



**SERRC**  
Social Epistemology  
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

Treating Conspiracy Theories Seriously: A Reply to Basham on Dentith

Matthew R. X. Dentith, University of Auckland

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Dentith, Matthew R.X. "Treating Conspiracy Theories Seriously: A Reply to Basham on Dentith." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5, no. 9 (2016): 1-5

<http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3ak>

Conspiracy theories are—if you believe certain sources—rife, plentiful, and abounding. Despite this being a concern to some social scientists (see, for example, the recent declaration in *Le Monde* by Gérald Bronner, et al.<sup>1</sup>), the academic literature on these things we call “conspiracy theories” is still small. On the one hand, what better way to spend a week or three than in the examination of the various articles and books on the subject? But, on the other hand, the smallness of the literature reveals some peculiarities, particularly among the works of many social scientists. For example, despite “conspiracy theory” appearing to be perfectly general term (some explanatory theory concerning the existence of a conspiracy), and the apparently “curious” fact (curious in that such instances are often played down when talking about conspiracy theories) that conspiracies occur, there is already a deep-seated vein in the existing literature which says conspiracy theories are bunk, and we have a *general* case to be suspicious of them.

### Generalism about Conspiracy Theories

*Generalism* about conspiracy theories (a tip of the hat to Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor for the terminology<sup>2</sup>), as I argue in “When inferring to a conspiracy theory might be the best explanation,” is a problematic thesis.<sup>3</sup> The Generalist—she who thinks conspiracy theories typically ought not be believed—ignores the very many *particular* reasons as to why *individual* conspiracy theories end up being the best explanation of some event.

In philosophy, however, Particularism about belief in conspiracy theories is an increasingly common position. The Particularist rejects the idea that there is some case against belief in conspiracy theories generally. Instead, we can only pass judgement on *individual* conspiracy theories, assessing them purely on their respective evidential merits. “When inferring to a conspiracy theory might be the best explanation” is, then, simply one more argumentative strand in support of the conspira ... Sorry, agenda associated with particularist philosophers like Brian L. Keeley,<sup>4</sup> Charles R. Pigden,<sup>5</sup> and David Coady,<sup>6</sup> all of whom have made substantial contributions to the nascent Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories). So, it was not surprising that Lee Basham—another notable particularist—would have things to say about my recent paper.

In “The Need for Accountable Witnesses,” Basham contrasts my attritive approach to dismantling the arguments of generalists with an alternative proposal, one which focuses on the critique of “primary information sources in our Western information hierarchies.”<sup>7</sup>

Now, there is a tendency among generalists to claim if a conspiracy were going on we would know about it (presumably because conspiracies always leak), or that there are sufficient

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<sup>1</sup> Bronner et al. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Buenting and Taylor 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Denith 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Keeley 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Pigden 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Coady 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Lee Basham 2016.

checks-and-balances in place to ensure that—by-and-large—those who hold power in Western societies will not get away with acting conspiratorially. Yet Basham challenges us to acknowledge the elephant in the room, a point which really should be basic to anyone’s understanding of politics and business: conspiracies are everywhere, and not just that; they are *normal*. He points out that:

If we start with personal experience, conspiracy explanations are natural, ordinary and often justified. We are a communication driven, highly social coordination-able species, imbued with the gift of tactical deception. We are also adept at intentionally coordinating this ability with others.<sup>8</sup>

Basham’s argument is simple, yet like many a good philosophical argument, has a conclusion that many take as contrary: If conspiratorial activity is normal in everyday life, why would we think it is abnormal (and thus accusations thereof being deserving of ridicule) in corporate or political life? After all, we still live in largely hierarchical societies, where much information comes down from the top. If we acknowledge that those at the top act as conspiratorially as everyone else down the line, then we have the question of how we evaluate the claims which emanate from such *information hierarchies*. As Basham asks:

Don’t our political and economic elites retain these abilities? Why should we expect they neglect our well-developed human powers for cooperative deception when shaping the course of a polis? What is the reasoning, psychological, sociological, epistemic or otherwise, that indicates they would?<sup>9</sup>

That is to say, if we accept (and surely we do) that conspiratorial activity is not exactly rare, why are we so loathe to talk about it when it comes to government and corporate activity? The answer is, I think, a combination of the *common wisdom* (everything thinks this because everyone has been told to think this by people who already thought it in the past!), as well as a certain kind of Establishmentarian thinking (it’s best people think of conspiracy theories derisively, because we don’t really want people questioning the very underpinnings of our Western democracies).

Yet Generalist has some strange fellow travellers. Take, for example, a piece by Andrew Sullivan in *The New York Magazine*, which effectively argues that democracy is ruining things for the political class who know what is best for us.<sup>10</sup> Let’s leave to one side the worry that history doesn’t exactly show that this class really does act in the best interest of the *polis*, or the idea that even if the political class is an epistemic elite who knows best, surely we should still be asking “*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*” No, let’s just focus on the idea that this fosters belief in conspiracy theories, because it signals to the rest of us that we cannot be trusted to know our best interests, and sometimes people have to work *in secret* to save us

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<sup>8</sup> Basham 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Basham 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Sullivan 2016.

from ourselves. Sullivan is not alone in thinking this way, either. Another example of such Establishmentarian thinking—leading to predictable and undemocratic consequences—is Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule’s “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures.”<sup>11</sup> They argue the best way to cure society of conspiracy theories is to infiltrate conspiracy fora and *conspire against the conspiracy theorists*. Both Umberto Eco<sup>12</sup> and Dom DeLillo<sup>13</sup> wrote similar treatises, but they, at least, were being satirical.

## Democracy and Conspiracy

What is interesting about the Sullivans, Sunsteins and Vermeules of this world is they recognise that conspiratorial activity is perfectly understandable in (and perhaps even necessary to the functioning of) a democracy. Sometimes governments need to keep secret what they are up to now to realise some future benefit. On occasion businesses need to deny some claim in order to investigate it more fully. And, yes, sometimes it is because governments and corporations get up to no good. Yet said theorists would like us to ignore that last possibility (or, at the very least, downplay it). It certainly does not help that these Sullivans, Sunsteins and Vermeules are political insiders, who charitably are defending a system which largely works (Churchill’s quote about democracy being the worst form of Government, except for all the others comes to mind), or, less charitably, are telling us to blithely ignore clear and present threats in the very structure of our democracies.<sup>14</sup>

Now, the Sullivans, Sunsteins and Vermeules are right to be interested in conspiracy theories, because such theories present an interesting problem. On one hand, there are so many conspiracy theories that it is hard to know when—if ever—we should take any of them seriously, let alone expend resources in investigating them. On the other hand, if some claim about the existence of conspiracy, say, involving the members of an influential, public institution turned out to be true, then we would be obliged to take action. The existence of conspiracies don’t just threaten our trust in the influential institutions that make up our societies, they can also pose a direct threat to members of the public. What we need, then, in Basham’s words is:

[A]n open-society epistemology and ethics of discourse so this network can be fairly rational and actually fearlessly illuminating, with the power of applying real accountability; the essence of particularism.<sup>15</sup>

Now, it is either by luck or conspiracy that I am in the process of working on this very issue. Over the next year I will be working on a project at the University of Bucharest entitled “The Ethics of Investigation: When are we obliged to take conspiracy theories seriously?” The motivation for this project is this: there have been cases historically where someone put forward a conspiracy theory which initially looked outrageous (and thus implausible) yet

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<sup>11</sup> Sunstein and Vermeule 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Eco 2010.

<sup>13</sup> DeLillo 1989.

<sup>14</sup> Churchill 1947.

<sup>15</sup> Basham 2016.

ought to have been treated seriously.

For example, imagine you've heard stories that the police and upper echelons of government are protecting a group of high profile sexual offenders from investigation and prosecution. Such a conspiracy would seem unthinkable, because surely this kind of thing could not happen (because it is unthinkable), and if it had happened, it would have been revealed to the public by the authorities (because who could keep such unthinkable acts secret).

Except it happened. As the Operation Yewtree investigation in the UK has shown, prominent Britons (and at least one Australian) in the Seventies and Eighties not only successfully preyed on young men and women, but the attempts to expose this scandal were at best ignored, and at worse, covered up by influential members of British society. There are numerous other examples, like the Moscow Show Trials of the 1930s, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964, and, of course, Watergate (to name but a few). In each case someone (or some set of bodies) claimed "Conspiracy!" were charged with being conspiracy theorists, and only later vindicated for being right in the first place.

### **The Challenge of Judgment**

Basham's challenge, then, can be answered in part with an analysis of how we appraise the utterances and claims that emanate from the influential institutions which make up the informational hierarchies in our societies. We need to ask:

- When is it rational for citizens to trust officials?
- What sort of political culture, and what kinds of social arrangements, would ensure that it is, on the whole, rational for citizens to trust politicians and others acting in a public capacity?
- When is it rational for journalists and others to take conspiracy theories seriously, and even to investigate them?
- Could it be rational to take a conspiracy theory seriously even when it is not rational to believe it?

Each and every one of us has a limited set of hours in a day, some of which are taken up with the necessities of day-to-day living, and others of which we apportion according to our needs and desires. Questioning each and every piece of information we hear, whether it be from the government, the local business leader, or just the odd neighbours who live across the street, is both time consuming and arduous. What we need, then, is epistemic and ethical guidance on these issues. We need to know what we should be looking out for, and also who to trust. Not just with respect to what is said, or who said it, but also with respect to who can be reasonably relied upon to assess the claims that fall outside our epistemic remit.

The risks are real. In an environment in which people take a dim view of conspiracy theories, conspiracies may multiply and prosper. Conversely, in an environment in which conspiracy theories are taken seriously and investigated by journalists, police and the like, conspiracies

should be much more likely to fail. Thus, influential institutions, and the people who run them, are more likely to be trustworthy if they are not automatically trusted, but, rather, are subject to the vigilance of, say, an investigative press which does not think it a mark of intellectual sophistication to dismiss conspiracy theories out of hand, and a public who know not just when they are obliged to ask questions, but when they can expect others to do likewise.

My response to Basham, then, is to accept his challenge to get my hands dirty (again), by exploring just what it means to explore the problems inherent with investigating conspiracy theories in the kinds of informational hierarchies we have in the West. He kindly calls my previous work “cutting edge”; I hope to keep that edge keen over the coming year.

**Contact details: [m.dentith@episto.org](mailto:m.dentith@episto.org)**

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