What Is Interesting about Conspiracy Theories?

Melina Tsapos

Lund University

Abstract

It is not clear that scholars, when they use the term 'conspiracy theory', are in fact interested in investigating the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and belief in them as such. There is a deep disagreement on how to understand the concept itself. I consider two views as possible explanations for this, found in the fast-growing literature on conspiracy theories: The Faux-pas View and The Neutral View. I argue that these views are a difference in scholarly motivation. What the underlying reasons are is much too complex to determine without empirical investigation, and I only give a suggestion to possible ones to consider. However, I maintain that investigating the motivations for- and the interest in conspiracy theory research will illuminate why there is a deep-rooted disagreement in the academic research on conspiracy theory. While acknowledging that social scientists inherently peruse their studies in relation to value references, my account concludes that if we are interested in a scientific account of conspiracy theories, our approach (not only the definition itself) must remain neutral, following the norm of objectivity, constructing an account of conspiracy theory such that it allows for communication among people who may belong to distinct ideological and cultural traditions.

Introduction

The question I am concerned with here relates to the particularist-generalist divide[1] in some important ways, but asks why there is such a seemingly irreconcilable divide in the first place. I believe one explanation, and perhaps the most readily available one, is that researchers have

[1] The particularist-generalist divide is an ongoing debate in Conspiracy Theory Theory – the academic research on conspiracy theory – about the proper definition or understanding of conspiracy theory; and the boarder consequence on questions about the rationally and moral aspects on belief in such theories. The particularist generally argue that conspiracy theories must be considered on their own merit, while generalists believe the term 'conspiracy theory' designate an epistemically or morally flawed concept (Dentith 2018; Bunting and Taylor 2010).

different interests and motivations too study the phenomenon. On the one hand, there is what I call The Faux-pas View[2], which main interest is not to study conspiracy theories (or belief in conspiracy theories) as such. Rather, there are other sustaining motivations for this research, which may be much too complex to identify, but I will nevertheless discuss some possible motivations, such as political- and publishing biases. I will then consider what I call The Neutral View, which – much like particularism – thinks that a neutral, non-pejorative understanding of conspiracy theories is best suited for academic research, if the interest is to study the phenomenon of conspiracy theory as a whole with the underlying assumption that it is possible to do so following 'the norm of objectivity' (Bird 2020). But is it reasonable and even desirable to expect objectivity when studying conspiracy theories as such? A further challenge for particularism and a neutral definition of 'conspiracy theory' is The Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness. The Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness – as defined by Tsapos (2023) – raises the question of how empirical investigations into conspiracy theorists (in the academic research, such as psychology and political science) can be theoretically fruitful: if a conspiracy theory is about a conspiracy, and the nightly news and history books are full of these theories, then a definition including everyone that believe these would make most of us conspiracy theorists (Pigden 1995). How, then, do we investigate the phenomenon of conspiracy theories objectively and without necessarily taking on determining the epistemic status of each particular conspiracy theory? Since, according to Hagen (2022), most philosophers and social scientist interested in the subject today arguably are not interested in the "very complex business" of determining the epistemic status of each and every conspiracy theory. I will argue that, despite these challenges, The Neutral View is operationalizable, lending itself to objective research questions, informed by social epistemology, psychology, cognitive science, argumentation- and decision theory, and others.

[2] From the French term 'faux-pas' meaning to transgress some social or cultural norm, typically something frowned upon and a socially awkward or improper act or remark.

Ultimately, I suggest that what is currently causing confusion in the field is a difference in motivation and a lack of a stable theoretical framework for the academic research on conspiracy theories (Conspiracy Theory Theory).[3]

I will first discuss The Fux-pas View as it's found both in philosophy and the social sciences; I will present some of its problems and consider possible reasons for such a research motivation. Then, I will consider the challenge of objectivity for The Neutral View, and argue that it can be met. Finally, I will address whether it can provide a theoretical fruitful account, and – after considering some examples of such accounts – conclude that if our interest is to have a scientific theory for the phenomenon of conspiracy theories as such, then The Neutral View looks like the most promising approach.

The Faux-pas View

Making a *faux-pas* in French means to transgress some social or cultural norm. The Faux-pas View, is similar to the generalist in that it prefers a value laden definition of the term 'conspiracy theory'. However, it approaches the academic research of conspiracy theories, not as an interest in conspiracy theories as such, but based on a standard relative to the research communities' social group or political views. The Faux-pas View is meant to capture researchers' motivations – an aspect that is not necessarily captured by the generalist notion – viewing the primary task of the study of conspiracy theories as investigating transgressions of some social or culture norm from the researcher's perspective. It views conspiracy theories, the term itself as political and/or beliefs in them as problematic.[4] Proponents of The Faux-pas View believe we have reasons to

[3] There are suggestions for such frameworks in the literature, see for example Pfeifer (2023).

[4] In a recent talk the economist Ole Bjerg (2024) described the phenomenon of people having extreme and disproportioned negative reactions to conspiracy theories, as if uttering conspiracy theories is "blasphemy against the system God" – meaning our institutions and establishments – such that uttering or entertaining conspiracy theories against these institutions ("the system God") are considered on par with committing sins.

reconceptualize or elaborate on the meaning of our understanding of conspiracy theories. I will discuss some examples found in philosophy and in the social sciences and argue that they are possible examples of The Faux-pas View, and I will show that the primary interested is not to investigate conspiracy theories *as such*, and that the accounts reported are 'less than objective', and that this leads to certain problems if we desire a scientific account of conspiracy theories.

The Faux-pas View in Philosophy

I start with The Faux-pas View accounts in philosophy. I first consider the account by Napolitano and Reuter (2021) that argue for a reconceptualization of the term itself, and to relativize it according to a folk understanding. Then I will consider Cassam's (2020) account, which argues for a political view, namely a right-wing propaganda understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, I consider Napolitano's (2021) 'belief insulated'-account, and I will show that these accounts are less than satisfactory if we want a scientific understanding of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories.

Leading with the approach found in Napolitano and Reuter (2021), suggests that a reconceptualization of the meaning of conspiracy theories is achieved by consulting the folk language use of the term. The account present empirical data from a corpus analysis revealing that the predominant use of the term is pejorative and evaluative, and argue that – informed by *some* language's common usage of the term – we ought to operationalize the term as being just that. Of course, such common language usage may vary and change over time and across context and culture (Husting and Orr 2007; Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen 2017), making it difficult to study conspiracy theories as such. According to Carap's (1950) exposition – being one the main reference points for explication (work on scientific concept formation) – a fruitful concept is one that is useful for the formulation of universal statements, empirical laws. The Napolitano and Reuter (2021) account seems to be tracking the contemporary use of the term in a particular language and community, and not what conspiracy theories in fact are. Further, such an unstable method for

determining the definition fails to meet Carnap's crucial criteria of universality and empirical laws, for a useful concept for scientific purposes.

Cassam's (2020) account of conspiracy theory illustrates further The Faux-pas View in philosophy. It argues that the phenomenon we are interested to investigate is right-wing propaganda. These conspiracy theories are not theories about conspiracy according to Cassam; rather, they are extraordinary theories defined by being speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish, premodern and self-sealing (2020: 97). He writes that this subset of conspiracy theories are "a conscious and deliberate strategy designed to advance a political cause", in particular "to advance right-wing political causes" (2020: 7 and 9). While a subcategory of conspiracy theories that function as propaganda could be an empirically interesting project approached objectively, Tsapos (2023: 457-458) argues that Cassam's particular description of conspiracy theory presupposes a standard of assessment of what is and what is not contrarian (being right-wing), which makes such an account run the risk of lacking any predictive validity. Further, Hagen (2022a: 332) refutes some of the features that make up Cassam's special cases of conspiracy theories. Hagen questions whether "(1) the theories that Cassam counts as Conspiracy Theories (including common 9/11 and JFK assassination theories) actually have those features, and (2) those theories are rightly regarded, on account of having those features, as so implausible that they do not deserve thorough assessment according to their evidentiary particulars." Thus, subscribing to a conspiracy theory as Cassam takes it, I argue, would not be empirically very interesting since it suggests little to nothing about a person, and amounts to little more than someone classifying a person as a conspiracy theorist because of their political ideology.[5]

Another example of an account from philosophy is Giulia Napolitano's (2021), who – much like psychologist – turns her interest to the individuals who believe conspiracy theories.

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

Napolitano explains that "contrary to those who argue that conspiracy theories are just explanations of events that involve conspiracies", she maintains that "conspiracy theories are not theories (or explanations) at all. Instead," she continues, "I take 'conspiracy theory' to refer to a particular way of holding a belief in the existence of a conspiracy. The attitude of the believer, rather than any feature of the theory, determines whether a person's belief in a conspiracy is a conspiracy theory or not" (Napolitano, 2021: 82-83). According to Napolitano, then, the identifying feature that is observed in people who defend conspiracy theories, is that "no matter what evidence we present them against their theory, they'll find a way to dismiss it". Thus, a pejorative definition of 'conspiracy theory' pertains to conspiracy theories as somehow faulty reasoning, an attitude of the believer rather than a feature of the theory itself. For example, according to Napolitano's account, those who believe conspiracy theories don't update their belief according to the evidence, and the belief is evidence "insulated". As such, it makes conspiracy theories epistemically problematic. That evidence insulated belief is, according to Napolitano, "a belief that is immune to being disconfirmed by the kind of evidence that is available in normal circumstances" (87-88). I take Napolitano's definition of 'conspiracy theory' as referring to the phenomenon of being psychologically resistant to changing one's beliefs when presented with information to the contrary. A closer analysis of this definition of the term will help determine its theoretical usefulness.

Napolitano states that 'conspiracy theory' refers to *a particular way of holding a belief in the existence of a conspiracy.*[6] The definition is not unambiguous. One reading of her definition verbatim et literatim, says something like (a): "*S* holds a belief in a particular way – a self-insulating way – and there exists a conspiracy". This reading of 'conspiracy theory' would apply to the following case: if *S* believes in a self-insulating way that the cup of water in front of her contains water, while

[6] There is an obvious category mistake between conspiracy theory and conspiracy belief, which has been identified by Duetz (2023).

there exists some conspiracy at the university campus, then *S's* belief that there is water in her cup is a conspiracy theory. This reading of Napolitano's definition is clearly absurd, which suggests a more charitable interpretation; such as (b): "S holds a belief about a conspiracy in a particular (a self-insulating) way". Thus, an example of (b) is: if *S* believes in a self-insulating way that the cup of water in front of her contains poisoned water, and she believes that some of her colleagues conspired and poison the water on campus to make everyone sick, then *S's* belief that there is poisoned water in her cup is a conspiracy theory. The distinguishing factor between (b) and the simple definition – that a conspiracy theory is an explanation of an event by referencing a conspiracy as the salient cause – is that according to (b) the focus is on the belief and it being held in a particular way, being evidence insulated and not updated as expected in normal (rational) belief formation.

However, this particular way to hold a belief is more commonly known as having a dogmatic belief. The research literature on dogmatism is well-established and rich, containing far too much to discuss in detail here.[7] A succinct way of defining dogmatism is, according to Rokeach and Fruchter (1956) that it refers to "total systems of beliefs and disbeliefs which are closed or resist change". In *The nature and meaning of dogmatism* (1954) Rokeach defines, among many others, one feature of dogmatism, which is for all practical purposes, the same as Napolitano's feature of

[7] There are various contemporary accounts of dogmatism, and the concept is much debated in the philosophical literature (Dodd 2013; Kung 2010; Lipton 2004; Pryor 2000; 2005; Weatherson 2007). White (2006) for instance, argues that the "popular view of 'dogmatism'" is inconsistent with the Bayesian account of how evidence rationally affects our credence. Moretti (2015: 262) on the other hand, defends dogmatism against White's challenges, and argues that "White's objections don't get off the ground because they assume that our introspective beliefs that we have experiences have the same evidential force, whereas the dogmatist is uncommitted to this assumption." However, further consideration of the philosophical debate on the epistemological status of dogmatism is beyond the scope of this paper. Although, of course, arguments against dogmatism, such as presented by White and others, would present substantial challenges for Napolitano's account.

conspiracy theory, namely holding on to a belief in such a way that any new information against it is resisted. According to Rokeach, the greater the dogmatism the greater the denial of events contradicting or threatening one's belief system (e.g., on grounds of "face absurdity" that the true facts are not accessible, that the only available sources of information are biased because they are seen to emanate from the disbelief system, and so on). Further, the problem of dogmatism is not necessarily restricted to the political and religious spheres. It is arguably observed in other realms of intellectual and cultural activity—in philosophy, the humanities, and the social sciences. There are numerous scales for measuring dogmatism for use in research further cementing its theoretical validity as identifying a distinct concept (even though the concept itself has been challenged and brought into question) (Troldahl and Powell 1965). I submit that it is the dogmatic characteristic of the belief Napolitano describes that is interesting, and the term 'conspiracy theory' is superfluous. If there is some additional explanatory capacity, or explanatory value of the term 'conspiracy theory' as defined by Napolitano, it remains to be shown.[8]

Having considered how relativistic approaches in philosophical accounts fail to deliver a scientific concept (e.g. by referencing a particular language and community's conceptualization of the term, by labeling your political opponent as a conspiracy theorist, and by not having a sufficiently differentiated concept), I turn to consider cases form empirical studies as they relate to The Faux-pas View.

The Faux-pas View and Empirical Research

Many research projects initially take some version of the definition that conspiracy theories are "explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups"

[8] A further concern for Napolitano's account is that by limiting her conception to only the problems of self-insulated conspiracy beliefs, as argued by Duetz (2022), her account automatically disregards other problematic aspects of the epistemology of conspiracy theories.

(Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017)[9] as their working definition of conspiracy theories. Notably, theories that fall under this definition are not necessarily false or even irrational to believe in (Moulding et al. 2016). Hagen (2020: 424) has argued that social scientists do not explicitly define conspiracy theories as false or unwarranted, but even so they seem to treat them as if they were, and he writes that they "treat the issue in a biased manner". In *Psychology as Science and as Propaganda* Jussim and Honeycutt (2023: 241) show that "biases characterize at least some work on […] belief in conspiracy theories" and that (political) biases have produced unjustified conclusions.

Some projects relativize the study by focusing, for example, on conspiracy theories that are contrary to the official explanation[10]. Consider one such study presented in Douglas and Sutton (2011).[11] The authors write that "A conspiracy theory is defined as an attempt to explain the ultimate cause of a significant political or social event as a secret plot by a covert alliance of powerful individuals or organizations" (Douglas and Sutton 2011: 545). They agree that the definition conspiracy theory need not be false, and continue: "It is important to stress that not all conspiracies are crackpot theories: some have ultimately been verified, such as the Watergate conspiracy of the 1970s." Nevertheless, they emphasis that conspiracy theories are contrary or alternatives to some other accounts, stating that "in the main conspiracy theories are unproven, often rather fanciful alternatives to mainstream accounts." Regarding the first part of their study, they argue that the results revealed that:

> [P]ersonal willingness to engage in the conspiracies predicted endorsement of conspiracy theories. Machiavellianism also predicted endorsement of conspiracy theories.

[9] For example, Goertzel (1994); Wood and Douglas (2013); Douglas and Sutton (2008); Wood and Gray (2019).

[10] Determining the official explanation is itself not unproblematic, and is an ambiguous criterion, often calling into question just which official explanation we are comparing.

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

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

Emphasizing the significance of the results, they write: "The present results are important because they provide the first evidence to suggest that people endorse conspiracy theories because they project their own moral tendencies onto the supposed conspirators (ibid.). The study asked participants to read and rate some conspiracy theory statements. A closer look at these items (See Table 1) – the conspiracy theory statements – reveals that all of them are of the contrarian type, commonly considered to be alternatives to what is sometimes called official narratives (in relation to Western governments and institutions, or as the authors call it "alternatives to mainstream accounts"). What, then, does the choice of conspiracy theory statements – all being of a certain kind – entail for the interpretation of the results? I argue that, since the authors do not provide any reasonable criteria or assessment for the particular conspiracy theories that they are in fact assessing, the authors are probably not interested in conspiracy theories and belief in conspiracy *as such* (per the definition they initially provided). Let's take a closer look at what possible interests there might be, and what motivations there are for researching conspiracy theories.

Table 1 The statements tested in Douglas and Sutton 2016 study, and according to Douglas the one they use regularly. Obtained through personal correspondence.

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

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

Motivations

To determine motivations is complex, especially without any preceding empirical investigations. However, I will consider some that are already identified in the literature, and others that at a minimum are empirically testable.

Researchers interested to study what they take to be false or unreasonable conspiracy theories (or *alternatives to the mainstream*), often do so without any particular consideration to actually investigate the conspiracy theories featured in their study stimuli, and draw conclusions without motivating the viability (or lack thereof) of the conspiracy theories. Instead, it seems they have made a prejudged call on which are rational and irrational conspiracy theories to believe as if it is self-evident; which bears a striking resemblance to the characteristics detailed in Bird's (2020) account of private and privileged communication: that speakers (the researchers) and their audiences take for granted the existence of a range of common assumptions, presuming that "they do not have to demonstrate fully their positions because their audiences are already sympathetic, […] in many instances they allude to or invoke but do not fully explain and defend their assumptions" (90-91).

It is expected that, if the interest is to investigate the phenomenon of conspiracy theory as such, the researchers should be explicit about investigating strictly non-mainstream accounts or narratives of conspiracy theories and provide the criteria by which they measure and determine such conspiracy theory statements as alternatives *to mainstream accounts* and why; since it seems like the obvious thing to do and would clearly be in the interest of the researcher if they want to say anything meaningful about the phenomenon of alternative accounts (or any other kinds of conspiracy theories) and why people believe in them. And yet, they don't. What, then, are some possible explanations for this?

It is fairly uncontroversial to say that reasons guide us. But just how reasons guide us in forming beliefs about the acts we might do is a complex and much debated question (Parfit and Broome 1997). Without committing to a position on the role reasons play in action and belief formation, I will discuss some practical reasons[12] that might be explanations for The Faux-pas View, and in particular motivating- and explanatory reasons, excluding normative reasons.[13]

There is a range of problems about practical reasons as they have traditionally been understood in philosophy, which complicates even a minimum use of the notion. Some of the problems relates to work in experimental psychology (e.g., Nisbett and Wilson 1977) that claims to identify 'real reasons' for acting; for example, that there are situations where people's choices are influenced by factors which they themselves are unaware of (for example, that we tend to choose items to the right). Often people are not aware of their bias, and when asked to justify their

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

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

choice they cite reasons for the superiority of their chosen option. These phenomena – and others such as implicit bias – seem to show that agents are motivated by reasons they are not always aware of, even after careful reflection on their reasons and motivations. The mentioned complexities and many more, make it near impossible to suggest that I will get to the bottom of what reasons and motivations researchers have for The Faux-pas View. However, the tools of scientific method used, intentionally or not, "to advance and confirm one's political beliefs and values rather than to discover truth" is well known (Crawford and Jussim 2018: 1), and I will explore some possible explanatory reasons and motivational reasons that need not be true, but nevertheless are, if not reasonable, at a very minimum empirically testable.

There are both individual researchers' motivations and sustaining motivation for research projects at play, and sometimes it can be one without the other. Such motivation for investigating conspiracy theories might be, as some of the above examples suggest, (political) biasing (Jussim and Honeycutt 2023), to evoke common and shared feelings rather than discriminate analysis (Bernstein 1971; Bird 2020), or conceptual blind spots (Reyna 2018). If the motivation is biases, then it is easy to see why the primary interest is not to investigate the phenomenon of conspiracy theories as a whole, but as it pertains to, for example: the worry of a rise in right-wing propaganda; the worry that people believe things that are different from what others (perhaps the researchers themselves) believe or subscribe to; or the worry of a rise in people turning to other news- or information sources e.g., the internet, and so on.[14]

Christine Reyna (2018: 82) argues that biases can affect what we measure, since worldviews present a particular "reality" that "make certain issues or problems come to the forefront as relevant, important, and real and make other seem less relevant, unlikely, or even nonexistent".

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

According to Reyna, ideological narratives "can lead to conceptual blind spots that prevent important questions from being explored".

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

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

I argue that the private and privileged accounts described by Bird can be traced in the social sciences and among philosophers on the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and conspiracy belief; and it affects both the interest and what guides scientists in their approach. The Douglas and Sutton (2011) study presented above, for example, states that some conspiracy theories may be true, such as the Watergate scandal. Moreover, they write that their result is "the first evidence to suggest that people endorse conspiracy theories because they project their own moral tendencies onto the supposed conspirators". But how can that be? Surely some who believe conspiracy theories, (again, such as the Watergate scandal, even when it was not the mainstream account[15]), have good reasons. Following Charles Pigden's argument from his (1995) paper, almost everyone

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

is a conspiracy theorist (somebody who endorse at least some conspiracy theories), which, when we consider Douglas and Sutton's results – that people endorse conspiracy theories because they project their own moral tendencies – would mean that most of us endorse these because we project our own moral tendencies. But this is not what Douglas and Sutton have investigated. Nor do they rely on any other definition that would make the interpretation of the results exclude such a conclusion. Thus, we are in the dark on what the results really show.

There may also be other reasons that don't pertain strictly to personal motivations, for example, some general features inherent in academic research domains that effect things such as adopting particular conceptual frameworks and publication bias. Kuhn (1962) described that consensus developed around particular scientific paradigms on how to conduct and report on research. Polanyi (1962) has argued that scientist frequently adopt conceptual frameworks because they are more elegant, because they seem more profound, or because they seem to offer more opportunities for the scientists to carry out their work. Rorty (1980) argued in the same vein that the conceptual frames scientist come to adopt are not primarily because they reflect nature but because of pragmatic reasons, such as enabling the scientist to make predictions, and carry on intelligible discussions.

Publication bias occurs when the publication of studies depends on the nature and direction of the results – for example so that the published studies are systematically different from those of unpublished studies – with statistically significant or positive results being more likely to be published than those with nonsignificant or negative results (Song, Hooper and Loke 2013). Further, there could also be – as Charles Pigden (forthcoming) hints at – a biasing in which research grant applications receive funding; and thus, a not inconceivable reason would be to approach the conspiracy theory research such that it would receive research grants.

Arguably then, some researchers are not primarily interested to investigate conspiracy theories as such (the phenomenon as a whole). Rather, there are other interests and motivations at play as well. And they may be approaching the research in a less than objective way. However,

if the primary interest is to understand the many dimensions of conspiracy theories and to develop an empirical account, I argue that a neutral, objective perspective is imperative. But is it reasonable to expect such an account, given the criticism of objectivity and realism? I now turn to discuss The Natural View and its challanges.

The Neutral View

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

However, to study and understand the phenomenon of conspiracy theories as such, I argue that we must consider a neutral, objective account. The Neutral View should be understood as more than just defining conspiracy theories in a neutral way. It prioritizes a theoretical framework for researching conspiracy theories that is objective and committed to being a "public account" (Bird 2020). Following Bird, central to this view is 'the norm of objectivity'. The norm of objectivity sets standards for how researchers are expected to report on their observations, how to gather and interpret the data collected. If we want to advance the understanding of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories accounts ought to be public, inviting others to debate and examine the work. For this principle to be satisfied the account must be rational in the sense that it is reasonable and intelligible such that "people who may belong to quite distinct ideological and cultural traditions" are able to interact with it (2020: 92). If we want an account of conspiracy theory that will not prove to be arbitrary, but more reliable than those provided by common sense, folklore, conventional wisdom, myths and so on, the field needs to develop a model that (at a very minimum attempts to) possess such reliability and accuracy, and sometimes predictability. Is such a view possible given the criticism of objectivity?[16]

As I have presented The Neutral View, it is not necessary for a norm of objectivity in conspiracy theory research to expect value-free research, that nothing less than depicting *reality as it is* will satisfy the condition, and that our conception must be like a reflecting "mirror of nature" (Rorty 2009). It is enough that researchers allow for reasonable comparisons by independent observers and, as Weber (1949) commented on social scientists, criticizing, not that they have value-influenced interests, but that they failed to acknowledge them.

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

A case in point is a recent account by van Prooijen et al. (2023). van Prooijen and his colleagues reexamines a well-established finding that belief in contradictory conspiracy theories (e.g., that Princess Diana was murdered and faked her own death) are positively correlated. The finding has been well referenced and interpreted as "evidence that people systematically believe blatant inconsistencies." They propose that the field has "insufficiently acknowledged a compelling alternative explanation: Disbelieving both conspiracy theories also yield a positive correlation" (van Prooijen et al. 2023: 670). If we have a neutral and objective research approach – as understood by The Neutral View – more such findings will be properly reexamined, will help to overcome confusion and to help people understand in a more reliable way our lives and the world as they relate to conspiracy theories. However, there is a remaining challenge for a neutral definition, namely The Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness, to which I turn next.

The Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness

Philosophers have argued successfully that we ought to take conspiracy theories seriously (Dentith 2018). According to Dentith (2023) a broad consensus of particularism has emerged among philosophers, that there is nothing inherently disqualifying about conspiracy theories qua theories. The particularist appeal to some version of a so-called simple definition[17] of conspiracy theories – one that would typically capture any sort of theory that contains a conspiracy, including the ones that most historically and politically literate people believe. But this raises the problem of how to make the research on conspiracy theories and conspiracy belief theoretically fruitful. If conspiracy theories are theories about conspiracies, and the nightly news and history books are full of them, then pretty much everyone (who believes these) are conspiracy theorists (Pigden, 1995). But, if it is the case that we are all conspiracy theorists, it doesn't make much sense to say – as the research suggests – that people who believe in conspiracy theories are, for example, less educated and lack

[17] See Tsapos (2023) for a discussion on the definition.

critical thinking skills, are more likely to be narcissistic and suffer from paranoid ideation and so on (van Prooijen 2017; Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Biddlestone 2022). Compared to whom? Cassam (2020: 5) points out that if this is what we mean by conspiracy theories then "the psychology of 'conspiracy theories' is starting to look like a total waste of time". Tsapos (2023) identified this as The Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness (see footnote 3). It would be like defining a pyromaniac as someone who has ever lit a fire, or intelligence in a way that makes everyone intelligent. As Joseph Uscinski puts it: '… since everyone believes at least one conspiracy theory, the term is meaningless' (Uscinski 2020: 34).

Much like particularism, The Neutral View considers conspiracy theories seriously, as things that can be true or false, doxastic or non-doxastic, well- or not well supported, and so forth; and indeed, not all conspiracy theories need be serious. van Prooijen (2022), for example, has argued that some conspiracy theories are entertainment. And so, some of these conspiracy theories do not necessarily need serious consideration or examination as such. But The Neutral View offers a solution to the problem, where we can remain neutral as to the epistemic status, and instead draw conclusions based on peoples' motivations to believe or not believe these conspiracy theories (for example because they are entertained). Empirical research could provide interesting insight by, among a wide range of things, clarify which particular conspiracy theories cluster (if they do!) and what the correlations – and possibly causations – might be.

The Neutral View so understood, approaches the study of conspiracy theories and belief in them as a research interest in the subject in itself, that allows for categorization of conspiracy theories based on a set of criteria that may be further supported by findings, rather than the other way around. Under The Faux-pas View the study of conspiracy theories and conspiracy belief narrows the scope such that it excludes many, even most, of the features of conspiracy theories that make them interesting and scientific to study. Dentith (2018: 20) argues: "It seems that by defining away conspiracies and conspiracy theories as *prima facie* unlikely, then we not only do the analysis of inferring what gets ruled in by our best inferences a disservice, but we unfairly shift the

burden of proof onto those who might well have good reason to infer that a conspiracy really is occurring here-and-now."

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

To have a theoretically fruitful account the starting point should be, much like historical explanations, based in the context of history (past events) and focus on the motives of social agents (Jacott et al., 2013). Historical explanations are motivated by perception, reason and emotions. A person's perception of different events depends on the state in which her mind is, at that particular point in time.[18] A person who is brought up with one particular set of values will have a different perception to one who has been brought up elsewhere with another set of values. Alper et al., (2022: 610), for example, showed that corruption moderates how political orientation predicts conspiracy beliefs. Further, they argue that "this is because corruption increases perceived plausibility of conspiracies, and everyone across the political spectrum becomes similarly likely to

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

adopt a conspiracy mentality". One may perceive conspiracy theories to be more or less true, depending on various psychological factors, emotions and environmental factors.

For example, when investigating the rationality of believing in conspiracy theories, Tsapos' (2024) account – acknowledging the important aspects of empirical and epistemic features – highlights a social dimension of the phenomena, since conspiracy theories are notoriously moving-target, making it hard to come by real-world data. Instead, the account builds on a decision theoretic approach, considering peoples priors and decisions when under uncertainty about the state of the world. It provides a framework for the inherently social cognitive dimension of the decision-making process in the beliefs we hold as they relate to conspiracy theories. Another example is Orr and Husting (2007) investigation of the label of conspiracy theory. By maintaining a neutral position, they sidestep the examination of evidence in regards to conspiracy theories, and remain objective in important ways, where other accounts investigating the label have failed.

There are many other interesting features to investigate when The Neutral View is available to us. van Prooijen, Spadaro and Wang (2022: 65) found that conspiracy theories have the ability to "erode the fabric of society" by harming people's interpersonal, within-group, and between-group relationships by causing distrust and suspicion of institutions. As such, to determine and understand the unique features of conspiracy theories (if any) we must be able to compare them to other explanations that do not include a conspiracy. There are also the moral evaluative aspects of conspiracy theories, which can best be studied with a scientific, value-neutral definition; in which case the broader questions and methods from social cognition and social epistemology may provide interesting insights, by correlating belief in conspiracy theories with trust, and how trust affects our beliefs about the world (Levy, 2023). Thus, The Neutral View allows for pragmatical considerations, the notion of argumentation and social cognition among other useful and applicable ways to study the phenomena.

Conclusion

An overview of the empirical research literature shows that various socio-economic and personality factors correlate with conspiracy theory belief. Just how we interpret this data and how the studies are designed will depend on and be reflected by the interest we have in conspiracy theories as a phenomenon, which in turn calls for defining the term itself to correspond to our interest. I have considered the two main contenders for the academic approach to conspiracy theory research, The Faux-pas View and The Neutral View. I have argued that if we , per The Faux-pas View, favor a relativist approach our account will fail to be of much empirical value. The accounts provided thus far fall short, for example by not distinguish the concept of conspiracy theory from other already well-established concepts, making the concept of conspiracy theory at best superfluous. And when researchers make prejudged calls on the epistemic status of conspiracy theories without much support (rather, treating it as palpable – letting their biases penetrate the study setup – we are not investigating conspiracy theories as such and might miss out on exploring important questions on how conspiracy theories effect society and people. However, if our interest is to operationalize the term, having a scientific theory for 'conspiracy theory', to explain and interpret objective research about conspiracy theories and belief in them as a distinct phenomenon, The Neutral View looks more promising. Thus, I have shown that if the interest is the phenomenon of conspiracy theories *as such*, the academic research should move towards a scientific and objective research program about conspiracy theories and belief in them. One that will avoid arbitrary judgments, and allow for communication among people who may belong to distinct ideological and cultural traditions.

References

Alper, S., & Imhoff, R. (2023). Suspecting foul play when it is objectively there: The association of political orientation with general and partisan conspiracy beliefs as a function of corruption levels. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *14*(5), 610-620.

Alvarez, M., (2017) "Reasons for Action: Justification, Motivation, Explanation", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/reasons-just-vs-expl/>.

Bernstein, R. (1971). *Praxis and action: Contemporary philosophies of human activity* (Vol. 1016). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bird, F. (2020). A defense of objectivity in the social sciences, rightly understood. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, *16*(1), 83-98.

Bjerg, O. (2024) "Antikrist som konspirationsteoretiker. Taler: Ole Bjerg, 14 januar 2024." YouTube, uploaded by Hans Kristian Larsen, 15 January 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wF5RwyUcHAE&t=871s

Bjerg, O., & Presskorn-Thygesen, T. (2017). Conspiracy theory: Truth claim or language game?. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *34*(1), 137-159.

Buenting, J., and J. Taylor. 2010. "Conspiracy Theories and Fortuitous Data." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 40 (4): 567–578. doi:10.1177/0048393109350750.

Carnap, R. (1950). *Logical Foundations of Probability*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Cassam, Quassim. 2020. *Conspiracy Theories*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. [Google Scholar]

Cichocka, A., Marchlewska, M., & Biddlestone, M. (2022). Why do narcissists find conspiracy theories so appealing? *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *47*, 101386.

Cohen, G. A. (2000). *Karl Marx's theory of history: A defence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Crawford, J.T., & Jussim, L. (Eds.). (2017). Politics of Social Psychology (1st ed.). Psychology Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315112619

Dentith, M. R. (Ed.). (2018). *Taking conspiracy theories seriously*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Dentith, M. R. (2022). Suspicious conspiracy theories. *Synthese*, *200*(3), 243.

Dentith, M. R. (2023). Some Conspiracy Theories. *Social Epistemology*, *37*(4), 522-534.

Dodd, D. (2013). Roger White's argument against imprecise credences. *The British journal for the philosophy of science*.

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The psychology of conspiracy theories. *Current directions in psychological science*, *26*(6), 538-542.

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2011). Does it take one to know one? Endorsement of conspiracy theories is influenced by personal willingness to conspire. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *50*(3), 544-552.

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2008). The hidden impact of conspiracy theories: Perceived and actual influence of theories surrounding the death of Princess Diana. *The Journal of social psychology*, *148*(2), 210-222.

Duetz, J. C. M. (2023). What Does It Mean for a Conspiracy Theory to Be a 'Theory'?. *Social Epistemology*, 1-16.

Duetz, J. C. M. (2022). Conspiracy theories are not beliefs. *Erkenntnis*, 1-15.

Feyerabend, P. (1987). *Farewell to reason*. Verso.

Goertzel, T. (1994). Belief in conspiracy theories. *Political psychology*, 731-742.

Hagen, K. (2022a). Are 'conspiracy theories' so unlikely to be true? A critique of Quassim Cassam's concept of 'conspiracy theories'. *Social Epistemology*, *36*(3), 329-343.

Hagen, K. (2020). Should academics debunk conspiracy theories?. *Social epistemology*, *34*(5), 423-439.

Husting, G., & Orr, M. (2007). Dangerous machinery:"Conspiracy theorist" as a transpersonal strategy of exclusion. *Symbolic interaction*, *30*(2), 127-150.

Jacott, L., LopezManjon, A., & Carretero, M. (2013). Generating explanations in history. *Voss, James/Carretero, Mario (Hg.): Learning and Reasoning in History*, *2*, 294-306.+

Jussim, L., & Honeycutt, N. (2023). Psychology as Science and as Propaganda. *Psychology Learning & Teaching*, *22*(3), 237-244.

Kuhn, T. (1962). The Structure of Scientific Revolution. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Doi: 10.1086/ahr/68.3.700.

Kung, P. (2010). On having no reason: dogmatism and Bayesian confirmation. *Synthese*, *177*(1), 1-17.

Levy, N. (2023). It's Our Epistemic Environment, not Our Attitude Toward Truth, that Matters. *Critical Review*, 1-18.

Lipton, P. (2004). *Inference to the best explanation*. London: Routledge.

Moretti, L. (2015). In defence of dogmatism. *Philosophical Studies*, *172*, 261-282.

Moulding, R., Nix-Carnell, S., Schnabel, A., Nedeljkovic, M., Burnside, E. E., Lentini, A. F., & Mehzabin, N. (2016). Better the devil you know than a world you don't? Intolerance of uncertainty and worldview explanations for belief in conspiracy theories. *Personality and individual differences*, *98*, 345-354.

Napolitano, M. G. (2021). Conspiracy theories and evidential self-insulation. *The epistemology of fake news*, 82-105.

Napolitano, M. G., & Reuter, K. (2021). What is a conspiracy theory?. *Erkenntnis*, 1-28.

Nisbett, R. E., & Wilson, T. D. (1977). Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological review*, *84*(3), 231.

Parfit, D., & Broome, J. (1997). Reasons and motivation. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian society, supplementary volumes*, *71*, 99-146.

Pigden, C. (1995). Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories?. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, *25*(1), 3-34.

Pigden, C. (Forthcoming). How to Make Conspiracy Theory Research Intellectually Respectable (and What It Might be Like if it Were). *Inquiry*.

Pfeifer, N. (2023). Towards a Conceptual Framework for Conspiracy Theory Theories. *Social Epistemology*, *37*(4), 510-521.

Polanyi, M. (1962). Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy. New York: Harper and Row.

Pryor, J. (2005). Is there immediate justification? In M. Steup & E. Sosa (Eds.), *Contemporary debates in epistemology* (pp. 181–202). Oxford: Blackwell.

Pryor, J. (2000). The skeptic and the dogmatist. *Noûs*, *34*(4), 517-549.

Reyna, C. (2017). Scale creation, use and misuse. *Politics of Social Psychology*.

Rokeach, M., & Fruchter, B. (1956). A factorial study of dogmatism and related concepts. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *53*(3), 356.

Rokeach, M. (1954). The nature and meaning of dogmatism. *Psychological Review, 61*(3), 194–204. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0060752

Rorty, R. (1980) Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Oxford: Blackwell.

Song, F., Hooper, L., & Loke, Y. K. (2013). Publication bias: what is it? How do we measure it? How do we avoid it?. *Open Access Journal of Clinical Trials*, 71-81.

Stokes, P. (2023). The Normative Turn in Conspiracy Theory Theory?. *Social Epistemology*, *37*(4), 535-543.

Troldahl, V. C., & Powell, F. A. (1965). A short-form dogmatism scale for use in field studies. *Social Forces*, *44*(2), 211-214).

Tsapos, M. (2023). Who is a Conspiracy Theorist?. *Social Epistemology*, 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2023.2172695

Tsapos, M. (2024). Betting on Conspiracy: A Decision Theoretic Account of the Rationality of Conspiracy Theory Belief. *Erkenntnis*, 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-024-00785-9

Uscinski, J, E. (2020). *Conspiracy Theories, a Primer*. The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

van Prooijen, J. W., Wahring, I., Mausolf, L., Mulas, N., & Shwan, S. (2023). Just Dead, not Alive: Reconsidering belief in contradictory conspiracy theories. *Psychological science*, *34*(6), 670-682.

Van Prooijen, J. W., Spadaro, G., & Wang, H. (2022). Suspicion of institutions: How distrust and conspiracy theories deteriorate social relationships. *Current opinion in psychology*, *43*, 65-69.

van Prooijen, J. W. (2022). Psychological benefits of believing conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101352. *f*

van Prooijen, J. W. (2017). Why education predicts decreased belief in conspiracy theories. *Applied cognitive psychology*, *31*(1), 50-58.

Weatherson, B. (2007). The Bayesian and the dogmatist. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 107*, 169–185.

Weber, M. (1949). Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy. The Methodology of the Social Sciences. Translated by E. Shils and H. Finch. New York: Free Press.

White, R. (2006). Problems of dogmatism. *Philosophical Studies, 131*, 525–557.

Wood, M. J., & Douglas, K. M. (2013). "What about building 7?" A social psychological study of online discussion of 9/11 conspiracy theories. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*, 409.

Wood, M. J., & Gray, D. (2019). Right-wing authoritarianism as a predictor of pro-establishment versus anti-establishment conspiracy theories. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *138*, 163-166.