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Conspiracy Theories and Their Investigator(s)

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Is there a conspiracy by certain philosophers to turn the *Social Epistemology Review & Reply Collective* into a clearing house for articles on conspiracy theories and conspiracy theory theories? That I cannot answer (for a variety of reasons), but what I can say is that a recent reply piece by Patrick Stokes, ‘Reluctance and Suspicion: Reply to Basham and Dentith’² has induced me to put pen to paper once again.

Stokes’ piece is a reply to two earlier pieces, one by myself, and another by fellow philosopher of conspiracy theories, Lee Basham.³ Stokes’ commentary on Basham’s piece will not concern me here (I suspect the agents working for the aforementioned putative conspiracy about this journal will do that job for me). Rather, I want to focus on what I think Stokes gets right about his reply to me (the worry about how we deal with conspiracy theories in public discourse), and what I think he gets wrong (how I think an investigation into conspiracy theories would work). I do not think Stokes gets my view wrong through any mistake on his part. Rather, due to a poor choice of words on my part, I failed to adequately describe my view, and this naturally lead Stokes to assume I imagined a more individualistic, less socially epistemic investigator (or set of investigators) into these things we call ‘conspiracy theories.’

The Investigator(s)

In ‘Reluctance and Suspicion,’ Stokes takes me to task for speciating out what I label as ‘conspiracy narratives’—arational, rhetorical bad habits associated with particular conspiratorial tropes—from conspiracy theorising *generally*. He points out that these conspiracy narratives seem awfully hard to distinguish from actual cases of conspiracy theorising. Stokes is too polite to claim I am engaging in the *No True Scotsman* Fallacy⁴. He saves his criticism for the crux of my reply⁵ to his first reply⁶ (we are hurtling towards a conspiracy theory theory inception), where I argue we can hand wave the problem away by appealing to an investigator locked up in a room, ‘dispassionately coming up with conspiracy theories, and then getting her lackeys to see if they have any merit’ (my words, not his).⁷ Stokes characterises my putative investigator as someone:

[S]omehow oblivious to conspiracy theorizing as a social practice—perhaps she, in a nod to Frank Jackson’s “Mary,” has been raised in an environment where she has never been exposed to any existing conspiracy theories or conspiracy tropes. Her conspiracy theories are, let’s stipulate, self-standing and *sui generis* alternatives to “official” explanations of given events.⁸

² Stokes 2017.

³ Basham 2016.

⁴ Or, like me, he’s not sure what to call it now, given that the label seems rather racist.

⁵ Dentith 2016.

⁶ Stokes 2016.

⁷ Dentith 2016, 28.

⁸ Stokes 2017, 49.

Now, as I noted in the piece Stokes is replying to, knowing about these narratives/social practices is part-and-parcel of being an investigator with regard to conspiracy theories. I admit that this is not immediately obvious, but when I wrote about:

[S]peciating out talk of conspiracy theories with respect to conspiracy theorising and the invocation of conspiracy narratives is principled case of the particularist insisting that we need to work with the evidence (Dentith 2016, 31).

I was talking about how particularists-qua-investigators should go about their investigative work. That is to say, like the detective investigating the murder of a spouse, there is certain background information we expect the detective to be aware of, such as the likelihood of the surviving partner being the most plausible perpetrator, etc. But my point could have been clearer, and for that I apologise.

However, my chief mistake was to talk about **an** investigator, and **her** lackeys. That is to say, I posited a quite individualistic notion of the investigator when the model I am proposing for the investigation of these things called ‘conspiracy theories’ is more akin to a community of inquiry.

Communities of Inquiry

A community of inquiry (a term I take from the works of John Dewey⁹ and C. S. Pierce¹⁰) is a community-led inquiry into problematic situations, where members of said community cooperate in a democratic and participatory fashion. It is a way of talking how best to distribute the epistemic burden when it comes to the discussion and analysis of complex claims (and thus, by extension, these things called ‘conspiracy theories’). Such a community operates on the assumption that while there may be no *one* expert (or set of experts) with respect to the complex claims contained in many conspiracy theories, we can compensate for the lack of conspiracy theory expertise by sharing the epistemic burden across a suitably constituted community.¹¹ Potential members of a community of inquiry will include interested members of the public, journalists (both professional and citizen), the police, the judiciary, politicians, and the like.

Describing my putative investigators in the singular ‘she’ was a mistake born out of not quite having nailed down aspects of the terminology of my current research project, ‘Investigating conspiracy theories.’ A social epistemologist at heart, I have always thought that how we analyse any complex claim is a *community* affair, one of sorting out who shoulders the epistemic burdens, and who gets to be a ‘free rider,’ appealing to the views of others. So, Stokes was misled only because of my poor choice of words.

⁹ Dewey 1938.

¹⁰ Pierce 1958.

¹¹ I have a (hopefully) forthcoming paper on this issue, but—in short—I take it while there are no institutionally-accredited experts in conspiracy theories (unlike, say, in the sciences), and that any conspiracy theorist worth their salt will find issue with appeals to expertise or authority when it comes to dismissing some conspiracy theory (because of the worry the institutions which accredit expertise or authority might be conspired) we can partially solve both of these problems by properly allocating the epistemic burden across members in our societies.

Stokes asks what would motivate these investigators, given they are *supposedly* isolated from conspiracy theorising as a social practice? I think they would—in an ideal setting—be spurred by the idea that if a conspiracy theory turned out to be warranted, then surely we would be obliged to do something about it? Obviously that sense of obligation is linked somehow to scale and/or purpose; a conspiracy to organise a surprise party is something you might well encourage, rather than work against (unless you hate surprise parties). A political conspiracy to rot an election, however, is something most of us think we ought to work against.¹²

Dispassionate Investigations

Now, Stokes might find issue with this fuller picture of a community-led investigation in conspiracy theories because of my stipulation about the investigator(s) ‘dispassionate’ nature. He notes that:

[W]e do not apply our evidential reasoning in a vacuum, but do so from within historically conditioned and epistemically finite situations, in a world already freighted with moral and political meanings.¹³

I admit, talking about the ‘dispassionate’ nature of the investigator(s) was another poor choice of words on my part.¹⁴ What I was trying to get across with the label ‘dispassionate’ is that an investigator can be *informed* by cultural mores, etc., but that does not mean that she is immediately or necessarily *subject* to them. Which is to say that members of the community of inquiry will surely know about certain conspiracy narratives (or the social practices associated with some cases of conspiracy theorising) without necessarily having to in any way endorse or engage with them.

Indeed, the diversity of members within a community of inquiry should help with this, in that even if *some* members embrace the trope, others in the community will question it. Said communities may also end up being international or globalist in constitution, so views which might not be socially or politically unacceptable in one context might be allowed to be expressed in some other. Finally, the diversity of the community (properly—there’s that word again—constituted) should mean even if some members act insincerely, that insincerity

¹² Some people might disagree, if they think the party favoured by the conspiracy ought to be in control; a diverse community of inquirers should be able to counteract the *pro this-conspiracy* aspect of some of its members.

¹³ Stokes 2017, 50.

¹⁴ One reason to think ‘dispassionate’ is a poor choice of word here is a curious but troubling aspect of contemporary debate, which is that passion (whether anger, joy, or sadness) is taken to be a mark against someone’s argument in much public discourse. The marginalised person of colour, or the trans person, say, who gets angry about some policy debate, or discussion of institutional prejudice, is taken to not be arguing properly. Instead, they are asked to be dispassionate about the details of a debate which affects them personally, as if separating their lived experience from their discourse is somehow a good thing. It is easy to be dispassionate about events which do not directly effect you, but it is very cruel indeed to ask those who are directed effected to be dispassionate by those very same events.

should be uncovered or outed (that is, a well-formed community of inquiry should be resistant to conspiracy if it emerges in a society which is largely open¹⁵).

But the real issue here—which separates Stokes’s work from mine and that of Basham—is the worry about the kind of accusations implicit in some conspiracy theories, and the way in which they (sometimes) can entail particular harms.

Accusations Without Merit

Using the example of recurrent anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (or narratives, as I termed them) as his example, Stoke writes:

[W]e not morally or rationally obliged to entertain every theory, we are morally obliged to reject some theories even at the risk of occasionally being wrong.¹⁶

I appreciate Stoke’s point here; conspiracy theories or narratives which suggest that, say, the Jewish people are behind the world’s various calamities are, indeed, of the kind we have grounds to not treat seriously. Or, at least, most of us do. The reason why most of us have grounds to not treat these claims seriously is both the harm such theories cause, and the fact that—on investigation—these theories routinely turn out to be baseless.¹⁷ The relationship between these two claims—harms and baselessness—are tightly intertwined. Our communities of inquiry, we should hope, will know this. They will not theorise in a vacuum. If they investigate some alleged Jewish banking cartel plot, they do it with the knowledge of systemic racism, a familiarity with tropes, and an eye on new, and compelling evidence.

However, it is important to note that we already allow some pretty extreme accusations to be made in the public sphere. Many government chambers allow politicians to make accusations on the public record *without being subject to libel or defamation*. The police can arrest and charge people on what is—to many an epistemologist or ethicist—troublingly vague evidence, and various security services make claims about people on the basis of secret evidence (which may or may not exist). Now, we might object to all of these examples, but we have systems in place which allow accusations to be made, and for them to be challenged.¹⁸

It is also worthwhile to note that a community of inquiry which investigates some particular conspiracy theory need not do it publicly; the members might work behind closed doors, only going public once an investigation has been concluded. Secret investigations into conspiracy theories, I realise, seem almost *prima facie* problematic, but unless we think of these investigations as being necessarily public in nature, there is no reason why concerned

¹⁵ All bets are off if the society is towards the closed end of the spectrum, of course.

¹⁶ Stokes 2017, 50–51.

¹⁷ Not just that; we have good anthropological and sociological theories as to how these narratives first emerged, which strongly suggest that the appellation ‘conspiracy’ in these cases was insincerely fomented by agents who wanted to blame the Jewish people, in order to make them scapegoats.

¹⁸ Admittedly, the fact we allow these accusations to be made does not tell us anything about the morality of making them. However, the fact there are societal agreements about when such accusations can (and cannot) be made speaks to the idea that we at least tolerate allowing discussion of *certain* extreme claims in a range of cases.

citizens cannot start their investigation behind closed doors. Indeed, think of the case of a community of inquiry into the Moscow Trials of the 1930s; if you were a Muscovite, would you want your work to be public?¹⁹

Stokes also makes the following claim about the moral cost of my dispassionate investigator(s) speculations:

Dentith's dispassionate speculator may not be doing very much practical harm, but she is nonetheless engaging in a practice with a moral cost. My walking into a room and idly wondering if you're planning to kill me may not cause you much upset—mostly because I wouldn't mention doing so, as that would make things pretty awkward—but I've still entertained the idea you might be a murderer, and thereby done you a passing wrong.²⁰

I am sympathetic to this point. A similar argument stands for why we rightfully cast opprobrium on racist speech. After all, someone might claim that is *logically possible* members of a particular ethnicity (or the opposite sex, etc.) have lower IQs than members of some other group. However, most of us realise that treating such a claim seriously is likely to cause more harm than good; the very act of engaging in the anthropological (or sociological, etc.) research involved creates the idea such notions are respectable, and thus deserving of serious scrutiny. All such an investigation will do—even in the case of a null result—is give proponents of such a theory grounds to say 'Look, those boffins at Yale thought it was worth checking out...' Whilst *in theory* any idea is worth investigating, or treating seriously, in practice there are certain ideas which deserve scrutiny *only if we have good grounds to investigate them*. Indeed, sometimes we have good socially-constituted reasons to think certain questions need not be raised, or, if raised, not answered.²¹

Yet consider the following hypothetical: a woman walks into a room and finds herself alone with a man. Does she cause a passing wrong by entertaining the notion she might not be safe in that situation? I don't think so, but even if she does, it seems both justifiable and outweighed by the need for caution. Or think of the detective who, on investigating the murder of a spouse immediately suspects the surviving partner as a matter of course. Is this also a passing wrong, given that she knows a crime has been committed, and that the most likely culprit in such cases is the surviving spouse?

Investigators think like this all the time, and I do not think this is a problem *per se*. Yes, such thinking entails beliefs which—if expressed in a certain way, or in particular contexts—can

¹⁹ There is also a question about whether we are concerned with open *practices*, or merely open and accessible *results*? That is, could we—in some cases—run our investigation in secret? Then, once we have our findings, publish **all** the data (and give a full accounting of our investigative method), and thus by 'revealing' our secret to the world, circumvent the issues associated with such a secretive investigation?

²⁰ Stokes 2017, 50.

²¹ Some will claim that such grounds should not be of interest to the epistemologist, but I would counter by saying that the *social* epistemologist is very much aware of the social-constituted nature of knowledge, and how these things play out.

cause harm. *Apropos* of nothing, if I walk into a room and *tell* you that I think you are planning to kill, that likely will damage our friendship. My idly thinking it, however, does not strike me as problematic. However, I guess it all depends on what ‘idly’ means here; if it is a passing thought, then I cannot see how it causes harm at all. If it persists throughout the conversation I am having with you, causing me to act nervously or become reticent around you, maybe that does mean I’ve wronged you in some sense.

Now, admittedly, this kind of response entails a problem: if we accept that investigators (or, our putative community of inquiry) think like this all the time, **and** some investigations can be undertaken in secret, then surely there is nothing wrong about some community going off, behind closed doors, and looking into the question about IQs being lower in *that* particular ethnicity? Surely Stokes’s argument that such putative accusations/speculations are problematic points to the central intuition as to why some of us might think they entail passing wrongs?

Stokes notes that ‘default background trust that is a condition for social life.’²² I do not disagree; for the most part, ordinary epistemic agents should operate with a degree of trust in others. Otherwise it is hard to establish even the basics of human life, let alone much knowledge, given how social constituted most of our knowledge is. Yet the whole point of this talk of conspiracy theories is to push the idea that some one, or some body needs to take these claims seriously, and investigate them in order to preserve that ‘default background trust.’ Such trust is—at least, I would argue, in the case of politics—not a *prima facie* given; it is earned, and the reason why people trust their governments comes out of some belief that the threats to said trust are investigated, or going to be investigated. It may mean that investigators must do work that other (more ordinary) epistemic agents are not obliged to do. Some of that work might even be dirty. But—and I hope this speaks to Stokes’ concern here—our investigators, or community of inquiry, will not only be cognisant of conspiracy narratives, but that some of their putative work might entail passing wrongs. Thus they will only be motivated to investigate when there are new, compelling reasons to do so.

Primed for Failure?

Let me end by pre-empting the most obvious criticism to the community of inquiry approach I am advocating. Surely this is how we already investigate conspiracy theories? Isn’t this project a dismal failure from the start? Whilst we can point to interested communities of inquiry which uncovered the conspiracies behind the Moscow Show Trials (lead by John Dewey, whose terminology I am borrowing), Watergate, and the like, the sceptic of this approach will gesture towards on-going calls to re-investigate 9/11, the assassination of JFK, and the claims the MMR vaccine is responsible for the uptick in autism diagnoses. In these cases, nothing seems to have been settled, and we have rival communities of inquiry claiming the other side are stupid, irrational, or engaged in a cover-up.

What is happening here? Is the problem one of these communities of inquiry being badly constituted (which then raises question: how might we better form them?), or is there some

²² Stokes 2017, 57.

other, lingering issue getting in the way of their investigations. I would hazard that it is a little of both. Given the pejorative labelling of these things called ‘conspiracy theories’, investigations into them tend to fall into two camps: those who think the conspiracy has occurred, and those who want to show that the conspiracy theorists are a bunch of wackos. That is, arguably, most of our communities of inquiry (at least when it comes to investigations into conspiracy theories) start from an assumption that the members already know the conclusion, and thus are looking for evidence to prove it to the unbeliever.

Part—and I’d like to stress that this is only part—of this problem is the spectre of Generalism: the pathologising approach to the treatment of belief in conspiracy theories Basham, Stokes, and myself have been discussing in these pages. The ‘she said/he said’ approach to dealing with conspiracy theories in public discourse often bifurcates along the lines of ‘these theories are *prima facie* irrational!’ and ‘you’re ignoring the elephant in the room!’. The only salve to this worry would be to ensure that any community of inquiry include members who have diverse attitudes to these things called ‘conspiracy theories.’ This is not just a salve to the conspiracy theorist; after all, the sceptic of conspiracy theories will also be concerned about communities of inquiry made up of people who already assume the existence of the very conspiracies they are investigating.

We might think of this as being a ‘Devil’s Advocate’ condition: for the investigation of any conspiracy theory to pass muster, there must be some members of the community who will challenge the need or urgency to investigate some given claim, and some members who will argue that pursuing, or treating seriously this conspiracy theory is a potentially dangerous activity. Given that a community’s findings will be more akin to a judicial decision than a jury decision (dissenters should always be able to explain their minority view), even if the sceptic is not convinced by the community’s findings, their presence in the investigation will surely be of value.

This is no different as to how we debate the issues in Philosophy, or Physics, or Sociology, and so it should be the same when it comes to these things called ‘conspiracy theories.’ That is, if our investigative communities of inquiry are properly constituted. But that is a discussion for another time.

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