

The Conspiracy Pathology

One can say many things about Søren Kierkegaard: his penchant for pseudonymy, poetic rhetoric, and his trademark wit have been known to delight and bedevil readers in equal measure, and as such, he, as an author and philosopher, makes excellent subject matter for debate, especially as he relates to the corpus of existential literature. What people do not say, or least they do not emphasize nearly enough in the present author's opinion, is that the man had a keen understanding of human psychology that makes itself most apparent in "The Crowd is Untruth," an essay about the madness of crowds, and the primacy of the single individual and the burden that individual bears. We all know how the story goes. Pitchforks at the ready; torches held high; a perceivable monster sequestered in a dank, dark and miserable tower while a faceless, nameless rabble screeches and shrills at its door, demanding blood from the contemptible creature within, whose only crime—if it can be called a crime, given the ignorance of its actions—is that of simply not knowing the order of things and the ways of humanity. This scenario seems to be an unfortunate universal: one is just as likely describing an ideological dogpile in the hellscape formerly known as *Twitter* as a scene from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, however far removed the former may be from the latter in terms of temporal and spatial whereabouts. These events, at least in contemporary terminology, are almost always preceded by a certain phrase or one of its ideologically accidental fragments: *conspiracy*. Racism; homophobia; cultural Marxism; diversity, equity and inclusion. Each one of these terms or collection of terms, despite the historical precedence warranting concern about each, have become something of an unfortunate bugbear in the lexica of various sociopolitical groups.

Political ramifications notwithstanding, what I find myself concerned with are the simple economics of the situation. If the word *conspiracy* is "on the tip of [every] tongue, the negative

[assumption] of any and every kind of experience," with Group A suspecting Group B of all manner of historical atrocities or supposed violence—whatever that means given the lack of rhetorical clarity from either side of *that* particular issue—then it stands to reason that that word, which seems inherently neutral when taken at face value, is at risk of losing all meaning at the hands of a world beset by a turbid concoction of reasonable suspicion and wanton paranoia (Wasser 2). That said, the question at hand is not whether humanity can disabuse itself of conspiracy altogether, since conspiring seems to be an intrinsic part of what it means to be a species creature, but whether we can understand how it has become pathologized to the extent that it has, and whether there are appropriate avenues toward a homeostatic condition.

Seeing that at its heart this a problem of definition, a definition seems to be the most reasonable place to begin, and therefore we must ask ourselves what a conspiracy *is*, or more appropriately, what it means to conspire. The contemporary designation, which is anything other than contemporary given its emergence in the 14th century, seems entirely too "on the nose" when one considers its general utterance in reference to some agreed upon "evil . . . or unlawful purpose," usually of a political persuasion. The etymological portion of the root is more interesting to me, more telling of the nature of the phenomenon than contemporary definitions could ever dream of being, hence, to conspire is to "to breathe together . . . to accord, harmonize, agree, combine or unite in a purpose," or, for the misanthropically inclined, "plot mischief together secretly" ("Conspire, v."). We will momentarily dispense with that last understanding, not because it does not bear any weight—far from it if one earnestly considers what qualifies as a "mischievous act"—but because our metaphorical plate is full of food for thought with the originary meanings. To that end, the suffix *spirare* is significant, if only because it is the essential component of other widely misused words such as aspire, inspire, and expire

(Harper). Each word has to do with the spirit: spirit of forward progress, spirit of inward strength, and the end of the spirit respectively. To me, this means that while conspiring most certainly can be understood as "breathing together," perhaps a more insightful way to look at it would be to say that those who conspire are of those who share the same spirit. Conspiracy, it would seem, naturally implies resonance between entities of a certain order.

If that is the case—and I honestly believe that it is—then the notion of conspiracy ceases to be the *bête noire* that postmodern and digital humans make it out to be, and instead reassumes the countenance of a phenomenon that is no more threatening than any of the other human modes of solicitude one experiences over the course of a lifetime, love and hate and admiration and all of that. The fact of the matter is that we conspire with one another to one degree or another every single day: returning to the idea of mischief, children in the West conspire with one another (and against each other) every Halloween by scheming to obtain absurd quantities of confections or to play tricks—toilet-papering houses being the most common method in my neck of the woods—on those woeful adults who shrug off the demands of their miniature extortioners; audiences at horror movies conspire both individually and as a group to forget that what they are seeing is a movie, all in an effort to vicariously experience a sense of terror that seemingly no longer exists the Western world because of the comforts of 21st century life; pedagogues and pupils are in a perpetual state of conspiracy, with those in the grade schools conspiring to identify and ameliorate gaps in a child's general education, and increasingly, as those students matriculate up to and through graduate school, conspiring to identify and ameliorate the exigence of any particular area of study. Of course there are conspiracy theories *about* that final idea, namely that public schools have, at the expense of their students' welfare, become indoctrination grounds for various sociopolitical movements, but that is a conversation for another time.

For the moment, it would be good to recognize that there is a deeper conspiracy rooted in the human condition that all too often we take for granted, and for that reason, it is that much more compelling than conspiracies to commit transgressions of political power and guile. At least that is what Martin Heidegger and Eastern thinkers like Lao Tzu, Liezi, and Zhuan Zhou might say. As a matter of fact, so do I: human-being, the kind of being that humans have, is not that of an alienated subject and an external world, two things doomed to endemic opposition. Existence is being-mutually-interdependent, an interwovenness both with the environment and the cosmos as a whole. It is for all these reasons that Alan Watts once said, with respect to the human organism as a singular process embedded in its environment, that words like "'I' or 'self' should properly mean what the whole universe is doing at this particular 'here-and-now' called John Doe" (90).

Heidegger calls this kind of being *Dasein*, which literally translates to "there-being," the existential condition (eksistenz or eksistence depending on the text) of the being for whom Being is a concern. Elsewhere, in "Letter on 'Humanism,'" Heidegger describes this kind of being as the "standing in the clearing of Being" that allows the manifest world to occur, but that does not mean that *Dasein* *determines* the factual existence of the beings with which it interacts. Instead, it acts as the *meaning-context* of things by unconcealing the essential aspects of those within its presence, and in that regard no two *Dasein*, despite the possibility of extreme similarity, will ever experience phenomena in exactly the same way (228). What this means is that wherever an extant "there" in space and time *is*, the being of beings is brought to light, and this is the experience of the "I" that we all assume to be so particular to each of us, which, at the same time, is arguably one of the only true human universals as it pertains to experience. "It is [man's] essence," says Medard Boss, "to disclose things and living beings in their meaning and content,"

something every person does continually and unthinkingly simultaneously alongside one another (37). It is in this way we co-create the occurring world *together*. Existence *as such* is therefore a conspiracy in the truest sense of the word.

With that understanding in mind, perhaps the question at hand and a concern worth greater preoccupation than it is afforded—if only in the absence of “all those [otherwise] terribly important things” as Thornton Wilder once put it (82)—ought to be how our tendency to *breath together*, our proclivity for sameness of spirit becomes pathological, particularly by manifesting as conspiracy theories. Of course, by referring to something as “pathological,” I mean to say that there is a certain morbidity or excessiveness to the matter in the same way that cancer is considered a classic example of bodily pathology.

Naturally, one runs the risk of being labelled a polemicist by proffering analogies of that sort, and it would be irresponsible if not unforgivable of me not to acknowledge the legitimacy of such a complaint, especially when other theories such as Richard Dawkins' memetics seem more amenable to the perceivable reality of the situation. Dawkins' theory posits the notion that ideas can act as cognitive replicators in the same way that genes are the mechanism for our biological replication, a claim that is hard to deny when one considers the longevity of meme-complexes associated with thinkers like Socrates, Copernicus and Marconi (259). Further supporting the validity of the parallels between conspiracy theories and memes are properties associated with the latter that facilitate their survival, namely *longevity, fecundity, and copy-fidelity*: a successful meme is a meme that is not only capable of persisting long enough to replicate itself, but one that presents itself as viable to a particular demographic of interest while maintaining its essence despite the problem of “continuous mutation [and] blending” associated with interpretation during transmission (252). The issue is that ideas of any kind, regardless of

their memetic viability, are effectively part of the process of the human understanding whereas "cancer" operates more as a descriptor, not of the process itself but of a specific, ultimately dysfunctional (and potentially fatal) mode of productivity by which that process operates.

It is for this reason that cancer holds a special place in the catalogue of corporeal ailments alongside conditions like schizophrenia and acromegaly, where the body does not cease to be productive but instead becomes productive to the point of dysfunction, effectively generating instances of overabundance both in terms of "relevance," to borrow the vernacular of John Vervaeke, Timothy Lillicrap and Blake Richards, and growth hormone. In any case, the negative of the particular condition inevitably strikes down those inflicted by it. In the case of cancer, the body's ability to normally reproduce itself at the cellular level is altered by some force, whether it be a random occurrence (what might be classified as an "error" of sorts), a biological inheritance from one's forebears, or the result of some external stimuli such as Monsanto's popular Roundup weed killer.

The same seems to hold true for conspiracy theories. Like any naturally occurring process, our tendency to perceive conspiracies seems to have the potential to become cancerous, to grow out of control and metastasize into areas of "the body" where it would have otherwise been stopped. According to Hugo Gonzalez, Catharina Hagerling and Zena Werb of the Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center, cancerous tumors accomplish this feat by utilizing two distinct strategies: first, by avoiding immune system recognition through the mutation and deletion of key antigens that would otherwise provoke an attack from cells responsible for the elimination of other harmful cells; and second, by "instigating an immunosuppressive [tumor microenvironment]" (1275), what others describe as "a highly heterogeneous milieu consisting of different cell types and many abundant molecules produced and released by tumor cells, stromal

cells, and immune cells" (Labani-Motlagh et al. 1). In layman's terms, cancerous tumors thrive in environment where the body's immune responses are so overworked that they cannot properly detect cancerous growths, and that environment is "intentionally" cultivated by the cancer cells by instigating the bodily excretion of various suppressive and inhibitory molecules into the local area (Gonzalez et al. 1276).

Obviously, it is not my intent to discourse about the deeper workings of the oncological sciences since I am neither credentialed nor equipped to do so, nor would I want to for any other purpose but to draw attention to the startling similarities between oncology's physiologically vexatious point of concern and my own. In that regard, the problem surrounding the matter of conspiracy theories in the 21st century can be delineated across two presumably concomitant vectors, the first being that certain modern conspiracies seemingly avoid recognition as conspiracies through all manner of logical and rhetorical slights of hand such as but certainly not limited to the act of gaslighting one's intellectual opponents whereas the second vector is the problem of categorization. Since any particular issue can potentially be classified as a conspiracy, the "market," for lack of better words, has become saturated to the point where the word "conspiracy" itself has become intolerably inane, and because of this, society as a whole has seemingly lost its senses when it comes to distinguishing between conspiracies of "consequence" and those drawn across ideologically frivolous battle lines. As such, the loci of "the conspiracy theory problem" would necessarily be epistemological and taxonomical in nature, even if the ordinance of the two perspectives is difficult to ascertain.

But perhaps questioning how we know a conspiracy theory is actually a conspiracy and how we classify different theories is not what is most important at this point in time. I say that because theories about conspiracies have likely been around as long as humanity has had the

capacity to plan for the future—a capacity that came about as a result of the development of the prefrontal cortex over the course of five-million years or so—and the propensity to think badly (or even the worst) about our fellow humans. That is not to say that those suspicions are entirely without justification; the assassination of Gaius Julius Caesar taught us that much. What this means is that the extent to which the human tendency toward paranoia is a problem is arguably proportional to the immediate access we have to one another and each others' potentially infectious ideas. To that end, one might be inclined to add a twist to Dawkins' memetics, namely that while a conspiracy theory continues to exhibit all of the trademark characteristics of a meme as previously described, memes of this sort (and perhaps any sort given the technological advances of the past two decades) also seem to exhibit a relational pattern similar to Marx's theory historical materialism, which is to say that the production and power of any particular conspiracy theory seems to be as dependent if not more dependent on its mode of transmission for its propagation than the mere fecundity of the idea.

Take, for instance, organized religion, specifically Christianity: Religions are *by definition* metaphysical conspiracies, and prior to the invention of the printing press, the Christian theological conspiracy was transmitted orally by way of the clergy. At first, this was by necessity since Bibles were in short supply, but later the control of information became a matter of institutional fiat, with more than a couple of people being imprisoned, stockaded, or, at the hands of English inquisitors such as Sir Thomas More, burned at the stake for having the temerity to own a Bible in their own language (Wood 7).¹ The reason I draw attention to this

¹ Apologists will claim that "Thomas More had no problems with the idea of an English Bible, what he [did] have a problem with was the fact that the heretics weren't making good, faithful translations" (Yoko No-No). This may well be the case, but such a middle-witted response seems content to attempt to dodge any number of elephants in the proverbial room, namely the admittedly anachronistic and possibly immaterial moral argument that any *reasonable* person would think twice about committing such heinous acts, but also the more likely scenario that such actions on the part of the Church and its agents were little more than an attempt to consolidate theological and intellectual hegemony. And even if neither of those arguments stand up to scrutiny, the waving-off of such

most inglorious and unsavory historical fact is not to bemoan the malfeasances of the Church—as if such moaning was even necessary—but to highlight the fact that *in spite* of all of the institutional pressure to the contrary, private ownership of the Bible flourished and has continued to flourish in the wake of the Printing Revolution, selling more than five billion copies of various translations in 736 different languages since the statistic began to be officially tracked by the team at Guinness World Records in 1995 (Gorny, "2023 Global Scripture"). One can only speculate about the conspiratorial impact more recent developments in communication have had on the human species, developments such as Cyrus Field's transatlantic cable, Guglielmo Marconi's radio wave technology, or, as I will discuss momentarily, widespread access to the Internet and various social media platforms. Each of these developments revolutionized human communication at a global scale, but that does not mean that the effects of those revolutions were necessarily the same in a qualitative sense.

The difference, I believe, between the connectivity provided by the first three modes of transmission—print, wire and radio—and the connectivity of the Internet and social media is that whereas the former technologies did not significantly inhibit the requisite sociability that used to be part-and-parcel of everyday life, the latter most certainly has. It is undeniable that newspapers, books, telephones and radios distracted their users to one degree or another, but at the end of the day, the imperative to venture outside of one's immediate residence to socialize was left relatively unfettered. After all, one cannot simply wave off or ignore one's neighbors whilst mowing the lawn. To do so would smack of social impropriety, and justifiably so. That is not to say that such times didn't suffer from the problem of insularity. Far from it. Evolutionary psychologists have made a career of pointing to our evolutionary tendency toward in-group

atrocities—atrocities which have never been seriously atoned for or rectified—by the previously mentioned apologists is a moral problem of today.

preferences and "coalitional thinking," a particular mindset linked to the innate and seemingly intransient human need to belong (Saad 137). The funny thing is—and this is not meant to diminish the labor of my colleagues in the empirical sciences—it is not as though such observations are necessarily needed, at least not by anybody with a pair of operating eyes and a shred of honesty to their name. As a resident of a small, sports-minded town, I can attest to this fact: going a certain distance in any direction is effectively the same as a civil war soldier crossing the Mason Dixon line. At a certain point, you are in *their territory*, despite the fact that contiguously related towns tend to share quite a lot in common in terms of interests, especially at successively higher levels of government. But even in those instances, the epistemic possibility of meaningful confrontation with an opposing viewpoint is never off the table, however unlikely that might seem when the Friday night lights are shining. That would seem to mean that the group preferentiality of modern regionalism is decidedly shallow in comparison to that of digital society *writ large*. In other words and at the risk of presenting myself as more cynical than I would otherwise prefer, the human species in the year 2023 seems to be less well-connected than ever, not in terms of quantity, since many people are only a few exponential connections away from millions of people at any given moment, but in terms of quality. It is precisely the preponderance of poor or deficient social connection that has created a seemingly infinite number of perfect microenvironments for conspiracy theories to grow.

In spite of obvious evidence to the contrary and a historical body of intellectual work pointing to our nature as a "species creature," one of the more common human contrivances of the modern and contemporary West (and the United States in particular), is that the individual is the primary unit of existential measurement, and that all other units—the family, state and species—are generally considered secondary in terms of importance. This, of course, is an idea

that has its merits, especially when one considers the importance of the individual in terms of ethics and comportment: it is the singular personage who *acts*, and with the exception of certain attitudes that seek to explain away bad or immoral behavior as byproducts of corrupt histories and environments, it is ultimately the singular personage who is *responsible* for their actions. That is not to say that humans are radically-free as Sartre might have us believe. To the contrary, each of us is a node in a vast network, both historical and existent, that consciously and unconsciously delimits our possibilities for action, and in the same way that those individually undertaken actions affect the surrounding environment, the surrounding environment responds in kind like the return of an outward emanation of an air bubble rising up from the depths of a vast pool of water. As we move, so too are we affected by the world as it moves along with us.

Because of this, the reliability of the processes “used” to evaluate and interpret input are of the utmost importance at the individual level, notably the processes involved in the production of beliefs directly related to an individual's comportment. Consider the following example provided to us by Nick Leonard of the University of San Francisco:

... suppose that [a] friend tells you that the concert starts in an hour and that you thereby acquire testimonial justification for believing that this is the case. In very broad strokes, Testimonial Reliabilists can explain the nature of your justification as follows: When it comes to concerts, your friend testifies truly almost all of the time; moreover, you are great at differentiating cases in which your friend is speaking honestly and when she is trying to deceive you; thus, you have testimonial justification in this case because the processes involved in the production and consumption of the testimony in question are highly reliable. (Leonard)

Obviously, Leonard's simple situation is easily reconciled since there are only a handful of processes that need to be negotiated, namely those related to the truthfulness of the person that is the source of the incoming information as well the listener's process of being able to discern whether their interlocutor is telling the truth or being deceptive. As such, Leonard's example skirts the larger *problem of generality* as described by Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, that being that reliability "does not apply in any obvious way to the particular sequence of concrete events that [cause an individual's] belief [at any specific moment in time]," but to "enduring mechanisms, such as an eye or a whole visual system, and to repeatable types of processes such as the type: visually initiated belief formation" (2). That is why problems arise when situations featuring more complex processes such as conspiracy theories are introduced. If, as Conee and Feldman suggest, process reliability theories of justification are hopeless as a result of the problem of generality—the main gist being that humans typically have a relatively limited understanding of what constitutes "relevant" types of ideas and "typical" belief-forming situations—then the present discourse would seemingly find itself at an impasse, assuming, that is, that justification of such theories is the concern at hand (24). As it just so happens, the point of examining the transmission and pathologization of conspiracy theories is not to determine whether the ideas in question *are* justifiable in any epistemological sense, but why those ideas *seem* justifiable to those to whom they appeal. And the ostensible reason why questionable ideas remain justifiable to those who hold them seems to be related to the novel, dual-pronged insularity of partisan media coverage and sociopolitical echo chambers, specifically those found on contemporary social media platforms.

The fact of the matter is that the insularity I spoke about earlier is only exacerbated by the socioeconomic practices and technology of the 21st century. When people of various political

ideologies² lean toward and are catered to by specific news outlets, bad things are bound to happen, so when one ideological group—Republicans—exhibits a general tendency to distrust any network not named *Fox News*, and the other group—Democrats—exhibits a general tendency to trust almost any other network aside from *Fox News*, an essential aspect of the epistemological process of understanding is cut out of the picture (Jurkowitz et al., Mitchell et al.).³ These "news" sources are what Christopher Tokita, Andrew Guess and Corina Tarnita of Princeton University refer to as *low-correlation outlets*, outlets that present information in an unbalanced way when it comes to the coverage of any particular news story, even if the underlying ideology that "slants" the story is not always apparent (5). According to the researchers, "The observational data from *Twitter* matched [their] model's prediction that users in low-correlation information ecosystems [would] lose cross-ideology social ties at a higher rate" than others, resulting in the unwitting user tendency to "self-sort [in order to] to create politically homogeneous social environments," otherwise known as *echo chambers* (6).

Although the language behind these studies may seem jargonistic to some, especially to those uninitiated in the pageantry of certain academic disciplines, the underpinning concept upon which they are built is relatively simple: ideas that propagate in environments without *resistance* tend to be *weaker ideas* than those forced to contend with competing ideas. This is not new or especially novel thinking. Aside from evolution, the idea that untested beliefs are inherently weak is an integral part of the philosophies of people like René Descartes and John Stuart Mill, but nowhere, at least in the opinion of the present author, is this way of thinking conceived of as

² For the time being, I will utilize "Republicans" and "Democrats" since describing either group as "conservative" or "liberal" would seem to an intentional misnomer on my part, and making any other distinctions beyond low resolution picture would distract from the point at hand.

³ As opposed to simply relying on one Pew research study, I felt it would be worthwhile to include a previously conducted study that largely shows the same trend, namely that Republicans and Democrats tend to receive their news from a stable source or body of sources, but that those sources do not overlap at all.

poetically as in the opening statements of one Nietzsche's last cogent works, *Twilight of the Idols*, where he spoke candidly about the importance of philosophizing with a hammer in order to *sound out idols*. Through questioning and provocation, one listens for that "famous hollow sound which speaks of inflated bowels" in order to learn which presuppositions—both those of the individual and others—are capable of withstanding scrutiny, and those that are not (31).

Further evidence of the same principle can be found in human physiology and the sports sciences. Bodybuilders, first and foremost, are conscious of the idea that the extent to which any particular muscle group will develop is dependent not just upon the amount of weight that the muscle is forced to move, but the quality and frequency of the movements as well as the diversity of ranges with which those movements are performed.

Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the inverse principle would apply to conspiracy theories proliferated in echo chambers: certainly, a pathological idea would *expand* in such low-correlation environments; that is the *modus operandi* of any cancerous cell after all. But expansion does not necessarily equate to development, let alone structural integrity, and when one considers the analogous relationship between the lack of physiological rigidity of individual cancer cells in comparison to their healthy counterparts and the lack of intellectual rigidity of echo chamber conspiracy theories in comparison to more thoroughly examined ideas, one is forced to acknowledge a disturbing reality (Alibert et al. 175). In effect, it is not the integrity of the cancerous cell that makes it dangerous to the body, but its pliability both in literal, physical terms as well as in terms of coding and response due to mutations of the nucleic DNA. Such cells are easily destroyed as individuals, but the horror of any cancer diagnosis is the pervasiveness of the condition: as the cells spread and spread and spread, the possibility of permanently eliminating those cells decreases to the point where recurrence of the cancer is all

but an inevitability. So it is with conspiracy theories. A bad idea at the level of the individual can easily be tamped down through measured discourse with rationally construed, opposing viewpoint, but in the absence of reasoned opposition—which is the very definition of an echo chamber—the bad idea stands to expand in an uncontrollable fashion so long as there are ears to hear it and sympathetic minds to give it safe harbor. At that point, the pathologized conspiracy theory becomes all but impossible to root out.

Much as I am loathe to do so, I must preface my examples with a trigger warning of sorts, even if that warning is made with tongue firmly planted "in-cheek." I say this knowing that even a hushed utterance of the name "Donald J. Trump" has the potential to whip up a storm of scathing vitriolic idiocy that it would risk derailing whatever measured conversation might have come as a result of this article, but ironically it is precisely *because* of Trump's polarizing effect that one can observe the phenomenon I have described. I need only point to two events in the last decade as proof positive of my claim: the conspiracy theory about collusion between former President Trump and Russian operatives (otherwise known as "Russiagate"), and the conspiracy theory that the 2020 Presidential Election was stolen. For obvious reasons, this will not be a comprehensive analysis of either matter, simply a brief overview of each event, the official findings related to each, and the observable effects the original reporting has had on echo chambers on the affirmative side of each issue.

Although there is undoubtedly a litany of smaller moments that contributed to development of the Russiagate fiasco, casual observers will likely only recognize two pivotal moments in the timeline that culminated with the special counsel investigation by Robert Mueller, the first and arguably less prominent being claims made by Senator Diane Feinstein and Congressman Adam Schiff as well as the broader U.S. Intelligence Community of direct Russian

influence during the 2016 election (Jurecic, Department of Homeland Security). The second, more widely known series of events were the revelation of two documents that contained testimony about Trump campaign malfeasance, the infamous 2017 Steele dossier and a subsequently released memo by U.S. Representative Devin Nunes about Trump adviser George Papadopoulos' inappropriate relationships with Russian officials who claimed to be in possession of materials considered politically deleterious to Hillary Clinton's campaign (Steele 2, Bush et al.). And although the Mueller investigation and subsequent report would reveal many disturbing details about the 2016 election, notably "sweeping and systemic" Russian election interference and multiple possible episodes of obstructive conduct on the part of the Trump campaign (*Volume I of II* 1,4), the report could not decisively conclude that any crime had been committed (*Volume II* 182).

Fast forward a couple of years, and the Trump campaign would find itself embroiled in another conspiracy theory except this time, arguably, Trump and his allies were the point of origin of the theory as opposed the object at its center. Suffice to say that attitudes toward election integrity at the federal level have been lukewarm at best in recent years: a Pew Research Center study conducted in 2018 found that only an underwhelming twenty percent of respondents believed that federal elections are well-run and administered, and only twenty-five percent were solidly confident that their votes would be counted as intended in future elections ("Elections in America"). Perhaps that is why, when he began ramping up rhetoric about the questionable integrity of the forthcoming election in July of 2020—a pattern of behavior that arguably culminated with his comment that the "only way [they'd] lose [the] election [was] if the election [was] rigged"—former President Trump's followers were primed and primed to concur, especially in lieu of the fact that many had long written off traditional "fake news"

outlets in favor of social media platforms such as *Twitter*, "The Donald" *Reddit* subforum, and later, Trump's personal platform, *Truth Social* (Niedzwiadek, Chalfant). However, official evaluations both prior to and after the election appeared to prove otherwise: seemingly in spite of Trumpian sentiments, The Organization of American States confirmed the election's integrity, findings that were later echoed by a cadre of high-ranking federal senators and judges who found, and I quote, that "[some] of [the electoral] changes may have created possibilities for fraud, but that there is no evidence that those risks materialized in reality; nor did they result in dampening voter participation" (Danforth et al. 2).

Of course, neither of the scenarios I have described or the outcomes of the investigations that followed stopped either of the affirmative parties' from holding on to the dogma that accrued around their respectively questionable set of beliefs. For instance, despite a public meltdown on air that saw her nearly break into tears and a continued reliance on pushing back on or discrediting the Mueller probe findings ("Rachel Maddow Opening," Farhi), a large portion of audiences that would have likely tuned into Rachel Maddow's primetime news production on MSNBC—roughly seventy-two percent of democrats—continue to believe that Russian interference not only influenced the 2016 election, but that it was a deciding factor when it came to its outcome ("Democrats Still Believe"). Given the findings of the Mueller report, that would not be an unreasonable perspective were it not for the wording of questionnaires that prompt such data, which, at least in one case, avoids all of the nuance surrounding the matter in favor of a reflective question arguably dependent upon one's attitude toward Hillary Clinton and her position on the matter.⁴ When one then considers the possibility that a "sizable minority" of

⁴ To see the survey question word, see the following link or find the link on the Rasmussen Report article. https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/questions/questions/april_2022/questions_russian_interference_april_14_and_17_2022

voters can be characterized as low-information, especially "among the young, the poor, women, the less educated, and minorities," and that individuals are more capable of discerning truth from untruth when a story reflects positively on their identified political party, it would not be beyond the pale to suggest that media coverage such as Maddow's and the tendency to ideologically self-segregate online has allowed for the continued propagation of poorly informed positions regarding the conspiracy of Russian election interference (Angelucci and Prat 25).

Of course, I do not believe that any principled person would accuse Trump's voter base of exceptional perspicacity, especially considering the otherwise well-documented mistrust of news agencies fomented by President Trump himself, arguably in an attempt to increase traffic to *Truth Social* where he would continue to shout down the election results in the wake of his unceremonious banning from *Twitter*. To individuals of that sort, the fact that Trump lost sixty-one out of the sixty-two federal cases he launched in the wake of the election says little about the actual election and more about the judges in charge of overseeing and dismissing those cases, in spite of the fact that a slim majority of those judges were Republican-appointed (Wheeler). As one *Instagram* user put it:

It's not that there is no evidence the election was stolen, but that no court had the guts to hear the evidence. They dismissed the cases, not the evidence. They refused to look at it, because the price of getting involved was too high. This is how evil destroys a republic.
(Czopek)

Again, in the same way that there is some inkling of truth to the idea that there likely was (and potentially still is) a level of political impropriety on the part of the Trump campaign, there is probably some truth to the idea that there was *some* intentional manipulation of the 2020 election, and furthermore that *some* of the American judiciary dismissed cases for personally

advantageous reasons as opposed to a lack of merit. It should not take a citation or stretch of the imagination to say that the tendency of the 21st century has been to cast one's political opposition in the worst light possible, and as it pertains to "MAGA" conservatives, I doubt that trend will subside, especially in the wake of certain revelations of political malfeasance such as the incident of ballot stuffing by democratic pollsters in the 2023 Bridgeport, Connecticut mayoral elections or the malfunction voting machines in Pennsylvania that caused votes from one candidate to be switched to the other (Nierenberg, Rubinkam).

Of course it goes without saying that the two conspiracy theories I have just laid out only represent a small portion of theories that divide the public consciousness at any given time, with the larger body being composed of speculations as whimsically facile as the flat Earth theory and others as gravely serious as those surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy. Again, conspiracy theories *as such* are not necessarily the problem, since such a capacity technically equates to the human proclivity for pattern recognition and the tendency of those with shared perceptions to coalesce common themes among them into something approximating a unified narrative. This process is universal: humans conspire with each other in every aspect of daily life, so to develop hypotheses about the rationale behind the actions of others would seem to be a justifiable if not logical offshoot of that tendency, if only because deep down each of us is subtly aware of our own dispositions. Solzhenitsyn once said that the "line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts" (322). For better or for worse, truer words may have never been written, and because of that, the pathologization of theories about conspiratorial actions assumes a calamitous visage, one that under "normal" circumstances would be worthy of little more than derision and disgust.

Unfortunately, I fear that the time for indignation has passed, as has the time for relatively simple, "middle path" corrective measures; humanity is now confronted by two diametrically opposed solutions that poetically mirror those available to patients with metastasized, near-terminal cancer. On the one hand—and what will undoubtedly result in my being construed as some senselessly mawkish and lachrymose old fellow—is acceptance, recognition of the fact that everything gets worse in time, that things ultimately fall apart, and that maybe, just maybe, it is pointless and in fact existentially detrimental to try and stop it. Here I am reminded of Ramana Maharshi, a Hindu sage who, upon recognizing its own right to grow inside of him, famously refused treatment of his own fatal cancer (Watts 114). Acceptance in this regard is trusting the ebb and flow of the universe and of nature, a conscious respect for the balance of things that allows for the maintenance of individual dignity in spite of one's interminably terminal pain.

Violence, on the other hand, is a willful renunciation of that trust, and is therefore a secret cut to a totalitarian state of being. *Lack of trust in nature* is the instinctive response to question of mortality, the nagging and indeed mortifying idea that it is certainly better for a person or society to go on rather than not, that life is always preferable to death and that the extension of that which has worked until now is always preferable to starting over anew. Admittedly, as any good Burkean would, I find myself *inclined* to agree. But things become muddy upon closer inspection of what is at stake, and what is at stake at this moment is something more consequential than perhaps anybody might realize. It is no secret, I would argue, that treatments like chemotherapy are often regarded as worse than cancer itself in terms of the physical toll they exert on the human body, and as an analogue to the pathologization of conspiracy theories, violence would necessitate a complete reconsideration of the way we perceive fundamental Western rights such

as individual liberty, autonomy and freedom of expression. It is in that sense that a *lack of trust in nature* results in situations not unlike those found in Huxley's *Brave New World* or Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," and because of that, the violencing of principles that have arguably grounded the West since time of the Enlightenment would be no different than murder, the deprivation of the conspiracy at the heart of the West and at the heart of the American experiment. That is a path that perhaps would be better left untraveled.

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