

Bardon, Adrian (2020). *The Truth About Denial: Bias and Self-Deception in Science, Politics, and Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 352 p., ISBN: 9780190062279

Science denial has emerged as a critical area of scholarly concern, evidenced by a growing corpus of academic literature that interrogates its cognitive, ideological, and sociopolitical underpinnings. Adrian Bardon's *The Truth About Denial: Bias and Self-Deception in Science, Politics, and Religion* exemplifies this trend, providing a seminal synthesis of epistemic, psychological, and political frameworks to elucidate the mechanisms underlying the rejection of empirically validated knowledge. Bardon's analysis situates denialism—manifested in climate skepticism, ideological economic doctrines, and religious extremism—within the broader phenomenon of identity-protective cognition, wherein epistemic norms are systematically subordinated to the preservation of entrenched ideological narratives and group affiliations. This framework posits that denialist practices arise not merely from informational deficits but from the interaction of motivated reasoning, affective polarization, and the sociocognitive imperative to maintain alignment with identity-defining belief systems.

The conceptual framework of Bardon's analysis is anchored in a synthesis of Quinean epistemology, which situates beliefs within interconnected webs of ideological commitment, and dual-process cognitive theory, which distinguishes affectively driven intuitive reasoning from deliberative analytical cognition. Bardon extends these foundations through the term of «motivated reasoning», defined as habitual cognitive practices that privilege identity congruence over truth-apt belief formation (p. 31). This framework challenges positivist assumptions about the corrigibility of false beliefs, arguing instead that denialism emerges when empirical evidence threatens the coherence of self-conceptualization or group belonging. The implications

for science communication are profound: Bardon's analysis suggests that fact-centric communication models are inherently inadequate to address denialism's roots in moral and existential anxiety (p. 111-112).

The book's tripartite structure systematically deconstructs denialism's psychological, institutional, and discursive dimensions. The initial section (chapter 1) establishes a theoretical foundation by analyzing confirmation bias, cognitive dissonance, and the «backfire effect» as mechanisms of belief preservation. Here, Bardon draws extensively on Kahneman's (2011) dual-process theory to illustrate how intuitive reasoning dominates in contexts where beliefs are entangled with identity. The second section applies this framework to case studies in climate science (chapter 2), economic policy (chapter 3), and religious fundamentalism (chapter 4). Of note is Bardon's analysis of climate denialism, which serves as a paradigmatic example of institutionalized doubt production, wherein corporate actors exploit cognitive biases to legitimize anti-scientific positions—a process he likens to the tobacco industry's historical deployment of «merchants of doubt» (Oreskes, Conway 2010). The final section proposes depolarizing local mitigation discussions as a normative framework for science communication, advocating for empathic dialogue that acknowledges the moral narratives underlying denialist positions while systematically dismantling their factual inaccuracies (p. 317).

While theoretically incisive, Bardon's work exhibits several limitations in its empirical and methodological scope. The U.S.-centric focus of its case studies—particularly the analyses of fossil fuel lobbying and evangelical opposition to evolutionary biology—constrains its applicability to global contexts where denialism operates through distinct sociocultural logics. For instance, vaccine hesitancy in Europe or AIDS denialism in South Africa might reveal alternative mechanisms of identity-protective cognition unaddressed by Bardon's framework. Furthermore, the proposed strategy of empathic and locally centered dialogue, while philosophically coherent, lacks operational specificity compared to empirically validated rebuttal frameworks such as technique rebuttal (McIntyre 2021). This theoretical-prescriptive gap is compounded by the book's limited engagement with digital media ecosystems, which play a pivotal role in the algorithmic amplification of denialist content.

Bardon's work makes three principal contributions to science communication scholarship. First, it bridges critical philosophy of science with empirical psychology, challenging the field to move beyond deficit-model assumptions regarding public misunderstanding (p. 102). Second, he sheds light on the moral dimensions of science denial, complementing Kahan's (2017) cultural cognition thesis while adding a normative dimension often absent in descriptive social science approaches. Third, it underscores the need for communication strategies that address both the cognitive

and affective drivers of denialism (p. 299). However, the book's focus on individual and institutional cognition risks obscuring the structural reforms required to combat systemic misinformation, such as regulatory interventions targeting algorithmic amplification or transnational disinformation networks.

The Truth About Denial is a relevant piece of work for scholars of science communication, political epistemology, and Science and Technology Studies (STS). Its theoretical rigor makes it particularly valuable for graduate seminars interrogating the intersection of cognitive psychology and science policy. Bardon accurately analyzes our current polarized climate, emphasizing the risk to productive public discourse. As he warns, «an atmosphere of ideological polarization and divisive rhetoric is not a good atmosphere for achieving good public policy outcomes» (p. 112), a sentiment that underscores the urgency of addressing this challenge. Practitioners seeking prescriptive guidance may find the concluding chapter's recommendations less immediately actionable than technique-focused frameworks like Schmid and Betsch's (2019) empirically tested rebuttal strategies. Nevertheless, Bardon's conceptual contributions provide a critical foundation for designing communication initiatives that address both the epistemic and existential dimensions of science denial, marking a significant advance in the field's capacity to navigate the «post-truth» epistemic landscape.

References

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