

Expertise and conspiracy theories

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Abstract

Judging the warrant of conspiracy theories can be difficult, and often we rely upon what the experts tell us when it comes to assessing whether particular conspiracy theories ought to be believed. However, whereas there are recognised experts in the sciences, I argue that only are is no such associated expertise when it comes to the things we call ‘conspiracy theories,’ but that the conspiracy theorist has good reason to be suspicious of the role of expert endorsements when it comes to conspiracy theories and their rivals. The kind of expertise, then, we might associate with conspiracy theories is largely improvised—in that it lacks institutional features—and, I argue, ideally the product of a community of inquiry.

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I Introduction

If you are even slightly politically or historically literate, then the fact conspiracies occur will be of no surprise. From the massive disinformation campaign waged by the Allies around D-Day in the Second World War; the Ford Pinto and VW Emissions Scandals; the financial subterfuge of Mossack Fonseca (revealed in the Panama Papers); the Moscow Show Trials; the Gulf of Tonkin Incident; Watergate; to the official theory that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction back in 2003, these are but a few examples from the rich vein of conspiratorially-infused history of the last one hundred years.

Yet conspiracy *theories*—to wit, theories about conspiracies—seemingly have a bad reputation, at least in the literature. Scholars have argued that belief in such theories is often the product of a crippled epistemology (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009), gullibility (Cassam 2016), akin to theism (Popper 1969) or analogous to paranoid ideation (Hofstadter 1965). Some theorists have—among other things—noted conspiracy theorists are prone to commit basic errors in probabilistic reasoning (Brotherton and French 2014), or worry that belief in such theories results in potentially serious or deleterious negative social consequences (Jolley and Douglas 2014).

These views are, in the words of Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor, ‘generalist’ positions (Buenting and Taylor 2010). The generalist thinks she has a case for scepticism about belief in conspiracy theories *generally*, which, in turn, justifies the pejorative aspect of the label ‘conspiracy theory.’ Often the generalist claims that these things we call ‘conspiracy theories’ are not *merely* theories about conspiracies. Rather, a conspiracy theory is not *merely* a theory about a conspiracy but, instead, a theory about a conspiracy which has certain features which dictate its implausibility or irrationality as a belief.

Philosophers have—by and large—presented challenges to such generalist views. Scholars like Brian L. Keeley (Matthew R. X. Dentith and Keeley in press; Keeley

1999), Charles Pigden (C. R. Pigden 2016), Lee Basham (Basham Early access), David Coady (Coady 2012), Juha Räikkä (Räikkä 2017) and myself (Matthew R. X. Dentith 2017) have all argued that all a conspiracy theory—when broken down into its constituent parts—is just some theory about a conspiracy, to wit, a theory about two or more people working together, typically in secret, towards some end.¹ This is the thesis of ‘particularism.’² Particularists argue that you cannot principally assess the warrant of conspiracy theories as a class, but, rather, on a case-by-case basis. That is to say, we need to assess the particulars of each conspiracy theory we come across. According to the particularist the suggestion we have some *prima facie* suspicion of conspiracy theories gets things back-to-front. Conspiracy theories—just like any other theory—need to be assessed on their individual merits.

Now, an insistence that we must assess particular conspiracy theories on their merits is all-well-and-good, but given:

- a) just how many conspiracy theories there are, and
- b) that they often rely on evidential claims many of us are not qualified to judge

one reasonable response is to say ordinary epistemic agents can skip over the assessing of conspiracy theories on a case-by-case basis and, instead, rely upon the claims of experts. If I want to know whether some claim about particle physics is warranted, I am best off talking with a particle physicist rather than an accountant. If I want to know whether Hitler was a heroin user, I am best off talking with

¹Where these philosophers disagree (respectfully) tends to be on matters such as whether the planning of surprise parties or minor criminal activities get counted among the theories we consider conspiratorial, what—if anything—the distinction between an ‘official theory’ and a ‘conspiracy theory’ is, and other related matters. However, when it comes to assessing theories labelled as ‘conspiratorial’, particularists are interested in assessing them on the evidence, rather than dismissing them out of hand just because they are called ‘conspiracy theories.’

²Another term of art we owe to Buenting and Taylor (2010).

an historian of the Third Reich than a marine biologist. Surely, then, we can rely on expert testimony when it comes to assessing the merits of the many conspiracy theories we have no *explicit* expertise in.³

However, there are three worries about how we parse talk of expertise that we need to be cognisant of:

1. Who are the experts *in this case*,
2. Are these experts acting sincerely, and
3. Are the experts conspiring?

The first two worries (discussed in sections 2 and 3) are general in that whilst they speak to the question of how ordinary epistemic agents judge and ascertain whether belief in a particular conspiracy theory is warranted, the lessons drawn will apply to any complex claim we have no *explicit* expertise in. The third worry (discussed in section 4) you might think is a little weird, but it comes out of the analysis of the second concern and speaks to the special character of certain conspiracy theories which posit conspiracies by the very experts we would normally turn to assess said theories. As we will see, this worry is not as unmotivated as perhaps some of us might like to think.

2 The first issue: Who are the experts?

We often know—or at least can work out—who has the appropriate expertise when it comes to assessing evidence for certain kinds of theories or claims. However, it

³For the purposes of the analysis in this paper, let us assume that we are talking about conspiracy theories we have a) no direct knowledge of, and b) the claims of said theories are too complex for individual epistemic agents to *easily* appraise on their own, thus the need to refer to experts for guidance. Of course, not every conspiracy theory we hear requires an appeal to expertise for us to judge whether it is warranted or not.

is also true that many ordinary epistemic agents are insensitive to the distinction between someone being in a position of authority and someone being an expert. This is not just a problem for the laity; even philosophers can be beguiled by the *mere appearance* of authority. Neil Levy, for example, argues that when conspiracy theories exist in contrast to some *official* theory (a theory which has been endorsed by some influential institution), then we should prefer the official theory. This is because—at least to Levy—official theories are largely the product of *epistemic* authorities, and we have a preference for such official theories when they exist in contrast to conspiracy theories (Levy 2007).⁴

If there is a case for preferring official theories over conspiracy theories, it will be grounded in the understanding that only *some* official theories are epistemically superior; the officialness of a theory does not *necessarily* tell us anything about its epistemic merits. Officialness in this case only tells us that the theory has been endorsed by some influential institution. Given institutions are many and varied, some endorsements will be epistemic whilst others will be merely political or pragmatic.

For example, David Coady argues that there is a difference between official theories and conspiracy theories. However, he does not think this means conspiracy theories are somehow *inferior* to official theories. Rather, he respects some⁵ common language intuition that conspiracy theories are unofficial, in that they are accounts with no institutional accreditation. Indeed, he notes that ‘quite often the official version of events is just as conspiratorial as its rivals’ (Coady 2006, p. 125), and:

⁴Susan Feldman argues in a similar fashion (S. Feldman 2011, p. 15), as does Peter Lipton (Lipton 2004).

⁵I say ‘some’ here because it is not clear that the label ‘conspiracy theory’ necessarily has the pejorative gloss routinely associated to it by conspiracy theory theorists (see Michael Wood (Wood 2016), for example). As such, it is not clear that in all cultures or at all times there really is a common language distinction between a theory being official and thus not also a conspiracy theory.

[T]o say that a conspiracy theory by definition contradicts an official version of events is to say nothing about whether it is true, or whether a person who believes it is justified in doing so (Coady 2012, p. 123).

Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold have argued in a similar fashion about the distinction between a theory being official and unofficial and how this tells us more about the power relationships involved in naming or labelling theories than it does about the truth of said theories (Pelkmans and Machold 2011). Ole Bjerg and Thomas Presskorn-Thygesen similarly argue the label ‘conspiracy theory’ marks out a class of disreputable theories, but that this is a feature of natural language, and does not tell us the theory in question is necessarily unwarranted (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen 2016).⁶

The telling point is that being an authority—a member of an influential institution—does not necessarily make one an expert; a theory can be labelled as ‘official’ just because it has been endorsed by some influential authority. This does not tell us about the epistemic nature of the endorsement, which might be political or pragmatic. As such, we should not confuse a theory’s endorsement with it having any special epistemic character. An endorsement tells us little about whether the evidence supports the theory. It simply tells us that someone or some influential institution has lent support to it.

Theories can have other qualifiers attached to them, in that they can be frowned upon, treated dismissively or even sneered at. This can cause such theories to be labelled as ‘unofficial’ (or, in some cases, ‘conspiratorial’). A theory which has been sneered at, for example, will not only lack official status but will have been rejected by the members of some influential institution. That is, for a theory to be sneered at requires that the people dismissing it have some *purported* authority on the matter.

⁶We find similar arguments in the works of Kurtis Hagen (Hagen 2010, 2011) and Lance de-Haven-Smith (deHaven-Smith 2010, 2013).

Take, for example, the Moscow Trials of the 1930s: the Dewey Commission at the time correctly surmised that the official explanation by the Soviet government—that the trials were free and fair—was a cover-up of what were, in reality, show trials. Yet the findings of the Dewey Commission were labelled by the Soviet Government of the day as both ‘disinformation’ and a ‘conspiracy theory.’ Yet in 1953—with the death of Stalin—said government admitted that the trial verdicts had been fixed and the criticisms/conspiracy theory of the Dewey Commission were largely right.

Now, if a set of experts has endorsed or sneered at a theory and we are in no position to inspect the evidence for ourselves, that might be a reason to adopt their views. However, even for that claim to have any weight we need to know that the experts in question are the *relevant* authorities because, as we have seen, claiming a theory has been endorsed does not necessarily tell us what the relevant experts think.

One way to talk about *relevant* expertise, then, would come from *familiarity* with such theories by the various, disparate experts in particular fields. So, whilst an historian may not be a subject expert in conspiracy theories, an historian who works on the history of the Jewish people in Europe may well have familiarity—and thus relevant expertise—when it comes to antisemitic conspiracy theories. That is, they will be able to recognise certain patterns of claims and—crucially—the circumstances under which such theories appear and flourish. However, this gives us only a limited starting point for our analysis. After all, conspiracy theories are often complex theories⁷ and rely on evidence—and thus expertise as to what counts as *salient*

⁷Although some theorists have argued that conspiracy theories are often simplified explanations for complex events, it is not hard to find examples of sophisticated and complex conspiracy theories. For example, see (Olmsted 2009), Martha Lee (Lee 2011), (Harambam and Aupers 2014) and (Franks, Bangarter, Bauer, et al. 2017). This is very much in line with the work of Charles Pigden (C. Pigden 1995), Kurtis Hagen (Hagen 2011), Lee Basham (Basham 2011), M R. X Dentith (M R. X. Dentith 1995) and M R. X. Dentith and Martin Orr (Matthew R. X. Dentith and Orr Early access).

evidence—in a way which often often crosses disciplinary boundaries. Such theories are often a mix of social, political, scientific (and, in some cases, religious or mystical) claims.

This is not to say that we should ignore familiarity with kinds of conspiracy theories when it comes to assessing the merits of a particular conspiracy theory. However, we should not mistake being able to plug a particular conspiracy theory into some family resemblance notion of a *kind* of conspiracy theory as being anything more than a way of establishing the prior probability that this conspiracy theory will (or will not be) part of the set of best available explanations for some event. We still need to evaluate the evidence, establish its posterior probability and assess the strength of the explanatory argument with respect to whatever rival explanations are on offer (the relative probability).⁸ As such, familiarity only gets us so far in our analysis; even if a theory resembles some other (warranted or unwarranted), we are still obliged to investigate it. It might *look* familiar but, on inspection, turn out to be novel or based on new evidence.

Familiarity with conspiratorial tropes comes with the concomitant danger of assuming that if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is a duck *when it otherwise might not be*. As such, we might even be tempted to think a little knowledge is a dangerous thing here; some familiarity with conspiratorial tropes might tempt us to pre-judge the warrant of a theory, and thus—in a range of cases—lead us to a false positive or negative.⁹

⁸See Matthew R. X. Dentith (2016) for a detailed analysis of the role of past conspiratorial activity and the way in which they affect our judgements of prior, posterior and relevant probability in the assessment of particular conspiracy theories.

⁹Think, for example, of conspiracy theories about, say, the United States meddling in the Middle East; given the past incidence of American meddling in that region of the world we might think it likely indeed that the U.S. is meddling now, and so a proposed conspiracy theory about such meddling in Iran might look awfully familiar, yet, upon investigation, turn out to be worthless.

2.1 Improvised expertise

This brings us to an interesting question: is there a community of experts with respect to conspiracy theories like there are, say, for scientific theories? Or is expertise—at least when it comes to *particular* conspiracy theories—‘improved’? After all, whilst there are experts in conspiracy theories *as a class of theories* (i.e. conspiracy theory theories) in social psychology, sociology and philosophy, when it comes to *particular* conspiracy theories the waters, as we have seen, are muddy.

Take, for example, some of the various 9/11 Inside Job hypotheses, which claim that the Twin Towers and Building 7 of the World Trade Center were controlled demolitions, rather than the result of impacts of flights AA11 and AA175. Some of the evidence for these claims is in the domain of Physics—such as claims about the way in which the towers fell—while some of the evidence is somewhere in the domain of the Political Sciences, Sociology, and Psychology—such as claims about the intentions of the actors involved, and the like. Whilst you can refer to experts about *some* of the cited evidence, there is no one group you can appeal to when appraising the theory as whole. As such, any expertise when it comes to these theories is cobbled together or improvised.¹⁰

Now, the label ‘improved’ here should not be taken as a marker of false, or pseudo-expertise. Rather, it is the recognition that we are dealing with a domain of knowledge which lacks certain institutional or accredited features. Calling such expertise ‘improved,’ simply acknowledges that—unlike some fields—there are few to no *accredited* experts (or even accrediting institutions) when it comes to conspiracy theories.

¹⁰Other domains of improvised knowledge include gossip (a form of malicious testimony), and rumour (a way in which certain propositions can be tested for their truth value by asking ‘Have you heard?’). Like conspiracy theories, there are no experts in the domain of gossiping or rumourmongering *in the sense* we think that there are experts in doing physics, chemistry or biology.

Now, you could also respond that there are no experts in physics per se either. Rather, there are experts in *particle* physics, *astrophysics*, and the like. That is to say being an expert on the intricacies of the Iran-Contra Deal (a cover-up), but not being an expert on the Gulf of Tonkin incident (a false flag) is not dramatically different from that of a particle physicist who deals solely with muons but has no expertise when it comes to planetary physics.

However, whereas one can be a *recognised* expert on the Iran-Contra Deal, this is different from being an *accredited* expert on specific elementary particles. This difference between being *recognised* as an expert and being an *accredited* expert is important. Accreditation of expertise implies some kind of institutional endorsement whilst recognition of expertise can come in a variety of ways. For example, when we theorise in the sciences we are engaging in a process attached to (although not necessarily occurring in) certain scientific institutions. Theorising about particular claims of conspiracy—to wit, conspiracy theories—typically does not happen in an institutional context.¹¹ Rather, the kinds of people we think of as having epistemic weight as experts when it comes to assessing conspiracy theories are investigative reporters, officials, and the like. They may not be experts in the *accredited* sense but may well have *recognised* expertise (and may very well have some accredited expertise on certain matters which relate to the conspiracy theory in question).

None of this talk of improvised expertise should give us any reason for a *prima facie* suspicion of such theories; it is—on one hand—merely an interesting feature of the way we analyse particular conspiracy theories.¹² However, on the other hand, there are certain features associated with the accreditation of expertise that we might not find with recognised authority, one of which is taken to typically guard against experts acting insincerely.

¹¹As opposed to theorising about conspiracy theories, as we are doing here.

¹²For more on the improvised nature of expertise when it comes to conspiracy, see Dentith and Keeley (Matthew R. X. Dentith and Keeley in press).

3 The second issue: Sincerity

This brings us to the second worry: when, and just how often, are experts *insincere* when endorsing the rivals to conspiracy theories? After all, any appeal to authority implicitly rests upon the claim that the expert or set of experts in question are testifying sincerely.

The question of just how often experts testify insincerely is, of course, an empirical matter, one not easily settled by philosophical analysis. What we can say is that endorsements by experts can be problematic for a variety of different reasons: the expert might just be insincere; they might endorse a theory for reasons other than to do with arguments and evidence; or ordinary epistemic agents might mistake authority with expertise. After all, people confuse astroturf groups—organisations which look like Mom-and-Pop activist groups, but which are really industry-funded lobbyists—with the views of concerned citizens, and the like.

Now, it might seem reasonable—in cases where we do not know the details of the evidence, or even have access to it—to accept the endorsement or dismissive attitude of some authority. However, that simply means it is reasonable for ordinary epistemic agents to believe *all other things being equal*. It does not tell us that some rival theory is worse, unless we understand something about the nature of the endorsement or dismissal.

This is where accreditation ends up being important. For example, the story of peer review in the sciences—suitably finessed—tells us that scientific theories endorsed by suitably qualified scientific peers are well-evidenced. That is, part-and-parcel of being a scientific expert is being subject to a on-going process of accreditation. However, the notion that the people engaging in peer review are acting sincerely is also doing a lot of work here. If a scientist is dishonest, then the result for her is typically career termination, and scientists who have less than rigorous research methodologies typically find their results being called into question by other,

more rigorous members.

Being a recognised expert is different. For example, sometimes you can be an accredited expert in one field, a recognised expert *by the public* in another but find that the accredited experts in that latter field do not recognise your expertise (see, for example, Richard Dawkins with respect to the Philosophy of Religion). Or you can be a recognised expert who turns out to fail the kinds of tests we expect of accredited expertise (see, for example, David Irving and the history of the Second World War).

Thus far we have talked about expertise but there is also a form of authority which is not easily captured by talk of accreditation or recognition which, nonetheless, appears to have weight of some kind in public discourse. This is, of course, political authority.

For example, the members of political institutions do not necessarily form beliefs on the basis of rigorous research. Politicians might (and some would say ‘often’) rely not-so-much on the testimony of experts, but appeal, rather, to positions which are popular with the public.¹³ Indeed, a common complaint about politicians is that they seem prone to changing their beliefs for any old reason, or deliberately downplaying or ignoring the evidence of relevant subject experts.

History is also rife with examples of members of political establishments *sneering* at theories, some of which turned out to be warranted *conspiracy* theories. For example, the Soviets labelled claims that the Moscow Trials of the 1930s were rigged as ‘disinformation’. The governments of the U.S. and the U.K. pejoratively labelled those who claimed there was no evidence Iraq was still developing weapons of mass destruction in 2003 as ‘conspiracy theorists.’ The government of the Russian Federation sneered at claims that their agents were involved in the assassination of

¹³This is, admittedly, is a kind of evidence salient to why a government acted in a particular way, making the politician’s decision—at the very least—explicable, and not necessarily insincere.

Alexander Litvinenko. In each of these cases (which are but a small sample) political authorities used their position to cast doubt on explanations which suggested they had acted insincerely, despite a wealth of evidence of malfeasance on their part. As such, we have some grounds at least to think that politicians may well end up being insincere when it comes to talking about the conspiracy theories which implicate them.

How, then, can we know if some political theory was endorsed sincerely, given past instances of officials endorsing theories they knew were unwarranted? This problem is compounded by the fact that members of political institutions sometimes have good reason to be, if not deceitful, secretive. Sensitive negotiations between foreign powers might require working behind closed doors, or even denying such negotiations are occurring. There *might* even be good reasons for deceiving the public about some minor scandal, if revealing it might inadvertently bring down the government as a result.¹⁴

Now, we might be tempted to fall back on some assessment of character when it comes to judging political endorsements or sneers. After all, sometimes we are in a position to appraise the competence of the person who put forward some claim, or their integrity. Someone, for example, who is competent but lacks integrity is likely to be considered as untrustworthy; while they have ability—because they are competent—their lack of integrity means we cannot trust that they are being sincere. On the other hand, someone who is incompetent but happens to have integrity might act sincerely, but you cannot guarantee they are doing their job properly.

We could also distinguish between the trust we have in the *individual* members of political institutions and the sector as a whole. Individual members can be untrustworthy, say, in their private lives, but does this distrust necessarily extend to the political sector as a whole? We could go even further and argue that individuals

¹⁴See Basham (Early access) for more on this topic.

could be untrustworthy even in their political dealings, and yet the endorsements of the political institutions incorporate sufficient checks and balances to neutralise individual untrustworthiness; to wit, provide a guard against conspiracies even if we think individual politicians would like to conspire. There is, after all, an auditing system, one of checks and balances, in politics: ‘oversight’ (or ‘political oversight’). Not just that, but journalists and interested members of the public can check the public records, minutes, et cetera, of their elected representatives to ensure that everything they claim to do is legitimate, and above board.

However, whereas the process of peer review in the academic world provides a check for both competency and integrity, in the realm of politics we need to ascertain whether someone is both competent and has integrity *before* we can trust them. There is, of course, the question as to whether members of political institutions are even interested about the warrant of the particular claims they make. Members of the political sector might be *merely* expressing beliefs, without necessarily asserting them as warranted (the reverse of what we expect from the academic sector). As such, appeals to expertise (or, in cases of confused appeals to authority) we need positive grounds to trust that the *purported* experts are acting sincerely, a claim independent of whether or not we are dealing with *conspiracy* theories.

4 The third issue: A conspiracy amongst experts?

This brings us to the third issue, which is about the special character of particular conspiracy theories; to wit, those which posit conspiracies by the very experts we would turn to assess such theories. After all, certain conspiracy theorists—like David Icke, and Alex Jones—are of the belief influential institutions like the government, the judiciary and the like are in on a conspiracy to suppress the truth about the very things those institutions get up to. From claims various Federal agencies

conspired to hide the evidence 9/11 was an inside job, the history and role of elite paedophile networks in our governments, to allegations that climatologists are fraudulently claiming anthropogenic climate change is occurring, some conspiracy theorists worry that evidence is being manufactured or manipulated in order to make their theories look unwarranted.

Given the past incidences of conspiratorial activity by influential institutions, these worries do not appear completely unfounded. So, what should we make of claims that experts might conspire *against* conspiracy theorists and their theories? We can think about this in at least one of two ways:

1. Is there a conspiracy to suppress the truth of particular conspiracy theories, and
2. Is there a conspiracy to portray conspiracy theories generally as *prima facie* unwarranted?

Take the debate over the existence of nano-thermite residue in the debris of Ground Zero post the September 11th attacks of 2001. Certain proponents of the Controlled Demolition hypothesis (a version of the Inside Job Hypothesis)—such as Steven Jones, Robert Korol, Anthony Szamboti, and Ted Walter (Jones et al. 2016)—argue that their opponents are underplaying or ignoring the existence of said residue at Ground Zero in order to cast doubt on certain alternative explanations of the events of 9/11.

As we saw earlier, there is an interesting debate to be had here as to how and why claims might be *insincerely* endorsed by influential institutions. With respect to explicit claims of conspiracy—as Lee Basham argues—we cannot claim to live in a *sufficiently* open society to be able to outright dismiss the possibility at least one major conspiracy is occurring here-and-now (Basham 2003). Due to the hierarchical nature of our society—which is still largely a top-down system of governance—it

is possible that we live in a society which *merely* looks open. That is, we might believe there are sufficient checks-and-balances in existence to guard against political conspiracies, but that apparent openness might be the product of those very same conspiracies. Further to that, as I have argued elsewhere, our judgements about the prior probability of conspiracies in the past make claims of conspiracy (to wit, conspiracy theories)—at the very least—here-and-now worthy of consideration (Matthew R. X. Dentith 2016).

Indeed, the argument that our society is just open enough to warrant taking a dim view of conspiracy theories might, as David Coady has argued, be subject to manipulation:

It may be that in an ideal society official stories would carry an epistemic authority such that it would almost always be rational to believe them. But that is not our society, nor I suspect, is it any society that has ever been or ever will be. What is more, if such a society were to come into existence, it seems likely that it would be unstable, since the complacency about officialdom that it would engender would be exploitable by officials hoping to manipulate public opinion to advance their interests (Coady 2007, p. 199).

This is, at best, what we might term a ‘weak’ justification for trust in influential institutions, which would only work in cases where we have no access to the evidence and are being forced to choose between theories which have been endorsed vs. those which have not. In the academic case this seems like a reasonable move *to some degree*, but—as we saw earlier—in the political case these grounds are hesitant at best.

Even if we do not want to treat that claim seriously, there is still the possibility that our societies are not open enough; given that we rarely get information about the activity of the members of political institutions directly (since it is often medi-

ated through official information requests, press statements and the like), the worry remains that our society might look open in a way that it is not.

4.1 A generalist ‘conspiracy’

Let us turn now to the second question posed earlier: is there a conspiracy by experts to dismiss or debase conspiracy theories generally?

Any casual search of the literature by pejoratively labelled ‘conspiracy theorists’ will turn up a variety of interesting claims. Did you know that the CIA invented the term ‘conspiracy theory?’ Or that Karl Popper, and Claude Levi-Strauss were part of an orchestrated campaign to debase the term? Now, these claims are demonstrably false, given the etymology of the term goes back to at least 1909 and ‘first’ appears as a pejorative (Online 2011). Yet, considered seriously, it seems conspiracy theorists have reason to think that there is something akin to a conspiracy against them. After all, there is a substantial literature which argues that belief in conspiracy theories is problematic. As noted earlier, conspiracy theorists are typically portrayed as suffering from crippled epistemologies, being paranoid(-esque) in their thinking, and entertaining theories with serious negative social consequences.

Take, for example, a 2016 opinion piece in *Le Monde*, in which a group of social scientists chided the French State for wanting to engage with conspiracy theories on the evidence, because—they claimed—it would exacerbate conspiracist attitudes (Bronner et al. 2016). Or there is the work of Cass Sunstein—former Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs—and Adrian Vermeule, who argue that the best way to combat conspiracy theories is to infiltrate groups of conspiracy theorists, on the notion that conspiring against conspiracy theorists will somehow cure them of their belief that they are being conspired against (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009).

Now, maybe we should not infer that these experts have some malign purpose

in mind when proposing these ‘cures’, but note that—for all intents and purposes—the cure here is to stifle public debate about whether some event might have been caused by a conspiracy. Indeed, there is an entire research programme devoted to diagnosing the fault of conspiracy theorists, one I have taken to task elsewhere (Matthew R. X. Dentith 2017).

What is interesting about much of the academic work on belief in conspiracy theories is the way in which it typically misrepresents conspiracy theorists *and* their beliefs. Often unusual adherents of conspiracy theories—like your Alex Jones, David Ickes, and the like—are put forward as typical.¹⁵ As Joseph E. Uscinski notes:

[T]he term [conspiracy theorist] is often used to demarcate those, such as David Icke or Alex Jones, who take an entrepreneurial role in developing or spreading conspiracy theories (Uscinski 2017).

Sometimes the academic work presents results from other papers which weakly suggest some correlation between belief in a conspiracy theory and an epistemic or psychological vice as evidence of a definitive link. Take, for example, the work of Robert Brotherton and Christopher French, who argue that people who believe conspiracy theories have a greater susceptibility to the conjunction fallacy (the idea that people are more likely to believe the conjunction of A and B than A or B alone) (Brotherton and French 2014). This finding has been reported by Dieguez, Wagner-Egger, et al. (2015), Swami et al. (2014), Douglas et al. (2016), Gebauer et al. (2016), Freeman and Bentall (2017) and Franks, Bangerter, Bauer, et al. (2017). Yet these mentions go beyond talk of a ‘greater susceptibility;’ now it is a ‘tendency’ or a certain ‘proneness’ on the part of conspiracy theorists, which ignores both the contextual

¹⁵See, for example Franks, Bangerter, Bauer, et al. (2017) who use attendees of a David Icke seminar to explore conspiracist worldviews (see also Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer (2013)) or (Wood and Douglas 2013) who name Icke as one of those ‘prominent’ conspiracy theorists who ‘exhort the unthinking masses to “wake up,”’ among others.

factors of Brotherton and French's claims and glosses over that the same modes of thinking or phenomena are not exclusively the domain of conspiracy theorists and are found elsewhere (and often not treated as *prima facie* problematic in such cases).

Now, reporting research findings in stronger terms (or, perhaps more charitably, simplifying them for the sake of brevity) might not seem like a big deal. But for the conspiracy theorist who, say, believes that 9/11 was an inside job, much of this expert consensus can look like the product of an organised plot designed to deny people their ability to ask probing or politically inconvenient questions.

This response is a natural consequence to the generalist view which portrays conspiracy theories as a *prima facie* suspicious kind of belief; because generalists play down actual conspiratorial activity or overplay the idea belief in conspiracy theories can be suspicious, generalist views end up unfairly pathologising belief in conspiracy theories.

Philosophers, as was noted earlier, have largely resisted generalism. As David Coady points out, generalist views often rely upon a naïve understanding of the appeal to authority, and the role officialness plays in the rivals to conspiracy theories (Coady 2007). Lee Basham argues generalists typically fail to distinguish between theories about conspiracies they happen to take as warranted and the conspiracy theories they rail against (Basham 2011). Basham, along with Juha Räikkä, argues that generalism about conspiracy theories has produced a reticence to talk about real conspiracies (Basham Early access), a point Charles Pigden has also stressed (C. R. Pigden 2016). I have argued generalists tend to associate conspiracy theorising with what is likely non-typical conspiracy theorists (Matthew R. X. Dentith 2017), and that generalists critically underestimate the prior probability of conspiratorial activity being in the pool of candidate explanations of political phenomena (Matthew R. X. Dentith 2016).

Yet generalists have, typically, paid no attention to this critical literature, or, at

best, disparaged it by suggesting that these philosophers (and associates) are being deliberately obstructive (see, for example, Dieguez, Bronner, et al. (2016)). This is troubling not just because it goes against the ethic of academic debate, but also because many of the points particularists have raised are issues conspiracy theorists have long expressed. In this fashion it is understandable why conspiracy theorists are worried about the expertise of certain conspiracy theory theorists: if such theorists are not actively engaged in a conspiracy to downplay or dismiss conspiracy theorising, they certainly are acting like it. So, we do not have to believe that there is a conspiracy against conspiracy theorists to understand their reluctance to engage with conspiracy theory theorists on the topic of belief in conspiracy theories. Indeed, contemplation of this issue should give us some pause to think that maybe the worries of certain conspiracy theorists—that it comes to claims public debate is often biased against them and their claims—are not entirely unfounded.

5 A modest proposal

It would be fair to say that the preceding analysis paints a poor picture about expertise, at least when it comes to the assessment of conspiracy theories. If we agree that there are:

- a) an awful lot of conspiracy theories in contemporary public discourse, and
- b) most of us do not have the time to appraise each and every one of them on the evidence

then the realisation that appeals to expertise—at least in order to sort out the warranted from the unwarranted conspiracy theories—are problematic *at best* should be a worry to us all.

Part-and-parcel of this analysis rests upon the claim that there can be no *single* set of experts about conspiracy theories. That is to say, we are working here with some kind of *institutional theory* of expertise; there exists no institution which accredits, or is recognised as accrediting, conspiracy theorists.¹⁶ Indeed, if there were, conspiracy theorists would find such institutions problematic. After all, what better way to cast doubt on conspiracy theories than by controlling who accredits the conspiracy theory theorists?

We can, however, talk about there being something analogous to the kind of expertise we associate with institutions—which, for the purposes of this section, we will assume are epistemic—by talking about ‘communities of inquiry.’¹⁷

A community of inquiry is a community-led inquiry, where members of a community cooperate in a democratic and participatory fashion to solve problematic situations. A community of inquiry approach *with respect to conspiracy theories* would accept that while there may be no accredited experts with respect to such theories, the epistemic burden of analysing such theories can be shared by the members of a properly constructed epistemic community.

The idea that a community of inquiry model can allow us to talk about some kind of social, or community-based ‘expertise’ for the investigation and appraisal of conspiracy theories should not be surprising. The institutions we typically associate with expertise often are the products of such communities of inquiry, which have been codified or commodified as time went on.

So, who is going to be in such a community of inquiry? Well, it will likely include

¹⁶I take it there is a salient difference between a conspiracy theory and a conspiracy theory theory (a theory about conspiracy theories). This suggests there can be conspiracy theory theorist experts, and there could be institutional accreditation for such conspiracy theory theorists, but conspiracy theorising, it seems, remains largely an *improvised* branch of knowledge.

¹⁷A concept found in the works of C.S. Pierce (Pierce 1958), and a term pedagogues will be well aware of due to the work of John Dewey (Dewey 1938).

a variety of experts from different fields, some of whom will be institutionally accredited experts in some area, some of whom will have *recognised* expertise on some topic, and some of whom will be perfectly ordinary (yet interested) epistemic agents like ourselves. Potential members will include the police, members of the judiciary, politicians, journalists, citizen journalists, and members of the public.

One feature of this community of inquiry model is its (presumable) *lack* of institutional features. Although members may well *also* be members of institutions, the lack of shared governance, or institutional structure between its diverse members, should be a salve to the conspiracy theorist concerned that institutionally accredited experts might be involved in conspiracies *generally*, or conspiring against them *specifically*. After all, a community of inquiry, made up of diverse agents, is less likely to be conspired than a group of experts associated with an accrediting institution. The diversity of the agents should also mean that even if certain members are acting insincerely, such insincerity will be outed.¹⁸ The community of inquiry approach towards the investigation of conspiracy theories may well also avoid dogmatism when it comes to the generalism which pervades so much academic discussion of belief in conspiracy theories. So, not only should the conspiracy theorist not be concerned about the community of inquiry approach, they may well find that it is more sympathetic to the notion that particular conspiracy theories should be treated on their own merits, rather than dismissed just because it is yet another one of ‘those’ conspiracy theories.

Of course, nothing about the preceding story tells us anything about whether the members of a community of inquiry will end up endorsing any particular conspiracy theory. A community of experts treating conspiracy theories seriously does

¹⁸In addition, a community of inquiry can also be transnational or international in nature, which means that worries certain views might not be socially or politically expressible in one society might allow them to be expressed in another.

not entail that belief in conspiracy theories is *prima facie* rational. Rather, it requires that we treat particular instances of such conspiracy theorising seriously enough to investigate them.

Now, we might claim that this is how we already investigate or assess conspiracy theories. Discussions of 9/11, the assassination of JFK, the ‘vaccines cause autism’ alleged cover-up, and the like, have largely centred—at least recently—around communities of diverse and interested epistemic agents seeking to uncover the truth of what happened in 1963, 2001, and the contemporary motives of the ‘vaccine industry.’ The results of these investigations are contentious, insofar as the conspiracy theories continue to persist, despite claims by rival communities that these theories are unwarranted.¹⁹

In this sense, the community of inquiry approach seems like it might already be a dismal failure. One response to this worry is to argue that these communities of inquiry are badly constituted. That is certainly one option. However, as a reply it smells somewhat of the self-sealing fallacy: the fact there is disagreement indicates that said disagreement is only due to bad ‘groupthink’, and a *proper* community of inquiry would present definitive results.²⁰

The other response is to argue that part of the problem is still a lingering generalism in these communities of inquiry; we are constantly told that belief in conspiracy theories is irrational, and thus these putative communities of inquiry are often set up in diametric opposition to one another. One side seeks to prove the existence of some conspiracy, whilst the other tries to show that the conspiracy theorists are

¹⁹This is precisely the kind of issue Brian L. Keeley worries about when discussing *mature* conspiracy theories; the lack of institutional endorsement of some conspiracy theories allows them to persist (and sometimes thrive) when they should have withered on the vine (Keeley 1999).

²⁰Such a response also ignores the possibility that there might be reasonable disagreement about conspiracy theories. See Richard Feldman’s work on reasonable disagreements *generally* (R. Feldman 2006, 2011) and Simon Locke (Locke 2009) on rationalisation in conspiracy culture.

acting irrationally. That is, we often start our investigations from the assumption we know the answer, and thus are looking for evidence to confirm it.

Now, this response also potentially suffers from the self-sealing fallacy, since the *apparent* disagreement between communities is construed as being insincerity (wittingly or unwittingly) of some parties to *properly* investigate and appraise conspiracy theories. However, unlike the first response, we can at least point to evidence that generalist views—which portray conspiracy theories and their proponents as pathological—both exist, and have sway in the discourse around such theories. If we accept this response, then the conspiracy theorist worried about pejorative aspect of the label ‘conspiracy theory’ might have reason to be cautious about the community of inquiry model because the presumed attitudes towards conspiracy theories might ‘infect’ the various communities of inquiry which investigate them.

Of course, some of the ‘dogmatism’ we might associate with generalist views might itself be a product of appeals to experts and authorities. As such, the only salve to this concern would be to ensure that any community of inquiry into a particular conspiracy theory be made up of not just diverse people with respect to expertise or interest, but also with respect to their attitudes towards these things called ‘conspiracy theories.’ After all, the conspiracy theory *skeptic* will also be concerned about communities of inquiry into conspiracy theories which are only made up of people who already assume the existence of the conspiracies they are investigating. This is why any community of inquiry must include members who have diverse views about things called ‘conspiracy theories.’

The benefit, then, of the community of inquiry approach may not necessarily be getting the general population to consensus on an issue. Rather, it is how it makes it harder for opponents to deny the results of such an inquiry. Whilst people may well (and some will say ‘surely’) reject the results of such an inquiry for factors other than reason and evidence, a diverse epistemic group coming to some consensus on

the warrant (or lack thereof) of some conspiracy theory is evidence at the very least that the results of the investigation need to be treated seriously, and simply not dismissed because ‘That’s what “they” want you to believe...’

How we would model a community of inquiry into conspiracy theories remains—for now—an open question. Such a community would, however, provide us with reason to think there can be some kind of distributed expertise (or something similar to it) when it comes to conspiracy theories. It hopefully will not suffer from the worries the conspiracy theorist sometimes rightly associates with experts and expertise (at least as we commonly know them). This means that while traditional appeals to expertise are—at the very least—problematic when it comes to appraising conspiracy theories, there is at least one way to think about how to solve this issue, one informed through the lens of an epistemology which is—at heart—social and community focussed.

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