What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues. David Coady. Oxford: Wiley–Blackwell, 2012, x + 202 pages, $96.95 hardcover, $31.99 paperback.

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What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues is a lively, interesting, and stylishly written book. The author, David Coady, draws from an eclectic mix of epistemological theory to illuminate — albeit sometimes briefly — a range of currently controversial topics. These include the claims of "epistemic democrats" that democracy is better able than other political systems to "track the truth," and the debate about whether votes in democratic elections should be understood as statements, as preferences, or as resources; torture; and government surveillance and privacy. However, the heart of the book, and its most significant contributions, lies in its assessment of the epistemic credentials of a number of sources of popular beliefs, in particular the testimony of experts, rumours, conspiracy theories and the blogosphere. Accordingly, this review will focus on those assessments. Though there is a certain amount of overlap, the content of each is distinct enough to merit individual consideration.

Experts

Let me begin with expert testimony. On the face of it, it seems that we should give more weight to the testimony of experts than to that of laypeople. But what distinguishes the experts? According to Coady "being an expert is simply a matter of being well informed about a subject, that is, having a significantly greater store of accurate information about it than most people . . . " (p. 28). Generally, of course, we should believe experts when they make claims in their area of expertise. But what should we believe when experts disagree? At least in some cases of expert disagreement, there is a clear majority on one side of the dispute. In those cases, perhaps laypeople should accept the view of the majority. Coady considers the salient case of anthropogenic climate change, which exemplifies such a pattern; though there are some dissenting climate scientists, the large majority of climate scientists are convinced of anthropogenic climate change. Is that a reason for the layperson to do likewise? Alvin Goldman (Goldman, 2001, p. 99) and others think that in cases like these, numbers alone should not count (Elga, 2010, p. 177; Kelly, 2010, p. 148). The argument goes as follows. If Bob accepts a claim made

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by Andrew because of Andrew's supposed expertise, Bob becomes what Goldman calls a "non-discriminating reflector" of Andrew. Suppose Bob then retells the claim to Charles, who has previously also heard it from Andrew. According to Goldman, Bob's testimony does not give Charles a further reason to believe the claim, in addition to the reason he already had after hearing the claim from Andrew. To think it does is, in effect, to count the same evidence twice. Now consider a situation where the views of the majority of experts are not formed independently of each other (in the most extreme case, there is only one expert who has formed her view independently, and all the rest of the majority are non-discriminating reflectors of that view) but a minority of experts each independently comes to a view dissenting from the majority view. Here, it may be that the minority view is the one which should be accorded more weight.

Coady argues, I think persuasively, that that conclusion is too swift. He does so by appeal to the notion of meta-expertise — the capacity accurately to identify who possesses expertise in an area (that is, who is more likely to possess true information in that area). If, say, the members of the majority possess such meta-expertise, then even if most of them are non-discriminating reflectors, the fact that they accept the claims of some (or even only one) over others, is a reason to give the claims they accept greater weight than the claims they reject. Since climate scientists obviously possess meta-expertise in their field, then, on this line of reasoning, the fact that most of them believe that anthropogenic climate change is occurring is powerful reason to do likewise, even if the beliefs of most of those scientists depend on claims of a few of their colleagues. And even where particular scientists are not themselves expert in the field of climate science, given their grasp of scientific method, they presumably possess meta-expertise in relation to the claims of those who do (or claim to) possess such expertise. Moreover, the structure of the institution of science, with its various formal markers of scientific expertise (such as academic qualifications, publications in peer-reviewed specialist academic journals etc.) means that even laypeople can possess meta-expertise (or perhaps by this stage meta-meta-expertise) in respect of who has scientific (meta-)expertise. So, contra Goldman et al., even if it were the case that most of the scientists who accept anthropogenic climate change are non-discriminating reflectors of the views of a small number of their peers, and most of the smaller number of scientists who reject it do so because they have considered the evidence on their own account, it is still reasonable for a layperson to accept the views of the majority.

In the course of his discussion of expertise, Coady also considers whether there are moral experts and, if so, whether moral philosophers are such experts. Coady denies that there are any moral experts, and so, *a fortiori*, that moral philosophers are moral experts. He claims not just that as a matter of fact that there are no moral experts, but that there *cannot* be, "because morality is too vast and amorphous a subject for anyone to be *significantly* better informed than *most* people about it . . ." (p. 54, emphasis in original). He draws an analogy with science. He thinks it too is a "vast and amorphous subject," and so also one where there cannot be experts. Certainly, both science and morality are vast, at least in the sense that there are huge numbers of phenomena which fall within their purview. It is less clear that they are amorphous: many theories of morality, for instance, hold that there is a small number of overarching moral principles which apply to particular, apparently diverse, events. In any case, Coady's rejection of the possibility of moral expertise on the grounds of the vast and amorphous nature of morality surely proves too much. Many subjects, including history, geography, the law etc. are vast and amorphous. Are we to say that there are no experts in history, or geography or . . . ?

If we reject the claim that there cannot be moral experts because of the vast and amorphous nature of morality, then it is at least possible that there are moral experts. And, indeed, if we do reject that claim, it follows from Coady's own definition of expertise that there *are* moral experts. Recall that for Coady "being an expert is simply a matter of being well informed about a subject, that is, having a significantly greater store of accurate information about it than most people . . . . " Now consider a morally sensitive historian, who has read widely about a range of cultures and periods. Since she knows many more facts about human behaviour than most of us, and is capable of making generally accurate moral evaluations of that behaviour, she also knows many more moral truths (assuming that there are such things, as Coady and common opinion both hold) than most of us. So, on Coady's definition, she is a moral expert.

What this shows is not, I take it, that there actually are moral experts, but rather that if we do not think that examples such as the sensitive historian force us to accept that there are, we need to reject, or perhaps broaden, Coady's definition of expertise. In any case, Coady's definition seems to me unduly narrow. Sometimes, as Coady has it, experts are just people who know more about some subject than most others. But sometimes they are people who can do things (including finding things out) that most of us can't, and sometimes they are people who can help people do things they can't otherwise do (and sometimes they are people who have all these abilities). Moreover, to call someone an expert is typically to accord them the status of an authority in their area of expertise, that is, someone whose opinion about what to do or believe provides a pre-emptive reason for the layperson to do or believe as the expert says, that is, a reason which supplants whatever reasons the layperson may otherwise have acted on. "The expert told me to" is *ceteris paribus* a sufficient justification for acting in accordance with the expert's direction (including coming to hold a belief).

It is the idea of the expert as an authority in this sense which we tend to resist in the case of morality. Some people clearly are better morally informed and more sensitive than others. Nevertheless, if one person is facing a morally difficult choice and takes a particular course of action on the advice of a second, acknowledged on all hands as morally wiser than the first, it is the actor, not her adviser, whom we hold morally responsible. That is, the opinions of the morally wise do not function as pre-emptive reasons for the less enlightened. This seems to be partly constitutive of the concept of moral autonomy. If so, moral autonomy is strikingly at odds with rational autonomy since, as noted above, the rational person recognises, and defers to, the views of experts and ought to do so. Probing the source and justification for this difference in any serious way is obviously beyond the scope of this discussion, but two possibilities suggest themselves. One is that, given the centrality of morality to human life, in the course of maturation all ordinarily intelligent people become morally competent deliberators. The morally wise can assist us in our deliberations in morally difficult situations by pointing to moral reasons, and their force, which it would otherwise be more difficult for us to see, but it is *our* recognition of those reasons which explains and justifies our action. A second possibility is that, given the importance of moral conscientiousness, we in effect apply strict liability rules to moral behaviour, as a way of trying to ensure that people do give due consideration to morally significant choices.

Expert reports are, of course, strong bases for belief. After his discussion of expertise, Coady looks at a number of sources of information which have a less elevated reputation, in particular, rumors, conspiracy theories, and the blogosphere. He argues that their reputation is unduly negative, and, that like more respectable sources of information such as the senses and testimony, they may in fact be valuable, even if not infallible, sources for the critical inquirer. Coady thinks each of these sources of information can

be defended in similar terms (see, for example, p. 139). I am not convinced by that claim, nor by the defence he does provide of rumors and the blogosphere, though his views about conspiracy theories seem to me to be powerfully persuasive. Let me look at each of these sources in turn, beginning with rumor.

Rumor

Rumor is obviously an important source of information, for good or bad. It has, however, received little attention from philosophers, though more from social scientists. As a glance at the relevant social science literature shows, it is a slippery concept, with a range of definitions on offer. Coady takes rumor to possess two defining features: it is communication which has passed through many informants, and it "has not been endorsed by an institution with official status" (p. 97).

Despite its unsavoury reputation, Coady aims to "defend rumor against those who argue (or simply assume) that rumors are always, or typically false" (p. 87). Coady argues, by contrast, that "many rumors are credible . . . and that in general the fact that a proposition is rumored to be true is evidence in favour of it being true" (p. 87). I find it hard to believe that anyone could seriously maintain a claim so obviously contrary to common experience as that rumors are *always* false, and Coady does not provide a reference for anyone who does so. On the other hand, rumors (like their close relative, gossip) certainly are widely seen as epistemically and even morally suspect.

Before examining Coady's attempt to rehabilitate rumor's standing, let me point to what I take to be problems with his definition of rumor. First, on that definition, one of the essential features of rumor is that its content is information which is not officially sanctioned. What counts as official here? According to Coady ". . . to describe a communication as 'official' is to say that it is endorsed by an institution with significant power (especially the power to influence what is widely believed) at the time and place in question" (p. 97). The fundamental problem with this description is that it detaches the concept of official communication from a connection with the occupation of offices, particularly state offices, by those who issue such communication. That means that, on the one hand, information provided by, say, a state-run newspaper will not count as official if it is widely seen as mendacious (as such newspapers often were in Communist states) and so lacks the power to influence what is widely believed. On the other hand, it means that information provided by an institution which is broadly trusted (as some religious organisations have been in repressive states) will count as official, even where that institution is illegal and operates underground. This surely gets things the wrong way around: whatever the people of the USSR thought of *Pravda*, for example, and however unlikely to believe its reports, those reports surely counted as official.

Furthermore, Coady's definition entails that many things will be counted as rumors which are not usually seen as such. Think, for example, of the kinds of stories about family members which people often tell. These often satisfy both conditions of Coady's definition: they have not been officially endorsed (and given the kinds of events they cover, such as first meetings of spouses, often not capable of being so endorsed) and they have passed through a number of informants. It jars my ear, at least, to call such stories rumors.

One important difference between broadly circulated unofficial claims which are not seen as rumors and those which are seems to be that rumors remain unverified. Official confirmation (sometimes) provides verification, but there are many other ways in which claims can be verified, most obviously by the rumored event actually occurring.

In any case, lack of verification is often taken as one of the defining features of rumor. It is noteworthy that on any approach which does take lack of verification (official or otherwise) as a defining feature of rumors, a rumor is not identified by its content, but rather by its place in a process of communicative transmission. An utterance becomes a rumor at some stage in that process — on Coady's account, after it has passed through a number of informants — and may cease to be a rumor, either by being discredited and broadly disbelieved, or by being verified.

Whatever the problems with his definition of rumor, the plausibility of Coady's defence of the epistemic credentials of rumor does not rest on that definition. He points out that both those who recount a rumor (whom he calls rumor mongers) and those who hear it — who must of course in turn recount it to others if it is to survive — generally have some interest in its truth. Indeed, this seems just to be a specific case of a more general socio-linguistic phenomenon: speakers do not usually want to appear to be exceptionally credulous, badly informed or ill-willed; and usually we subject speakers' claims to some degree of filtering (however implicit) before adding them to our stock of beliefs. Assuming that each listener/speaker is less likely to decide to pass on a rumor which she has heard if she judges it to be implausible than if she judges it to be plausible, the epistemic community jointly acts as a filter for rumors, winnowing implausible ones, and spreading plausible ones. On the basis of these considerations, Coady (p. 103) maintains that "two closely related and widespread views about rumor . . . are unfounded" viz. "that there is a presumption against believing rumors" and that "belief in a particular rumor becomes less warranted the further it spreads." On the contrary, according to Coady, "in general the fact that a proposition is rumored to be true is evidence in favor of its being true . . ." and ". . . except in special circumstances, our warrant for believing a rumor will actually increase as the rumor spreads" (p. 103). The special circumstances which Coady has in mind are the operations of "selection pressures other than judgments of plausibility"(p. 103). A rumor may flourish "even though it is highly implausible, because it satisfies some deeply felt psychological or social need" (p. 103).

I am unconvinced by the claim that, in general, the further a rumor has spread the greater our warrant for believing it. Coady's argument to this effect seems to me to rest on an equivocation on the meaning of "plausibility." What might be called subjective plausibility is a hearer's judgment that a claim is believable; objective plausibility indicates that there is evidence available to a hearer which provides the hearer with good reason to believe a claim. Obviously, and notoriously, subjective and objective plausibility do not always track each other — many people (for example, climate sceptics) have beliefs which are not well supported by evidence available to them. Members of a group might find a false claim plausible in the light of other false beliefs they share. Moreover, contra the implication of Coady's claim, there is no necessary conflict between, on the one hand, plausibility, and on the other, selection pressures such as "deeply felt psychological and social needs." As the work of social psychologists on cognitive biases such as confirmation bias (interpreting new data in a way which confirms one's preconceptions) and the bandwagon effect (believing something because others in one's group do) has shown, those needs often influence judgments of plausibility. Hence, in a group which shares false beliefs which reflect deep-seated attitudes, rumors which are consistent with or reinforce those beliefs are likely to be found plausible and flourish, even if false (think for example of the prevalence of blood libel among anti-Semitic populations in Europe in the Middle Ages). That such rumors are widely disseminated in that group provides no warrant for believing them.

Notwithstanding, Coady's claims about rumors hold in certain settings: research from the 1940s on, investigating workplace rumors, for instance, has found both that

such rumors tend to be accurate, and that they become more accurate through their life (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2008). There are a number of distinctive features about rumors and rumor-mongering in such settings. Firstly, the topic of the rumor is (often) of material importance to the group within which it circulates. Hence, hearers have an incentive to ensure that they only accept true (not just plausible) rumors, while rumor-mongers have an incentive to ensure that the rumors they repeat are true since there is likely to be a cost to gaining a reputation for unreliability. Secondly, since there are likely to be a number of people in possession of information relevant to the truth of the rumor, a rumor is unlikely to survive unless it is (largely) true. Thirdly, in the kind of small and stable population typically found in workplaces, it is possible to know who is an (un)reliable source of information, either about matters relevant to the truth of a particular rumor, or more generally.

However, none of these things has to be true about rumors and rumor-mongering in general, and in many cases none of them will be true. I conclude that both the generalisations about rumors which Coady objects to (that there is a presumption against believing rumors and that belief in a particular rumor becomes less warranted the further it spreads) and their contraries, which he supports (that there is a presumption in favour of believing rumors, and that belief in a rumor becomes more warranted the further it has spread), are false, or at least misleading. We should assess the plausibility of rumors on a case-by-case basis, in the same way as we treat testimony in general, by considering the reliability of our source, and fit with other well-established beliefs.

Conspiracy Theories

Like rumors and rumor mongering, conspiracy theories, and theorising, have a bad name. Indeed, while it would be a rare person who could claim in good faith that he never listened to or spread rumors, the denial that one is a conspiracy theorist now seems to be obligatory for anyone who wants to be taken as minimally rational. Coady's discussion, drawing on his previous work (Coady, 2007), shows how peculiar that attitude is.

Again, as is the case with rumor, there is a variety of extant definitions of conspiracy, at least as that term figures in the phrase "conspiracy theory." These definitions all agree in understanding conspiracies as involving groups of people jointly and secretly planning to bring about some state of affairs. They may also see conspiracies as involving deception (in order to ensure secrecy, say) and being morally suspect in their goals or methods (which in turn helps to explain why conspiracies are kept secret).

The modern scorn for conspiracy theories seems to originate with Karl Popper's discussion in *The Open Society* of what he calls the conspiracy theory of society, which he characterizes as the belief that "whatever happens in society — especially happenings such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages, which people as a rule dislike — is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups" (1972, p. 123).

Anyone who did believe in the conspiracy theory of society in this sense clearly would be deeply irrational. Popper (p. 123) himself claimed that the conspiracy theory of society was "very widespread." That seems doubtful, to say the least, and Popper provides no evidence that it is true. In any case, when people accuse others of being conspiracy theorists, they do not usually seem to be accusing them of holding the conspiracy theory of society, at least in its unvarnished Popperian sense.

It would be absurd to believe that everything that happens in society (or even just the seriously bad things) is the product of conspiracy; it would be equally absurd to believe that nothing that happens is. Conspiracies patently exist, so on any plausible

definition of conspiracy, in itself it cannot be irrational to believe that there are conspiracies. Moreover, since conspiracies are by their nature secret, it hardly seems irrational to believe that some things that have happened are the result of undiscovered conspiracies.

What, then, is supposed to distinguish the irrational conspiracy theorist from the rational person who nevertheless accepts that at least sometimes events are the results of conspiracies? Coady considers various salient possibilities. Perhaps what identifies the conspiracy theorist is a mistaken belief about the frequency of conspiracy? While it is difficult (and given the secrecy which is an essential element of conspiracies, perhaps impossible), to know how often conspiracies occur, they clearly are a common enough social phenomenon. Much criminal activity involves conspiracies, and even in work-places and family life they are hardly unknown. Perhaps, then, the conspiracy theorist is someone who has false beliefs, not about the frequency of conspiracies, but rather about their significance? But clearly there have been highly significant — indeed world historical — conspiracies, such as those which brought Lenin and Hitler to power, and, more recently, the conspiracy which led to the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York. Other possibilities that Coady considers are that conspiracy theorists are distinguished by their (irrational) belief(s) that conspiracies are frequently successful, or that Western governments, especially the United States, engage in con-spiracies often, successfully or significantly. In fact, far from being irrational, those beliefs are true, as the evidence that Coady produces shows.

Of course, particular beliefs that some people hold about conspiracies are false and even irrational, and some people are prone to attribute events to conspiracies with little or no evidence, and even to take the presentation of countervailing evidence as demonstration of the existence of the conspiracy. But these are just particular instances of broad epistemic failings; they no more show that it is generally wrong to believe in conspiracies than children's belief in the Easter Bunny show that children shouldn't believe anything their parents tell them.

The Blogosphere

The twentieth century was the heyday of what Coady calls conventional media — large private or public organisations, staffed by professional journalists, seeking out and transmitting information, and providing commentary, about such matters as international affairs, domestic politics, high-profile court cases, sporting events and so on. Much of what most of us believed about such things ultimately came to us through the work of such media organisations, which became enormously profitable and influential by virtue of their control of the mechanisms for gathering and dissem-inating news. Recent developments in information technology, in particular the growth of the internet, have undercut that control by allowing many private individuals around the globe to transmit and receive information. Many people and groups now run internet sites — blogs — to provide access to information which in the past would have been (largely) confined to mainstream media outlets, and to allow and invite comment from the readership, which can then be published on the blog. The numbers and impor-tance of blogs as sites of information and discussion have grown to the point where it is meaningful to speak of a distinct blogosphere.

Coady draws a distinction between the blogosphere and conventional media. Journalism in the blogosphere supposedly differs from that which occurs in conventional media in that it is carried out by non-professionals, who "are not part of any large, formally structured, institution" (p. 162). The principal form of research of these blogger journalists "consists in examination of documentary evidence, rather than interviews (and other forms of contact) with people in power" (p. 162).

Since the blogosphere has become such an important source of beliefs it is certainly
worth examining its status as a source of belief, and comparing it to that of conven-
tional media. Coady's discussion is still one of the few philosophical considerations of
these matters. A problem inherent in any such discussion is the rapid pace of the
developments in information technology as well as the use of such technology. Although
Coady does acknowledge some interaction between the blogosphere and conventional
media (p. 158), the distinction between them has become more blurred even in the
relatively short time since the book was written, with popular blogs becoming commercially
valuable items attracting the attention of media conglomerates, newspapers becoming
increasingly interactive, and writers more and more moving between the blogosphere
and older media outlets. Such changes are exemplified in the recent career of Glenn
Greenwald, described as a "prominent blogger" on page 148 of the book. Greenwald
has in fact spent the past few years working for the *Guardian* newspaper, leaving in
October 2013 to help run a new independent, for-profit, on-line news site, bankrolled
to the tune of $250,000,000 by an internet entrepreneur.

Coady aims to show that the blogosphere is a valuable source of information, indeed
superior to the conventional media. He considers Alvin Goldman's (2008) claim that it
is the conventional media which are superior, because they have filters in place to
help guarantee the quality of published material, unlike the blogosphere. The filters
Goldman has in mind include the use of fact checkers to vet reports for accuracy, the
requirement that more than a single source is used for a story, and limitations on the
use of anonymous sources. The extent to which the conventional media actually
make use of such filters is, of course, an empirical matter, and Coady convincingly
shows that in fact the record of the conventional media in utilizing such filters is spotty
at best. Moreover, Coady points to common practices of conventional media which
tend to undermine their validity. Foremost of these is the misguided emphasis on so-
called balance. Balance, as it has come to be understood by the conventional media,
involves giving "equal time to opposing positions," rather than making any judgment
about the epistemic status of those positions (again, reporting of the climate change
debate provides an apposite example), or taking an independent stance about the
substance of those positions. In the case of political reporting, this has led to the
media becoming virtually a mouthpiece for the political establishment, with the kinds
of results seen in the retailing of reports of the existence of Saddam's weapons of mass
destruction in the prelude to the second Gulf War.

By its nature, the blogosphere massively extends the offerings that are available in
the marketplace of ideas, while simultaneously allowing much greater scrutiny and crit-
icism of those ideas than was possible with the kind of one-way flow of information
which characterized conventional media in the mechanical age. If one accepts a
Millian approach to the epistemic benefits of free speech, it would seem to follow that
the rise of the blogosphere is leading to more true beliefs being held, as Coady maintains.
That said, there are features of the blogosphere as it actually exists, which are less
epistemically desirable. The picture of the blogosphere which emerges from Coady's
discussion is one which is largely inhabited by epistemically responsible agents, open
to rational discussion and rebuttal. One does not have to travel far into the blogosphere
to discover agents who are not so open, to put it mildly. As noted above, according
to Coady, bloggers base their claims in examination of documentary evidence. While
this may be true of Wikileaks and the like, it would require an implausibly liberal
understanding of the idea of documentary evidence for it to hold true of the more
polemical and demented sites, of which there are many. Further, the blogosphere has
allowed for a much greater fragmentation of what might be called communities of

believers — groups who share fundamental commitments and beliefs — than was the case in the heyday of the conventional media. That fragmentation allows members of those communities to insulate themselves from challenges to their cherished beliefs. While the rise of the blogosphere may have made much more information available, in itself it does not necessarily improve people's capacity to engage critically with that information and draw well-founded conclusions from it. Again, I think Coady presents a somewhat over-idealised picture of the blogosphere to support his claims.

Despite the reservations I have expressed above about certain details of Coady's arguments, this is a good book. It deals with under-explored issues of real intellectual and practical importance in an imaginative and stimulating way. It is also unusually readable — pithy, accessible and often witty. Its virtues would, I think, make it an excellent text for upper-level courses in applied philosophy.

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