

Science Denial, Post-Trust, and Epistemic Blame: A Review of Contessa's *Science Denial*

Goldenberg, Maya J. 2026. "Science Denial, Post-Trust, and Epistemic Blame: A Review of Contessa's *Science Denial*." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 15 (4): 66–70.
<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-b5l>.

Science Denial: Post-Truth of Post-Trust?

Gabriele Contessa

Cambridge University Press (Elements in the Philosophy of Science), 2025

84 pp.

One of the most distinctive features of Gabriele Contessa's *Science Denial* is that its critique of the science-denial framework reorients where epistemic failure is located. Having shown that the label "science denial" conflates epistemically heterogeneous phenomena—motivated non-belief, misinformed non-belief, prudential non-compliance, and insincere contestation—Contessa argues that the dominant counter-denier diagnosis systematically misplaces epistemic blame.

The central problem, he suggests, is not that citizens have become indifferent to truth or incapable of rational belief revision, but that the epistemic infrastructure on which lay belief-formation depends has itself become unreliable. Contessa's rejection of the post-truth diagnosis is thus not merely deflationary but relocate: it shifts attention from individual cognitive or moral deficit to the breakdown of trust relations that mediate access to scientific knowledge. By doing so, the Element systematizes and sharpens an already emerging critique of individualistic post-truth explanations for public epistemic failure in philosophy of science and social epistemology.

Helen's Story

This taxonomic critique is more than a housekeeping exercise. By disaggregating what is commonly treated as a unified phenomenon, Contessa exposes a systematic mismatch between the categories used to diagnose public resistance to science and the actual epistemic states of those so diagnosed. One of his most instructive cases concerns a vaccine-hesitant parent, Helen, whose doubts take shape through a familiar institutional trajectory. Her initial concerns are brushed aside in a hurried clinical encounter, prompting her to seek information elsewhere. In that search, she encounters an online parent support group whose members attribute their children's developmental conditions to vaccination and who, unlike her physician, appear attentive, responsive, and emotionally invested in her child's well-being. Presented with resources and testimony that reinforce these claims, she comes to trust the group and adopts their view that vaccines are dangerous. She ultimately decides not to vaccinate (41).

Contessa argues that it is highly implausible to diagnose Helen as a motivated non-believer. Her ultimate goal is to keep her daughter safe and healthy, and she pursues that goal through what she takes to be the appropriate epistemic means, namely trusting sources that appear credible within her social environment. If her conduct is epistemically criticizable at all, it is not because she subordinated epistemic goals to non-epistemic ones, but because she placed her trust in sources that were untrustworthy on this topic. Helen is a misinformed non-believer, not a science denier, and treating her as the latter not only misdescribes her epistemic situation but actively deflects remedial attention away from the structural conditions that shaped her response, including a polluted epistemic environment, a

dismissive clinical encounter, and a well-organized misinformation network. Before asking how to change minds like Helen's, Contessa insists, we must ask what kind of epistemic situation those minds are actually in.

Post-Trust

The conditions that produced Helen's situation are, for Contessa, symptomatic of something larger: a collective failure not of individual rationality but of the epistemic infrastructure on which rational individuals depend. It is this structural diagnosis that Contessa gathers under the label *post-trust*. As he presents it, the post-trust diagnosis holds that contemporary epistemic malaise originates not from citizens' indifference to truth but from a breakdown of trust in the institutions that form the backbone of liberal democracies' epistemic infrastructure, including science, government, and the press (44, 57). This is a valuable reorientation, building directly on Contessa's earlier work developing what he calls a socio-epistemic infrastructure approach to public trust in science (Contessa 2021). Yet the concept of post-trust is, oddly, one of the thinner parts of the book.

Despite appearing in the subtitle and being announced as Contessa's most ambitious fourth goal (2), the concept is introduced on page 44, disappears across the sustained middle of the argument, and briefly resurfaces at the section's conclusion without having been substantially elaborated in between. That the concept receives so little sustained development may reflect Contessa's failure to engage with the scholarly literature in which the term has been most rigorously developed. In the absence of such engagement, the book does little more than gesture at the concept its subtitle announces.

Most notably, Ward Jones (2023), whose work offers arguably the most philosophically careful articulation of post-trust as a political-epistemological concept, goes unmentioned. Although Jones did not coin the term, which was already circulating in journalistic and sociological discussions of declining institutional confidence, he builds on testimony and trust scholarship to develop post-trust as an explicit philosophical alternative to the post-truth diagnosis. On Jones's account, public epistemic failure is relocated from individual belief-formation to the structure of testimonial relations and their breakdown.

Seen against this background, Contessa's deflationary analysis of science denial supplies what Jones's post-trust diagnosis leaves programmatic. Jones's account of how trust breaks down between communities and institutions is substantively and philosophically rich, but he offers relatively little guidance on the specific epistemic states that arise when individual agents navigate a post-trust environment, or the categories by which those states are subsequently misidentified. Contessa fills this gap with considerable precision. Where Jones operates at the level of social diagnosis, Contessa operates at the level of epistemic taxonomy, showing exactly how the category of science denial obscures the heterogeneity of responses that degraded trust produces in individual believers. Together, they converge on the claim that the dominant response to public resistance to science—one that emphasizes education, communication, and the correction of individual cognitive bias—is not merely inadequate but structurally misconceived, because it targets the symptom rather than the epistemic infrastructure that produces it.

Structural Epistemology

It is worth situating Contessa's analysis within the broader structural epistemology literature with which it shares clear affinities. Recent structural approaches relocate epistemic failure from individual cognition to epistemic infrastructure, emphasizing how epistemic trust, embedded in structures of recognition and power, shapes belief independently of individual rational capacities (Narita 2024), the causal priority of social and institutional organization over individual doxastic failure (Sertler 2022; 2023), and the role of background injustice in shaping moral responsibility for epistemic wrongdoing (Jaggar and Tobin 2024). Like these approaches, Contessa rejects explanations that treat public resistance to science as primarily a matter of individual irrationality or character defect. Yet his contribution is distinctive.

Where much of this literature focuses on how unjust structures distort credibility assessments, marginalize knowers, or undermine justificatory practices, Contessa targets the diagnostic categories through which epistemic dysfunction is identified in the first place. His analysis suggests that even structurally informed accounts risk reintroducing misplaced epistemic blame if they rely uncritically on categories, such as science denial, that collapse the heterogeneity of epistemic states produced by degraded trust and information environments.

What remains underspecified in this emerging framework, however, even when Jones and Contessa are read together, is the explanatory route by which structurally degraded trust relations reliably generate widespread false or non-compliant belief among otherwise epistemically conscientious agents. Jones is explicit that his project is primarily diagnostic and normative rather than explanatory, and Contessa, for all his taxonomic precision, largely brackets detailed accounts of how epistemic infrastructures come to misfire at scale. It is at this juncture that Neil Levy's work on epistemic environments becomes particularly illuminating.

Levy's central claim, that belief-formation in complex domains is overwhelmingly testimonial and therefore structurally dependent on cues of credibility and trustworthiness, fits naturally with Contessa's insistence that most alleged science deniers are not motivated reasoners or epistemically vicious actors. On Levy's account, agents typically respect epistemic norms by deferring to sources they have reason to trust on the basis of available social cues. When those cues are polluted, distorted, or strategically mimicked through disinformation campaigns, manufactured dissent, or algorithmic amplification, rational trust predictably misfires. What results is not a collapse of concern for truth, but a mismatch between what Levy terms *subjective evidence*, meaning what counts as evidence for the agent given their informational position, and the testimony of genuinely reliable epistemic authorities. Epistemically conscientious agents arrive at conclusions that diverge from scientific consensus not because they are irrational, but because the environment in which they form beliefs has been systematically corrupted.

Levy thus provides an explanatory bridge between Jones's normative diagnosis and Contessa's taxonomic critique. Where Jones shows why the post-truth framing misdescribes contemporary epistemic failure, and Contessa shows why the category of science denial

obscures the relevant distinctions, Levy explains how structurally compromised epistemic environments generate precisely the kinds of sincere, misinformed, and prudential responses that counter-deniers mistakenly subsume under a single label. The three projects interlock. One cannot adequately diagnose the problem without Jones's post-trust reframing, accurately categorize its manifestations without Contessa's taxonomy, or explain its systematic character without Levy's account of how rational agents are predictably misled by polluted epistemic environments. Read together, they amount to a division of philosophical labour in the service of a shared structural epistemological thesis, namely that contemporary epistemic dysfunction is not primarily a failure of individual rationality or concern for truth, but a consequence of systematically compromised social conditions for trustworthy testimony.

Understanding Epistemic Breakdowns

An admirable feature of Contessa's method is his refusal to follow the well-worn path from explanation to condemnation that characterizes much scholarly and policy-oriented discussion of public resistance to science, including and especially work by so-called counter-deniers. In discussions of science denial and anti-science movements, diagnostic categories are often treated as vehicles for moral appraisal, with epistemic error taken as evidence of epistemic vice. Contessa resists this slide, and that resistance is methodologically significant. By insisting on careful diagnostic distinctions rather than evaluative shortcuts, he shows how explanatory frameworks can themselves carry normative and political consequences.

Science Denial ultimately succeeds not by offering yet another explanation for why people reject scientific claims, but by showing how much explanatory and normative work the category of *science denial* is mistakenly asked to do. By disentangling motivated non-belief from misinformed trust, prudential non-compliance, and strategic contestation, Contessa demonstrates that contemporary epistemic breakdowns are better understood as products of structurally degraded trust relations than as failures of individual rationality or concern for truth. Read alongside Jones's post-trust diagnosis and Levy's account of epistemic environments, his analysis points toward a structural epistemology that is both more accurate and more responsible, one that resists reflexive epistemic blame and attends instead to the institutional and social conditions under which belief is formed. In insisting on conceptual restraint where the literature has often favoured denunciation, and in modelling a form of diagnostic humility that is itself a philosophical contribution, Contessa offers an approach that is at once analytically rigorous and politically attuned.

References

- Contessa, Gabriele. 2025. *Science Denial: Post-Truth of Post-Trust?* Cambridge University Press.
- Contessa, Gabriele. 2021. "It Takes a Village: Trust, Social Epistemic Practices, and the Epistemology of Science Communication." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 89: 59–68.
- Jaggar, Alison M. and Theresa W. Tobin. 2024. "Moral Justification and Structural Epistemic Injustice." In *What Is Structural Injustice?*, edited by Jude Browne and Maeve McKeown, 168–186. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Jones, Ward E. 2023. “Post-Trust, Not Post-Truth.” *Critical Review* 35 (1–2): 63–93.
- Levy, Neil. 2023. “It’s Our Epistemic Environment, Not Our Attitude Toward Truth, That Matters.” *Critical Review* 35 (1–2): 94–111.
- Narita, Hiroki. 2024. “Recognition, Power, and Trust: An Epistemic Structural Account of Ideological Recognition.” *Constellations* 31 (3): 428–443.
- Sertler, Ezgi. 2022. “Epistemic Dependence and Oppression: A Telling Relationship.” *Episteme* 19 (3): 394–408.
- Sertler, Ezgi. 2023. “Notes from a Structural Epistemologist.” *Hypatia* 38 (4): 839–848.