

# When inferring to a conspiracy might be the best explanation

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**Abstract:** Conspiracy theories are typically thought to be examples of irrational beliefs, and thus unlikely to be warranted. However, recent work in Philosophy has challenged the claim that belief in conspiracy theories is irrational, showing that in a range of cases belief in conspiracy theories is warranted. However, it is still often said that conspiracy theories are unlikely relative to non-conspiratorial explanations which account for the same phenomena. However, such arguments turn out to rest upon how we define what gets counted both as a ‘conspiracy’ and a ‘conspiracy theory’, and such arguments rest upon shaky assumptions. It turns out that it is not clear that conspiracy theories are prima facie unlikely, and so the claim such theories do not typically appear in our accounts of the best explanations for particular kinds of events needs to be re-evaluated.

## 1. Introduction

Whilst philosophers have been late in coming to the analysis of these things we call ‘conspiracy theories’, it seems that – as a discipline – many of us analyse them with much more sympathy than our peers in the social sciences. In a raft of papers and books, starting with Charles Pigden’s ‘Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories?’ (1995), philosophers like Brian L. Keeley (1999), Juha Räikkä (2009a), Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor (2010), Lee Basham (2011), David Coady, (2012), and myself (2014) have argued that as

conspiracies occur – and that theories about conspiracies sometimes turn out to be warranted – conspiracy theories cannot automatically be dismissed just because they are called ‘conspiracy theories’.<sup>1</sup>

This does not mean that philosophers consider belief in conspiracy theories to be the exemplar of rational thinking; the current findings in the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories (to coin a new discipline) simply show that belief in conspiracy theories is not prima facie irrational. Rather, the kind of issues often held up as being a problem for belief in conspiracy theories tend to also be examples of issues common to a great many other beliefs that we do not typically think of as prima facie suspicious.

However, there still remains the view among some philosophers – and a great many thinkers in other disciplines – that even if explanations of events citing conspiracies can be warranted, conspiracy theories themselves are still unlikely. For sure, many of the complaints such conspiracy theory theorists (to coin

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<sup>1</sup> The aforementioned philosophers all agree that some version of the following captures the definition of a conspiracy theory: it is an explanation of an event which cites a conspiracy as a salient cause of said event.

This definition – being perfectly general – does not build in that belief in conspiracy theories is irrational, and thus the philosophical debate has shifted to an analysis of the purported problems with belief in such theories, and whether our commonplace suspicion – that such theories are bunk – is itself justified.

another name) have about belief in conspiracy theories get phrased in terms of conspiracy theorists seeing conspiracies where none exist, or being prone to making bad inferences. Yet at the heart of these complaints – as we will see – are claims either about the unlikelihood of conspiracies or conspiracy theories. These claims of unlikelihood are then meant to explain why most ordinary people (and a great deal of academics) are justified in treating conspiracy theories as a kind of suspicious belief. Yet, as we shall see, it is not obvious that conspiracy theories are unlikely. Indeed, when we understand what this supposed unlikelihood means, it throws an interesting light on how we sometimes avoid talking about just how much conspiratorial activity might be going on around us. Not just that; as we will also see, our judgements about the likelihood of conspiracies and conspiracy theories, in turn, affect our judgements as to when some theory about a conspiracy might just qualify as an inference to the best explanation.

## **1.1 Philosophers and the unlikelihood of conspiracy theories**

Let us start with the philosophers. Karl Popper, in 'The open society and its enemies', considers conspiracy theories to be unlikely. Why? Because such theories take it that history is largely the result of a succession of successful conspiracies. However, Popper believes that as most of us accept conspiracies

are both rare and seldom successful, conspiracy theories are just unlikely. (1969)

Whilst Popper accepts that conspiracies occur, belief in what he calls the 'conspiracy theory of society' is irrational because conspiracy theories are rarely warranted. Popper's most modern echo is Quassim Cassam, who argues that conspiracy theorists suffer from the epistemic vice of gullibility.<sup>2</sup> As such, whilst he – like Popper before him – admits conspiracies occur, conspiracy theories – being the kind of thing gullible conspiracy theorists believe – simply turn out to be so unlikely as to be untrue. (2015)

Neil Levy argues that conspiracy theories which conflict with official theories – theories that have been endorsed by some authority – are prima facie unwarranted. As such, they turn out to be unlikely compared to their non-conspiratorial rivals. (2007)

Pete Mandik takes a slightly different tack, and argues that when there is conflict between an official theory of the type 'shit happens'<sup>3</sup> and a conspiracy theory,

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<sup>2</sup> A view held by many other academics. Cassam's argument echoes that of Susan Feldman, for example, who writes:

Conspiracy theorizing does not point to possession of an incommensurable world view, but does suggest possession of defective epistemic character. (2011)

<sup>3</sup> 'Shit happens' is Mandik's playful term for what are commonly called 'coincidence theories' or 'cock-up theories'. Such theories explain away the

then we have no good reason to prefer the conspiracy theory. (2007) Conspiracy theories are, for Mandik, no more likely than their non-conspiratorial rivals. Indeed, because conspiracy theories often portray a world of complex causation – which might be better understood as the result of the law of unintended consequences – we are justified in thinking conspiracy theories are prima facie unlikely. This, in turn, justifies our preference for the hypothesis that ‘shit just happens’.

Mandik’s view echoes an argument put forward by Steve Clarke. Clarke argues that conspiracy theories are examples of dispositional explanations (explanations which rely on some central claim of someone intending for an event to happen). He argues that we should prefer situational explanations (explanations which rely on some central claim about the context or situation under which a series of events occurred), because situational explanations are better than claiming some event was the result of intentional activity. Given that most of the rival explanations to conspiracy theories – so Clarke claims – are situational in

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occurrence of an event as being the result of often unpredictable, complex and intersecting causes; while such theories might look conspiratorial, they are, in fact, better explained as the product of happenstance.

character, we should think conspiracy theories – as dispositional explanations – are unlikely, at least compared to their situational rivals.<sup>4</sup> (2002)

Peter Lipton – in what is admittedly only a passing reference in his book ‘Inference to the best explanation’ – thinks that conspiracy theories may very well be unlikely, using such theories to illustrate how to disambiguate what it is we mean by ‘best’ when parsing talk of inference to the best explanation.

By showing that many apparently unrelated events flow from a single source and many apparent coincidences are really related, such a [conspiracy] theory may have considerable explanatory power. If only it were true, it would provide a very good explanation. That is, it is lovely. At the same time, such an explanation may be very unlikely, accepted only by those whose ability to weigh evidence has been compromised by paranoia. (2004, 59–60)

Lipton distinguishes two notions of ‘best’; the most likely explanation, and the one that provides the most understanding (with respect to some account of the explanatory virtues), which he calls the ‘loveliest explanation’. Lipton considers conspiracy theories to be problematic because, whilst they have some lovely

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<sup>4</sup> Clarke, in a more recent paper, worries that conspiracy theories are typically examples of degenerating (Lakatosian) research programmes, and so he takes it that conspiracy theories are unlikely because, amongst other things, they tend not to make successful or novel predictions. (2007)

features (if they were true they really would provide a very good explanation as to why some event occurred) they are unlikely compared to their rivals. This is because Lipton assumes that conspiracy theories only seem likely because conspiracy theorists suffer from paranoia.<sup>5</sup> For Lipton, it is evidence (or the lack thereof) that makes conspiracy theories unlikely because conspiracy theorists are paranoid, and thus see evidence of conspiracies where none exist.

## **1.2 Non-philosophers and the unlikeliness of conspiracy theories**

These philosophers who think that conspiracy theories are unlikely are in 'good company'. For example, Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (foreshadowing Cassam) claim conspiracy theorists suffer from a 'crippled epistemology'.

Conspiracy theories are unlikely because the

[A]cceptance of such [conspiracy] theories may not be irrational or unjustified from the standpoint of those who adhere to them within epistemologically isolated groups or networks, although they are

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<sup>5</sup> In this respect Lipton is echoing the work of Richard Hofstadter, who claimed that belief in conspiracy theories is similar to (but not exactly like) clinical paranoia. (1965)

unjustified relative to the information available in the wider society[.] (2009, 204)

Which is to say that conspiracy theories look likely to conspiracy theorists, but only because they typically consort with, and gain information from, other like-minded individuals.

Similarly, Michael J. Wood and Karen M. Douglas argue that conspiracy theorists are, typically, more interested in disputing rival and official theories than they are promoting their own conspiracy theories. They characterise conspiracy theories as a kind of ‘negative belief’, one which calls into question another explanation, and is indicative of a worldview in which most of what we are told is a lie. They consign belief in such theories to something akin to paranoia. (2013)

Jovan Byford differentiates conspiracy theories from ‘legitimate analyses of secrecy’<sup>6</sup>, arguing – like Popper before him – that as conspiracy theorists see the world as the product of successive and successful conspiracies, conspiracy theories are unlikely. This is because they do not reflect the way in which the world actually works. (2011)

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<sup>6</sup> Byford’s work here echoes that of Lance deHaven-Smith, who would rather we talk about ‘state crimes against democracy’ than pejoratively-labelled ‘conspiracy theories’. (2013)



Meanwhile, Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French build into their definition of what counts as a ‘conspiracy theory’ that such theories are ‘an unverified and relatively implausible allegation of conspiracy, claiming that significant events are the result of a secret plot carried out by a preternaturally sinister and powerful group of people.’ As such, they take it from the off that conspiracy theories are going to be unlikely. (2014)

Much of this kind of work accepts that conspiracies occur, but holds it that conspiracy theorising – the generation of, or coming up with, conspiracy theories – is a suspicious kind of activity to engage in. As Sander van der Linden writes:

Clearly, people and governments have conspired against each other, throughout human history. Healthy skepticism lies at the very heart of the scientific endeavor. Yet there is something fundamentally dangerous and unscientific about the nature of conspiracy theorizing. (2015)

There is something chilling about this kind of sentiment. ‘Yes’, the proponent of this view agrees, ‘conspiracies occur. Just don’t go around suspecting people of conspiring; that’s unhealthy!’ Whilst often of this suspicion of conspiracy theorising is couched in terms of conspiracy theorists suffering from some ominous and psychological pathology, a failure by said theorists to think critically about their conspiracy theories, or the inability for adherents of conspiracy theories to contemplate non-conspiratorial alternatives, at root this suspicion stems from some variety of the claim ‘Look, conspiracies are unlikely, or even if they do occur, conspiracy theories are unlikely, right?’ Yet this latter claim – no

matter what we believe about the psychology of conspiracy theorists – is not something we should accept without further examination. This is particularly important because whilst many of us might reasonably think claims about conspiracies should be evaluated according to the evidence, many theorists – as we have seen – argue that we can dismiss such claims out of hand merely because they are conspiracy theories.

## **2. Unlikely compared to what?**

If we are told something is unlikely, we need to ask ‘In relation to what?’

Likelihood is a relative thing. One argument for the relative unlikelihood of conspiracy theories is to claim that conspiracies are unlikely, say, because conspiratorial activity is taken to be rare or, if not rare, seldom successful. Popper – echoed by Byford – argues that conspiracy theorists see the world as the product of successive and successful conspiracies, a position many conspiracy theory theorists take to be obviously false; conspiracies are either unlikely, or, when they do occur, seldom successful. Brotherton and French – in a similar vein – take it that conspiracy theories are unlikely because they are based upon unverified and relatively implausible claims of conspiracy. For theorists of this ilk, conspiracy theories turn out to be unlikely, because of the unlikelihood of conspiracies.

Another argument for the relative unlikelihood of conspiracy theories is that they are unlikely because even if we accept that conspiracies occur, given a choice between a conspiracy and a non-conspiracy theory, the non-conspiratorial explanation will just be more likely, all things considered. This kind of view can be found in the works of Cassam, who takes it conspiracy theorists are gullible (and thus treat conspiracy theories as more likely than they really are); Sunstein and Vermuele (whose argument is a more sophisticated take to that of Cassam's), who argue conspiracy theorists only see conspiracy theories as likely because they suffer from a 'crippled epistemology', born out of existing in isolated epistemic communities; and Levy (as well as Mandik) who claims we have no good reason to think conspiracy theories will ever be more likely than their rivals.<sup>7</sup>

Yet it is not clear that conspiracies or conspiracy theories are relatively unlikely. For example, Kathryn S. Omlsted's book 'Real enemies: conspiracy theories and American democracy, World War I to 9/11' – in which Omlsted covers topics such as the secrecy behind the US's entry into the First World War, the ills of the McCarthy Era, and the way in which the official theory of 9/11 was sometimes misrepresented by the authorities for political point-scoring – reads as a litany of

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<sup>7</sup> Wood and Douglas offer a variation on this kind of argument: Even if we accept that conspiracies occur, given a choice between a conspiracy and a non-conspiracy theory, we should prefer the non-conspiratorial explanation, rather than give into a pathological worldview in which rival, non-conspiracy theories are a lie.

US government-run conspiracies. Her calm and dispassionate historical analysis of a century of US political practice presents conspiracies not so much as deviation from the norm, but, rather, as standard operating practice. (2009) We can add to this numerous other examples; the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964<sup>8</sup>; the Ford Pinto Scandal of 1977<sup>9</sup>; the Snowden revelations of 2013, concerning the National Security Administration (NSA) in the US covering up the existence of a mass surveillance programme; and the Volkswagen Emissions Scandal of 2015<sup>10</sup>. In each of these cases the idea that the perpetrators were up to no good

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<sup>8</sup> The Johnson Administration in the US claimed, at the time, that the North Vietnamese Navy attacked the USS Maddox. This story turned out to be disinformation, which is to say it was a story which latter turned out to be a lie. It has been claimed that said lie was designed to give the US a pretext for an escalation of US involvement in Vietnam.

<sup>9</sup> The Ford Motor Company knowingly manufactured a car, the Ford Pinto, with a serious design fault, where the fuel tank could be punctured in a rear-end collision, which could subsequently result in fatalities due to fires from the spilt fuel.

<sup>10</sup> It was discovered that diesel cars produced by Volkswagen were not only passing environmental tests through the use of sophisticated cheat devices, but senior personnel at Volkswagen were covering up their cheating by falsely blaming the people running the tests.

was labeled as a 'conspiracy theory'. These examples are but the tip of an iceberg.

So, if, there really is anything to the claim conspiracy theories are relatively unlikely, then the debate about said likelihood depends on:

- a) how you define what counts as conspiratorial, and
- b) whether you accept the claim any official theory which cites a conspiracy as a salient cause is no longer considered to be a conspiracy theory.

Understanding how our definitions of these key terms rules in or out certain kinds of activities or theories as conspiratorial ends up being important not just for our understanding of these things called conspiracy theories, but also for working out whether some claim about a conspiracy can ever qualify as being part of the best explanation for some event.

## **2.1 What counts as a conspiracy?**

Conspiracy theories posit the existence of a conspiracy, where the conspiracy is the salient cause of some event. The most minimal conception of what counts as a conspiracy, then, must satisfy the following three conditions:

**The Conspirators Condition:** There exists (or existed) some set of agents with a plan.<sup>11</sup>

**The Secrecy Condition:** Steps have been taken by the agents to minimise public awareness of what they are up to.<sup>12</sup>

**The Goal Condition:** Some end is, or was desired, by the agents.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Conspiracies are a kind of group activity: people conspire together, and so it is a necessary condition for the existence of a conspiracy that there exists some set of agents who have a plan. Defining a ‘conspiracy’ as being the product of a set of conspirators is circular (since it builds into the definition of a conspiracy that it is a conspiracy), but for the purposes of this analysis it is easier to refer to ‘conspirators’ than, say, ‘planning agents’; the latter locution does not exactly roll off of the tongue.

<sup>12</sup> Conspirators operate – at least for a time – in secret. Such secrecy sometimes explains why the evidence which would satisfy this condition might be vague. However, if it turns out the conspirators have even some success in keeping their plot a secret, this would explain why details remain unknown.

<sup>13</sup> There could be a mismatch between what the conspirators desired and the outcome of their activity, but this should not be considered a problem with determining whether there is a conspiracy. After all, the conspiracy theory should – if it is an adequate explanation – explain away said difference. As long as the

These conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for some activity to be classified as conspiratorial, and it is fair to say that some beliefs about the likeliness or unlikeliness of conspiracy theories hinge on finessing or questioning such a minimal definition of what counts as a conspiracy.

For example, Mandik argues that theories about known conspiracies – citing such examples as the official theories of 9/11, the Watergate Affair, and the Iran-Contra deal – fail to be proper conspiracy theories. Why? Because the aforementioned conspiracies were not kept secret; they were not conspiracies in the sense that we typically talk about when discussing conspiracy theories.

(2007) Yet the view that a conspiracy is not a proper conspiracy unless the conspirators keep their activities properly secret is incredibly idiosyncratic. If that were the case, how could we have any belief in the existence of conspiracies?

Indeed, if we accept Mandik's view, then it is not even clear that conspirators could believe in the existence of their own conspiracies. After all, the fact someone knows about the conspiracy means it is not being kept properly secret.

Not just that, but if someone blows the whistle on a conspiracy, does that mean – under Mandik's view – that the conspiracy is no longer a conspiracy because it is no longer secret?

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work the conspirators undertook is in some way responsible for the actual outcome, this should not be a concern.

Mandik challenges the idea of known conspiracies being the kind of thing we mean when people talk about conspiracy theories. However, when it comes to the secrecy condition of conspiratorial activity, all we need say is that some conspirators will be more successful at keeping their existence and activities secret than others. If we restrict talk of what counts as conspiratorial to cases of proper secrecy, then not only are we using a restrictive definition (with some strange corollaries), but it just follows from said definition that conspiracy theories will be unlikely. After all, if a conspiracy must be kept properly secret, then the associated conspiracy theory turns out to be irrational to believe. This is because it will not be based upon any good evidence of a conspiracy.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This notion of ‘perfect secrecy’ can also be found in the work of Juha Räikkä (2009b). Räikkä explores the idea that we can rule out known conspiratorial activity as being properly described as a ‘conspiracy theory’ – like the involvement of the Nazis in the Holocaust, or the CIA in acts of rendition – because a ‘genuine conspiracy’ is one where the conspirators maintain perfect secrecy. Given that we know about the CIA’s rendition programme, and the Holocaust, these are not genuine conspiracies. Rather, they are part-and-parcel of everyday history.

However, in a more recent paper (co-authored with Lee Basham) Räikkä argues that the explanation of known conspiracies falls under the rubric of these things we call ‘conspiracy theories’, and that our distaste to call them as such is evidence of a ‘conspiracy theory phobia’. (Forthcoming)



The problem with Mandik's view – and this applies to Popper's as well (who runs a similar argument) – is that what he means by 'conspiratorial' does not match what we know of actual conspiratorial activity. A lot hinges on what is captured by the term 'conspiracy'. If we stick to the minimal definition of conspiracy, then objectors might say that it rules in seemingly non-conspiratorial activities, like that of organising a surprise party. If this is a bullet we have to bite with regards to the definition of what counts as a conspiracy, then so be it. Surprise parties – like conspiracies – are organised by agents who work in secret, and desire some end. Whilst the minimal definition of what counts as conspiratorial makes conspiracies appear to be either commonplace or, at least, more common than we would typically think, this should not worry us.

After all, if we want to truly appraise whether conspiracies are really unlikely, we need to look at the wider and more general class of conspiratorial activity, one that is ruled in by the minimal definition. If we rule out certain kinds of conspiratorial activity for either not being secret enough, or not being of interest, then that affects our estimates as to how likely or unlikely conspiracies are. After all, one of the key features of the debate over the likeliness and warrant of conspiracy theories is how to account for cases of known historic and contemporary conspiratorial activity. Mandik – like Popper – has to explain away how known conspiratorial activity – and theories about that activity – are either not the subject of warranted conspiracy theories, or not really conspiracies in the first place. Popper, for example, claims that the Holocaust – a massive plot to

secretly wipe out the Jewish people in Europe – does not qualify as a conspiracy theory because it is both known and was unsuccessful. (1972) As such, defining away certain cases of known conspiracies as not conspiratorial enough moves the problem of assessing the likelihood of conspiracy theories away from talk about the evidence to simply making it a definitional issue instead.

## 2.2 What counts as a conspiracy theory?

No matter what we believe about the likeliness of conspiracies, surely we are justified in thinking that conspiracy theories are unlikely? After all, there are an awful lot of conspiracy theories, and many – if not most of them – turn out to be unwarranted. This kind of argument is commonly put forward as one reason for being suspicious about conspiracy theories generally, but it, too, relies on us defining what gets ruled in – and what is ruled out – by the term ‘conspiracy theory’.

Take, for example, official theories or official stories (as they are often interchangeably called). Some official theories – theories which have been endorsed by some authority – are theories about conspiracies, but they are not typically taken to be examples of conspiracy theories. One reason for making such a distinction is the idea conspiracy theories are never official. That is to say, an endorsed explanation which cites a conspiracy as a salient cause of some event cannot be called a ‘conspiracy theory’ because conspiracy theories are –

by their very nature – unofficial. Thus, official theories – like the examples of 9/11, Watergate and the Iran-Contra deal that Mandik offers – might well cite conspiracies as salient causes of those events, but their officialness means that while they are technically theories about conspiracies, they are not conspiracy theories.

One philosopher who argues along these lines is David Coady. However, he does not think conspiracies are unlikely, or that conspiracy theories are prima facie unwarranted. Rather, he merely respects the intuition that such theories are – in some sense – unofficial. In ‘Conspiracy theories and official stories’ he includes in the definition of a conspiracy theory that:

Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an ‘official’ explanation of the same historical event. (2006, 117)

and notes:

The last part of this definition rules out the possibility of an official explanation of an event qualifying as a conspiracy theory, no matter how conspiratorial it is. (2006, 117)

However, Coady does not buy into any claim that theories which are official are more warranted or rational to believe, noting that ‘quite often the official version of events is just as conspiratorial as its rivals.’ (2006, 125) More recently Coady has argued for a more conditional view, claiming that if you are the kind of person who thinks conspiracy theories are unofficial, then:

[T]he relationship between conspiracy theories and officialdom is like the relationship between rumors and officialdom, with the difference that rumors are defined as merely lacking official endorsement, whereas conspiracy theories, on this way of understanding them, must actually contradict some official version of events. (2012, 122)

and:

[T]o say that a conspiracy theory by definition contradicts an official version of events is to say nothing about whether it is true, or whether a person who believes it is justified in doing so. (2012, 123)

Coady, then, is not committed to thinking that conspiracy theories will be unlikely compared to official theories. This is because – in a range of cases – some official theories will simply turn out to be unlikely compared to their rival conspiracy theories.

It is useful, then, to contrast Coady's view with that of Levy. Levy stipulates that:

A conspiracy theory that conflicts with the official story, where the official story is the explanation offered by the (relevant) epistemic authorities, is prima facie unwarranted. (2007, 182)

Levy builds into the definition of a conspiracy theory the claim that conspiracy theories which are in conflict with some official theory will be unwarranted, and

thus automatically so unlikely as to be false.<sup>15</sup> Yet there are many different kinds of official theories, and the officialness of these various kinds is conferred on them in a variety of different ways. Sometimes theories are official because they have been endorsed sincerely by field-relevant experts, and sometimes theories are official because someone has either insincerely endorsed them, or because they have no relevant expertise (and so their endorsement means nothing).

Take, for example, the official theory as to why it was necessary for the US and the UK to invade Iraq in order to dismantle a purported Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programme. These days it is well-accepted that what seemed to be a relevant authority with respect to claims about whether Iraq was keeping secret the existence of a WMD programme – the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – either insincerely endorsed the official theory for reasons not to do with epistemology but, rather, politics, or mistook the official credentials of certain members of the Intelligence community as being based upon merit, rather than just stature.

It turns out that even relevant authorities can be insincere or duplicitous, and so we cannot simply prefer official theories over conspiracy theories. It is a problem, then, if we build such a stipulation into our definition of such theories. Levy's view restricts what it is we mean by the term 'conspiracy theory'. After all, conspiracy

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<sup>15</sup> Susan Feldman also takes it that conspiracy theories, similarly, cannot be official theories. (2011)

theories are just going to be unlikely relative to non-conspiracy theories, if we stipulate that conspiracy theories can never be official, well-accepted explanations; we are, in such cases, restricting the class of things we are comparing the likelihoods of, seemingly in order to ensure that conspiracy theories come off badly, and thus end up being prima facie unlikely.

Then there is Clarke. Clarke's argument about the unlikeliness of conspiracy theories hinges on them being the wrong kind of explanation; he builds into the definition of what a conspiracy theory is that they are dispositional explanations – in this case, explanations which cite the intention to conspire as a salient cause – and that we should prefer rival, situational explanations instead. (2002) However, there is no obvious case for conspiracy theories being largely dispositional.

Indeed, any explanation – conspiracy theory or not – might be an example of both. For example, the official theory about the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy invokes both the intentions of the lone assassin, and situational factors. Conspiracy theories almost certainly do invoke dispositions, but, then again, so do official theories. It is not even clear that conspiracy theories are any more dispositional than their rivals, or that their rivals are any more situational.

To be fair, Clarke now considers his view about the overly dispositional nature of conspiracy theories to be in error. (2006) Instead, he argues that the apparent dispositionality of conspiracy theories is a problem to do with the psychology of belief in conspiracy theories, rather than a problem with conspiracy theories as

explanations. What is interesting about this is that Cassam echoes Clarke on both the psychology of belief in conspiracy theories, and the situational nature of such conspiracy theories, without picking up on the subsequent critiques of Clarke's work. As Lee Basham and I have argued, the problem for Cassam's version of Clarke's argument<sup>16</sup> is that he characterises belief in conspiracy theories along the lines of theories which have already been classified as unlikely. (2015) Cassam gets to his conclusion that conspiracy theorists suffer from the intellectual vice of gullibility by restricting belief in conspiracy theories to those which he takes it are irrational to believe in the first place. As such, Cassam restricts the scope of what counts as a 'conspiracy theory' in order to make belief in such theories prima facie unlikely.

Restricting the definition of what counts as a conspiracy theory ends up making conspiracy theories relatively unlikely, because the interesting cases of warranted conspiracy theories get defined away as not being proper conspiracy theories. However, if we keep to a general definition, then we can analyse conspiracy theories with respect to the evidence which either warrants or does

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<sup>16</sup> Although, given the lack of references in 'Bad thinkers', it is not clear that Cassam has read much, if any, of the philosophical material on conspiracy theories, and so Cassam may well have just reinvented Clarke's position without realising it.

not warrant them, rather than dismissing conspiracy theories out of hand for just being conspiracy theories.

### **3. A case for treating conspiracy theories on their individual merits**

An obvious objection to the preceding arguments is to say something like: 'This simply shows that conspiracies and conspiracy theories are more likely than previously thought, but it does not show that such activity and theories are as likely as non-conspiratorial equivalents, let alone more likely'. This is an understandable response, but all we need argue is that it is not clear that conspiracies and conspiracy theories are unlikely compared to their rivals. As a consequence, we should take a particularist approach to dealing with claims about conspiracy theories, rather than trying to make general claims about them.

The notion of Particularist versus Generalist views about conspiracy theories comes out of the work of Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor. They argue that when we look at the range of views about conspiracy theories we find there are two opposing positions: Generalism and Particularism. (2010)

According to the Generalists, conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering the particulars of individual conspiracy theories. It is the view that



conspiracy theories are typically irrational.<sup>17</sup> The pejorative definition of what counts as a ‘conspiracy theory’ – which says such theories are unlikely – falls under the rubric of the generalist view.

Particularists, however, argue that the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories can only be assessed by considering the evidence for and against individual conspiracy theories. Particularists – particularly Charles Pigden, David Coady, and Lee Basham – have recently gone on the offensive. They have argued not only is Particularism a defensible position, but that the Generalist strategy has a number of unfortunate consequences. For one, the Generalist approach rests upon a naïve understanding of both the appeal to authority, and what role officialness plays in theories which have been endorsed, a point David Coady has stressed (2007). For another, Generalists – like Cassam when it comes to the conspiracy and official theories of 9/11 – end up looking confused. The Generalist has to principally accommodate the conspiracy theories they take to be irrational, as well as the theories that cite conspiracies as salient causes

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<sup>17</sup> There may well exist Generalists who believe that conspiracy theories are typically rational, but such figures do not seem to exist in the academic discussion concerning conspiracy theories; philosophers who have defended conspiracy theorising have not committed to the notion all or most such theories are good, but, rather, that the commonplace suspicion of conspiracy theories is itself not justified.

which they happen to endorse as warranted. Lee Basham has taken such confusions to task in his work. (2011)

Then there is the social cost of Generalism. As Charles Pigden has forcefully argued:

[T]he idea that conspiracy theories as such are intellectually suspect helps conspirators, quite literally, to get away with murder (of which killing people in an unjust war is an instance). (Forthcoming)

Pigden's point here is worth reiterating: a general scepticism of these things called 'conspiracy theories' makes it all the easier for conspirators to get away with their conspiracies. After all, it is easy enough for them to respond to any claim about their activity as being merely a conspiracy theory. Yet we need to remember that it is uncontroversial to say conspiracies occur. So why, then, is it controversial to say conspiracy theories are irrational to believe?

As such, the preceding argument as to why we should treat conspiracy theories on their individual merits is designed to bolster the particularist case; given many of the attempts to show that conspiracy theories are unlikely come out of problematic generalising strategies, should we not assess particular conspiracy theories on their individual merits? That is to say, if we accept that conspiracies are not unlikely (or, at least, not as unlikely as some conspiracy theory theorists have made out), surely they can – in a range of cases – feature in our best explanations.

### 3.1 Showing that a conspiracy theory is likely

Particularism requires we assess conspiracy theories on their own merits, and if the evidence shows that both a conspiracy occurred, and said conspiracy is the probable cause of some event, then we should accept some conspiracy theory as both likely, and as the best explanation. So, how might we show that some conspiracy theory is a good explanation? That is to say, how do we work out whether some explanatory hypothesis which cites a conspiracy as a salient cause is the one we want to say is the best explanation of why some event occurred.

Well, when we infer to an explanation, we typically consider:

**The posterior probability:** The extent to which the available evidence renders some hypothesis probable.

**The prior probability:** The degree to which the hypothesis is independently likely.

**The relative probability:** The likelihood of the hypothesis, relative to the other hypotheses being considered.

Of course, there is also the possibility that some other, worthwhile hypotheses might not have been considered. Even if we end up accurately appraising the probability of rival hypotheses, it is still possible that some worthwhile candidate might not have been considered, because of a lack of knowledge about them, or because we have a disposition to ignore certain possibilities. Our choice of

plausible hypotheses can also be restricted to what we have been told about.

Which is to say that even if we can give an account as to how we satisfy the first three probabilities when inferring to an explanation, it is always possible we have ignored other plausible hypotheses for reasons beyond our control.

For example, Lipton's worry about conspiracy theories comes out of his view that such theories are lovely but unlikely. He takes it that one sense of inferring to the best explanation is appealing to the likeliest explanation. That is to say, we appeal to the way in which the available evidence renders the hypothesis in question probable. Likely explanations, then, are explanations that are probable in the posterior sense. He contrasts such likely explanations to another conception of the inference to the best explanation, the inference to the loveliest explanation. Lovely explanations emphasise not just how the available evidence renders some hypothesis probable, but also includes considerations such as the various explanatory virtues. Lipton takes it that lovely explanations include aspects of both prior and relative probability, such as how the explanatory hypothesis is consistent with what else we know, has explanatory power, predicts new and novel observations, applies to a large number of related phenomena, is simple, and the like. (2004)

Lipton's worry about conspiracy theories – one that he shares with Cassam, Clarke, Levy, and Mandik – ends up being centred on the idea that either conspiracies or conspiracy theories are generally unlikely; either conspiracies just are independently unlikely, or even if conspiracies do occur, conspiracy theories

are rarely warranted. As such, they are unlikely compared to their rivals. Yet, as we have seen, neither of these positions is obvious or warranted; such claims about said independent likeliness typically depend on the definitions of 'conspiracy' or 'conspiracy theory' we are using. So, while Lipton accepts that conspiracy theories can be lovely, it is not clear that they turn out to be unlikely. That is, unless we define them as such.

### **3.2 The independent likeliness of conspiracies**

Our estimates as to how independently likely conspiracies are varies over time. Certainly, post the revelations of the NSA's mass surveillance programme by Edward Snowden in 2013, claims of large-scale, political conspiracy have been treated much more sympathetically, and considered more likely by ordinary reasoners; it appears people underestimated how independently likely it was that a major, political conspiracy was happening here-and-now.

Working out the true prior probability or independent likeliness of claims of conspiracy being in amongst the pool of credible explanatory hypotheses will be, of course, difficult. However, it is fair to say that people either underestimate or underplay both historical and contemporary accounts of events which cite conspiracies as salient causes.

Take, for example, the extraordinary death of Alexander Litvinenko. He was poisoned with the rare, expensive and highly radioactive radionuclide, polonium-

210. Litvinenko, a former Russian Federal Security Bureau (FSB) agent, was living in exile in London at the time of his death, and was a vocal detractor of Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin. On November 1st, 2001, he met with two of his former FSB colleagues, and one of them surreptitiously slipped the polonium-210 into Litvinenko's teapot.

Litvinenko's death was long and protracted, and so it looked as if he had been poisoned in a truly unusual way – Polonium-210 is prohibitively expensive to buy<sup>18</sup>, and very difficult to refine – in order to send a message. The way in which Litvinenko was killed looked very much like an assassination, and given that there were easier and faster – and certainly cheaper – ways to dispose of Litvinenko, his death had all the hallmarks of being a state-sponsored hit. So, given what we know about the death of Alexander Litvinenko, it seems certain that his death was the result of a conspiracy; his death had to be plotted by agents who acted in secret. Any account of the death of Litvinenko turns out to be a conspiracy theory. The big question about Litvinenko's death is who was behind the conspiracy?

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<sup>18</sup> The official findings of eminent UK judge Sir Robert Owen, who chaired the public inquiry into the death of Alexander Litvinenko estimated that the cost of the polonium-210 used to poison Litvinenko was somewhere between \$US20,000 and tens of millions of dollars (the discrepancy between the two values is the result of experts in 2015 disagreeing about the cost of obtaining the radionuclide in 2006). (Owen 2016, 226)

Now, we could claim – like Mandik and Popper – that this is not a proper conspiracy because it is not sufficiently secret. All this does, however, is rule out cases which raise the prior probability a conspiracy could be considered in the pool of candidate explanatory hypotheses for certain kinds of events. Mandik and Popper rule out known conspiracies as being properly conspiratorial, and thus end up thinking that conspiracies are independently unlikely. Yet in the Litvinenko case this seems absurd; the available evidence renders some hypothesis about a conspiracy as quite probable indeed. The big question should be which theory about a conspiracy is going to be the best explanation?

In this particular case, there are at least two major, rival conspiracy theories. The first is that Litvinenko was killed at the behest of the Russian State, as both a punishment, and a warning for those who would side against Putin. The other hypothesis is that Litvinenko was killed by Russian dissidents, in a manner which made it look as if it were ordered by Putin; Litvinenko in this version of the story was either a willing sacrifice, or a patsy. Both hypotheses explain who the poisoners were, and where the poison was sourced; they differ only with respect as to the real motive of the poisonous conspirators.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> According to an Sir Robert Owen, the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko was ordered by elements within the FSB, and it was very likely that Vladimir Putin signed off on the kill order. (Owen 2016, 241-244) The official story, then, of Litvinenko's death is that of a conspiracy by the Russian state to kill a defector.

So, with this in mind, when we consider which conspiracy theory is the best in this case – if we assume all the relevant alternative explanatory hypotheses have been covered<sup>20</sup> – then we should expect there to be some argument about how probable one of the particular claims of conspiracy is. That is, if we are to think of it as the salient cause of the event, and thus part of the best explanation. Such an argument would show that the explanatory hypothesis is probable in the posterior sense – Lipton’s likeliest explanation – as well as the prior and relative sense.

### **3.2.1 Evidence and prior probabilities**

When judging any putative explanation with respect to prior and posterior probabilities, there is a tension between our judgements about the independent

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Putin and the Russian government, however, claim this is just yet another anti-Russian conspiracy theory, designed by enemies of the Russian State to cause it embarrassment.

<sup>20</sup> For the sake of this example we shall, although the Litvinenko story is a lot messier than the presentation of it here. Litvinenko was an informant for British Intelligence, and it is claimed he had begun working for the Spanish Intelligence services; Litvinenko likely had many enemies, some of whom would have had access to assets of their particular states.



likeliness of certain hypotheses being in the pool of credible explanations, and the evidence required to show that one of those hypotheses is the most likely.

For example, in a world where 99% of people cheat on their partners, you only need a little evidence to justify your suspicions that your partner is cheating on you. After all, the prior probability they are being unfaithful is very high – it is just independently likely they are cheaters<sup>21</sup> – and so the evidence required to justify your suspicions is low.

Conversely, in a world where 99% of people are faithful to their partners, the idea your partner is cheating on you would be so preposterous that you would require a lot of evidence to even suspect them of such a thing. There is, then, a tension between the independent likeliness of some explanatory hypothesis, and the evidence required to support it. A high prior probability reduces the evidential requirement associated with the posterior probability. After all, if some hypothesis is independently likely, then this reduces the evidential burden on showing that it is at least a contender for being in the set of credible explanatory hypotheses for some event.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> You are also likely a cheater, at least with respect to this possible world. This might reduce the evidential threshold even further, since you would likely know a) what cheating looks like and b) what evidence of hiding cheating also looks like.

<sup>22</sup> The caveat here is ‘Somewhat...’, since even in a world where cheating is very likely indeed, you still need some evidence to support the claim your particular

So, how independently likely are conspiracies? On one level this is not an easy question to answer, because we do not know. That is an empirical question. On another level, however, we can say that we typically and artificially lower the independent likeliness of conspiracies by our choice of definition as to what counts as properly conspiratorial. A lot of the aforementioned theorists who claim conspiracies are unlikely get to that conclusion by simply defining particular examples of conspiracies as being out-of-court. This, at the very least, suggests that conspiracies are more independently likely than most of us typically think.

Of course, claiming we typically underestimate the independent likeliness of conspiracies does not mean that we should consider conspiracies independently likely as salient causes for all kinds of events. We still need to judge explanatory hypotheses with respect to the kind of events we are seeking to explain. It may make sense to consider a conspiracy as a salient cause, say, in a political scandal, whilst also thinking that the extreme weather event in Otago last August is most likely explained by a change in climate (rather than, say, covert, US-sponsored weather manipulation). After all, conspiracies might be more common than we think, but only relatively likely when it comes to explanations for certain kinds of events (say, political scandals), and relatively unlikely in others (say, why the courier always delivers packages when I am not at home).

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partner is cheating on you. After all, it might be unlikely they are faithful, but it is still a possibility that should be considered seriously.

### 3.3 Connecting prior, posterior and relative probabilities

As we have seen, the independent likeliness or prior probability of conspiracies being a salient cause for particular kinds of events depends both on how we estimate how likely conspiracies really are (which sometimes turns on how we define conspiratorial activity) as well as the kind of events we are trying to explain. However, when we consider any claim of conspiracy which is embedded in a conspiracy theory – to wit, an explanation citing a conspiracy as a salient cause – we have to demonstrate that there is a link between the conspiracy **and** the event in question. After all, in many cases a conspiracy might well be shown to exist, and yet turn out not be the salient cause of some event. However, demonstrating there is a connection between a conspiracy and the occurrence of some event – such that the conspiracy is the salient cause of that event – shows that the conspiracy theory is probable in the prior, posterior, and relative sense. Which is to say that by showing a conspiracy was both likely and a salient cause, the existence of said conspiracy will feature in the best explanation of the event in question.

None of this says that conspiracy theories are prima facie likely. That would be a generalist claim, one which would be as problematic as the generalist scepticism typically associated with conspiracy theories. Rather, this is an argument in favour of particularism about conspiracy theories. When we hear some

conspiracy theory we should, at the very least, treat the claim of conspiracy seriously, and look at the evidence. This is not an arduous burden: when inferring to any explanation we have to look at the evidence before we can accept or dismiss it. Conspiracy theories are no different.

What is interesting and striking, then, about much of the current literature on belief in conspiracy theories, is that people want to be able to generalise about such theories in a way which marks them out as special or different. By defining both conspiracies and conspiracy theories as prima facie unlikely, such theorists shift the burden of proof. However, if we consider that conspiracies are more independently likely than most of us think, or have been told, then the burden of proof on the conspiracy theorist will – in a range of cases – turn out to be not so extraordinary. In a world in which we admit not just that conspiracies occur, but there are more of them than maybe we would like to think, if someone claims there is a conspiracy in existence here-and-now, then should we not investigate said claim? That is, we should not just dismiss it. No; we should treat the allegation seriously enough to ask what is the evidence, and how well does that evidence stack up compared to other, rival explanatory hypotheses. Could this particular conspiracy theory prove to be the best explanation of some event? If the answer is no, then the conspiracy theory is unwarranted, and we have learnt that some other explanation will be the best. However, if the answer is yes, then we have on our hands a case where inferring to a conspiracy turned out to be the best explanation. As such, people who put forward conspiracy theories should

not be seen as facing a higher burden of proof than those who offer explanations of similar, complex social processes. If someone alleges a conspiracy was a factor in some event, we should ask for evidence, and see if that evidence renders that hypothesis probable.

This prescription for a sensible treatment of claims of conspiracy flies in the face of much of the current literature on conspiracy theories. For example, conspiracy theories are bad according to social psychologists because conspiracy theories are unlikely, and belief in them has negative social consequences. Brotherton and French – as previously mentioned – claim conspiracy theories are unlikely, and from this they go on to argue that conspiracy theorists are particularly prone to suffering from the conjunction fallacy (where people overestimate the likelihood of two things being connected). (2014)

Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Michele Acker claim that:

Furthermore, accumulating research findings reveal a range of detrimental perceptions and behaviors that are associated with conspiracy beliefs, including health problems, decreased civic virtue, hostility, and radicalization. (2015, 1)

Yet they take it that these behaviours are not the result of people judging the merit of conspiracy theories, but, rather, because conspiracy theorists lack some sense of control over their lives and the world in which they live. Then there is Preston R. Bost and Stephen G. Prunier's claim that conspiracy theories are

often-inherently implausible, and that belief in such theories is often predicated on people overstating the motives of suspected conspirators. (2013)

Yet if it turns out we are wrong about the supposed unlikeliness of conspiracies here-and-now, those negative social consequences – distrust in authority; apathy with respect to engaging in the political process; and the like – might very well be appropriate responses to talk of conspiracy theories. It is, then, important to understand this issue of just how probable conspiracies really are, and what this says about how we go about inferring that a conspiracy theory is the best explanation. This is of serious import, because it very much looks like we typically and artificially underestimate the prior probability of conspiracies. With that in mind, then, our condemnation of conspiracy theorists – those who believe conspiracy theories – needs to be similarly examined.

## 4. Conclusion

As we have seen, much of the reasoning behind thinking both conspiracies and conspiracy theories are unlikely comes out of defining them as such, rather than asking what prevents them from featuring in the set of best explanations. If we claim conspiracies are only conspiracies if they are kept perfectly secret, or that conspiracy theories which have been endorsed are no longer proper conspiracy theories, then we run the risk of defining away some truly interesting questions which are at the root of whether or not conspiracy theories really are irrational to

believe, unwarranted, and the like. 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. This matter is of import to the academic discussion of these things we call 'conspiracy theories' because – once again as we have seen – there are a plethora of views – both inside and outside of Philosophy – which adopt question-begging definitions in order to come to the conclusion such theories are bunk.

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