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Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event

Clientelism, Bounded Freedom, and Fiduciary Scaffolding

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At the edge of knowledge, where unease is felt most keenly, freedom begins.

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Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics. Our work integrates legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies for public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

This paper reinterprets cognitive dissonance as an epistemic event: the affective signal of finitude and the edge of knowledge. Drawing on Schopenhauer, phenomenology, and social psychology, it argues that dissonance is not anomaly but structure. Ordinarily, it collapses into conformity, obedience, or epistemic clientelism, producing only illusory freedom. Yet when endured, dissonance can yield bounded freedom, fragile in isolation but sustainable through fiduciary scaffolds — institutional duties of candour, accountability, and openness that dignify dependence.

The argument develops across domains. In academia, corporations, journalism, and politics, dissonance is typically pacified through uniformity, yet fiduciary scaffolds can reorient institutions to preserve contradiction. At the frontier — artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and climate governance — the stakes are existential. Here the lure of coherence magnifies fragility, while survival requires epistemic constitutions: frameworks that bind epistemic authorities to sustain plurality under duty.

The conclusion is philosophical. Freedom is bounded, dependence dignified, and survival itself a fiduciary responsibility. Plurality, though fragile, is the only ground of resilience. At the edge of knowledge, where unease is felt most keenly, freedom begins.

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Working Paper Status

This is a working paper circulated for discussion and comment. It represents ongoing research and is intended to stimulate debate. Readers are welcome to cite it, but please note that revisions are likely as the material is incorporated into the book project *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*.

Keywords

Cognitive dissonance, Epistemic clientelism, Fiduciary-epistemic governance, Bounded freedom, Solitude and finitude, Epistemic injustice, Epistemic pluralism, Epistemic constitutions, Artificial intelligence, Biotechnology, Climate governance, Fragility and resilience, Knowledge and institutions

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1. Introduction

Cognitive dissonance is one of the most cited phenomena in psychology. Since Leon Festinger's pioneering work in 1957, it has been defined as the discomfort of holding contradictory cognitions or acting against one's beliefs.[1] The concept has generated an immense empirical literature, showing how people seek relief from contradiction by rationalising behaviour, adjusting beliefs, or conforming to group opinion.[2] And yet, despite its influence, cognitive dissonance is still commonly described as a bias — a quirk of cognition to be corrected — or as a pathology of judgment. Philosophy, by contrast, has rarely examined dissonance in its own right. Governance has tended to overlook it altogether, treating it as irrelevant to institutional design.

This paper advances a different claim. Dissonance is not an anomaly, bias, or pathology. It is an epistemic event: the affective signal of solitude and finitude. Each act of knowing is bounded; each decision forecloses alternatives. Dissonance is the body's way of registering this boundary. When contradiction arises — between my belief and another's, between conscience and command, or even within the solitude of thought itself — the unease I feel is not accidental but the lived mark of finitude. Dissonance belongs to the very architecture of epistemic life.

The ordinary human response, however, is to pacify. Festinger himself argued that individuals are motivated to reduce dissonance as quickly as possible.[3] Solomon Asch's conformity experiments showed how perception bends to majority opinion.[4] Stanley Milgram's obedience studies revealed how conscience yields under authority.[5] Stanley Feldman traced authoritarian predispositions to this very dynamic: the preference for conformity over autonomy when faced with threatening diversity.[6] My own *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025)[7] extends this diagnosis, showing that collapse often takes the form of epistemic clientelism: a structural pattern in which individuals resolve dissonance by surrendering autonomy in exchange for recognition, belonging, or protection. Collapse yields comfort but produces only illusory freedom.

Yet collapse is not inevitable. Dissonance can be endured. Philosophy exemplifies this possibility. Schopenhauer insisted that 'the world is my representation' and showed that the striving of will

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[1] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford UP 1957) 3–5.

[2] April McGrath, 'Dealing with Dissonance: A Review of Cognitive Dissonance Reduction' (2017) 11(12) *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*.

[3] Festinger (n 1) 5.

[4] Solomon Asch, 'Effects of Group Pressure upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgment' in Harold S Guetzkow (ed), *Groups, Leadership and Men* (Carnegie Press 1951) 177–190.

[5] Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (Harper & Row 1974) 41–43.

[6] Stanley Feldman, 'Enforcing Social Conformity: A Theory of Authoritarianism' (2003) 24(1) *Political Psychology* 41, 43–44.

[7] Peter Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory: Power Dynamics and the Delegation of Epistemic Agency in Academia* (3rd edn, Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025) <https://github.com/Peter-Kahl/Epistemic-Clientelism-Theory> accessed 5 September 2025.

ensures contradiction is never fully reconciled.[8] Husserl's phenomenology demonstrated how meaning is constituted in the first-person horizon, always partial and incomplete.[9] Merleau-Ponty emphasised that subjectivity is embodied and interwoven with others, yet irreducibly singular.[10] These traditions converge on a common point: contradiction is not to be eradicated but to be lived with. Endurance of dissonance requires cultivation of epistemic agency — the capacity to remain with contradiction long enough for it to disclose new possibilities.[11] Habituation can reframe the body's unease, turning anxiety into a signal of proximity to truth. What results is not absolute freedom, which is impossible, but bounded freedom: the fragile achievement of acting within limits without fleeing them.

Still, endurance at the individual level is rare. Most people, most of the time, collapse into conformity, silence, or deferral. And institutions, as they are presently structured, too often reinforce collapse rather than endurance. Miranda Fricker has shown how such suppression produces epistemic injustice.[12] Elizabeth Anderson argues that democracy gains legitimacy precisely by integrating diverse knowledge.[13] Yet universities enforce orthodoxy through peer review and metrics[14], corporate boards suppress dissent in the name of cohesion[15], journalism filters contradiction out of public view[16], and politics pacifies pluralism with populist slogans.[17] In all these cases, dissonance is neutralised, contradiction erased, and dependence exploited.

To resist collapse, scaffolding is required. Fiduciary law provides the model. A fiduciary arises wherever one party wields discretionary power over another who is vulnerable.[18] Trustees, guardians, directors, and agents are bound by duties of loyalty, candour, and accountability. Knowledge relations, I argue, are structurally fiduciary: students depend on teachers, shareholders on directors, citizens on journalists, societies on politicians. Yet epistemic authorities are rarely held to fiduciary standards. Extending fiduciary duties into the epistemic domain would dignify dependence rather than exploit it. Under such scaffolds, dissonance could be sustained as resource rather than pacified as threat.

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[8] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (trans EFJ Payne, Dover 1969) vol 1, §1–3; vol 2, ch 17.

[9] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (Martinus Nijhoff 1983) §31.

[10] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans Donald Landes (Routledge 2012) 58–63.

[11] Juuso Henrik Nieminen and Laura Ketonen, 'Epistemic Agency: A Link between Assessment, Knowledge and Society' (2024) 88 *Higher Education* 777, 779.

[12] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (OUP 2007) 1–10.

[13] Elizabeth Anderson, 'The Epistemology of Democracy' (2006) 3 *Episteme* 8, 10–11.

[14] Peter Kahl, *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review: Fiduciary-Epistemic Duties, Epistemic Agency, and Institutional Openness in the Age of Generative AI* (Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025).

[15] House of Commons, *Carillion* (HC 769, 2017–19).

[16] Peter Kahl, *How Institutional Corruption Captured UK Higher Education Journalism* (Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025).

[17] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (Verso 2000).

[18] Tamar Frankel, *Fiduciary Law* (OUP 2011) 4–6.

This paper makes two contributions. First, it reframes cognitive dissonance as structural to epistemic life rather than as anomaly. Second, it proposes fiduciary scaffolds as normative architecture for sustaining bounded freedom. The argument develops in six steps. Section 2 examines solitude as the ontological ground of finitude, drawing on Schopenhauer, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty. Section 3 reinterprets cognitive dissonance as epistemic event, integrating classical psychology with findings that show its evolutionary and embodied basis. Section 4 analyses the double response to dissonance — collapse into conformity or endurance toward bounded freedom. Section 5 proposes fiduciary scaffolds as institutional condition for endurance, using academia as primary case while gesturing toward corporate, journalistic, and political contexts. Section 6 synthesises these insights into a conception of epistemic pluralism. Section 7 situates the argument in frontier domains such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and climate governance, where fiduciary-epistemic constitutions may prove indispensable for survival.

The claim is ambitious but simple. Dissonance is not an error to be corrected but a condition to be sustained. Collapse is ordinary, yielding the illusion of freedom. Endurance is fragile, yielding bounded freedom. Fiduciary scaffolds can transform endurance from personal rarity into institutional practice. To live freely is to endure contradiction, both individually and collectively. At the edge of knowledge, where unease is felt most keenly, freedom begins.

2. Solitude as the Ground of Dissonance

2.1 Schopenhauer's solitude

The starting point for any account of dissonance must be solitude. Arthur Schopenhauer opens *The World as Will and Representation* with the thesis: 'the world is my representation'.[19] All knowledge is mediated through consciousness: every phenomenon exists for me only insofar as it appears within my forms of intuition and concepts. However crowded the world, no subject can directly access another's consciousness.

This recognition carries ontological weight. Solitude is not merely social isolation but a structural feature of experience grounded in the *principium individuationis*: space and time individuate appearances such that each subject's access to the world is irreducibly first-personal.[20] Schopenhauer presses this further through his metaphysics of will. Beneath representation lies will: blind striving, ceaseless, pre-rational, and prior to conceptual thought.[21] Representation imposes the principled order of space, time, causality, and the principle of sufficient reason, but it can never still the restless

[19] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, vol 1* (EFJ Payne tr, Dover 1969) §1.

[20] Schopenhauer, *WWR, vol 1*, §§1–7.

[21] Schopenhauer, *WWR, vol 2*, ch 17.

demand of will. The two registers never fully coincide; their tension guarantees that contradiction is inescapable.

Suffering, for Schopenhauer, manifests will's excess over representation: desire arises from lack; satisfaction is brief; new lack follows. The human condition is marked by restlessness and the inability of representation to pacify will's demands.[22] In this light, dissonance is not accidental noise in otherwise harmonious cognition. It is the affective register of a structural mismatch: striving consciousness pressed against the limits of its own representational scaffolding. When I feel conflict between what is presented and what my willing demands, the unease is the felt sign of finitude that solitude imposes.

Two further Schopenhauerian details sharpen the claim. First, my own body is given in a double aspect: as representation among representations and as the immediate objectification of will.[23] This doubleness explains why dissonance is somatic as well as cognitive: the body registers the strain where will exceeds representation. Second, because the forms of intuition individuate access to the world, no merging of perspectives is possible; other minds are inferred through bodily expression but never directly intuited.[24] The solitude of representation thus sets the stage on which dissonance must appear.

2.2 Phenomenological texture of solitude

Later phenomenology develops these insights in a different register. Edmund Husserl's epoché suspends the natural attitude in order to analyse how meaning is constituted in the stream of consciousness.[25] What the epoché reveals is intentionality: every act of consciousness is 'of' or 'about' something. Yet the object is always given within a horizon structured by the first-person perspective. This makes solitude irreducible: no one can perceive on my behalf; my horizon cannot be identical with another's, even when we are directed toward the 'same' object.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty extends the analysis through embodiment. Perception is not detached 'I think' but lived 'I can': the body is our general medium for having a world.[26] To perceive is to inhabit a situation, grasping meanings through posture, gesture, movement, and practical engagement. Intersubjectivity, on this view, is neither inferential construction nor mystical fusion but intercorporeality: I encounter the other's interiority only as expressed in a body that moves, speaks,

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[22] Schopenhauer, *WWR, vol 1*, §56.

[23] Schopenhauer, *WWR, vol 1*, §18.

[24] Schopenhauer, *WWR, vol 1*, §§18–19.

[25] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (Martinus Nijhoff 1983) §31.

[26] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans Donald Landes (Routledge 2012) 159.

and responds within a shared world. There is intertwining of horizons, but not transparency or collapse.[27]

Dan Zahavi's account of empathy clarifies the boundary conditions. Empathy is a direct, non-inferential access to another's experience, but it preserves alterity: 'empathy does not entail a fusion or collapse of perspectives; it is precisely the recognition of the other as other'.[28] Even the most refined empathic understanding confirms solitude: first-person givenness is irreducible, and intersubjective access is always mediated by expressive embodiment and shared practical contexts.

Phenomenology thus refines Schopenhauer rather than rejecting him. The will's striving explains why harmony is never complete; intentionality shows that all experience is horizon-bound; embodiment demonstrates that intersubjectivity is real yet partial; empathy confirms the persistence of otherness. Solitude is not a defect to be overcome but the ground condition of knowledge. It is precisely because we are embodied, horizonal, and non-fusional subjects that dissonance can appear—and must.

2.3 From solitude to finitude

Taken together, Schopenhauer and phenomenology demonstrate that knowledge is always bounded. Solitude ensures that representation is partial; embodiment ensures that perspective is finite; will ensures that contradiction is ineradicable. The implication is that dissonance is not an occasional disturbance but a structural feature of epistemic life.

Leon Festinger described dissonance as psychological discomfort.[29] From the standpoint of solitude, that discomfort can be reinterpreted as the affective signal of finitude itself. It arises when my limited horizon encounters contradiction — whether from others, from the world, or from within my own reasoning. The tightening of the chest, the unease in the gut, the restlessness of thought: these are not epiphenomena but bodily signs that my scaffolding of representation has reached its edge.

This also explains why dissonance so often provokes closure. If solitude is ontological, then contradiction is unavoidable. The unease it generates cannot be permanently resolved but only pacified. Conformity, obedience, rationalisation, or silence provide temporary relief, but the structural condition persists. Closure provides comfort at the cost of openness. Openness, by contrast, accepts finitude and inhabits its unease.

Thus, the movement from solitude to finitude sets the stage for the central claim of this paper: dissonance should be reinterpreted as an epistemic event. It is not an error in reasoning but the lived encounter with the limits of representation. Solitude ensures that dissonance will always arise;

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[27] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Landes) 58–63.

[28] Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (OUP 2014) 23–26.

[29] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford UP 1957) 3–4.

finitude ensures that it will always unsettle. The task, therefore, is not to eliminate dissonance but to decide how to respond: suppression through closure, or preservation through openness.

In the chapters that follow, psychology provides empirical confirmation of this claim. If philosophy shows why dissonance must arise, psychology shows how it is lived and managed. Festinger's experiments, Asch's studies of conformity, Milgram's obedience paradigm, and contemporary findings from developmental and comparative research all reveal how solitude and finitude translate into behavioural patterns of closure. To reinterpret these not as anomalies but as epistemic events is to bridge phenomenology with psychology — and to lay the groundwork for fiduciary reform.

3. Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event

3.1 Festinger's paradigm

Leon Festinger defined dissonance as the 'existence of non-fitting relations among cognitions'.[30] When an individual holds two contradictory beliefs, or when action and conscience diverge, discomfort arises. Festinger described this unease as a 'state of psychological discomfort which the person is motivated to reduce'.[31]

His famous 'boring task' experiment (1957) made the mechanism visible. Participants asked to perform monotonous tasks later told a waiting 'subject' (actually a confederate) that the tasks were enjoyable. Those paid $20 for the deception reported little change in attitude; those paid only $1 subsequently rated the task as genuinely more enjoyable. The dissonance between lying and self-conception was resolved not by admitting dishonesty but by altering belief.

Festinger's contribution was radical: dissonance motivates not only behaviour but belief itself. Human beings, he argued, seek not truth but consonance. Later reviews have confirmed the ubiquity of this drive, showing how strategies of rationalisation, trivialisation, and avoidance flow from the paradigm he established.[32]

Read through the lens of solitude and finitude, Festinger's finding takes on deeper significance. Dissonance is not a deviation from rationality but the felt signal that representation has reached its limit: my scaffolding of meaning falters, and the body registers contradiction. The crucial question is not whether dissonance occurs but how it is met: submission to coherence at the cost of autonomy, or endurance of unease in search of knowledge.

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[30] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford UP 1957) 3–4.

[31] Festinger 1957, 5.

[32] April McGrath, 'Dealing with Dissonance: A Review of Cognitive Dissonance Reduction' (2017) 11(12) *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*.

3.2 Conformity and the submission of perception

Solomon Asch's experiments in the 1950s demonstrated how easily perception bends under group pressure. Participants were asked to judge line lengths in the presence of confederates who deliberately gave incorrect answers. A significant proportion of participants conformed to the group, even when the error was obvious.

The discomfort participants experienced was dissonance: the clash between their perception and the group's assertion. Rather than endure contradiction, many collapsed into conformity. The unease was pacified by aligning with the majority, even at the cost of accuracy.

Philosophically, Asch's findings echo Martin Heidegger's analysis of *das Man*, 'the Anyone', in *Being and Time*. For Heidegger, individuals often surrender authenticity by dissolving into the undifferentiated consensus of society.[33] Asch's participants exemplified this collapse: rather than stand in solitude, they retreated into the anonymity of the group. Conformity provided relief, but at the price of agency.

Cross-cultural research confirms the depth of this tendency. Güngör and colleagues (2014) found that individuals in collectivist contexts (e.g. Turkey, East Asia) often interpret conformity not as weakness but as relational attunement, while those in individualist contexts (e.g. USA, Western Europe) treat autonomy as central value.[34] This shows that conformity is not merely psychological reflex but also culturally scaffolded: what looks like collapse in one context may appear as loyalty in another. Yet in either case, dissonance is pacified by aligning with the group, illustrating how solitude resists contradiction only with difficulty.

3.3 Obedience and the submission of conscience

Stanley Milgram extended the study of dissonance into the moral domain. In his obedience experiments (1960s), participants were instructed by an authority figure to administer electric shocks to a 'learner' (a confederate). Despite the apparent screams of pain, many participants continued to deliver shocks up to dangerous voltages.[35]

Here the dissonance lay between conscience and command. Participants recognised the harm, yet submitted to authority. For Milgram, the crucial mechanism was not sadism but delegation: ordinary individuals, under institutional pressure, transferred responsibility for their actions to an epistemic superior. Conscience was pacified by outsourcing autonomy.

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[33] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Blackwell 1962) §27.

[34] Derya Güngör, Mayumi Karasawa, Michael Boiger, Duygu Dinçer, and Batja Mesquita, 'Fitting in or Sticking Together: The Prevalence and Adaptivity of Conformity, Relatedness, and Autonomy in Japan and Turkey' (2014) 45(9) *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 1374–1389.

[35] Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (Harper & Row 1974) 41–43.

Recent work on epistemic trust clarifies this mechanism. Ivana Marková argues that human cognition is not merely individual but dialogical: our judgments depend upon trust in others who hold knowledge and authority.[36] In Milgram's laboratory, participants confronted a stark asymmetry of epistemic authority. The white coat conferred legitimacy, the script provided certainty, and trust displaced doubt. Obedience was thus not only moral submission but epistemic delegation, a transfer of agency under conditions of pressure.

Schopenhauer's metaphysics of will makes this clearer. Beneath rational representation lies will: blind striving for order, avoidance of conflict, instinct for submission to power.[37] Representation, embodied in conscience, falters under the pressure of will's demand to obey. Submission offered relief; resistance was exceptional.

Seen through this lens, Milgram's participants did not merely 'fail' ethically. They embodied a structural pattern: dissonance between conscience and command resolved by transferring epistemic agency to authority. Obedience was the price of relief.

3.4 Authoritarianism as institutionalised submission

Stanley Feldman theorised authoritarian predispositions as rooted in dissonance-reduction.[38] Faced with diversity and contradiction, authoritarian personalities seek closure through uniformity. Authoritarianism is thus institutionalised submission: the codification of individual strategies of dissonance-reduction at the system level.

Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, described how totalitarian regimes silence plurality by transforming political life into orchestrated coherence.[39] Diversity of opinion is reframed as existential threat, and contradiction is eradicated through propaganda, censorship, and fear. What begins as psychological discomfort in the individual becomes institutionalised as the suppression of dissonance across society.

Populist politics illustrates this logic. Brexit's slogan 'Take Back Control' reduced a complex pluralism into a simple coherence. Trump's rallying cry 'Build the Wall' pacified the dissonance of diversity with a unifying image. Viktor Orbán frames dissent as a threat to national unity. Each case demonstrates systemic submission: dissonance reduced by collapsing plurality into uniform narrative. Resistance is marginalised; loyalty demanded.

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[36] Ivana Marková, 'Epistemic Trust and Authority' (2025) 8 *Cultures of Science* 133.

[37] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, vol 2*, ch 17.

[38] Stanley Feldman, 'Enforcing Social Conformity: A Theory of Authoritarianism' (2003) 24(1) *Political Psychology* 41, 43–44.

[39] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt 1951) 323–326.

From the perspective of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025)[40], authoritarianism represents the macro form of the same structural bargain. Individuals and groups pacify dissonance by exchanging autonomy for recognition, protection, or belonging. Authoritarian leaders function as epistemic patrons: they absorb contradiction by dictating coherence, and in return, followers surrender agency. This is not pathology at the margins but the institutional face of ordinary dissonance-reduction strategies.[41]

3.5 Strategies of submission

April McGrath catalogued strategies by which dissonance is pacified: rationalisation, trivialisation, selective exposure, compartmentalisation, and blame-shifting.[42]

- Rationalisation reframes contradiction as justified.
- Trivialisation minimises its significance.
- Selective exposure avoids contradictory information.
- Compartmentalisation isolates dissonance into silos.
- Blame-shifting displaces responsibility onto others.

Each strategy brings relief, but all reflect submission. Instead of remaining open to contradiction, the subject closes down possibility.

Contemporary technologies have industrialised these strategies. Social media platforms algorithmically curate selective exposure, shielding users from dissonant views. Online communities foster compartmentalisation, where contradictory identities or beliefs coexist without engagement. Blame-shifting is amplified in echo chambers, where responsibility is externalised onto scapegoated groups. Rationalisation and trivialisation are normalised through meme cultures that reframe contradiction as humour or irrelevance. What Festinger observed in the individual, platforms now scale to millions.

Academic infrastructures replicate the pattern. In *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* (2025), I argued that repositories and citation indices act as epistemic filters, enforcing coherence by marginalising dissent and privileging orthodoxy.[43] Peer review silences dissonant results

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[40] Peter Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory: Power Dynamics and the Delegation of Epistemic Agency in Academia* (2025).

[41] Peter Kahl, Beyond Epistemic Clientelism (unpublished manuscript, 2025).

[42] April McGrath, 'Dealing with Dissonance: A Review of Cognitive Dissonance Reduction' (2017) 11(12) *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*.

[43] Peter Kahl, *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* (Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025).

through rationalisation ('methodologically flawed'), trivialisation ('incremental'), or selective exclusion. The result is institutionalised avoidance of dissonance, disguised as quality assurance.[44]

From the standpoint of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025), these strategies exemplify clientelism. To rationalise is to defer to orthodoxy; to seek selective exposure is to entrust authority with epistemic filtering; to blame-shift is to delegate responsibility for truth. In each case, autonomy is surrendered in exchange for comfort, recognition, or belonging.

3.6 Evolutionary roots of submission

Louisa Egan et al tested dissonance in non-human primates and children.[45] When asked to choose between two equally valued items, both capuchin monkeys and four-year-old children subsequently devalued the rejected option — even when the choice was arbitrary.

This finding demonstrates that dissonance-reduction is not cultural artefact but structural to agency itself. To choose is to foreclose; to foreclose is to encounter unease; to submit is to pacify. Resistance is not natural but cultivated.

Embodied research extends the point. Klein and McColl (2019) showed how clinicians under diagnostic uncertainty resort to self-protective distortions, reducing dissonance by clinging to premature conclusions or discounting contradictory evidence.[46] Their findings highlight that dissonance is registered somatically — in anxiety, tension, and stress — and that reduction strategies are often visceral rather than deliberative. The body, as Merleau-Ponty insisted, is barometer of contradiction: dissonance is felt before it is reasoned.

From the perspective of solitude and finitude, this is decisive. Every act of choice marks the boundary of representation; every bodily unease is the echo of finitude. Evolution has primed us to pacify contradiction swiftly, for indecision can be costly in survival contexts. Yet what was once adaptive — the rapid foreclosure of dissonance — now imperils epistemic life, where uncertainty must often be endured. Resistance to dissonance is not instinctive; it is cultivated through habituation, philosophy, and fiduciary scaffolds that protect contradiction long enough for new knowledge to emerge.

3.7 Dissonance as epistemic event

The evidence converges.

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[44] Peter Kahl, *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review: Fiduciary-Epistemic Duties, Epistemic Agency, and Institutional Openness in the Age of Generative AI* (Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025).

[45] Louisa C Egan, Laurie R Santos, and Paul Bloom, 'The origins of cognitive dissonance: evidence from children and monkeys' (2007) 18(11) *Psychological science* 978–983.

[46] Jill Klein and Geoff McColl, 'Cognitive dissonance: how self-protective distortions can undermine clinical judgement' (2019) 53(12) *Medical Education* 1178–1186.

- **Ubiquity**. Dissonance arises across domains: perception in Asch, conscience in Milgram, politics in Feldman, evolution in Egan, Santos, and Bloom.

- **Ordinary reflex**. Submission pacifies unease through conformity, obedience, rationalisation, or loyalty.

- **Clientelism**. Submission often takes structured form: the conditional exchange of autonomy for recognition, protection, or belonging.[47]

- **Micro-level reinforcement**. The same pattern appears in intimate contexts. In *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (2025), I showed how dissonance between partners — over values, expectations, or knowledge — is often resolved not through dialogue but through clientelist trade-offs: one partner surrenders epistemic agency in return for stability, affection, or recognition.[48] The intimate sphere thus mirrors the structural dynamics of institutions, confirming that clientelism is not confined to politics or academia but permeates the fabric of social life.

- **Fragile alternative**. Resistance is rare, but when sustained, it enables agency and bounded freedom.

Thus, dissonance is not anomaly but condition. It is the affective signal of solitude and finitude: the embodied reminder that my scaffolding of representation has reached its limit. Submission suppresses contradiction through closure; resistance preserves it through openness.

The fork is decisive. One path leads to coherence through clientelism and uniformity, offering comfort but eroding autonomy. The other leads to bounded freedom through endurance and openness, fragile in isolation but sustainable through fiduciary scaffolds.

The task, then, is not to eradicate dissonance but to decide how to respond. The next chapter turns to resistance: how the phenomenology of embodiment and habituation can transform unease from threat into resource, and how fiduciary frameworks can support bounded freedom at the edge of knowledge.

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[47] Peter Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory: Power Dynamics and the Delegation of Epistemic Agency in Academia* (3rd edn, Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025).

[48] Peter Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (unpublished manuscript, 2025).

4. Endurance and Bounded Freedom

4.1 The phenomenology of endurance

If Chapter 3 showed that dissonance ordinarily provokes submission, the next question is whether it can be resisted. What would it mean not to flee contradiction, but to inhabit it? Philosophy provides resources to articulate this possibility.

Edmund Husserl insisted that consciousness is always intentional, directed toward horizons that can never be fully encompassed.[49] Dissonance arises when these horizons collide — when my limited intentional arc encounters its boundary. The ordinary response is avoidance: to shut down the horizon prematurely, to flee the unease. Endurance requires another stance: to remain within contradiction, acknowledging its irresolvability while refusing closure.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty sharpened this with his analysis of embodiment. 'Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of "I think that" but of "I can"'.[50] Contradiction is not registered in abstract cognition but in flesh. The tightening chest, the churn of the gut, the trembling of the hand — these are not incidental. They are the body's barometer at the frontier of knowledge. Avoidance interprets them as danger signals, urging retreat. Inhabitation reinterprets them as markers of epistemic edge, confirmation that one has reached finitude.

Martin Heidegger provides existential grounding. Human beings are *geworfen* — thrown into a world not of their choosing.[51] Dissonance is the affective trace of this thrownness: the reminder that understanding is situated and finite. Avoidance dissolves into *das Man*, the tranquillity of conformity; inhabitation sustains anxiety as disclosure of being.

For Schopenhauer, this possibility was implicit in his account of asceticism. The will is restless striving; representation can never still it. Yet he held that philosophy and aesthetic contemplation can suspend the will, however briefly, producing clarity at the edge of contradiction.[52] To inhabit dissonance is to adopt this contemplative stance: not eradicating striving, but suspending submission to its demand for closure.

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[49] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (Martinus Nijhoff 1983) §31.

[50] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception, trans Donald Landes* (Routledge 2012) 159.

[51] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Blackwell 1962) §29.

[52] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol 1, §38.

4.2 Professional distortions and the rarity of inhabitation

The rarity of inhabitation becomes evident in professional practice. Medicine offers a striking example. Klein and McColl argue that clinicians confronted with evidence contradicting established practice often distort interpretation to protect self-image and group belonging.[53]

The history of medicine is replete with such cases. Ignaz Semmelweis's discovery that handwashing dramatically reduced maternal mortality was dismissed by contemporaries, whose professional identity was bound to established routines. More recently, studies showed that arthroscopic knee surgery for osteoarthritis offered no significant benefit over placebo, yet the procedure continued for years, driven by practitioner confidence and patient expectation.

These examples show avoidance in action. Rather than inhabiting contradiction — admitting that their practice was flawed — physicians pacified dissonance through denial, rationalisation, and suppression of evidence. The discomfort was managed, but at the cost of truth and patient welfare.

From the standpoint of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025), such distortions exemplify clientelist exchange. Clinicians surrendered epistemic autonomy to the authority of professional consensus in return for security and recognition. Their dependence was pacified through conformity, not opened to revision. Avoidance stabilised belonging but perpetuated harm.

The lesson is stark. Avoidance of dissonance is not confined to laypersons; even highly trained experts, operating in high-stakes contexts, suppress contradiction when it threatens status and identity. Inhabitation is rare precisely because it is costly: it risks social exclusion, professional sanction, and psychic discomfort. Yet it is in such contexts that inhabitation is most necessary, for the stakes of error are measured in lives.

4.3 Epistemic agency and cultivated resilience

If avoidance is the ordinary reflex, what makes inhabitation possible? Nieminen and Ketonen define epistemic agency as the capacity to evaluate, transform, and use knowledge agentically, especially under conditions of uncertainty.[54] Their analysis offers a bridge between psychology and philosophy.

To exercise epistemic agency is precisely to resist avoidance. It is to remain within contradiction, to accept discomfort as part of the process of knowing, and to act reflectively despite tension. This is not passive tolerance but active inhabitation: the conscious choice to stay with unease rather than resolve it prematurely.

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[53] Jill Klein and Geoff McColl, 'Cognitive dissonance: how self-protective distortions can undermine clinical judgement' (2019) 53(12) *Medical Education* 1178–1186.

[54] Juuso Henrik Nieminen and Laura Ketonen, 'Epistemic Agency: A Link between Assessment, Knowledge and Society' (2024) 88 *Higher Education* 777, 779.

Yet Nieminen and Ketonen stress that agency is not exercised in isolation. It is cultivated through practice and context. In education, students who are encouraged to question, to confront uncertainty, and to tolerate ambiguity develop resilience. In contrast, when assessment rewards only conformity to authoritative answers, avoidance is reinforced and inhabitation stifled.

This analysis resonates with *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025)[55]. Clientelism arises when individuals manage dissonance by trading autonomy for recognition, protection, or security. Epistemic agency is the counterpoint: the capacity to resist such exchanges, to hold one's ground in uncertainty rather than defer. Inhabitation, then, is not simply a matter of personal strength but of cultivated resilience against the gravitational pull of clientelism.

Resilience here is double: psychological and institutional. Psychologically, habituation to dissonance reframes bodily unease as epistemic signal rather than threat. Institutionally, contexts must protect and reward inhabitation rather than penalise it. Without such scaffolding, even the most resilient individuals will eventually be drawn into avoidance.

Thus, epistemic agency names the fragile but crucial achievement of inhabiting contradiction. It shows that while avoidance is natural, inhabitation can be cultivated. Yet because the conditions of agency are fragile, fiduciary scaffolding is necessary — a point that prepares the transition to Chapter 5.

4.4 Illusory freedom and bounded freedom

The distinction between avoidance and inhabitation allows us to sharpen the account of freedom. Avoidance offers relief from contradiction by pacifying dissonance through conformity, rationalisation, or deference. In doing so, it produces a sense of harmony — but this is an illusory freedom. It feels like choice, yet the choice has been traded away for security, belonging, or recognition. The student who silences dissent to preserve a grade, the citizen who repeats the populist slogan to remain part of the crowd, the clinician who ignores new evidence to protect professional identity — each experiences temporary relief, but only at the cost of autonomy.

This dynamic is structural, not accidental. In *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*[56], I argued that such trade-offs constitute clientelism: epistemic autonomy is conditionally surrendered to authority in exchange for recognition or protection. Avoidance is thus not merely psychological but systemic: the institutionalised surrender of freedom in return for comfort.

Inhabitation, by contrast, yields what may be called bounded freedom. It does not abolish solitude, nor overcome finitude. Absolute freedom is impossible, for knowledge is always partial and situated.

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[55] Peter Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory: Power Dynamics and the Delegation of Epistemic Agency in Academia* (3rd edn, Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025) <https://github.com/Peter-Kahl/Epistemic-Clientelism-Theory> accessed 5 September 2025.

[56] Peter Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory: Power Dynamics and the Delegation of Epistemic Agency in Academia* (3rd edn, Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025) <https://github.com/Peter-Kahl/Epistemic-Clientelism-Theory> accessed 5 September 2025.

But inhabitation allows freedom to be lived within these limits. By resisting the reflex to avoid, the individual inhabits unease as the condition of agency.

Bounded freedom is fragile. It requires repeated practice, habituation to unease, and often institutional support. But it is also the only genuine freedom available. Whereas illusory freedom pacifies contradiction by suppressing it, bounded freedom accepts contradiction as ineradicable and chooses to act within it. Avoidance closes down possibility in exchange for comfort; inhabitation sustains openness to finitude and preserves agency.

Thus the stakes of dissonance become clear. The body's unease is not an error signal but a signpost: avoidance interprets it as danger and flees; inhabitation interprets it as threshold and endures. Illusory freedom collapses at the first touch of finitude; bounded freedom lives with finitude as its permanent horizon.

4.5 Transition: from inhabitation to scaffolding

The argument so far has established two claims. First, dissonance is structural: the affective signal of solitude and finitude. Second, the ordinary response is avoidance, yielding illusory freedom. Inhabitation is possible, yielding bounded freedom, but it is rare and fragile.

Why is inhabitation so fragile? Part of the answer lies in psychology. The bodily unease of contradiction is difficult to tolerate; without habituation, most will flee. But the deeper reason lies in structure. Social and institutional contexts reward avoidance. Schools grade conformity, professions sanction dissent, political parties punish deviation, corporations reward harmony. Avoidance is stabilised by systemic incentives.

This is why fiduciary scaffolding becomes necessary. In fiduciary law, those with discretionary power are bound to duties of loyalty, candour, and accountability to protect the vulnerable.[57] Knowledge relations are structurally analogous. Teachers, directors, journalists, and politicians all hold discretionary epistemic power over dependents. Without binding duties, they may exploit that dependence by suppressing contradiction.

To secure inhabitation, therefore, requires more than individual courage. It requires institutional scaffolds that dignify dependence, obligating epistemic authorities to sustain rather than pacify dissonance. Inhabitation can then become more than rare exception; it can become collective practice.

The next chapter develops this claim. By examining academia, corporations, journalism, and politics, it shows how fiduciary-epistemic duties can be designed to prevent avoidance, dignify dependence, and transform dissonance from pathology into resource.

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[57] Tamar Frankel, *Fiduciary Law* (OUP 2011) 4–6.

5. Fiduciary Scaffolds for Inhabitation

5.1 Why fiduciary scaffolds?

If avoidance is the ordinary reflex and inhabitation the rare exception, then the question is how to make inhabitation more than fragile possibility. Psychology alone cannot supply the answer: it reveals the reflex but cannot alter structural incentives. Philosophy identifies the condition of finitude but cannot redesign institutions. What is needed is a framework capable of dignifying dependence and binding authority to protect, rather than pacify, dissonance.

Fiduciary law provides the model. As Tamar Frankel explains, fiduciary relations are those in which one party holds discretionary power over another who is vulnerable.[58] The law responds by imposing strict duties: loyalty, candour, care, accountability. Without these, the vulnerable party would be exposed to exploitation.

Knowledge relations share this structure. Students depend on teachers for certification; shareholders on directors for disclosure; citizens on journalists for credible information; societies on politicians for deliberative decisions. In each case, one party holds discretionary epistemic power, and the other is vulnerable. Yet unlike trustees or directors, epistemic authorities are rarely bound by fiduciary duties.

The result is predictable. Without scaffolding, authorities suppress contradiction to protect themselves, institutions reward avoidance, and dependents trade autonomy for recognition — the core dynamic of epistemic clientelism. Fiduciary scaffolds would transform this landscape. By binding epistemic authorities to openness, candour, and loyalty to truth, they would ensure that dissonance is dignified rather than suppressed, making inhabitation possible not just individually but collectively.

5.2 Academia: orthodoxy and fiduciary reform

5.2.1 Avoidance through peer review and metrics

Academia is often idealised as the site of free inquiry, yet its structures frequently enforce avoidance. Peer review, performance metrics, and global rankings create systemic incentives to suppress contradiction. Junior researchers quickly learn to conceal heterodox findings until they secure tenure. Students are rewarded for reproducing authoritative answers rather than for sustaining dissent.

[58] Tamar Frankel, *Fiduciary Law* (OUP 2011) 4–6.

In *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review* (2025)[59], I argued that peer review has become a gatekeeping cartel, preserving incumbency and silencing novelty. Journals operate less as fiduciaries of truth than as protectors of reputational order. Metrics reinforce this epistemocracy: knowledge becomes currency of ranking and reputation.[60] In this environment, dissonance is managed through avoidance — conformity rewarded, deviation punished.

5.2.2 Scholarly oath as fiduciary scaffold

In *Towards Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath*[61], I proposed that scholars be bound by fiduciary oath: to loyalty to truth, candour in disclosure, humility in judgment, and openness to dissent. Like physicians, scholars wield discretionary power over dependents: students, peers, and publics. Without duties, this power risks exploitation through suppression. A scholarly oath would dignify dependence, obligating scholars to sustain rather than silence contradiction.

5.2.3 Fiduciary peer review

Peer review itself can be restructured under fiduciary principles. Reviewers would be bound to disclose conflicts, provide transparent reasons, and preserve dissenting reports rather than erase them. Journals would be accountable for epistemic harm caused by arbitrary suppression. Fiduciary peer review would convert contradiction from liability into resource: minority voices documented, disagreement preserved as part of scholarly record.

5.2.4 Inhabitation as academic practice

If these scaffolds were adopted, inhabitation could become not heroic exception but standard practice. Scholars would no longer face the choice between truth and career; students would learn that resistance to orthodoxy is part of learning; institutions would shift from pacifying contradiction to sustaining it. Avoidance might still occur, but it would no longer be structurally incentivised. Fiduciary scaffolds would transform the epistemic culture of academia from one of clientelist avoidance to one of dignified inhabitation.

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[59] Peter Kahl, *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review: Fiduciary-Epistemic Duties, Epistemic Agency, and Institutional Openness in the Age of Generative AI* (Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025) <https://github.com/Peter-Kahl/Why-We-Must-Reject-the-Colonial-Peer-Review> accessed 5 September 2025.

[60] Peter Kahl, *Epistemocracy in Higher Education: A Proposal for Fiduciary and Epistemic Accountability in the University* (Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025) <https://pkahl.substack.com/p/epistemocracy-higher-education-fiduciary-epistemic-accountability> accessed 5 September 2025.

[61] Peter Kahl, *Towards Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath: A Proposal for Fiduciary and Epistemic Accountability in Higher Education* (Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025) <https://pkahl.substack.com/p/academic-hippocratic-oath-fiduciary-epistemic-duties> accessed 5 September 2025.

5.3 Corporations: delegation, blame, and fiduciary openness

5.3.1 Avoidance through delegation and denial

Corporate governance demonstrates a different mode of avoidance: responsibility is displaced through delegation. Chang, Solomon, and Westerfield show how investors avoid confronting their own poor decisions by delegating to fund managers and later blaming them for losses.[62] Delegation functions as a mechanism of dissonance-reduction: the unease of loss is pacified by displacing accountability.

The collapse of Carillion illustrates the institutional scale of this pattern. Parliamentary inquiries found that directors ignored repeated warnings from employees and auditors, suppressing dissonant information that contradicted optimistic projections.[63] Shareholders, meanwhile, assumed oversight was someone else's responsibility. Avoidance was system-wide: dissonant knowledge was excluded, leaving the firm blind to looming insolvency.

5.3.2 Epistemic duties for directors

In *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (2025)[64], I argued that directors should be bound not only by duties of care and loyalty but also by epistemic duties: to integrate diverse knowledge, to disclose candidly, and to sustain contradiction. These duties require openness to dissent, even when inconvenient, and candour in acknowledging uncertainty.

Such scaffolds would reconfigure the boardroom. Minority reports could be institutionalised through dissent-by-design, obligating boards to document and address dissent rather than erase it. Epistemic audits could supplement financial audits, evaluating whether directors adequately considered dissonant evidence. Fiduciary openness would turn contradiction from liability into safeguard.

5.3.3 From avoidance to inhabitation in governance

The corporate domain shows how easily dissonance is avoided through delegation and denial. But it also shows that fiduciary scaffolds can reorient governance. By obligating directors to inhabit contradiction — to sustain dissonance rather than suppress it — fiduciary openness can transform board culture. Instead of avoiding uncomfortable truths, corporations would be required to face them. Inhabitation would no longer depend on exceptional individuals; it would be embedded in institutional duty.

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[62] Tom Y Chang, David H Solomon and Mark M Westerfield, 'Looking for Someone to Blame: Delegation, Cognitive Dissonance, and the Disposition Effect' (2016) 71(1) *The Journal of Finance* 267.

[63] House of Commons, *Carillion* (HC 769, 2017–19) 55–57.

[64] Peter Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness: A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Framework for Corporate Governance* (2025).

5.4 Journalism: silence, capture, and fiduciary candour

5.4.1 Avoidance through media capture

Journalism is structurally fiduciary: citizens depend on reporters and media institutions for access to knowledge they cannot gather themselves. Yet the press frequently pacifies contradiction through capture and silence. Herman and Chomsky's 'propaganda model' showed how advertising, sourcing, and institutional pressures filter information into manufactured consensus.[65]

Contemporary examples reinforce the pattern. The 2023 Fox News defamation settlement revealed internal acknowledgement that election-fraud claims were false, yet the network continued to broadcast them to pacify partisan audiences. Cambridge Analytica's micro-targeting scandal filtered political information to confirm prior beliefs, shielding citizens from contradictory evidence. Both cases exemplify avoidance: dissonance is resolved not by confrontation but by narrative coherence, manufactured at scale.

In *How Institutional Corruption Captured UK Higher Education Journalism* (2025), I documented similar dynamics in academic media. Rankings agencies, consultancies, and journalists formed epistemic cartels, mutually reinforcing metrics while silencing dissent. Here too, contradiction was pacified through conformity to institutional orthodoxy. Citizens and academics alike were positioned as dependents, fed filtered information in exchange for trust.

5.4.2 Fiduciary journalism

A fiduciary framework would obligate journalists and media institutions to candour and loyalty to truth rather than to advertisers or partisan audiences. Fiduciary candour would require disclosure of conflicts of interest, transparency in sourcing, and inclusion of dissenting perspectives. Citizens, as epistemic dependents, would be entitled to protection against epistemic harm caused by systematic silence or distortion.

This vision aligns with Jürgen Habermas's claim that legitimacy in communication requires inclusive and non-coercive dialogue.[66] Fiduciary journalism would institutionalise this demand: not just a professional norm, but a duty enforceable through accountability.

5.4.3 From silence to inhabitation in media

Fiduciary candour transforms journalism from mechanism of avoidance into vehicle of inhabitation. Contradictory claims would be contextualised rather than erased; plural voices protected rather than

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[65] Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Pantheon 1988).

[66] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Polity 1996) 322–35.

filtered out. The result is not cacophony but pluralism: a press that sustains contradiction as a condition of democratic legitimacy. Avoidance silences; inhabitation amplifies.

5.5 Politics: populism, loyalty, and fiduciary democracy

5.5.1 Avoidance through populist slogans

Democracy institutionalises dissonance: diverse perspectives must coexist within a shared polity. Yet populism pacifies contradiction by collapsing plurality into slogans. Brexit's 'Take Back Control', Trump's 'Build the Wall', and Orbán's rhetoric of national unity all offered relief from complexity by supplying a singular coherence. Citizens, confronted with the unease of pluralism, resolved dissonance by submitting to narrative closure.

Yang et al. demonstrate a parallel dynamic within organisations: employees who commit unethical pro-organisational behaviour experience dissonance, which erodes moral identity.[67] The dissonance is not resolved through reflection but through loyalty, trading moral autonomy for belonging. Populism operates similarly at scale: citizens pacify contradiction by exchanging autonomy for identity, avoiding complexity through collective submission.

5.5.2 Fiduciary democracy

Elizabeth Anderson has argued that the legitimacy of democracy depends on integrating diverse knowledge.[68] A fiduciary democracy would make this obligation explicit. Representatives would be bound by duties of candour, accountability, and openness to dissent. Citizens, as epistemic dependents, would be entitled to disclosure of reasoning and protection of plural perspectives.

This is not utopian. Experiments in deliberative mini-publics illustrate the principle. Ireland's Citizens' Assembly brought together randomly selected citizens to deliberate on same-sex marriage and abortion.[69] Participants sustained contradiction, listening to opposing views without silencing them, and produced recommendations that commanded broad legitimacy.

Other cases reinforce the point. The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform institutionalised contradiction by bringing together a randomly selected body to deliberate on proportional representation.[70] At the international level, the OECD has documented more than 300

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[67] Yang N, Lin C, Liao Z and Xue M, 'When Moral Tension Begets Cognitive Dissonance: An Investigation of Responses to Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior and the Contingent Effect of Construal Level' (2021) *Journal of Business Ethics* <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04866-5>.

[68] Elizabeth Anderson, 'The Epistemology of Democracy' (2006) 3 *Episteme* 8, 10–11.

[69] David M Farrell, Jane Suiter and Clodagh Harris, 'Ireland's Deliberative Mini-Publics' in Farrell DM, Ó Beacháin D and Suiter J (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Irish Politics* (OUP 2021) 627, 633–638.

[70] Mark E Warren and Hilary Pearse (eds), *Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly* (CUP 2008) 98–103.

deliberative mini-publics across countries, concluding that such forums enhance legitimacy by sustaining plurality and integrating diverse perspectives.[71]

These examples show that inhabitation can be institutionalised: dissonance preserved long enough to yield considered judgment. A fiduciary democracy would generalise this principle by embedding duties of candour and accountability into the very structure of representative office.

5.5.3 From populist loyalty to inhabitation in democracy

Avoidance in politics takes the form of populist loyalty: slogans simplify, identity pacifies, dissonance is erased. Fiduciary democracy reorients the dynamic: leaders obligated to candour, citizens protected in their plurality, institutions structured to sustain contradiction. The shift is from politics as comfort to politics as inhabitation. Only under such scaffolds can bounded freedom become a collective democratic practice.

5.6 Synthesis: scaffolding inhabitation

Across these domains, the pattern is clear.

- Academia pacifies contradiction through peer review and metrics; fiduciary oaths and peer review reform could preserve dissent.
- Corporations avoid responsibility through delegation and denial; fiduciary epistemic duties and dissent-by-design could institutionalise openness.
- Journalism silences dissonance through capture and filtering; fiduciary candour could transform the press into a medium of pluralism.
- Politics collapses plurality into populist slogans; fiduciary democracy could dignify citizens' dependence by obligating candour and openness.

In each case, avoidance offers comfort but yields only illusory freedom. Contradiction is pacified, autonomy surrendered, and clientelist exchanges reinforced. Inhabitation is possible but fragile, requiring individuals to resist pressures that institutions structurally reward.

Fiduciary scaffolds change the equation. By binding epistemic authorities to duties of loyalty, candour, and accountability, they dignify dependence, ensure that contradiction is sustained rather than suppressed, and transform inhabitation from heroic exception into collective practice.

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[71] OECD, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave* (OECD Publishing 2020) <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en> accessed 5 September 2025.

The significance of fiduciary scaffolds is therefore double. Psychologically, they protect individuals against the temptation of avoidance. Institutionally, they stabilise inhabitation as a norm rather than anomaly. Together, they make bounded freedom sustainable.

Yet scaffolds are not the horizon. Their purpose is to preserve the conditions under which plurality can flourish. If avoidance reduces difference to uniformity, and inhabitation sustains it as condition of agency, then fiduciary scaffolds provide the bridge to epistemic pluralism: structured coexistence of perspectives under duty. To this task the next chapter now turns.

6. Toward Epistemic Pluralism

6.1 From scaffolds to plurality

Fiduciary scaffolds are not ends in themselves. Their function is to create conditions in which contradiction can be preserved rather than suppressed. Without scaffolds, dissent is crushed; without pluralism, scaffolds ossify into procedure. The horizon is therefore epistemic pluralism: the structured coexistence of multiple perspectives within institutions and public life.

The basic contrast is stark: orders oriented to uniformity manufacture closure — by gatekeeping in academia, by delegation and denial in corporations, by capture and filtering in journalism, by slogans in politics. Orders oriented to plurality organise for openness — sustaining contradiction long enough for judgment to ripen, legitimacy to form, and error to be seen before it becomes catastrophe. If fiduciary law protects the vulnerable where power is discretionary, then fiduciary-epistemic duties protect plurality where knowledge is discretionary.[72]

Thus, scaffolds are means to plurality. They dignify dependence and bind authority to candour and accountability so that contradiction is preserved. Where uniformity seeks tranquillity through suppression, plurality secures stability through sustained openness.

6.2 The roots of pluralism

The case for plurality is anchored in three complementary traditions and two normative commitments.

Value pluralism (Berlin). Isaiah Berlin argued that central human values are irreducibly many and often in conflict; there is no master currency by which liberty, equality, justice and knowledge can be harmonised without loss.[73] Uniformity, on this view, is an evasion — a false peace purchased by

[72] Tamar Frankel, *Fiduciary Law* (OUP 2011) 4–6.

[73] Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (OUP 1969) 213–14.

suppressing conflict among goods. Plurality acknowledges tragic choice and designs institutions to live with it.

Epistemic freedom (Mill). John Stuart Mill defended free expression because even false or partial opinions may contain neglected truth, or force prevailing views into sharper relief.[74] Uniformity silences this corrective friction; plurality institutionalises it as a standing condition of inquiry and self-government.

Agonistic democracy (Mouffe). Chantal Mouffe insists that democracy is not consensus but 'agonism': conflict domesticated without violence.[75] Uniformity mistakes disagreement for pathology; plurality transforms antagonism into contestation by protecting the right to appear and be heard as an adversary rather than an enemy. Fiduciary scaffolds fit this task: by obligating candour and accountability, they preserve disagreement while preventing its violent resolution.

Truth and legitimacy (Arendt, Habermas). Hannah Arendt warned that truth is fragile where propaganda or bureaucratic coherence substitutes for judgment.[76] Jürgen Habermas argued that legitimacy depends on inclusive, non-coercive communication under conditions of reciprocity.[77] Plurality operationalises both insights: it preserves the world-disclosing power of truth and secures the discursive conditions for legitimate rule.

Taken together, these strands yield a single imperative: design institutions against uniformity's closure and for plurality's openness. Fiduciary-epistemic duties are the juridical expression of that design.

6.3 Pluralism-in-practice

Pluralism is not merely theoretical. Practices already exist that sustain contradiction against pressures of uniformity, though they remain fragile and often contested.

Academia. In *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review* (2025), I showed how peer review entrenches epistemic colonialism by enforcing uniform standards and suppressing heterodox voices. By contrast, open peer review platforms illustrate how plurality can be institutionalised: multiple assessments are preserved, dissent remains visible, and readers can judge without the illusion of a single verdict. This aligns with my broader claim in *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (2025) that higher education governance should prioritise epistemic openness over optocratic drift, which seeks comfort in closure.

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[74] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (CUP 2011) ch 2.

[75] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (Verso 2000) 101–5.

[76] Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Penguin 2006) 227–32.

[77] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Polity 1996) 322–35.

Corporate governance. Boards typically resolve contradiction by erasing minority voices, a move that reflects fiduciary breach. Yet some firms experiment with dissent-by-design: requiring that minority views be recorded alongside majority decisions. This embodies the fiduciary duties of candour and accountability I proposed in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (2025). Instead of collapsing into uniformity, dissent is preserved as a living part of institutional memory, protecting plurality within governance.

Journalism. The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) illustrates pluralism as method. The Panama Papers project assembled more than 350 reporters from 80 countries. Each brought distinct epistemic horizons, but the structure preserved rather than flattened their plurality. As I argued in *How Institutional Corruption Captured UK Higher Education Journalism* (2025), most journalistic institutions resolve contradiction through capture, pacifying readers with simplified narratives. ICIJ demonstrates an alternative: a fiduciary commitment to transparency that turns plurality into collective breakthrough.

Politics. Deliberative mini-publics institutionalise pluralism by design. Ireland's Citizens' Assembly brought together randomly selected citizens to deliberate on same-sex marriage and abortion.[78] Participants sustained contradiction, listening to opposed views without silencing them, producing recommendations of broad legitimacy. Other cases — the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly[79] and over 300 OECD-documented mini-publics worldwide[80] — show that plurality is practicable when scaffolds dignify dissent.

These cases are fragile, often operating against incentives that favour conformity or silence. As I argued in *Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?* (2025), institutions still fear unsanctioned knowledge, preferring the security of uniformity. Yet these examples demonstrate that pluralism is possible where fiduciary scaffolds protect contradiction from being erased.

6.4 Anticipating objections

Pluralism is often resisted on the grounds of paralysis and inefficiency. Both objections reflect the deeper clientelist preference for uniformity: they treat contradiction as threat rather than condition.

Paralysis. Critics argue that sustaining contradiction risks decision-making gridlock. Cass Sunstein warns that excessive diversity can fragment judgment and undermine collective action.[81] Yet paralysis is not inherent to plurality. The aim is not endless debate but structured delay: preserving

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[78] David M Farrell, Jane Suiter and Clodagh Harris, 'Ireland's Deliberative Mini-Publics' in Farrell DM, Ó Beacháin D and Suiter J (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Irish Politics* (OUP 2021) 627, 633–638.

[79] Mark E Warren and Hilary Pearse (eds), *Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly* (CUP 2008) 98–103.

[80] OECD, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave* (OECD Publishing 2020) <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en> accessed 5 September 2025, 12–15, 24–29.

[81] Cass R Sunstein, *Why Societies Need Dissent* (Harvard UP 2003) 7–10.

contradiction long enough to integrate dissent before closure. Decisions so reached carry legitimacy rather than the taint of suppression. By contrast, uniformity accelerates decision-making only by erasing dissent — a comfort that weakens institutions. As Isaiah Berlin reminded, values are irreducibly plural, and attempts to force them into harmony are evasions that sacrifice truth for tranquillity.[82]

Efficiency. Another objection is that pluralist structures are resource-intensive. Open peer review, deliberative forums, or epistemic audits take time and money. Yet the costs of uniformity are higher. The collapse of Carillion, where directors systematically suppressed dissonant knowledge, demonstrates that false efficiency accelerates failure.[83] Similarly, as Klein and McColl showed, avoidance in medicine allowed ineffective practices to persist, harming patients.[84]

From the perspective of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory: Power Dynamics and the Delegation of Epistemic Agency in Academia* (2025), both objections illustrate the structural temptation of clientelism: pacify dissonance by trading autonomy for speed or security. Uniformity offers illusory efficiency by suppressing contradiction, but at the cost of autonomy and truth. Plurality slows institutions, but this delay is the very condition of bounded freedom and durable legitimacy.

6.5 Toward fiduciary pluralism

Pluralism cannot be left to accident. It must be institutionalised, for without scaffolding, contradiction is quickly suppressed under the pressures of uniformity. Fiduciary duties provide the necessary framework: they dignify dependence by binding epistemic authorities to candour, loyalty, and accountability.

Academia. In *Towards Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath* (2025), I proposed that scholars swear fiduciary commitments to truth, humility, and openness. Such oaths would protect dissenting voices, obligating reviewers and supervisors to preserve, not erase, contradiction. Similarly, in *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review* (2025), I showed how peer review silences heterodox scholarship in the name of coherence. A fiduciary peer review regime would reverse this: dissenting reports preserved, conflicts of interest disclosed, heterodox perspectives protected under duty.

Corporate governance. In *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (2025), I argued that directors should be bound to integrate dissonant knowledge and disclose minority views. Epistemic audits could evaluate not only financial outcomes but whether boards honoured dissent. Such duties prevent uniformity-by-delegation, ensuring plurality within the boardroom.

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[82] Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (OUP 1969) 213–14.

[83] House of Commons, *Carillion* (HC 769, 2017–19) 55–57.

[84] Jill Klein and Geoff McColl, 'Cognitive dissonance: how self-protective distortions can undermine clinical judgement' (2019) 53(12) *Medical Education* 1178–1186.

Knowledge institutions. In *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* (2025), I documented how platforms claim epistemic sovereignty by enforcing uniform standards, masking suppression as authority. Fiduciary pluralism would dismantle such pretence: universities and repositories would be recast not as sovereigns but as stewards of plurality, accountable for protecting voices rather than homogenising them.

Journalism and politics. Fiduciary candour in media would obligate disclosure of conflicts, transparency in sourcing, and publication of minority perspectives, countering the silencing identified in *How Institutional Corruption Captured UK Higher Education Journalism* (2025). In politics, fiduciary democracy would bind representatives to duties of candour and reciprocity, ensuring that citizens are not pacified with slogans but engaged as epistemic dependents.

Pluralism is fragile without duty; with fiduciary scaffolds, it can become durable. As Hannah Arendt warned, truth becomes fragile when reduced to propaganda or consensus.[85] As Jürgen Habermas argued, legitimacy rests on inclusive, non-coercive communication.[86] Fiduciary pluralism operationalises both insights: it sustains difference without coercion by obligating those with epistemic authority to preserve contradiction rather than eliminate it.

6.6 Conclusion: pluralism as horizon

Pluralism is the horizon of fiduciary scaffolding. Solitude ensures finitude; finitude produces contradiction; contradiction generates dissonance. The ordinary response is avoidance: suppressing dissonance through uniformity, producing the illusion of freedom. Inhabitation sustains dissonance, yielding bounded freedom, but it cannot remain the fragile achievement of individuals alone. It requires scaffolds that dignify dependence and bind authority to candour and accountability.

Epistemic pluralism is not consensus, nor chaos, but the structured coexistence of voices under fiduciary duty. It is the collective form of bounded freedom: freedom within finitude, preserved by institutions that resist the temptation of closure. As I have argued in *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025), collapse into uniformity is the systemic face of clientelism. Fiduciary pluralism is its antidote: the institutionalisation of contradiction as resource.

The stakes extend beyond academia, corporations, journalism, or politics. In the emerging domains of artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and climate governance, dissonance will intensify. Here the temptation of uniformity will be greatest: to pacify uncertainty through algorithmic coherence or technocratic monism. Yet it is precisely in these high-stakes contexts that fiduciary-epistemic constitutions will be most vital. The final chapter therefore turns to the frontier: how pluralism, sustained by fiduciary scaffolds, may prove decisive not only for legitimacy, but for survival.

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[85] Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Penguin 2006) 227–32.

[86] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Polity 1996) 322–35.

7. The Frontier: Technology, Coherence, and Survival

7.1 The new edge of dissonance

If Chapter 6 established pluralism as the horizon of fiduciary scaffolding, the final task is to face the domains where dissonance intensifies to the point of existential threat. Artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and climate governance confront us with problems whose complexity exceeds human capacity to assimilate. Here, dissonance is not occasional but pervasive: knowledge is partial, uncertainty radical, consequences global.

The temptation in such contexts is to seek coherence at any cost. Algorithms promise decision without contradiction, technocrats promise order without dissent, and populists promise clarity without complexity. Yet these forms of coherence are illusory. They pacify dissonance by collapsing plurality, producing comfort but at the expense of resilience. At the frontier, the choice is stark: coherence as uniformity, or survival through plurality.

7.2 Artificial intelligence: coherence at machine scale

Artificial intelligence epitomises the lure of coherence. Large-scale models generate outputs that appear authoritative, compressing plurality into single answers. Institutions under pressure to decide adopt such tools as epistemic shortcuts. Yet the very scale that makes AI powerful also magnifies the risks of uniformity. When algorithmic judgments become opaque and unchallengeable, dissent is erased by design.

In *Foucault's Dream: On the Domestication of Knowledge and Epistemic Subjugation* (2025), I argued that epistemic subjugation is most insidious when interiorised as aesthetic inevitability.[87] AI threatens precisely this: the domestication of plurality into machine coherence, where difference appears as error to be corrected rather than signal to be heeded.

As I argued in *Is Artificial Intelligence Really Undermining Democracy*? (2025), the error lies in attributing inherent political agency to AI itself.[88] AI is epistemically neutral; democratic erosion stems not from the artefact but from failures of fiduciary accountability in the institutions that govern it. The proper response is not to collapse into algorithmic coherence, but to embed fiduciary epistemic duties — candour, transparency, and accountability — into the governance of AI systems.

Otherwise, the logic of clientelism will scale to the machine: institutions pacifying dissonance by outsourcing autonomy to algorithmic patrons. Survival depends not on coherence at machine scale, but on scaffolds that protect plurality against algorithmic closure.

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[87] Peter Kahl, *Foucault's Dream: On the Domestication of Knowledge and Epistemic Subjugation* (Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025).

[88] Peter Kahl, *Is Artificial Intelligence Really Undermining Democracy?* (Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025).

7.3 Biotechnology and climate governance: coherence as risk, plurality as survival

Biotechnology and climate governance confront humanity with problems whose scope exceeds any single discipline or institution. Both domains intensify dissonance: uncertainty is radical, consequences global, and stakes existential.

Biotechnology. Advances in gene editing, synthetic biology, and neurotechnology create unprecedented possibilities but also unprecedented risks. The lure of coherence appears in technocratic promises of mastery: the genome as code to be corrected, the body as system to be optimised, humanity as programmable. This reductionist logic pacifies dissonance by treating plurality of values — dignity, identity, justice — as noise. History warns of the danger. The eugenics movement sought coherence by collapsing human difference into hierarchies, a project now recognised as epistemic and moral catastrophe.[89] Today, gene-editing debates risk repeating this pattern under the guise of inevitability.[90] Without scaffolds, uniformity will masquerade as progress.

Climate governance. Climate change intensifies contradiction: long-term planetary limits confront short-term political incentives. Here too, the temptation of coherence looms. Simplistic slogans — 'net zero by 2050', 'green growth' — pacify unease by projecting singular solutions. Yet the plurality of values at stake — justice, sovereignty, livelihood, biodiversity — resists reduction. Uniformity collapses this plurality into technocratic monism, often privileging corporate or state elites. The result is fragile legitimacy and policy failure.[91]

Fiduciary scaffolds. In both domains, survival depends on sustaining plurality rather than collapsing it. Biotechnology requires fiduciary governance that obligates candour about risks, accountability to publics, and humility before uncertainty.[92] Climate governance requires fiduciary institutions that preserve diverse voices — especially those most vulnerable — rather than silencing them in the name of efficiency.[93] The analogy with *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (2025) is direct[94]: just as boards must preserve dissent within organisations, global institutions must preserve dissonance across polities.

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[89] Daniel J Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Harvard UP 1995).

[90] Jennifer A Doudna and Samuel H Sternberg, *A Crack in Creation: Gene Editing and the Unthinkable Power to Control Evolution* (HarperCollins 2017) 193–198; Sheila Jasanoff and J Benjamin Hurlbut, 'A Global Observatory for Gene Editing' (2018) 555 *Nature* 435–437.

[91] James Dyke, Robert Watson and Wolfgang Knorr, 'Climate Scientists: Concept of Net Zero is a Dangerous Trap' (The Conversation, 22 April 2021) <https://theconversation.com/climate-scientists-concept-of-net-zero-is-a-dangerous-trap-157368> accessed 6 September 2025; Henry Shue, *Climate Justice: Vulnerability and Protection* (OUP 2014).

[92] Sheila Jasanoff, *The Ethics of Invention: Technology and the Human Future* (WW Norton 2016) 1–7, 221–227.

[93] Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* (CUP 1990).

[94] Peter Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness: A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Framework for Corporate Governance* (Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025).

In biotechnology and climate governance alike, uniformity offers coherence but at the cost of survival. Plurality, sustained by fiduciary scaffolds, ensures that dissonance is preserved as resource: the condition of resilience under uncertainty.

7.4 Epistemic constitutions and survival

At the frontier, the stakes of dissonance are no longer limited to personal discomfort or institutional failure. In artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and climate governance, the collapse of contradiction risks catastrophe at planetary scale. The temptation of coherence — algorithmic closure, technocratic reductionism, populist slogans — offers relief from uncertainty, but only by erasing plurality. In such domains, coherence becomes fatal.

The alternative is survival through epistemic constitutions: frameworks that bind institutions not to pacify dissonance but to sustain it. Just as political constitutions restrain sovereign power through separation of powers and rule of law, epistemic constitutions would restrain epistemic power through fiduciary duties of candour, accountability, and openness. They would dignify dependence, obligating epistemic authorities — whether scholars, directors, engineers, or states — to preserve plurality as a condition of legitimacy and resilience.

This vision extends the trajectory traced throughout this paper. Solitude ensures finitude; finitude generates contradiction; contradiction produces dissonance. The ordinary reflex is collapse into clientelism and uniformity, yielding only illusory freedom. Endurance, supported by fiduciary scaffolds, yields bounded freedom. When scaled institutionally, these scaffolds crystallise into fiduciary pluralism. At the frontier, where survival itself is at stake, fiduciary pluralism must be entrenched as constitutional principle.

As I argued in *Is Artificial Intelligence Really Undermining Democracy?* (2025), technologies are not agents of erosion in themselves; erosion arises when institutions abdicate fiduciary responsibility. AI, like gene editing or climate modelling, is epistemically neutral. It is institutional governance that determines whether plurality is preserved or suppressed. The lesson generalises: survival depends not on coherence at scale, but on institutions constitutionally bound to preserve contradiction as resource.

Epistemic constitutions are not luxury. They are conditions of survival in a century where complexity will intensify and dissonance will deepen. To deny this is to seek comfort in coherence at the cost of resilience. To embrace it is to accept that freedom, though bounded, can be made durable through duty — and that plurality, though fragile, is the only ground on which survival can stand.

8. Conclusion: Fragility and Resilience

8.1 From solitude to constitutions

This paper began with a philosophical claim: solitude is the ground of knowledge. For Schopenhauer, consciousness is irreducibly individual; the world is always my representation. Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Zahavi confirmed the irreducibility of first-person perspective, while recognising that intersubjectivity is real but mediated. From this solitude follows finitude, and from finitude, contradiction. Cognitive dissonance is therefore not an anomaly but an epistemic event: the affective signal of finitude.

The psychological literature confirmed this. Festinger showed that dissonance produces discomfort; Asch and Milgram demonstrated how conformity and obedience pacify it; Feldman showed that authoritarianism institutionalises this dynamic. Collapse is ordinary, and conformity is rewarded. My own *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025) generalised this pattern: dissonance is pacified by trading autonomy for protection or belonging. Clientelism is collapse writ large.

Yet collapse is not destiny. Philosophy showed that contradiction can be endured, psychology that habituation can reframe discomfort, and fiduciary law that duties can dignify dependence. From these threads emerged the argument: dissonance can be reinterpreted as resource. Endurance yields bounded freedom, fragile in isolation but sustainable through fiduciary scaffolds. At scale, these scaffolds crystallise into fiduciary pluralism and, at the frontier, into epistemic constitutions.

8.2 Fragility of coherence

The alternative path is coherence through uniformity. This paper has shown that coherence pacifies dissonance by erasing plurality: peer review silences dissent; corporate boards suppress minority views; journalism filters perspectives into manufactured consensus; populist slogans collapse pluralism into identity. In each case, coherence appears as stability but produces fragility.

The frontier domains magnify the danger. Artificial intelligence compresses plurality into algorithmic outputs, risking domestication of knowledge. Biotechnology reduces humanity to code, repeating eugenic temptations under scientific veneer. Climate governance collapses diverse values into technocratic monism, sacrificing justice for efficiency. In each, coherence offers comfort but undermines resilience.

Uniformity is fragile because it denies the condition of knowledge: contradiction. By pacifying dissonance, it builds institutions on silence rather than resilience. Fragility is therefore not accidental but systemic: it is the cost of seeking coherence where finitude ensures plurality.

8.3 Resilience of plurality

Resilience arises not from eliminating contradiction but from sustaining it. The strength of an institution lies not in its capacity to enforce coherence, but in its ability to absorb dissonance without collapse. This is the central lesson of fiduciary scaffolding: duties of candour, loyalty, and accountability convert dissonance from pathology into resource.

In academia, fiduciary peer review and scholarly oaths would protect heterodox voices, ensuring that plurality is not sacrificed to orthodoxy. In corporate governance, directors' epistemic duties would preserve dissent in board deliberations, preventing the blindness that hastened the fall of Carillion.[95] In journalism, fiduciary candour would safeguard plural reporting, resisting capture and silence. In politics, fiduciary democracy would bind representatives to openness, obligating them to preserve plurality rather than pacify it.

At the frontier, fiduciary pluralism scales into epistemic constitutions. These are not metaphors but design principles: structural constraints on epistemic authority, binding institutions to preserve contradiction as condition of legitimacy. Just as political constitutions secure stability by institutionalising conflict through separation of powers, epistemic constitutions secure resilience by institutionalising dissonance.

This resilience is not infinite. Plurality cannot eliminate tragedy or dissolve uncertainty. But it provides the only stable ground for navigating finitude. Institutions that embed fiduciary scaffolds can bend without breaking, absorbing contradiction as signal rather than silencing it as error. Resilience therefore lies not in coherence but in plurality dignified by duty.

8.4 Philosophical horizon

The argument that began with solitude ends with survival. Solitude ensures finitude, finitude generates contradiction, and contradiction produces dissonance. The ordinary reflex is collapse: pacifying unease through conformity, obedience, or clientelism. This yields coherence but only as illusion, trading autonomy for comfort.

The alternative is endurance: to remain with dissonance long enough for it to disclose new epistemic possibilities. Endurance, however, cannot rely on individual courage alone. It requires scaffolds that dignify dependence, binding epistemic authorities to candour, accountability, and openness. When scaled, these scaffolds crystallise into fiduciary pluralism and epistemic constitutions.

The philosophical stakes are clear. Freedom is not absolute but bounded: exercised within finitude and sustained by duties. Dependence is not degradation but dignity: an acknowledgement that autonomy

[95] House of Commons, *Carillion* (HC 769, 2017–19).

flourishes only when trust is secured by fiduciary responsibility. Survival itself becomes a fiduciary task: institutions entrusted with knowledge owe duties not only to their dependents but to the future.

To inhabit this horizon is to accept that fragility and resilience are not symmetrical. Fragility is easy: it follows from silence, uniformity, and the refusal of contradiction. Resilience is difficult: it demands scaffolds, duties, and institutions strong enough to sustain dissonance. Yet only resilience offers a path forward. At the edge of knowledge, where unease is felt most keenly, freedom begins — not in the denial of dissonance, but in its preservation as the very condition of knowing together.

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