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Some Conspiracy Theories

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ABSTRACT

A remarkable feature of the philosophical work on conspiracy theory theory has been that most philosophers agree there is nothing inherently problematic about conspiracy theories (AKA the thesis of particularism). Recent work, however, has challenged this consensus view, arguing that there really is something epistemically wrong with conspiracy theorising (AKA generalism). Are particularism and generalism incompatible? By looking at just how much particularists and generalists might have to give away to make their theoretical viewpoints compatible, I will argue that particularists can accept many of the concerns that motivate generalism because generalism can never be about 'all' conspiracy theories without being either ahistorical or apolitical. In the end generalist critiques are best seen as useful guidelines or considerations for the appraising of particular conspiracy theories.

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Introduction

A remarkable feature of the first generation of work on conspiracy theory in philosophy has been that – with few exceptions – most philosophers working in the field agreed that there is nothing inherently problematic about belief in conspiracy theories.¹ This consensus has come to be known as 'particularism', a term of art we owe to Buenting and Taylor (2010).

Particularists argue that we cannot make broad generalisations about the warrant of conspiracy theories *as a class*. Rather, we have to deal with conspiracy theories *on a case-by-case basis*. In this respect conspiracy theories are just like any other kind of theory: we have to judge particular instances on the evidence.

Recent work, however, has challenged this consensus, arguing that we have *prima facie* grounds for a general suspicion of these things called 'conspiracy theories'.

Here, then, we will examine what – if anything – the particularist needs to do to accommodate the *new* generalism. I will argue that particularists can accept many of the concerns which motivate generalism; as long as particularists can show that these new generalist critiques only apply to *some* conspiracy theories (even if by 'some' we mean 'many') then such generalist critiques end up being, at best, useful guidelines or considerations for the appraisal of particular conspiracy theories (rather than hard-and-fast rules which explain why we should express a dismissive attitude to these things called 'conspiracy theories').

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The First Generation Consensus

Patrick Stokes notes that,

[A] small but illuminating literature has emerged over the last decade, focusing almost entirely on the status of conspiracy theory as an epistemic problem and attempting to determine whether and under what conditions conspiracy beliefs might be warranted. Quite astonishingly, something like a broad consensus has emerged: regarded simply as explanations, conspiracy theories are not *intrinsically* irrational, and believing in conspiracy explanations is not necessarily unwarranted. (2018a, 25)

Now, there are two senses of ‘astonishing’ here worth noting: the first is that because philosophers are typically fractious, this kind of general agreement is in itself *astonishing*.

The other sense, of course, is that the consensus in philosophy is astonishing because it is at odds with the consensus elsewhere. Typically, when academics talk about belief in conspiracy theories they at least appear to be talking about beliefs people often consider to be *mad, bad, or dangerous*.²

A new generation of philosophers have challenged the consensus (which we might call the ‘first generation consensus’). I will focus here on, by virtue of their publication dates, four such challengers: Quassim Cassam; Keith Harris; M. Giulia Napolitano; and Napolitano and Kevin Reuter.

Now, if someone is going to challenge a consensus view, we need to ask whether the challenge they pose is well-motivated, and also whether the challenger engages with the existing literature. That is, does their challenge engage with the existing literature in order to show that some rival view should take precedence? Thus, in analysing these challenges, we will look at how they situate their contribution in the wider philosophical literature about belief in conspiracy theories, which then allows us to ask whether there is room for particularism in their accounts.

The New Generalism – Cassam and the Conspiracy Apologists

Quassim Cassam’s *Vice Epistemology* (2016) was an attempt to develop an account of intellectual character vices using conspiracy theories as examples of beliefs generated by such vices.³

Cassam’s worked example of how belief in conspiracy theories is predicated on intellectual vices is that of Oliver, a fictional character who believes some variation of the Inside Job Hypothesis of 9/11 (the idea that the September 11th Terror Attacks of 2001 were a false flag operation run by elements within the US). As Cassam puts it:

[Oliver] believes that P because he is gullible, cynical and prejudiced. Oliver’s intellectual vices help explain his belief that P without being reasons, or his reasons, for believing that P. . . . Oliver has been led astray by his intellectual character defects, and it is by reference to these defects that we can start to make sense of his bizarre views. (2016, 163)

Cassam contrasts Oliver’s vice-ridden beliefs with our scepticism of such beliefs, pointing out that unlike Oliver, we are not gullible, dogmatic, closed-minded, cynical, or prejudiced:

The difference is that you are giving conspiracist sources precisely the credit they rationally deserve whereas Oliver’s sense of what deserves epistemic credit and what does not is totally skewed. (2016, 165)

We do not need to get into the weeds of whether 9/11 Inside Job Hypotheses are warranted or unwarranted here. It is enough to say that no matter what Oliver (a fictional character) believes, Cassam will say it is inherently irrational without giving any argument other than what Oliver believes is ‘baseless and false’ (2016, 162).⁴

My account of intellectual character traits as habits or styles of thought or inquiry is very much in keeping with the finding that conspiracist ideation is underpinned by a distinctive thinking style, and what is a general propensity to subscribe to conspiracy theories if not a character trait? (2016, 172)

Frustratingly, at least in his 2016, Cassam does not engage with the first generation consensus. Yet, as we see in his 2019, he admits he got pushback for an earlier version of his 2016 piece in *Aeon*

the year prior (2019, vii), which at least suggests that in 2016 he was aware there were philosophers working on this topic.⁵

Cassam's 2016 is interesting not just because it is a view in isolation from the other philosophical work on the topic, but also because it is a view even its author has neglected. In his 2019 book *Conspiracy Theories* he writes:

Since the publication of my *Aeon* article, my take on conspiracy theories has changed. I have come around to the view that they need to be understood first and foremost in political terms, and that the intellectual character of conspiracy theorists is a side issue. (2019, vi)⁶

In *Conspiracy Theories* Cassam argues that we should understand the problem of conspiracy theories as right-wing propaganda, with such theories, capitalised as 'Conspiracy Theories', being characterised as speculative, contrary in nature, put forward by amateurs, and embodying a pre-modern view of the world. That is, there seems to be room for belief in warranted conspiracy theories (in the lowercase) as he does distinguish between warranted conspiracy theories and those that are unwarranted and function as right-wing propaganda ('Conspiracy Theories').

Yet part of what hinders Cassam's analysis here is his limited engagement with the existing philosophical literature. Cassam refers to the work of Charles Pigden ('a conspiracy apologist' (2019, 82)), David Coady (another conspiracy apologist (2019, 65)), and Brian L. Keeley.

Why are Coady and Pigden 'conspiracy apologists'? Because they:

[M]ake excuses for Conspiracy Theories and downplay the serious harms they do. These are of different kinds: personal, social, intellectual and political. Conspiracy apologists risk becoming apologists for the political causes that Conspiracy Theories have promoted. (2019, 65)

Now, whatever we might think of Coady and Pigden's views on the warrant of *particular* conspiracy theories, they are not conspiracy apologists in the sense Cassam paints them. After all, Cassam is interested in his capital C, capital T 'Conspiracy Theories', whilst Coady and Pigden are interested in the cases where lower-case conspiracy theories are warranted; the very kind of conspiracy theories Cassam has also admitted can be warranted.

Keeley, a particularist, is admittedly praised by Cassam, who writes: 'If nothing else, [Keeley's] article proves that not all philosophers who write about Conspiracy Theories are Conspiracy Theorists' (2019, 25). Yet this point by Keeley is made towards the end of his article, when he has moved on to the discussion of the issue of belief in the class of *mature*, and thus *unwarranted*, conspiracy theories. Indeed, latter work by Keeley (for example, the chapter we co-authored in 2018a), makes him as much a 'conspiracy apologist' as Coady and Pigden.

Cassam, then, chastises two philosophers for holding to views they do not, in fact, hold,⁷ whilst misinterpreting the work of another. Thus, despite ostensibly allowing that belief in conspiracy theories can be warranted, nonetheless he wants to distinguish his work from that of the first consensus

It seems, then, that particularism is incompatible with Cassam's view simply because his engagement with the philosophical literature is simply at the level of caricature.

Harris and Trusting Authority

Keith Harris argues that conspiracy theorists are more likely or inclined towards '[A] probabilistic, and fallacious, extension of modus tollens' (2018, 236).

Contra Cassam, Harris does not understand conspiracy theorists to be riddled with epistemic vices. He points out that conspiracy theorists can exhibit what we normally take to be epistemic virtues (doing their own research, getting to know a topic inside and out, etc.). Instead, Harris argues that conspiracy theorists are prone to epistemic errors, and this gives us a reason for a *prima facie* scepticism of conspiracy theories generally.

Harris, unlike Cassam, does engage to *some* extent with the existing literature, largely concerning how particularists take it that the official theory of 9/11 still counts as a ‘conspiracy theory’. He argues that this means particularists are using a faulty definition, as official theories are typically formed in more veristic ways than what we typically label as ‘conspiracy theories’. Yet this is a topic has previously been discussed by particularists such as Coady (2003), Lee Basham (2011), and myself (Dentith 2014).⁸

His view of what counts as the proper subject of a ‘conspiracy theory’ also turns out to be slippery. Talking about Flat Earth theories (which need not even involve conspiracies) he claims:

My own view is that the assimilation of such theories under the label ‘conspiracy theories’ involves a loose use of the term. (2018, 238)

This way of opposing the particularist definition of conspiracy theory we find in the first generation: arguing it is too expansive, yet then proposing an even more expansionary definition, is a move we will also see in the work of Napolitano and Reuter (2021).

Harris also seems reluctant to cite particularist critiques with which he agrees: his critique of the idea conspiracy theories are unfalsifiable has previously been expressed and criticised by, for example, Basham (2001), Juha Räikkä (2009) and myself (Dentith 2014). His critique of Steve Clarke’s thesis that conspiracy theories resemble degenerating research programmes (2002) resembles much earlier criticisms by both Basham (2006) and Pigden (2006).

So, is there room for particularism in Harris’ view? Ostensibly yes:

Even if no argument shows that belief in conspiracy theories is invariably irrational, there might be reason to think that conspiracy theorising typically involves errors of reasoning. (2018, 239)

That is, the problem is conspiracy *theorising* rather than conspiracy theories *per se*. Harris rejects particularism because:

[T]he alternative position [particularism], according to which whether conspiracy theorising is irrational must strictly be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, fails to recognize the extent to which conspiracy theorising may involve problematic reasoning patterns. (2018, 240)⁹

Harris does, admittedly, engage more with the first generation of scholars in his 2022, where he attempts to analyse Cassam’s in light of the philosophical consensus. By fleshing out his account of how conspiracy theories are contra the findings of epistemic authorities, he then goes on to criticise Cassam’s 2019 by showing why only *some* conspiracy theories end up being attractive to people who subscribe to right-wing populism. As Harris argues:

[F]or those who resent what appears from their perspective as the shaping of the epistemic landscape by alien perspectives, the adoption of conspiracy theories may facilitate the reassertion of epistemic autonomy. (2022, 2)

In theory Harris in his 2022 seems to allow for a particularist take, given that he writes:

[I]f one prefers an alternative definition of conspiracy theory, one can nonetheless acknowledge that an important subclass of conspiracy theories have the nature of those captured by the present definition. One may in this case think of the arguments to follow as concerning only that subclass of conspiracy theories. (2022, 4)

Yet he criticises particularist definitions with the claim ‘Many commentators regard such a definition as implausibly broad’ (2022, 3), without mentioning who these commentators are, or – more crucially – whether their objections have any merit. His only argument against the ‘implausibly broad’ particularist definition ends up being the worry that calling the official theory of 9/11 a ‘conspiracy theory’ would go against ordinary language considerations.¹⁰ The only philosopher of the first generation that he engages with in any depth is Neil Levy, largely because Harris’ view on epistemic authority is a restatement of Levy’s (2007).¹¹

Harris’ account, then, allows that you could have a different definition of conspiracy theory from his own, but such a definition must still fall under the rubric of a generalist conception where there is something typically wrong with conspiracy theorising.

Napolitano and Evidential Self-Insulation

In Napolitano's (2021) she argues that:

(i) many explanations that involve conspiracies are not to be considered conspiracy theories, and (ii) whatever distinguishes conspiracy theories from mere theories that involve conspiracies makes the former epistemically problematic. (2021, 82)

Napolitano argues that conspiracy theories are not *theories*; rather they are 'a particular way of holding a belief in the existence of a conspiracy' (2021, 82) that are 'self-insulated' (2021, 86). Napolitano accepts that her definition is revisionary, like that of the particularists. However, she argues it captures common usage in a way that the particularist definition does not. It is also a generalist one: she argues that a central characteristic of belief in conspiracy theories is that no matter the evidence against said theory, people who believe it will find a way to dismiss it. She states that:

I still consider conspiracy theories a way of holding beliefs, rather than a derivative notion of an independently defined 'conspiracy theorist'. A conspiracy theorist, on my view, is a person who holds one or more self-insulated conspiracy-beliefs-one or more conspiracy theories. (2021, 87)

She claims, then, that the problem conspiracy theories pose are the theories themselves, and not some characteristic of the people who believe them. Yet she also states:

This analysis also shows that the resistance to revision that many conspiracy theorists exhibit is better understood as a feature of the believers, as my account suggests, rather than of the theories. (2021, 95)

As such, the account she gives of evidential self-insulation seems like an account concerning the character of people who subsequently come to believe conspiracy theories, rather than something that happens just because someone believes a conspiracy theory.¹²

Napolitano, unlike Cassam and Harris, engages fully with the consensus, discussing the reasons why those scholars have argued for a particularist definition. This allows her to carve out what she takes to be the essential problem: conspiracy theorists are immune to the dis-confirmatory role of the existence of relevant counter-evidence.

Is there room for particularism in Napolitano's view? Presumably yes, given that she argues that '[O]ne can never be rational in holding a belief in a conspiracy that is self-insulated' (2021, 88). That is, if we can show that there are at least some conspiracy theories which are not self-insulated, then her arguments will not apply to them; that is, if we can show that at least one conspiracy theorist is receptive to changing their mind if new evidence comes to light, then not all conspiracy beliefs are self-insulated.¹³ However, this seems incompatible with Napolitano's account, as she continues her argument with: 'In other words, I argue that it is irrational to hold conspiracy theories' (2021, 88) and concludes her paper with:

[T]his account of conspiracy theories is in line with other research in social epistemology aimed at making sense of the seemingly absurd opinions that some people hold (despite the easy and widespread access to information that the Internet grants), without having to assume that, somehow, these people have stopped being responsive to the demands of truth and rationality. (2021, 102)

Under her account, then, it is just a stipulation that belief in conspiracy theories is *prima facie* irrational because such beliefs are defined as being self-insulated.

However, later in 2021 Napolitano, along with Kevin Reuter, investigated the conceptual engineering of the concept of the 'conspiracy theory' in the philosophical literature. They distinguish their engineering¹⁴ of the concept from that of the consensus by going through that work piece-by-piece, arguing that however philosophers define 'conspiracy theory' it should contain the *evaluative* aspect, commonly found in the ordinary language concept, which characterises conspiracy theories as *bad*.

In order to support their argument that the label ‘conspiracy theory’ is essentially evaluative, Napolitano and Reuter use the results of five studies that, they conclude, ‘[R]eveals a rather uniform picture, according to which the ordinary meaning of the expression “conspiracy theory” is predominantly evaluative’ (2021, 18).

That is, the minimal definition favoured by particularists appears not to match how ordinary people typically apply the label ‘conspiracy theory’. Their results also indicate that some participants were willing to label something a ‘conspiracy theory’ even in cases where there is no conspiracy being referenced.¹⁵ From this they conclude that the definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ going forward should not just be evaluative in nature; it should also not even require that referring to a conspiracy be considered a necessary condition of something falling under the label.¹⁶

Is there room for particularism in this account? Yes, so long as we accept Napolitano and Reuter’s recommendation that the term ‘conspiracy theory’ should ‘refer only to the epistemically evaluative *conspiracy theory*—while introducing a new expression, such as ‘conspiratorial explanation’, to refer to the descriptive ‘theories which involve conspiracies’ (2021, 23).

Servicing Someone Else’s Generalism

A curious feature of this new generalism is how it seeks to service work on conspiracy theory theory outside of philosophy. For example, part of what motivates Cassam is that as conspiracy theorising is seen as irrational by other scholars, this needs explaining in philosophical terms. Thus, in his 2016 Cassam invents someone like Oliver to explain that irrationality by reference to epistemic vices. This comes up again in his 2019 when he seeks to tie belief in conspiracy theories to right-wing propaganda.

Napolitano’s motivation is similar. She writes:

The main advantage of understanding conspiracy theories as self-insulated conspiracy-beliefs rather than as mere theories involving conspiracies, is that it allows for empirical studies in the psychology of conspiracy theorists without having to make problematic assumptions about the rationality of believing conspiracies. (2021, 97)

Those ‘problematic assumptions’ are the arguments of particularists, who Napolitano criticises for having critiqued generalist arguments in the social psychological literature.

In her co-authored piece with Reuter, they argue that ‘adopting a neutral definition for investigating conspiracy theories [as particularists have argued for] in academic settings would run the risk of driving a wedge between the academic and the public discussion of this phenomenon’ (2021, 8).¹⁷ Yet as Douglas and Sutton (2018) explain:

[R]ecent findings call into question this rather pathological view of conspiracy beliefs. Far from being limited to people who are paranoid and delusional, research suggests that conspiracy beliefs are common (Oliver and Wood, 2014) and may be characterized as the product of everyday cognitive processes. That is, everyone is to some extent likely to believe in conspiracy theories. (2018, 259)

and later in 2019 they, along with several other co-authors argue that:

It is first necessary to define some key terms since many arguments about conspiracy theories originate with disputes over what counts as a conspiracy theory and what does not. First, we identify a ‘conspiracy’ as [sic] secret plot by two or more powerful actors (Keeley 1999; Pigden 1995). Conspiracies typically attempt to usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions. (Douglas et al. 2019, 4)

It is not clear, then, that particularists are driving a wedge into the debate at all.¹⁸ Indeed, recent work suggests that particularist critiques of generalist work has made academics in conspiracy theory theory more aware that when we talk about the problem of belief in conspiracy theories, we need to be specific as to which conspiracy theories we are referring to.¹⁹ It is also not clear from this work that the academic discussion of conspiracy theory outside of philosophy is as close to the evaluative meaning preferred by Napolitano and Reuter as they would have us believe.

Indeed, even if the work in social psychology is seemingly *contra* to the work in philosophy, it is not clear that it is the philosophers who should fall in line and march in lockstep. Work in sociology,²⁰ anthropology,²¹ political science,²² religious studies,²³ and communication studies,²⁴ after all, seems much more in line with the particularist position. That is, it might be the generalist position that is not as obviously dominant a position as it is presented by Napolitano and Reuter (and that is even if we grant that it *might* reflect common use).

Bridging the Generations

What, then, can we say about the resurgent, new generalist challenge to the consensus of the first generation? Can particularists accommodate it?

Now, you might think that even asking whether particularists can accommodate the new generalism is a weird question, since it cedes a lot of ground to the critics of the first generation consensus. After all, as we saw in the introduction to this special issue, the consensus did not emerge immediately from the initial papers published by Keeley and Pigden. Rather, philosophers settled on a consensus position, one that challenges a widely-held but ultimately (in Pigden's words) 'modern-day superstition' (1995), on the basis of arguments for said consensus.

In nearly all these challenges to the consensus, it is at least admitted that *some* conspiracy theories can be warranted: Cassam distinguishes between 'conspiracy theories' and *prima facie* problematic 'conspiracy theories'; Harris admits some conspiracy theories that go against the proclamations of epistemic authorities can be warranted; and Napolitano and Reuter allow for a particularist definition, albeit under a new label.

Now, particularists can agree with Cassam, Harris, and Napolitano and Reuter that *some* conspiracy theories can be warranted; this is, after all, the motivation for, and a consequence of, the minimal definition favoured by particularists. Given that the particularist can then point to at least one theory that was pejoratively labelled as a 'conspiracy theory' which nonetheless turned out to be warranted, they can say that even if the set of warranted conspiracy theories turns out to be small, we should still apply some precautionary principle (based, say, upon the fear of future conspiracies being mislabelled as *mere* 'conspiracy theories'), and thus treat conspiracy theories seriously.

Indeed, this is part of the argument behind Stokes' reluctant particularism or defeasible generalism (2018a): some particularists might even agree that most conspiracy theories *upon investigation* turn out to be unwarranted. But given that most of us presumably would not like a warranted claim of conspiracy to be treated dismissively simply because it has been labelled a 'conspiracy theory', then generalism seems like overreach.

The particularist could push further, of course, and argue it is not clear that most conspiracy theories will turn out to be unwarranted. We might think of this in terms of the base rate fallacy: the kind of conspiracy theories we tend to be interested in, or know about, are typically those that have been investigated and then found to be unwarranted. That is, we don't really have a *prima facie* scepticism of certain kinds of conspiracy theories without having engaged in a little particularism first. As Keeley argues, after all, there is no 'mark of the incredible' when it comes to distinguishing between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories *on first glance* (2007, 137).

The problem is this: generalism is predicated on inferring from a corpus of unwarranted conspiracy theories *we know are unwarranted because they were investigated* to the claim that conspiracy theories *investigated and un-investigated* are unwarranted. Arguments that claim this corpus of unwarranted theories are the result of evidential self-insulation (Napolitano) or rejecting epistemic authority (Harris) are mistaking the identified errors of the *subset* of unwarranted conspiracy theories, and then generalising from those errors to anything which has been labelled as a 'conspiracy theory'.

Objection – Why Appeal to a Consensus?

One obvious objection is to ask, ‘Why we should appeal to a consensus anyway?’ The history of the sciences, for example, is littered with examples of consensus positions that are now considered wrong. Just because one generation of scholarship agrees on a position, then, this is not in itself a reason to think it should be treated as a *de facto* view.

This objection cuts both ways: generalist scholars who appeal to the consensus of ordinary language, or the idea there is *rival* consensus in a related discipline, should ask the same question. This is why it is important to emphasise that the consensus in the first generation was the product of a research programme, and not some view *ex nihilo*.

Now, it is possible that the consensus of the first generation might not end up being the consensus of the second generation. This article might look dogmatic and stubborn in five to ten years’ time. But if the early work on conspiracy theory theory in philosophy is going to be overturned, it will be due to both an emphasis on showing where the literature went wrong (thus, it will be predicated on engagement with the consensus) and it likely will also result from the use of new and novel examples (one curious feature of the first generation scholarship is, after all, its origin pre-9/11, and its subsequent coming of age in a new era of political conspiracy theories).²⁵

Let us deal with Cassam first. Contra Cassam, philosophers can and have admitted that *some*—but crucially only *some*—conspiracy theories can be used as political propaganda. Indeed, Juha Räikkä (2009) and Patrick Stokes (2018a; 2018b) have both argued this prior to Cassam’s (2019). As I noted in my replies to Stokes, this issue with *recurrent* conspiracy narratives is a problem we should recognise, without then generalising about it to the class of all things called ‘conspiracy theories’ (or even Cassam’s ‘conspiracy theories’) (2018c; 2018d).²⁶

Contra Harris, there has been a significant debate about the role of epistemic authorities (see Coady 2003; Dentith and Keeley 2018; Dentith 2018a) which allows that when conspiracy theories conflict with *genuine* epistemic authorities we should reject those conspiracy theories. The issue, as analysed in that literature, concerns the difficulty of picking out genuine epistemic authorities from *ostensible* authorities. Indeed, this is a problem Harris fails to grasp: in his 2022 paper he conflates *political* or *journalistic* authorities with epistemic authorities, thus disregarding the very criticisms made against Levy’s earlier account (which made similar mistakes).

Now, as previously noted, neither Cassam nor Harris engages much with the existing philosophical literature. Admittedly, one potential defence of not citing said literature is they not might think it is sufficiently established, and thus they do not need to engage with it in anything other than a cursory manner. It also allows these philosophers to present their views as if there is no larger corpus that supports the idea of the consensus of the first generation. But this is where Napolitano, and Napolitano and Reuter present a more interesting challenge. They get into the weeds of the particularist arguments, treating seriously the idea that there is a developed consensus, even if it is one they either reject (Napolitano’s solo piece) or feel needs to be contextualised and reframed with respect to the wider academic debate on conspiracy theories (their joint piece).

Yet even Napolitano and Reuter (solo or jointly) do not present a significant challenge to the particularist consensus. After all, the major criticism of all these resurgent generalist positions can be accommodated with the addition of just one word: ‘some’.

Some Conspiracy Theories/Theorists

As long as *some* conspiracy theories are warranted, particularists can argue the default position should be that we analyse them on a case-by-case basis. That is, we can accept that *some* conspiracy theories are:

- weaponised in political debates (Cassam)
- contrary *in a problematic sense* to epistemic authority (Harris), and

- subject to labelling worries (Napolitano and Reuter).

The word ‘some’ is very powerful here. Consider these modified (changes in bold) claims:

Here, then, is my list of what makes **some** Conspiracy Theories special. As I’ve tried to explain, these **problematic conspiracy** theories are **often** speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish and premodern.²⁷ (Cassam 2019)

Because **some** conspiracy theories conflict with the claims of epistemic authorities, the belief in **such** conspiracy **theories** requires **their** holder, on pain of consistency, to reject epistemic authority – at least with respect to the matter at hand.²⁸ (Harris 2022)

There is an interesting feature that we observe in **some of the** people who defend conspiracy theories. It seems to be the case that, no matter what evidence we present to them against their theory, they’ll find a way to dismiss it. (Napolitano 2021)

In each case adding the word ‘some’ makes the claims made by the generalist compatible with particularism. Given that few generalists think all conspiracy theories are *prima facie* false or unwarranted,²⁹ adding in a few instances of the word ‘some’ to their descriptions of the apparent problem of belief in *particular* instances of conspiracy theory serves to make their claims more plausible.

Admittedly, this response might not work for Napolitano’s solo piece, given she defines a ‘conspiracy theory’ as an evidentially self-insulated belief; that is, to be a conspiracy theory is to be evidentially-insulated. Yet we can take a page out of her co-authored piece and argue that maybe generalists can argue along those lines, as long as they are happy to use a different term to describe what is, in essence, a subset of these things called ‘conspiracy theories’. That is, maybe *some* conspiracy theories are evidentially self-insulated, but this is not true of *all* things labelled as ‘conspiracy theories’.³⁰

You might think that this response to the new generalism gets us into the problem of what Daniel Dennett calls ‘burden tennis’ (1988); if ‘some’ turns out to be ‘very many/most’ then generalism seems advisable, whilst if ‘some’ is – as particularists have mostly argued – a small subset of these things called ‘conspiracy theories’ then it is particularism which should rule the roost. The debate ends up being like a game of tennis, with particularists and generalists lobbing the burden of proof back and forth (perhaps with historians shouting ‘Love’ from time to time).

Now, this is an empirical issue. But we should note though, that this new generalism relies on using restrictive definitions of what counts as a ‘conspiracy theory’. Cassam talks about capital C, capital T ‘Conspiracy Theories’. Harris defines them as necessarily bucking epistemic authority. Napolitano claims that conspiracy theories are evidentially self-insulated. Napolitano and Reuter blow open the definition of a conspiracy theory such that it is simply a label designating a bad explanation. In each case, the new generalism restricts what counts as a ‘conspiracy theory’ by defining out of court examples that would show that some (perhaps even many) conspiracy theories are warranted. Not just that, but the kind of restrictions being hashed out turn out to be rehashes of debates in the particularist literature of the first generation (which are sometimes not even acknowledged by the people rehashing them). So, even if you think this is a game of burden tennis, it seems that the burden should be squarely on the generalist.

Conclusion

As we can see from the preceding discussion, particularists can accommodate the concerns raised by the new generation of generalists, largely because their concerns are echoes of debates which led to the consensus in the first place.

Now, as this very issue attests to, not all the new work in the philosophy of conspiracy theory challenges the work of the first generation in order to overthrow it; there is ample new work which works to extend and develop the consensus.

So, rather than rehash old issues, then, my challenge to the new generalists is to emphasise that their concerns centre on the problem of *some* conspiracy theories. One challenge to the consensus of the first generation is that we have – at best – only a sketch of how we might show that a conspiracy theory is warranted. Carving out, then, the conceptual space of what might be epistemically distinctive about *unwarranted* conspiracy theories will contribute, then, to the positive case of what might well be turn out to be some ‘mark of the incredible’³¹ that shows a particular conspiracy theory is, indeed, unwarranted and deserving of our scorn.

Notes

1. See the introduction of this special issue for coverage of this (Dentith [forthcoming](#)).
2. Stokes clarifies his sense of ‘astonishing’ in the critical discussion included in this issue ([forthcoming](#)).
3. An earlier version of Cassam’s argument appeared online in the pages of *Aeon* in March 2015; I have elected to focus on the peer reviewed piece; I have discussed some of the differences between Cassam’s argument in 2015 vs. his more refined version in 2016 in my [2018b](#).
4. Cassam introduces Oliver as a ‘concrete example’ ([2016](#), 161) yet Oliver is not a real person, and the example is clearly designed to be illustrative of someone who suffers from intellectual vices. After all, later on in the article Cassam asks us to imagine that Oliver (a fictional character to begin with) also believes the Moon landings were faked, and that the AIDS epidemic was a conspiracy orchestrated by some government ([2016](#), 162). He also claims: ‘[H]e is only cynical about legitimate sources of information; he gives epistemic credit where it isn’t due and fails to give it where it is due’ ([2016](#), 163). Whatever Oliver believes, it is – by stipulation of his creator – irrational.
5. One reason as to why Cassam might not have engaged with the existing literature in his 2016 is his interest in *inquiry epistemology* over that of *analytic epistemology*. Inquiry epistemology, according to Cassam (citing Hookway [2003](#)), is ‘[T]he attempt “to find things out, to extend our knowledge by carrying out investigations directed at answering questions, and to refine our knowledge by considering questions about things we currently hold true’ ([2016](#), 161). Cassam later claims that: ‘If it turns out that conceptual analysis doesn’t cast much light on the nature of inquiry that would not be a reason for concluding that analytic epistemology is asking the wrong questions. It would be a reason for concluding that analytic epistemology doesn’t have the right tools for answering the questions it asks’ ([2016](#), 176). As most of the work of the first generation is in the tradition of analytic epistemology, Cassam might well have *chosen* not to engage with it because he felt it was inadequate for the kind of analysis he was pursuing.
6. There are two curious features to this move by Cassam: for one thing, he notes he received criticism for his earlier work, but he does not specify who his critics were, or why those criticisms made him realise the intellectual character approach is, at best, a side issue. The other thing is that Cassam refers to the non-peer reviewed *Aeon* piece rather than his more refined argument in the peer-reviewed article in *The Monist*.
7. Cassam claims conspiracy apologists like Coady and Pigden should look at ‘long and hard before leaping to their defence’ ([2019](#), 84). But, given that he characterises Pigden’s view correctly on page 83, Cassam should recognise that Pigden (and Coady) are interested in conspiracy theories, not Cassam’s problematic capital C, capital T ‘Conspiracy Theories’, and thus they are not engaging in conspiracy apologetics in the sense Cassam thinks they are.
8. If we remove the assumption about the veristic nature of official theorising from Harris’ argument there is a genuinely interesting thesis there: people who hold certain theories (conspiracy or otherwise) as being warranted sometimes overstate the evidence for their theory such that it prevents them from properly analyzing whether a rival explanation might be the better explanation.
9. See Hagen ([2020](#)) for another critical analysis of Harris’ ([2018](#)).
10. Harris confuses things even further when he writes: ‘No definition, including this one, can be expected to conform perfectly to ordinary usage of the term – terms can be misused, after all – and some degree of arbitrary stipulation is necessary to arrive at a definition that is suitably simple and general’ ([2022](#), 4). By that proviso it is not clear why, for example, people might just be said to be wrong about not thinking the official theory of 9/11 is a conspiracy theory, or why it is not simpler to stipulate that the official theories can also be conspiracy theories.
11. Harris also argues that: ‘I take it to be a plausible empirical assumption that epistemic authorities recognized in modern societies are generally reliable and thus that conspiracy theorizing in such societies tends to be at odds with the acquisition of knowledge’ ([2022](#), 13). This empirical assumption is not backed up with any data, and ignores Basham’s earlier arguments about information hierarchies ([2018](#)).
12. See Duetz for further analysis of Napolitano’s 2021 ([2022](#)).
13. See also a recent article by Matthew Shields ([2022](#)) for more on this, as well as Duetz in this issue ([forthcoming](#)).
14. See also the article in this issue by Shields ([forthcoming](#)).

15. One worry about the study which produces this curious result is that whilst there is no explicit conspiracy being appeal to in the examples that generate this result, it is plausible to imagine someone adding in a suppressed premise which implicitly reinstates the conspiracy condition.
16. Keeley ([forthcoming](#)), Pigden ([forthcoming](#)), and Mittendorf ([forthcoming](#)) have all responded in some sense to Napolitano and Reuter in this issue. See also Shields (2022) for another examination of the limits of not just Napolitano and Napolitano and Reuter's work, but also for criticism of Cassam's 2019.
17. As I have argued elsewhere, this rather ignores the context of a debate between some particularists and some French social psychologists, notably how particularist work was falsely represented by said social psychologists (Dentith 2022).
18. See also Nera, Leveaux, and Klein (2020), and Ahadzadeh, Ong, and Wu (2021) for further examples of particularists being cited approvingly in the contemporary social psychological literature.
19. Indeed, I am currently an advisor on a European Research Council-funded project, *Consequences of conspiracy theories (CONSPIRACY_FX)*, led by Karen Douglas.
20. See, for example, Husting and Orr (2007) and Harambam and Aupers (2014).
21. See, for example, Mathijs and Machold (2001).
22. See, for example, Uscinski (2018) and Cibik and Hardoš (2020).
23. See, for example, Robertson (2017).
24. See, for example, Goodnight and Poulakos (1981) and Spence (2021).
25. A curious feature of the first generation of work on conspiracy theory theory *both inside and outside of philosophy* is that it emerged at a time when conspiracy theories were considered fringe beliefs of interest only to obsessively online weirdos. Much of the second generation of work has come out in an era where conspiracy theories appear to have become part-and-parcel of mainstream political rhetoric.
26. Indeed, given the functionalist nature of Cassam's argument about the role of 'Conspiracy Theories' and the problem of functionalist critiques in general, particularists might want to be cautious of functionalist accounts, and continue to work on a case-by-case evaluative basis. However, for a more robust functionalist analysis that evades the kind of worries we see in Cassam's (2019), see Hauswald ([forthcoming](#)).
27. Indeed, Cassam is happy to introduce conditional claims such as 'many' to his talk of Conspiracy Theories (such as, 'The politics of many Conspiracy Theories is right-wing (2019, 13)).
28. Indeed, given Harris admits that '[I]f one prefers an alternative definition of conspiracy theory, one can nonetheless acknowledge that an important subclass of conspiracy theories have the nature of those captured by the present definition. One may in this case think of the arguments to follow as concerning only that subclass of conspiracy theories' (2022, 4) then he should be happy to accept that his analysis of conspiracy theories being counter to epistemic authority only applies to *some* conspiracy theories.
29. See my 2019 for a discussion of the few conspiracy theory theorists who do; Napolitano's solo piece might also be an instance of this kind of view, given that evidential insulation is built into her account; at best the conspiracy theorist could only ever be epistemically lucky in belief in the existence of a conspiracy in her view.
30. See Niki Pfeifer's article in this special issue for more on this ([forthcoming](#)).
31. Apologies to Brian L. Keeley for this appropriation of his terminology!

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