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Substantive Disagreement in the *Le Monde* Debate and Beyond: Replies to Deutz and Dentith, Basham, and Hewitt

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I agree with much of what J.C.M. Deutz and M.R.X. Dentith have to say in “Reconciling Conceptual Confusions in the *Le Monde* Debate on Conspiracy Theories” (2022). They have given me a lot to think about and have caused me to change my perspective in some ways. I found their discussion of conspiracy beliefs and conspiracist mindsets to be especially interesting. Drawing on the work of social scientists, they argue that conspiracy beliefs are to be identified by how they are supported. They also clarified for me what this debate is really about in a way I had not previously appreciated. In particular, what do ordinary people think of when they hear ‘conspiracy theory’? There are a number of issues that I was running together without realizing it. And I think they show that the question about how ordinary people understand conspiracy theories is the central issue in this discussion.

Conceptual Confusion or Substantive Disagreement?

Deutz and Dentith identify a distinction between conspiracy theories and conspiracy beliefs. They argue that conspiracy theories are a very broad category and that category is what philosophers are talking about. And they argue that conspiracy beliefs are a narrower category and that category is what social scientists are talking about. They trace a lot of the alleged disagreement about this topic to a conceptual confusion committed by both philosophers and social scientists. Their view is that the two groups are mostly talking past one another. And once we see this, the two approaches can be reconciled.

I have a different perspective. I think that there are some substantive disputes in this literature. Among these are disputes about what ordinary people are talking about when they use ‘conspiracy theory’. Such disputes impact how we should report the findings of social science to ordinary people. In addition, there are disputes about how to evaluate specific conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists. Such disputes impact what social scientists should assume and which examples social scientists should use in their experiments.

It would be one thing if philosophers and social scientists each introduced ‘conspiracy theory’ in their own ways as distinct technical terms divorced from the ordinary meaning of ‘conspiracy theory’. In that case, I would agree that they are talking past one another and that the debate has no real substance. But I don’t think that is what is going on. ‘Conspiracy theory’ is an ordinary term that ordinary people use. My view is that if a term is part of ordinary language, then when people use that term we should assume they are using it in the ordinary way unless they say otherwise. So I think that both philosophers and social scientists intend to use ‘conspiracy theory’ in its ordinary way.

Consider Pigden’s (2007) discussion of the conventional wisdom about conspiracy theories. What Pigden says would make little sense if he were not intending to talk about what ordinary people are talking about when they use ‘conspiracy theory’. Ordinary people intend to talk about a class of propositions using the term ‘conspiracy theory’. That class, Pigden suggests, is very different from what ordinary people believe. Ordinary people think the members of that class are not to be believed. Ordinary people think that class is very narrow and that it excludes propositions like ‘Nixon conspired in Watergate’ but includes

propositions like ‘9/11 was an inside job’. Pigden argues, however, that ordinary people are wrong about all of this.

It is clear that Pigden is not merely introducing ‘conspiracy theory’ as a technical term that is divorced from the common usage of ‘conspiracy theory’. He is not arguing that ordinary people are talking about one thing that works one way but he is going to talk about this broader thing that works a different way. Instead, Pigden uses the same term as ordinary people to talk about the same thing as ordinary people. And he makes the substantive claim that ordinary people are mistaken.

Consider discussions of concrete examples of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists by figures such as Basham and Coady. Each denies that it is acceptable for social scientists to use the proposition that 9/11 was an inside job as an example in their research. Basham (2022) thinks this is because in doing so such social scientists dismiss “thoughtful concerns about the details of the 9/11 catastrophe.” Coady (2021) grants that thinking 9/11 was an inside job “manifests some sort of irrationality” but not a conspiracist mindset. And so he thinks it should not be employed in the experiments of social scientists. His argument depends on the assumption that ‘conspiracy theory’ is used by ordinary people in a broad way rather than a narrow way. Basham (2022) thinks conspiracy theorists are “some of the most thoughtful and intelligent segments of the population.” Coady (2007) and (2021) expresses skepticism that the sort of conspiracist mindset Deutz and Dentith talk about exists. So as I see it, these are additional substantive issues in this debate.

On the Dangers of Social Science Reporting

Duetz and Dentith worry that although social scientists study conspiracy beliefs, they report their findings as being about conspiracy theories. As Deutz and Dentith put it:

What is problematic, from a theoretical perspective, is that the conspiracy theories appealed to in such polls are almost invariably ‘unwarranted’ or ‘obviously false’ conspiracy theories—i.e., those bad, mad, and wacky speculations lacking appropriate evidential support (Hill’s stereotypical conspiracy theories)—whilst the conclusions being drawn are presented in terms of conspiracy theories *generally* (i.e. seemingly applying to conspiracy theories both stereotypical and non-stereotypical) ... Framing these conclusions in terms of conspiracy theories generally is thus overreaching, misleading and is unwarranted. Furthermore, as the Commentators argue, these over-generalized conclusions are not just academically problematic because they are inflated and unjustified, they are also socially/politically problematic because of the stigmatizing effects such conclusions entail for all conspiracy explanations (warranted ones included) (44, 45).

I am skeptical that this is a real danger. I think that when ordinary people hear ‘conspiracy theory’, they do not think merely of a proposition about a conspiracy occurring. I take a side on the dispute about what ordinary people think about when they use and hear ‘conspiracy theory’. I believe they are thinking of a much narrower class of propositions than what some philosophers take them to be thinking of. I am skeptical that when social scientists claim people who believe conspiracy theories have certain traits, that ordinary people will hear that

someone who merely accepts a proposition that a conspiracy occurred has those traits. And so I do not think they will draw the conclusion that Deutz and Dentith are worried about.

I place my bet on reporting of this kind not having bad effects. Deutz and Dentith place their bets on people being more resistant to positing conspiracies even when the evidence warrants it. I am happy to be refuted if things turn out the way Deutz and Dentith predict rather than the way I predict. But whichever of us turns out to be right, it seems to me that we have a substantive dispute. We have different perspectives on how the way in which social scientists report their findings will affect people. And our different perspectives seem to stem from having a different perspective on what ordinary people think of when they hear ‘conspiracy theory’. In particular, the issue is whether ordinary people see themselves as talking about something narrow or something very broad. It is the issue of whether when ordinary people hear ‘conspiracy theory’ it will call to mind QAnon alone or whether it will call to mind Watergate as well.

This seems like a great place for experimental philosophers to contribute. They could perform experiments and see what people really hear in response to such reports. If they do the experiments and find that what Deutz and Dentith say is true, then I will change my mind.

Are the Stereotypes Unified?

Pigden (2007) puts pressure on the idea that we can distinguish between propositions that are stereotypical conspiracy theories and propositions that are merely about conspiracies just through a priori reflection on the content of those propositions. I think Pigden might be right. I get that this is an important insight. But what I don’t get is why this implies that ‘conspiracy theory’ in its ordinary use is broad and expansive rather than narrow as the conventional wisdom would suggest it is. I think people can talk about a collection of things even if nothing interesting unifies that collection. I do not accept the principle I take to be implicit in the reasoning of some philosophers that if nothing unifies a collection that people are talking about, then they are really talking about whatever broader unified category includes that collection. Instead, they may just be talking about something disunified.

I also think that even though Pigden is probably right that the stereotypes are not unified by their content, it is too quick to conclude that nothing unifies them at all. Perhaps they are unified by their causes, their effects, or what they are correlated with. In their enlightening discussion of conspiracist mindsets and conspiracy beliefs, I take Deutz and Dentith to be providing an account of the unity of conspiracy beliefs in terms of being caused by a conspiracist mindset. If I am understanding them correctly, I wondered why they couldn’t make their very interesting model even more ambitious and extend their approach to be about conspiracy theories as well. In an unpublished manuscript, I have my own way of working out what I think unifies the stereotypes. But I think Deutz and Dentith suggest a way of doing it that is worth exploring.

Nature, Purpose, and Talking Past Each Other

Deutz and Dentith show that philosophers and social scientists have very different ideas about the nature of conspiracy theories. And they have very different uses for them in their different research programs. One might reasonably think that since the two groups have radically different theories about and uses for conspiracy theories, they must be talking about different things when they use ‘conspiracy theory’. However, I think profound theoretical and practical disagreement between two groups need not imply that the groups are talking past one another. It might be that they are talking about the same thing but sharply disagree about the nature and uses of that thing.

Consider the planet Venus. We once thought it was not a planet but a star. And we once thought it was not one star but two stars—the Morning Star and the Evening Star. We once used Venus to navigate. Under the guise of the Morning Star it would guide our navigation during one cycle. Under the guise of the Evening Star it would guide our navigation during a different cycle. Now we think Venus is a planet rather than a star. Now we think it is one thing rather than two things. Now we use our phones to navigate and we use Veuns to appreciate beauty and learn about space. We have very different purposes for Venus than we did in the past. And we have very different theories about the nature of Venus than we did in the past. Nevertheless, both people today and people of the past have been talking about Venus all along.

In the same way, my view is that even though social scientists and philosophers have very different ideas about the nature of conspiracy theories and very different uses for them, they might nevertheless be talking about the same thing when they use ‘conspiracy theory’. And I think one disagreement between them is this question: “What do ordinary people call to mind when they think of conspiracy theories?”

Does the *Le Monde* Group Think ‘Conspiracy Theory’ has a Broad Scope?

Deutz and Dentith point out that in reply to Basham and Dentith (2016), the *Le Monde* group explicitly agreed that ‘conspiracy theory’ has a broad scope rather than a narrow scope. I agree. And their point is well taken.

However, I continue to think that is compatible with my view. What I think happened is that the *Le Monde* group gave up some ground to the philosophers. I think part of it is that they were not used to arguing with philosophers and they weren’t sure about what points they could push back on and what points they had to accept. So they just accepted the way the philosophers framed the discussion without realizing they could reject various aspects of that framing.

And I think part of it is that they were trying to communicate that even if the philosophers are right about conspiracy theories being a broad category rather than a narrow one, that they can still talk about only a subset of that category and that ordinary people often hear talk about conspiracy theories as being only about that subset rather than the bigger category.

Consider universalism. That is the metaphysical view according to which two objects always compose a third. So my cup is an object and Jupiter is an object. But the universalist will say that my cup and Jupiter together form a distinct third object. This is a respectable metaphysical view. But it is not the view of ordinary people. It is much broader in what it counts as an object. When ordinary people hear ‘object’, they do not hear both ‘Scott’s cup’ and ‘the mereological fusion of Scott’s cup and Jupiter’. They just hear ‘Scott’s cup’. In the same way, I think the view that conspiracy theories are a very broad category rather than a narrow one is a respectable philosophical view. But even if that view is right, I deny that it captures how ordinary people understand conspiracy theories. And I do not think we should assume that people have the broader view when we are thinking about how to report the results of social science to them.

Why Talk About This?

I want to say a bit about why I think it is valuable to have this discussion. I think there are substantive issues at stake. I think some of these are perennial issues in the philosophy of conspiracy theories that people are always talking about anyway and others suggest new areas of research that would open the subfield to new perspectives. There are issues about how to report the findings of social science to ordinary people, what ordinary people mean by ‘conspiracy theory’, and whether ordinary people are deeply mistaken in their beliefs about the nature of conspiracy theories or whether they have got it basically right. There are also issues about how to evaluate concrete examples of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists. Are social scientists entitled to presume that the idea that 9/11 was an inside job is preposterous in their research? Or in doing so are they, as Basham puts it, dismissing “thoughtful questions about the 9/11 catastrophe”? Are the people who defend the idea that 9/11 was an inside job at best seriously misguided? Or are they instead heroes to be admired and essential to a functioning democracy? Does a conspiracist mindset exist? Or is it just something social scientists made up? I think these are exciting and substantive issues that are worthy of discussion.

Reply to Basham

Basham (2022) claims that I am part of an “EU funded” “suppression program” to “dehumanize”, “cognitively disable”, and “de-rationalize persons” in the service of “organized governmental and corporate deception.” Obviously this is false. Below I consider two issues raised in Basham’s paper.

Did the *Le Monde* Group Use ‘Conspiracy Theory’ in a Narrow Way or a Broad Way?

Basham (2022, 64) quotes the *Le Monde* group as saying: “Let’s fight conspiracy theories effectively. The Ministry of Education must test its pedagogical tools against conspiracy culture. The wrong cure might only serve to spread the disease.”

Basham thinks this conflicts with my claim that the *Le Monde* group only meant to use ‘conspiracy theory’ in a narrow way rather than a broad way. Basham (2022) says this about the quoted passage:

This is entirely *general*. There is no constraint to labeling conspiracy theories as “stereotypical”. Or by guilt by association, arguing they are “stereotypical-like” by juxtapositioning them with surprising explanations that posit a conspiracy on the part of governments or corporations. This method is poor epistemology. It is also anti-democratic ... The *Le Monde* declaration is a paradigm instance of a political pathologizing project. There are no limits set here; it is applied to conspiracy theorizing and theorists *in general*. Which includes all of us (original emphasis, 64-65).

Basham thinks that if the *Le Monde* group did not explicitly place a restriction on the scope of their claim, then they meant to use the broadest sense of ‘conspiracy theory’ possible. But imagine Basham and I are drinking beers together. I say “There is no more beer.” Basham then runs to the grocery store, comes back with five cases of beer, and says “You lied to me Scott. You said ‘there is no more beer’. But I found a lot of beer at the grocery store!” I then say “You know that's not what I meant. I meant there is no more beer *in the fridge*.” Then Basham says “No. What you said is ‘there is no more beer’. It is entirely *general*. It includes no restriction on being in the fridge. If there is beer somewhere in the totality of existence and you knew about it, then what you said is a lie!” This would be a misguided thing for Basham to assert. And it is equally misguided in the present context.

To further clarify matters, I emailed the *Le Monde* group and asked them what they meant. I said:

Basham claims that you meant to use 'conspiracy culture' in a very broad way to include any belief that any conspiracy ever occurred. So he thinks you meant to use it to include both the belief that the Jews control the Islamic State and are responsible for the Charlie Hebdo massacre as well as the belief that Nixon conspired in Watergate. I think Basham is mistaken. I think you meant to use 'conspiracy culture' in a more narrow way that includes the belief that the Jews are responsible for the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre but not that Nixon conspired in Watergate. Would you be willing to weigh in and say which, if any of us, is correct?

In reply, one member of the *Le Monde* group, Sebastian Dieguez, wrote: “This part of the ‘tribune’ (as well as the title) was written by the editorial team at Le Monde (which is usual in this journal). But yes, Basham is mistaken, and of course, he knows it.” So Dieguez confirmed that Basham is mistaken in claiming that they meant to use ‘conspiracy theory’ in the very broad way that Basham claims they used it.

Poison

Basham thinks there is a problem with the poison example. I said: “Imagine it turns out that there is no simple and obvious definition of ‘poison’ that captures the stereotypical examples of poison but rules out *regular* liquids” (original emphasis, 2022b, 19)

And Bahsam replies:

We might think not. A poor parody. The answer is simple: Water is not a poison. A poison is a substance that through its chemical action usually kills, injures, or impairs an organism. Chemical action is on the level of electron interactions between atoms and molecules. Basic physical science (66-67).

This seems like a misunderstanding of the word ‘imagine’. When John Lennon sings: “Imagine all the people .. Livin’ life in peace...”, it would display a misunderstanding to reply “Some people are fighting a war. Basic social science.” It also seems like a misunderstanding of parodies. When Johnathan Swift recommends that the Irish sell their babies as food to rich people, it would display a misunderstanding to reply “We might think not. A poor parody. The answer is simple: There is no way the Irish will sell their babies as food.”

When I said ‘*imagine* there is no simple definition of poison’, I didn't mean to say that *actually* there is no simple definition of poison. What I meant is that whether there is a simple definition of poison is irrelevant to whether we can talk about what we typically classify as poison without talking about what we do not typically classify as poison.

If you Google ‘definition of poison’, one of the first results is the *Merriam-Webster* definition of ‘poison’. Although Basham does not cite *Merriam-Webster*, that definition is identical to the one he takes to be “Basic physical science.” However, *Merriam-Webster* is not an authoritative source for scientific definitions. Nor is its definition of ‘poison’ plausible. Imagine a substance that through its chemical action explodes when it touches an organism. It is a bomb rather than a poison. But it is a substance that through its chemical action usually kills, injures, or impairs an organism. Of course, this is beside the point since I didn’t make any claims about the actual definition of ‘poison’ in my earlier paper. But it serves to illustrate some of the problems with Basham’s approach to research.

Reply to Hewitt

In Hewitt’s (2022) contribution to this exchange, he goes further than I did in pressing Basham and Dentith (2016) on some of the historical claims they made. For example, Hewitt argues that by the time of the Wannsee conference, Jews had already been murdered across Europe, Hitler had made his intentions clear, and the murder of Jews was an intentional and overt policy rather than a secret conspiracy as Basham and Dentith claim. Hewitt also disputes other historical claims Basham and Dentith make that I accepted in my earlier paper. I do not know enough about the history of the Holocaust or the other topics Hewitt discusses to competently weigh in on this dimension of the dispute. But I find what Hewitt says to be plausible. And I’ll leave the historical matters to him.

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