

The Philosophy of Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously

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Abstract: During the last few decades, the proliferation of interest in conspiracy theories became a widespread phenomenon in our culture, and also in academia. In this piece, I review a new book on the topic of conspiracy theory theory (that is—the theory of conspiracy theories) *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, edited by M R. X. Dentith. To contextualize my review, I first turn to the '90s, to see what sparked current interest in conspiracy theories within the field of analytic philosophy. I then critically assess the current limitations of social epistemology, as a field. Among other things, I show how accepted assumptions in social epistemology cause cross-disciplinary disagreements with other social sciences, present the dilemma of trivializing whistle-blowers, and discuss few neglected roles technologies play in belief formation.

1. Introduction

[A]udiences can no longer tell truth from fiction [...] And in a world in which there is no truth, the most entertaining conspiracy theory will often win.

(Benkler, Faris, & Roberts 2018, p. 37)

During the last few decades, the proliferation of interest in conspiracy theories has grown tremendously. What was once a niche interest of the very few is now a widespread phenomenon in our culture – from political campaigns and mainstream news, to the entertainment business. Scholars who were dealing with conspiracy theory theory (that is - the *theory* of conspiracy theories) in the past have witnessed the rise of its popularity within academia. Amongst the many characteristics in the growth of academic knowledge, is the birth of a new sub-discipline. I take the publication of *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, edited by M R. X. Dentith, as one of the signs for the birth of a new sub-discipline within philosophy: the philosophy of conspiracy theories. The expectation is that through time, the philosophy of conspiracy theories will take part in the broader field of what is referred to as “conspiracy theory studies”² and will be able to communicate its research insights beyond academia. This new sub-discipline not only carries a

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² A rising example for conspiracy theory studies is COMPACT (Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories): a research project funded by the European Cooperation in Science & Technology. See: <https://conspiracytheories.eu>

potential to better understand conspiracy theory theory, but also an opportunity for social epistemology to re-evaluate available social epistemic theories. It also poses an opportunity for social epistemologists to make a difference in the world with their knowledge about the social dimensions of knowledge.

Since the introduction to the book entails a very clear summary of the chapters, I chose to critically assess the socio-epistemological research direction of studying the theory of conspiracy theories. I first give a general context of what preceded the birth of this sub-discipline, namely – how conspiracy theories won their pejorative label (§2). I then describe the two sections of *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously* (§3): the first is about the particularist view – which claims that each conspiracy theory must be evaluated in particular, as opposed to the generalist view of assessing conspiracy theories as a class of explanations; and the second section of the book, which is about diagnosing conspiracy theories, with its core chapters presenting a debate between social scientists holding the generalist view, and social epistemology-oriented scholars advocating the particularist view. Most of the chapters, from both sections, were previously published in SERRC before – a point that will receive some of my focus as well.

After providing a very brief contextual history for how this sub-discipline was born, I focus on what the book offers. Based on the publication of this book, I turn to critically assess the current state of the philosophy of conspiracy theories (§4). I highlight a dilemma that both the particularist and generalist views pose to mainstream social epistemology: either there is a lacuna in social epistemology, or that our social epistemic theory needs a revision. I end by suggesting possible routes for this newborn sub-discipline (§5). Taking a cue from David Bloor (1976), I argue that some kind of a symmetrical approach must be taken: it seems that all the intellectual effort within social epistemology is focused on rational conspiracy theories, rendering a social epistemic analysis of irrational conspiracy theories as missing. I also suggest a way to extend the social epistemology of conspiracy theories by analyzing belief formation of an individual in a social context, theorizing as group agents (collective epistemology), and giving a proper place in research for the epistemic roles of technologies.

2. Pre Sub-Discipline: A Very Brief History of ‘Conspiracy’ as a Pejorative Term

Karl Popper, in his famous *The Open Society and its Enemies* [1945], considered whether or not the unfolding of events in society is the outcome of conspiracies. Popper’s favoring of historicism over conspiracism is well studied. He rejected “the conspiracy theory of society” - the idea that conspiracies are the driving force of events. It is probably due to Popper’s work that the term ‘conspiracy’ began, around the 60’s, to gain its stigma and derogatory connotations (Ayto 1999, cited in: Coady 2018, p. 186 fn. 7; cf. Thalmann 2019). Since then, many scholars have adopted the pejorative view: a view that conspiracy theories are *prima facie* irrational, and those who

believe them suffer from logical flaws in their reasoning, some kind of cognitive bias, a certain psychological pathology such as delusions or paranoia, or a mixture of the above. As such, it surely had negative social consequences that are worth tackling. Long story short: the study of conspiracy theories over the 70's was mainly done by historians, but the 90's brought new critical perspectives (for the intellectual history of studying conspiracy theory, see: Uscinski 2018).

Though philosophers such as Niccolò Machiavelli and David Hume studied conspiracy theories (Räikkä 2018), the philosophical interest in conspiracy theories was only revived relatively recently. In 1995, Charles Pigden published a paper calling into question the endorsement of the conspiracy theory in terms of how Popper discussed it. Pigden, building upon historical narratives, argued that there are conspiracy theories that are warranted since “[h]istory is littered with conspiracies, successful and otherwise” (p. 3). Four years later, Brian L. Keeley published a paper in *The Journal of Philosophy*. Aware of Pigden's work, and acknowledging it, Keeley believed that the lack of interest in conspiracy theories among academics was because academics “simply find the conspiracy theories of popular culture to be silly and without merit” (p. 109, fn 1). He challenged philosophers by stating that “it is incumbent on philosophers to provide analysis of the errors involved in common delusions, if that is indeed what they are” (ibid). In other words, Keeley challenged philosophers to take conspiracy theories seriously. His challenge re-sparked the interest philosophers have in conspiracy theories.

As with most other fields of knowledge, papers on the topic were increasingly published, gradually laying the foundations towards a more methodological investigation. A community of scholars with a shared language gradually sprung: Brian L. Keeley, Charles R. Pigden, David Coady, Juha Räikkä, Lee Basham, Neil Levy, Pete Mandik, and Steve Clarke have done some pioneering work. Some of them, later on, continued to pursue this effort - making substantial contributions.

The philosophical interest in conspiracy theories has transformed remarkably since it was considered being “silly and without merit”, to use Keeley's words from two decades ago. Since then, philosophical literature had produced research that goes beyond the treatment of individual subjects as irrational, paranoid, or having logical fallacies. A worldview has gradually developed: conspiracies do happen; if it is epistemically rational to believe in conspiracy theories, then the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, *qua* theories - rather than a set of individual pathological beliefs, is a phenomenon that should be accounted for. Similar to other fields of knowledge, the philosophical study of conspiracy theories constantly grew. Articles, book chapters, collected essays, and special issues were published. Most notably the editorial work of David Coady in *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate* (2006), Episteme's (2007) special issue on conspiracy theories, and his authoring of the book *What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues* (2012).

One of the climaxes in the process of giving birth to the field of philosophy of conspiracy theories, is, with no doubt, the 2014 publication of *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, authored by Dentith. The plethora of prior debates about the nature of conspiracy theories and the argument that if conspiracy theories do happen, it is not irrational to believe in them - have solidified into a cornerstone publication. The phenomena of conspiracy theories now have a coherent socio-epistemic theory. To those outside the field of philosophy, it presents a theory that includes taxonomy, definitions, and a well-phrased unbiased approach towards conspiracies. To those inside the field of philosophy, it also offers tools and methods for investigating theories that lack evidence and considering them in relation to alternative explanations. It deals with common social epistemic topics such as authority and expertise, next to questions about preferring theories over others, as discussed mostly over within the field of philosophy of science. At the time of its publication, it succeeded to cite most, if not all, the philosophical papers on conspiracy theories that were published by then. This was an important achievement since it was the most powerful intellectual force against the pejorative view that everyone seems to hold. It is fair to say that since 2014, the gradual decline in dealing with the rejection of the pejorative view enabled other topics to be developed. For example, a special issue of *Argumenta* (2018, edited by Juha Räikkä) includes papers about the civilian roles of conspiracy theories, as well as their moral implications and place in history.

Despite the important achievement and the ability to spread to other topics, many of the subsequent arguments are only convincing under the non-pejorative assumptions that social epistemologists came up with, and only they seem to be the ones to accept. Isn't this, then, a case of an intellectual echo chamber? While within social epistemology no one defends the pejorative view, it is (still) the received view that is widely held among almost everyone else, everywhere: in academia, governmental administration, mainstream media, and the general public – worldwide, crossing all political spectrums. The argument that “some conspiracies happen; therefore, conspiracies should not be *a-priori* dismissed” might be easy for social epistemologists to embrace; but there is a long way to go in changing a person's (read: a non-social epistemologist's) worldview on this matter. The publication of *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously* not only marks a new sub-discipline but also shows how the gap between the worldviews of social scientists (and the general public) and between social epistemologists is widening. It seems that where everyone in society is seeing green and blue, social epistemologists insist on seeing bleen and grue. Continued social epistemic discourse widens the gap between the worldviews. But unlike many other topics within philosophy, this gap can bear negative consequences.

3. Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously

Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously proves that the sub-discipline of philosophy of conspiracy theories has been born; at least under the criteria of going outside social epistemology. The book is divided into two sections: while the first is an internal, social-epistemic, debate about how to correctly characterize a position, the second section encompasses a variety of social issues around its core: a true disagreement between social scientists and social epistemologists. Many of the chapters on both sections of the book were previously published before in SERRC. An advantage of having the articles collected into one publication is the ability to examine these related two topics distinctively.

3.1. The Particularist Turn in the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories

Given that conspiracy theories must not be dismissed *a-priori*, how can conspiracy theories be taken seriously? To this end, Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor's (2010) distinction between generalism and particularism approaches to conspiracy theories is introduced. The generalists approach claims that conspiracy theories should be evaluated as a distinct class of theories. It treats conspiracy theories as unlikely to happen, and therefore problematic to belief in - reflecting the pejorative connotation of the term conspiracy. Contrarily, the particularist approach claims that a theory, any theory - including a conspiracy theory, should be evaluated on its own merits.

The story behind the first section began with the publication of Dentith's (2016) paper "When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation" in SERRC. Lee Basham (2016) replied; Patrick Stokes (2017) replied both; and debate about how to correctly characterize the particularist view began. Reading the chapters feels like diving into the cutting edge of this internal debate. It is also a pleasure for anyone who's mind enjoys fine-tuned analytical distinctions. The closing chapter of the section is a response of Dentith, offering a revised thesis of the particularist view.

3.2. Diagnosing Conspiracy Theories

The core of the second section is the debate between social epistemologists and social scientists: On June 6, 2016, a group of eight social scientists published a piece over the French daily newspaper *Le Monde*, titled *Let's fight conspiracy theories effectively* (Bronner *et al.*; translated freely from "Luttons Efficacement Contre Les Théories Du Complot"). In it, the authors call on French authorities to deal with the spread of conspiracy theories in classrooms by having a firmer research-based approach to conspiracy theories; and they are the ones who should offer that. The social scientists linked conspiracy theories in classrooms with the unwanted result of students taking conspiracy theory seriously.

Besides the bold link to the book's title, there is a bold link between the two sections: The authors of the *Le Monde* piece judge conspiracy theories in generalist terms, without considering the particulars of a theory. Basham and Dentith (2016), co-signed by a few other contributors to the book - David Coady, Virginia Husting, Martin Orr, Kurtis Hagen, Marius Hans Raab, argued that such an approach might lead to terrible consequences - both epistemically and politically. This, in turn, led to a response by most of the authors of the original *Le Monde* piece (Dieguez *et al.* 2016). Lee Basham (2019) summarizes the state of the debate and the exchanges from a social-epistemic (i.e. particularist) point of view:

They envision a mass psychological engineering project to curtail rational social epistemology, one particularly, but not limited to, targeting children in public schools. The project was originally brought to public attention when their bid for public funding appeared the prestigious French daily, *Le Monde*. Their project was widely critiqued in *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* (SERRC) and elsewhere. Their first defense in SERRC only heightened skepticism. Their newest defense remains as epistemically unsound and politically dangerous.

This is an important debate to have. In addition to further establishing one's (particularist or generalist) view, this debate is a live example of how cross-disciplinary disagreements form. If proponents of the particularist view wish to convince the social scientists, then the way this debate goes seems like a classical example of group polarization rather than stimulating belief revisions for the disagreeing peers. It is an opportunity to build bridges and fine-tune received views. The debate continues even after the publication of the book (see Wagner-Egger *et al.* 2019, then: Basham 2019; and to this date: Dentith 2019 which summarizes the debate so far) and that is a good sign: the dialog continues. Maybe a cross-discipline agreement will one day form and the social scientists will repent. Or maybe we will get to revise the received views within social epistemology. Perhaps none of the above will happen, but the intellectual efforts in this case are only worth as long as we will understand new things about the social nature of conspiracy theories, and no less important – self reflect on the social nature of social epistemology.

The core of the second section of the book consists of some of the papers that made up this debate. Because of its wide social-scientific nature, rather than internal socio-epistemic, other social issues that regard conspiracy theories were included as well. Unique contributions were made by Charles Pigden, David Coady, Ginna Husting, and Marius Raab. These contributions widen the scope of what the philosophy of conspiracy theories covers. Pigden's topic is the rejection of conspiracy theories; Coady compares rumors with conspiracy theories, arguing they can take part as an anti-democratic propaganda; Husting's topic is the role conspiracy plays in

producing knowledge in neoliberal politics and economy; Raab points to flaws in how psychologists measure belief in conspiracy theories.

4. Beyond the Particularist Turn?

Taken as a whole, this collection provides an introduction for both the battlefield of the particularism/generalism debate outside of social epistemology and a deep look to the particularist view within. The first section of the book, about the particularist view, should be read completely, while single chapters from the second section can be read individually. Having explained the internal debate and the external - I am left with questions about what's next.

The dilemma that the prevalence and ubiquity of conspiracy theories pose to mainstream social epistemology is even more present in light of the particularism/generalism debate³. This dilemma can be thought of as a choice between the two options: Under generalist assumptions, a belief in a conspiracy theory is usually considered irrational. If this is so, the current accepted epistemological and socio-epistemological theories probably do not need a revision. But this means that there is a lacuna in the field, namely, that social epistemologist must explain the prevalence of belief in conspiracy theories, *qua* irrational theories, as a social epistemic pathology (e.g., Gelfert 2013; Coady C. 2006)⁴. But the widespread beliefs in irrational conspiracy theories, especially among those who are considered educated and rational, experts in their domains, academic scholars, scientists, and other specialists, should be accounted for - and this poses a serious challenge to current social epistemic theories.

For example, in the epistemology of testimony, it is often assumed that a speaker's unreasonable beliefs are *prima facie* evidence against the speaker's epistemic competence, which serves as a justified reason for the hearer to reject the testimony (Lipton 2007; Webb 2004). If a belief in a conspiracy theory is indeed unreasonable, how can this be settled with the fact that in many other realms, those who believe in conspiracy theories are often considered trustworthy? It works vice versa as well: if a belief in a conspiracy theory is not evidence against the speaker's competence, isn't her testimony about the conspiracy theory itself, at least under certain conditions, trustworthy? If it is, why is it not commonly believed? We can think of similar dilemmas arising regarding the epistemology of peer disagreement, consensus and dissent, epistemic authority, trust, and probably other fundamental social-epistemic concepts.

³ I thank Boaz Miller for helping me articulate an earlier version of this dilemma.

⁴ The phenomena of individual subjects who believe irrational conspiracy theories should be explained as an epistemic pathology also without the generalist assumption, a point that I will later turn to.

The other option for the dilemma is unraveled under particularist assumptions. The widespread of beliefs in conspiracy theories among reasonable people - is evidence that belief in conspiracy theories is more rational than is currently (and commonly) accepted. If indeed this is the case, then the reasons that the various beliefs in conspiracy theories are not part of the mainstream are not so much individual as they are social. That is, beliefs in conspiracy theories should be more widely accepted, and the reasons that they are not as widely accepted might be related to various attitudes, or even social mechanisms, that regard intellectual atmosphere, sophisticated politics, and technological platforms. They all play social epistemic roles.

For example, take US President Donald Trump's recent (August 10, 2019) retweeting of a post that implies that the suicide of convicted pedophile and sex offender Jeffery Epstein was somehow caused by former US president Bill Clinton⁵. A Guardian newspaper article quotes the original author of the tweet: "[he] later insisted he was not a '*conspiracy theorist and whacko*'" (my emphasis)⁶. Other media employed similar dismissive attitudes towards conspiracy theories and theorists, strengthening what we refer to as the generalist, pejorative, view. When this practice becomes repetitive by authoritative people or institutions, and covered by mainstream and social media, the pejorative label of conspiracy theories and theorists only sticks harder (cf. Husting 2018; Coady 2018; for earlier Trump-related and other right-wing populist conspiracy theories undermining public trust, see Bergmann 2018; Benkler, Faris, & Roberts 2018, especially pp. 18-20). But the reputation of conspiracy theories is not the only casualty here.

The rejection of the particularist view might be fatal: By undermining conspiracy theories and theorists, future whistleblowers - politicians, government administrators, journalists, bloggers, businessmen, and others, will be downgraded and ridiculed. This, in turn, results in the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions - both as having the public's best interests, and by reporting reliable information they are accounted for. This very point makes the common socio-epistemological norms and practices, as they are analyzed and described in the social epistemic philosophical literature, in *prima facie* need of revision: our current theories might give the wrong analysis of the correct social-epistemic attitudes that should be taken regarding conspiracy theories. The common norms outside social epistemology should embrace conspiracy theorists rather than mock them, but social reality is backwards. This clashes with the way social epistemology, as a field, is able to offer an acceptable description of the social-epistemic attitudes towards conspiracy theories. The result might be wrong, or a correct analysis that

⁵Twitter. (2019). Terrence K. Williams, 11:26 AM, 10 Aug 2019.
https://twitter.com/w_terrence/status/1160256105399967744

⁶ Oliver, Mark. (2019). "Jeffrey Epstein conspiracy theories run riot, with Trump's help", *The Guardian* 11 Aug 2019.
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/11/jeffrey-epstein-conspiracy-theories-run-riot-with-trumps-help>

everyone might reject. Maybe advocating against the pejorative view is not the right tactic. It seems that when the particularist views are considered outside of social epistemology, they are mostly dismissed, exactly as is the legitimacy of conspiracy theories themselves. Is this a bullet worth biting? Maybe.

5. Taking the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories Seriously

The philosophy of conspiracy theories is currently focused on rational theories, neglecting some of the most interesting social epistemic phenomena that seem to be found within irrational conspiracy theories and accompanied by social-epistemic pathologies. For example, how can we account for the acceptance of bogus, even debunked, conspiracy theories that people believe in? If the philosophy of conspiracy theories is to be taken seriously, some kind of a symmetrical approach (Bloor 1976) must be applied: both rational and irrational conspiracy theories should be accounted for. Hereinafter, I wish to draw attention to possible social epistemic research directions for the philosophy of conspiracy theories.

A first route is aiming to clarify the individual's epistemic dependence on prior knowledge as knowledge outside her own cognitive agency. It asks how an individual subject forms her attitude towards a conspiracy theory in a socio-technological epistemic context? That is, how does a person form a belief about a conspiracy theory due to inputs she gets online?

A second route that the philosophy of conspiracy theories can turn into is collective epistemology. Here, group agents who believe various conspiracy theories, or even collectively phrase ones, can be the object of inquiry.

The third path of inquiry is to inquire after whether or not unique epistemic mechanisms exist in regard to conspiracy theories. For example, is the distribution of epistemic labor, which regards various roles such as the production, dissemination and promotion, and receiving of conspiracy-related beliefs, different than other kinds of beliefs? Do conspiracy theories have unique spreading mechanisms? How about mechanisms for different kinds of conspiracy theories over different kinds of platforms?

But there's a fly in the ointment: The second chapter in this book, authored by Patrick Stokes, begins with the following: "It's hard to think of any other phenomenon as widespread and salient in contemporary society that has been so roundly ignored by philosophers as conspiracy theory" (p. 25). I think that what has been largely ignored, are the epistemic roles of communication technologies rather than conspiracy theories. If the philosophy of conspiracy theories is to be taken seriously, it must go together with how beliefs spread; And in today's society, conspiracy

theories - as are urban legends, gossip, and rumors - spread through, and no less importantly - as a result of communication technologies. It is easy to spot that they all share an a-priori pejorative connotation. Counter commonsense, social epistemology shows how these phenomena have positive social roles and epistemic benefits. Recently, a new member has joined this family: trolling (Kerr & Lee 2019). While the epistemic roles of technologies are acknowledged in these phenomena (also in this book, e.g. Husting 2018 in chapter 8; Raab 2018 in chapter 11), they are almost never the primary topic of social epistemic inquiry.

The epistemic role of technologies is crucial to current understanding of society. In the context of conspiracy theories theory, content published over the 8chan platform was connected with recent Christchurch and El Paso massacres and the Poway shootings; anti-scientific propaganda such as the notably dangerous anti-vaxxers and the (still-funny but soon may be dangerous) flat earthers - cite conspiracies; extreme and violent ideologies such as ISIS and white nationalism use conspiracies to shoot their poisoned arrows; even the incitement to the worst of all - genocide (in Myanmar) is fueled by the spread of conspiracy theories online. Issues, such as fake news, bots, deepfakes, and many others, affect the spread of beliefs in general, and conspiracy theories in particular. Also, algorithms, and not just people, are acknowledged as directly disseminating conspiracy theories⁷. None of the above comes as a surprise; but the state of the philosophical inquiry still prevents social epistemologists who deal with conspiracy theories from offering insights, not to say “applied insights”. Social scientists already offer insights based on the role technologies play (see, e.g. Benkler, Faris, & Roberts 2018; COMPACT 2018. For generalist social scientists, see Douglas *et al.* 2019; for the association of the authors with the generalist worldviews, see Dieguez 2016; Wagner-Egger et al. 2019).

I assume that together - the epistemology of conspiracy theories and the social epistemic inquiry into the epistemic roles of technologies - can result in prolific, insightful and valuable research. Despite the importance and relevance of both the philosophy of conspiracy theory and the epistemic roles of technologies, social epistemologists have yet to seriously and systematically tackle these closely related issues. This is not only an opportunity to deal with issues that are relevant and important, but, as I see it, a normative imperative for the social epistemologists’ community to deal with.

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⁷ For a recent example: Collins, Ben. (2019). “On Amazon, a Qanon conspiracy book climbs the charts — with an algorithmic push”, *NBC News* March 5, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/amazon-qanon-conspiracy-book-climbs-charts-algorithmic-push-n979181>

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