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Critical Citizens or Paranoid Nutcases?

*On the Epistemology
of Conspiracy Theories*

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*Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus,
Leden van het Bestuur,
Beste studenten,
Beste vrienden en familie,
Geachte toehoorders,*

1 Introduction

It surely feels as if conspiracy theories and conspirational thought are at an unprecedented high. A quick glance into the comment section of almost any topic at almost any online news outlet will acquaint you with a wide range of conspiracy theories, from the moderately suspicious to the outright bizarre.

Indeed, it seems that almost any recent event is the result of a conspiracy. 9/11 was an inside job, Obama's birth certificate is a forgery, global warming is a major hoax. Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 has been abducted by the United States, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 has been shot down by a Ukrainian fighter jet in a failed attempt to assassinate Vladimir Putin. Refugees are let in masses to enter the EU as part of a large conspiracy that tries to abolish nation states and install the New World Order. The Clintons are members of a child sex ring that operates from a Washington D.C. pizza place. The Paris terror strikes of 2015 were in fact another inside job, while the terror attack on a Christmas Market in Berlin last winter did not actually kill anyone—with the exception of the alleged terrorist—, but was just entirely staged by the German government.¹

¹All claims about the content of particular conspiracy theories in this essay can be

For all we know, these theories are false. More importantly, some of them are simply absurd. Can't we then just shrug the rise of conspiracy theories off as a an insignificant—and perhaps even somewhat entertaining—cultural development that is largely due to the fact that—thanks to the internet—nerdy crackpots have it now very easy when they want to disseminate their crazy views?

Well, I don't think that we can just shrug it off. On the one hand, conspiracy theories, of the kind just listed, aren't harmless. As I said, for all we know, they are false. So, people who believe these theories believe something false, and might—because of that—make poor choices. They might end up voting for the wrong party, or oppose important policies, they might not vaccinate their children, might not be willing to contribute to efforts intended to prevent global warming, and so forth.

And these are still only the moderate negative consequences. On December 4 of last year, 28 year old Edgar Maddison Welch took his assault rifle and a revolver and drove from Salisbury to the pizza restaurant "Comet Pingpong" in Washington D.C. in order to investigate himself whether the restaurant indeed houses a sex ring of child abusers (as it was claimed in the "pizzagate" conspiracy theory). He did fire his gun there, fortunately not hurting anyone, and, of course, found nothing. So one reason for being worried about the rise of conspirational thought should be that it leads to false beliefs.

False conspiracy theories are also harmful to those not believing them. Scientists, officials and journalists will have to spend their valuable time debunking false allegations. This debunking is enourmously complicated by the fact that the false theory one is trying to debunk is a conspiracy theory. All the evidence one can produce against the conspiracy theory is just too easily interpreted in the light of that very theory as simply being further smokescreen produced by the conspirators.

Finally, conspiracy theories are not only a symptom of a receding trust in expertise, science, and the government, but the propagation of these theories further nourishes this distrust. This development undermines these institutions. In a society in which universities and experts aren't trusted anyway, few will protest when universities are closed and research funding is cut.

verified via the relevant Wikipedia entries. These entries also contain links to websites providing more information.

So, these theories aren't harmless. But also their support isn't marginal, it isn't confined to "middle-aged white male Internet enthusiasts who live in their mother's basements" [Uscinski and Parent, 2014, 5]. As polls in the United States show, "conspiracy theories permeate all parts of American society and cut across gender, age, race, income, political affiliation, educational level, and occupational status" [Uscinski and Parent, 2014, 5].

The political relevance of this phenomenon is also apparent in Europe. 'Lügenpresse' (*lying press*) has become famous as the fighting word of the self-proclaimed "critical citizens" that support PEGIDA or the AfD in Germany. Essentially, the background of the "Lügenpresse" allegation is just a conspiracy theory, according to which the left and liberal mainstream media are collaborating with the German government in its evil plan to destroy Germany with an influx of immigrants.

This all is surely reason enough to take the apparent rise of conspirational thought seriously and to inquire into its origin. Many social scientists, psychologists, historians, and a somewhat smaller group of philosophers have thus looked into that issue in the past few years.

One of the central questions that will need to be answered here if we hope to find out why conspirational thought is recently gaining such support *and* to find out how to respond to it, is the following: *what mindset leads to the belief in conspiracy theories?* People who believe in conspiracy theories are often ridiculed as nutcases, tinfoil hats, and paranoid crackpots, while they portray themselves as particularly critical, better informed and enlightened responsible citizens. Finding out which of these characterizations is correct is crucial for coming up with the appropriate response to the rise of conspirational thought. Is the best response logic and argumentation or is it therapy and medication?

In this talk I want to discuss this question and the phenomenon of conspirational thought in two respects. First I want to explain how philosophy, and epistemology in particular is essential for understanding the phenomenon and for developing a strategy to deal with the harmful kind of conspirational thought. Secondly, I want to show how epistemology in turn can learn from studying this phenomenon. Along the way, I hope it becomes clear that I see the analysis of conspiracy theories, its current popularity and its cure a matter that requires interdisciplinary effort.

2 What Can Philosophy Contribute?

So let's begin with the question how philosophy can contribute. *That* philosophy can contribute might not be obvious. Sociology and psychology might *prima facie* be seen as the most relevant disciplines to explain the phenomenon of the rise of conspirational thought and the questions of whether its proponents are nutcases or sane critical citizens.

2.1 The Sociology of Conspiracy Theories

Let us consider sociology first. Conspiracies themselves are a social phenomenon. Under which conditions they can form, be sustainable and successful is an issue that social scientists are best placed to investigate. It is also a matter of sociology to inquire who (i.e. what type) develops theories about conspiracies and how these theories get disseminated to wider audiences and come to be influential for public discourse. The latter is the social study of—what might be called—“conspiracy culture” [Aupers, 2012].

Some sociologists believe that the study of such cultures should abstain from any normative judgments about the rationality or accuracy of the beliefs that are held and sustained in these cultures. In the literature on conspiracy theories I found this view motivated from either Max Weber's considerations for a value-free science, or by David Bloor's conception of the so-called strong programme (e.g., [Harambam, 2017] cites both motivations as a motivation to refrain from any normative judgments).

Max Weber famously argued that social scientists should clearly distinguish practical value judgments from the rest of their empirical analysis, because the former do not logically follow from the latter.

The strong programme, on the other hand, is a research paradigm in the sociology of knowledge. According to that programme, historical or sociological accounts of the choices made by scientists in the past should receive equal treatment, whether the scientists were—from the point of view of contemporary science—on the right track or not. Both views are in a certain interpretation sound methodological advice and neither results—under that interpretation—in normative impotence nor in radical relativism.

But it does seem true that a purely descriptive sociological analysis of the phenomenon of conspirational thought will not suffice to get a grip

on conspiracy theories. If we think that the rise of conspirational thought is problematic, we will need to understand what exactly is wrong with conspiracy theories. Otherwise we won't know how to adequately react to the rise of conspirational thought and the effects it has on political discourse and society in general. A descriptive, purely sociological analysis alone will just not tell us that.

As I said, some sociologists will deliberately refrain from taking a stance on the correctness of conspirational thought. But also sociologists who do *not* shy away from taking such stance are not terribly helpful in identifying what if anything is wrong with conspiracy theories. Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent, for example, who published their study *American Conspiracy Theories* in 2014, in fact try to identify standards by which one is supposed to measure how likely it is that a given conspiracy theory is true [Uscinski and Parent, 2014].

We don't have the time now to go into the details of each of these, so one example must suffice to understand the problem with their approach. Let's just consider their first criterion, which they call "Occam's Razor". According to that criterion, an explanation "is more likely to be false, the more complicated it is" (and intuitively, many conspiracy theories are quite complicated). Uscinski and Parent do not tell us where that criterion comes from or why it should be true, but let's leave that aside for a minute.

However, Uscinski and Parent also claim that whether an explanation is simple or complicated is subjective, and they admit that this will make it difficult to apply the criterion. But that is, of course, not the only problem with the supposed subjectivity of parsimony judgments. Unless Uscinski and Parent are prepared to claim that it is also subjective how likely it is that a theory is false, their first criterion is not just difficult to apply, but plainly useless.

And the problems don't stop there. For even if parsimony wasn't a subjective matter, theories can be simpler or more complicated in a variety of ways. In what sense exactly is a conspiracy theory complicated? And how could this be measured absolutely? At best a conspiracy theory can be more complicated than some alternative explanation. But are they? A conspiracy theory often purports to explain a wide range of things. Many events that are unconnected according to the official story are in fact orchestrated by the same conspirators that try to establish, say, the New World Order—isn't that a simpler explanation than one that explains these

events from distinct unconnected causes?

The same questions arise with all the criteria that Uscinski and Parent formulate. It's not clear how they should be applied, they are not terribly plausible, and no justification is given for why they should be good indicators of the truth of a theory.

To cut a long story short, the social sciences can tell us a good deal about certain *descriptive* matters. Like, for example, under what conditions conspiracy theories are likely to spread, and what type of people typically ends up believing these. The great value of the analysis by Uscinski and Parent lies in the observation that conspirational thought in the US, although also there it seems to many to be on the rise, is actually over the past decades in decline.

They also found, as already reported above, that belief in conspiracies is not confined to specific demographics in the US. Moreover, they found that the public impact of a conspiracy theory very much depends on who's in the White House. Under democratic presidents, more people believe that communists are the conspirators, under republican presidents more people believe that it's capitalists who conspire against the American public. Of course, in 2014 Uscinski and Parent couldn't foresee that in 2017 a president would be in the White House who himself propagates conspiracy theories.

Another sociological find, that seems to be quite robust, is the fact that conspiracy theories often lead to more conspiracy theories. That is, if someone starts to believe that 9/11 was an inside job, such person will often also believe in other conspiracies, such as the idea that vaccinations cause autism, or that climate change is a hoax or that the holocaust didn't happen. Moreover, it seems that there doesn't need to be any coherence between these theories, other than that they explain events in terms of a conspiracy [Sutton and Douglas, 2014].

As we will see in a bit, such observations are crucial in order to understand the rise of conspirational thought in a society, but by itself they don't answer the question to what degree (if any) conspiracy theories are *rationaly* believed. For that latter question, the social sciences do not provide the necessary expertise.

2.2 The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories

One might perhaps think that psychology is better equipped to deal with that latter problem. Psychology informs us about our unconscious biases and the quick and dirty heuristic that our mind uses to generate solutions to problems that would sometimes better be tackled by careful reflection. Psychology also informs us about character traits and personality profiles, all of which can then be correlated with certain types of beliefs. For example, a prominent explanation for why some people might be prone to believe in conspiracy theories is that they have a hypersensitive module for agency detection.

Hypersensitive agency detection is considered a cognitive bias that came about as an adaptation.

[S]ince humans have evolved in an environment that contains many agents (e.g., friends, enemies and dangerous predatory animals) hypersensitivity to agency may be adaptive because it makes people wary in their interactions with the environment around them, reducing vulnerability to unexpected outcomes and avoiding risk from potentially dangerous factors. Being able to detect and understand an event and react quickly, or respond quickly to an ambiguous situation, is important for physical and social survival. [Douglas et al., 2016, 60]

While taking a stroll through the park, you hear a noise in a nearby bush or tree, and you spontaneously form the belief that someone or some animal is hiding there, while perhaps the sound just came from the wind stirring up some leaves. Hypersensitive agency detection means that you sometimes suspect agency when in fact there is none. Having a reaction of that kind might still have been overall better for survival even if it sometimes leads to mistaken assumptions of agents in your environment. As so often, it's better to be safe than sorry. The fact that we have this hypersensitivity to agency has been cited to explain why humans believe in the existence of invisible spirits and gods, why we are superstitious and belief in causal connections among unconnected events, etc.

Obviously, to overascribe agency and intentionality and to see purposes and causal connections where there are none is typical for false conspiracy theories. Thus, plausibly, people that tend to overascribe agency might also be prone to believe in conspiracies. As Douglas and colleagues have shown

in their [Douglas et al., 2016] this is indeed the case. They found that a low level of education predicts endorsement of conspiracy theories, which is mediated by a general tendency to overattribute intentional agency. Thus, some people end up believing in conspiracies because of a certain thinking style that involves hypersensitivity to agency.

Again, this is a very valuable and interesting result, but whether this is going to help in understanding how we should respond to the apparent rise in conspirational thought is still a question that is itself left open by these psychological results. Is it sometimes rational to believe in a conspiracy theory? If it is not rational to believe in such theory then the existence of a hypersensitive module for agency detection could explain why some people nevertheless believe in such theories. But the psychological result is silent on that question. We learn that low educational level predicts belief in conspiracies. But whether you believe a theory *rationally* is often a matter of your background knowledge, a matter of the evidence that you have for the theory and the alternative explanations that you are aware of. Perhaps people who lack certain levels of education lack the background knowledge that would make their belief irrational. In order to understand better whether it is at all possible to believe rationally in a conspiracy theory, we should eventually turn to philosophy.

2.3 The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories

Theoretical philosophy deals in several areas with the kind of normative questions we are here seeking answers to. In *logic* we investigate the logical correctness of reasoning and argumentation, in *epistemology* theoretical philosophers investigate the conditions under which we can have knowledge of the world around us, and in *philosophy of science*, we look at the questions of when theories are supported by evidence, what criteria an explanation needs to satisfy in order to be a good scientific explanation, and how scientists should go about testing and revising their theoretical accounts of the world. This is precisely the kind of expertise that seems relevant for answering the question when—if ever—it might be rational to believe a conspiracy theory. So let us see what theoretical philosophy has to say about conspiracy theories.

The philosophical engagement with conspiracy theories is still relatively young and—unfortunately—as yet not very developed. It is often

(e.g. [Pigden, 1995]) claimed that Karl Popper was the first to write about it in his famous opus magnum *The Open Society and its Enemies* in 1945 [Popper, 1962].

Popper's theory is supposed to be that conspiracy theorists must believe that every event is due to intentional successful planning and Popper holds against this view that it overlooks the fact that many if not most of the consequences of our actions are not in fact under our control. Very often events happen as unintended consequences of our actions. Hence conspiracy theories are irrational, because they rest on an untenable assumption concerning the amount by which we have control over the consequences of our actions. If many or most of these consequences are not intended then it can't be true that all events are the product of successful intentional planning.

People who understand Popper as making this argument have been quick to point out that Popper's critique of conspiracy theories can't be right. Why should every conspiracy theorist assume that *all* events are the result of successful intentional planning? After all, conspiracy theories are typically theories of specific outcomes, for example the collapse of the World Trade Center, or the death of Lady Di. Why should conspiracy theorists then have to believe that *all* events that happen were so planned? And, clearly, *sometimes* events *do* come out as planned, so how is Popper's argument supposed to work?

I believe that this controversy is due to a misunderstanding of Popper's writings. Popper is not in fact engaging with conspiracy theories in the way in which we are interested in them here. Popper is instead trying to make a quite valid methodological point about the social sciences in general. When he talks about the "conspiracy theory of society" he has sociologists in mind who think that the social sciences work by providing intentional explanations of social events.

A theory of the type Popper has in mind here, is—what he calls—*Vulgar Marxism*, the idea that social events are to be explained by identifying the social class related motives of the protagonists that brought an event about, and to explain the event, in turn, as the intended satisfaction of these class-related motives. But that's not a theory or a criticism of conspiracy theories as such.

So Popper didn't believe that all conspiracy theories rest on that one mistaken premise that *all* conspiracy theorists must believe that *all* events

Figure 1: “Chemtrails are not a conspiracy theory”



are due to a conspiracy. Nevertheless this is a type of view that one can indeed find in the philosophical literature. There are several attempts to show that belief in conspiracy theories rests on some fundamental mistake, such that it is always or almost always irrational to believe such a theory, just because it is a conspiracy theory.

This is certainly somewhat in line with the ordinary use of the word ‘conspiracy theory’. To call a theory a “conspiracy theory”, or someone a “conspiracy theorist” is often intended in a derogatory way. Wondering whether conspiracy theories are irrational—in that usage—makes no sense; of course they are. This usage is so widely spread that conspiracy theorists themselves want to avoid the label. For example, you find youtube videos on one of the paradigmatic conspiracy theories, the chemtrails theory, that are titled “Chemtrails are not a conspiracy theory” (c.f. figure 1).

If that’s so, then perhaps we should define ‘conspiracy theory’ right away as a certain type of irrational belief. So, perhaps *a conspiracy theory is an irrationally believed theory that explains an event as the result of a conspiracy*. The problem with such definition is that it doesn’t relate to the psychological and sociological research on conspiracy theories. Most of that research tries to correlate belief in certain specific explanations—for example the

theory that 9/11 was an inside job, or that Oswald didn't act alone—with a demographic or psychological profile. But this correlation will hold between this profile and conspiracy theories as defined in the proposed definition only if these theories are irrationally believed by the people that participate in that study. But these studies typically do not investigate on what evidence or with which justification these theories are believed (as we have seen above in the discussion of whether a hypersensitive agency detection module can *explain* belief in conspiracy theories) .

The trick to close this gap is not to define conspiracy theory outright as an irrationally believed explanation of some event, but to show that conspiracy theories *can* only be believed in an irrational way.

It seems that what we'd need in order to draw immediate consequences from the empirical results of psychology and sociology is a critical analysis of conspiracy theories that resembles in result David Hume's critical analysis of miracles. In section X of his *Enquiry* David Hume makes the following argument:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.
[Hume, 1999]

Hume defines a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature. Thus to *recognize* something as a miracle is to recognize it as a violation of the laws of nature. But that means that we must have had strong empirical evidence to believe the law in the first place, which the miracle supposedly violates. Which means in turn, so Hume's reasoning, that whatever evidence we think we have for the proposed miraculous event is simply outweighed by the evidence that speaks against it—it is far more likely that we are not dealing with a miracle but with a mistaken or misleading observation report. Consequently, believing that a miracle has occurred is always irrational. This analysis rests on a conceptual and an empirical component. The conceptual component is the definition of a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature. The empirical component of the argument is human fallibility, and the fact that miracles are never observed by sufficiently many in order to outweigh the evidence against them.

Hume's argument is controversial, but my point is independent of whether Hume is right about miracles. I just want to explain by that analogy that if we had such an analysis for conspiracy theories as Hume offers for miracles, we could immediately answer our initial question: conspiracy theorists must be paranoid nutcases, because there is no rational way to believe such a theory (just as—according to Hume—there is no rational way to believe in miracles). Also sociological and psychological research into the correlation between, say, cognitive biases and conspiracy belief, would then directly tell us something about the causes of these beliefs.

Alas, I don't quite see how such a Humean analysis could be achieved, at least not on conceptual considerations alone. Such "conceptual considerations" of course depend on the definition one presupposes for the term 'conspiracy theory'. We have seen above that such a definition should—at least for our purposes—not include *explicitly* that any believe in such theory is irrational.

But what is a conspiracy theory then? First of all, it is an explanation for sometimes an event, sometimes just some other kind of phenomenon. For example, the inside job conspiracy theory of 9/11 explains as an event the collapse of the World Trade Center, and the theory that Diana, Princess of Wales, was killed by MI6 explains as an event the car crash in a tunnel in Paris in August 1997. As in these cases, the events in question are often tragic or even traumatic, and believing that they were the results of malicious intentional planning might be a form of psychological coping with the tragedy.

However, not every conspiracy theory explains a traumatic event. For example the chemtrails conspiracy theory holds that long-lasting trails, so-called "chemtrails", are left in the sky by high-flying aircraft and that they consist of chemical or biological agents deliberately sprayed for purposes undisclosed to the general public. So this theory explains the durability of the condensation trails of planes.

In the introduction I already mentioned the pizzagate conspiracy theory. This theory developed quickly after Wikileaks released emails that were hacked from the account of John Podesta, the chairman of Hilary Clinton's campaign in the presidential elections of last year. The publication of these emails occurred just a month before the election. The emails were then discussed on social media and a few Trump supporting platforms. At some point it was suggested that the occasional reference to pizza and

to meetings at Washington restaurants were in fact secret code for child pornography (allegedly, 'cheese pizza' with the initials 'c' and 'p' is code for 'child pornography'). Under this new interpretation, seemingly innocent and unconnected emails about dinner invites were quickly revealed to be in fact hiding a child sex ring that the Clintons and the Podesta brothers were a central part of, and that operated from the restaurant "Comet Pingpong" in Washington D.C. In the case of the pizzagate conspiracy theory, there is no specific event or even tangible phenomenon that gets explained. Instead, the theory explains why John Podesta exchanged emails that contained reference to pizza and dinners at restaurants.

So far we know that conspiracy theories are explanations of a certain kind that explain something. What makes these explanations now *conspiracy* theories is that they invoke secretly conspiring agents as a salient cause in the explanation. The reasons why these agents are conspiring *secretly* can be several. Often it is assumed that the conspirators are not up for anything good. They have malicious, evil plans, that would meet with heavy resistance if the public were to learn about them.

But the maliciousness of the intentions behind the conspiracy are not a necessary ingredient of conspiracy theories, even if one restricts the analysis to the paradigmatic cases. First of all, some conspiracy theories remain agnostic about the intentions that are behind the conspiracy. For example, a prominent German authority on the chemtrails conspiracy theory expresses in interviews that he does not know what exactly the chemtrails contain and what they are good for, and that it is conceivable that they are supposed to serve some beneficial purpose.

A clearer example is perhaps the theory that Paul McCartney died in a car crash already in November 1966. According to that theory, Paul drove off after an argument with the other band members during a recording session, crashed his car and died. He was then replaced by a certain "William Campbell" who had previously won a Paul McCartney lookalike contest. William Campbell is in conspiracy circles referred to as "Faul McCartney".

The theory is extremely elaborate and there are hundreds of clues found that are supposed to support it. At first, the theory is supposed to explain why the Beatles for some time after Paul's death did not appear in public together. Since Faul McCartney is supposed to be taller than Paul, they also didn't play many live concerts anymore with the new line-up (so people

Figure 2: The cover of *Abbey Road*, 1969



wouldn't notice the difference in height between Paul and Paul). But the band also left clues for their fans, since they couldn't quite keep that secret for themselves. Most prominently, the cover of the Beatles' *Abbey Road* record, which displays, according to the conspiracy theorists, a funeral procession. Lennon in white is the priest, Starr symbolizes the undertaker, Harrison, in denim is the gravedigger, and Paul, finally, out of step with the others and barefooted is the supposed corpse (c.f. figure 2).

The theory is also confirmed by several backside messages that the Beatles allegedly hid in their songs, and it explains the complex symbolism of the cover of the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), which supposedly represents the funeral of Paul McCartney.

According to most versions of that theory, the band, the management and the media together conspired to hide the death of Paul McCartney from the public. But the intentions behind it were not primarily sinister. Most theorists seem to hold that the death of McCartney was covered up to spare the public from grief. The Beatles were so popular at the time that it would have been a catastrophe for the fans to learn that their idol had died.

Also, according to the conspiracy theory, the cover-up had an altogether positive side effect; Paul is supposedly more talented than Paul McCartney and the music of the Beatles improved after Paul's death.

Thus, sinister motives are often assumed to be the reason for the agents acting in secrecy, but it isn't a defining feature of a conspiracy theory.

Some definitions of conspiracy theories have a problem with the secrecy condition. It is clear that conspirators *intend* to act in secrecy. But can a theory still be a conspiracy theory if the secret conspiracy has been leaked by, for example, a whistleblower? Once something is out in the open such that others are aware of it, it isn't anymore a secret, but isn't being secret a defining feature of conspiracy theories?

Again, this seems to be a confusion. Otherwise everyone who sincerely proposes a conspiracy theory would thereby undermine it. Conspiracy theories couldn't be rationally believed, because they—literally—couldn't be believed. Obviously, the secrecy requirement just means that the conspirators *intend* to act and coordinate secretly.

Another feature that has been suggested as a defining feature of conspiracy theories is the fact that they are often in conflict with the "official story". On that view, the official explanation of the collapse of 9/11, namely that it is due to a conspiracy between members of the terror network Al-Kaida, is not a conspiracy theory, while the theory that the collapse is due to a conspiracy in the US government is a conspiracy theory.

There are two problems with this requirement that a conspiracy theory always has to be in conflict with the official story. One is that what counts as "the official story" is context dependent. Russian mass media came up with several explanations of the crash of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 that conflicted with the explanation that the Dutch Safety Board and the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team provided. According to the story that was in Russia considered to be the official account, the Ukrainian army was to blame, while the official story recognized in the Netherlands holds that the plane was shot down by a missile that was fired from a rebel-controlled area. Which of these theories is a conspiracy theory and which is not doesn't depend on whether you are in Russia or in the Netherlands.

Another, related problem is that a conspiracy theory doesn't cease to be such if its proponents come to power. On April 10 2010 an aircraft of the Polish Air force with several Polish government officials on board crashed near the city of Smolensk in Russia. For some time, the official story according to Polish and Russian investigators was that the plane crashed because of an unsafe landing approach in the bad weather conditions of that day. Now, in 2015 the political party "Law and Justice" won the Polish parliamentary elections; the leader of that party, Jaroslaw Kaczyński believes that the crash is due to an assassination—possibly orchestrated by

Russia—and the investigation of the crash has since been reopened. What used to be a conspiracy theory in conflict with the official account is now a story supported by officials.

Likewise, the fact that it is the current president of the United States, Donald Trump, who publishes on Twitter that his predecessor, Barack Obama ordered to wiretap his phones during the election campaign, doesn't make the wiretapping story any less of a conspiracy theory. So, again, *being in conflict with the official story* is not a defining element for a conspiracy theory.

But then we arrive at a rather thin definition of the term 'conspiracy theory':

Definition. A *conspiracy theory* is an explanation that cites agents acting together in secrecy as a salient cause.

This definition is thin, which means that it is also quite broad.² The official explanation that 9/11 was the result of a secret plot by Al-Kaida terrorists is a conspiracy theory just as much as the theory that it was an inside job. But since we left out sinister motives from the definition, also your suspicion that your friends may be planning a surprise birthday party for you, is a conspiracy theory.

But because the definition is that broad, we also know immediately that conspiracy theories in this sense can be rationally believed. In fact all of us believe several conspiracy theories. In other words, a general argument that could show that conspiracy theories are always irrational to believe and that would just fall out of a definition of "conspiracy theory" is not forthcoming. The kind of argument that Hume produced against miracles can not be produced against conspiracy theories.

3 What is wrong with conspiracy theories?

But that means that a lot more work needs to be done, both on the side of philosophy and on the side of sociology and psychology to understand what goes wrong with conspiracy theories *when* they go wrong.

Now, of course, often conspiracy theories will be bad explanations of an event for familiar reasons. Familiar in the sense that philosophers of

²A similarly broad definition is defended in [Dentith, 2014].

science have already identified such reasons. For example one explanation of an event might be worse than an alternative explanation of that same event if it can explain less aspects of the event, if it is less supported by the empirical evidence gathered about the event, if it needs to postulate a greater number of unlikely events, etc.

Also, theorists who fall for these inferior explanations might make familiar mistakes, they might have taken a too uncritical attitude towards the available evidence, they were epistemically lazy in not reviewing alternative explanations, and they might have been ignorant with respect to certain parts of the available evidence.

Psychological research into a “conspiracy mindset”, as well as philosophical research into epistemological virtues and vices, can then profile typical conspiracy theory believers and characterize their typical mistakes.

My suspicion is, though, that these familiar pitfalls of bad reasoning and bad epistemological practice will only partly explain the phenomenon of the rise of conspirational thought, at least for Western Europe. And I believe that this is also the area in which philosophy might gain new insights from studying this phenomenon.

In societies in which most of the media is clearly partisan, and where your main or only channels of information are one-sided and also unreliable, you may be lazy and end up with a largely mistaken picture of the world around you. The echo-chamber that will reinforce your mistaken beliefs is set up for you, and when you don’t make an effort to break out of it, you will remain having a world view that might be massively mistaken.

Fortunately the relatively open societies of Western Europe are not like this. For the most part, the media are doing a pretty good job in providing accurate and relatively balanced information, they are also relatively independent, and from the way they are organized and managed, not likely to get under external influence that could force the media to distort the information they are providing. In such a situation, being an epistemically lazy citizen of such a society does not automatically lead to inaccurate beliefs. You actually need to do something, you need to find alternative information sources in order to become massively misinformed.

And, strangely enough, this is what happens. The conspiracy theories that *you* find in the comments section of your favorite news-outlet have others found in the internet on specially dedicated blogs and websites, when looking exactly for this alternative account. The people writing these

comments did not lazily believe what the mainstream media tell them, but go the extra mile and look up “information” that we safely ignore. After critically weighing the different accounts they then make up their own mind, and—tragically—end up with spectacularly false beliefs.

It is true that thanks to social media, like *facebook*, people can now create their own echo chambers in which they only receive the information that supports their world-view and beliefs, but not all conspiracy theorists confine their information intake to such echo chambers. Indeed, those who post the weird comments under *your* favorite news outlet, must at least also consult that source. The picture of the lazy, gullible, ignorant conspiracy theorists (c.f. [Cassam, 2016]) seems inappropriate for many cases.

This corresponds to the image that conspiracy theorists have of themselves. They are *sceptics*, they look at the information they receive via mainstream channels more critically than others and are enlightened and better informed than the average citizen (c.f. [Harambam, 2017]). Indeed, the strategies they use in choosing the theory to believe are often consistent with recommended criteria for good explanations (which I already listed above), choose the theory that can explain more aspects, choose a theory that is supported by more evidence, choose a theory that doesn’t postulate a great number of unlikely events.³ Of course, in the application of these criteria, mistakes are made, mistakes that are due to the fact that laypersons are often not in a good position to apply the appropriate criteria for theory choice.

I believe philosophy and epistemology in particular can gain from a better understanding of these mistakes, because it promises to lead to a better understanding of the general epistemological principles which philosophy tries to formulate.

Some of the mistakes are relatively easy to identify. Take for example the standard *cui bono* heuristic that conspiracy theorists use in order to find the conspiracy that caused the event they try to explain. Sometimes such a heuristic makes sense. Finding the culprit of, say, a murder by asking who would have had a motive, is a useful strategy if you know that the event in question was murder; an intentional and planned killing. But you can’t just use this heuristic randomly for any event that you want to explain, since not every event is the result of successful intentional action.

³The observation that conspiracy theories often seem to satisfy criteria for theory choice better than their competitors is also made in [Hepfer, 2015].

Here Popper's argument against the conspiracy theory of society, that we encountered in the beginning of the talk becomes now relevant for ordinary conspiracy theories. Using a *cui bono* heuristic without prior independent evidence that an event was indeed caused by intentional action relies on unreasonable assumption about the world and is thus irrational.

Other mistakes are not that easy to analyze. Conspiracy theorists often misidentify the relevant experts. They mistrust the proper scientist, but put trust in charlatans. But how should they have known who the proper expert is, given that they themselves don't know the relevant subject matter? What criteria can laymen use to determine whom they can trust? In social epistemology this is discussed as the "Novice/2-Experts Problem", a problem that will require a solution in terms of indirect indicators of relevant expertise (c.f. [Goldman, 2001]). Indicators that will have to be provided by trustworthy institutions, such as universities. But these institutions are in the danger of losing public trust, and we need to understand why that is and what we can do to stop and reverse this development.

Finally, conspiracy theorists seem to suffer from a certain overconfidence in their own ability to inform themselves and arrive at a considered judgment over issues for which they don't possess the relevant expertise. Again, it is difficult to blame them for this if epistemologists standardly recommend that the art of critical thinking requires the exercise of your own informed, critical judgment. Apparently, there is something wrong with the idea that we *always* should exercise *our own* best judgment. Sometimes it seems just prudent to trust the experts and to defer to their epistemic authority. When that's so and whether such deference is compatible with the enlightenment ideal of epistemic autonomy is an open question that philosophers need to answer (c.f. [Zagzebski, 2013]).

I hope that I have shown that conspiracy theories provide a fruitful test-case for philosophical theories and that philosophy is the relevant discipline to provide the normative analysis of the rise of conspirational thought in Western societies. How the normative analysis should then be translated into policies and strategies to address this dangerous phenomenon is, however, a question that philosophers, sociologists, psychologists and political scientists will have to solve together. I very much hope that some of these question will be solved by us in Utrecht and I'm very much looking forward to collaborating with many of you on these questions.

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