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Dismissive Incomprehension: A Use of Purported Ignorance to Undermine Others

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses a particular social phenomenon whereby a speaker purports ignorance of the meaning of another speaker's speech in order to undermine that other speaker: dismissive incomprehension. It develops a speech act theory of the phenomenon, and develops its distinctive, and sometimes problematic perlocutionary character. After taking a look at some of the issues surrounding the phenomenon, the paper compares it to more fully studied features of our social lives, including epistemic injustice and gaslighting. It ends with some thoughts on counteracting the problematic cases of dismissive incomprehension.

KEYWORDS

Social epistemology; speech acts; epistemic injustice; gaslighting

Dismissive Incomprehension: A Use of Purported Ignorance to Undermine Others¹

I have absolutely no idea what any of this means. You take this woman seriously? Honestly, half of these words are made up.

What on earth? That's nonsensical – those words don't mean what the author thinks they mean. In this context they're just nonsense.

What on earth does any of this mean? It's just crazytalk!

You are sat in a seminar room, and a talk by a visiting philosopher has just finished. The talk was on an area that no members of your department specialise in, and indeed, you do not think that anyone in the department's history has ever specialised in. Indeed, in the run up to this talk, several senior members of the department sniffed at the thought of having to attend a talk on this area, and you were reminded of several jokes shared in the department about the kind of silliness that this area apparently involved. After a moment's polite applause for the visiting speaker, the question period begins. A senior figure in the department immediately puts up his hand and the chair invites his question. It begins, 'I really don't understand what's going on here.' The senior figure is not, however, asking for clarification, nor is he professing his own epistemic frailties or lack of confidence with the issues at hand (how could he be? So quickly did he put up his hand!) – instead he is attempting to suggest that what the speaker was saying was somehow confused, mistaken, or downright wrong.

I am sure that something like the above scenario is familiar to many readers who have spent time in analytic philosophy departments, and indeed I hope that others will recognise it too. In this paper, I want to give an account of the kind of speech act that is taking place in the above example.² There are a number of roles that an expression of incomprehension can have in discourse. It can serve, for example, as a sign to one's interlocutors that one is out of one's

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depth, or that one simply does not know the answer to a question posed. However, there are other ways of using the expression of incomprehension that can have important social and political effects. In this paper, I want to outline a specific type of speech act with perlocutionary effects that are pertinent to epistemology, our current political climate, and academia. I call it *dismissive incomprehension*. Dismissive incomprehension is the act of displaying one's incomprehension (or pretending to be ignorant) of the meaning of some other agent's speech, in order to dismiss that speech and the agent who made that speech.

Incomprehension at Large

Let us begin by looking at a few examples in order to introduce and better understand this phenomenon. On the 8 December 2017, Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the United Kingdom's Labour party, spoke on 'Towards a Post-Neoliberal World Order: Rebuilding Human Rights-Based Multilateralism' at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). Picking up on this news, John Rentoul, Chief Political Commentator at *The Independent* (a major UK newspaper) tweeted the following:

Every word is gibberish: 'Towards a Post-Neoliberal World Order: Rebuilding Human Rights-Based Multilateralism.' (Rentoul 2017a)

Rentoul shortly qualified his remark:

Apart from 'human rights'. (Rentoul 2017b)

There is a lot we could say about this set of tweets, but here are a few important things to note: First, that it seems to me that Rentoul does know, or should know, that each of the words in the topic Corbyn was to speak on are not gibberish. As chief political commentator at a major news outlet, he ought to know what, say, 'multilateralism' means. I suspect that he is thus presumably pretending to be ignorant of the meanings of these terms. Second, that he is not a political ally of Corbyn. Rentoul, a Blairite (Total Politics 2011), supports a right wing of the Labour party, whose neoliberal policies are precisely those that Corbyn sought to move past in his speech on a possible post-neoliberal world order. Third, that this utterance occurred on a public forum, visible to Rentoul's thousands of followers.

What I find particularly interesting is to analyse this utterance as a speech act with a particular purpose and perlocutionary effects. I suspect that Rentoul's purpose in making this utterance is to dismiss Corbyn's speech as 'gibberish'. The perlocutionary effects of the utterance, if successful, I suggest, are precisely to get others to reject Corbyn's utterances as meaningless, and to treat Corbyn as not offering meaningful speech. One way of reading Rentoul's tweets, therefore, is as an attempt to preclude Corbyn's speech acts from being recognised as meaningful speech at all. We might also think that in asserting that Corbyn's speech is meaningless, Rentoul discredits Corbyn, making his audience lower their credibility rating of Corbyn. We might, therefore, also read the tweets as an attempt to discredit Corbyn as a reliable testifier.

See also a recent comment by Jordan Peterson, a psychologist from the University of Toronto. South Yorkshire Police (SYP) tweeted the following on 9 September 2018:

"In addition to reporting hate crime, please report non-crime hate incidents, which can include things like offensive or insulting comments, online, in person or in writing. Hate will not be tolerated in South Yorkshire. Report it and put a stop to it #HateHurtsSY." (South Yorkshire Police 2018).

The tweet was accompanied by a picture explaining the nature of a hate crime and encouraging the reporting of those incidents. The following day, Peterson quote-tweeted the SYP's original tweet and attached the following comment:

Absolutely beyond comprehension. 'Non-crime hate incidents.' (Peterson 2018).

What is quite astonishing here is that we have a case of a tenured professor of psychology professing to fail to understand the notion of a non-crime hate incident, despite the tweet he is referencing clearly setting out the kind of thing that a non-crime hate incident might be. It seems to me that Peterson does not intend for us to think that he is at fault for his professed failure to comprehend the concept of a non-crime hate incident: rather, he is using this profession of incomprehension to suggest that SYP are in the wrong for putting forward the idea of a non-crime hate incident, and to get his followers to reject such an idea as meaningless.

Katie Hopkins, a well-known British right-wing talking head tweeted the following in 2013:

Global warming dropped to near stand still. Scientists overheating with their efforts to find more gibberish to talk about. (Hopkins 2013)

Here Hopkins, it seems to me, wishes to undermine the scientists who were talking about 'global warming', by calling their talk gibberish. Interestingly, this plays nicely into a stream of discourse that would come to a head in 2016, when Michael Gove, the then justice secretary, suggested of Britain that, 'people in this country have had enough of experts' and that he 'had a faith in the British people to make the right decision' (Sky News 2016). The right wing of British politics pushed back against the epistemic authority of scientists, academics and think tanks, by attempting to set the epistemic standards around the 'normal bloke down the pub', supposedly exemplified in 'no-nonsense' UKIP politician Nigel Farage. Instead of the so-called experts and technocrats in the ivory tower telling us right from wrong, the narrative goes, we need to go back to the common sense of the real, straight-talking, honest working people – they know what's really going on. The thought here is this: by positioning herself as an epistemic authority, as an ordinary person, Hopkins can then suggest that the climate scientists working on climate change are talking nonsense. Without having the appropriate level of epistemic authority in the eyes of Hopkins' audience, and having been accused of talking gibberish by someone with a high level of epistemic authority in the eyes of that audience (if Hopkins were successful) the future speech of the scientists on climate issues may be dismissed by Hopkins' followers.³

Of course these are but three examples drawn from Twitter. However, I do not think that the phenomenon is unique to the medium, nor to these topics. Indeed, I suspect that the reader will already be familiar with the technique to some extent.⁴

Dismissive Incomprehension

I take it that a general characterisation of dismissive incomprehension is as follows:

Some speech act by some person B that suggests ignorance on the part of B with regards to the meaning of utterances by some other speaker A. Such a speech act has the intended perlocutionary effect of dismissing some utterances of A as meaningless in order to dismiss A more generally in the eyes of some audience C.⁵

By dismissing A more generally, I mean a variety of perlocutionary effects of speech, including three that I will detail in the next section: credibility reduction, silencing and pathologisation. The way this is achieved is by treating A as not having anything worthwhile to say, only nonsense, by purporting to not know what A means by some utterances. This generally works by B suggesting that they, B, are ignorant of the meaning of A's utterances, and the audience C believing that B is an appropriate epistemic authority who can judge the meaningfulness of A's utterances. Thus, given B claims to not know the meanings of A's utterances, it would seem reasonable for C to conclude that no one knows what A means.⁶

In cases of dismissive incomprehension, the utterer, B, draws attention to the fact of their incomprehension (or the purported fact of their incomprehension).⁷ Now normally, incomprehension is taken to be a fault of the person who is ignorant of the meaning(s) in question. Even if the ignorance is blameless, it would, all other things being equal and excluding cases of clutter,⁸ be better to not be ignorant. However, the success of a speech act of dismissive incomprehension

makes the audience believe, not only that the utterer B is faultless for their ignorance, but that A is at fault for purporting to say something which would imply that B is ignorant, which is in fact meaningless. The fault with A is not (merely) that they expressed themselves in such a way as to prevent a clear reading, but rather, that this expression is obfuscatory in order to hide the fact that A has nothing worthwhile to say.

What are the felicity conditions for dismissive incomprehension? That is, what are the conditions for the success of speech acts of this sort? For one, B must present themselves as some sort of epistemic authority to the audience. In order for the intended perlocutionary effects to take effect upon an audience, the audience must think that B is appropriately positioned to be able to judge the meaningfulness of A's utterances. Absent this condition, the audience C may well simply respond to B's speech act by dismissing B's testimony on the subject, rather than A's testimony. In the above Rentoul example, this condition is met in virtue of Rentoul's job as a chief political commentator and his audience believing that this makes him an expert on politics and political concepts. Meanwhile, by positioning the common sense of some mythic bloke-down-the-pub as the arbiter of knowledge, Hopkins, positing herself as an ordinary, straight-talking working person, is able to position herself as an epistemic authority in her audience's eyes, declaring the testimony of others as academics' nonsense, out of touch with the people who really know what is going on. Similarly, Peterson can portray himself as an academic authority, but one who is a rebel against a repressive politically correct orthodoxy which spouts 'nonsense' like the idea of genders beyond the binary, or hate crime legislation. Peterson is therefore invested with a special kind of authority in the eyes of his followers – both an insider to the world of scientific study, and yet also a sceptical outsider not suckered in by the supposed excesses of the academy.

Having (rightly or wrongly) recognised B as appropriately epistemically positioned to judge the meaningfulness of A's utterances, the audience treats B as being a reliable testifier as to the meaningfulness of A's utterances – a good referee or evaluator of A's utterances as it were. Thus, if B says that they do not know what A is saying because what A is saying is nonsense, the audience, recognising B as the type of person who would be able to recognise the meaningfulness of A's speech *were it meaningful*, treats A's speech as meaningless.

Note that, of course, it is irrelevant whether B is in fact ignorant of the meanings of A's utterances. It seems clear that Rentoul was not, and in fact fully understood the topic of Corbyn's talk. Meanwhile, for the person familiar with her oeuvre, it might seem fairly plausible that Hopkins is in fact ignorant of (many of) the meanings of the climate scientists' utterances. It is not, therefore, a condition of the success of dismissive incomprehension that B be ignorant of the meanings of A's utterances. What is important, rather, is that B portrays themselves in speech as ignorant (and that their audience believes that they are ignorant) and the effects that such a portrayal can have.

Note that not all expressions of failure to understand another are cases of dismissive incomprehension in the sense that I have outlined here. Take the following utterance:

You're not making much sense there; I don't really follow – would you mind re-phrasing?

I take it that a sentence of this sort is not out of place in a classroom context, and is a perfectly reasonable thing to say to a student who has just uttered some sentence. And whilst this is a performance of incomprehension (of a sort) it does not have the perlocutionary effects of silencing or credibility reduction, but is rather premised on the assumption that the student in question has something worthwhile to say, which they will be able to convey given the chance to rephrase their sentence.

Perlocutionary Effects of Dismissive Incomprehension

I suggest that there are several plausible perlocutionary effects that may occur in successful examples of dismissive incomprehension. However, I think that there are three that are especially

epistemically relevant, which I take to be cases of dismissing testimony generally: (1) credibility reduction, (2) silencing and (3) pathologisation.⁹

Hearing some B's speech acts of dismissive incomprehension, the audience C may (1) reduce their credibility rating of A. After all, if someone says something nonsensical, it would seem odd to trust their testimony in the future. This is not merely achieved by claiming that A's assertion is false and that A is wrong to believe it, aiming to reduce credibility based on the supposed failure of A to appropriately assess evidence. Rather, it is that A's very assertion is nonsensical and that therefore A is untrustworthy, given their propensity to spout nonsense.

Another effect that may occur is that the audience may (2) no longer recognise A's speech as speech. Instead of treating A's utterances as speech to be interpreted and assessed, I suggest that the audience may begin dismissing A's utterances as merely not asserting anything at all. In a sense, this is a type of silencing. B, by way of dismissive incomprehension, makes it such that A will no longer be considered worthy of listening to on this topic, let alone be worth trying to understand. In its extreme form, dismissive incomprehension might cause the audience C to no longer hear A's speech at all (*qua* speech – they will still hear noises and see A's bodily movements). This extreme form, I take it, will also be linked to (3) pathologisation. In portraying the target A's utterances as meaningless, the speaker B can thereby portray A as in some way irrational. After all, their audience may make the illegitimate inference from the claim that some of A's utterances are irrational to the claim that A themselves is irrational. This inference is easiest to make when B's speech acts in some way make reference to ableist concepts such as 'crazy' or 'mad'. Think of the following utterance:

Terry's remarks are always completely loony. I don't understand his crazytalk at all.

Here, given that the audience thinks that the speaker B is an appropriate epistemic authority with respect to the remarks made by Terry, we might think that they will be tempted to draw the conclusion that Terry himself suffers from a mental illness of some sort that makes him delusional or irrational in some way. This leaves Terry vulnerable to the stigma attached to mental illness, and the identity-based prejudice facing those with mental illnesses. For an example of a particularly *epistemic* identity-based prejudice, think of the testimonial injustice faced by those with mental illness, whose testimony is often dismissed out of hand, even when reliable, on the basis that they are mentally ill (see Crichton, Carel, and Kidd 2017).

Relationship to Epistemic Injustices

Note that dismissive incomprehension is not a species of testimonial injustice (see Fricker 2007). Testimonial injustice requires that there is an unjust distribution of credibility on the basis of identity. In dismissive incomprehension, the reason that credibility is reduced is not A's identity, but rather, the utterances that they produce and the way that they are represented by B.¹⁰ This is not to say that identity is irrelevant here: The reason B acts may be based on identity, and the likeliness of the intended perlocutionary effects occurring will depend on various identities among the speaker, target, and audience. The incorporation of identity into dismissive incomprehension, as in the case of the supposedly hysterical wife below, may also have the effect of widening the scope of targets beyond A to all those who are in an identity category with A. In performing ignorance about the meaningfulness of one disabled person's claims about the challenges they face in a society not designed for their bodies, and treating that person as a stand-in or representative for all disabled people, the person opposed to disability rights can, in some cases, portray all disabled people as uttering meaningless statements. We might also see the above case of the senior philosopher as not merely hoping to dismiss the particular individual visiting philosopher, but also all of those working in that visitor's tradition. However, despite the relevance of social identity, dismissive incomprehension is not a form of testimonial injustice.

Further, there are times when dismissive incomprehension is just, or at least not unjust – and therefore it would be wrong to subsume it under the category of any type of epistemic injustice (whether testimonial, hermeneutic, contributory or otherwise – see Dotson 2012). Take the case of the crystal ‘healer’ who, in front of a number of their devoted disciples (who put a very high credence in their healer’s knowledge of cancer-curing crystals) utters something such as the following:

Quantum Quattro is a magic combination stone in which four copper-bearing power minerals (Shattuckite, Diopside, Malachite, and Chrysocolla) coexist synergistically and are amplified inside of grounding and clearing Smoky Quartz. (Goff 2013).

I take it that one appropriate response to such a healer and their disciples is some form of dismissive incomprehension, attempting to reduce the disciples’ inflated credence in their healer. One might, for instance, utter:

“Look, that’s just all nonsense word-soup cherry-picked from geology and physics textbooks!”

Not only is (to my mind at least) this utterance true, I take it that it is not unjust to utter it, and indeed that it may in fact be the right thing to do all things considered, especially if the healer were deliberately deceiving their disciples in order to exploit the disciples in some way.

Note, however, that there are cases of dismissive incomprehension that perpetuate testimonial injustice. Take the following utterance:

Don’t listen to my wife, she’s like all women: utterly crazy, spouting nonsense all the time. I never understand what she’s saying.

Here, buying into a stereotype about the ‘hysterical’ women, the speaker attempts to reduce the credibility of their wife, whilst at the same time using dismissive incomprehension to the same effect.

Meanwhile, one might think that dismissive incomprehension is also regularly used to undermine the hermeneutic resources of marginalised epistemic communities, or to perpetuate conceptual competence injustice ‘in which a member of a marginalised group is unjustly regarded as lacking conceptual or linguistic competence as a consequence of structural oppression’ (Anderson 2017). These kinds of epistemic oppression (see Dotson 2014) seem like obvious results of dismissive incomprehension in cases of oppressive power relations. Suppose, for instance, upon reading and setting Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* for a social philosophy class, a white professor utters the following to that class’s students:

It’s complete tosh, I have no idea how these ‘controlling images’ are supposed to work – it just doesn’t make sense.

Here, the white professor, believed for the most part by their students to be an epistemic authority on philosophy, professes incomprehension of Collins’ notion of a *controlling image*. Regardless of whether the professor in fact understands controlling images, we can imagine that the plausible perlocutionary effects of this utterance are to undermine many of their students’ credence in both Collins and black women philosophers more generally as sources of new concepts, and to undermine any uptake that the notion of a controlling image might had achieved in their students. Thus, the hermeneutic resource that may have been available to the class’s students is dismissed, and a lacuna in those students’ resource is not filled. Think also of Pohlhaus’s notion of *willful hermeneutical ignorance*, where,

marginally situated knowers actively resist epistemic domination through interaction with other resistant knowers, while dominantly situated knowers nonetheless continue to misunderstand and misinterpret the world. (Pohlhaus 2012, 716)

We might think of the above case as one wherein a dominantly situated knower (the white professor) pre-emptively dismisses (see Pohlhaus 2012) the epistemic resources that have been

developed by marginally situated knowers (the black feminists who are the subjects of Collins' book) *via dismissive ignorance*. In so doing, the professor perpetuates wilful hermeneutical ignorance. Dismissive incomprehension, then, is a powerful tool that can further epistemic oppression.

Relationship to Gaslighting

We might also think that dismissive incomprehension is a case of gaslighting aimed at making some person doubt themselves or even question their own sanity. That is, I take it that this kind of gaslighting is a limit case of dismissive incomprehension, where A and C are the same person. Abramson characterises gaslighting as follows:

Very roughly, the phenomenon that's come to be picked out with that term is a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds – paradigmatically, so unfounded as to qualify as crazy. Gaslighting is, even at this level, quite unlike merely dismissing someone, for dismissive simply fails to take another seriously as an interlocutor, whereas gaslighting is aimed at getting another not to take herself seriously as an interlocutor. (Abramson 2014, 2)

Take a case of dismissive incomprehension where A is not merely the intended target of the dismissive incomprehension (i.e. the person B is intending to discredit) but also the intended audience of the speech act C. Here, if B's speech act or acts is (are) successful, that audience will begin to doubt themselves, think that they themselves are talking nonsense. Of course, gaslighting generally involves a sustained period of undermining an agent, and not merely an individual speech act, but note how this kind of speech act can be a key way in which this occurs. Think of the following interaction, which takes place in the context of an abusive relationship between X and Y, and Y is gaslighting X by consistently going through X's belongings and moving them whilst denying that any such thing is occurring, by feigning incomprehension:

X: Why is my purse in the bathroom?

Y: I don't know what you're talking about.

X: My stuff keeps moving!

Y: I don't understand what you're saying. That's nonsense!

Here I suggest that Y is, as a part of a larger strategy of abuse, using dismissive incomprehension to undermine X's confidence in herself and her sense of reality, contributing to her confusion. Y is able to do this despite the fact that in this case, he knows what X means, because he in fact knows that he move X's purse and other belongings.

Counteracting Dismissive Incomprehension

Dismissive incomprehension is precisely so potentially pernicious because it is performed by those who are taken by an audience to have some sort of epistemic authority. One way, therefore, to counteract the effects of some instance of dismissive incomprehension is to undermine the perception of B's authority, such that B's attempted dismissive incomprehension fails to have its intended effects. Another is to demonstrate A's authority on a given topic, such that A's speech is no longer considered senseless by C.

However, note that it will be very difficult for A to do either of these. After all, if B's speech act was successful in achieving its intended perlocutionary effects, then the audience C will dismiss much of what A has to say, especially as it pertains to the topic in question. It may well be that A will simply not be able to undermine B's epistemic authority, or demonstrate their own, given that C has already dismissed them. Nor is it as simple as involving allies of A. B is taken by C to have some epistemic authority – thus mere bystanders, who do not have any special epistemic authority

in C's eyes will struggle to counteract that authority. What is required, therefore, is allies of A who are viewed by C as having some epistemic authority.

Even if B's authority can be undermined, this does not automatically mean that an audience will revisit their initial dismissal of A. Having had it demonstrated that B was in no position to dismiss A's speech, it would be rational for C to re-evaluate their attitudes towards A and A's speech. However, this will not always occur – humans are fallible and sometimes (indeed often) fail to properly revise their belief sets in the light of new evidence. It may well be that in addition to the undermining of B's authority on the issue, what is required is a positive attempt to (re)bolster A's authority on the issue.

Conclusion: The Uses and Abuses of Dismissive Incomprehension

I have presented dismissive incomprehension in a largely cautious light, wary of its powers to influence others in ways that dismiss those whose voice should be heard. Certainly, it can be used in this way, and in such cases we should, as discussed above, find ways of counteracting its effects. Nonetheless, it is possible that in particular circumstances we ought to seek to use the powers of dismissive incomprehension for good. In cases such as that of the exploitative crystal healer, I suggest that we might employ it in appropriate circumstances in order to achieve our epistemic, moral and political goals. Certainly, as a potential way of undermining one's political opponents, dismissive incomprehension has already entered into discourse, as we might think we saw in all of the initial cases we looked at. Perhaps we might consciously use it, alongside other discursive techniques, in undermining those who would oppose the good. I further hope that this is not the final word on dismissive incomprehension, and that this paper rather serves as an invitation for further research. For instance, I have said little about the conventional means by which we distinguish those declarations of incomprehension that are dismissive incomprehension from those that, like the case of asking a student to rephrase, are innocent of undermining perlocutionary effects. Perhaps inviting further speech on the part of the initial speaker is the only general way of indicating this sort of innocence, or (more likely) there are a number of similar linguistic and paralinguistic conventions. Likewise, there may be ways that politeness and techniques of face-saving mitigate or accentuate the effects of dismissive incomprehension that deserve further attention. Similarly, I have said relatively little about how dismissive ignorance is connected to structural injustices such as racism, sexism, transphobia, ableism and so on. Nor have I discussed whether dismissive incomprehension need always be understood in intentional terms. Certainly, we might think that in addition to the paradigm cases I have discussed above, there might be cases of individuals uttering 'I don't understand' with the intent of soliciting a response which helps them understand, but who end up undermining the speaker unintentionally. However, I leave these interesting issues for future analysis.

Notes

1. I'd like to thank Jennifer Saul, Kayleigh Doherty, Sabina Wantoch, Joshua Habgood-Coote, Lewis Brooks, Robbie Morgan, Rosa Vince, Holly Longair, and Louise Delmege for all of their help in thinking about this paper and surrounding issues.
2. Whilst examples of the above kind are, I believe, common, it is hard to find recorded evidence of 'that guy' in the seminar. Thus, rather than rely on anecdotal examples, most of the below will focus on online discourse, which provides a handy archive that allows us to analyse actual examples of this kind of speech.
3. One could also read this example as working in a slightly different way to the others. One could read Hopkins as (implicitly) relying on presenting her target as putting forward a different type of nonsense to that implied by Rentoul and Peterson. In correspondence, Lewis Brooks remarked that it's less like 'Green ideas sleep furiously' and more like 'Finland is a conspiracy created by the Japanese Government'. Thus, whilst Rentoul and Peterson purport to fail to *comprehend the very concepts* at issue, on this reading Hopkins purports to fail to *comprehend that one could sincerely believe in the kind of program* that climate scientists are involved in.

4. Indeed, when first writing this paper I was inspired by conversations with (fellow) analytic philosophers who seemed to use this sort of speech act in an attempt to dismiss continental philosophy. I take it that anyone who has spent time in any Anglo-American philosophy department has heard such dismissals – and indeed perhaps took them seriously as an impressionable student in the face of an authoritative senior philosopher talking about the field in which they work.
5. Here I am following in the feminist speech act tradition arising from Austin (see especially Austin 1962; Saul and Diaz-Leon 2018). The tradition has a (perhaps surprisingly) broad conception of speech, which includes not only linguistic utterances and paralinguistic acts such as gestures, but also writing, images, tweets, pornography and so on (see, for instance, Langton 1993).
6. I will not spend much time on the motivation for wanting to undermine some speaker A in this paper. Whilst the examples from twitter above suggest that the use of dismissive incomprehension is generally motivated by a concern for political gains, I suggest that this need not be the only motive. Indeed, an anonymous reviewer has suggested that dismissive incomprehension may even stem from judgements about whether A's utterances violate Gricean maxims of conversation (see Grice 1989).
7. Of course, this act need not be verbal – raised eyebrows and a shocked look might be all that is required, if it conveys to an audience that B thinks A is talking nonsense. Indeed, a recognised trope in comedic television is precisely one character giving a pointed look to the camera accompanied by an exasperated look designed to undermine another character.
8. For example, knowing the precise number and location of every single grain of sand on the Severn Estuary.
9. An anonymous reviewer has suggested that we might understand one of the nonepistemic perlocutionary effects of dismissive incomprehension as a threat or damage to the 'face'. That is, a threat or damage to one's desires to be unimpeded in one's actions (negative face) and one's desires to be approved of (positive face) (see Brown and Levinson 1987, 13). It seems fairly obvious that dismissive incomprehension is a threat to A's positive face, given that C will be less likely to approve of A given successful dismissive incomprehension on the part of some B – the intended effect of the speech act is of course to try to get C to dismiss A. It may initially seem a little less clear that negative face is threatened by dismissive incomprehension, but we only need note that on many occasions where dismissive ignorance is used, A is trying to persuade C of some thing, and B is attempting to undermine B in the eyes of C such that A fails to persuade C. As such, A's actions are impeded, and their negative face threatened.
10. As an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, B may even sincerely consider A a highly credible source of testimony whilst seeking to rhetorically defeat A in the eyes of C.

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Notes on contributor

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