.

Many conspiracy theories are built on eyewitnesses, but is their interpretation trustworthy? Some are built on physical observations derived from physics, but they too are open to different interpretations by different scholars in physics.

Let's say that there are some convincing observations then the next level of investigation is to look at whether the theory is coherent. Who is creating the conspiracy and how well are the different ideas related so they can be understood? Conspiracy theories often consist of many ideas put together to show overwhelming coherence, but this can also lead to absurdity if these ideas are far from what we expect others to be capable of actually doing. The philosopher of science Sir Karl Popper (1902-1994) argued long ago that the main problem with conspiracy theories lies in their dependence on secrecy among many and therefore for the most part would have been revealed, but other philosophers disagree (Popper 1966, 1972, Pigden 1995, Keeley 1999).

The characteristics of most conspiracy theories are that they are built on few observations, but contain many coherent interpretations. If the coherent ideas are in line with one's viewpoint then one can be seduced by coherent alone overlooking the lack of correspondence from observation. Conspiracy theories fuel the individual with meaning, and once the ideas have been accepted they are difficult to get rid of. But some conspiracy theories have proven to be true? Yes and they show high correspondence between observation and interpretation and are highly coherent in theory. Because some conspiracy theories are shown to be true doesn't mean that most of them are.

The truth is often difficult to handle because it is seldom obvious by observation and reducible to one theory. Looking for hidden causes opens for a variety of personal biases. To overcome our personal biases we need to be in dialog with scholars from different areas of expertise to reach the best conclusions.

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You certainly can't handle the truth - alone.

The truth can be hard to handle intellectually or emotionally, and in both cases we need to be in dialog with someone who can take a different view.

This is also the cornerstone in many conspiracy theories because there is always someone who thinks they are better at handling the truth than you and me. Because the truth often is complex there will always be someone who can't handle it and try to deduce it to a simple fight between good and evil or to support personal biases.

How can we best handle complex truth today?

Let's look at the third fallacy often overlooked in conspiracy theories.

The limitation of logic

Logic is a powerful tool, but it comes with some limitations. Logic plays a major role in building up the coherence of conspiracy theories, but it only shows how certain premises relate to a specific conclusion. The validation of the conclusion depends on true premises, but we never know if our premises are true. Logic only investigates what it is possible to think without contradictions. You cannot deny the conclusion if the premises are true, but where do the premises come from? They come from something we have experienced from our senses (mathematics excepted). This is a fundamental limitation of logic because we never prove our premises, and logic only tells us what is possible to think. This could be called the uncertainty principle of philosophy, and just like the uncertainty principle in quantum physics it gets us closer to the truth, but can't bring us the full truth. Logic investigates possibilities, and if it is based on good observations we tend to trust it with different degrees of certainty, but it is never the final truth because no one knows what tomorrow might bring.

Most conspiracy theorists exaggerate the tools of logic, and by not accepting the limitation of logic one can be convinced that a certain interpretation is true, and that it cannot be otherwise. It can be pretty hard to live with uncertainties, but this is what life is all about, and only our habits protect us from living in the unknown moment. We live by the truth we already know and don't experience anything else for the most parts of our life. Certainty feels reassuring while uncertainty feels dangerous. Logic and science try to reduce uncertainties, but they never give us complete certainties.

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If you have a flair for conspiracy theories then remember or discover what you don't know. As former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld stated: *'there will always be known unknowns and unknown unknowns'*.

With a little help from philosophy we can acknowledge that it is in discovering the limitations of cognition that the mind can be liberated from the conspiracies in our minds.

Opposition versus conspiracy

Followers of conspiracy theories are for the most part minorities in opposition against a majority, but being in opposition is of course not identical to believing in conspiracy theories, but both are exposed to the same vulnerability being a minority not satisfied with the current situation.

One of the dangers of being in opposition is the risk of overidentification with one's own view because one has to uphold strong conviction in one's own belief system. This can also create a need to explain why so many don't believe in one's viewpoints despite the existing evidence, and from here there is only a thin line to be crossed engaging in conspiracy theories. What might the leaders of the majority be doing behind our backs to hold us down? They must be doing something to hide the truth otherwise our truth would be accepted. If the idea that one's own view might be wrong or incomplete isn't on the agenda one could slide from opposition to conspiracy theories without being aware of it.

Impatience can incline the oppositionist to become irritated and attribute negative or evil intentions to the leaders of the majority. Being in opposition demands a lot on our humanistic character not to fight against a majority, but to keep on investigating and asking questions endlessly to inform instead of attacking the leaders of the majority.

One has to know oneself very well to manage the role of opposition and since this is not the case for most people, some oppositionists end up in conspiracy theories. This is most visible on the outer right and outer left in politics. Being in opposition brings forth personal biases that could become shadow material and fuel for a given ideology. But this is also a mirror where one can learn a lot about the conspiracy of the mind. If one can't uphold an opposition without quickly jumping into wild conspiracies it could be a sign of low self esteem or simply not grasping to

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understand other people's mind in our development through evolution.

Revolutionists are much more exposed to conspiracy theories than evolutionists, after all it takes some conspiracy to make a revolution.

Being in opposition is one of the best ways to learn about truth-seeking and experience how new ideas evolve while they are scrutinized by the majority.

Every new idea starts in opposition, but it can easily die in a conspiracy theory if the mind is not mature enough to handle the pressure from the majority. Patiently integrating by showing how one's ideas are better is the way forward.

Are you a conspiracy theorist?

Because it is so difficult to demarcate what distinguishes conspiracy theories from other belief systems it is hard to know when our mind slides into the mode of conspiracy of the mind by misinterpretation of an event. From the material of this essay I will suggest a guideline on how one can discover if one is inclined to kinds of misinterpretations by conspiracy of the mind.

A guideline to question belief systems

1. Are you aware of which criteria for truth your viewpoint subscribes to?
2. Can you name two or three of the most central problems with your viewpoint?
3. Can you name at least one personal bias related to your viewpoint?
4. Are you well acquainted with alternative viewpoints?
5. Can you name at least one situation that would make you change your mind if it could be shown to be well documented (falsification)?

If you cannot answer yes to these questions it means that your relation to the truth is unconscious to some degree, and your viewpoint could risk sliding into conspiracies of the mind. This means that the feeling of certainty controls your mind, and not being in control over one's viewpoint of certainty means that one's consciousness doesn't relate optimally to life events.

One's perspective diminishes by one's certainties.

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One feels safe, but lives with blind spots that could become problematic. Not being so sure may be a better way to the truth. Most of the common conspiracy theories don't follow this safer road to the truth, and this also shows how one should relate to friends and followers of conspiracy theories as a starting point for an open discussion.

How to relate

Conspiracy theories can be part of a worldview or become a whole worldview in itself.

Followers of conspiracy theories will view anything you do or say from their worldview, and anything you say against it will be seen as a victimization of the conspiracy. Followers of conspiracy theories wish to rescue you, and this is what gives them a purpose, but often make them missionaries without being aware of it. They wish to help you find the truth, and if you wish to help them in their truth-seeking process you are heading for a confrontation.

Most conversations start with you being introduced to their findings and from here the response could be to politely ask questions based on the five points in the previous guideline. This will give you a sense of the quality of the content, and where the person is on the continuum from open-mindedness to close-mindedness. If the person acts close-minded then politely agree to disagree because the conversation will get you nowhere. You might ask why the person finds it so interesting among so many other subjects in the world and focus your attention on psychological triggers. What is the person's notion of paradise and does the devotion to a particular conspiracy theory fulfill this wish? Are there any cultural and social triggers? This will give you a better understanding of why the person engages in a particular conspiracy theory, but don't expect the person to gain much insight from this.

If the person is moderate to open-minded and show some doubt it is possible to investigate the subject together discussing the pros and cons.

In any conversation about a conspiracy theory it is important to relate stages of consciousness to the theory and evaluate how well a person deals with cultural and social disintegration in the world. If the conversation is all about irritation, anger and blame it could be a sign of disintegration with the risk of sliding into conspiracy

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theories. If the conversation is more about meaning and learning it's a good sign of an integrated mind, and keep in mind that integration happens at many levels in the evolution of consciousness.

Another point to focus on is how well informed the person is on the three stands of philosophy in knowing about the explanatory gap between observation and interpretation, criteria for truth and the limitation of logic. A close-minded person often makes no clear distinction between observation and interpretation, is unaware of the different criteria for truth and the limitation of logic, while a moderate to open-discussion acknowledges these difficulties.

Likewise be aware of the metaparadigms behind the conversation where followers of ideologies of the absolutistic metaparadigm and the democratic metaparadigm collide in almost every conversation about world events.

The pressure of being in opposition is demanding psychologically, culturally and socially, and in dealing with friends, colleagues and family who engage in conspiracy theories they will often need someone to talk to about these subjects. I hope these suggestions can help you not to let them down because they often already feel let down by society. Maybe you could find some strength in viewing their devotion as a cry for help in order to integrate and find meaning again in the world. You could be the only one who can help them integrate psychologically, culturally and socially again, but you need to be prepared to be a personal example of how one can approach life open-mindedly and avoid conspiracies of the mind.

What can we learn?

Searching for the truth have been divided in two major schools; the empiricists and the rationalists or idealists. Searching for the truth has been split between something that exists in the mind or in the world, and today the truth is divided in different scientific disciplines. Followers of most of the common conspiracy theories today are caught in this gap between different kinds of knowledge. They either don't know of them or ignore them, and the price is an unconscious conspiracy of the mind. This is a lack of methodology, but there is a more deeper rooted cause - the lack of abilities in our human development.

All humans are not created equal and do not grow up equally even though we share the same equal rights, but we are neither completely different in our abilities and

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interpretations. There is a common ground in our ongoing development as human beings, and it can be described in a few stages by science to show a generalization in human development.

This work by science has been neglected because of the fear of repeating the intolerant use of verticality by both religion and science in the past. Studies in cognition, emotions, empathy, needs, moral reasoning and core values have shown verticality in human development among adults, but only few dare to try to take the consequences and use it to describe the development of humanity as a whole (Wilber 2000, 2006). No one is conspiring here, it is just because this kind of research has gone out of date at the academic institutions, and because it is a huge task to try to describe commonalities of humans' global development.

The truth used to be dictated from an authority, but in today's individualism truth is set free from dogma, and the replacement by the division of truth-seeking in science has mostly gone in over our heads.

The truth has been set free without any common understanding of either the methodologies of truth or how truth-seeking changes in relation to how humans develop as adults. The lack of these two factors has left us in a situation as the perplexed beaver.

The widespread use of conspiracy theories is a symptom of this lack of knowledge and abilities. Human development and truth-seeking go hand in hand, and if we wish to create a better global coherence we need to educate and integrate these. We need conspiracy theories in order to break taboos and challenge the viewpoint of the majority, but they should be presented as investigations based on the methodologies of how truth works, and the understanding of how humans develop in order to avoid the conspiracy of the mind.

Being a perplexed beaver is not so bad, after all it is perplexity that makes us aware of our lack of knowledge, and it can be a gateway to a new level of understanding. Perplexity is the fuel for truth-seeking and properly the best means against the mind being caught in a conspiracy.

The positive take away from this essay is that as human development progresses, and we learn how the truth gets more complex our knowledge also expands and divides into a variety of areas.

All we need is to start emphasizing how to integrate our knowledge, and who knows where it takes us.

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