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The Role of Stereotypes in Theorizing about Conspiracy Theories: A Reply to Dentith

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I am very grateful to M R. X. Dentith (2022) for their helpful and valuable reply. I will begin by scaling back and dropping one of the claims that I made in my earlier paper. In the earlier paper, I made it sound like the only move philosophers ever make in the conspiracy theory literature is this: “So you think the stereotypical examples of conspiracy theories are bad? Well guess what? That means you have to think that any belief that any conspiracy ever occurred is bad.” That was an uncharitable exaggeration on my part. I thank Dentith for the helpful correction. And I thank Kurtis Hagen (2022) for his helpful bibliography of the literature on conspiracy theories detailing the valuable work in that area.

Dentith also points out that they are now working on a project with some of the social scientists that they criticized earlier and that some social scientists agreed with their earlier criticism of the *Le Monde* Group. So I was mistaken to think that this was a philosophers vs social science debate. There were social scientists on both sides. I think that is great! I accept this correction as well. And I am glad to hear that Dentith thinks there is more to the social science than I thought and is even doing some social science on the topic!

Finally, I am grateful for the friendly, generous, and humorous tone Dentith takes in their reply. I think that is a model way to express disagreement. And I will try to follow Dentith’s model here.

With that said, I would like to focus on some remaining questions after reading Dentith’s reply. So while there is more I could agree with Dentith about and more concessions I could make, I think it would be most fruitful for me to instead explore possible areas of disagreement between us and to highlight what I take to be some of the biggest differences in our approaches.

Remaining Questions

There are some questions that I had while writing the earlier paper that I took to be central to what I was doing. And after reading Dentith’s reply I am still not sure how they would answer those questions. Here I will make those questions more explicit than I did in the earlier paper.

Is it Acceptable to Study Ways to Get People to See that the Stereotypes are Very, Very Unlikely?

In the earlier paper (2022), I made the following claims:

The claim that the Jews are secretly in control of the Islamic State is stupid and obviously false.

It can be acceptable for social scientists to study how to help people see that claims like this are stupid and obviously false.

Dentith says that we disagree because I think the relevant claims are stupid and obviously false while Dentith thinks that the relevant claims are at most merely very, very unlikely.

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However, I do not think that conflicts with what I said in the paper. Recall, Basham and Dentith (2016) said:

What we are told by them is scientific techniques must be developed—and then deployed—so that people won’t even recognize conspiracy as an option. Their goal? That conspiracies can never (or at least hardly ever) be allowed to explain certain events (or any events) in Western society ... [P]eople are to be scientifically directed, somehow, to fixate on the cry of “That’s a conspiracy theory!,” flee the room, and not reflect on any facts (12-13).

And then Dentith and Basham talk about how the Holocaust involved conspiracies and how the Iraq War involved conspiracies.

So the social scientists observed that people believe the relevant claims. And they wanted to study how to get people to see that the claims should not be believed. Dentith and Basham said that this suggestion is dangerous and bad. In particular, it was claimed that getting people to no longer believe the stereotypes, such as that the Jews control the Islamic State, would require also getting people to no longer believe that any (or almost any) conspiracy ever happens.

By “stupid and obviously false” (20) I did not mean to suggest that we can know with Cartesian certainty that the stereotypes are false. I meant something much closer and more down to earth such as Dentith’s useful phrase “being very very unlikely”. It would be one thing if the social scientists were arguing that people think that the stereotypes are very, very unlikely and that they want to study how to convince people to instead think with Cartesian certainty that the relevant claims are false. That would be strange. I get that. As far as I am concerned we should not have Cartesian certainty about anything (even the *Cogito!*). But that is not what the social scientists were saying and that is not what I was trying to say. Rather, my interpretation of what the social scientists were doing in the *Le Monde* letter was something more like this: People think the stereotypes are true. They think, for example, that the Jews control the Islamic State and are responsible for the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings. I think it is worthwhile for social scientists to study how to help people instead see that such claims are very, very unlikely. I do not see how adopting this position has the implication that one should never think any conspiracy ever occurred or deny that conspiracies were involved in the Holocaust or in the Iraq War.

So after reading Dentith’s reply, I am not sure that they disagree with me about any of this. I see that Dentith allows that the stereotypes might be very, very unlikely. But what I still do not see is whether Dentith continues to think it is dangerous and unacceptable for social scientists to study why people believe claims that are as very, very unlikely, or as I put it in my earlier paper “as stupid and obviously false”, as the claim that the Jews control the Islamic State and are responsible for the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings.

So to put my questions about this topic more explicitly than I did in the earlier paper, I ask: Does Dentith accept this point? Or do they think it really is dangerous to have the mindset I

attributed to the social scientists? Or maybe Dentith would instead wish to scale back the claim that they and others make? Or maybe I have misunderstood their claims?

Do Philosophers of Conspiracy Theories Make the Error that I Claim They Make?

There is one other set of questions that I may not have been sufficiently explicit about asking in my previous paper and that I remain unsure whether Dentith and I disagree. I claimed in the earlier paper that the main idea of the literature on conspiracy theories was that if you believe there is something bad about accepting the stereotypes, then you are committed to believing that there is something bad about accepting that any conspiracy occurred ever.

As I said above, Dentith helpfully corrects me on this. They point out that there is more to that literature than I said. I appreciate that correction. But what I do not get is the idea that this is not a move that is made in the literature again and again. And insofar as this move is made in the literature again and again, it seems to me that it is a mistake.

I did not see Dentith address this in their reply. So to make my question about this more explicit than I did in the previous paper, I ask: Even though I exaggerated things in the previous paper (apologies!), am I wrong in thinking that this is at least one major thread of the relevant literature? Insofar as I am correct about the presence of this move in the literature, am I wrong in thinking that it is mistaken?

Answered Questions

There are other questions that I had and that Dentith answered. And on those questions we continue to have different perspectives. Below, I would like to say a bit to clarify what I take to be some of those differences.

Did Conspiracy Theory Panic Significantly Causally Contribute to the Iraq War?

Dentith and Basham, among others in this literature, think conspiracy theory panic played a significant role in bringing about the Iraq War. I do not. Dentith (2019 said:

Let me start with a simple error. Wagner-Egger, et al. claim that: “If we did not miss any other, Basham and Dentith cite only one (!) conspiracy theory that turned out to be true: the US/UK Weapons of Massive [sic] Destructions [sic]” (Wagner-Egger et al. 2019, 51). I do not even need to state this is false.... This is all the more confusing as earlier on in their piece they seem to deny that the “US/UK Weapons of Mass Destructions” theory is a conspiracy theory *at all*.... What you probably should not do is rewrite history to make the problem of the “US/UK Weapons of Mass Destructions” conspiracy theory disappear (1).

And then in my paper I said (2022):

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I can't find any evidence that anyone at the time suggested that the idea that there were no WMDs in Iraq was a conspiracy theory ... If the Philosophers really want to saddle Bush with dismissing doubt about weapons of mass destruction as mere conspiracy theories, then they should at least provide a single source in which he says it (23).

In their reply, Dentith identifies two spots in which Blair uses the term 'conspiracy theory'. In each spot, Blair dismisses the idea that the Iraq War is all about oil as a conspiracy theory. And Dentith (2022) says this:

I address Hill's claim there is no evidence George W. Bush or Tony Blair accused their critics, during the build-up the invasion of Iraq in 2003ACE, as being "conspiracy theorists" (41).

But I did not say Blair never accused critics of the war of believing conspiracy theories. I was aware of one of the quotes Dentith cites. Instead, I asked for a single example in which Bush, or someone in Bush's orbit, dismissed doubts about WMDs as a mere conspiracy theory. That is what, as I understood it, Dentith and the *Le Monde* Group were arguing about. I did not say anything about dismissals of the war being about oil. So we are still without any examples in which Bush or Blair claim that the idea that there are no WMDs in Iraq is a conspiracy theory.

This is significant for the following reason: We just have two spots where Blair dismisses the idea that the Iraq War was all about oil as a wild conspiracy theory. Imagine Blair had never made those two claims. The Iraq War would still have happened. It would have gone on just the same. The case for the War depended on the case for the presence of WMDs. It didn't depend on Blair dismissing the idea that the war was about oil as a conspiracy theory. Take away the defenses of the presence of WMDs in Iraq and the war would have been much harder to sell. Take away Blair's two mentions of conspiracy theory and oil, and the Iraq War would still have gone on just the same as it actually did. It is not plausible to suggest that "conspiracy theory panic powerfully enabled the war."

Furthermore, if you remove conspiracy theory talk, Blair had numerous other tools at his disposal to evade the question about oil. For example, if asked about oil, he could have just said this: We have just made the case that there are WMDs in Iraq. The presence of WMDs is what motivates the war. The motivation is right there. That is what explains why we are going to war. It is not about oil. All Blair needed to do was handle the question about oil. He had many tools to handle it. So even if we grant for the sake of argument that handling the oil questions did significantly aid the war effort, conspiracy theory talk was inessential to handling those questions. Nothing rested on conspiracy theory talk. Much rested on the alleged case for WMDs.

Finally, imagine Blair had instead responded to the two questions about oil by engaging in gaslighting talk. Imagine he had said, "People who claim the Iraq War is all about oil are gaslighting me. I know my real motivations. They cannot gaslight me into thinking that my

motivations must be different.” It would be completely implausible, on the basis of two such quotes, to suggest that gaslighting panic was responsible for the Iraq War. Get rid of Blair’s hypothetical use of gaslighting talk and the war would still go on much as it did. That would not be a good reason to give up the pejorative use of ‘gaslighting’. Nor is Blair’s actual use of ‘conspiracy theory’ a good reason to give up the pejorative use of ‘conspiracy theory’. Or so it seems to me. So this is a respect in which Dentith and I continue to disagree. They see the Iraq War as being powerfully enabled by conspiracy theory panic. I do not.

Can the Social Science of Conspiracy Theories be Valuable Even if Social Scientists are Bad at Defining ‘Conspiracy Theory’?

Another respect in which Dentith and I continue to have different perspectives concerns how we see the role of social science. Let me begin with what I think is potentially interesting about the social science. The social scientists start with a collection of stereotypes. Then they investigate whether acceptance of the stereotypes are correlated with various things. What the social scientists such as Karen Douglas et al. (2019, 6-24) claim to have found are:

Epistemic Motives: Some subjects desire to accurately understand important events. But they lack the ability to do so. Believing the stereotypes helps them accommodate this desire.

Existential Motives: Some subjects feel that they lack control over important events and feel alienated from their political system. Believing the stereotypes helps such subjects feel more in control and less alienated.

Self-Image Preservation Motives: Some subjects are narcissists. Some subjects feel the need to be unique. Believing the stereotypes helps boost the self-esteem of such subjects.

Group-Image Preservation Motives: Some subjects feel that a group they belong to is looked down upon or under threat by an out-group. Believing the stereotypes helps such subjects sustain their positive group image and explain their perceived low status in comparison to higher status groups.

There are other factors social scientists identify. Among these are demographic, political, and ideological. Given the replication crisis and related issues, I am not sure how much we can trust these findings. But that is beside the point. The crucial thing is that this is what social scientists are supposed to be trained to do. They are not trained to come up with sharp and precise definitions. They are trained to come up with clever experimental designs. And the measure against which they should be evaluated, it seems to me is this:

Do they succeed in finding interesting correlations between acceptance of the stereotypical examples and various phenomena?

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That is how we should evaluate what the social scientists are doing. It does not matter that social scientists bungle the definition of conspiracy theory. The main thing they are trying to do is find correlations between the stereotypes and other phenomena. And they can do that even if they offer poor definitions of 'conspiracy theory'. Look at their papers on this topic. They are all about finding the correlations. The definitions play no role in what they are doing.

Dentith and David Coady have a different perspective. They each point out that social scientists have put forward terrible definitions of 'conspiracy theory'. In their reply Dentith points out that the *Le Monde* Group even offered a circular definition of 'conspiracy theory'! That is a bad definition indeed! But I do not think that matters in the least. Getting the right definition of 'conspiracy theory' is one worthwhile project. But it is not the only worthwhile project. If social scientists were to discover that belief in the stereotypes is correlated with troubling phenomena, that is a significant contribution to our understanding of conspiracy theories.

As I understand Dentith, they think that social scientists need to have a plausible definition of 'conspiracy theory' in order to do fruitful work. Dentith points out that some social scientists cite favorably the definitions they and others give. I understand all that. But what I am not seeing is a reason why social scientists cannot fruitfully study whether the stereotypes are correlated with various phenomena without having a plausible definition of conspiracy theories in hand. I do not see why they cannot just take the relevant collection of stereotypes, look at people who believe them, contrast them with people who do not, and then see whether any interesting correlations with believing members of that collection emerge. I did not understand why Dentith thinks we need a plausible definition of 'conspiracy theory' to search for correlations in this way. So this should be seen as a friendly invitation for Dentith to say more about the importance of having a plausible definition to discovering the relevant correlations.

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