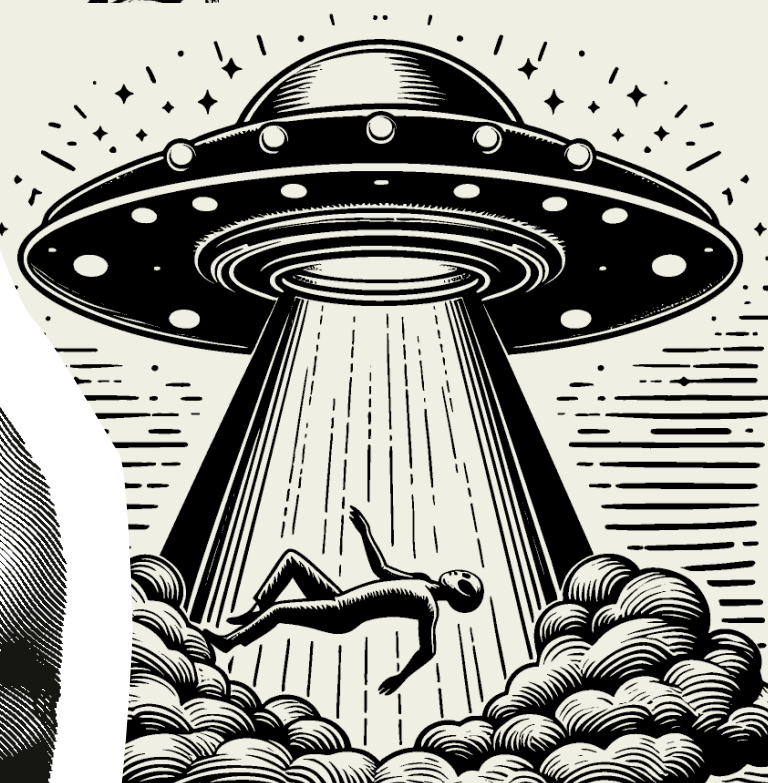




By Simon Lewson
Photographs by Avital Hirsch

MYSTERY DRONES ARE ALIEN SCOUTS!



CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE COMING FAST AND FURIOUS. A PHILOSOPHER OFFERS A COOL-HEADED APPROACH TO SEPARATING THE KOOKY IDEAS FROM THE VALID

Before they were celebrities, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were considered by some to be conspiracy theorists. As cub reporters at *The Washington Post* in the early '70s, the duo suspected that United States President Richard Nixon had helped orchestrate — and cover up — a plot to wiretap the Watergate Building, headquarters of his political rivals. Of course, Woodward and Bernstein weren't sure, at first, that any of this had happened. They were journalists, following a lead. Which is to say, they had a theory, and it involved a conspiracy. For Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier, there is nothing disparaging about the “conspiracy theorist” label. Sometimes, it's a simple matter of fact.

Stamatiadis-Bréhier is an Azrieli International Postdoctoral Fellow and a philosopher at Tel Aviv University. He is part of a generation of philosophers who are rethinking conspiracy theories, bringing nuance to a field that often lacks it.

Conspiracy theories, they argue, can be an annoyance — even a distraction. But, they can also be necessary components of a healthy civic culture. The trick, for Stamatiadis-Bréhier, is to figure out how to manage them — to give them the attention they deserve without succumbing to crankery.

Stamatiadis-Bréhier came by his interests in conspiracies by happenstance. As a PhD student at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom, his main focus was the niche field of “philosophy of explanation” — an endeavour that began in earnest in the 20th

Conspiracy theories, says philosopher Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier, are a natural feature of a healthy civic culture. He first became fascinated by conspiratorial thinking during the height of COVID.

century as philosophers sought to understand the nature of modern theoretical science. This corner of philosophy asks questions such as: What is an explanation? How should explanations be modelled? And what does it mean to say that X explains Y? He recognizes that these inquiries may seem pedantic to the average person. “That’s how philosophy works,” he says. “You take a seemingly simple question and abstract away from it.”

Stamatiadis-Br  hier was deep into his PhD in 2020, when COVID hit. Locked down in northern England, he became fascinated by the many theories then proliferating online. Was the virus real? Was it engineered in a lab? Were the lockdown orders the work of a shadowy cabal intent on re engineering society? “Even among reasonable people,” he recalls, “the experience of the pandemic generated paranoia and conspiratorial thinking.”

When Stamatiadis-Bréhier returned to Athens later that year, his curiosity had ballooned into all-out fascination. He started watching movies about conspiracy theories — *Marathon Man*, *The Conversation*, *All the President's Men* — so often that it proved tiresome for his girlfriend. Around that time, the couple adopted a black cat and named it Zapruder. She liked the name for its quirky charm. He liked it for its connection to the notorious Zapruder film, a piece of amateur footage of the Kennedy assassination that spurred theories about a second gunman.

Like most countries, Stamatiadis-Bréhier's native Greece has its own homegrown conspiracy theories. The country has been rocked by wiretapping cases, from the Vodafone scandal of 2004–05 that affected more than 100 Greek lawmakers and civil servants, to the Predatorgate scandal of 2022, when prominent politicians, prosecutors, journalists and businesspeople were allegedly monitored by the Greek National Intelligence Service using Predator spyware (a definitive link to the GNIS has not yet been established). The stories are extreme, but to call them far-fetched would be to miss a crucial point: They are based in fact, even if many details remain unclear.

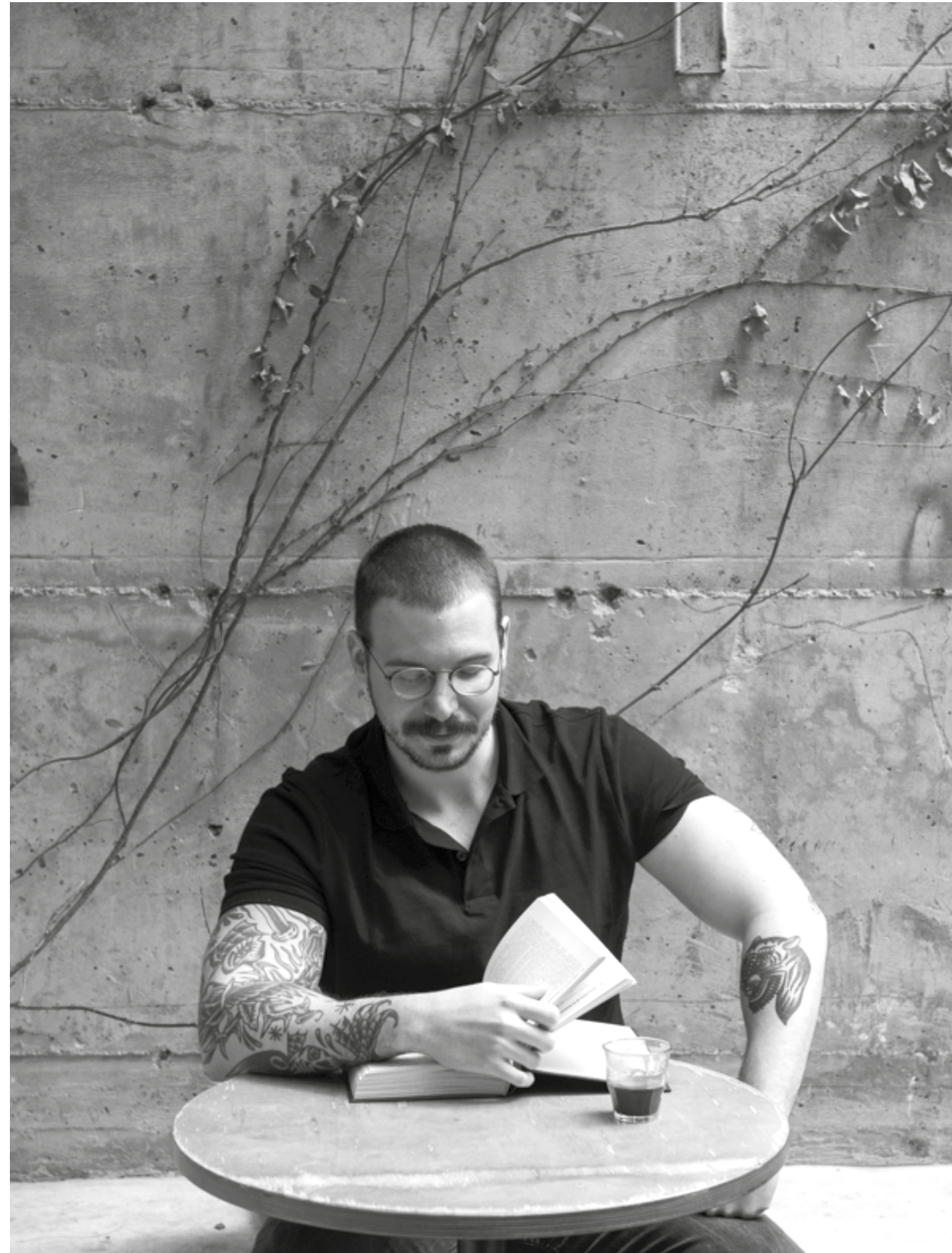
Stamatiadis-Bréhler has come to believe that it is rational for “reasonable people” to entertain conspiratorial thoughts, if only from time to time. Philosophers of his generation reject what might be called the naive view of conspiracy theories, which relegates them to the domain of kooks and odd characters. We all know folks who subscribe to this view. They trust science and mainstream expertise and believe a conspiracy theorist is a loner who spends too much time online and is dangerously estranged from reality.

One problem with the “trust the experts” standpoint is that sometimes experts are wrong. (Recall the public health authorities who, in the early days of the pandemic, claimed that masks did little to prevent infections.) Another problem is that sometimes conspiracy theories are right. If you had met someone in 2012 who believed that the U.S. government was running a dragnet surveillance operation, collecting metadata on hundreds of millions of people, you would have thought they were nuts. You probably would have thought the same of anyone claiming Volkswagen was cheating on its emissions test via software secretly installed in its Audis, Beetles and Jettas. If these theories seem less nutty today, it is only because they turned out to be true.

How can we figure out which seemingly kooky ideas are valid? The American philosopher Brian Keeley has argued that, when it comes to conspiracy theories, there is no “mark of the incredible,” no robust sign of plausibility or nuttiness. Perhaps, as citizens and truth seekers, we must investigate every theory, no matter how farfetched.

But as Stamatiadis-Bréhier points out, this argument is wildly impractical. Investigating conspiracy theories requires time and resources. There are only so many hours in a day.

SOMETIMES, CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE PROVEN RIGHT. WATERGATE, AFTER ALL, REALLY DID HAPPEN. WHEN ENCOUNTERING A NOVEL CONSPIRACY THEORY, THE FIRST QUESTIONS TO ASK ARE: WHO IS BEHIND IT? AND WHAT MIGHT THEIR MOTIVATIONS BE?



An Azrieli International Postdoctoral Fellow, Stamatiadis-Bréhier rejects the perhaps naive view of conspiracy theories, which relegates them to the domain of kooks and odd characters.



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“SECOND-ORDER” CONSPIRACY THEORIES FEATURE ONE CONSPIRACY NESTED IN ANOTHER. CONSIDER THE ROSWELL INCIDENT. DID A UFO CRASH IN A DESERTED AREA OF NEW MEXICO? WELL, MAYBE IT WASN’T A UFO BUT A U.S. TOP SECRET ESPIONAGE PROJECT THAT IS BEING PASSED OFF AS A UFO



And many conspiracy theories are dizzyingly complex. An investigator could spend an entire lifetime navigating the highways and byways of QAnon-land, and they would still leave much of the territory unexplored. When Stamatiadis-Bréhier began reading the philosophical literature on conspiracy theories, he realized that, as a society, we need a heuristic — a process for deciding quickly, if perhaps imperfectly, which ideas are most deserving of our attention.

In his first article on conspiracy theories, published in 2023 in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, Stamatiadis-Bréhier argues that would-be investigators should begin their quest by conducting genealogical research. When encountering a novel conspiracy theory, the first questions to ask are: Who is behind it? And what might their motivations be? One prominent theory today, for instance, holds that the science of climate change is an elaborate hoax. A quick genealogical investigation reveals that lobbyists for the fossil fuel industry have publicized this narrative for obviously self-interested reasons. Does this revelation debunk the theory outright? Perhaps not. But in Stamatiadis-Bréhier’s opinion, it offers a compelling case for skepticism. In their mental filing cabinets, investigators can move the climate-hoax theory from a folder labelled “urgent” to one labelled “low priority” or “maybe later.”

Stamatiadis-Bréhier’s work on genealogy got him thinking about what he now calls “second-order conspiracy theories” — that is, conspiracy theories that have a meta-dimension, as many do. At its most basic level, the narrative of the Roswell incident holds that, in 1947, the U.S. government found and concealed wreckage from an alien spacecraft that had crashed onto the High Plains of New Mexico. But dig deeper into Roswell lore, and you will find an alternative explanation: There were no flying saucers at Roswell but rather the remains of a U.S. top secret espionage project, and for reasons of national security or wounded pride, the U.S. government concocted a story about alien spacecraft, thereby deflecting attention from the truth. This explanation, far from definitive, is a second-order narrative. It challenges one conspiracy theory and offers up another.

Stamatiadis-Bréhier published a paper on the “second order” phenomenon in *Inquiry* in 2024. His argument — that conspiracy theories are sometimes nestled inside other conspiracy theories — has a brain-busting, matryoshka-doll logic to it, which can make it seem trollish, like a parlour game for philosophy nerds. But Yannis Ktenas, an Athens-based philosopher and legal scholar who has collaborated with Stamatiadis-Bréhier, argues that the idea has profound implications for our world.

“Many of the wars happening around the globe are not just about territory or resources,” Ktenas says. “They’re disputes over contested facts.” This applies to wars over ideas as well. Take the case, again, of climate change denialism. People who believe that the climate change agenda is based on a hoax often fancy themselves critical thinkers resisting dominant Western ideas — which, to a degree, they are.

But in their zeal to label one narrative a conspiracy, are they falling for another? Here, says Ktenas, Stamatiadis-Bréhier’s ideas are useful. If they would apply his genealogical test and ask themselves who was behind the anti-climate change perspective, they would get an obvious answer: the fossil fuel industry, that has worked, via a vast and coordinated network of conservative foundations, think tanks and contrarian scientists, to undermine support for climate change mitigation. In our information-saturated era, critical thinking is, well, critical. But to do it properly, we must be mindful of second-order conspiracies, which can turn independent thinkers into pawns in someone else’s game.

Stamatiadis-Bréhier believes that we’re all walking an epistemic tightrope, seeking a balance between complacency and paranoia. We should not trust everything the establishment tells us, but neither should we reject establishment wisdom too quickly. “I’m trying to make conspiracy theorizing a responsible practice, maybe even a scientific practice,” Stamatiadis-Bréhier says. “We must apply the same rigour to conspiracy theorizing that we apply to science.”

Ultimately, rigour may be the only means of separating the useful conspiracy theories from the misleading ones. Watergate happened, contrary to what Nixon said at the time. The moon landing happened too, almost exactly as Nixon described it. ▲●■

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