What Is Interesting about Conspiracy Theories?

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Abstract

A central debate in the conspiracy theory research concerns how to understand conspiracy theories in a theoretically fruitful way given our research interest to study the nature of such theories and those who believe in them. However, far from settling on one account, this is still an on-going dispute in which researchers take widely different positions. For instance, while some argue for a purely descriptive understanding, others seem strongly committed to the view that conspiracy theories are, or can be shown to be, inherently irrational. In an attempt to reconstruct this controversy, I argue that the disagreement arises because there are in fact two distinct motives underlying scholarly studies in the field: to attain objective knowledge of the phenomena in question versus to defend beliefs and norms that are part of the researcher's own cultural context. This paper examines the epistemological and methodological challenges in the study of conspiracy theories, focusing on how competing frameworks—normative cultural biases versus objective scientific inquiry—shape our understanding of rational belief. I argue, finally, that if the motive is to attain objective knowledge, there is no serious alternative to the descriptive understanding of conspiracy theories.

1 Introduction

The philosophical debate on conspiracy theories has to a large part been centered around whether there are features of conspiracy theories allowing them to be dismissed as irrational out of hand. The position that defends default suspicion is called generalism. Those who disagree with the idea that conspiracy theories should be prima facie doubted are called particularist. The particularist argue that conspiracy theories must be considered on their merits. However, particularist have also argued that there are some researchers – mostly social psychologists who typically support the generalist perspective – doing, in their words, "troubling" research on conspiracy theories which, they think, reinforces the stigmatization of conspiracy theories and those who believe in them

(Hagen 2018; Basham and Dentith 2016). As Hagen argues, they are engaged in "sloppy reasoning" motivated by cultural activism under the guise of objective scientific inquiry. As an example, consider the well-cited study by Wood, Douglas and Sutton (2012) concluding that conspiracy theorists are irrational. The study claims to have shown that conspiracy theorists endorse flatly contradictory conspiracy theories. However, philosophers, such as Hagen, Basham and Dentith, were quick to notice that the authors conflate *belief* with various ways of *giving some degree of credence*. Of course, it is not obviously irrational to give some credence to each member of a set of contradictory claims. Even so, the article continued to be uncritically cited for years. Further damaging criticism in the same direction was raised more recently in a study by van Prooijen et al., (2023) who argued, convincingly, that the authors' results do not support the conclusion that conspiracy theorists are irrational in this way. Another example, which might be a bit more difficult to dismiss as merely sloppy research, is the justification of a definition of 'conspiracy theory' that turns out to be circular in Douglas and Sutton (2023). While Douglas and Sutton (2023: 281) demonstrate awareness of a crucial problem—one that philosophers have repeatedly pointed out—namely, that researchers have "seldom provided an integrated rationale for the definitional criteria they have chosen," they explain that researchers' choice of definition "often reflects their particular theoretical preferences." For example, they note that "researchers who prefer to study or emphasize irrational features of conspiracy theories tend to define them in these terms (e.g., 'such beliefs are usually unsubstantiated and implausible')."

However, using a definition that predisposes any investigation to confirm conspiracy theories as implausible—since this is how they are defined from the outset—creates a self-reinforcing loop where findings always reflect the initial assumption. Moreover, if the goal is to understand or study the irrational features of conspiracy theories, researchers must first demonstrate why these features are irrational. A circular definition, where the term being defined is used in its own definition, is unhelpful and hinders meaningful analysis.

This example illustrates how theoretical preferences shape not only the research process but also its foundational assumptions, thereby limiting broader understanding. The issue is significant because biased definitions risk failing to capture the complexity of conspiracy theories, including instances where such theories are well-founded or represent rational responses to uncertainty or distrust. Nevertheless, it is striking that researchers often fail to recognize the logical fallacy at play here—a *petitio principii* (begging the question).

How do such errors persist in much of the research on conspiracy theories? In this paper, I will argue that these and other examples of less than rigorous research occurring systematically in the context of defenses of a generalist perspective of conspiracy theories point to something more fundamental. On a reconstruction of the debate I will show that there is a difference in motivations to study the phenomenon. On the one hand, there are those whose main interest is not to study conspiracy theories (or belief in conspiracy theories) as such. Instead, they take the norms of (their) society as a given. I refer to this approach as the Faux-pas view. The term 'faux-pas' refers to a violation of certain social or cultural norms—often an action or remark that is deemed socially inappropriate or awkward. Consequently, researchers examine belief in a conspiracy theory as a faux pas, assuming the societal norms of the researcher's culture to be fixed and unquestioned. The Faux-pas view exemplifies a failure to adopt an epistemically neutral stance, instead projecting culturally contingent norms as objective criteria. This recalls Kuhn's (1962) observation that paradigms shape not only what is studied but also the standards of evaluation. Now, it may be much too complex to identify the motivations involved, but I will nevertheless discuss some possible ones, such as political- and publishing biases.

On the other hand, there are those who consider an objectivist scientific method to be the more promising way to investigate conspiracy theories, who are motivated by a classical scientific approach to understand a phenomenon. I will call this the Objectivist view. But is it reasonable and even desirable to expect objectivity when studying conspiracy theories? How do we investigate the phenomenon of conspiracy theories objectively and without necessarily taking on determining

the epistemic status of each conspiracy theory? I will argue that, despite these challenges, the Objectivist view is the most appropriate if we are interested to understand the phenomena.

I will first discuss the Faux-pas view as it is found both in philosophy and the social sciences. Then, I will consider the challenges for the Objectivist view and argue that it can be met. Finally, I will conclude that if our interest is to have a scientific theory for the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, then the Objectivist view is the most promising approach.

2 The Faux-pas View

When immersed in a particular cultural and social context, one intuitively knows how to avoid committing a *faux pas*. However, if you are not aligned with the prevailing social and cultural norms, you might commit a faux pas by saying or doing the wrong thing, thereby causing social embarrassment. In the same spirit, much of the contemporary conspiracy theory research supports the generalist position in that it assumes a value laden definition of the term 'conspiracy theory'. According to my reconstruction, researchers' motivations and interests in conspiracy theories as expressions of faux pas, lead to investigating transgressions of social or culture norm relative to the researcher. While the generalist view can in principle be defended objectively (see Grimes 2016: 2021; Harris 2023)[1], the Faux-pas view has an inherently relativistic perspective and approach to Conspiracy Theory Theory (the academic research of conspiracy theories). In the Western, English-speaking world, conspiracy theories—both the term and the phenomenon—are typically understood as political and/or problematic (Husting and Orr, 2007).[2] This view is mirrored in the

[1] For example, if generalism is researched through an objective lens, it may in principle be found to be in favor of generalizing conspiracy theories that might lead to their uncritical acceptance (Le Monde). However, as Hagen rightly notes, this further support that generalism is epistemically problematic regardless of its directional orientation (Hagen 2018: 130).

[2] In a recent talk the economist Ole Bjerg (2024) described the phenomenon of people having extreme and disproportioned negative reactions to conspiracy theories, as if uttering conspiracy theories is "blasphemy against the

science community as demonstrated in the title of a joint statement by a group of scientists published in *Le Monde*[3], which reads, "Let's Fight Conspiracy Theories Effectively." The title reveals their assumptions and agenda for studying conspiracy theories.

With this reconstruction in mind, let's consider some examples in more detail where the interest in conspiracy theories amounts to the Faux pas view. I will argue that the primary concern is that such accounts are 'less than objective' (Bird 2020), and that the Faux-pas view leads to certain problems if we desire a scientific account of conspiracy theories.

2.1 The Faux-pas View in Philosophy

The Faux-pas view is most notable in philosophy when researchers engage in the reconceptualization of the term 'conspiracy theory.' Consider Napolitano and Reuter (2021), who argue for a reconceptualization guided by a folk understanding. They suggest that defining 'conspiracy theory' for scientific purposes should involve consulting the everyday language use of terms like 'conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracy theorists.' Drawing on empirical data from a corpus analysis (including online forums such as Reddit.com), they found that the predominant use of the term is pejorative and evaluative. Based on this observation, the authors conclude that—guided by the common language usage of 'conspiracy theory'—we should operationalize the term for scientific purposes as inherently pejorative and evaluative.

The study of common language usage of 'conspiracy theory' is an interesting research project, provided we acknowledge that it focuses on the term's use within the English-speaking world. However, justification is needed for why common language usage should provide us with scientifically robust concepts. For instance, Carnap's (1950) exposition—one of the main reference points for conceptual explication—argues that a fruitful concept must be useful for formulating

system God" – meaning our institutions and establishments – such that uttering or entertaining conspiracy theories against these institutions ("the system God") are considered on par with committing sins.

[3] Le Monde, 6 June 2016

universal statements (empirical laws). The account by Napolitano and Reuter (2021) primarily tracks the contemporary use of the term within a specific language and community, rather than addressing what conspiracy theories are. Moreover, the common usage of terms may vary over time and across different contexts and cultures (Husting and Orr 2007; Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen 2017), which creates a tension with the goal of studying and understanding conspiracy theories as a stable scientific concept. Overlooking the lack of justification and the relativistic nature of this approach may indicate an interest in something other than an objective understanding of conspiracy theories.

Consider another example of the Faux-pas view in philosophy. Cassam's (2020) account argues that the phenomenon we are interested to investigate is "right-wing propaganda".[4] These right-wing conspiracy theories are not theories about conspiracy, according to Cassam. Rather, they are extraordinary theories defined by being speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish, premodern and self-sealing (2020: 97). He writes that these conspiracy theories are "a conscious and deliberate strategy designed to advance a political cause" – specifically "to advance right-wing political causes" (2020: 7 and 9). While a subcategory of conspiracy theories that function as propaganda could be an empirically interesting project approached objectively, Tsapos (2023: 457-458) argues that Cassam's description of conspiracy theory presupposes a standard of assessment of what is and what is not contrarian (for example being right-wing), which makes such an account run the risk of lacking any predictive validity.

Further, Hagen (2022a: 332) refutes all five features that make up Cassam's special cases of conspiracy theories. Hagen questions whether "(1) the theories that Cassam counts as

[4] Some suggest that conspiracy theories are forms of communist propaganda, while others disagree and argue that our our interests are far-fetched conspiracy theories rather than political ones (such as alien visits and flat earth theory). If everyone's narrow interest in specific types of conspiracy theories were to guide and define the term "conspiracy theory" we would end up with as many definitions as there are researchers. This would undoubtedly lead to contradictory accounts, further complicating our understanding of what constitutes a conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy Theories (including common 9/11 and JFK assassination theories) actually have those features, and (2) if those theories are rightly regarded, on account of having those features, as so implausible that they do not deserve thorough assessment according to their evidentiary particulars." Thus, Cassam's definition of "conspiracy theory" and "conspiracy theorists," I argue, is not particularly empirically compelling. as it reveals little to nothing about a person. It seems to reduce to labeling someone a conspiracy theorist based primarily on their political ideology being contrary to Cassam's.[5] Consequently, these accounts serve as examples of researchers seemingly motivated by factors other than an objective study of conspiracy theories. Their approaches appear shaped by cultural and social contexts, as well as a desire to uphold and validate the status quo.

2.2. The Faux-pas View in Social Science and Psychology

Many research projects initially take some version of the definition that conspiracy theories are: "explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups" (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017: page).[6] Notably, theories that fall under this definition are not necessarily false or even irrational to believe (Moulding et al. 2016). Hagen (2020: 424) has argued that social scientists do not explicitly define conspiracy theories as false or unwarranted, but even so they seem to treat them as if they were, and he writes that they "treat the issue in a biased manner". In *Psychology as Science and as Propaganda* Jussim and Honeycutt (2023: 241) show that "biases characterize at least some work on […] belief in conspiracy theories" and that (political) biases have produced unjustified conclusions.

[5] For a comprehensive refutation of most of the arguments and ideas articulated in Cassam's book (2020) see Hagen (2022a) and Dentith (2022).

[6] Other are Goertzel (1994); Wood and Douglas (2013); Douglas and Sutton (2008); Wood and Gray (2019).

Some projects relativize the study by focusing, for example, on conspiracy theories that are contrary to the official explanation.[7] Consider one such study presented in Douglas and Sutton (2011).[8] The authors write that "[a] conspiracy theory is defined as an attempt to explain the ultimate cause of a significant political or social event as a secret plot by a covert alliance of powerful individuals or organizations" (Douglas and Sutton 2011: 545). They agree that the definition of a conspiracy theory need not be false, and that "[i]t is important to stress that not all conspiracies are crackpot theories: some have ultimately been verified, such as the Watergate conspiracy of the 1970s." Nevertheless, they emphasize that conspiracy theories are contrary or alternatives to some other accounts, stating that "in the main conspiracy theories are unproven, often rather fanciful alternatives to mainstream accounts." As for the first part of their study, they interpret that the results to have shown that some individuals are more likely to believe some conspiracy theory because they think it is likely for themselves to act as the conspirators:

> [P]ersonal willingness to engage in the conspiracies predicted endorsement of conspiracy theories. Machiavellianism also predicted endorsement of conspiracy theories. Finally, the relationship between Machiavellianism and conspiracy beliefs was fully mediated by participants' willingness to engage in the conspiracies themselves. In other words, for example, highly Machiavellian individuals were seemingly more likely to believe that government agents staged the 9/11 attacks because they were more likely to perceive that they would do so themselves, if in the government's position (545).

As for the significance of their findings, the authors write that "[t]he present results are important because they provide the first evidence to suggest that people endorse conspiracy theories because

[7] Determining the official explanation is itself not unproblematic, and is an ambiguous criterion, often calling into question just which official explanations we are comparing (see Coady xxxx).

[8] See Pigden (2024) for a discussion on how other studies, particularly Brotherton, French and Pickering's *Generic Conspiracy Belief Scale* (which other researchers in their turn have leaned on for their research studies on conspiracy belief) fails to meet the neutral objectives of the research.

they project their own moral tendencies onto the supposed conspirators" (ibid.). However, a closer examination of the conspiracy theory statements used in the study (see Table 1) reveals that the sample is not representative of the wide range of conspiracy theories that fall under the provided definition. Rather, there seems to be a selection of conspiracy theories that are "alternatives to mainstream accounts". However, one is left to wonder – if researhers are investigating how people project their own moral tendencies in relation to conspiracy theories – why chose to ommit conspiracy theoires that are main stream?

Consider the 'private and privileged communication' described in Bird (2020). Speakers – in this case, the researchers – and their audiences rely, according to Bird, on a set of shared assumptions, presuming "they do not have to demonstrate fully their positions because their audiences are already sympathetic. […] In many instances, they allude to or invoke but do not fully explain and defend their assumptions" (90–91). Such privat and privlaged communiation might be part of the explanation. However, I will return to the shared assumptions and private langauge in the next section.

What implications, then, does a biased sample of conspiracy theory statements have for interpreting the results? By failing to provide clear criteria and a rationale for the specific conspiracy theories included in their analysis, their results raises questions about their approach, and the generalizability and scope of the study.

Table 1 The conspiracy theory statements surveyed in Douglas and Sutton (2016). According to Douglas (through personal correspondence) one they use regularly.

Please indicate how much you agree with each statement below by selecting the appropriate response in each case.

	Strongly disagree . . . . . Strongly agree
Scientists are creating panic about climate change because it is in their interests to do so.	
There was an official campaign by MI6 to assassinate Princess Diana, sanctioned by elements of the establishment.	
The AIDS virus was created in a laboratory.	
The attack on the Twin Towers was not a terrorist action but a governmental conspiracy	
The American moon landings were faked.	
Governments are suppressing evidence of the existence of aliens.	
Lee Harvey Oswald collaborated with the CIA in assassinating President John F. Kennedy.	

2.3 Motivations and Biases

Determining motivations is a complex task, particularly in the absence of prior empirical investigations. Nonetheless, I will consider some motivations already identified in the literature.

Researchers studying what they perceive as false or unreasonable conspiracy theories (or alternatives to mainstream views) often do so without thoroughly investigating the specific conspiracy theories featured in their study stimuli. Conclusions are frequently drawn without evaluating the viability—or lack thereof—of the conspiracy theories in question. Instead, it appears that researchers make a preconceived judgment about which conspiracy theories are rational or irrational to believe, treating such distinctions as self-evident. Researchers ought to be explicit about investigating strictly non-mainstream accounts of conspiracy theories and provide the criteria by which they measure and determine such conspiracy theory statements as alternatives to mainstream accounts and why this is significant. This is surely the obvious thing to do – and would be in the interest of the researcher – if they want to say anything meaningful about the phenomenon of alternative accounts and why people believe in them. And yet, they don't. What, then, are some possible explanations for this omission?

It is uncontroversial to say that reasons guide us. But just how reasons guide us in forming beliefs about the acts we might do is a debated question (Parfit and Broome 1997). Without committing to a position on the role reasons play in action and belief formation, I will discuss some practical reasons[9] that might be explanations for the Faux-pas view, and in particular motivating- and explanatory reasons, excluding normative reasons.[10]

There is a range of problems about practical reasons as they have traditionally been understood in philosophy, which complicates even a minimum use of the notion. Some of the problems relates to work in experimental psychology (e.g., Nisbett and Wilson 1977) that claims to identify 'real reasons' for acting; for example, that there are situations where people's choices are influenced by factors which they themselves are unaware of (for example, that we tend to choose items to the right). Often people are not aware of their bias, and when asked to justify their choice they cite reasons for the superiority of their chosen option. These phenomena – and others such as implicit bias – seem to show that agents are motivated by reasons they are not always aware of, even after careful reflection on their reasons and motivations. The mentioned complexities and many more, make it near impossible to suggest that I will get to the bottom of what reasons and motivations researchers have for the Faux-pas view. However, the tools of scientific method used, intentionally or not, "to advance and confirm one's political beliefs and values rather than to discover truth" is well known (Crawford and Jussim 2018: 1), and I will explore some possible

[9] Reasons for acting and not, for example, reasons for feeling emotions, for believing or wanting.

[10] Traditionally normative reasons have been conceived of as facts, and were regarded as mind-independent: the facts are what they are independently of whether anyone knows them or thinks about them. Motivating and explanatory reasons, by contrast have traditionally been conceived of as mental states of agents and as entities that depend on someone's thinking or believing certain things. According to Alvarez (2017), in recent years this has been challenged, giving rise to a number of disputes about the ontology of reasons. Although a reason that motivates an action can always explain it, a reason that can explain the action is not always the reason that motivates it.

explanatory reasons and motivational reasons that need not be true, but nevertheless are, if not reasonable, at a very minimum empirically testable.

There are both individual researchers' motivations and sustaining motivation for research projects at play, and sometimes it can be one without the other. Such motivation for investigating conspiracy theories might be, as some of the above examples suggest, (political) biasing (Jussim and Honeycutt 2023), to evoke common and shared feelings rather than discriminate analysis (Bernstein 1971; Bird 2020), or conceptual blind spots (Reyna 2018). Christine Reyna (2018) argues that biases can affect what we measure, since worldviews present a particular "reality" that "make certain issues or problems come to the forefront as relevant, important, and real and make other seem less relevant, unlikely, or even nonexistent" (82). According to Reyna, ideological narratives "can lead to conceptual blind spots that prevent important questions from being explored" (ibid.)

Further, Bird (2020: 90-91) suggests that there are accounts in the social sciences that are less than public, and less than objective if they are "essentially private or privileged". Such private and privileged accounts approach social phenomena "primarily to voice points of view, to rally political support, to reinforce communal feelings, and/or to support value commitments. Many reports of social phenomena assume the form of sermons to the converted". Bird details some characteristics of private and privileged communication:

> [S]peakers and their audiences take for granted the existence of a range of common assumptions including their commitment to shared values and beliefs. […] Typically, they presume that they do not have to demonstrate fully their positions because their audiences are already sympathetic. In this way, their accounts often become foreshortened: they point to some but not all evidence; […] in many instances they allude to or invoke but do not fully explain and defend their assumptions (90-91).

I argue that the private and privileged accounts described by Bird can be traced in the social sciences and among philosophers on the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theory beliefs. If there are biases, then it is easy to see why the primary interest is not to study

conspiracy theories objectively, but as it pertains to, for example: the worry of a rise in right-wing propaganda; the worry that people believe things that are different from what others (perhaps the researchers themselves) believe or subscribe to; or the worry of a rise in people turning to other news- or information sources e.g., social media, podcasts, and so on.[11]

The Douglas and Sutton (2011) study presented above, for example, states that some conspiracy theories may be true, such as the Watergate scandal. Moreover, they write that their result is "the first evidence to suggest that people endorse conspiracy theories because they project their own moral tendencies onto the supposed conspirators". But how can that be? Surely some who believe conspiracy theories, (again, such as the Watergate scandal, even when it was not the mainstream account[12]), have good reasons. Following Charles Pigden's (1995) argument that everyone is a conspiracy theorist – who endorse at least some conspiracy theories – which, when we consider Douglas and Sutton's results – that people endorse conspiracy theories because they project their own moral tendencies – would mean that most of us endorse these because we project our own moral tendencies. But this is not what Douglas and Sutton have investigated. Nor do they rely on any other definition that would make the interpretation of the results exclude such a conclusion. Thus, we are in the dark on what the results really show.

2.4 Other Reasons for Adopting Conceptual Frameworks

There may also be other factors that do not pertain strictly to personal motivations. For instance, general features inherent in academic research domains can influence the adoption of particular conceptual frameworks and contribute to publication bias. Kuhn (1962) described how consensus

[11] Again, all these worries can be studied in objective ways, however, sometimes the researcher's main interest is not to study how they relate to conspiracy theories, but often treat them as equivalent and interchangeably.

[12] The time before Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein decided to investigate the leads on information about the burglary further, and publish their reports in The Washington Post.

develops around specific scientific paradigms that dictate how research should be conducted and reported. Similarly, Polanyi (1962) argued that scientists often adopt conceptual frameworks because they are more elegant, appear more profound, or seem to offer greater opportunities for conducting research. In the same vein, Rorty (1980) contended that the frameworks scientists adopt are driven not primarily by their ability to reflect nature but by pragmatic considerations, such as enabling predictions and facilitating coherent discussions.

Publication bias occurs when the likelihood of studies being published depends on the nature and direction of their results. For example, published studies often differ systematically from unpublished ones, with statistically significant or positive results being more likely to appear in print compared to nonsignificant or negative findings (Song, Hooper, and Loke 2013). Additionally, as Charles Pigden (2024) suggests, there may also be bias in the allocation of research grants, where certain topics or approaches are favored for funding. It is therefore not entirely inconceivable that conspiracy theory research might be framed in ways that increase its chances of securing research grants.

Arguably then, some researchers are not primarily interested to investigate conspiracy theories as such. Rather, as I have argued, other interests and motivations are at play when approaching the research in a less than objective way. However, if the primary interest is to understand the many dimensions of conspiracy theories and to develop an empirical account, I argue that a neutral, objective perspective is imperative. But is it reasonable to expect such an account, given the criticism of objectivity and realism? I now turn to discuss the Objectivist view and its challenges.

3 The Objectivist View

Traditionally, objectivity has been an ideal for scientific inquiry, a reason for valuing scientific knowledge, and the basis of the authority of science in society. However, this ideal of objectivity

has been criticized repeatedly in philosophy of science, questioning both its desirability and its attainability. Philosophers of science, including David Hume, have argued for the scope and limits of our understanding the ultimate nature of reality. Feyerabend (1987) argued against the idea of any objective truths. In objection to the objective and realist view Richard Rorty (1980: 385) concluded that one ought to look at the normal scientific discourse as "patterns adopted for various historical reasons and as the achievement of objective truth, where "objective truth" is no more and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on." To some extent this criticism is appropriate and it would be self-deceptive to assume that we can gather data without making personal judgments. Social scientists characteristically focus their studies in relation to what interest them, and choose a particular phenomenon rather than another to explore. They do so all the while influenced by value references, such as beliefs and commitments. Thus, many question whether a value-free science is desirable in the first place; and some argue that it would be self-deceptive to aim to produce truth (following from the reasoning that we can never be free from value-judgments in research).

However, to study and understand the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, we must consider a neutral, objective account. The Objectivist view should be understood as more than just defining conspiracy theories in a neutral way. It prioritizes a theoretical framework for researching conspiracy theories that is objective and committed to being a "public account" (Bird 2020). Following Bird, central to this view is 'the norm of objectivity'. The norm of objectivity sets standards for how researchers are expected to report on their observations, and how to gather and interpret the data collected.

If we want to advance the understanding of conspiracy theories accounts ought to be public, inviting others to debate and examine the work. For this principle to be satisfied the account must be rational in the sense that it is reasonable and intelligible such that "people who may belong to quite distinct ideological and cultural traditions" are able to interact with it (Bird 2020: 92). If we want an account of conspiracy theory that will not prove to be arbitrary, but more

reliable than those provided by common sense, folklore, conventional wisdom, myths and so on, the field needs to develop a model that (at a very minimum attempts to) possess such reliability and accuracy, and sometimes predictability. Is such a view possible given the criticism of objectivity?[13]

As I have outlined the Objectivist view, it does not require research to be entirely value-free to meet the norm of objectivity. It is not that nothing less than depicting *reality as it is* will satisfy the condition, and that our conception must be like a reflecting "mirror of nature" (Rorty 2009). It is enough that researchers allow for reasonable comparisons by independent observers. As Weber (1949) noted regarding social scientists, the critique lies not in their value-influenced interests but in their failure to acknowledge those interests.

3.1 The Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness

Philosophers have argued successfully that we ought to take conspiracy theories seriously (Dentith 2018). According to Dentith (2023) a broad consensus of particularism –that there is nothing inherently disqualifying about conspiracy theories qua theories– has emerged among philosophers. The particularist appeal to some version of a so-called simple definition[14] of conspiracy theories – one that would typically capture any sort of theory that contains a conspiracy, including the ones that most historically and politically literate people believe. But this raises the problem of how to make the research on conspiracy theories and belief in conspiracy theories theoretically fruitful. If conspiracy theories are theories about conspiracies, and the nightly news and history books are full of them, then pretty much everyone (who believes these) are conspiracy theorists (Pigden, 1995).

[13] In his article, Kurtis Hagen addresses the question if we can and should, as scholars, stay neutral in these discussions, or if we have a responsibility to debunk conspiracy theories and to help diminish their popularity. For this related discussion, see Hagen (2020).

[14] See Dentith (2014) for a minimalist definition and Tsapos (2023) for a discussion on the Simple definition.

But, if it is the case that we are all conspiracy theorists, it doesn't make much sense to say – as the research suggests – that people who believe in conspiracy theories are, for example, less educated and lack critical thinking skills, are more likely to be narcissistic and suffer from paranoid ideation and so on (van Prooijen 2017; Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Biddlestone 2022). Compared to whom? Cassam (2020: 5) points out that if this is what we mean by conspiracy theories then "the psychology of 'conspiracy theories' is starting to look like a total waste of time". This is the Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness (Tsapos 2023). It's like defining a pyromaniac as someone who has ever lit a fire, or intelligence in a way that makes everyone intelligent. As Joseph Uscinski puts it: '… since everyone believes at least one conspiracy theory, the term is meaningless' (Uscinski 2020: 34).

Much like particularism, the Objectivist view considers conspiracy theories as propositions, things that can be true or false, doxastic or non-doxastic, well- or not well supported, and so forth. van Prooijen (2022), for example, has argued that some conspiracy theories are considered for their entertainment value. And so, some of these conspiracy theories do not necessarily need serious consideration or examination as such.

The Objectivist view offers a solution to the problem, where we can remain neutral as to the epistemic status, and instead draw conclusions based on peoples' motivations to believe or not believe these conspiracy theories (for example because they are entertained). Empirical research could provide interesting insight among a wide range of conspiracy theories by clarifying which (if any!) conspiracy theories cluster by types and what the correlations – and possibly causations – might be. The Objectivist view so understood, approaches the study of conspiracy theories and belief in them as a research interest in the subject, that allows for categorization of conspiracy theories based on a set of criteria that may be further supported by findings, rather than the other way around. Under the Faux-pas view the study of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theory beliefs narrows the scope such that it excludes many, even most, of the features of conspiracy theories that make them interesting and scientific to study. Dentith (2018: 20) argues: "It seems

that by defining away conspiracies and conspiracy theories as *prima facie* unlikely, then we not only do the analysis of inferring what gets ruled in by our best inferences a disservice, but we unfairly shift the burden of proof onto those who might well have good reason to infer that a conspiracy really is occurring here-and-now."

Conspiracy theories can be true or false, ultimately however, that is an empirical question (at least in theory). Whether they are all false or all true is a contingent feature, rather than a necessary one. If most, or all conspiracy theories prove to be false, it would not call for a reevaluation and reconceptualization of the term (for research purposes), since it would be a category mistake to assume that something contingently false is necessarily false. Since the probability of conspiracies occurring could affect the rationality of believing conspiracy theories, understanding how human societies tend to work is an important question in the inquiry of Conspiracy Theory Theory. Stokes (2023), for example, claims that the conflict of just how conspired the world really is, is essentially an undecided question. However, to use Pigden's reply to this line of reasoning, "'it is obvious [to every historically literate person] that the world – *including the Western world* – is indeed 'conspired'", and he continues "[s]ince many conspiracy theory theorists appear to think otherwise, we have a whole scholarly industry founded on historical ignorance" (2024: 15); and possibly – as I and others have argued – (political) biasing.

For a theoretically fruitful account the starting point should be, much like historical explanations, a context of history (past events) and focus on the motives of social agents (Jacott et al., 2013). Historical explanations are motivated by perception, reason and emotions. A person's perception of different events depends on the state in which her mind is, at that particular point in time.[15] A person who is brought up with one particular set of values will have a different perception to one who has been brought up elsewhere with another set of values. Alper et al., (2022: 610), for example, showed that corruption moderates how political orientation predicts

[15] For example, see Cohen, (2000). *Karl Marx's theory of history: a defense*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

conspiracy beliefs. Further, they argue that "this is because corruption increases perceived plausibility of conspiracies, and everyone across the political spectrum becomes similarly likely to adopt a conspiracy mentality". One may perceive conspiracy theories to be more or less true, depending on various psychological factors, emotions and environmental factors.

When investigating the rationality of believing in conspiracy theories, Tsapos' (2024) account – acknowledging the important aspects of empirical and epistemic features – highlights the social dimension of belief in conspiracy theories, by a decision theoretic approach, which allows for a consideration of people's priors and decisions when under uncertainty about the state of the world. Another example is Orr and Husting's (2007) investigation of the labeling of something a conspiracy theory (and someone a conspiracy theorists). By maintaining a neutral position, they sidestep the examination of evidence in regard to conspiracy theories, and remain objective in an important way, where other accounts investigating the label have failed.

There are many other interesting features to further investigate when the Objectivist view is available. van Prooijen, Spadaro and Wang (2022: 65) found that conspiracy theories have the ability to "erode the fabric of society" by harming people's interpersonal, within-group, and between-group relationships by causing distrust and suspicion of institutions. But just why conspiracy theories have this ability is still undecided. Another interesting analysis is the failure of the epistemic authorities to adhere to the norms by which citizens take them to be governed when presented with apparent anomalies or alternative hypotheses, and as Brooks (2023) argues is one reason for positing a conspiracy theory. There are also a moral evaluative aspects of conspiracy theories, which can best be studied with a scientific, value-neutral definition; in which case the broader questions and methods from social cognition and social epistemology may provide interesting insights, by correlating belief in conspiracy theories with trust, and how trust affects our beliefs about the world (Levy, 2023).

4 Conclusion

The study of conspiracy theories reveals a compelling intersection between philosophical inquiry and empirical investigation. This paper has argued that the persistent disagreements about the nature of conspiracy theories stem from two fundamentally distinct motivations underlying scholarly research: the desire to defend cultural norms (the Faux-pas view) versus the pursuit of objective understanding (the Objectivist view). This distinction not only shapes the methodological approaches but also informs the theoretical frameworks employed by researchers. The Faux-pas view, often motivated by implicit cultural or political biases, tends to treat conspiracy theories as violations of societal norms, thereby reinforcing a stigmatized perspective. Such an approach risks circular reasoning by defining conspiracy theories in inherently negative terms, undermining efforts to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Examples from philosophy and social sciences illustrate how these biases influence the framing, selection, and interpretation of data, often excluding alternative explanations that may enrich our understanding.

In contrast, the Objectivist view offers a more promising path forward. By advocating for a neutral, empirically grounded approach, this perspective avoids prejudging the epistemic status of conspiracy theories. Instead, it focuses on understanding the motivations and contexts that give rise to such beliefs, allowing for a more nuanced categorization and analysis. This approach not only aligns with the ideals of scientific inquiry but also opens avenues for exploring broader societal impacts, such as the erosion of trust and the interplay between conspiracy theories and institutional legitimacy.

The implications of adopting an Objectivist framework are profound. It enables researchers to move toward a more productive investigation of the social, psychological, and epistemological dimensions of conspiracy theories. Moreover, it provides a robust foundation for addressing the Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness, ensuring that research contributes meaningfully to both academic discourse and practical understanding. Ultimately, this paper concludes that the Objectivist view represents the most theoretically fruitful approach to the study

of conspiracy theories. By prioritizing objectivity it aligns with the broader goal of advancing knowledge in a way that transcends cultural and ideological boundaries, paving the way for more rigorous and insightful scholarship in this complex and contentious field.

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