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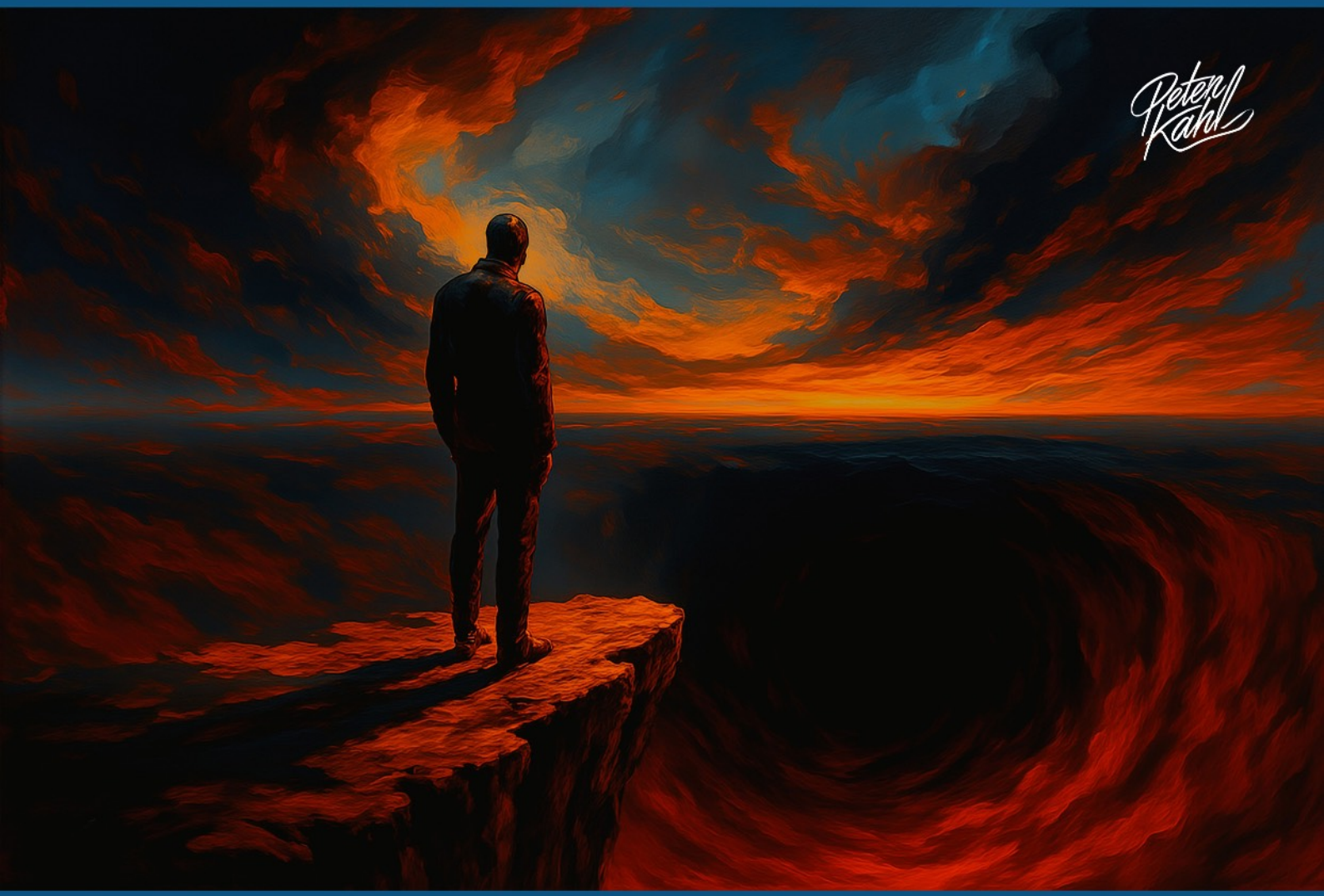

Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event

Clientelism, Bounded Freedom, and the Architecture of Epistemic Fear

PETER KAHL

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At the edge of knowledge, unease signals freedom —
yet casts the shadow of fear.

PETER KAHL

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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 reconceptualises cognitive dissonance as an epistemic event: the affective signal of solitude and finitude at the edge of knowledge. Drawing on Schopenhauer, phenomenology, and ontology, it demonstrates that contradiction is not accidental but structural. Anxiety discloses this finitude, while fear accelerates collapse into conformity, obedience, or epistemic clientelism — yielding only illusory freedom. Endurance, by contrast, enables bounded freedom, fragile in isolation but sustainable through fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds: institutional duties of candour, accountability, and openness that dignify dependence. The argument unfolds across psychology, philosophy, and governance, showing how academia, corporations, journalism, politics, and frontier domains such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and climate governance require scaffolds that preserve contradiction. The conclusion is stark: survival in conditions of radical uncertainty depends on fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds strong enough to sustain plurality against the temptation of closure.

Keywords

cognitive dissonance; epistemic event; epistemic clientelism; epistemic injustice; epistemic pluralism; epistemic agency; epistemic fear; epistemic anxiety; fiduciary duties; fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds; bounded freedom; solitude and finitude; ontology; conformity; obedience; authoritarianism; deliberative democracy; institutional design; artificial intelligence; biotechnology; climate governance; knowledge governance

Working Paper Status

This paper forms part of a wider research programme on fiduciary-epistemic governance and will be integrated into my forthcoming monograph *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*. Readers are welcome to cite it, but please note that revisions are likely as the material is incorporated into the book project.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and problem

Cognitive dissonance is among the most cited phenomena in psychology. Since Festinger's (1957) pioneering work, it has been defined as the discomfort of holding contradictory cognitions or acting against one's beliefs. An immense empirical literature has shown how people seek relief from contradiction by rationalising behaviour, adjusting beliefs, or conforming to group opinion (McGrath, 2017). Yet despite this influence, cognitive dissonance is still often treated as a bias — a quirk of cognition to be corrected — or as a pathology of judgment. Philosophy has rarely examined it in its own right, and governance has tended to overlook it altogether, treating dissonance as irrelevant to institutional design.

1.2 Thesis statement

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

1.3 Significance and Contribution

This paper makes three domain-specific contributions and one integrative move.

Philosophy

It reframes cognitive dissonance not as a contingent anomaly but as a structural feature of epistemic life. Building on Schopenhauer's account of will and representation (1969/1818), Husserl's phenomenology of intentionality (1983/1913), Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodiment (2012/1945), and Heidegger's distinction between fear (*Furcht*) and anxiety (*Angst*) (1962/1927), the paper shows that dissonance is the affective signal of solitude and finitude. This reinterpretation locates dissonance alongside central ontological conditions of existence, treating it as a constitutive horizon of knowing rather than as a defect in reasoning.

Psychology

It reinterprets Festinger's paradigm (1957), Asch's conformity studies (1951), Milgram's obedience experiments (1974), and Feldman's theory of authoritarianism (2003) not as demonstrations of irrational bias but as behavioural evidence of epistemic limits. Evolutionary findings from Egan,

Santos, and Bloom (2007) confirm that dissonance-reduction is structural to agency rather than cultural accident. Read through this frame, the experimental record reveals how the ordinary reflex is to collapse contradiction for comfort, while the fragile alternative of endurance signals the possibility of bounded freedom.

Governance

It advances a normative response through fiduciary-epistemic scaffolds. Drawing on fiduciary theory (Frankel, 2011) and extending arguments from Kahl (2025a, 2025c, 2025h, 2025i, 2025k), the paper proposes that students, citizens, shareholders, and publics stand in fiduciary relations to epistemic authorities. Duties of candour, loyalty, and accountability should therefore bind academics, directors, journalists, and politicians. Under such scaffolds, dissonance can be preserved as a resource rather than pacified as a threat, transforming collapse from the ordinary reflex into an avoidable institutional failure.

Integrative contribution

Taken together, these arguments bridge ontology, psychology, and governance into a unified framework. Dissonance is shown to be constitutive rather than anomalous, endurance to be possible but fragile, and fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds to be the institutional architecture capable of sustaining bounded freedom. The payoff is both diagnostic and normative: a diagnosis of why collapse into conformity, obedience, and clientelism is so pervasive, and a proposal for how resilience can be institutionalised across domains from academia to politics.

1.4 Methodological Lens / Approach

This paper does not pursue empirical psychology but adopts a conceptual and interpretive method. Its analysis is anchored in the epistemic dimension of dissonance: the claim that dissonance is constitutive of knowing itself. To develop this, the argument integrates four registers. From philosophy, Schopenhauer, phenomenology, and Heidegger provide the ontological grounding of solitude, finitude, anxiety, and fear. From psychology, Festinger and later research offer empirical patterns that, when reframed, illuminate the epistemic rather than anomalous character of dissonance. From law and governance theory, fiduciary duties provide the normative architecture for institutional scaffolding. The approach is therefore interdisciplinary but not eclectic: it unifies ontological, epistemic, psychological, and institutional perspectives into a single fiduciary-epistemic framework.

1.5 Roadmap of the Paper

The argument unfolds across eight chapters. Chapter 2 examines solitude as the ontological ground of dissonance, drawing on Schopenhauer, phenomenology, and Heidegger, and distinguishing fear from anxiety as epistemic affects. Chapter 3 turns to psychology, revisiting Festinger's paradigm and

extending through Asch, Milgram, Feldman, and evolutionary evidence, reinterpreted through an epistemic lens. Chapter 4 develops the double response to dissonance: collapse into conformity, obedience, or clientelism, versus endurance through cultivated epistemic agency. Chapter 5 introduces fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds as the institutional condition of endurance, analysing cases in academia, corporations, journalism, and politics. Chapter 6 advances a conception of epistemic pluralism, showing how fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds can sustain contradiction without coercion. Chapter 7 extends the framework to contemporary frontiers — artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and climate governance — where coherence becomes seductive but survival requires fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds. Chapter 8 concludes by reflecting on fragility and resilience, arguing that freedom is bounded, dependence dignified, and fiduciary responsibility central to epistemic survival.

1.6 Closing Claim

Dissonance is constitutive of epistemic life. It arises not as anomaly but as the ordinary signal of finitude, solitude, and contradiction. The central task is therefore not to eliminate dissonance but to decide how it will be resolved: through collapse into conformity and illusory comfort, or through endurance that opens the fragile possibility of bounded freedom. This paper argues that fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds — institutional duties of candour, accountability, and loyalty — are necessary to transform endurance from a rare individual achievement into a collective practice. The argument that follows develops this claim in detail, leaving the full philosophical resolution to the concluding chapter.

2. Solitude, Finitude, Ontology, and Epistemic Fear

2.1 Schopenhauer's solitude

The starting point for any account of dissonance must be solitude. Arthur Schopenhauer opened The World as Will and Representation with the claim that 'the world is my representation' (Schopenhauer, 1969/1818). 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 simply social isolation but a structural condition grounded in the *principium individuationis*: space and time individuate appearances such that each subject's access to the world is irreducibly first-personal. No merging of perspectives is possible; other minds are inferred through bodily expression but never directly intuited. Solitude, therefore, is not a defect but the horizon of all knowing.

Schopenhauer pressed this further with his metaphysics of will. Beneath representation lies will: blind striving, ceaseless and pre-rational, prior to conceptual thought. Representation imposes the principled order of space, time, causality, and the principle of sufficient reason, but it can never still the restless demand of will. The two registers never fully coincide, and their tension guarantees that contradiction is inescapable.

From this perspective, dissonance is not accidental noise in otherwise harmonious cognition. It is the affective registration of will's excess over representation — the body's way of signalling that its scaffolding of meaning has reached its edge. Desire arises from lack, satisfaction brings only momentary respite, and new lack follows. Consciousness is thus marked by restlessness, contradiction, and the impossibility of complete reconciliation. When I feel the clash between what is presented and what my willing demands, the unease is the lived sign of finitude that solitude imposes.

2.2 Phenomenological texture of solitude

Later phenomenology develops Schopenhauer's 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 (Husserl, 1983/1913). 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, and my horizon can never coincide perfectly with another's, even when we are directed toward what appears to be the 'same' object. Ontologically, finitude is baked into perception itself.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty extended the analysis through embodiment. Perception, he argued, is not detached 'I think' but lived 'I can': the body is our general medium for having a world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012/1945, p. 159). 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 subjectivity only as expressed in a body that moves, speaks, and responds within a shared world. There is intertwining of horizons, but not transparency or collapse.

Dan Zahavi's account of empathy sharpens this boundary. Empathy provides a direct, non-inferential access to another's experience, yet it preserves alterity: 'empathy does not entail a fusion or collapse of perspectives; it is precisely the recognition of the other as other' (Zahavi, 2014, pp. 23–26). Even in its most refined forms, empathy confirms solitude. The first-person perspective is irreducible, and intersubjective access is always mediated by expressive embodiment and practical contexts.

Taken together, phenomenology 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. The ontological implication is decisive: solitude is not a defect but the ground condition of knowledge. Precisely because we are embodied, horizonal, and non-fusional subjects, dissonance must appear. It is the phenomenological form in which finitude discloses itself.

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 (1957) described dissonance as psychological discomfort, a state individuals are motivated to reduce. From the standpoint of solitude, that discomfort can be reinterpreted as the affective signal of finitude itself. It arises when my limited horizon collides with 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 incidental by-products but bodily markers 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 resolved once and for all but only pacified. Conformity, obedience, rationalisation, or silence provide temporary relief, yet the structural condition persists. Closure offers comfort at the cost of openness. Openness, by contrast, accepts finitude and inhabits its unease, however unsettling.

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 a cognitive malfunction but the lived encounter with the limits of representation. Solitude ensures that dissonance will always arise; 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.

To deepen this point, the next sections turn explicitly to ontology and affect. Ontology, especially in Heidegger, shows why contradiction is not incidental but structural to existence, disclosing itself in anxiety (*Angst*). Affect explains why collapse is the ordinary response: fear (*Furcht*) translates unease into avoidance. Together, these perspectives illuminate dissonance as both constitutive and precarious — a condition that demands not erasure but scaffolding strong enough to preserve it.

2.4 Ontological Ground of Dissonance

If solitude and finitude describe the epistemic texture of experience, ontology clarifies why these conditions are inescapable. Martin Heidegger characterised human existence (*Dasein*) as being-in-the-world: always situated, finite, and exposed to the possibility of non-being (Heidegger, 1962/1927). In

this framework, dissonance is not merely a clash of cognitions but the affective disclosure of *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) — the fact that existence begins already embedded in contexts not of one's choosing, confronting horizons of meaning that can never be fully mastered.

This ontological structure explains why contradiction recurs. As *Dasein* projects itself toward possibilities, it necessarily forecloses others. Each choice is bounded, each perspective partial, and dissonance becomes the affective reminder of these foreclosures. The unease Festinger (1957) described as 'psychological discomfort' can thus be read more deeply as a Stimmung (attunement) in which finitude is disclosed. Heidegger distinguished fear (*Furcht*) from anxiety (*Angst*): fear attaches to specific threats within the world, while anxiety discloses the null ground of possibility itself. Dissonance, when grasped as epistemic event, partakes of both — the fear of error and the anxiety before openness.

Ontology therefore reframes dissonance as constitutive, not contingent. It is not a malfunction of reason but a structural feature of finite being. Schopenhauer's will already pointed to this in metaphysical terms: striving consciousness always exceeds representation (Schopenhauer, 1969/1819). Phenomenology confirmed it at the level of intentionality and embodiment (Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Zahavi, 2014). Ontology makes explicit why such excess cannot be eliminated: because being itself is finite, knowing is always marked by contradiction.

This perspective also clarifies why dissonance is lived affectively. Anxiety (*Angst*) discloses finitude as such; fear (*Furcht*) attaches to particular threats and accelerates closure. Anxiety belongs to the ontological horizon of dissonance, while fear operates in the register of everyday avoidance. The next section develops this distinction: anxiety as disclosure of finitude, and fear as the accelerant of collapse.

2.5 Fear and Anxiety as Epistemic Affects

Ontology shows that dissonance is inescapable. Heidegger (1962/1927) distinguished between anxiety (*Angst*) and fear (*Furcht*). Anxiety is objectless: it discloses the null ground of existence and reveals finitude itself. It is an ontological mood, already implicit in §2.4, where solitude and finitude were shown to structure all knowing. Fear, by contrast, is directed toward particular threats — dangers to stability, recognition, or meaning.

It is fear in this narrower sense that explains why collapse is the ordinary human response to dissonance. Fear channels unease into avoidance, driving the subject toward conformity, obedience, or silence. Festinger (1957) described dissonance as discomfort individuals are motivated to reduce. Egan, Santos, and Bloom (2007) found that monkeys and young children devalued rejected options after arbitrary choices, suggesting a survival mechanism geared toward rapid avoidance of contradiction. Klein and McColl (2019) showed that clinicians under diagnostic uncertainty resorted to

self-protective distortions, clinging to premature conclusions. In each case, fear accelerates closure before reflection can intervene.

At the micro level, *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl, 2025b) argued that fear of losing recognition often drives submission. At the macro level, *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism* (Kahl, 2025j) showed how regimes institutionalise fear, recasting pluralism as threat and training populations to collapse contradiction into loyalty. Across scales, fear functions as catalyst for clientelism: autonomy is traded for recognition or protection when dissonance is experienced as intolerable.

Thus, epistemic anxiety (*Angst*) names the ontological horizon: the unease of finitude itself. Epistemic fear (*Furcht*) names the psychological and institutional accelerant of collapse. Both are constitutive, but their roles differ. Anxiety opens the possibility of bounded freedom, while fear hastens its foreclosure. Institutions that aim to preserve dissonance must therefore build scaffolds strong enough to hold fear without silencing contradiction.

2.6 Conclusion of Chapter 2: From Ontology to Psychology

This chapter has shown that solitude, finitude, and ontology make dissonance unavoidable. Schopenhauer's will, phenomenology's horizon, and Heidegger's analysis of anxiety and fear all converge on the claim that contradiction is structural, not contingent. Dissonance is the affective trace of this structure: anxiety discloses finitude, while fear accelerates collapse. The task now is to see how these ontological and phenomenological insights manifest in lived behaviour. Psychology provides the bridge. Festinger, Asch, Milgram, Feldman, and later research document how dissonance surfaces across domains — in perception, conscience, politics, and even evolution — and how fear-driven avoidance becomes the ordinary reflex. Chapter 3 turns to this empirical record, reinterpreting it through the epistemic lens established here.

3. Psychology: Dissonance in Behaviour and Evolution

3.1 Festinger's paradigm

Leon Festinger (1957) defined dissonance as the 'existence of non-fitting relations among cognitions'. When an individual holds two contradictory beliefs, or when action and conscience diverge, discomfort arises. He described this unease as a 'state of psychological discomfort which the person is motivated to reduce' (p. 5). Dissonance, in this classic framing, is not neutral information-processing but a felt disturbance in the coherence of self and world.

His famous "boring task" experiment gave the mechanism its canonical illustration. Participants were asked to perform monotonous peg-turning tasks and then to tell a waiting "subject" (actually a confederate) that the task was enjoyable. Those paid $20 for the deception reported little change in their actual 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, 1957, pp. 22–30).

Festinger's conclusion was radical: dissonance motivates not only behaviour but belief itself. Human beings, he argued, are driven less by the pursuit of truth than by the pursuit of consonance. Later reviews have confirmed the ubiquity of this drive, showing how strategies such as rationalisation, trivialisation, selective exposure, and avoidance consistently flow from the paradigm he established (McGrath, 2017, pp. 3–5). In this sense, dissonance operates as a primary organising principle of cognition, shaping both judgment and justification.

Read through the lens of solitude and finitude, however, Festinger's findings take on deeper significance. The unease he described is not merely a deviation from rationality. It is the affective signal that representation has reached its limit: my scaffolding of meaning falters, and the body registers contradiction. In this light, Festinger's "discomfort" can be reinterpreted as an epistemic event — the moment when finitude discloses itself. Schopenhauer's account of the restless will already pointed to this inevitability, and Heidegger later captured it as anxiety before the null ground of possibility. The laboratory experiment, then, is a microcosm of ontology: contradiction is structural, not incidental.

The crucial question is therefore not whether dissonance occurs but how it is met. One path is submission — the adjustment of belief to restore coherence, even at the cost of autonomy. The other is endurance — remaining with unease long enough for contradiction to disclose new epistemic possibilities. Festinger revealed the pervasiveness of dissonance; philosophy reframes it as the lived encounter with finitude. Together they establish the terrain of this paper: dissonance as an unavoidable feature of epistemic life, demanding either collapse into comfort or the fragile pursuit of bounded freedom.

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 (Asch, 1951, pp. 177–183).

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. What appears on the surface as perceptual error is, on closer analysis, the submission of judgment to collective authority.

Philosophically, Asch's findings echo Martin Heidegger's analysis of *das Man*, 'the Anyone', in Being and Time (Heidegger, 1962/1927, §27). For Heidegger, individuals often surrender authenticity by dissolving into the undifferentiated consensus of society. In *das Man*, one no longer chooses but "one does what one does," evading responsibility for independent judgment. 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 epistemic agency — a trade of autonomy for the security of belonging.

Cross-cultural research confirms the depth of this tendency. Güngör and colleagues (2014, pp. 538–540) 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 a central value. 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.

From the perspective of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl, 2025c), conformity can be read as a paradigmatic form of epistemic clientelism. The individual surrenders autonomy in exchange for the recognition and protection that come with consensus. In this light, Asch's laboratory findings are not isolated curiosities but microcosms of a broader structural pattern: the ordinary reflex to resolve dissonance through deference, and the fragility of bounded freedom when confronted with the weight of collective judgment.

3.3 Obedience of conscience (Milgram)

Stanley Milgram (1974) extended the study of dissonance into the moral domain. In his famous obedience experiments, participants were instructed by an authority figure to administer electric shocks to a "learner" (actually a confederate). Despite hearing what seemed to be cries of pain and pleas to stop, a striking proportion of participants continued to deliver shocks up to dangerous voltages. The unease here was acute: conscience recognised harm, yet command demanded compliance.

Milgram's interpretation was unsettling. The mechanism at work was not sadism but delegation. Ordinary individuals, under institutional pressure, displaced responsibility onto the authority figure in the lab coat. Dissonance between personal conscience and imposed command was pacified by outsourcing autonomy. Relief came not from moral justification but from transferring agency to an epistemic superior.

Recent work on epistemic trust clarifies this process. Marková (2025) argues that cognition is never purely individual but dialogical: our judgments rely on trust in those deemed to hold knowledge and legitimacy. In Milgram's laboratory, participants faced a stark asymmetry of epistemic authority. The white coat conferred scientific legitimacy, the scripted instructions conveyed certainty, and trust displaced doubt. Obedience, in this sense, was not merely moral capitulation but epistemic delegation: the surrender of one's interpretive authority to an institutionally sanctioned other.

Philosophy sharpens the insight. Schopenhauer (1969/1819) described will as blind striving for order, avoidance of conflict, and instinctive submission to power. Representation — here, embodied in conscience — falters under will's demand for relief. To obey was to quiet the unrest of contradiction. Resistance, by contrast, required an exceptional assertion of agency against both will and institutional authority.

Seen in this enriched light, Milgram's participants did not simply "fail" ethically. They embodied a structural pattern: dissonance between conscience and command resolved through epistemic delegation. Obedience was the price of comfort, a way of silencing the unease of finitude by entrusting agency to authority. The experiment thus reveals not pathology but the ordinary dynamics of epistemic life: fear hastens collapse, trust legitimises it, and only rare endurance resists.

3.4 Authoritarianism as Institutionalised Submission

Stanley Feldman (2003) theorised authoritarian predispositions as rooted in dissonance-reduction. Faced with diversity, ambiguity, or contradiction, individuals with authoritarian leanings seek closure through uniformity. What begins as a private unease is projected into political preference: a longing for coherence, stability, and the erasure of conflict. Authoritarianism is thus institutionalised submission — the system-level codification of ordinary psychological strategies of dissonance-reduction.

Hannah Arendt (1951) traced this transformation in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Totalitarian regimes silence plurality by reorganising political life into orchestrated coherence. Diversity of opinion is reframed as existential threat; contradiction is eradicated through propaganda, censorship, and fear. In this light, authoritarian closure can be seen as the macro-scale analogue of the micro processes revealed in Asch's conformity or Milgram's obedience experiments: the pacification of dissonance through the sacrifice of autonomy.

Populist politics provides vivid contemporary illustrations. Brexit's slogan "Take Back Control" distilled complex pluralism into a single reassuring coherence. Donald Trump's "Build the Wall" transformed unease at demographic change into a unifying symbol. Viktor Orbán reframes dissent as disloyalty to national unity. Each case demonstrates systemic submission: dissonance is collapsed into uniform narrative, resistance is marginalised, and loyalty is demanded as the price of belonging.

My *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl, 2025c) helps clarify this structure. Authoritarianism functions as a clientelist bargain at scale: individuals and groups pacify dissonance by exchanging autonomy for recognition, protection, or belonging. Authoritarian leaders act as epistemic patrons, absorbing contradiction by dictating coherence and offering stability in return. This logic is not exceptional but continuous with ordinary patterns of dissonance-reduction.

In *Foucault's Dream: On the Domestication of Knowledge and Epistemic Subjugation* (Kahl, 2025e), I argued that epistemic subjugation is most insidious when internalised as inevitability — when dissent feels not merely forbidden but unthinkable. Authoritarian systems cultivate precisely this condition: fear reframes plurality as danger, and contradiction is not simply silenced but pre-emptively disqualified. The individual's struggle with dissonance thus becomes institutionalised as systemic closure.

Seen in this light, authoritarianism is not aberrant but familiar. It is the political crystallisation of the same reflexes that govern individual conformity and obedience. The challenge, therefore, is not only to resist authoritarian systems but to recognise how ordinary strategies of dissonance-reduction, when unscaffolded, prepare the ground for their rise.

3.5 Strategies of Dissonance-Reduction

April McGrath (2017) catalogued the repertoire of strategies by which dissonance is pacified: rationalisation (reframing contradiction as justified), trivialisation (minimising its significance), selective exposure (avoiding conflicting information), compartmentalisation (isolating contradictions into silos), and blame-shifting (displacing responsibility onto others). Each strategy delivers relief, but only by foreclosing openness. Instead of dwelling with contradiction, the subject collapses it into coherence — often at the expense of agency.

Contemporary technologies have industrialised these strategies. Social media platforms algorithmically curate selective exposure, shielding users from dissonant perspectives and reinforcing homogeneous echo chambers. Online communities foster compartmentalisation, where contradictory identities or beliefs coexist without challenge. Meme cultures trivialise contradiction by reframing it as humour or irrelevance, while blame-shifting is amplified through virality: scapegoats are identified, responsibility externalised, and dissonance dispersed into hostility. Rationalisation becomes systemic, embedded in the design of digital infrastructures that reward speed, coherence, and conformity over doubt or reflection.

Academic infrastructures replicate the same logic. In *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* (Kahl, 2025i), I argued that repositories, metrics, and citation indices act as epistemic filters, enforcing coherence by privileging orthodoxy and marginalising dissent. Peer review often operates as a dissonance-reduction mechanism: dissonant findings are rationalised away as "methodologically flawed," trivialised as "incremental," or excluded altogether. The result is institutionalised avoidance of contradiction, disguised under the rhetoric of quality assurance.

Universities thus embody what McGrath described at the individual level, but at scale: dissonance is domesticated, managed, and neutralised before it can generate epistemic transformation.

These strategies, whether individual or systemic, can be understood through the framework of *epistemic clientelism* (Kahl, 2025c). To rationalise is to defer to orthodoxy; to seek selective exposure is to entrust platforms with epistemic filtering; to compartmentalise is to accept partial coherence rather than confront contradiction; to blame-shift is to displace agency onto others. In each case, autonomy is traded for comfort, recognition, or belonging.

What Festinger (1957) identified as a psychological drive is thus revealed as an epistemic economy: contradiction generates unease, unease demands relief, and institutions provide the scripts by which relief is achieved. Yet the cost is profound. Instead of sustaining dissonance as a resource for knowledge, societies increasingly outsource its management to systems designed to pacify rather than preserve contradiction.

3.6 Evolutionary and Embodied Roots

Louisa Egan, Laurie Santos, and Paul Bloom (2007) tested dissonance in non-human primates and young children. 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 a cultural artefact but structural to agency itself. To choose is to foreclose; to foreclose is to encounter unease; to submit is to pacify. Resistance, in this light, 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. 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 the barometer of contradiction: dissonance is felt before it is reasoned.

From the standpoint of solitude and finitude, these findings are decisive. Every act of choice marks the boundary of representation; every bodily unease is the echo of finitude. Evolution has primed organisms to pacify contradiction swiftly. In survival contexts, hesitation could be lethal: a primate unable to decide whether to flee or fight risks predation; a human ancestor paralysed before ambiguous signs of threat would not pass on their genes. Rapid foreclosure of dissonance was thus adaptive, a mechanism favouring decisiveness over deliberation.

Yet the very reflex that once preserved life now imperils epistemic life. Modern contexts — scientific inquiry, democratic deliberation, ethical judgment — often demand precisely the opposite: not immediate resolution but the capacity to sustain contradiction. Where survival required speed,

knowledge requires patience; where evolution rewarded closure, epistemic responsibility demands openness. The inherited reflex to silence unease collides with the normative demand to inhabit it.

This paradox underscores the fragility of epistemic agency. Left to instinct, dissonance is pacified before reflection can intervene. Only through cultivation — habituation, philosophical reflection, and fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds that dignify dependence — can individuals and institutions hold dissonance long enough for it to yield transformation. Evolution arms us with fear of contradiction; culture and philosophy must train us to resist it.

3.7 Dissonance as Epistemic Event

The evidence converges: dissonance is not anomaly but condition. It arises across domains — perception in Asch (1951), conscience in Milgram (1974), politics in Feldman (2003) and Arendt (1951), evolution in Egan, Santos, and Bloom (2007), and embodied professional practice in Klein and McColl (2019). What unites these findings is ubiquity: whenever contradiction presses on representation, dissonance emerges.

The ordinary reflex is submission. Unease is pacified through conformity, obedience, rationalisation, or loyalty. April McGrath (2017) catalogued the repertoire of strategies — rationalisation, trivialisation, selective exposure, compartmentalisation, and blame-shifting — and digital infrastructures have since scaled them into systemic filters (Kahl, 2025i). Institutions no less than individuals manage contradiction by suppressing or displacing it.

Submission often takes structured form: *epistemic clientelism* (Kahl, 2025c). At its core lies a conditional exchange of autonomy for recognition, protection, or belonging. At the micro level, *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl, 2025b) showed how dissonance between partners is often resolved not through sustained dialogue but through clientelist trade-offs: one partner surrenders epistemic agency for stability or affection. At the institutional level, universities and corporations absorb contradiction through metrics and orthodoxy; at the political level, authoritarian leaders function as epistemic patrons, dictating coherence in return for loyalty. Across scales, the bargain is constant: dissonance is pacified by collapsing plurality into coherence.

Yet an alternative exists, fragile but real. Resistance means enduring contradiction long enough for it to disclose new epistemic possibilities. It transforms unease into resource, opening the path toward bounded freedom. From solitude and finitude, dissonance signals the limit of representation; resistance preserves that signal as openness rather than foreclosing it.

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, fragile in isolation but sustainable through fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds. The task, therefore, is not to eradicate dissonance but to decide how to inhabit it. The next chapter turns to this alternative: how the

phenomenology of embodiment and habituation can reframe unease from threat into resource, and how fiduciary frameworks can support bounded freedom at the edge of knowledge.

4. The Double Response: Collapse or Endurance

4.1 Collapse into Conformity, Obedience, or Clientelism

The ordinary response to dissonance is collapse. From Festinger's (1957) early experiments onward, research has consistently shown that contradiction generates discomfort, and discomfort is swiftly pacified. Whether by aligning with the group (Asch, 1951), submitting to authority (Milgram, 1974), or adopting authoritarian predispositions that seek closure through uniformity (Feldman, 2003), the pattern recurs: dissonance is reduced rather than endured.

This reflex is intelligible. Contradiction unsettles the scaffolding of representation. The body registers unease — a tightening of the chest, a restless urge for relief — and the mind hastens to restore coherence. Collapse provides comfort, but at the cost of autonomy. Asch's subjects could have trusted their perception, but relief came faster by conforming to "the group." Milgram's participants might have resisted, but relief came through delegating responsibility to the man in the white coat. In each case, dissonance was silenced rather than sustained.

Institutions magnify this reflex. Authoritarian regimes reframe pluralism as threat, institutionalising obedience through censorship, propaganda, and fear (Arendt, 1951). Universities enforce orthodoxy through peer review and metrics, where dissenting voices are marginalised under the guise of "quality assurance" (Kahl, 2025i). Corporate boards suppress minority views in the name of cohesion; journalism filters contradiction to preserve narrative coherence. In each domain, the collapse of dissonance is reinforced structurally, so that what begins as psychological reflex becomes institutional routine.

Epistemic clientelism provides the conceptual frame for this dynamic (Kahl, 2025c). Collapse is rarely a matter of brute surrender; it is structured as a bargain. Autonomy is traded for recognition, belonging, or protection. At the micro level, this may take the form of a student deferring uncritically to a professor's interpretation; at the macro level, a population rallying behind a leader who promises certainty. In both cases, dissonance is absorbed into a clientelist exchange: unease pacified in return for security.

The result is illusory freedom. Collapse yields the feeling of stability but at the cost of epistemic agency. Plurality is reduced to coherence, dissent muted into consensus, and fragility disguised as strength. Collapse is the ordinary reflex because it is easy. The difficulty lies in endurance.

4.2 Endurance as fragile alternative

If collapse is the ordinary reflex, endurance is the exceptional alternative. To endure dissonance is to resist the impulse toward immediate closure and to inhabit contradiction long enough for it to disclose new possibilities. This path is rare, fragile, and difficult — yet it is the only one that allows bounded freedom to emerge.

Philosophy provides deep precedents for this stance. Schopenhauer (1969/1819) insisted that contradiction is ineradicable because will perpetually exceeds representation. His claim that "the world is my representation" was not a promise of certainty but an acknowledgement that all knowing is mediated and finite. Endurance, in this light, is not the triumph of reason over contradiction but the acceptance of contradiction as constitutive of experience.

Husserl (1983/1913) offered a complementary lesson. Through the *epoché*, the suspension of assumptions, he showed that meaning arises within the horizon of consciousness — always partial, never complete. To practice phenomenology is to dwell with this incompleteness, resisting the urge to collapse plurality into premature closure. The *epoché* is thus a method of enduring dissonance: to refrain from silencing contradiction in order to see what it reveals.

Merleau-Ponty (2012/1945) carried this further by grounding endurance in the body. To perceive is not merely to "think" but to "inhabit": the body's gestures, hesitations, and openness to others are ways of sustaining ambiguity. Intersubjectivity, for Merleau-Ponty, never dissolves solitude, yet this non-fusion is not failure. It is precisely the partial intertwining of horizons that allows new meaning to arise. Endurance here means living with the tension of incompleteness rather than fleeing it.

From these traditions, endurance emerges not as stoic suppression but as cultivated practice. Habituation plays a crucial role. Just as muscles adapt to repeated strain, the mind and body can be trained to remain with dissonance. Philosophical inquiry, artistic creation, and even meditative practice can reframe unease from something to be avoided into a signal of proximity to truth. Anxiety, instead of threat, becomes resource.

The key concept is epistemic agency: the capacity to sustain openness in the face of contradiction. Agency is not independence from all dependence — it is the fragile ability to resist premature closure, to delay surrender to conformity or obedience. To exercise epistemic agency is to hold the line between fear and freedom, transforming dissonance from pathology into condition for knowledge.

Yet this alternative remains fragile. Individuals rarely endure alone for long; institutions often punish rather than reward sustained contradiction. Without scaffolds, endurance collapses back into conformity. But with scaffolds, endurance can crystallise into practices that protect plurality. Endurance is fragile, but it is the hinge on which bounded freedom turns.

4.3 The freedom–fear duality

Endurance is never neutral. To remain with dissonance is to linger at the threshold where unease may disclose freedom but may equally collapse into fear. Heidegger's (1962/1927) distinction between *Angst* and *Furcht* illuminates this duality. Anxiety (*Angst*) is objectless: it discloses finitude itself, the openness of existence, the recognition that every possibility is shadowed by exclusion. Fear (*Furcht*), by contrast, is directed: it attaches to particular threats — the danger of exclusion, humiliation, or loss of recognition.

At the level of epistemic life, this duality is decisive. Anxiety can be reinterpreted as the very signal of freedom: it marks the encounter with finitude, the unsettling recognition that no horizon is final, no closure permanent. To remain with anxiety is to accept fragility as the ground of agency. Fear, however, accelerates collapse. It channels unease into avoidance, driving the subject toward conformity, obedience, or silence. In this sense, fear is the accelerant of epistemic clientelism: autonomy is traded for the comfort of belonging, the reassurance of recognition, or the stability of imposed coherence (Kahl, 2025c).

The freedom–fear duality is thus not a peripheral matter but the affective core of dissonance. At the edge of knowledge, unease can open into freedom if endured, or collapse into fear if evaded. To cultivate epistemic agency is to learn to distinguish between these registers — to sense fear without being paralysed, and to interpret anxiety not as danger but as the condition of possibility for knowledge.

Yet endurance alone is not sufficient. As argued in *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl, 2025b), fear often manifests in micro-dependencies: partners surrender epistemic agency to preserve recognition. At the macro level, authoritarian regimes institutionalise fear to suppress plurality (Arendt, 1951). In both cases, fear drives collapse. The only counterbalance is scaffolding strong enough to dignify dependence — institutional arrangements that convert fear into a companion of inquiry rather than its silencer.

The paradox is clear. Freedom begins where certainty ends, but at that same threshold fear lurks. The task is not to abolish fear — impossible and undesirable — but to ensure that institutions protect the fragile possibility that unease might open into freedom rather than close into submission.

4.4 Conclusion of Chapter 4: From Fragile Endurance to Institutional Scaffolds

The double response to dissonance is now clear. Collapse is the ordinary reflex: conformity, obedience, or clientelism pacify unease but yield only illusory freedom. Endurance, by contrast, is fragile: it requires cultivating epistemic agency and reframing anxiety as the signal of finitude rather than its threat. Yet endurance remains precarious when left to individual courage alone. Fear persists as accelerant, always pressing toward closure.

If freedom is to be more than a rare achievement, scaffolding is required. Institutions must be reoriented so that dependence is dignified rather than exploited, and unease preserved rather than silenced. The next chapter turns to fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds as the normative condition for sustaining endurance — frameworks that bind epistemic authorities to duties of candour, accountability, and openness, so that dissonance can be held long enough to become resource for knowledge.

5. Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds

5.1 Conceptual basis

Fiduciary law begins with a simple but far-reaching insight: whenever one party wields discretionary power over another who is vulnerable, duties of loyalty, candour, and accountability arise. Trustees, guardians, directors, and agents are bound because those who depend on them cannot fully monitor or control the decisions that affect their welfare (Frankel, 2011). Fiduciary obligation is thus not optional morality but legal architecture designed to dignify dependence.

Knowledge relations are structurally analogous. Students rely on teachers for access to disciplinary horizons, patients on physicians for medical judgment, citizens on journalists for truthful reporting, and societies on politicians for candid governance. In each case, epistemic authorities exercise discretionary power over dependents whose access to truth, recognition, or survival is shaped by decisions they cannot fully oversee.

Miller and Gold (2014) sharpen this point by distinguishing trust from entrustment. Trust may be a psychological attitude, but fiduciary duties arise only when trust is institutionalised as entrustment: a vulnerable party places their epistemic or material interests in the hands of another precisely in contexts where self-protection is limited or impossible. It is this asymmetry of power and vulnerability that generates fiduciary responsibility.

Extending this framework to epistemic life reframes dissonance not as private discomfort but as a public matter. Institutions of knowledge — universities, corporations, media, politics — do not merely inspire trust but receive entrusted authority. They therefore owe fiduciary duties to preserve contradiction, sustain plurality, and prevent dissonance from being prematurely pacified. Only by recognising knowledge relations as fiduciary can dependence be dignified and epistemic freedom sustained.

5.2 Academia

The university ought to be the paradigm case of an institution where dissonance is preserved and cultivated. Peer review, in principle, should act as fiduciary scaffolding: a duty of candour toward new knowledge, loyalty to truth above institutional or personal interest, and accountability for fair evaluation. In practice, however, peer review often collapses into epistemic clientelism. Miranda Fricker (2007) showed how epistemic injustice arises when voices are silenced or discredited; in peer review, this manifests when originality is dismissed as "methodological weakness" or when unconventional epistemologies are excluded. What is presented as quality assurance frequently masks conformity-enforcing mechanisms that pacify dissonance rather than sustain it.

My own work has traced these failures in detail. In *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review* (Kahl, 2025k), I argued that peer review operates as a colonial filter, policing epistemic boundaries in ways that enforce orthodoxy. In *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design* (Kahl, 2025l), I showed how institutional structures entrench fiduciary breaches by systematically privileging dominant paradigms while marginalising dissent. And in *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* (Kahl, 2025i), I highlighted how repositories, metrics, and citation indices act as epistemic instruments of control, filtering what counts as legitimate knowledge while excluding the disruptive. Collectively, these mechanisms convert what should be fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds into devices of clientelism.

The *Research Excellence Framework* (REF) exemplifies this drift. Intended to ensure accountability and reward excellence, the REF has been shown to reward "safe" research while penalising epistemic risk-taking. The 2018 review commissioned by the UK government confirmed that the system disadvantages high-risk, high-reward research, incentivising incremental contributions over transformative challenges to existing paradigms (Technopolis Group, 2018). This bias is not accidental: it follows from an audit culture that privileges measurability and coherence, thereby suppressing the very dissonance out of which epistemic breakthroughs might emerge.

Ron Barnett (2000) diagnosed this dynamic as the "performativity" of higher education: universities reorient themselves toward audit targets, performative indicators, and reputational visibility, rather than toward epistemic openness. In my own *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia* (Kahl, 2025m), I extended this critique by showing how metrics displace epistemic substance with performative substitutes: visibility, citation counts, and rankings become stand-ins for truth. The fiduciary breach is stark: those entrusted to safeguard the epistemic life of the university instead manage appearances, leaving dependents vulnerable to epistemic injustice by design.

The result is a betrayal of fiduciary responsibility. Students, scholars, and the wider public depend on universities for access to epistemic horizons they cannot oversee directly. Yet the current architecture converts this dependence into vulnerability: epistemic authorities manage contradiction out of existence rather than dignify it. The promise of peer review and assessment regimes was to preserve

plurality under conditions of trust; the practice has too often been to enforce uniformity through systemic avoidance of dissonance.

Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds can reorient this trajectory. In *Towards Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath* (Kahl, 2025h), I proposed that academics be bound by explicit fiduciary commitments: to disclose conflicts of interest, to preserve dissenting reports in peer review, and to treat dependence not as weakness to be exploited but as trust to be dignified. Such scaffolds would reframe dependence as a source of strength, protecting dissonance from premature closure. Only under such reforms can universities recover their fiduciary role: not as gatekeepers of coherence, but as guardians of dissonance — sustaining contradiction long enough for new knowledge to emerge.

5.3 Corporate Governance

Corporate governance offers a revealing site where dissonance is routinely pacified through delegation, denial, and selective avoidance. Responsibility is displaced in ways that diffuse accountability and silence contradiction. Chang, Solomon, and Westerfield (2016) showed how investors often manage the discomfort of losses by attributing blame to fund managers, even when their own choices contributed to failure. Delegation, in this sense, is not only an efficiency mechanism but also a psychological one: it allows dissonance to be outsourced, pacifying unease by displacing agency.

The collapse of Carillion illustrates the systemic scale of this pattern. Parliamentary inquiries found that directors repeatedly ignored warnings from employees and auditors, while shareholders assumed oversight lay elsewhere (House of Commons, 2019). The effect was cumulative: each actor shielded themselves from dissonant knowledge by assuming responsibility belonged to another. Contradictory signals were muted, warnings disregarded, and optimism preserved until the company entered insolvency. What appeared to be corporate failure was also epistemic failure: the inability of governance structures to sustain contradiction long enough to correct course.

In *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl, 2025a), I argued that boards should be held not only to legal duties of care and loyalty but also to fiduciary-epistemic duties. These include the obligation to integrate dissenting perspectives, disclose uncertainty candidly, and preserve contradiction as a safeguard. Fiduciary openness demands more than tolerance of dissent: it requires institutionalising mechanisms that ensure dissent cannot be erased.

Two reforms illustrate this approach. First, minority reports should be made a standing requirement of board deliberations. Documenting and addressing dissent would prevent premature closure, obligating directors to confront uncomfortable truths rather than bury them in the pursuit of consensus. Second, epistemic audits could supplement financial audits. Whereas financial audits test compliance with accounting standards, epistemic audits would evaluate whether directors adequately

considered contradictory evidence, disclosed risks honestly, and preserved dissent in decision-making processes.

Such scaffolds would reconfigure the epistemic architecture of the boardroom. Instead of treating contradiction as liability to be managed away, fiduciary openness reframes it as protection against error. Dissonance becomes not an irritant to be pacified but a condition of responsible governance. Inhabiting contradiction would no longer depend on the courage of exceptional individuals; it would be embedded in institutional duty.

The corporate domain therefore underscores the wider thesis of this paper. Collapse into avoidance and delegation is the ordinary reflex, offering comfort but eroding autonomy and accountability. Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds can transform this reflex by obligating directors to sustain dissonance long enough for knowledge to become actionable. By treating epistemic responsibility as a fiduciary duty, corporate governance can move from avoidance to endurance — from suppressing contradiction to preserving it as the precondition of resilience.

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 (1988) propaganda model showed how advertising, sourcing, and institutional pressures filter information into manufactured consensus, muting dissenting voices.

Contemporary examples reinforce the pattern. In *Dominion v. Fox News*, the network agreed to a $787.5 million settlement in April 2023 after a summary judgment confirmed that election-fraud claims repeatedly aired were false. Internal communications revealed that hosts and executives knew these claims lacked basis yet continued to broadcast them, fearing audience loss (Associated Press, 2023; Reuters, 2023). The Cambridge Analytica scandal similarly exposed how personal Facebook data was harvested and used to deliver micro-targeted political messages — tailoring narratives to reinforce prior beliefs and limiting exposure to dissenting perspectives (Schneble, Elger, & Shaw, 2018). Both cases exemplify avoidance: dissonance is not confronted but absorbed into narrative coherence, manufactured at scale.

The problem extends beyond partisan media. In *How Institutional Corruption Captured UK Higher Education Journalism* (Kahl, 2025f) and in *Report on Times Higher Education: Conflicts of Interest in Rankings, Journalism, and Consultancy* (Kahl, 2025o), I documented how rankings agencies, consultancies, and journalists form epistemic cartels, mutually reinforcing metrics while silencing

critique. Citizens and academics alike are positioned as dependents, fed filtered information under the guise of impartial reporting.

5.4.2 Habermas and fiduciary candour

Jürgen Habermas (1996) argued that legitimacy in communication requires inclusive, transparent, and non-coercive dialogue. Media capture undermines this requirement, converting journalism into a mechanism of avoidance rather than deliberation. Where public discourse should preserve plurality, capture replaces it with managed coherence. Journalism, in such cases, becomes complicit in what Habermas called the colonisation of the lifeworld: systemic imperatives displace communicative rationality, and citizens' capacity to engage with contradiction is eroded.

5.4.3 Toward fiduciary journalism

A fiduciary framework would obligate journalists and media institutions to candour and loyalty to truth rather than to advertisers, institutional patrons, or partisan audiences. Fiduciary candour entails disclosure of conflicts of interest, transparency in sourcing, and intentional preservation of dissenting perspectives. As I argued in *Epistemic Gatekeepers as the Fourth Estate: Reining in Media's Unchecked Epistemic Power* (Kahl, 2025n), journalists must be recognised as epistemic fiduciaries. Citizens, as epistemic dependents, are entitled to protection against epistemic harm caused by silence, distortion, or capture.

5.4.4 From silence to endurance in media

Fiduciary candour transforms journalism from a mechanism of avoidance into a vehicle of endurance. Contradictory claims would be contextualised rather than erased; plural voices protected rather than filtered out. The result is not cacophony but pluralism: a press that sustains contradiction as a condition of democratic legitimacy. Avoidance silences; endurance amplifies.

If fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds can reorient journalism from capture toward candour, the same principle must extend to political institutions, where representation itself depends upon preserving plurality rather than collapsing it into managed coherence.

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 call to "Take Back Control" exemplified this dynamic: a complex debate over sovereignty, migration, and economic interdependence was reduced to a single imperative that promised relief from unease through

national closure (Igwe, 2022). Similarly, Trump's "Build the Wall" and Orbán's rhetoric of national unity offered coherence in place of plurality, pacifying the dissonance of diversity with the comfort of uniformity.

Yang et al. (2021) demonstrate a parallel dynamic within organisations: employees who engage in unethical pro-organisational behaviour experience dissonance, which erodes moral identity. The tension 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 (2006) has argued that the legitimacy of democracy depends on integrating diverse knowledge. 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, sustaining contradiction and producing recommendations that commanded broad legitimacy (Farrell, Suiter, Harris, & Cunningham, 2021). The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly institutionalised contradiction by convening a representative body to deliberate on proportional representation (Warren & Pearse, 2008). At the international level, the OECD (2020) has documented more than 300 deliberative mini-publics worldwide, concluding that such forums enhance legitimacy by sustaining plurality and integrating diverse perspectives.

My own work has extended this argument by showing how political loyalty often distorts fiduciary responsibility. In *Constituents First, Party Second* (Kahl, 2025p), I argue that representatives' fiduciary duties must run to citizens rather than parties, reversing the current logic of parliamentary politics. Under fiduciary democracy, candour and accountability to constituents would replace party loyalty as the primary scaffolding of representation.

5.5.3 From populist loyalty to endurance in democracy

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

5.6 Synthesis: fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds across domains

Across academia, corporations, journalism, and politics, the same pattern recurs: dissonance is ordinarily pacified through closure, whether in the form of peer review orthodoxy, boardroom delegation, media capture, or populist slogans. These strategies deliver comfort but erode autonomy, silencing contradiction at precisely the moment when it might disclose new knowledge.

Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds offer an alternative. By binding epistemic authorities to duties of candour, accountability, and loyalty to dependents, they dignify dependence rather than exploit it. In academia, they would protect originality from suppression; in corporate governance, they would preserve dissent through epistemic audits; in journalism, they would institutionalise transparency and plurality; in politics, they would embed candour into representation and deliberation.

The point is structural. Just as fiduciary law recognises that vulnerability is not weakness but the ground of relational duty, fiduciary epistemic design reframes dependence as dignity. Contradiction is not a threat to be erased but a resource to be preserved. Only scaffolds strong enough to hold dissonance without collapse can transform ordinary reflex into collective resilience.

The next chapter develops this insight further by articulating epistemic pluralism as the horizon of bounded freedom — the philosophical and institutional condition under which dissonance can be preserved rather than pacified.

6. Toward Epistemic Pluralism

6.1 From scaffolds to pluralism

Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds are instruments, not destinations. Their function is to hold contradiction open long enough for it to yield insight rather than be smothered by premature closure. Without scaffolds, dissent collapses under the weight of conformity; without plurality, scaffolds ossify into technical procedure, preserving form without substance. The horizon is therefore epistemic pluralism: the structured coexistence of divergent perspectives, secured not by accident but by design.

Plurality is not a luxury to be indulged when convenient, but a necessity born of finitude. Every act of knowing is bounded; every decision forecloses alternatives; no perspective is exhaustive. To deny plurality is to deny this ontological fact, substituting an illusion of coherence for the reality of conflict. Scaffolds dignify dependence by binding authority to candour and accountability, but their ultimate purpose is to sustain plurality — to ensure that contradiction is preserved rather than extinguished.

The contrast is stark. Orders oriented to uniformity manufacture closure: academic gatekeeping filters out dissent, corporate boards suppress bad news, media capture enforces coherence, populist slogans

collapse diversity into loyalty. Orders oriented to plurality organise for openness: they institutionalise contradiction so that judgment ripens, legitimacy takes shape, and error can be corrected before it hardens into catastrophe.

Plurality, in this sense, is not destabilising. It is the only durable source of stability in finite institutions. Where uniformity seeks tranquillity through suppression, pluralism secures resilience through sustained openness. Fiduciary-epistemic duties provide the juridical and normative scaffolds to hold this openness in place.

6.2 Philosophical roots

The case for pluralism is anchored in three complementary traditions, each of which illuminates why fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds are necessary to sustain contradiction.

Value pluralism (Berlin). Isaiah Berlin argued that central human values are irreducibly many and often in conflict (Berlin, 1969). Liberty, equality, justice, and knowledge cannot be reconciled under a single master principle without distortion or loss. Uniformity, on this view, is a false peace purchased at the expense of value itself. Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds answer this by obligating authorities to acknowledge conflict openly rather than suppress it, converting value pluralism from a tragic fact into an institutional norm.

Epistemic freedom (Mill). John Stuart Mill insisted that free expression is indispensable, because even false or partial opinions may contain overlooked truth or force prevailing views into sharper articulation (Mill, 2011/1859). The silencing of dissonant voices deprives society of corrective friction. Fiduciary duties of candour and accountability carry this insight into institutional practice: they require epistemic authorities not only to tolerate dissent but to protect it as the very condition of inquiry and self-government.

Agonistic democracy (Mouffe). Chantal Mouffe described democracy not as consensus but as agonism — conflict domesticated without violence (Mouffe, 2000). Where uniformity treats disagreement as pathology, agonistic pluralism recognises adversaries as legitimate participants whose presence sustains democracy itself. Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds fit this agonistic task: by binding epistemic authorities to candour and openness, they preserve disagreement while preventing its displacement into authoritarian closure.

Together these traditions show that plurality is not a luxury but a necessity. It answers the existential unease described earlier: anxiety (*Angst*) discloses the finitude of knowledge, while fear (*Furcht*) tempts retreat into conformity. Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds channel these affects into constructive endurance, securing institutional settings in which contradiction is not erased but preserved as the ground of resilience.

6.3 Pluralism in Practice

6.3.1 Academia: Open Peer Review as Pluralist Scaffold

Peer review ought to serve as a fiduciary scaffold: a duty of candour toward emerging knowledge, loyalty to truth above disciplinary or institutional interest, and accountability for fair evaluation. Yet in practice, it often collapses into epistemic clientelism. In *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review* (Kahl, 2025k), I argued that conventional peer review entrenches epistemic colonialism by enforcing uniform standards and suppressing heterodox voices. Reviewers frequently rationalise away dissonant results as "methodological weakness" or trivialise originality as "incremental," thereby silencing contradiction rather than sustaining it.

Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds can counteract this closure. In *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl, 2025d), I proposed a model of fiduciary-epistemic accountability that binds reviewers and editors to duties of candour, disclosure, and plurality. Open peer review platforms exemplify such scaffolds: multiple reports are published rather than collapsed into a single verdict; minority views are preserved in the record; and readers are empowered to confront epistemic plurality directly. The result is not chaos but structured openness — dissonance institutionalised rather than erased.

Critical scholarship reinforces this trajectory. Dobusch and Heimstädt (2019) call for open peer review as a governance response to predatory publishing, framing transparency as a safeguard against capture. Ross-Hellauer et al. (2017) show that most academics favour at least some elements of open peer review, though resistance persists against full identity disclosure. Together, these findings indicate that pluralism is not only normatively desirable but practically feasible when supported by scaffolds that dignify dissent.

Open peer review thus marks a fragile but real step toward epistemic pluralism in academia. Where traditional peer review pacifies dissonance by filtering out the unfamiliar, fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds hold contradiction in public view, dignifying dependence while preserving plurality.

6.3.2 Corporations: Dissent-by-Design

Corporate governance often resolves contradiction by erasing minority opinions. Dissent in the boardroom is frequently left unwritten, dismissed as unconstructive, or absorbed into the majoritarian record. Yet recent research shows that dissent is far from anomalous. Eirola's (2024) integrative review highlights how boardroom dissent functions as a source of critical challenge, often correlating with improved decision-making. Sauerwald, van Oosterhout, and van Essen (2015) demonstrate that shareholder dissent serves as an expressive mechanism, surfacing contradictions that directors and executives might otherwise suppress. Sauerwald, van Oosterhout, van Essen, and Peng (2016) extend this by showing how proxy advisors shape dissent across institutional contexts, underscoring that dissent is structurally necessary for governance even when institutions attempt to silence it.

Some boards are beginning to experiment with dissent-by-design: formally recording minority reports alongside majority decisions. This practice prevents closure from erasing contradiction and allows organisations to retain epistemic memory of contested judgments. Instead of treating dissonance as a liability, dissent-by-design reframes it as an asset — a standing safeguard against overconfidence, groupthink, or institutional myopia.

From the fiduciary perspective, the implications are clear. Directors, as epistemic trustees, owe not only duties of care and loyalty but also duties of candour to dissent itself. Recording minority reports and institutionalising epistemic audits would embed contradiction into governance, ensuring that dissonant evidence is preserved rather than erased. As I argued in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl, 2025a), such scaffolds protect the institutional memory of conflict and ensure that contradiction remains available rather than being suppressed for the sake of coherence or ease. Fiduciary openness thus dignifies dissent as an epistemic resource — a standing reminder that coherence should not be purchased at the cost of truth.

6.3.3 Journalism

The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) exemplifies pluralism not as theory but as method. The Panama Papers investigation mobilised more than 350 reporters from 80 countries, preserving their diverse epistemic horizons while jointly producing exposés of global financial secrecy (Berglez & Gearing, 2018). Instead of collapsing divergent findings into a homogenised narrative, the consortium scaffolded plurality: transparency in sourcing, collaborative cross-national verification, and the protection of dissenting perspectives. This structure transformed contradiction from liability into resource, making dissonance the driver of breakthrough.

In *How Institutional Corruption Captured UK Higher Education Journalism* (Kahl, 2025f), I contrasted this pluralist method with the epistemic capture that marks more conventional media institutions. There, narratives are simplified for marketability, dissent is silenced by editorial hierarchies, and dissonance is pacified for institutional comfort. The ICIJ demonstrates the opposite: that fiduciary candour and collaborative openness can turn journalism into a site where contradiction is not erased but preserved as collective uncovering.

6.3.4 Politics: Deliberation as Scaffold

Political institutions, too, can sustain contradiction when structured for pluralism. Deliberative mini-publics offer perhaps the clearest example. Ireland's Citizens' Assembly deliberated on issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion, bringing together randomly selected citizens to honour conflict and listen across difference before reaching recommendations that commanded broad legitimacy (Farrell, Suiter, Harris, & Cunningham, 2021). Rather than pacifying dissonance through populist slogans, the Assembly institutionalised its endurance, making disagreement visible while guiding it toward judgment.

Other cases reinforce the point. The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform demonstrated how random selection, structured deliberation, and transparency can preserve minority views within democratic design. At the international level, the OECD (2020) documented more than 300 mini-publics across diverse contexts, concluding that such forums enhance legitimacy by embedding plurality into governance itself.

These models demonstrate that pluralism is not utopian but practicable. When political institutions adopt fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds — randomisation to dignify equality, procedures to protect minority perspectives, transparency to preserve candour — representation honours contradiction rather than erases it. Pluralism becomes the structured horizon of democratic legitimacy.

6.4 Objections: Paralysis, Inefficiency, and the Value of Delay

Pluralism often attracts scepticism on two familiar grounds: that it risks paralysis and that it sacrifices efficiency. Both objections reflect the deeper clientelist preference for uniformity — the impulse to pacify contradiction by collapsing it into coherence. They mistake dissonance for pathology rather than recognising it as constitutive of epistemic life.

Paralysis. Critics warn that sustaining contradiction risks gridlock. Cass Sunstein (2003) has argued that excessive diversity can fragment judgment and undermine collective action. Yet paralysis is not inherent to plurality. The point is not endless debate but structured delay: preserving contradiction long enough for dissent to be integrated before closure. Decisions reached under such scaffolds carry legitimacy rather than the taint of suppression. By contrast, uniformity accelerates only by erasing disagreement — a comfort that weakens institutions by masking fragility. As Berlin (1969) reminded us, values are irreducibly plural, and attempts to force them into harmony are evasions that sacrifice truth for tranquillity.

Efficiency. A second objection insists that pluralist structures are resource-intensive. Open peer review, deliberative forums, or epistemic audits demand time and money. Yet the costs of uniformity are often higher. The collapse of Carillion, where directors systematically suppressed dissonant knowledge, illustrates how false efficiency accelerates systemic failure. Similarly, Klein and McColl (2019) showed how avoidance under diagnostic uncertainty led clinicians to cling to premature conclusions, perpetuating error at the expense of patient care. In both cases, speed came at the cost of truth and trust.

From the perspective of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl, 2025c), these objections exemplify the structural temptation of clientelism: to trade autonomy for security, or accuracy for speed. Uniformity offers illusory efficiency by silencing contradiction, but the result is fragile consensus vulnerable to collapse. Plurality slows institutions, but this delay is precisely the condition of bounded freedom, resilient knowledge, and durable legitimacy.

6.5 Toward fiduciary pluralism

Pluralism cannot be left to chance. Without scaffolding, contradiction is quickly suppressed under the familiar pressures of uniformity: professional gatekeeping, corporate delegation, media capture, or populist slogans. If plurality is to endure, it must be bound to duty. Fiduciary principles provide the necessary architecture, dignifying dependence by binding epistemic authorities to candour, loyalty, and accountability.

Academia. In *Towards Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath* (Kahl, 2025h), I proposed that scholars undertake fiduciary commitments to truth, humility, and openness. Such oaths would convert professional ideals into enforceable duties: reviewers and supervisors obligated to preserve rather than erase dissent, editors required to disclose conflicts of interest, and heterodox perspectives protected under a framework of candour. As developed in *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review* (Kahl, 2025k), fiduciary peer review would replace colonial uniformity with structured plurality: multiple reports preserved, minority judgments recorded, and plural epistemologies safeguarded under duty rather than tolerated at discretion.

Corporate governance. In *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl, 2025a), I argued that boards must be accountable not only for financial outcomes but also for epistemic integrity. Duties of candour require disclosure of uncertainty; duties of accountability demand integration of dissenting knowledge. Epistemic audits could institutionalise this framework, ensuring that minority reports are preserved in the boardroom and that plural perspectives are treated as safeguards rather than inefficiencies. Fiduciary pluralism thus transforms dissent from disruption into institutional memory.

Knowledge institutions. As I showed in *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* (Kahl, 2025i), platforms often claim epistemic sovereignty by enforcing uniform standards, masking suppression as authority. Fiduciary pluralism would recast universities and repositories not as epistemic monarchs but as stewards of plurality. Their role would be custodial rather than coercive: to preserve multiplicity of knowledge rather than impose singular coherence.

Journalism and politics. Fiduciary candour in media would obligate transparency in sourcing, disclosure of conflicts, and protection of minority perspectives — countering the silencing practices documented in *How Institutional Corruption Captured UK Higher Education Journalism* (Kahl, 2025f). In politics, fiduciary democracy extends these principles into representation: leaders bound to reciprocity and candour, citizens recognised as epistemic dependents entitled to plurality rather than pacification. Deliberative forums and mini-publics already show how contradiction can be preserved without paralysis; fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds would embed such openness into the very structure of governance.

At stake is more than procedure. Hannah Arendt (1972) warned that truth becomes fragile whenever political order substitutes propaganda or bureaucratic coherence for judgment. Jürgen Habermas

(1996) argued that legitimacy depends on inclusive, non-coercive communication under conditions of reciprocity. Fiduciary pluralism operationalises both insights: it makes plurality enforceable, obligating those with epistemic authority to sustain contradiction rather than erase it.

Pluralism is fragile without duty; with fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds, it becomes durable.

6.6 Conclusion: pluralism as horizon

Pluralism is the horizon toward which fiduciary scaffolding points. Solitude discloses finitude; finitude produces contradiction; contradiction generates dissonance. The ordinary reflex is avoidance: suppressing dissonance through uniformity, manufacturing the comfort of coherence and the illusion of freedom. Endurance sustains dissonance, yielding bounded freedom, but left to individuals alone it remains fragile and exceptional. What endurance requires is scaffolding: institutional architectures that dignify dependence and bind authority to candour, loyalty, and accountability.

Epistemic pluralism is neither consensus nor chaos. It is the structured coexistence of divergent voices under fiduciary duty — a collective form of bounded freedom, secured within finitude by institutions strong enough to resist closure. As I argued in *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl, 2025c), collapse into uniformity is the systemic face of clientelism: autonomy traded for recognition, protection, or belonging. Fiduciary pluralism is its antidote: the institutionalisation of contradiction as resource rather than threat.

The stakes extend beyond academia, corporations, journalism, or politics. At the emerging frontiers of artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and climate governance, dissonance will intensify, and so will the temptation of uniformity. Algorithmic coherence and technocratic monism promise relief but risk epistemic fragility at planetary scale. Precisely here, fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds become indispensable: frameworks that sustain plurality not as luxury but as condition of legitimacy and, ultimately, of survival.

The next chapter therefore turns to these frontiers, asking how pluralism, scaffolded by fiduciary duties, may shape the governance of humanity's most urgent challenges.

7. Frontiers: AI, Biotechnology, Climate

7.1 Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence epitomises the lure of coherence. Large-scale models generate outputs that appear authoritative, compressing plurality into seamless single answers. Institutions under pressure to decide quickly adopt such systems as epistemic shortcuts. Yet the very scale that makes AI

powerful also magnifies the risk of uniformity. When algorithmic judgments are opaque and unchallengeable, dissent is not only marginalised but erased by design.

In *Foucault's Dream: On the Domestication of Knowledge and Epistemic Subjugation* (Kahl, 2025e), I argued that epistemic subjugation is most insidious when it is interiorised as aesthetic inevitability — when control masquerades as beauty or efficiency. AI threatens precisely this: the domestication of plurality into machine coherence, where difference is coded as "error" to be corrected rather than signal to be sustained. The risk is not simply technical but ontological: the transformation of contradiction into noise.

As I showed in *Is Artificial Intelligence Really Undermining Democracy?* (Kahl, 2025g), the error lies in attributing political agency to the artefact itself. AI is epistemically neutral. Democratic erosion stems from the institutions that govern it, and from their failures of fiduciary accountability. When parliaments, regulators, or corporations delegate judgment wholesale to algorithmic systems, they pacify dissonance by outsourcing autonomy to algorithmic patrons. This is epistemic clientelism at machine scale: a structural exchange of autonomy for the comfort of coherence.

The response cannot be to romanticise plurality while leaving institutions unchanged. It must be to embed fiduciary-epistemic scaffolds into AI governance: duties of candour (disclosing model limits and uncertainties), duties of transparency (opening datasets, architectures, and training processes to scrutiny), and duties of accountability (requiring epistemic audits of dissenting knowledge excluded by the system). Such scaffolds dignify dependence, ensuring that plurality is not erased but preserved as condition of legitimate governance.

Survival, in this domain, depends not on coherence at machine scale but on institutions strong enough to resist it. The challenge is to harness AI's productive capacities while preventing its conversion into epistemic monopoly. The task is not to suppress AI, but to scaffold it: binding algorithmic authority under fiduciary duty, so that plurality remains visible where uniformity tempts.

7.2 Biotechnology

Biotechnology sharpens the dilemma of dissonance at the frontier of human self-understanding. Advances in gene editing, synthetic biology, and neurotechnology generate unprecedented possibilities but also unprecedented risks. The temptation of coherence appears in the technocratic narrative of inevitability: the genome as code to be corrected, the body as system to be optimised, humanity as programmable matter awaiting redesign. Jennifer Doudna and Samuel Sternberg (2017) captured both the exhilaration and the dread of CRISPR's promise, emphasising that the same technology that can cure disease could also be used for enhancement or manipulation. Sheila Jasanoff and J. Benjamin Hurlbut (2018) similarly warned that without global governance, gene editing risks becoming a "runaway domain" in which scientific momentum substitutes for democratic deliberation.

This reductionist logic pacifies dissonance by treating plurality of values — dignity, identity, justice, ecological integrity — as noise to be silenced. History illustrates the danger. The eugenics movement sought epistemic and social coherence by collapsing human difference into hierarchies, a project now recognised as moral and scientific catastrophe. Today, inevitability narratives in biotechnology risk repeating the pattern under new banners: progress, innovation, or health security. Each substitutes singular coherence for plurality, foreclosing democratic deliberation and concealing contradiction.

From the perspective of fiduciary–epistemic governance, biotechnology requires scaffolds capable of preserving dissonance. Duties of candour must oblige scientists and institutions to disclose risks and uncertainties rather than projecting mastery. Duties of accountability must bind research institutions to publics whose futures they reshape. Duties of humility must restrain the tendency to convert uncertainty into inevitability. The global observatory model proposed by Jasanoff and Hurlbut (2018) embodies this aspiration: an institutional scaffold designed not to dictate consensus but to preserve plurality of perspectives across cultures, disciplines, and publics.

Without such scaffolds, biotechnology risks devolving into epistemic clientelism at planetary scale: publics surrendering autonomy to scientific or corporate patrons in exchange for promised cures or protections. With scaffolds, by contrast, biotechnology can become a domain where contradiction is sustained long enough for judgment to ripen, legitimacy to form, and innovation to proceed without erasing plurality.

7.3 Climate governance

Climate governance epitomises the tension between plurality and uniformity on a planetary scale. The crisis is defined by contradiction: long-term planetary limits confront short-term political incentives, global interdependence collides with national sovereignty, and justice for the most vulnerable competes with the interests of the powerful. The temptation is to pacify this dissonance through simplified coherence. Net Zero targets exemplify this logic. Dyke, Watson, and Knorr (2021) warn that the rhetoric of “Net Zero by 2050” projects the illusion of certainty while concealing unresolved conflicts — between mitigation and adaptation, carbon capture and decarbonisation, global equity and national interest. Such slogans displace anxiety with the appearance of inevitability, offering comfort but eroding legitimacy.

The deeper issue is fiduciary. Henry Shue (2014) argued that climate justice demands recognising the disproportionate vulnerability of poorer nations and future generations. High-emitting states and corporations exercise discretionary power over a planetary commons that others cannot escape. Their responsibilities are therefore fiduciary: to disclose risks candidly, to account for cumulative harms, and to preserve plurality in decision-making rather than suppress dissent with technocratic monism. To reduce climate policy to slogans or technocratic projections is to betray this fiduciary trust.

Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds reframe the challenge. Duties of candour would require transparency about uncertainties, trade-offs, and contested values. Duties of accountability would bind states and corporations to the interests of those most vulnerable, not only those most powerful. Duties of humility would guard against premature closure, ensuring that alternative pathways — indigenous knowledge, degrowth models, non-market solutions — remain visible rather than erased. In this sense, sustaining dissonance is not a luxury but a condition of survival.

Where uniformity pacifies contradiction with illusory coherence, fiduciary pluralism preserves contradiction as resource. Climate governance cannot succeed by erasing conflict; it must institutionalise it in forms capable of producing legitimate and durable action. Plurality, protected under fiduciary duty, is therefore not merely ethical but existential.

7.4 Synthesis

The three frontiers — artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and climate governance — reveal a common pattern. Each domain intensifies dissonance: uncertainty is radical, consequences are global, and stakes are existential. Yet in each case the temptation is the same: to pacify contradiction with coherence. Machine learning compresses plurality into algorithmic output; gene editing frames humanity as programmable code; climate politics projects certainty through Net Zero slogans. Coherence appears as strength but in truth produces fragility: dissent is erased, alternatives silenced, and legitimacy undermined.

Plurality, by contrast, is survival. AI requires transparency and audit so that divergent perspectives can contest algorithmic closure. Biotechnology requires humility and accountability to publics, preserving value conflicts instead of erasing them in the name of inevitability. Climate governance requires candour about trade-offs and responsibility to the vulnerable, institutionalising dissent rather than suppressing it. Across domains, survival depends on treating dissonance not as anomaly but as resource.

The institutional form of this survival is the fiduciary–epistemic scaffold: structures that bind knowledge-authority to candour, accountability, and openness. Just as fiduciary duties protect the vulnerable where discretionary power exists, fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds preserve plurality where knowledge is exercised under uncertainty. At the frontier, coherence courts collapse; only scaffolds strong enough to sustain dissonance can secure resilience.

8. Conclusion: Fragility, Resilience, Responsibility

8.1 Return to solitude, finitude, and dissonance

This paper began from the claim that cognitive dissonance is not an anomaly, bias, or pathology, but an epistemic event: the affective signal of solitude and finitude. Schopenhauer insisted that 'the world is my representation' (1969/1819), emphasising the irreducibility of first-person consciousness. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty deepened the point: intentionality structures all experience through individual horizons, while embodiment situates perception in lived, finite contexts. Heidegger sharpened this into ontology, showing that finitude is not contingent but structural: every projection forecloses alternatives, and anxiety (*Angst*) discloses this null ground of existence.

From solitude follows finitude, and from finitude, contradiction. Dissonance is thus not an occasional disturbance but the affective signal of this condition: the body registering that meaning has reached its limit. Psychology confirms what philosophy implies. Festinger (1957) defined dissonance as discomfort, but beneath this lies the ontological fact that knowledge is bounded and perspectival. Asch's conformity studies, Milgram's obedience experiments, and Feldman's theory of authoritarianism show how the unease of contradiction cascades into behaviour.

Reframed through this lens, dissonance is both ontological and epistemic: the lived encounter with the limits of representation, the mark of finitude inscribed in consciousness. It is not error but signal — the condition under which knowledge, judgment, and agency must unfold.

8.2 Collapse vs endurance revisited

As Chapter 4 established, dissonance presents a forked path: collapse or endurance. The ordinary reflex is collapse. Confronted with contradiction, individuals and institutions pacify unease through conformity, obedience, rationalisation, or clientelism. Collapse yields comfort and coherence, but only by trading autonomy for dependence and producing the illusion of freedom.

The fragile alternative is endurance. To endure dissonance is to remain with contradiction long enough for it to disclose new epistemic possibilities. This endurance is rare, because it resists the immediate relief of closure and accepts unease as the condition of knowledge. Yet it is here that bounded freedom emerges: acting within limits without denying them.

The contrast is decisive. Collapse secures tranquillity at the cost of truth; endurance preserves contradiction as resource, though always precarious and demanding. Without scaffolds, collapse will prevail. With fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds, endurance can be sustained not as isolated courage but as institutional practice.

8.3 Role of fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds

As Chapter 5 argued, endurance cannot remain the burden of isolated individuals. Left unsupported, most collapse into conformity, silence, or obedience. What enables endurance to scale is fiduciary–epistemic scaffolding: institutional duties that bind those with epistemic authority to candour, accountability, and loyalty to truth over convenience.

At the micro level, the same pattern is visible in intimate relationships. In *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl, 2025b), I showed how dissonance between partners is often resolved through clientelist bargains: one partner surrendering epistemic agency in exchange for recognition, stability, or affection. Without scaffolds of openness, such exchanges entrench dependency. By contrast, candour and accountability dignify dependence, preserving autonomy even within asymmetry.

At the institutional level, fiduciary scaffolds reorient practices that otherwise suppress dissent. In academia, fiduciary peer review and scholarly oaths (Kahl, 2025h; 2025k) transform evaluation from gatekeeping into stewardship of plurality. In corporate governance, directors' epistemic duties (Kahl, 2025a) preserve dissent within boards, preventing the systemic blindness exemplified by Carillion. In journalism, fiduciary candour resists capture by obligating transparency and plural sourcing. In politics, fiduciary democracy institutionalises contradiction through deliberative mini-publics.

At the frontier, fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds become conditions of survival. AI, biotechnology, and climate governance intensify dissonance by compressing plurality into technocratic coherence. Without scaffolds, institutions will outsource autonomy to algorithms, gene-editing narratives, or climate slogans, silencing contradiction at precisely the moment it is most needed. With scaffolds, these same domains can transform dissonance into resilience by binding epistemic authorities to protect plurality.

Across scales, the logic is consistent: dependence is inevitable, but its form matters. Exploited, it yields collapse; dignified, it sustains endurance. Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds are the architecture by which institutions dignify dependence and preserve contradiction, converting fragility into resilience.

8.4 Philosophical horizon

The trajectory of this inquiry leads to a philosophical horizon where freedom and dependence must be rethought. Freedom is never absolute: it is bounded by solitude and finitude, always exercised within conditions one cannot fully master. Dependence, likewise, is not degradation but dignity when secured by duty: it is the condition under which autonomy becomes sustainable, not surrendered.

The contrast is stark. Fragility follows from silence, uniformity, and the refusal of contradiction. Institutions that erase dissent appear coherent but are brittle, unable to absorb the shocks of uncertainty. Resilience, by contrast, arises when scaffolds of candour, accountability, and loyalty to

truth dignify dependence and preserve contradiction. What philosophy discloses as finitude and psychology confirms as dissonance becomes, under fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds, a resource for collective survival.

The closing claim is therefore simple but decisive: survival itself is a fiduciary task. Institutions entrusted with knowledge owe duties not only to those who depend on them now, but to the future that depends on their integrity. Plurality, fragile though it may be, is the only ground of resilience. To preserve it is to accept that freedom begins not in the denial of dissonance, but in its protection.

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Author Contact

Email: peter.kahl@juris.vc

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1616-4843

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/peter-kahl-law/

Research Gate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Peter-Kahl

PhilPapers: https://philpeople.org/profiles/peter-kahl

GitHub: https://github.com/Peter-Kahl

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Blog: https://pkahl.substack.com/

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Edition	Description of Changes	Epistemic Impact	Date
—	Released under the title *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event: Clientelism, Bounded Freedom, and Fiduciary Scaffolding*.	None	2025-09-06
2	Added §2.4 *Fear as Epistemic Affect*, changed subtitle to *… the Epistemic Architecture of Fear.*	The integration of fear reframes dissonance not only as an affective signal but as a structural condition of epistemic life. This widens the paper's scope from analysing collapse vs. endurance to showing how fear magnifies collapse and why fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds are essential to contain it. The subtitle shift signals this advance, strengthening the conceptual bridge between psychology, philosophy, and governance.	2025-09-10
3	Expanded ontological grounding with new §§2.4–2.5 on fear and anxiety as epistemic affects; restructured Chapter 4 into the double response (collapse vs endurance); streamlined fiduciary framework with consistent use of "fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds"; enriched Chapter 6 with value pluralism (Berlin), free expression (Mill), and agonistic democracy (Mouffe); broadened empirical anchoring in journalism, corporate governance, and politics (REF, Carillion, Panama Papers, Citizens' Assemblies, Brexit). Integrated additional works by Kahl (2025l–p).	These revisions deepen the philosophical foundation of dissonance (from psychology to ontology), clarify the conceptual architecture (endurance as alternative to collapse), and align fiduciary scaffolds with pluralist democratic theory. The result is a more rigorous account of dissonance as both ontological condition and institutional challenge, extending the argument's reach from micro (intimacy) to macro (global governance) and strengthening its normative force for designing institutions capable of sustaining plurality under duty.	2025-09-13

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