

On Chum and Chumps

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Abstract

Public discourse is often afflicted by what I call *chum*. “Chum” refers to easily repeatable considerations put forth as reason to doubt some important fact, that superficially appears to be evidence against believing that fact, but that would not count as evidence for a reasonably well informed subject. I argue that we have a positive epistemic obligation to sustain beliefs in the face of chum, because chum can spread in a way that has harmful effects that go beyond the usual harmful effects arising from other types of misleading putative evidence. In particular, people who are brought to doubt by chum, and who cite it in response to attempts to spread awareness of the fact in dispute, raise the practical cost of spreading that awareness and may discourage people from doing so. Many pernicious rhetorical devices, such as dogwhistles, figleaves, and implausibly deniable insinuations, can be seen as ways of creating chum.

The amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than that needed to produce it. — Brandolini's law¹

1. Introduction

Before the 2024 United States Presidential election, the Heritage Foundation put out a plan called Project 2025. The plan included many radical proposals, such as replacing non-political federal workers with loyalists to the President (Democracy Forward 2024), politicizing the Department of Justice to serve the President's ideological agenda (May 2024), eliminating the Department of Education (Stanford 2024), and using the Comstock Act to ban common abortion medications such as mifepristone (Rinkunas 2025). Its authors included officials from Donald Trump's first administration, and at one point it was advised by the legal foundation founded by Trump's chief policy advisor Stephen Miller (Kanno-Youngs and Green 2024). Yet Trump claimed that Project 2025, which polled poorly, did not reflect his goals for a second term. He said he had "nothing to do with" it, that he was "not going to read it," and that some of its goals were "absolutely ridiculous" (Kanno-Youngs and Green 2024).

As it turned out, Project 2025 was "the independently produced right-wing agenda that Mr. Trump spent much of last year's campaign distancing himself from, and much of his first few months back in power executing" (Goldmacher 2025). Trump appointed some of its authors to prominent administration roles and immediately took steps to

¹ From a tweet by Alberto Brandolini: <https://archive.ph/j3qTh>

implement many of those radical proposals (Quinn 2025). Even if some of Trump's about Project 2025 were technically true – surely he did not read it – those who doubted that he would implement its plans were not vindicated.

And many did doubt it, or acted as though they did. *Politifact* wrote that “[t]he effort is not Trump’s Project 2025,” evincing for instance Trump’s claim that he would not ban the abortion drug mifepristone (Jacobson et al. 2024) – which his administration has indeed attempted to ban (Moniuszko 2025; Rinkunas 2025). A later *Politifact* article said that “Harris and her presidential campaign have at times gone too far in describing what the project calls for and how closely the plans overlap with Trump’s campaign” even as it acknowledged that at least 140 former Trump officials had helped write it (Putterman 2024). *Forbes Magazine* uncritically reprinted Trump’s disavowals (Gleeson 2024). One think tank communications director later claimed that multiple media outlets refused to report on Project 2025’s effects on energy policy, because of Trump’s disavowals.²

These doubts were unjustified even at the time. There was plenty of evidence that Trump, if elected, would implement much of Project 2025. The report’s authors came from Trump’s past administration, and they formed much of the pool that he was likely to draw on for future staffing. Nor should his disavowals have been taken at face value or anything close. To an extent possibly unprecedented in American political history,

² Post by Silvio Marcacci (<https://archive.ph/eNbzy>): “In October 2024, multiple top-tier media outlets told me their editors wouldn’t approve stories on our Project 2025 modeling because Trump disavowed the plan.”

Trump makes outlandish claims and lies when it serves his purposes.³ Anyone familiar with the evidence about Project 2025 should have believed that he would attempt to implement it.

Yet the doubters had something to point to. Even if Trump's disavowals were not evidence that he would not implement Project 2025, they looked like evidence. Furthermore, it took some work to make the connections between Trump and Project 2025, because Project 2025 was issued by the Heritage Foundation rather than Trump's official campaign. Anyone who doubted that Trump would implement Project 2025, or who wanted to spread doubt, could easily cite his disavowals and the arms-length distance. Given the total evidence concerning Project 2025, these considerations did not provide genuine evidence that Trump would not implement it; but they provided a pretext for doubt, or for spreading doubt.

These considerations are one example of what I will call *chum*. In the face of evidence for some important proposition, chum provides something that may look like evidence, and is easy to repeat as if it were evidence, but is not evidence. Chum may lead people into unwarranted doubt. I will argue that it is particularly important to maintain belief in the face of chum. When chum tips someone into doubt or disbelief, not only do their beliefs suffer, but their doubts are likely to spread and make it difficult

³ Daniel Dale, CNN's lead fact-checker, said after a 2020 presidential debate: "[Trump] is a serial liar who keeps serially lying" and "Trump is an unprecedented liar in the Oval Office" (<https://archive.ph/aQydA>).

for those who are trying to spread the truth. Withholding judgment in the face of chum is not harmless.

2. *What Is Chum?*

To define chum more precisely:

Chum is a consideration that

(i) is easily repeatable

(ii) is put forth as evidence for doubting some significant public proposition

(iii) may appear to many people to be evidence for doubt or disbelief in the proposition

(iv) when taken as part of a substantial body of available evidence, is not evidence for that doubt or disbelief.

In the rest of the section, I will explain this definition, elaborating and clarifying its terms.

By a *significant proposition*, I mean a proposition that is important to the public or to some group of people. Editing a band's Wikipedia entry to include your friend as a tin whistle player may mislead people in an easily repeatable way, but it will not be chum because it is about something insignificant. Significance need not be universal, however. A particular person's misconduct may be important within their discipline, organization, or social circle, but not to the wider public. Then propositions about the misconduct will be significant within the group but not outside it, and it will be possible

to spread chum for people in that group. (Where necessary, the rest of my discussion should be taken as restricted to people in the group for which the proposition is important.)

By a *public* proposition, I mean one that is or will be under consideration by many people in the relevant group. A secret that has not come out is not a public proposition. Few people believe it, disbelieve it, or doubt it. Spreading chum about it would be counterproductive in raising doubts about it, unless the spreader expects the secret to come out soon. Even if the chum left people in doubt about the secret, for someone who wants to keep the secret it would be worse for them to suspend judgment about it than not to think about it at all.

Many different kinds of consideration can serve as chum. In the Project 2025 case, the considerations used to raise doubt included speech acts, such as Trump's disavowals; and organizational facts, such as the fact that Project 2025 was not an official project of Trump's campaign. The non-explicitness of a speech act can provide a way to spread chum about the act, as when Senator James Risch insisted that Trump's telling James Comey "I hope you can let this go" was not a way of directing Comey to drop a criminal investigation, because Trump's words literally expressed a hope rather than a directive (Camp 2022, p. 241). What is important is that the act of pointing to this consideration must be easy to perform and for others to repeat. If your philosophical adversary makes a bad argument for a false conclusion about some important matter, it is not likely to be chum, because it will take years of study for anyone to understand the argument and be fooled by it. Only if it gets written up in some repeatable form, such as

a popular article saying “Prominent philosopher defends morality of killing civilians,” will it provide chum. I will use “chum” for the consideration and “spreading chum” for speech acts in which the chum is used to spread disbelief or doubt.

Chum has a complicated relation to evidence. I take it that whether a consideration provides evidence to a person depends on the totality of that person’s evidence.⁴ My sight of a teapot would not provide me with evidence that the teapot is there if the rest of my evidence indicated that I were wearing virtual reality goggles. Thus a piece of chum may provide true evidence for doubt for some people but not others. Someone who knew nothing of Trump’s lying, and who heard only that Project 2025 was not a project of his campaign and that he disavowed it, would get genuine evidence to doubt that Trump would carry out Project 2025; for someone with more information, hearing this would provide no evidence.

When chum is not evidence, it can be a misleading appearance of evidence. Trump’s disavowals looked like evidence for doubt because disavowals are usually evidence for doubt. Few people’s words are as worthless as Trump’s. Nevertheless, people who were familiar with Trump’s track record should not have taken the disavowals as evidence. More so people who were familiar with the ties between Trump and the Project 2025 authors. Hence clause (iv) concerning a “substantial body of available evidence.” For chum to be chum, there must be enough evidence about the significant public fact in circulation that many people will be in a position to see that the chum is not evidence

⁴ I do not intend a particularly strong commitment to this conception of evidence; my arguments should be rephrasable in terms of different conceptions.

against it, if they evaluate it correctly. Its superficial appeal will be defeated by this body of evidence. A gun at a murder scene with an innocent person's fingerprints on it is genuinely misleading evidence rather than chum, because it is evidence of that person's guilt even for people who are familiar with the rest of the evidence. To count as chum, a consideration must both have the appearance of evidence and be something that many people are in position to see is not evidence, as long as they evaluate it properly against the rest of their evidence.

3. When Doubt Harms

In the following sections, I will argue that spreading chum is harmful and that we have a particular obligation to resist it, an even stronger obligation than we have to resist misleading putative evidence in general. Furthermore, to be harmful chum does not have to spread disbelief in significant public truths; it is enough for it to spread doubt in them. Even if someone didn't believe that Trump *wouldn't* execute Project 2025, it would be harmful if they doubted that he would. That will mean that we have a positive obligation to maintain belief in the face of chum, so long as we have an obligation to avoid doubts that can lead to harm.

In this section, I will step back from chum for the moment, in order to argue that we do have an obligation to avoid doubts that can lead to harm. I will argue for a relatively narrow conception of positive epistemic obligation, the obligation to believe rather than doubt. As the subsequent sections show, even this narrow conception will be enough to ground an obligation not to fall for chum.

Ichikawa puts forward a broad account of positive epistemic obligation, which I call the *Strong Theoretical Principle*:

(STP) If one considers the question whether P, and has sufficient evidence for P, one ought to believe that P (Ichikawa 2024, p. 83).

STP is arguably too strong. Consider the question of whether there are less than twenty words in that formulation of STP, beginning with “If” and ending with “P.” Your visual evidence is enough to settle that question, and you’re now considering it, but it seems unlikely that (before I tell you the answer) you are obligated to form the belief that there are less than twenty words in the formulation. It’s just not important for you to count the words in that sentence.

We might instead adopt the *Weak Theoretical Principle*:

(WTP) If one considers the question whether P, has sufficient evidence for P, and is aware that it is important whether P is true, one ought to believe P.

WTP will apply to significant public propositions whenever they are considered by someone for whom they are significant, because by definition the significant proposition is important to them. Yet WTP still seems to be too strong. It may be important whether P is true without being important whether someone believes it at a certain time. Suppose that I am following the county vote totals as they are reported for an important election. At some point, the totals of the counties that have reported may give me sufficient evidence to justify belief that one candidate will win, which I would realize if I did some number crunching. Even though it is important that this candidate

will win, I am not obliged to crunch the numbers and form the justified belief that they will win. Nothing hangs on my coming to that belief as soon as the evidence becomes available, as opposed to waiting for the official count to finish. Even if I come to an early justified belief about which candidate will win, I cannot do anything about it.

The sufficient condition for positive epistemic obligation is not whether the proposition is important, but whether the belief is important. Hence the *Practical Principle* (not intended as a *necessary* condition on positive epistemic obligation):

(PP) If one considers the question whether P, has sufficient evidence for P, and has evidence that failing to form a justified belief that P would cause significant harm through epistemic mechanisms, one ought to believe P.

“Through epistemic mechanisms” means that the failure to believe causes harm specifically because it is a failure to believe a proposition for which one has sufficient evidence. The harm can be prevented by coming to believe P for the right kind of reason.⁵ If a fanatic threatens to murder six hostages unless you believe that the formulation of STP has fewer than twenty words, then PP does not give you an obligation to come to that belief, even if your evidence would support it. Any obligation to believe is purely pragmatic. On the other hand, if the fanatic threatens to kill the hostages unless you come to the best justified belief about the number of words in the formulation, PP does oblige you to evaluate that evidence and come to that belief. The word count of STP has become a significant question, and you will come to your belief

⁵ See Fritz (2020) and Singh (2021) on wrong-kind-of-reasons objections in epistemology.

for the right kind of reason, even if your reasons for engaging in the inquiry are pragmatic.

PP is thus the kind of principle that Littlejohn and Finlay envision for epistemic obligation, on which “the evidence determines which beliefs about some matter, if any, would be rational and... additional non-epistemic reasons transmitted by potentially non-epistemic sources ‘turn’ a merely kosher belief into one that we ought to have” [this volume, p. xxx]. It allows for pragmatic and moral encroachment on our epistemic obligations, but not in a way that forces belief for the wrong kind of reason.⁶

One might worry that it is not failure to form a justified belief that causes harm, but action or lack of action that arises from that lack of belief. If an unwarranted doubt doesn’t affect the doubter’s actions, and the doubter doesn’t spread it, then the only harm will be to the doubter’s own epistemic state. In response, the point applies equally to belief as to lack of belief. If an unwarranted belief does not affect the believer’s actions, and the believer doesn’t spread it, then the only harm done is to the believer’s epistemic state. Hence this objection would motivate skepticism about negative epistemic norms as well as skepticism about positive epistemic norms, unless unwarranted belief causes harms that unwarranted doubts do not.

One might think that unwarranted beliefs *are* harmful in ways that unwarranted doubts are not, because belief motivates action and doubt does not. For instance,

⁶ See Ichikawa (2024), chapter 4 for more discussion of pragmatic and moral encroachment on positive epistemic norms; and Fritz (2020) on how theories of moderate moral encroachment in epistemology yield reasons of the right kind.

Ichikawa identifies one reason for negative epistemic bias as practical caution, that skepticism “tends to push against the idea that there is reason to do things” (2024, p. 29). Against this, I argue that doubt can motivate and even oblige action. Once I had a chair in my office that I was not sure would support anyone’s weight. I did not believe that it would collapse if someone sat in it, nor did I believe that it wouldn’t; I actively suspended judgment.⁷ If someone had tried to sit in it, I would have been obligated to warn them not to, saying “I’m not sure it’s safe.” It would have been wrong for me to fail to stop someone from sitting in the chair just because I did not positively believe that it was unsafe to sit in.⁸

More germane for our discussion of chum, sometimes when we have doubts we are obliged to voice them. Consider the following scenario: The graduate student Scarlett has accused Professor Plum of harassing her. *Higher Education Insider* has written a story about the accusations that appears to provide evidence that Scarlett’s accusations are false. However, I have looked closely into the article and have found evidence that it might not be reliable, just to the point where I am justified neither in believing that Plum did not harass Scarlett or in believing that he did. Some colleagues of mine are considering appointing Plum to a position in which he would advise women students.

⁷ Suspending judgment is not merely lacking belief either way. See Friedman (2013).

⁸ Ichikawa [this volume] argues that, in cases like this, what motivates action is not the doubt but the positive reasons that give rise to the doubt. So I would have been motivated to speak up, not by my doubts, but by my belief that my colleagues had told me that the chair might be unsafe as they moved it from the common area into my office. In response, I note that it is natural to cite my doubt rather than my evidence as my reason for speaking up. Furthermore, the doubt should lead me to speak up regardless of its grounds, and the particular grounds would not have led me to speak up if they had not grounded doubt. In my view, this makes it plausible that the doubt is what provides the reason for action.

As far as the chair goes, eventually I put a pile of papers on it to discourage anyone from trying to sit there.

One says to another, in my presence, “I hear Scarlett’s accusations have been discredited.”

Surely I am obliged to speak up and share my doubts in the article’s reliability. Not speaking up would risk that Plum is guilty and will harass women in his new position. It will not be obligatory in every circumstance to speak up when you have doubts about something under discussion, for the same reason that it is not always obligatory to share your beliefs. But there are circumstances, like this one, in which voicing your doubts is obligatory.

So doubt can make action obligatory. Similarly, doubt can motivate action or speech; people may see what their doubt obliges them to do and do it. The doubts cannot be cabined off from the actions they motivate, any more than beliefs can be cabined off from the actions they motivate. If a doubt is unwarranted, the actions it motivates may be harmful; as can any omissions it motivates. According to PP, we will have an obligation to come to a justified belief when doubting that belief would be harmful. I will argue that this means that we often have a particular obligation not to let chum deter us from a justifiable belief. If we do not resist chum, it spreads easily and multiplies its epistemic harms.

4. Who Spreads Chum, and How

Chum, I claim, is particularly harmful because of how easily it spreads. If all it did were to keep the people who fall for it from justified beliefs, it would be no different from other kinds of misleading evidence or putative evidence. Chum goes beyond other

misleaders in the way it multiplies beyond the person who falls for it and makes it harder for other people to spread the truth about a significant public proposition. To see how this works, let's run through several scenarios and consider the types of role different people play in them.

(Scenario 1) Eva wants to spread awareness that Trump is likely to implement some Project 2025 policy – say, banning mifepristone. She posts on social media that Project 2025 reveals Trump's plan to ban mifepristone. Chet is familiar with the evidence of Trump's ties to Project 2025 and the unreliability of his disavowals. Nevertheless, he doubts that Project 2025 is Trump's agenda. He responds to Eva, "Trump might not do this; he disavowed Project 2025." Norma, who does not follow politics very closely, reads the exchange. She concludes that she ought to suspend judgment over whether Trump plans to ban mifepristone.

Eva is what I'll call an *evangelist*, someone who has sufficient evidence to support belief in a controversial fact, believes it based on that fact, and tries to spread awareness of it.

Norma is what I'll call a *normie*, someone who does not have a substantial body of evidence (as defined in §2) about the significant public proposition. The normie relies on what other people say for their beliefs about the significant public proposition. The normie usually is not negligent in not having gathered this evidence for herself. We often must rely on other's testimony; no one can gather a substantial body of evidence on every significant question, and it is healthy not to try.

Chet is what I'll call a *chump*. A chump has access to a substantial body of evidence that justifies belief in a significant public proposition, but doubts it anyway, due to chum; and furthermore, voices those doubts when the proposition is discussed. Assuming the chump is aware that the proposition is significant, the chump is violating PP. They have enough evidence to justify belief and to realize that the chum is not really evidence against the significant public proposition. As I will argue, their doubts are foreseeably likely to cause harm by motivating them to spread these doubts and suppress spread of the truth.

(Scenario 2) As before, Eva posts that Project 2025 reveals that Trump plans to ban mifepristone. Norbert has seen some limited misleading evidence about Project 2025, which as it happens justifies him in doubting what Eva says (even when combined with the evidence supplied by Eva's post). Norbert voices his doubts. Again, Norma reads the exchange and suspends judgment.

Norbert, like Norma, is a normie. Norbert does not have a reasonable body of evidence concerning Project 2025; if he had, it would not justify him in doubting. Norbert does not violate any epistemic obligations, but is in an unfortunate epistemic position.

(Scenario 3) Eva posts as in (1) and (2). Shermy also is familiar with the evidence about Project 2025 and believes that it expresses Trump's plans. However, Shermy wants to help Trump, so he dishonestly brings up Trump's disavowals as grounds for doubt. Norma again reads the exchange and suspends judgment.

Shermy is what I call a *shill*, who has the reasonable body of evidence and the significant public belief, but who chooses to spread doubt anyway. Shills violate no epistemic obligations. The obligation they violate is the practical obligation to be honest.

(Scenario 4) Eva posts as in (1)-(3). Maria, like Chet, has unwarranted doubts; but unlike Chet, she doesn't say anything. Norma reads and believes Eva's post.

Maria is what I call a *mark*, someone who doubts a significant public proposition even though they have a reasonable body of evidence that justifies belief in it, but who does not voice those doubts. Sometimes, even by their own lights, it is reasonable for the mark not to say anything. (You don't always have to speak up when you think someone is wrong on the internet.) Even if it is a situation where voicing justified doubts would have been obligatory, the mark may have avoided further harm by negligently failing to voice their unwarranted doubts. But in some cases, a mark's silence can cause harm.

(Scenario 5) Marty is a reporter covering the presidential campaign. Marty comes into possession of the evidence about Project 2025, but she has unwarranted doubts about it anyway. Because of her doubts, Marty doesn't write anything about Project 2025. When Eva posts about Project 2025, Norma thinks, "That sounds bad, but if it were true, wouldn't I have heard something about it from the reporters covering the campaign?" Norma thus doubts Eva's story.

Marty is a mark in that she never voices her unwarranted doubts. Nevertheless, her doubts wind up suppressing belief. Beyond the potential effect on Norma described in

(5), there will likely be people who would have heard about Project 2025 if Marty had reported on it, but who never do. Others may wind up with weaker evidence about it than if Marty had reported on it. So Marty's doubts cause harm beyond her own epistemic state, and she runs afoul of PP.

Admittedly, (5) is not a scenario where Marty causes harm by spreading chum. That may happen when someone actively spreads chum in advance.

(Scenario 6) Ulysses is in possession of the evidence about Trump and Project 2025, but he has unwarranted doubts about it anyway. Ulysses writes a post (or article) about how we can't be sure Project 2025 expresses Trump's agenda, citing Trump's disavowals. Later Eva makes the same post as before. Norma has read Ulysses's original post, so when she sees Eva's post she suspends judgment.

Ulysses is what I call a *useful fool*. Like chumps, useful fools doubt a significant public proposition that they have enough evidence to believe. Unlike chumps, useful fools voice doubt on their own initiative rather than as a response to an evangelist.

(Scenario 7) Shulamith possesses the evidence about Project 2025 and believes that it expresses Trump's plans. Nevertheless, wanting to help Trump, she preemptively raises doubts about Trump's intentions. As in (6), Norma sees a post of Eva's after having read Shulamith's post; having seen both posts, Norma suspends judgment.

Shulamith is a shill like Shermy, the difference being that she spreads the chum on her own initiative instead of in reaction to someone else's utterance. Again, Shulamith's sins are practical rather than epistemic. Her beliefs are right, her actions are not.

As seen in these scenarios, some of the ways that chum spreads doubt are shared with other misleading considerations. Testimony often launders a speaker's misleading pseudo-evidence into genuine misleading evidence for the hearer, if the hearer is in no position to know that the speaker is misevaluating the evidence. Norma can fall victim to this in most of these scenarios; since she relies on others' testimony for her evidence, she is misled when some of her sources are chumps, useful fools, or shills.

In other cases, chum's spreadability makes it particularly likely to mislead. Chumps and their ilk not only provide misleading evidence to their direct audiences, but make it easier for others in the epistemic ecosystem to raise doubts. In scenarios (1) and (6), the chump or useful fool gives the normie misleading evidence; such a normie would be justified in raising their own doubts another time, as in scenario (2). Even when the person raising doubts is not justified in doing so, it will be easier to do so when someone else has given them something to repeat that sounds like evidence. An article that takes Trump's disavowals at face value makes it easier for a chump with unjustified doubts to voice those doubts, because they can cite the article rather than expressing the chum in their own words. As in scenarios (5) through (7), the problem is particularly acute when the spreader of chum is in a position where they should be authoritative on the subject. A journalist who expresses unwarranted doubts about a

significant public proposition provides a particularly easy thing for others to cite and spread, often literally packaged ready-made with a button to automatically share it.⁹

Chum can spread even when the doubts are not sincere on either side, or both. A useful fool might provide chum that a shill can repeat, even as the shill knows that the chum isn't really reason for doubt; a chump might be convinced by chum presented by a shill; or a shill may spread the work of another shill, knowingly or not. Yet chum has more ways to spread the more it causes sincere doubt, even when that doubt is irrational.

Besides spreading doubt, chum can suppress the truth by the effect it has on those who try to spread it. Suppose, in scenarios (1) through (3), that Eva has the chance to respond to the doubts that are raised: She sees the post, has the ability to respond to it, the social media algorithms (or other relevant distribution system) bring her response to Norma's attention, and her reply tips Norma's evidence back to belief in the significant public proposition. All is still not well. Eva has had to take the time and energy to rebut the chum. She has had to craft a convincing rebuttal to the superficially appealing consideration it provides. She now knows that the next time she tries to spread awareness of Trump's plans, she is likely to have to deal with the same chum again. She may not bother.¹⁰

⁹ Compare amplifier dogwhistles (Saul 2024, p. 57). Thanks to Sin yee Chan for pressing me on the notion that people with different social roles may have different epistemic responsibilities.

¹⁰ Compare Barney (writing as [Aristotle]) on trolling: "And this is how the troll generates strife. For what he indicates is known to be false or harmful or ignorant; but he does not say *that* thing, but rather something close. In this way he retains the possibility of denial" (Barney 2016, p. 193).

Chum's superficial plausibility means that it takes more work to refute it than to repeat it. It thus can create an effect like that Doston calls "testimonial smothering," in which speakers in an oppressed group truncate their testimony because their audience will unjustly fail to believe what they have to say (Dotson 2011, p. 244). Unlike smothering, the exhausting effect of chum applies beyond oppressed groups, to anyone who attempts to convey the significant public proposition. We might see chum as mimicking the effect of testimonial injustice; while epistemic oppressors do not need chum to be predisposed to doubt the testimony of an oppressed group, chum provides a quick way to doubt anyone. No doubt chum can also intersect with and reinforce testimonial injustice. A society that is already predisposed to dismiss women's concerns will more easily seize on any pretext to doubt the evidence about plans to ban abortion drugs or about sexual harassment.

Falling for chum thus does generally cause harm beyond the ordinary harm that comes from misevaluating evidence. Not only does the doubter lose a justified belief, but they make it harder to spread justified belief to others. In all these cases, chum may be even more effective if it goes beyond doubt to positive disbelief; having someone believe that Project 2025 did not represent Trump's plans might have been more effective for his goals than having them doubt that it did. But doubt alone is enough to cause harm. Under PP, we have a positive obligation to believe the significant public proposition when our evidence supports it, and even more so when chum is thrown up to cause doubt about it.

5. Forms of Chum

The concept of chum helps explain many rhetorical strategies for getting away with bad acts. Some forms of indirection allow a speaker or actor to do something that many people might condemn while providing a way to raise doubt about what they've done. Figleaves, dogwhistles, and insinuations all can be seen as facilitating chummy denials.

A figleaf is a scanty covering for anyone who thinks about what is beneath it. Saul defines a racial figleaf as follows (*mutatis mutandis* for norms other than norms against racism):

A racial figleaf F for an audience A and an utterance R is a bit of speech that blocks A from *correctly* concluding that either (a) R (the bit of speech) is racist; or (b) R *indicates* that the person who uttered R is racist. (Saul 2024, p. 90; italics in original)

For instance, when Trump said of immigrants from Mexico, "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume are good people" (quoted by Saul 2024, p. 71), the disclaimer about "good people" was a figleaf. The assertion that Mexican immigrants generically are rapists is viciously racist. Yet at least some Trump defenders cited the disclaimer as evidence that Trump had said nothing racist (Saul 2019, p. 105). The figleaf gave these defenders something to point to that looked like evidence against his racism, at least to some people. In other words, chum.

Different types of dogwhistle also provide chum. For instance, an overt code dogwhistle as defined by Saul is an utterance having more than one interpretation, one violating some widespread norm and one not, such that those who support the norm

are intended to take up the non-violating interpretation (Saul 2024, p. 57). Saul discusses the segregationist George Wallace's use of "states' rights," which may sound like an anodyne invocation of the different states' ability to set some of their own policies in the United States. Yet the phrase had historically been used to defend the southern states' policies of enforcing slavery and, later, segregation, and those who were attuned to this usage understood the phrase as signaling Wallace's support for segregation (Saul 2024, p. 37). Some of the people who did not pick up on the segregationist meaning may have genuinely been normies who had not been exposed to enough evidence to realize that "states' rights" meant the right to segregate. But doubtless others were chumps or useful fools, taking the possibility of a non-norm-violating interpretation to provide a "modicum of plausibility" (Saul 2024, p. 58) that the violating interpretation was not intended.¹¹ The existence of a non-norm-violating interpretation may look like evidence that the dogwhistle wasn't racist, even if the totality of evidence indicates that it was; and it is a consideration that is easily picked up and spread.

Covert effect dogwhistles, which intentionally raise norm-violating attitudes to salience without the hearer's being aware that they are doing so (Saul 2024, p. 51), also work in part by providing chum. Saul discusses a study showing that white Americans' racial resentment was activated when spending cuts were described as affecting "inner-city" Americans, more so than when they were described as affecting "African-

¹¹ Saul's use of this phrase concerns a different dogwhistle than Wallace's, but the principle is the same.

Americans” or “Americans” (Saul 2024, p. 49). The dogwhistle “inner-city” was effective because it did not make explicit that the subjects were meant to think of the cuts as primarily affecting African-Americans. This inexplicitness provides a misleading appearance of evidence against the dogwhistle’s racism; white subjects were picking up on the intention to target African-Americans, but the fact that the dogwhistle did not name African-Americans looked like evidence that it was not racist. The subjects thus made themselves marks for the dogwhistle.

The dogwhistle’s lack of mention of race could easily be repeated to raise doubt about anyone pointing out its racist subtext. Saul cites a case where Lee Atwater created a racist dogwhistle and, at the time, denied that it had a racist intent (Saul 2024, p. 58). Even if the denial was implausible, it was difficult to respond to because the dogwhistle did not explicitly mention race. Atwater was here acting as a shill – he knew full well that he intended to invoke race – but similar denials and doubts could be picked up by chumps or useful fools and would be equally difficult to refute. A dogwhistle’s function may not primarily be to provide chum; Saul argues that the dogwhistle subconsciously activates racial resentment (2024, p. 39), while Henderson and McCready (2019) argue that it signals the speaker’s ideological persona.¹² But the chum helps the speaker get away with the dogwhistle.

The creation of chum is even more important for what Weirich calls a *brazen dogwhistle*, which she defines as “a dogwhistle whose speaker either has no regard for

¹² See also Harris (2025), who argues that disinformation operates on sub-doxastic states, including but not limited to doubt.

concealing the nonexplicit norm violation from the outgroup or intends that outgroup members detect the nonexplicit norm violation” (Weirich 2025, p. 21). The brazen dogwhistle, Weirich argues, may among other things be a challenge (“just try to defy my statement”) or a display of authority (“look what I can get away with”) (Weirich 2025, pp. 19-20). In my framework, the speaker’s ability to get away with the dogwhistle, or the difficulty of defying it, comes from the extra effort that it takes to fight the chum created by the possibility of an innocent interpretation, which the dogwhistler’s defenders can point to in order to raise doubt (sincerely or not).

For instance, Weirich discusses Elon Musk’s Nazi salutes at Trump’s second inauguration (p. 21). Anyone who watched the video should have seen the straight-armed salutes for what they were. Yet because Musk did not explicitly describe them as Nazi salutes, there was a possibility of interpreting them as innocent waves to the crowd that just happened to look like Nazi salutes. Indeed, the Anti-Defamation League, a group founded to fight antisemitism, explained them away as “an awkward gesture” (Lapin 2025).¹³ The existence of the alternative interpretation gave Musk’s defenders an easily repeatable thing to cite in order to raise doubt about what he had done. We cannot know that Musk performed a blatant but unverballed Nazi salute with the intention that others would implausibly deny it, as a demonstration of what he could get away with; we can only know that if that was his intention, it succeeded.

¹³ In case one is inclined to give Musk the benefit of the doubt here, consider that when he reprogrammed the AI Grok to more accurately reflect his values, it repeatedly praised Adolf Hitler (Detrow 2025).

Insinuations also create a kind of chum that can allow the speaker to deny what they have insinuated. Camp analyzes insinuation as presenting a proposition that is not conveyed by the conventional meaning of the speaker's words, that the speaker intends to be recognized, and that the speaker is "prepared and able to coherently *deny*" if someone explicitly attributes that proposition to them (Camp 2018, pp. 44-45; quote from p. 45, emphasis in original). Where it is a significant public fact that the speaker has made the insinuation, the speaker's denial can create chum, by providing an easily repeatable consideration that seems to provide evidence that the speaker did not mean to insinuate what they did. The indirection even allows others to make the denial on the original speaker's behalf. Camp discusses a case where Trump told then-FBI director James Comey "I hope you can let this go" about a criminal investigation. Because Trump had not *explicitly* ordered Comey to drop the investigation, U.S. Senator James Risch insisted to Comey that Trump had not directed him to drop the investigation, even though Comey (as any reasonable person would) took Trump's words as an attempt to direct him to drop it (Camp 2022, p. 241). Because the conventional meaning of Trump's words, taken entirely literally, amounted to an expression of his feelings, there was an easily repeatable way to raise doubts by saying "you may have taken it as a direction, but that's not what he said" (p. 241). The sense in which the insinuation can be denied is not that a denial would be plausible, but that it can cause doubts in the way that chum would.¹⁴

¹⁴ Here I am opposing the account of deniability given by Dinges and Zakkou (2023). Dinges and Zakkou would classify this case as involving untouchability rather than deniability, because the denial

I have not exhaustively classified the forms of chum. Indeed, the Project 2025 example discussed previously is not easily classified as a figleaf, dogwhistle, or insinuation. Figleaves, dogwhistles, and insinuations all involve speech or action that is open to more than one interpretation; the ambiguity in Project 2025 concerned not what it put forth, but whether it expressed Trump's agenda. Nevertheless, all these cases have in common the structure of chum, that they provide some easily repeatable consideration that some may improperly take as reason to doubt something significant, which makes it particularly difficult and exhausting to spread the truth.

6. What Is To Be Done?

I have argued that we have an epistemic obligation not to fall for chum. When we have enough evidence to believe a significant public proposition, we should believe it, and it is especially important to believe it in the face of some tempting consideration that seems to cast doubt on it but does not. Doubting on the basis of chum will spread the chum and make it difficult and exhausting to spread the truth. I have no general prescription for how to avoid falling for chum; sometimes a consideration that looks like reason for doubt really is reason for doubt. One must know how to properly evaluate the evidence. But it is important that failing to believe on the basis of adequate evidence can be as harmful as believing on inadequate evidence.

does not destroy the hearer's knowledge but raises the practical costs of acting on it. Terminology aside, I observe that with chum the practical costs are raised in a distinctively epistemic way: it becomes more difficult and exhausting to spread knowledge of the insinuation because other people improperly take the denial as evidence for doubt.

It is particularly important for journalists to have the courage of their evidence. Journalists properly hold themselves to higher evidential standards than ordinary people; in order to report out a story, a journalist properly requires sourcing that goes beyond the level of evidence that would justify a layperson in believing that story. But a journalist who has solid evidence for some significant proposition, and who nevertheless reports as if there is doubt about it, will become an authoritative useful fool. They can do considerable harm by preventing the spread of the truth.

Beyond not falling for chum as individuals, we must fight its pernicious effects. One way fight it is simply to be aware of its exhausting effects. As Weirich argues, we should abandon the “principle of the benefit of the doubt” (Weirich 2025, p. 22) that favors the most innocent construction of someone’s words. When people put forth chum, it can be a trap to engage with them as if their doubts are supported by the evidence. It can be exhausting to attempt to deal with pseudo-evidence, and it need not be rational to ignore it. This can be true even if the doubts are sincere; shills, chumps, and useful fools all spread chum in the same way.

Not to say that it is always unwise to engage with chum. Sometimes refuting chum is necessary to convince the normies in the conversation. You may even convince the person who is putting it forth. It is just that the extra effort will not always be worth it. There is a tradeoff between the possibility of persuading others and the costs of wearing yourself down.

More collectively, we can try to lower the costs of fighting chum. One way might be to create counter-chum: An easily repeatable consideration that provides real evidence

that undermines the superficial plausibility of the chum. If one evangelist creates a story that lays out the evidence, it will make it easier for other evangelists, who can cite the story rather than going through the evidence themselves. Perhaps this is to say that it would help to have fact-checkers who took seriously the task of weighing evidence and stating the conclusion that it supported, rather than the excessive caution of the sites that repeated Trump's disavowals as if they meant anything.

There is no magic bullet, however. It is easier to craft superficially plausible apparent evidence than it is to refute it, because refuting it requires that someone take enough care to go through the real evidence. We can do our best to avoid falling for chum, but we will still have to deal with the fallout from it.¹⁵

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