Vienna Forum for Analytic Philosophy presents

Filtering Truth

a Graduate Conference on **Epistemic Bubbles, Echo Chambers** and the Spread of **Misinformation**

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Leon Isenmann
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The Metaphysics of Echo Chambers and Conspiracy Believers

Providing a Unified Framework for Individual and Structural Epistemic Responsibility

Dysfunctional epistemic phenomena such as conspiracy beliefs and echo chambers have been of concern to social epistemologists for quite some time now. A number of recent approaches advocate an explicit problematization of these phenomena. The discussion about who is responsible for the emergence and spread of echo chambers and conspiracy beliefs, and what possible solutions result from this, roughly speaking, moves between two poles: on the one hand, there are a number of individualistic approaches that focus on the epistemic education of individuals to become better epistemic actors. On the other hand, there are structural approaches that focus on the role of the epistemic environment of the actors. Actors, in this view, can act epistemically virtuous, but if they are trapped in a dysfunctional structure, even the most meticulous epistemic behavior leads to undesirable outcomes. In my paper, I aim to show that by clarifying the metaphysics underlying the emergence of conspiracy beliefs and echo chambers, we can integrate the individual with the structural approach. This enables us to provide a unified account that can discern cases of individual and structural responsibility for the maintenance of conspiracy beliefs.

I start by reconstructing both M. Giulia Napolitano's individualistic approach[1] to conspiracy theories as the irrational maintenance of a conspiracy belief, and C. Thi Nguyen's structural approach of echo chambers as trust-distorting socio-epistemic structures.[2] Explaining the specifics of the two approaches raises direct questions regarding the relationship between the belief-holding individual and its structural epistemic environment.

Secondly, I argue that to make sense of this relationship, we ought to clarify the metaphysical commitments underlying both theories. A reason for this is that Napolitano argues that her approach should be understood as irreducible to the phenomenon of filter bubbles or echo chambers.[3] Whether or not this is plausible hinges on a clear understanding of what this reduction would amount to.

For this, I draw on a tool of contemporary metaphysics by arguing that the question of the irreducibility of conspiracy beliefs to echo chambers can be posed as a question of metaphysical grounding. Here, I will first argue in favor of classifying Napolitano's concept of conspiracy beliefs as a partial ground for the existence of Nguyen's echo chambers.[4] This approach is supplemented by pointing out the causal role of the maintenance mechanisms of the kinds of echo chambers described by Nguyen: it may be that it is the individual's belief that partly grounds the echo chamber, but it is the echo chamber's structural epistemic features that work to maintain this belief.

Combining the constitutive with the causal view enables us to form a unified framework in which we can discern (1) cases of individual epistemic actors that are responsible for their irrational beliefs, (2) cases where it is the flawed epistemic structure that absolves the individuals trapped in them, and (3) how one kind of case transforms into the other over time.

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[1] Napolitano (2021)
[2] Nguyen (2020)
[3] Napolitano (2021), p.97
[4] See Correia & Schnieder (2012)

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Tyler Porter
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Weaponizing Defeaters

According to Nguyen, members of echo chambers "have been brought to systematically distrust all outside sources" (2020 p. 1). Here, I argue that this systematic distrust can be brought about by weaponized justificatory defeaters. First, a bit on defeaters. Justificatory defeaters are reasons to think a source of evidence is either irrational or unreliable. Most theories of justification say that it is irrational to hold a belief that p when you have a defeater for p (for internalist views see Chisholm 1966; Huemer 2007; and Steup 2013; for externalist views see Alston 1988; Goldman 1986; Nozick 1981; and Bergmann 2006). So, when you have a defeater for a source of evidence, you should not use evidence from that source. There are two main types of defeaters: rebutting and undercutting defeaters. Rebutting defeaters for a belief that p are reasons for holding ~p or q, where q is incompatible with p (Pollock 1986, p. 38). An undercutting defeater for a belief that p, on the other hand, is a reason for no longer believing p – but not reasons in favor of believing ~p or q, where q is incompatible with p (Pollock, 1986, p. 39). Additionally, there are defeater defeaters: these are defeaters which give you a reason to think that your defeater is problematic. Importantly, justificatory defeaters need not be true to act as defeaters.

Defeaters can be weaponized in two ways. The first is to use defeaters to cut people off from reliable sources of information. Both rebutting and undercutting defeaters can be weaponized in this way. Weaponized rebutting defeaters for a belief that x is trustworthy are reasons for holding ~x is trustworthy or q, where q is incompatible with x being trustworthy. Claims made by the BBC and Alex Jones are incompatible. So if someone comes to trust Alex Jones more, this gives them a reason to distrust the BBC (for more on this phenomenon, see Porter 2024). Weaponized undercutting defeaters for a belief that x is trustworthy are reasons for holding ~x is trustworthy. These can be given by offering a widely accepted narrative that challenges the rationality or reliability x. For example, if you can create a widely accepted narrative that universities and mainstream media are ideological in an irrational way, then you create an undercutting defeater for those sources. People who accept these defeaters will view any arguments using these reliable sources as question begging. The second way defeaters can be weaponized is to use defeater defeaters to get people to engage in epistemic labor that will likely lead to false beliefs (for more on 'risky epistemic labor' see Levy 2021). People have a standing defeater against believing p based on their own investigations when investigating p requires expertise. This defeater can be defeated by devaluing the need for expertise in investigating difficult claims – as is done by Scott Orson Card, who says "we aren't impressed by your credentials, Dr. This or Senator That… we're going to think it through for ourselves."

Marie Charlotte Wolf & Nick Felix Dreikausen
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Epistemic Pipelines

Intercepting epistemic violence and the cause of echo chambers

In his 2020 paper "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles" C. Thi Nguyen describes the formation and character of social epistemic structures he calls "echo chambers", which intrinsically bear epistemic harm. Based on his definition we want to conceptualise a theory on how people end up and stay in these structures. Thi Nguyen offers a limited account to explain the exact mechanisms that lead subjects into echo chambers. We want to propose the concept of epistemic pipelines as an epistemic social superstructure on top of echo chambers. Our account draws upon Miranda Fricker's (2007) "Epistemic Injustice. The Power & Ethics of Knowing". What we want to propose is a hybrid approach combining Fricker's theoretical framework regarding identity power and stereotypes and Nguyen's concept of discrediting mechanisms to offer a three stepped approach to epistemic pipelines. How exactly our epistemic interdependence is being preyed on?

The first step uses Fricker's concept of prejudicial identity stereotypes (Fricker 1998, 2007) to explain how pipelines create an out-group by stereotyping certain identities. We intend to show that the stereotyping manifests in distrust prescribed to the out-group while simultaneously starting to solidify the in-group. This step focuses on identity dynamics and the social imagination rather than clear epistemic relations. We will draw on Fricker to explain how the created distrust might stem from stereotypes producing a credibility deficit or excess. (Davis 2016, Congdon 2017)

In a second step the established identity dynamics based on social imagination are connected with epistemic relations. The distrust then is not only targeting certain social identities but also statements, epistemic achievements and knowledge connected to these identities. As a result, an "exclusion by omission" takes place. (Nguyen, 2020, p. 8).

Only in a third step is the in-group able to introduce their own core beliefs. This comes as a result of the established distrust towards non-members. In this third step the social and epistemic structures of trust and distrust relations are firmly solidified and only then, we argue, can this continuum be called "echo chamber".

The social agent inside of the echo chamber has been lead to disregard any epistemic markers of expertise and is thus gullible to succumb to pseudo-experts and false information presented as fact (Janusz, 2022). The pipeline has been established and reaches its end in an echo chamber.

We aim to describe the specific mechanism-of-action of pipelines so that one of the core questions posed by Nguyen might be answered: "Is there any way out of an echo chamber?" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 24).

If we are correct in characterising this social epistemic superstructure as a general cause of the formation of echo chambers, the process of detecting, understanding and intercepting instances of individuals going down pipelines might turn out to be easier than Nguyen suspected.

KEYNOTE: Keith Harris

(University of Vienna, AUSTRIA)

Misinformation, Mistrust, and the Paradox of Persuasion

Misinformation is thought to cause a host of social, political, and epistemological problems. Here, I distinguish between three problems posed by misinformation that can broadly be described as "epistemological." Then, I argue that the deleterious effect of misinformation on trust in accurate information and reliable sources is in some respects the most concerning of these problems. I then argue that this effect is less straightforward than it might at first appear. Although survey data indicate a high degree of mistrust in authoritative information and sources, a finding sometimes captured in terms of a "crisis of trust," such data do not distinguish between merely expressive mistrust, sincere but mistaken claims to mistrust, and genuine mistrust. Consequently, it is not clear how deep the "crisis of mistrust" is. Finally, I assess some existing efforts to overcome mistrust and to increase the uptake of accurate information. I argue that many such efforts have a self-undermining character that I describe in terms of the "paradox of persuasion."

KEYNOTE: Benjamin Elzinga

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Bad Echo Chambers and Bad Education

While some epistemologists argue that echo chambers are not inherently problematic, the concept remains useful for characterizing social networks that struggle to engage in productive debate, find common ground, or learn from one another. These discursive failures are particularly salient when we confront *bad* echo chambers—especially those centered around pseudoscience and conspiracy theories. A common assumption is that bad echo chambers are the result of bad education, and education researchers have proposed Nature of Science (NOS) education as a potential remedy. Drawing on this literature, I explore how good education might help individuals avoid or escape bad echo chambers, while also acknowledging the limited scope of educational solutions.

Sam Kang
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Algorithmic Filters and Evidence-Gathering

Our understanding of the world is increasingly shaped by information we encounter online, with algorithms mediating each user's access to this vast informational landscape. In this paper, I explore the epistemic evaluation of such algorithms, conceptualizing them as filters that shape an individual's pool of accessible evidence. Drawing on concerns about mis/disinformation in the online space, one intuitive starting point is to claim that filters are epistemically bad when (and to the extent that) they present false or epistemically ungrounded statements. However, this approach is too simplistic, since users typically receive bundles of evidence across diverse and often inconsistent propositions rather than isolated bits of evidence about one proposition. A more nuanced proposal, echoing reasoning familiar from process reliabilism, is to assess filters by the proportion of truths (or knowledge) they convey. Yet I argue that this, too, faces challenges, as it neglects the epistemic significance that falsehoods can have as higher-order evidence. Building on the idea of epistemically problematic feedback loops (Hughes 2021), I develop an alternative etiological approach that identifies illicit effects that an agent's beliefs may have on a filter's selection criteria.

Ramona Zăgrean
(University of Bucharest, ROMANIA)

Science in the Post-truth Era

The Case of Genetics and Evolutionary Psychology

It is often said that science denialism is one of the defining characteristics (and causes) of the post-truth era (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; McIntyre, 2018). Generally, it is accepted that there has been a sharp decline in trust with respect to scientific findings, especially when it comes to topics such as climate change and vaccination (Lewandowsky et al., 2017), and that these findings "are now openly questioned by legions of nonexperts who happen to disagree with them" (McIntyre, 2018, p. 17). And yet, certain scientific fields are receiving wide-spread recognition among groups that are usually indifferent or hostile toward science. For instance, most alt-right and white supremacist groups tend to deny the science behind climate change and vaccines (Walter et al., 2022, 2023), while simultaneously praising findings from genetics or archeology (Hakenbeck, 2019). Proponents of "racial realism" are mainly interested in studies that show (or can be misconstrued to show) genetic distinctiveness between races (Panofsky et al., 2021, 2024). In contrast, the "manosphere" seems particularly enthralled by evolutionary psychology, especially as it pertains to theories of female sexuality (Bachaud & Johns, 2023; Conroy-Beam, 2024; Gosse et al., 2024).

The fact that these groups feel the need to search for scientific findings that support their theories, instead of solely relying on personal opinions and religious arguments, suggests that science still enjoys a somewhat privileged relationship with truth and facts for them. Consequently, I wish to argue that the post-truth era is not defined by science denialism, but rather by: (1) extreme cherry-picking, in that scientific claims are only supported insofar as they align with certain ideologies, (2) the weaponization of science and, (3) the return of biological determinism and essentialism, often associated with greater support for eugenic policies (Cheung et al., 2021). Adopting a more complex view on science in the post-truth era opens up new avenues of discussion, including: (1) the fact that this extreme cherry-picking and weaponization of science is getting more and more widespread, such as when Donald Trump claims that "we got bad, a lot of bad genes in our country right now" (Sullivan, 2024), (2) the difficulty of refuting these claims if one is not an expert in the field, as Panofsky et al., (2024) point out, (3) the fact that interventions that aim to increase trust levels in science might backfire if that science is then weaponized and, (4) what we should do to address these issues and to prevent the weaponization of other fields (such as neuroscience).

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Countering Misinformation in Social Networks:

A Network-Theoretic Approach to Fact-Checking

This paper develops a network-based model to examine the role of fact-checkers in countering misinformation and supporting the formation of true belief within social networks. Grounded in insights from social epistemology and political theory, I introduce the concept of apt epistemic environments—informational structures designed to facilitate reliable belief formation under conditions of cognitive limitation, urgency, and informational asymmetry. As online platforms increasingly mediate public inquiry, concerns about misinformation and the erosion of trust in traditional sources of knowledge have intensified. This shift demands new tools to assess not just individual cognition, but the structure of the environments in which beliefs are formed and shared.

Using agent-based simulations adapted from existing social epistemology models, I explore belief dynamics in networks that include reliable agents, misinformants, disinformants, and fact-checkers. Agents update their credences using Bayesian reasoning, drawing on both testimony and direct observation. Fact-checkers are introduced as corrective agents who disseminate accurate information and interrupt the spread of falsehoods by severing misinformation pathways within the network. The model allows for the examination of how different proportions and placements of fact-checkers influence collective convergence on true beliefs, particularly in environments where distortive agents are present.

Although the results and analysis are still forthcoming, this framework offers a robust methodological and conceptual foundation for understanding how structural interventions might mitigate epistemic failure in complex informational ecosystems. By integrating network theory with normative epistemology, the paper contributes to broader discussions on the design and governance of truth-conducive public spheres in the digital age.

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KEYNOTE: Megan Fritts

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How to be a Techno-Pessimist

Evaluating Emerging Technology in an Era of Misinformation

The term “techno-optimism” has been growing in popularity in recent years, especially among investors, technologists, and entrepreneurs, and broadly denotes an attitude like the following: the world has a lot of problems, and emerging technology is going to solve them. "Techno-pessimism," on the other hand, is a title rarely claimed, and often implies a Luddite’s attitude of general skepticism about the future and idealization of the past. In this talk, I will be fleshing out a way of meaningfully holding a techno-pessimistic position that does not commit one to trading their calculator for an abacus. Specifically, I will argue that large domains of emerging technology make it significantly more difficult to be a human agent in the world, for reasons that are due largely to the nature of the technology itself, and that these new difficulties are not obviously solvable through yet further technological advancements. Toward this end, I will focus on one example in particular: the proliferation of phantom patterns in the use of big data algorithms, and the resulting deluge of digital mis/disinformation.

Mihai-Alexandru Petrișor
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Why Epistemically Virtuous Agents Can't Stay in Echo Chambers

Thi Nguyen has recently proposed that the term "echo chamber" should be reserved for an epistemic community that engenders a pronounced disparity in trust between its members and non- members—one grounded in epistemic discrediting of outsiders alongside unwarranted elevation of insiders' epistemic credentials (2020). Following this analysis, Nguyen introduces the idea of a social epistemic reboot as a viable solution for an agent trapped in an echo chamber, thereby directly confronting the "structures of discredit" (Nguyen, 2020) that characterize such an epistemic environment. This approach resembles Descartes's method of radical doubt, which requires setting aside all preexisting beliefs in order to start anew, according equal weight to the testimony of all interlocutors unless further evidence suggests otherwise.

In this presentation, I challenge both Nguyen's analysis and proposed solution, shifting focus from the skewed distribution of trust that afflicts agents caught in echo chambers to the imaginative and pretense skills of these agents. I maintain that the discrediting mechanisms characteristic of echo chambers function to calcify and narrow an agent's imaginative capacities, thereby reinforcing their epistemological constraints. While this perspective does not strictly contradict Nguyen's account, it alters certain implications. Most notably, my position holds that no epistemically virtuous agent can be confined within an echo chamber—a claim at odds with Nguyen's contention that this remains a possibility. Following Marber and Wilson (2024), I maintain that imagination should be understood as an epistemic virtue. On a plausible responsibilist account of virtue, this implies that imagination is a gradable capacity. Consequently, adverse conditions—such as those that sustain the integrity of an echo chamber—can impair the development and exercise of one's imaginative abilities.

Second, conceiving of imagination as an epistemic virtue offers an alternative to the solution proposed by Nguyen. Rather than endorsing a social epistemic reboot, I advocate for the restructuring of social conditions in ways that cultivate and support the exercise of imaginative capacities. An epistemically virtuous agent aims to expand the scope of imagination in pursuit of epistemic goods; accordingly, our social epistemic structures ought to promote and enable such expansion. Drawing on Berto et al.'s (2022) recent account of the ampliative capacities and topical constraints of imagination, I show how this framework provides a comprehensive response to the central epistemic phenomena associated with echo chambers.

An important component of my proposal is reconciling the apparent contradiction whereby individuals within the echo chamber may exhibit thorough investigative methods yet still fail to grasp the relevant questions connected to their inquiries. Here, I draw on Silva's (2024, forthcoming) research on subject matters and questions under discussion, linking it with the role of imaginative capacities to demonstrate how limited imagination mediates the granularity of subject matter in echo chambers. This mediation, in turn, connects the epistemic ramifications of echo chambers to the phenomenon of hermeneutic injustice (Fricker, 2007). The proposed framework thus underscores both the epistemic and ethical significance of fostering imaginative diversity in social structures, a perspective that extends and revises current debates on echo chambers (e.g., Lackey, 2021).

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Philipp Kremers
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Vindicating the Myth of the Good Epistemic Bubble

Many critics have argued that epistemic bubbles are epistemically bad because they make their members prone to form false beliefs (e.g., Pariser 2011, Sunstein 2017, Nguyen 2020). In response, Lackey (2018, 2021) argued that these worries are overstated: some epistemic bubbles are epistemically good because they facilitate the formation of true beliefs. Recently, a new generation of critics put forward a more sophisticated way to articulate their discontent with epistemic bubbles that allegedly is not vulnerable to Lackey's objection. On the one hand, Sheeks (2023) argued that raising the question if an epistemic bubble is epistemically good involves consulting outside sources and, thus, results in performatively exiting the epistemic bubble in question. Thus, even though she admits that truth-conducive epistemic bubbles can exist, she claims that this conclusion remains practically toothless because this consideration can never compel anyone to enter an epistemic bubble or stay put in one. On the other hand, Ranalli and Malcom (2023) argue that we obtain a more forceful criticism of epistemic bubbles if we define epistemic rationality in a more pluralistic way that is not wedded to veritism. They argue that epistemic bubbles are "always epistemically harmful, including truth-conducive ones" (Ranalli / Malcom 2023: 2) because they always exhibit one serious epistemic downside: every epistemic bubble "preempts its members from critically engaging with serious objections" (Ranalli / Malcom 2023: 24).

In this talk, I defend the view that there are some epistemically good epistemic bubbles. First, I will put forward a positive argument for this claim: I argue that large social systems that divide epistemic labor in an efficient way necessarily give rise to epistemic bubbles and that staying put in these social systems is epistemically rational in many cases. Second, I argue that this argument from the division of epistemic labor allows us to expose some weaknesses in the reasoning of the 'second generation' of epistemic bubble critics. Against Sheeks, I argue that my argument is practically significant in the relevant sense, i.e., it allows us to decide if we should enter certain epistemic bubbles or stay put in them. Against Ranalli and Malcom, I argue that their reasoning is formulated in an ambiguous way that allows us to set up a dilemma counterargument: either we can utilize my argument from the division of epistemic labor to show that their reasoning leads to the implausible conclusion that it would be epistemically rational to leave all large social systems that divide epistemic labor in an efficient way, or we can show that their reasoning is irrelevant to assessing whether epistemic bubbles are epistemically good in the relevant sense.

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Evelina Lissoni
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Against a Pejorative Engineering of 'Conspiracy Theory'

The conceptual question of how to appropriately define the term 'conspiracy theory' (CT) is still open. A central disagreement concerns advocates of a neutral definition and those who claim that this notion should be conceptually engineered to carry an intrinsically pejorative connotation. The main motivation for proposing a pejorative engineering of CT comes from ordinary language, in which the predominant use of the expression is derogatory. In this talk, I will argue that folk intuitions of ordinary speakers are not a reliable basis for settling the conceptual question of how the term CT should be defined, as they are affected by two layers of bias: (i) a survivorship bias and (ii) a media-induced bias.

The first bias stems from the way in which the set of CTs evolves over time. While there are CTs (e.g., Watergate, Iran-Contra affair) that undergo an epistemic shift that allows for their reclassification as historical facts – where this epistemic shift can be accounted for in different ways, such as CTs 'becoming official', 'getting verified', 'being proven', etc. – the set of CTs continues to expand as novel CTs emerge, with epistemically indeterminate or implausible theories becoming increasingly dominant in number. This fosters the emergence of a survivorship bias, a logical error in which attention is paid only to those entities that have passed through (or "survived") a selective filter. In this case, folk intuitions are disproportionately influenced by the ever-growing (sub)set of epistemically indeterminate CTs that "survive" within the category – many of which are so far-fetched that they have no realistic chance of ever leaving the set of CTs – while neglecting those that get filtered out upon becoming historical facts (but were nonetheless CTs once).

The second bias arises from how CTs are portrayed in mainstream media. Outlandish CTs are overrepresented in media coverage, thus contributing to the reinforcement of a pejorative stereotype about the notion of CT. Media stereotypes are mediated messages that communicate overgeneralized information about social groups, affecting the beliefs, attitudes and emotions of audience members. Mass media may be especially influential when individuals lack personal experience with the stereotyped group. Given that, typically, laypeople's only epistemic access to conspiracy theorists is filtered through media outlets, they are more likely to passively adopt stereotypical (i.e., inaccurate) views of conspiracy theorists and, by extension, of CTs.

Since some CTs might ultimately prove to be correct, I contend that the definition of CT should be neutral rather than pejorative. In particular, I defend a family of views that I call 'Restricted Minimalism', which combines the minimalist definition for which CTs are, roughly, "theories about conspiracies" with a restricting condition that (1) specifies the epistemic status of CTs without conveying a prejudice of unwarrantedness and (2) aims to identify the necessary and sufficient condition that sets CTs apart from historical facts. One of the views falling under 'Restricted Minimalism' is David Coady's account of CTs as "unofficial theories about conspiracies", but I will argue that a better alternative is available.

KEYNOTE: Giulia Napolitano

(Erasmus University Rotterdam, NETHERLANDS)

Conspiracy Theories and Resistance to Evidence

The philosophical debate on conspiracy theories and their epistemic status has grown exponentially over the past few years. In this talk, I discuss the methodology of this philosophical debate, questioning some widespread assumptions. I then present my account of conspiracy theories as self-insulated beliefs in conspiracies, and its social and political implications. Finally, I address some objections that have appeared in recent work and respond to some criticisms.