Practical Wisdom in a Conspiratorial Age

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1. Introduction

Among the threats to democracy today is the use of misinformation by anti-democratic elites as a means of securing and retaining power. These tactics depend upon a significant portion of the citizenry accepting and spreading this misinformation. This is not a new challenge; indeed, as far back as *The Republic*, Plato warns of the potential for democracies to devolve into tyrannies through demagogues' use of flattery, fear, and lies (Plato 2000, Book VIII). However, new communication technologies combined with significant polarization have helped manifest this old threat in new and especially challenging ways. This paper turns to Hans-Georg Gadamer's revival of *phronesis* as a potential resource against the threat of misinformation, especially as seen in the spread of conspiracy theories.

I argue that meeting the challenge of misinformation and conspiracy theories requires, among other things, fostering *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as a civic capacity of making contextualized judgments about ends and means. Practical wisdom so conceptualized equips citizens to be comfortable in situations of uncertainty and complexity and so to resist fear-mongering, melodramatic narratives, and reputational pressures, thereby bolstering their immunity to the appeal of conspiracy theories. I make this case by: first, turning to the literature on conspiracy theories to gain insights on how and why they spread; second, examining the twentieth-century revival of the Aristotelian tradition of practical wisdom by Hans Georg

Gadamer, particularly in his later writings; and finally, extending and revising this tradition to meet the new challenges of conspiracy theories and misinformation today.

2. Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories

The rapid acceptance and spread of misinformation threatens democracy by, among other things, eroding trust in public institutions and electoral processes, enhancing prejudices against vulnerable groups, and legitimizing violence. Reducing this threat can target either the supply of misinformation, the demand for it, or some combination of the two. Efforts to restrict supply run into difficult epistemological questions, thorny free speech issues, and also usually depend on further empowering already powerful institutions (government bureaucracies, law enforcement, or social media corporations, for example). This paper focuses instead on the demand side. Given the recent increase in the spread and adoption of misinformation, especially during the first years of the Covid epidemic, why is this the case? What factors contribute toward some being susceptible to believing and spreading misinformation?

Growing literatures in political science and psychology seek to answer these questions, using conspiracy theories as a proxy for misinformation. There are disagreements about how precisely to define conspiracy theories, but generally they are taken to be explanations of social and political phenomena that (1) are framed in Manichean terms, (2) disregard conventional explanations as a ruse or distraction, and (3) instead locate causes in unseen and intentional forces (Oliver and Wood 2014, 953). The factors explaining the lure of conspiracy theories can be grouped into three sets: (1) broad economic, social, and cultural trends; (2) psychological and personality traits; and (3) political opportunities.

The first set has been of interest to philosophers and cultural and political theorists for decades, especially in twentieth-century analyses of the consequences of modernity. In a complex, modern society, outcomes are the result of large numbers of interacting agents and rarely correspond to the intentions of any of them directly. In the face of largely anonymous social and economic changes, the idea of some group or organization actually controlling events is a way that some citizens cope with a pervasive and generalized sense of powerlessness (Moore 2016, 6–8). This sense of powerlessness is particularly keen during eras of low trust (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016, 825). Given that we lack direct information and evidence for most of what we know and believe, the absence of trust in societal institutions and processes provides fertile ground for conspiracy theories as explanations for complex social and political phenomena (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 211).

Of course, not all those in the same social, economic, and cultural settings latch on to conspiracy theories to the same extent or with the same fervor. Researchers look to the second set of factors, psychological and personality traits, to try to understand why some are drawn to conspiratorial explanations while others are not. Two psychological predispositions contribute toward a “conspiratorial view” of politics: a propensity toward melodramatic narratives and a propensity toward attributing causality to unseen forces (Oliver and Wood 2014, 954). Early socialization contributes toward the development of this conspiratorial worldview, which is correlated with greater acceptance of violence, less political involvement, lower educational achievement, and lower household income (Uscinski and Parent 2014), although more recent research has questioned the correlation with lower incomes (Klofstad 2020). While some researchers have found belief in conspiracy theories to be unrelated to partisanship or political ideology (Oliver and Wood 2014), others have more recently found a correlation with right-wing, populist ideologies (Schaeffer 2020; van Prooijen 2018). Additional research has found correlations between endorsement of conspiracy theories and antisocial personality and psychological traits such as narcissism and psychopathy (Uscinski et al. 2022).

The third set of factors affecting the appeal of conspiracy theories is what I call political opportunities. Conspiracy theories can spread organically, especially via social media, but their distribution is also aided by what have been called conspiracy entrepreneurs (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 212). These individuals and their organizations often benefit directly from the spread of conspiracy theories through increased fame, wealth, or political influence, and thus are highly motivated to sell others on these beliefs, even if they may not personally believe them. Those theories involving the biggest groups, enemies, and gains tend to have the most adherents (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 18). Political polarization offers additional opportunities for the spread of conspiracy theories, since endorsement of one or more theories helps bolster a collective identity often construed as under threat (Miller and Saunders 2016, 129). Having one's party out of power heightens the feelings of anxiety and loss of control that help spur attachment to conspiracy theories (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 20). Alterations in power cause different conspiracy theories to resonate at different times.

The self-sorting that has accompanied polarization in the United States and elsewhere also supports the spread of conspiracy theories, as reputational pressures and reinforcing emotions push in the direction of endorsement. While political ideology may not be necessarily correlated with a general tendency to endorse conspiracy theories, a correlation with the *extremity* of one's political attachments has been found (van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet 2015, 575). Not surprisingly, conspiratorial thinking is magnified by social media use, although the relationship is complex (Enders et al. 2023).

These sets of factors – social and cultural, psychological, and political – interact in complex fashion, and not necessarily in the same ways with respect to particular theories or groups. Nonetheless, the research collectively suggests that we should not be surprised that conspiracy theories of all sorts are flourishing in the U.S. right now. A baseline sense of powerlessness and anxiety in the face of globalized economic changes, growing inequality, technological developments, natural disasters, and political upheaval provides fertile ground for conspiracy entrepreneurs to spread Manichean tales of dark, unseen forces at work. Political polarization and heightened mistrust help such tales take hold amongst extreme ideologues, and some of these tales spiral into broader endorsement by more moderate groups through reputational pressures and in-group and out-group signaling.

3. The Hermeneutic Recovery of *Phronesis*

In order for democratic citizens to resist getting caught up in the spread of conspiracy theories, they must be able to make political judgments in situations marked by uncertainty and complexity, and they must withstand the temptations posed by melodramatic narratives, fear-mongering, and reputational pressures. These civic capacities are part of what Aristotle theorized as *phronesis*.

Aristotle takes up *phronesis* systematically in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in his discussion of the use of right reason (*orthos logos*) to achieve the mean between excess and deficiency. As he is wont to do, Aristotle starts his discussion of practical wisdom with everyday empiricism: What qualities are possessed by those we regard as practically wise? In other words, why do we call them this? His answer is that we assign this label to those who excel at deliberating about both what is *good* and what is *expedient* in situations where there are not clear rules to follow. Practical wisdom is the ability to make good choices in situations of uncertainty and possibility, when things “can be otherwise than they are” (EN VI.5). Aristotle points out that, unlike the intellectual virtues of knowledge and art, the deployment of practical wisdom involves both assessing and taking action, which is why it is considered to be the virtue of political leaders. This is what we respect in Pericles and other leaders like him, Aristotle says: they see not only what the pursuit of the good demands in a particular situation, but also how to accomplish it. They are skilled decision-makers and skilled managers, of both households and political communities, corrupted by neither pleasure nor pain, but committed to the pursuit of the good (EN VI.5).

The twentieth century witnessed a retrieval of Aristotelian thinking in a variety of disciplines, including moral philosophy, social and political theory, philosophy of science, and theology (Hollinger 1985, 113). More than other strands of thought, philosophical hermeneutics saw itself as heir to Aristotelian practical philosophy (Gadamer 1979, 107). Gadamer and his interlocutors and disciples substantially recovered and reconceptualized *phronesis*, placing it at the center of their efforts to address the social and political challenges of the middle and late twentieth century.

Gadamer’s discussions of *phronesis* frequently include a contrast with *techne*, which he, departing from Aristotle, characterizes as a form of technical rationality. For Aristotle, *techne* and *phronesis* are both pragmatic, contextualized forms of knowledge that stand in contrast to *episteme*, which is context-independent and universal. As art or craft, *techne* is the kind of know-how found in practices of production, whereas *phronesis* has to do with deliberation about action and includes judgments as to what is good and possible (Duvenage 2015, 79). Gadamer tends to associate *episteme* solely with the mathematical sciences and instead shifts some of its traits to *techne*, which he links to the natural and technological sciences. For Gadamer, *techne* is marked by two features: (1) it depends on methodologies that enable distancing from the messiness of reality, and (2) its purposes of mastery and control are inherent. As a result, the relationship between general and particular in these areas is one of application of theory to practice (Gadamer 1995, 312). In making this move, Gadamer tends to identify contextualized knowledge *per se* with *phronesis*. He also views *phronesis* as the highest human excellence, ignoring the primacy Aristotle assigns to *sophia*, theoretical wisdom (Berti 2000, 347-350).

Gadamer sets *phronesis* in contrast to his version of *techne* in order to highlight the fact that the former includes choosing *both* ends and means. For example, in a 1970s essay on scientific expertise, Gadamer frets that the dominance of technical rationality undermines and threatens a more reflective mode of living in which one’s choices involve the exercise of judgment both about what is good and what course of action will advance the good (Gadamer 1981, 91). Rather than engage in this reflective choosing, we instead defer to those with scientific and technical expertise, hoping that such knowledge can simply be applied to social problems in order to solve them and bring society closer to some ideal (Gadamer 1981, 73). But, Gadamer argues, the application of theory to practice in the mode of scientific and technical knowledge is inadequate for solving social problems, since these problems require judgments in changing circumstances (Gadamer 1981, 92). Such judgments depend not on mere application but rather on the *concretization* that attends the human sciences, something exemplified most clearly in law. The judgment of a lawyer or judge bridges the gap between the generality of statutory law and its meaning in a particular situation. This moment of making the law concrete always has an interpretive dimension, which means that the text of the law "must be understood at every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way" (Gadamer 1995, 309). The concretization that takes place, Gadamer contends, depends upon *phronesis*, which involves a simultaneous judgment about both ends and means. The right purposes cannot be known in advance of a given situation, as they can in matters involving scientific and technical knowledge (Gadamer 1995, 321). Instead, one must in the moment determine both the right goal and the right means to that goal. Gadamer's elevation of *phronesis* in relationship to social and political problems opens up possibilities for rethinking practical wisdom today, although his ongoing concern about the dominance of *techne* potentially limits these possibilities, as I will argue in the next section.

4. The Possibility of Practical Wisdom

Certain features of Gadamer's rehabilitation and reconceptualization of *phronesis* make it better suited to contemporary, pluralist societies than Aristotle's original conception. Most importantly, Gadamer explicitly situates practical judgments about ends and means in the context of dialogue. In a 1978 article, he argues that the exercise of *phronesis* depends upon "being habitually understanding towards others" (Gadamer 1981, 132). An openness to the presence of others and their claims, in Gadamer's view, is necessary for making practical judgments about the ends we should pursue and how to achieve them. Encounters of understanding are, for him, necessarily dialogical, so in making social and political judgments, we gain a sense of the relevant contexts and their possibilities by falling into conversation with others. In so doing, we tap into what Gadamer in the same article calls "a kind of communality in virtue," the shared moral understandings that underlie communities and bind their members to each other. Practical wisdom, he clarifies, is "not to be thought of as a neutral capacity for finding the practical means for correct purposes or ends" (Gadamer 1981, 133). In other words, it is not mere pragmatic rationality or prudence. Instead its exercise always also involves making choices about what goods or purposes to pursue in a specific social and political context. As such, Gadamer argues, practical wisdom is "indispensably bound up" with *ethos* (Gadamer 1981, 133). The exercise of *phronesis* presupposes that we been shaped by the moral norms and convictions that lie at the basis of our social and political life, and when we make judgments about ends and means in particular situation, in dialogue with others, we draw on these shared norms and convictions. While the degree to which individuals exhibit this capacity will vary, that variance will always be constrained, and enabled, by the *ethos* in which and through which they have been formed. *Ethos* not only shapes but is also sustained by the exercise of *phronesis*.

The dialogical and communal dimensions of Gadamer's version of practical wisdom detach it from a singular, transcendental conception of the good. The habits, norms, and convictions that constitute *ethos* and form the basis of practical wisdom not only differ from society to society, but they also change within a given society over time. Practical wisdom must also necessarily change with place and time, given that its exercise draws on these shared, evolving moral understandings and convictions, rather than being guided by an intuitivelyknown, singular conception of the good. Gadamer's hermeneutical recovery of practical wisdom, with his emphasis on its dialogical and communal dimensions, allows practical wisdom to be relevant as a civic capacity in contemporary societies in which goods are seen not as transcendental and universal but immanent and plural.

Gadamer's reconceptualization also highlights the ways that a capacity for practical wisdom can serve as an antidote to ideological thinking, one of the contributing factors in the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories today. In a 1980 essay, "The Ideal of Practical Philosophy," Gadamer describes the practically wise person as one who has "overcome the temptation to dogmatism that goes with all supposed knowledge" (1998, 58). Dogmatism impedes our ability to make practical judgments since it denies the relevance of context and, consequently, the need for dialogue. When we succumb to dogmatism, we have no use for context because we see every situation simply as an opportunity to apply something we already know; dialogue, similarly, becomes unnecessary and a waste of time. Making social and political choices under the sway of dogmatism does not involve the exercise of *phronesis* but instead resembles the exercise of technical rationality or perhaps mere prudence, in which the ends are pre-given and all that must be decided is how to achieve them.

Overcoming the temptation to dogmatism requires the habitual openness toward others that Gadamer advocates in his earlier essay. By assessing, in part through dialogue with others, the context, possibilities, and stakes of political choices, we can discern what goals and means are appropriate and commit ourselves to them. Doing so will most likely disrupt some of our prior assessments and commitments, whether presumed or explicit. In this way, in Gadamer's view, the exercise of practical wisdom helps prevent our norms and convictions, the ground of *ethos*, from calcifying into mere indoctrination and enforced conformism. The exercise of practical wisdom involves the acceptance of others, the sharing of ideas, and, thereby, the construction of a common world (1998, 59). The ongoing interdependence of *phronesis* and *ethos*, in which the exercise of the former both draws from and transforms the latter, thus undermines dogmatism and ideological thinking.

As I mentioned earlier, the dogmatism preoccupying Gadamer at the time of his writing was excessive deference to science and technology, to the detriment of the contextual knowledge of the human sciences. Seeing social and political issues as mere problems to be solved by the application of technical solutions transforms all knowledge into *techne*. Gadamer's concern is that this category error contributes toward the erosion of both our shared moral understandings and our capacity for practical wisdom. His defense of the human sciences and his reinvigoration of Aristotelian ethical and political theory were meant to help counter these threats. But these are not necessarily the same threats we face today. Unquestioning deference to scientific and technical expertise hardly seems like a primary problem right now, as we have seen in response to both the COVID-19 pandemic and to the climate change crisis. In each case, significant groups of citizens have refused to accept a broad scientific consensus on causes and mitigation strategies. We instead live in an era of historically low trust in institutions, especially in those engaged in scientific research and knowledge production, and in government agencies tasked with addressing scientific and public health problems. In order for Gadamer's reconceptualized and reinvigorated conception of practical wisdom to serve as a democratic resource in this new context, marked by a flood of misinformation and conspiracy theories, at least two issues need to be addressed.

The first is the role that political polarization and social sorting play in the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. As section two of this paper argues, reputational pressures and information bubbles aid the spread of misinformation. Given that many citizens interact regularly only with those who also already share their political and social views, these views appear as common sensical, and there are few incentives, and often significant costs, for citizens to question, contextualize, and complicate them. In these circumstances, the interdependence of *phronesis* and *ethos* that Gadamer articulates becomes a negative feedback loop rather than a way that shared convictions and understandings are drawn upon and transformed. If the shared understandings underlying the exercise of practical wisdom are shared only because a subcommunity also shares a partisan identity, the resulting judgments will simply reinforce ideological thinking and dogmatism. Rather than choosing ends and means in a particular situation by drawing on a communality of virtue, practical judgments instead will resemble the application of something already known, the same problem that Gadamer associated with deference to scientific and technical rationality.

This social sorting and partisanization of identity is a serious, challenging problem in the United States and other democracies right now. The problem has been exacerbated by social media habits and the algorithms that underlie social media platforms. For practical wisdom to serve as a resource for democracy today, especially as an antidote to misinformation and conspiratorial thinking, the dialogical and communal dimensions of practical wisdom must extend beyond partisan echo chambers and polarized subgroups. Scholars of Gadamer have argued – convincingly, in my view – that implicit in his dialogical account of understanding is the presence of others who are unlike us (see especially Risser 1997 and Walhof 2017). But it is also understandable that some scholars read Gadamer as presuming that there is a single tradition and community over time that provides a commonality of virtue, with little need for, or emphasis on, diverse experiences and voices as part of this community. If citizens are to make judgments about ends and means in the context of complexity and uncertainty, the dependence of practical wisdom on the presence of others unlike us must be explicit, not left implicit. Nonpoliticized interactions among diverse citizens are especially important, since these interactions can help reveal and buttress some of the shared understandings and convictions on which practical wisdom depends and that get obscured by polarization and partisan identities. The relationships these nonpoliticized interactions support help undermine the dogmatism prevalent in a polarized polity. In so doing, they can also help foster the comfort with uncertainty and complexity needed to resist the allure of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

The second, related issue that needs to be addressed is the problem of decontextualized knowledge claims. Making judgments in situations of complexity and uncertainty involves assessing the context in which such judgments must be made, including what is (and is not) known, the relevance and reliability of information, the options available and their possible consequences, and the moral and political stakes involved. Democratic discourse today, however, is awash in bits of information that actively resist this kind of assessment. Tweets, audio and video clips, memes, and gifs are presented as if they accurately and fully capture a political dispute, a policy proposal, or a persuasive argument. Citizens accept them as informative in and of themselves and pass them along to like-minded friends and associates. Rarely are these information bits meant to, or do they, suggest the need for a better understanding of context and nuance, or even the need for any kind of judgment at all. Indeed, these information bits specifically work, and are meant to work, to close down rather than open up the possibility of judgment. The presumption is that no judgment is even required, since the truth is presented as self-evident, and so only someone who is deranged or evil would think otherwise. The decontextualized nature of these information bits is partly the source of their power.

A Gadamerian sense of practical wisdom includes an impulse towards contextualization. To build immunity to the lure of decontextualized knowledge that merely reaffirms their views, citizens have to resist the immediate temptation of simply absorbing and passing along these information bits. Practically wise citizens must be able first to recognize a situation *as* a situation involving uncertainty and complexity, and thus requiring judgment. This recognition would then also entail a desire to know more, in order to contextualize the alleged information or claim. This search for context would include asking what emotional response the decontextualized information is meant to provoke and why. Is this trying to get me to feel fear, anger, disgust, self-satisfaction, or superiority to others? What are the consequences of invoking these feelings? Whose interests are being served in catalyzing these responses?

Together these two issues – political polarization with attendant social sorting, and the pervasiveness of decontextualized knowledge claims – highlight that the practical wisdom needed to meet the challenge of misinformation and conspiracy theories must be more than an epistemic capacity. Recent democratic theory has sought to meet the challenge of misinformation primarily through better forms of democratic deliberation combined with improved informational literacy (Chambers 2021; Fishkin 2018; McKay and Tenove 2021). While informational literacy and informed democratic deliberation are certainly needed to buttress democratic practices and institutions, research shows, unfortunately, that countering misinformation with accurate facts does little to change political views, especially in the long run (Carey et al. 2022). Treating the challenge of misinformation primarily in epistemic terms is insufficient. Indeed, citizens drawn to conspiracy theories are often obsessed with seeking out information, albeit in ways that do not impel them outside their information bubbles and partisan communities. In addition, citizens drawn to conspiracy theories often maintain a posture of a kind of critical thinking, saying that they "are just asking questions." This response of just asking questions becomes the default response to counter-arguments.

Practical wisdom as a civic capacity that can help meet the threat of misinformation is not mere skepticism or open-mindedness, in the sense of withholding judgment until one has weighed the available evidence. The development of practical wisdom must also include the cultivation of a set of dispositions. First, practically wise citizens must not only recognize, but also be comfortable with, situations demanding judgment and contextualization. Otherwise they will prematurely foreclose the search for context simply to avoid the discomfort that attends uncertainty and complexity. Second, practically wise citizens must approach other citizens and decontextualized information with a degree of humility, expressed as a hesitation to think one knows fully and an openness to discovering more. Finally, practically wise citizens must exhibit a type of fortitude that resists the temptations posed by melodramatic narratives, fear-mongering, and reputational pressures.

The challenges posed by misinformation and conspiracy theories in the context of decontextualized knowledge claims, polarization, and social sorting point to the need for practical wisdom as an organizing concept for democratic civic capacities. The philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer offer a rich resource for conceptualizing practical wisdom in ways that include an openness to others in dialogue along with needed dispositions of humility, fortitude, and comfort with uncertainty and complexity. Furthering the development of hermeneutic practical wisdom as a democratic civic capacity will enable citizens to judge what is good and possible in social and political contexts. Developing this capacity will also help them become less susceptible to the kind of conspiratorial thinking that threatens democracy today.

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