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ARTICLE

Is Conspiracy Theorizing *Really* Epistemically Problematic?

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Abstract

In an article based on a recent address to the Royal Institute of Philosophy, Keith Harris has argued that there is something epistemically wrong with conspiracy theorizing. Although he finds "standard criticisms" of conspiracy theories wanting, he argues that there are three subtle but significant problems with conspiracy theorizing: (1) It relies on an invalid probabilistic version of modus tollens. (2) It involves a problematic *combination* of both epistemic virtues and vices. And (3) it lacks an adequate basis for trust in its information sources. In response to Harris, this article argues that, like previous criticisms, these criticisms do little to undermine conspiracy theorizing as such. And they do not give us good reasons to dismiss any particular conspiracy theory without consideration of the relevant evidence.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories; philosophy; epistemology; generalism; media; bias

Introduction

For more than two decades, philosophers have been debating whether or not there is something epistemically wrong with conspiracy theories.[1] While there is some disagreement about the definition of "conspiracy theory,"[2] all sides seem willing to stipulate that

[1]Early essays on this topic are collected in Coady (2006), and a recent set are in Dentith (2018*a*). Special issues of *Episteme* (2007; vol. 4(2)) and *Argumenta* (2018; vol. 3(2)) also contain a number of relevant essays. The rest are mostly scattered among various philosophy journals and anthologies.

[2]Harris's definition of conspiracy theory includes the idea that "architects of the event(s) [i.e. the conspirators] are involved in promoting the official account" (Harris 2019: 237). While this does not seem a *necessary* feature of conspiracy theories, it is perhaps typical enough to accept for the sake of argument. However, it is important to notice that the phrase "are involved in" is both weak and vague, as indeed it should be. Often conspiracy theorists do seem to believe that the "architects of the event" seek to influence the official account. But conspiracy theorists often also believe that, *to some degree*, coverups occur partly for more "benign" reasons, involving those who are *not* "architects of the event," and that some of the parties involved are unwitting. The influence of the core conspirators is not generally regarded as *completely* explaining the official narrative.

This arguably becomes an issue when Harris discusses conspiracy theories endeavoring to fit all the data. According to Harris, "The conspiracy theorist posits that some group of conspirators is responsible for the occurrence of some event, the official account of some event, as well as data that is errant with respect to the official account" (Harris 2019: 256). But this seems to exaggerate what conspiracy theorists posit. Generally, conspiracy theorists do not claim that the conspirators control everything, and are therefore solely responsible for it, exactly as it turns out. Rather, the conspirators are seen as seeking certain

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some conspiracy theories have turned out to be true or warranted – Watergate and the Iran-Contra Affair, for example (see Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 206). And thus, Keith Harris, whose recent article is reviewed here, concedes that "dedicated investigators may amass sufficient evidence to rationally believe certain conspiracy theories" (Harris 2019: 240).

Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor (2010) have characterized the philosophical debate as between *particularists*, who believe that each particular theory ought to be judged on its own particular merits, and *generalists*, who believe that there are general ways of showing that conspiracy theories should not be believed. In addition to Buenting and Taylor themselves, the particularist position is defended, separately, by David Coady, Charles Pigden, M Dentith, and Lee Basham, and is seemingly accepted by Juha Räikkä and ultimately by Brian Keeley. Generalist arguments have been attempted by Steve Clarke, Pete Mandik, Neil Levy, and also Brian Keeley.[3] In various ways, they have tried to show that a dim view of conspiracy theories is warranted. Some have targeted conspiracy theories directly, others targeted conspiracy theor*ists*.

Harris focuses on conspiracy *theorizing*, by which he means "the belief-forming practices or reasoning processes whereby individuals come to believe conspiracy theories" (Harris 2019: 239). So far, attempts to provide generalist critiques have been effectively rebutted. Or, as Harris puts it, "standard criticisms of conspiracy theorizing fail to demonstrate that the practice is invariably irrational" (Harris 2019: 235). Harris suggests that this may account for the fact that "many scholars have taken a relatively charitable attitude toward conspiracy theorists and conspiracy theorising in recent years" (Harris 2019: 235). Presumably Harris is thinking mostly of the particularist philosophers mentioned above, for the movement in the social sciences toward a charitable attitude has been, in my view, very modest. In any case, generalism, *if taken strictly*, seems an obvious dead end, as Harris admits.[4] Still, there remain philosophers, Harris among them, who believe there are nevertheless ways of showing that there is *something* epistemically problematic about conspiracy theories generally, or about a closely related concept, such as conspiracy theorizing.

1. Harris's literature review

The first half of Harris's essay is a literature review, in which he makes a number of concessions regarding the potential reasonableness of conspiracy theories. He concedes that, "many of the supposed faults associated with conspiracy theorising are not faults at all" (Harris 2019: 235). And so, "[T]he faults standardly associated with conspiracy theorising do not warrant the sort of criticism to which the practice is often subjected" (Harris 2019: 235). More specifically, Harris considers the idea that conspiracy theorizing is a straightforward epistemic vice, concluding that:

> [S]trong considerations militate against the idea that conspiracy theorists exhibit familiar epistemically vicious character traits to a greater degree than their counterparts. To see this, consider the paradigmatic conspiracy theorist, who goes to

specific ends and acting so as to influence circumstances with those ends in mind, and to get away with it. But they are not the only actors, and the results are expected to be somewhat messy. They are not thought to need to control everything, and although they may have set up a patsy, or something comparable, so long as they are not the official suspects, they can roll with changes in the official story as it evolves, perhaps continuing subtle influence, or intervening, to some degree, at critical junctures.

[3]Keeley is reasonably understood as initially attempting a generalist critique, recognizing that it didn't succeed, and ultimately accepting the particularist (or at least quasi-particularist) position.

[4]See the section below called, "Is Harris's critique a generalist one?"

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> great lengths to investigate the target event and amasses evidence that they take to undermine the official account of that event. Such an individual devotes a great deal of time – considerably more than non-conspiracy theorists – to uncovering the truth. Indeed, conspiracy theorists are often more knowledgeable about the circumstances surrounding target events than their counterparts, and this is plausibly a result of greater devotion to uncovering the truth, a hallmark of intellectual virtue in the responsibilist tradition. (Harris 2019: 242)

In addition, regarding the argument against conspiracy theories based on their unfalsifiability, Harris concludes: "If there is an epistemic problem with conspiracy theories, and belief in them, it is not that such theories are unfalsifiable" (Harris 2019: 246). Brian Keeley had previously suggested that "unfalsifiability is only a reasonable criterion in cases where we do not have reason to believe that there are powerful agents seeking to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter" (Keeley 1999: 121). And this does not apply in the case of conspiracy theories. For, Keeley argues, "we have reason to believe that there exist forces with both motive and capacity to carry out effective disinformation campaigns" (Keeley 1999: 121). Harris actually takes the defense of conspiracy theories on this point even further. He explains, "[R]esilience to falsification is hardly unique to conspiracy theories. Scientific theories in general are resistant to falsification. This point is emphasized by Imre Lakatos, among others … The need to conjoin theories to auxiliary hypotheses to derive testable predictions ensures that scientific theories are not straightforwardly falsifiable" (Harris 2019: 245). This is refreshing. The purported unfalsifiability of conspiracy theories continues to be used against them even though falsifiability has, in the philosophy of science, been repudiated as a useful criterion for literally decades. Indeed, the theory that unfalsifiability renders theories unwarranted is itself unfalsifiable, and thus is self-refuting.

Harris also addresses the suggestion, made by Steve Clarke, that believing a conspiracy theory is like holding on too long to a degenerating research program. He writes:

> The criticism that conspiracy theorising is analogous to clinging to a degenerating research programme struggles on two scores. First, it is not clear that conspiracy theories, like degenerating research programmes, are incapable of predicting novel facts. Second, it is not clear that the ability to predict novel facts is a reasonable criterion of goodness for a conspiracy theory. (Harris 2019: 247)

Given all this, Harris concludes, "Standard criticisms of conspiracy theorising are misguided" (Harris 2019: 247).

* * *

At this point, Harris offers three new critiques. He argues that (1) conspiracy theorizing involves a kind of invalid reasoning: probabilistic modus tollens. (2) It involves a particular combination of intellectual virtues and vices which, although the vices are not unique to conspiracy theorists, in combination with the otherwise virtuous intellectual traits of conspiracy theorists, the result is epistemically problematic. And (3) the skepticism conspiracy theorists exhibit toward authoritative sources leaves them with no basis for affirming their own theories. He summarizes his critiques this way:

> I argue that a range of epistemic errors are pervasive among conspiracy theorists. First, the refusal of conspiracy theorists to accept the official account of some target event often seems to be due to the exercise of a probabilistic, and fallacious,

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> extension of modus tollens. Additionally, conspiracy theorists tend to be inconsistent in their intellectual attention insofar as the effort they expend on uncovering the truth excludes attention to their own capacities for biased or otherwise erroneous reasoning. Finally, the scepticism with which conspiracy theorists tend to view common sources of information leaves little room for conspiracy theorists to attain positive warrant for their preferred explanations of target events. (Harris 2019: 235)

Below, I examine each of these critiques (and a couple of variants of them) and find them wanting, just as were all previous efforts of this kind. Then I ask whether Harris's project was, despite his explicit rejection of generalism, nevertheless really just another ill-fated attempt at a generalist critique of conspiracy theories.

2. Critique #1: Conspiracy theorizing relies on probabilistic modus tollens

Modus tollens (aka denying the consequent) refers to the following valid inference form: *If p then q; not q; therefore not p*. Given Harris's examples, it is best to add a couple of extra "nots," such that the *q* and *not q* switch, which does not actually change anything. It will nevertheless help to think of it this way: *If p then not q; q; therefore not p*. So, for example, suppose it is true that: if Rex is dead then Rex's heart is not beating (*if p then not q*). Suppose it is also true that: Rex's heart is beating (*q*). If we can be sure of both of those statements, then we can infer, with certainty, that Rex is not dead (*not p*). Because if he had been dead, we had agreed in the first premise, his heart would not be beating, and yet it is. That's just Logic 101.

The problem that Harris raises is that this inference is *not* valid when dealing with probabilities, rather than certainties.[5] The conjunction of "*if p then* probably *not q*" and "*q*" does not entail "probably *not p*." Harris gives the following example, "If any given lottery with many participants is fair, it is improbable that any particular entrant will win [*if p then* probably *not q*]. However, it would be absurd to conclude, once a winner is named [*q*], that the lottery was probably unfair [probably *not p*]" (Harris 2019: 250). Harris is right: *that* would not be a valid inference.

However, there are problems with Harris's critique. For one, the example Harris provides is misleading, but I will address that later. First let's address two central problems: (1) Harris's analysis implicitly assumes, wrongly, that if evidence is not conclusive, or at least not very strong on its own, then it doesn't count as evidence at all, and (2) it is not clear that conspiracy theorizing involves the form of reasoning Harris implies. Although conspiracy theorizing may be superficially similar to probabilistic modus tollens, nuances make a difference. And, although an argument form that is not valid cannot *establish* its conclusion, a form of reasoning similar to it, with the proper nuance applied, may legitimately provide *evidence* for it.

This can be seen by considering another invalid argument form, affirming the consequent: *If P then Q. Q. Therefore P*. A standard example is this: If it rained recently, the streets are wet. The streets are wet. Therefore, it rained recently. This is invalid, of course, because it is possible that the streets became wet some other way. Although this is clearly an invalid form, much scientific reasoning seems, superficially, to follow it. A scientist generates a hypothesis, *P*; Then she reasons that if her hypothesis is true, she should see result *Q*. She then devises an experiment to produce condition *P* and to

[5]In his words, "[M]odus tollens does not have a parallel legitimate probabilistic counterpart. Suppose that if *p* is true, it is enormously improbable that *q*. Now suppose that one observes that *q*. Does it follow that *p* is improbable? No" (Harris 2019: 250).

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see if *Q* occurs. Of course, if *Q* occurs, she does not conclude that *P must* be true. She recognizes that would be an invalid inference; it is possible that *Q* just happened to occur for some other unknown reason. However, the experiment is nevertheless *evidence* that her hypothesis, *P*, is true. And piling up evidence of this kind does legitimately increase her confidence in her hypothesis. Conspiracy theorizing using something that looks like probabilistic modus tollens is analogous.

Further, the reason the conjunction of "*if p then* probably *not q*" and "*q*" does not entail "probably *not p*" is that there are at least *some* instances in which we cannot draw that conclusion. But that does not mean that there are *no* circumstances under which we *can* reasonably draw that conclusion. For example:

> [A] If Ted won the lottery he would probably not continue living in his car.
> [B] He is still living in his car.
> [C] Therefore, he probably didn't win the lottery.

It may be possible to advance some technical quibbles, but the really important point is just that the conjunction of A and B is legitimate *evidence* for C. And under some circumstances this kind of evidence is sufficient to reasonably support belief.

To make his point about the invalidity of probabilistic modus tollens relevant to conspiracy theorizing, Harris ties it to what Brian Keeley has termed "errant data," that is, data that seems unexplained by or inconsistent with the official account of an event (Keeley 1999: 118). Harris writes, "The observation of errant data is, I suggest, analogous to the observation that some lottery entrant has won. The observation of errant data is improbable – perhaps extremely improbable – given the official account, but this alone does not provide reason to abandon the official account" (Harris 2019: 250).

Now it's time to consider why Harris's lottery example is misleading. In his version of it, it is not surprising that there was a winner – indeed, if the lottery is fair, someone should *eventually* win. And if there is a winner, it had to be somebody. So, there is really no cause for suspicion. But suppose we change the lottery story just a little, to make it resemble more closely conspiracy theorizing. Instead of some random person winning, let's assume that a close relative of someone involved in selecting the winner won.[6] That may legitimately raise some eyebrows. But suppose it happened again and again. At some point, surely, it is reasonable to conclude that the lottery is probably unfair. And yet Harris seems to suggest that that inference is never reasonable, no matter how many times this situation is repeated. He writes:

> A *set* of errant data does not tell against the official account in a fundamentally different way than a single errant datum does. The observation of any single errant datum is improbable if the official account is true, while the observation of a set of errant data is even more improbable. Nonetheless, to reject the official account because it would make one's observations improbable would be a mistake in either case. (Harris 2019: 251; emphasis added)

What has gone wrong? In the revised lottery example, which better represents conspiracy theorizing, it is not something simply *improbable* that happened. It is something *suspicious* that happened. It is something that suggests an alternative theory of events. In the article that first explicitly distinguished generalism from particularism, Buenting and Taylor label this "fortuitous data," sometimes referring to it colloquially as being

[6]As this is just a thought experiment, we need not worry about inaccuracies regarding how lotteries are administered.

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"lucky" (or even "fishy"; Buenting and Taylor 2010: 576). They explain, "If something is lucky in the way we intend, then merely stating it will suggest an alternative explanation of that fact. … some evidence is just so lucky that it cannot be shrugged off as mere chance; the luckiness of events requires explanation" (Buenting and Taylor 2010: 573).[7] One of the examples they offer is the following:

> [A] passerby discovered the passport of Satam al-Sugami, one of the (alleged) [9/11] hijackers. This is fortuitous. That al-Sugami's passport survived the impact, ensuing fireball, and was found eighty floors below in (surprisingly) pristine condition is lucky. Moreover, that a passerby should have noticed the passport, attached significance to it, and reported the finding to an appropriate authority is fortuitous, particularly given the panic and duress one imagines those terrifying moments would have been like. All of this evidence suggests an alternative explanation, besides the explanation offered by the official story. (Buenting and Taylor 2010: 574)[8]

Whatever one thinks about the particulars of this case (for example, whether the passport was found before or after the collapses, and whether it was essentially undamaged), one can imagine circumstances under which such a situation would suggest that al-Sugami was being set up. So, the mere fact that this is "errant data" does not show that it does not represent significant evidence of conspiracy. Its strength as evidence depends on the particulars.

Now let's consider an example provided by Harris: the collapse of Building 7 was reported as having occurred about 26 minutes before it actually occurred, with the building actually visible still standing in the background as the reporter reports that it had collapsed. This is errant data in the sense that it seems highly improbable, if one assumes the official account is true. Nevertheless, it does not follow that the official story is probably false. Harris explains:

> [T]he report does not demonstrate that the official account is probably false. It was highly improbable, given the official account, that the reporter would assert that the tower had already collapsed, rather than that it would collapse. But only an application of probabilistic modus tollens would lead one, on this basis alone, to conclude that the official account is probably false. (Harris 2019: 251)

[7]Consider this analogy: The odds of the universe developing into *exactly* the one we find ourselves in is extremely low. But *that* – that each particle happened to end up where it did – is not in itself suggestive of anything. In contrast, the odds of the universe developing in a way that life is possible is also low, but not nearly as low as the odds of it developing in *exactly* the way it did. And yet *this* – the fact that the universe is life-supporting – seems to support (to some degree) the notion that the universe is not simply a product of pure chance, because it is suggestive of an alternative: that there is a being that intended it. For a life-supporting universe is the kind of outcome that is not only *improbable* but is also plausibly understood as *desirable*.

[8]For contrast, Buenting and Taylor provide an example of unlikely but non-fortuitous data: "That terrorists wanted to inflict damage on the United States explains why they flew United Airlines Flight 175 into the South tower of the World Trade Center buildings, but it does not explain why the aircraft crashed between the 78th and 82nd floors, instead of between the 93rd and 97th floors (for example). But this latter fact does not appear noteworthy, surprising, or otherwise lucky. There is nothing fortuitous about this case that suggests an alternative explanation" (Buenting and Taylor 2010: 574). This is analogous to Harris's version of the lottery. And yet conspiracy theorists don't make an issue of this data, unless they believe they have independent reasons to think there is something special about those floors – as some conspiracy theorists do. In that case, much depends on how good *that* evidence is, as well as how suspicious it makes the locations of the crashes.

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It is not at all evident that there are a significant number of 9/11 conspiracy theorists who believe the official account is false *on this basis alone*. It is more likely they have other reasons for suspicion, and this is regarded as a striking anomaly, suggestive in that context of suspicious foreknowledge. So, the suggestion that conspiracy theorizing involves concluding the official story is probably false "on this basis alone" is a bit of a red herring. Further, whether or not this situation is reasonably regarded as suspicious depends, once again, on the particulars of the situation. Were there good reasons to expect Building 7 would fail, and thus reasonable explanations for how a report of its potential collapse may have innocently been converted to a mistaken report of its actual collapse shortly before it happened? If so, *that* is the reason this is not strong evidence against the official account. In general, it is just such particulars that will determine whether and to what degree errant data provide evidence against an official account.

Also, we must remember that the important question is *not* whether a situation such as the premature report of the collapse of Building 7 shows that the official account is *probably* false; it is whether such an example provides *any evidence at all*. Is it *completely* irrelevant? Can it be that, no matter how numerous and outlandish the errant data, we would *never* be justified in believing, based on this kind of evidence, that the account relative to which such data was errant was wrong? It is not too difficult to recognize that that just can't be right.

Let's briefly consider a couple more real-life examples for clarity and emphasis. A prominent argument cited by members of the 9/11 Truth Movement is that various lines of evidence suggest that there were significant quantities of molten steel (or iron) present at the WTC sites around the time of the collapse and after. When NIST representative John Gross was asked about reports of pools of molten steel at the WTC sites, he seemed to implicitly admit that, if true, this would constitute a problem. He responded, with a clearly dismissive air, suggesting that the reports are *not* true, "Steel melts at around 2,600° F. I think it's probably pretty difficult to get that kind of temperatures in a fire" (Walter 2015: 33).[9] This suggests that if the claims of molten steel or iron held up, they would constitute significant evidence (though still not proof). What is important is whether or not such claims *do* hold up, not whether they count as (merely) errant data.

Now consider some facts regarding the Robert Kennedy assassination. While the witnesses placed Sirhan's gun about three feet away, the coroner determined that Kennedy was shot from about one to three inches away, toward the back of the head, behind the right ear (Noguchi 2014). Surely that is *evidence* of Sirhan Sirhan's innocence, with reference to firing the fatal shot. It is not by itself proof, of course. It is not necessarily even sufficient evidence to make it *probable* that the official account is wrong. But it *is* evidence nonetheless. That is, it gives us a reason to increase our assessment of the likelihood that the official account is wrong. Whether or not one is warranted in believing the official account is wrong, or that it is probably wrong, depends on the sum total of evidence – including this kind of evidence.

There are also less directly relevant instances of errant data, which are less telling, but not necessarily without significance. In the RFK case, for example, Sirhan's lawyer, Grant Cooper, was under pending indictment at the time he was (some say incompetently) "defending" Sirhan. Though Cooper was potentially facing jail time for possession of stolen grand jury transcripts, he eventually got off with merely a fine. Are circumstances that suggest Cooper may easily have been pressured to throw his client under the bus, combined with reasons to think that he did just that, epistemically

[9]Gross's statements can be seen in context here: "9/11: NIST engineer John Gross denies WTC molten steel (extended)"; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SLIzSCt_cg.

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irrelevant? No, even if this could never *by itself* justify rejecting the official story, its degree of significance depends on the details and further context. However inconvenient, *that* is what has to be carefully considered.

Let's look at one last example of errant data: statements by doctors and others at Parkland Hospital after the attempt to save President Kennedy's life. Many of these statements seem to suggest that the President was shot from the front (see Palamara 2015). These statements, which are "errant" relative to the official story, *do* constitute evidence that Oswald was not the lone gunman. They are not, by themselves, conclusive, of course. They do not even show, by themselves, that Oswald was *probably* not the lone gunman. After all, many reasons have been given to explain away these statements. I'm not trying to adjudicate the strength of this evidence or the plausibility of the responses to it. But I am asserting that such adjudication, taking into account all the relevant evidence, is precisely what is necessary to determine whether or not the lone gunman theory is the best one. Simply making a point about probabilistic modus tollens just isn't going to do it. In fact, it does not help at all. Indeed, it is positively misleading. For it wrongly suggests that data that seems to problematize an official account cannot be relevant.

3. Critique #2a: The combination of intellectual effort and confirmation bias is problematic

Next Harris considers whether conspiracy theorizing involves some kind of epistemic vice. Ultimately, he concludes that it does. But he suggests that it is not a straightforward vice, such as has been alleged by others. For example, Harris rejects the view that conspiracy theorists, as a group, are intellectually lazy. He remarks, "Conspiracy theorists exhibit a sort of intellectual diligence, a motivation to uncover the truth, that seems downright praiseworthy" (Harris 2019: 252). That doesn't mean they have no straightforward intellectual problems; Harris sees that they do, and that the rest of us do too. He concludes, "[T]o the extent that proponents of conspiracy theories and official accounts alike are both prone to confirmation bias and closed-mindedness, appeals to such things cannot fully ground the relevant sort of criticism of conspiracy theorising" (Harris 2019: 253). After all, he writes, "[T]he susceptibility of the conspiracy theorists to these intellectual shortcomings is not, I would suggest, a dimension in which conspiracy theorists are clearly distinguished from their counterparts" (Harris 2019: 253).

However, Harris believes he has found a more complex way in which conspiracy theorizing is problematic. It is the particular *combination* of vices and virtues that characterize conspiracy theorists, he suggests, that results in problematic thinking. "In short, the fact that conspiracy theorists' enthusiasm for the pursuit of truth is not matched by a correspondingly heightened sensitivity to their own cognitive biases and potential for error exposes conspiracy theorists to unique epistemic criticism" (Harris 2019: 253–4).

Harris does not argue that conspiracy theorizing generally involves paying less attention to potential biases than does, say, official account *activism* or conspiracy theory *debunking*. Rather, Harris suggests that the problem of confirmation bias, though shared by conventionalists, is less problematic for conventionalists precisely because they tend, overall, to be more intellectually lazy, at least with respect to investigating issues related to conspiracy theories. The reason being lax with respect to one's attention to one's own biases is more problematic for the conspiracy theorist than the conventionalist is, Harris explains, "precisely the fact that conspiracy theorising typically involves a greater degree of intellectual activity than that involved in acceptance of an official account" (Harris 2019: 253) and "greater intellectual effort in general has

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the potential to go awry if it is not matched by greater intellectual caution" (Harris 2019: 254).[10] However, some conventionalists are also intellectually active, such as debunkers, and even journalists. And, Harris admits that conspiracy theorists may not be more biased than conventionalists.[11] So, this argument should also undermine intellectually active conventionalists, unless Harris means to suggest that we should make our judgement based on the *average* level of intellectual activity of different groups. But that makes little sense. Intellectually active conventionalists would be exonerated because of the large number of passive conventionalists, even though that is irrelevant. Further, perhaps the biggest problem is that intellectual passivity is not generally preferable to intellectual activity, at least so long as one strives to be careful and attentive to one's biases. And, again, Harris has conceded that conspiracy theorists are not less attentive to their biases than others.

The proper conclusion one should draw from this is not that there is something wrong with conspiracy theorizing, but only that one should be careful when one exerts intellectual effort to determine the truth of contested claims, whichever side one initially tends to favor. Certainly, we should not conclude that the best thing to do, given the pervasive propensity for confirmation bias, is to remain as intellectually disengaged as possible. Rather, it seems, when people engage with evidence relevant to conspiracy theories, both those who are inclined toward conventionalist thinking and those inclined more toward conspiracy theorizing should do so with as much intellectual fairness and caution as they can muster.

4. Critique #2b: The view promoted in the mainstream is unbiased

There is one other element in the above argument: the suggestion that when conspiracy theorists are intellectually active, they tend to consult non-mainstream sources. However, this does not really distinguish them from intellectually active conventionalists. And it is not clear that those who come to believe conspiracy theories are less attentive to their own biases than journalists who are compelled to be active, or at least ought to be active, in their inquiry regarding the issues in question. Harris is nevertheless optimistic about the reliability of the mainstream media.[12] And so, the assumption is, it is better to adhere passively to the mainstream perspective, than to actively consult non-mainstream sources.

[10]Similarly, Harris writes, "[T]he conspiracist's comparatively greater devotion to inquiry – manifested in their pursuit of inquiry beyond mainstream sources of information – is incongruous with her lack of attention toward her own biases and potential for error. Significantly, the comparatively intellectually passive non-conspiracy theorist displays no such incongruity in his failure to consider his own potential for error" (Harris 2019: 254).

[11]In addition to what is quoted in the main text above, Harris writes, "The ubiquity of confirmation bias is well-documented … More to the point, while conspiracy theorists are unlikely to seek out evidence against their own theories or to place much weight on testimony proffered by proponents of the official account, adherents to the official account are likely to exhibit comparably dismissive attitudes toward conspiracy theorists and the sources they endorse" (Harris 2019: 253).

[12]Although Harris does not actually say very much about the media, responding to what he does say requires saying a fair amount. This is because his arguments rely heavily on the assumption that viewpoints promoted by mainstream sources should be adopted without consulting alternative sources. And, although he merely appeals to a simple intuition about what is necessary to adequately ensure the reliability of the mainstream media, it is an intuition that many people seem ready to accept, even if counter-intuitions are presented. And so, even though I think the burden of providing empirical evidence should really rest on Harris, since he is advancing a position which is in some respects audacious (that people should shut themselves off from sources of information outside mainstream channels), responding to him effectively will nevertheless require the discussion of examples, in addition to conceptional analysis.

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Is such optimism warranted when it comes to contested interpretations of events? In general, the mainstream media's reliability regarding contested accounts may be difficult to adjudicate. Are we to rely on the mainstream media itself for determining its own reliability? That seems methodologically questionable. And I'm not sure what the alternative is if we are not to include the consideration of non-mainstream perspectives, which Harris seems to imply we should generally steer clear of. In any case, there are mainstream journalists, and former mainstream journalists, who argue from experience that American mainstream journalists who challenge sensitive official narratives run into a "buzzsaw" (see Borjesson 2004).[13]

That shouldn't be too surprising. After all, the vast majority of the mainstream media is controlled by a few giant corporations that have interests in selling certain products – including pharmaceuticals and instruments of war. Nevertheless, as Harris points out, they have at least some interest in getting the facts right. How "powerful" that interest is may be questionable. It would seem that they would indeed want to avoid blatantly misreporting "simple questions of fact." But the media's ability to ignore facts, underreport them, or report them with a subtle spin is significant. In addition to viewers and readers, they have advertisers to please. And "access journalists" don't want to step on the toes of those who provide them with access. Sometimes news outlets are pressured by government agencies to hold back on stories, such as the warrantless wiretapping program, which was not revealed until after President Bush's reelection. In short, the mainstream media has conflicting interests and is susceptible to influence by external pressures. The situation is not nearly so simple and unproblematic as Harris implies.

But it gets worse. When it comes to the allegations often involved in conspiracy theories, the alleged truth can be downright toxic, in the sense described by Lee Basham: "'Toxicity' is the likelihood that some conspiratorial scenarios, even if well evidenced, are too 'toxic' for our usual institutions of public information to disseminate to the public, or even investigate. Cover-up by intentional neglect, not descending control, is the easily predictable consequence" (Basham 2018*a*: 271). According to Basham, "The problem of toxic truths can threaten to *invert* our apparently warranted expectations of public institutions of information, our public trust" (Basham 2018*a*: 275–6, 286–7). The idea is this: Up to a certain point, the more momentous a story, the more attention will be paid to getting it right. However, for certain kinds of issues, there is a threshold point after which the situation is suddenly perceived to be *too* momentous.[14] At this

[13]For example, Dan Rather explains: "In general, before the war, before September 11, fear ruled every newsroom in the country in some important ways. It was the fear [of] if we don't dumb it down, if we don't tart it up, if we don't go to the trivial at the expense of the important, you know what, we're not going to be publishing a newspaper or magazine, and we're not going to be on the air; the ratings will eat us up. A more important relative of that fear takes hold in the wake of war. It is, 'You know, I know what the right question is, I should bore in and if he or she doesn't answer, I should come back with a follow-up and another follow-up. You know what, I'm not confident the public is going to understand that I see that as patriotic [rather than] not patriotic.' And there is the fear that you will have to pay the price – at the very least that you will be perceived as being unpatriotic. … It's an obscene comparison – I'm not sure I like it – but there was a time in South Africa when people would put flaming tires around people's necks if they dissented, and in some ways the fear is that you will be necklaced here. You'll have a flaming tire of lack of patriotism put around your neck. Now it's that fear that keeps journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions and to continue to bore in on the tough questions so often. Again, I'm humbled to say, I do not except myself from this criticism" (Rather 2004: 41–2).

[14]For example, there was serious concern, in the wake of the JFK assassination, that if the Russians had been involved, or even if they had merely been *thought* to have been involved, nuclear exchanges could have ensued. This seems to have played a role in President Johnson convincing the reluctant Earl Warren to lead the commission that would bear his name. Historian Kathryn Olmsted recounts the situation this way: "To

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point it has become toxic, or radioactive.[15] It becomes like the so-called "third rail"; everyone knows not to touch it. While Harris worries that when people venture beyond mainstream sources they risk reading biased sources, when it comes to accusations that would be significantly disruptive if acknowledged to be true, one also has reason to expect the mainstream to act in a biased way so as to support the status quo. And though one can expect it to be heavily scrutinized indeed, the harshest scrutiny may come from those concerned that the story not deviate too far from the official line or be too offensive to patriotic sensibilities.[16] Putting the point more mildly, political scientist Joseph Uscinski writes:

> [T]he mainstream media has its blind spots. For example, there was considerable trepidation at the *Washington Post* as Woodward and Bernstein moved forward with their investigation into the Watergate break-in. Sometimes, journalists have partisan biases and treat their favored party with kid gloves. And, investigating alleged conspiracies vigorously could cost journalists access or respect. (Uscinski 2018: 238)

Although, in the case of Watergate, the investigation continued and the conspiracy was exposed, if things had been just a little different it may well have ended much more

many Americans, the murder required a government investigation of a possible conspiracy. To Washington elites, though, the murder of Oswald required a different response: an official report naming him as the lone assassin. President Johnson agreed that it would be best for the country not to probe too deeply into the killing. To utter the word 'conspiracy' in public, Johnson believed, might risk nuclear war" (Olmsted 2009: 117). Similar thinking may have influenced deputy U.S. attorney general Nicholas Katzenbach as well. Olmsted writes, "In the memo [recommending the creation of the Warren Commission] Katzenbach told President Johnson that the public must be satisfied 'that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates who are still at large; in that the evidence was such that he would have been convicted at trial.' In other words, Johnson must convince the public of something he personally did not believe" (Olmsted 2009: 118).

Also consider this more recent, and less dramatic, example: Relatively uniform reporting, under headlines like "Bush Still Wins," indicated that, when all the votes of the Florida 2000 election were recounted, Gore had more votes. But this was reported only deep into the articles. The emphasis was put on the fact *if only the counties that Gore had requested were recounted*, Bush still wins. Did newspapers bury the lede in the interest of avoiding a destabilizing situation? It may have been worse than just awkward to highlight the fact that the man who had just recently moved into the White House was not the man who should have been President based on the best assessment of the votes.

[15]Basham illustrates the idea with a literally radioactive example: "If you approached American conspiracy theorists of the 1950s who claim mass media and law enforcement are purposely ignoring the real dangers of radioactive fall-out to the down-wind public caused by the Atomic Energy Commission's nuclear bomb testing – including a mass die-off of live-stock – with the reply that all can rest assured, the Department of Agriculture will no doubt hold a press conference to correct the deception, they would not be impressed. Nor should they be. It never happened" (Basham 2018*a*: 279–80).

[16]Harris does not consider that the mainstream media is unlikely to scrutinize evidence that favors official accounts *to the same degree* that they scrutinize evidence opposed to them. Official proclamations are often parroted relatively uncritically. Radical critiques, in contrast, may be either dismissed with little indication that rigorous and open-minded investigation has taken place, or alternatively they may be nitpicked to death. Consider the allegations of CIA involvement in the importation of cocaine to the United States in connection with the Nicaraguan Contras, which was described in a series of articles published in the *San Jose Mercury News* by Gary Webb. The rest of the mainstream media attacked Webb, and his career was ruined. But was he substantially wrong? His story was "discredited," but was that really justified? Perhaps his story was just too toxic to be acceptable to the establishment, including the major media establishment. To determine the answer, one must look at the specifics. Judging such a case by appeal to simplistic heuristics, such as the incentives of the mainstream media to get things right, is profoundly unfair to Webb.

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ambiguously,[17] as in some ways the Iran-Contra Affair did.[18] There is a survival bias issue here, as well. We can only definitively cite cases that did end up being pursued. But the tenuousness of the process of these and other cases[19] should give us pause.

But let's consider Harris's argument in support for his optimistic view. He reasons as follows:

> The official account, promoted by mainstream sources, is subjected to at least some degree of truth-oriented filtering. The mere fact that mainstream sources enjoy more attention ensures that, at least when it comes to simple questions of fact, errors are comparatively likely to be noticed and corrected. Moreover, mainstream purveyors of information have a powerful incentive to avoid errors and to correct erroneous reporting, as uncorrected errors are likely to lead consumers to defect to alternative sources in the media marketplace. (Harris 2019: 254)

Based on this, Harris seems to suggest we should just defer to the account promoted by mainstream sources, suggesting that "The collection of additional evidence may leave one worse off, epistemically, when that evidence is drawn from a biased pool."

There are many problems with this.

First, nearly *everything* is "subjected to at least some degree of truth-oriented filtering." So, without some quantification, applying this to the mainstream media is pretty meaningless. The degree to which the mainstream does a better job than other sources, after all, presumably varies. Some of these "other sources" may be published in respectable venues. Peter Dale Scott's *The Road to 9/11*, for example, is published by the University of California Press.[20]

Second, the question is *not* whether the media *generally* gets things right, it is whether they are reliable when it comes to *certain kinds of controversial issues*, such

[17]As Leon Neyfakh concludes his podcast series on Watergate: "Was Nixon's ouster the inevitable result of checks and balances working as intended? Or did the country just get lucky? When I look back … all I see are moments when things could have gone in a different direction: The *Washington Post* could have assigned the story of the break-in to reporters who are less aggressive than Woodward and Bernstein; James McCord could have chosen not to write a letter blowing the whistle on the cover up; John Dean could have decided not to turn on his boss or he could have had a worse memory; Nixon could have decided not to install tape recorders in the Oval Office or the Senate Watergate investigators could have not found out about them or Nixon could have destroyed those tapes as several people advised him to do" (Neyfakh 2018: 00:35:50). I would add that Martha Mitchell could have been less of an eccentric snoop.

[18]The role, if any, of then-Vice President George Bush is unclear, as is the connection, if any, with drug importation involving the Contras.

[19]For example, when the Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI (a group of conspiracy theorists) sent burglarized FBI files to various news outlets, most of them just sent the files back to the FBI. After agonizing about it, the *Washington Post* decided to run the story. Others followed, and the existence of COINTELPRO was eventually revealed (Medsger 2014). But that part was rather tenuous too, because only one of the stolen documents made reference to COINTELPRO. Even in this rather ideal case, in which multiple news outlets had been sent clearly incriminating documents, the outcome was not certain.

[20]I take "mainstream media" to include mass news media sources, not books or journals. It is questionable that news media sources, which can generally devote less attention to each story than books or scholarly articles, should be deferred to when the media's take is extensively challenged in these other sources, especially if at least some substantial challenges are found in reputable venues. As another example, the reliability of mainstream media treatment of evidence in the JFK case, such as NOVA's "Cold Case: JFK," is challenged in letters published in the journal of the Association of Firearm and Tool Mark Examiners, *AFTE Journal*, namely, Aguilar and Wecht (2015, 2016). I address one aspect of Aguilar and Wecht's critique in the main text below.

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as war provocations, or political assassinations.[21] The US mainstream media's promotion of the Iraq war, for example, was seriously flawed. And it is not the case that the mainstream media quickly corrected all their errors. Even today there is a tendency to whitewash the relevant history by framing the Iraq war as an honest mistake, despite strong reasons to think it was not.[22] Although it is commonly reported that everybody *thought* Iraq had WMD, there was never strong evidence supporting this, and plenty of people knew it.[23]

Third, there is at least some tension between the idea that the mainstream media can be trusted because it is heavily scrutinized, and the idea that, because it can be trusted, it need not be scrutinized. Or that, at least, one should not expose oneself to information outside the mainstream media, where one is likely to encounter ideas that challenge the mainstream view.

Fourth, the fact that the mainstream media has incentives against misreporting simple matters of fact does not make it an unbiased pool of information, as Harris implies.[24] FOX and MSNBC, for example, frequently support contrasting, and seemingly biased narratives. One study even suggests that exposure to Fox News and MSNBC, which are described as "partisan sources," "has a negative impact on people's current events knowledge." Most people would do better to watch the comedic

[21]Consider the murder of Black Panther leader Fred Hampton. Although the case is rarely mentioned at all, and accurate stories that focus on this event have occasionally appeared, it has been my experience that when it is mentioned tangentially in the mainstream media, the Hampton assassination is typically misreported as accidental – as collateral damage in a shootout. For a brief description of the circumstances of Hampton's murder, which involved the FBI and the Chicago Police, see Stubblefield (2005: 61).

[22]Paul Krugman puts the point well in a 2016 opinion piece, "Errors and Lies." He writes: "There's a palpable sense right now of the political and media elite trying to draw a line under the subject. Yes, the narrative goes, we now know that invading Iraq was a terrible mistake, and it's about time that everyone admits it. Now let's move on. Well, let's not – because that's a false narrative, and everyone who was involved in the debate over the war knows that it's false. The Iraq war wasn't an innocent mistake, a venture undertaken on the basis of intelligence that turned out to be wrong. America invaded Iraq because the Bush administration wanted a war. The public justifications for the invasion were nothing but pretexts, and falsified pretexts at that. We were, in a fundamental sense, lied into war. The fraudulence of the case for war was actually obvious even at the time: the ever-shifting arguments for an unchanging goal were a dead giveaway" (18 May 2015). While this opinion piece was published in the *New York Times* (to its credit), it nevertheless supports the view that the mainstream media was not typically reporting the truth on this issue. It continues, predominantly, to report the orchestrated lies of the Bush administration as innocent mistakes which everybody at the time believed to be true.

Regarding what I referred to as "orchestrated lies," Charles Lewis writes: "The carefully orchestrated campaign of untruths about Iraq's alleged threat to US national security from its WMDs or links to al Qaeda (also specious) galvanized public opinion and led the nation to war under decidedly false pretenses." See Lewis (2014: xiii).

[23]In an article titled, "Blix Insists There Was No Firm Weapons Evidence" (*The Guardian*, 28 April 2005) lead UN weapons inspector Hans Blix states: "We reported consistently that we found no weapons of mass destruction." In addition, a pre-war memo (dated 31 January 2003) confirms that George Bush and Tony Blair believed that weapons were not going to be found. This is why they were looking for other ways to justify an invasion. See "Confidential Memo Reveals US Plan to Provoke an Invasion of Iraq," *The Observer*, 21 June 2009.

[24]Harris implies this by twice suggesting that drawing from sources outside the mainstream media risks drawing from a "biased pool." In one formulation, Harris writes, "when one pursues evidence of a conspiracy from outside of mainstream sources, one encounters a significant risk of drawing evidence from a biased pool that is subject to minimal scrutiny" (2019: 554). The contrast implies that drawing from mainstream sources does not involve this risk. In addition, Harris here ignores the fact that this risk can be mitigated by being judicious about *which* non-mainstream sources one consults, and also by taking steps to verify the information found therein.

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Daily Show.[25] Also, the perspectives promoted in the mainstream media of other countries differ from those promoted in the US media,[26] despite the fact that they could appeal to the same "powerful incentives" to get things right. Rather than developing one's views based on a single mainstream source, it is probably wiser to base it on multiple mainstream sources with different perspectives. But if that is true, might not expanding one's net a bit further, if done carefully, be wiser still? Harris has not given sufficiently strong reasons to confidently answer "no."

Fifth, the idea that the mainstream media gets "simple questions of fact" right, and that errors are often corrected (though without fanfare) is not so much wrong as it is a *non sequitur*. An "official account," after all, is generally a complex theory, not "a simple question of fact." Although the media does sometimes significantly misreport facts relevant to conspiracy theories,[27] perhaps the greater worry, leading people to seek additional information, involves what the mainstream leaves out or fails to emphasize.[28] The media may faithfully report *selective* matters of fact that support a particular theory, while largely ignoring so-called errant data. For example, many in the 9/11 Truth Movement believe the collapse of Building 7 is particularly significant, and they often point out that, though shown on TV as it happened, it was seldom shown again for many years.

Finally, there is also the reality of spin. When purported "errant data" is addressed by the media, it is not always addressed in a fair and competent way. For example, the National Geographic documentary, "9/11 Science and Conspiracy" employed "experts" to perform an experiment to answer the question: "Can thermite of any kind burn

[25]See Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind Poll (3 May 2012), "What you know depends on what you watch: Current events knowledge across popular news sources." http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2012/confirmed/final.pdf.

[26]In the United States, at least, it would generally count as a conspiracy theory to suggest that the Iraq war was motivated by a cynical "desire to (re)establish American standing as the world's leading power." But for *Al Jazeera,* that is acceptable mainstream commentary. And why shouldn't it be? See Butt (2019).

[27]For example, when asked about the result of a paraffin test on Lee Harvey Oswald, Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry responded, "I understand that it was positive." Curry explains, "It only means that he fired a gun." Curry is referring to the tests on Oswald's *hands*. Upon further questioning, Curry said that he didn't know the results for Oswald's cheeks. Those results, actually, were negative – a fact that seems to have been revealed by conspiracy theorist Mark Lane. The media, perhaps through mere incompetence, or perhaps being over-eager for a good story, or even moved by misplaced patriotism, proceeded to state or imply, in various formulations, that the paraffin tests showed that Oswald had fired a *rifle* that day, and thus had killed the President. In fact, the cheek results suggested that he had *not* fired a rifle that day. And even Curry's statement, "It only means that he fired a gun," stretches the truth, even if the statement was perfectly sincere, since paraffin texts are not, in fact, conclusive. Despite the evidential ambiguity of the actual situation, the media essentially convicted Oswald on the basis of Curry's comments. Regardless of whether or not Oswald was actually the lone gunman, this was misleading reporting that was extremely prejudicial, even if sincere and well-intended, or mostly so. How *typical* is this kind of reporting in such cases? It is beyond the scope of this paper to answer. But Harris has not provided adequate justification for complacency.

[28]The 1921 Tulsa Massacre, for instance, was left out of history books for decades. Also, during the decade between Jeffery Epstein's 2008 "sweetheart" plea deal and Julie Brown's 2018 reporting in the *Miami Herald*, the mainstream media was relatively quiet regarding Epstein. Many voices in the alternative media, however, were raising the alarm. Some of the speculations put forth there may have been poorly grounded or exaggerated, but the main idea did pan out: Epstein was a well-connected serial pedophile, who had been given strangely favorable treatment by the authorities. In the wake of his death there remain a number of issues that seem to call for further exploration, and potential prosecution. Should we simply trust the mainstream media to cover those?

For abundant examples of underreported stories, see the books published by Project Censored annually, typically titled "Censored" followed by the year of publication.

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through steel beams?" They succeeded in showing that even large quantities of the weakest form of thermite cannot cut through a steel beam when uncreatively deployed. The clear intent is to leave the impression that thermite "of any kind" cannot have been used in the destruction of the WTC towers. But the underlying reasoning is patently invalid. And the implied conclusion that thermite cannot cut through steel beams appears to be falsified by more creative attempts using relatively small amounts of stronger forms of thermite (Cole 2013).[29]

As an example of the mainstream media apparently getting even basic matters of fact wrong, consider NOVA's "Cold Case: JFK." The program makes much of the supposed three-centimeter entrance wound on Governor Connally's back. This is used to support the single bullet theory by suggesting that the bullet yawed after passing through Kennedy's neck. One has to go outside the mainstream media to find a critique, by Gary Aguilar and Cyril Wecht,[30] that points out that the House Select Committee on Assassinations report indicated authoritatively:

> The rear entrance wound was not 3 centimeters [in diameter] as indicated in one of the operative notes. It was a puncture-type wound, as if a bullet had struck the body at a slight declination [i.e., not at a right angle]. The wound was actually approximately 1.5 centimeters in diameter. The ragged edges of the wound were surgically cut away, effectively enlarging it to approximately 3 centimeters.[31]

Aguilar and Wecht also point out that this is corroborated by the size of the holes through Connally's jacket and shirt, 1.5 cm and 1.3 cm respectively. So, it seems that much of NOVA's analysis is based on a false premise. I'm not aware of any correction or retraction on the part of NOVA or PBS regarding this matter. If there was one, few would know. Aguilar suggests that this case exemplifies the fact that "junk science continues to snooker the mainstream media" (2016). In fairness, it may be that a convincing response to Aguilar and Cyril is possible, and that NOVA and its experts are right after all.[32] But the question at hand is this: Are we really justified in just assuming this to be the case simply because *mainstream media sources have an incentive not to present simple matters of fact incorrectly*?

Let's briefly consider one last example. Glenn Greenwald, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who played a significant role in bringing to light Snowden's NSA spying revelations, argues that the mainstream media (1) got the Russiagate[33] story wrong, (2) has

[29]Other examples, or at least purported examples, of media misrepresentation and spin regarding the evidence in conspiracy theory cases abound. For a recent example, see Aguilar (2016), and for a historical analysis, see Hennelly and Policoff (1992), both regarding the JFK case.

[30]Cyril Wecht is a distinguished forensic pathologist. He has been president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, Allegheny County Coroner and Medical Examiner, and a member of the forensic pathology panel for the House Select Committee on Assassinations. He is also a long-time critic of the Warren Report.

[31]HSCA Appendix to Hearings, Volume VII, p. 142. Available on History Matters Archive: https://www.history-matters.com/archive/jfk/hsca/reportvols/vol7/html/HSCA_Vol7_0076b.htm. Bracketed material included in the original HSCA report. Quoted in Aguilar and Wecht (2015: 132). See also Aguilar and Wecht (2016), and Aguilar (2016) (which contains copies of Aguilar and Wecht 2015 and 2016).

[32]I'm being very generous here. It is unlikely that the claim that the wound was three centimeters would hold up at the end of inquiry. For even Lucien Haag himself, NOVA's expert who promoted the 3 cm claim, in an article written after the NOVA program, makes his argument on the basis of Connally's wound being 1.5 cm, though continuing to argue that the bullet was yawing (Haag 2019: 338).

[33]The key element in Russiagate is that President Trump had colluded with the Russians to inappropriately influence the 2016 election. The Russiagate case has the interesting twist that it is the mainstream media that is accused of promoting a conspiracy theory.

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not owned up to it, (3) will face no consequences for irresponsible and misleading reporting, and (4) all this has "destroyed the credibility of the U.S. media."[34] It is beyond the scope of this article to establish that Greenwald's perspective is correct. But it is not obvious that he is wrong. How should we decide? According to Harris's reasoning, we don't need to even try to weigh the evidence. Greenwald is *most probably* wrong, and we should *leave it at that*, because what he is asserting is not compatible with a simple heuristic: the mainstream media has an incentive to get things right, and to quickly correct themselves when they screw up. But that is just not adequate.

The bottom line is this: Harris has not shown that consulting non-mainstream sources is problematic, or that we are best advised to uncritically trust views promoted in our mainstream media. A conspiracy theorist may have specific reasons, as well as general reasons, to think that mainstream sources are biased on a particular issue. They may have spot-checked facts and found at least some of the mainstream media reporting to be skewed. In some cases, their reasoning might be circular, and criticizable on that count. But this need not always, or even typically, be the case. In any particular case, we would have to scrutinize the details. Likewise, the quality of reporting can only be determined by looking at the specifics of particular cases. We cannot conclude, based on the combination of virtues and vices suggested by Harris, and the assumed reliability of the mainstream media perspective, that conspiracy theorizing is problematic. And we cannot conclude, without consideration of the evidence in question, that there is something criticizable about any particular instance of conspiracy theorizing. And so, as far as providing guidance for thinking about proposed conspiracy theories, Harris's analysis of epistemic virtues and vices and its relation to actively seeking information from non-mainstream sources is unhelpful, and potentially misleading.

5. Critique #3a: Conspiracy theorists have no basis for believing their information sources

Harris's third critique shifts the focus from how conspiracy theorists can disbelieve conventional accounts to how they can affirm alternative ones. Conspiracy theorists get their information from a variety of sources, including both mainstream media sources and alternative media sources. Harris is particularly concerned with how they can rely on the latter, but I will address both, starting with the former.

Few conspiracy theorists are radical sceptics or believe that the mainstream media is entirely filled with liars covering up for conspirators. Rather, they tend to believe (or, in any case, only *need* to believe) that there are powerful, or powerfully connected,

[34]Greenwald's rant on *Democracy Now* is worth quoting at length: "[W]e [i.e. the mainstream media] were talking about Putin blackmailing Donald Trump with pee-pee tapes and Donald Trump being a Russian agent since 1987, which was a cover story that was on *New York* magazine, that Chris Hayes put on MSNBC. Just all kinds of moronic conspiracies, that we love to mock other countries' medias for circulating and disseminating, drowned out our airwaves and our discourse for three years … The game is over, and it's time to be honest about it. And the more we try to cling to this and invent new – you know what it reminds me of? In 2003, when the neocons finally had to face the truth that there were no WMDs, that they had fabricated that, that the media had misled millions of people around the world for years, and they started saying, 'Um, maybe Saddam hid them in Syria. Maybe they're buried in places we just haven't looked yet.' It's time to face the truth. The media got this story wrong. They obsessed on this for three years, and all this time there was no evidence for it. It was just a conspiracy theory. Rachel Maddow, the most influential liberal TV host in the country, every single night misled millions of liberals into believing something that was totally false, and there will be no media consequences for it" (Goodman 2019). Greenwald cites and endorses fellow journalist Matt Taibbi's (2019) essay, "It's Official: Russiagate is this Generation's WMD" (2019), which details the mainstream media's long series of missteps on the Russiagate issue.

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interested parties that can influence information sources when deemed sufficiently important. For example, conspiracy theorists might suspect that, for fear of losing sponsors, news agencies would tend not to dig into issues involving pharmaceutical companies that might reveal something scandalous. But if mainstream news agencies *do* engage in reporting that generates such a scandal, there is little reason to think it is made up or exaggerated.[35] After all, statements against one's interest are generally (and legally) regarded as more reliable than self-serving statements.

Suppose a defendant testifies that he was indeed at the scene of a murder but claims he didn't commit it. A juror may not believe the defendant is trustworthy, and reasonably doubt his claim of innocence, and yet nevertheless believe that his testimony is truthful regarding his presence at the scene. A conspiracy theorist may interpret media reports in an analogous way. They may believe that the mainstream media is biased toward certain official accounts (especially if the alternative is toxic), consistently trying to spin things to support the official view. And yet, when the media reports something that supports a counter-narrative, conspiracy theorists may (depending on the circumstances) legitimately regard *that* as relatively reliable.[36]

The model that governs the thinking of many, perhaps most, conspiracy theorists seems to be this: while *some* journalists may actually be intelligence assets, *most* are just trying to do their job responsibly. The latter type's tendency to support, or at least not challenge, certain official stories can be explained as a combination of bias and some degree of career-motivated self-censorship. After all, while journalists get rewarded for breaking most kinds of stories, they generally know better than to support toxic ideas, and so it is best for them to not even *believe* those. Thus, the conspiracy theorist may have good reasons to be skeptical of the mainstream reporting when they offer a certain take on certain issues, and yet regard them as more reliable when they provide evidence that cuts the other way.

Harris, however, seems more concerned about the level of trust he believes conspiracy theorists place in *alternative* media sources. In one formulation of this critique, Harris suggests, what is objectionable about conspiracy theorizing is that the skepticism involved is "often attended by, and even motivated in part by, a dogmatic acceptance of certain sources of information as reliable" (Harris 2019: 256).[37] This criticism, however, is only applicable to conspiracy theorists who actually do have a dogmatic acceptance of dubious sources of information, such as conspiracy theorists who uncritically accept everything said by Alex Jones. That leaves a lot of conspiracy theorists unscathed. In any case, one cannot legitimately criticize the activity of conspiracy theorizing itself by pointing to qualities that only apply to *some* conspiracy theorists.

However, in another formulation of this criticism, Harris casts a wider net. He writes, "[G]iven the level of scepticism that conspiracy theorists must adopt toward certain sources of information, it is unclear how a conspiracy theorist can maintain trust in the alternative sources needed to derive warrant for their preferred conspiratorial explanation" (Harris 2019: 255). Here, it seems, the trust that conspiracy theorists have in alternative sources need not be dogmatic to be criticizable. But why would it

[35]They may have an interest in exaggerating scandals in general, for better ratings, but not in exaggerating scandals involving major sponsors.

[36]How do conspiracy theorists explain the existence of reports that seem to provide "errant data"? They may be reported before an official account has taken hold, or before it is clear that the information reported will support a counter-narrative. Or, they may simply be a manifestation of the fact the influence of the powerful is not complete.

[37]The information sources referred to are those through which "evidence for the conspiracy account will typically be filtered" (Harris 2019: 256).

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be that *some degree* of trust in some alternative sources could not be warranted? As mentioned above, the quality of alternative sources varies. Further, as alluded to above, it is unclear what the "level of scepticism that conspiracy theorists must adopt toward certain sources of information" really is. Presumably most conspiracy theorists do not take a radically skeptical view of the mainstream media, as Harris's reference to Descartes implies they do. So, it is not at all clear that the conspiracy theorist's level of skepticism about mainstream media creates a serious "problem for deriving positive warrant for conspiracy explanations." For one thing, it is often possible to check these secondary sources with primary sources. For example, much of the work produced by the JFK research community is well-sourced to official documents, including the 26 volumes of documents produced by the Warren Commission.

6. Critique #3b: There is no basis for choosing between alternative conspiratorial accounts

Harris considers "a second problem for deriving positive warrant for conspiracy explanations" (Harris 2019: 256). Namely, "Because any number of conspiratorial explanations can be constructed, all of which account for the data equally well, the conspiracy theorist often lacks sufficient warrant for belief in any particular conspiratorial explanation" (Harris 2019: 256). Harris rephrases it, with a bit more elaboration, this way:

> [I]f one seeks to provide explanations of this sort [i.e. one that accounts for the event, the official account of it, and errant data], any number of conspiratorial explanations will fit the data, and hence will be equally supported. Thus, the conspiracy theorist has no basis for determining that some particular group of conspirators, as opposed to some other group, is responsible for the event in question. (Harris 2019: 256)

While, strictly speaking, it is true that "any number of conspiratorial explanations will fit the data" it does not follow, and indeed is unlikely, that they will all be "equally supported," or that "the conspiracy theorist has no basis for determining that some particular group of conspirators, as opposed to some other group, is responsible for the event in question." Fitting the data, which is always going to be a matter of degree, is not the only relevant consideration. The underdetermination of theory by data is also an issue in science, in which one is often presented with competing theories that (at least largely) fit the data. Broadly speaking, prior probability[38] considerations and explanatory power both have to be considered, and "fitting the data" is only one aspect of explanatory power. It is one thing to "fit" (not contradict), it is another to explain, and still another to predict.

In order to fit the data, one theory may posit that a key individual (perhaps one facing indictment) was pressured to act in a subtle but significantly corrupt way, while another theory may posit a large number of people with no apparent motives, or even disincentives, acting in a series of coordinated and outrageously corrupt ways. Clearly, the fact that they both "fit the data" doesn't imply that there is no basis for finding one theory to be better than the other.

In general, it seems true that the potential for variety in conspiratorial explanations is nearly limitless, but that does not mean that all account for the data *equally well*. It is

[38]Prior probability refers to the likelihood of a phenomenon based only on background considerations and thus judged prior to considering directly relevant evidence. Simplicity is an element of prior probability, as is the knowledge that certain types of things are known to happen.

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true that one can always expand the scope of the conspiracy to explain a phenomenon, but that is done at an *epistemic cost*. An explanation that relies on a large number of unlikely conspirators to account for some data does not account for it *as well* as an alternative conspiratorial explanation which is more modest in scope and implicates only individuals with plausible motives. For example, one conspiratorial explanation of the RFK assassination implicates Thane Eugene Cesar, who was standing immediately behind Kennedy's right side, hated the Kennedys, and falsely claimed to have sold his .22 before the assassination.[39] One could also construct an explanation involving interdimensional aliens. Both explanations can be made to account for the evidence, but that does not mean they do so equally well. Aliens with supernatural powers can nearly always be made to provide as much explanatory power as any more mundane explanation. But they do so at a severe cost in prior probability. Whether or not the view that Cesar shot Kennedy is true or warranted, it is certainly *better* than any view that implicates interdimensional aliens, even though the latter can also be made to "fit the data." It is also better than an account that "fits the data" only by suggesting that all the eyewitnesses are lying because they are in on it.

It is the combination of prior probability and explanatory power that determines the best of competing explanations, taking into consideration all of the relevant particulars. Harris has not provided a sound reason to think that, when these considerations are weighed, alternative theories will not vary in their degree of warrant.

7. Is Harris's critique a generalist one?

Harris suggests that he is not putting forward a generalist argument. For he explicitly recognizes that "A generalist view, according to which conspiracy theorising is invariably irrational, is plainly unfounded. … [T]here are plainly instances of rational belief in conspiracy theories and rational conspiracy theorising" (Harris 2019: 240). But if his points are not generalist ones – if they don't undermine conspiracy theorizing as a legitimate activity based on generalizations about it – then what force *do* they have? Although, some of his points have no force at all, or so I have argued, some of them suggest this: conspiracy theorizing should be carried out with a certain kind of care, and when this care is lacking, *that* is criticizable. Harris himself writes, "I do not mean to suggest that all conspiracy theorists commit the sort of errors described in the preceding sections. However, there are epistemic grounds on which to criticize those that do" (Harris 2019: 257). Harris, then, has not, even by his own lights, shown that conspiracy theorizing is inherently problematic, but only that it can be done badly – a fact that is only too obvious. The proper implication, even if his analysis of the problems of conspiracy theorizing held up, would be that one ought to be cautious about it. But that doesn't tell us much about conspiracy theorizing in particular. For one ought to be cautious about one's belief formation in general, including accepting official accounts, especially if the alternative would likely be toxic. So, contrary to the rhetorical import of his opening paragraph, it is not merely "standard criticisms of conspiracy theorising" that "fail to demonstrate that the practice is invariably irrational" (Harris 2019: 235). His own criticisms, he ultimately admits, wouldn't demonstrate that either, even if they had held up.

So, why then is a "relatively charitable attitude" toward conspiracy theories not thought to be appropriate? After all, if conspiracy theorizing is not itself inherently

[39]Though far from new, this view has been recently adopted by Robert Kennedy Jr. See "Thane Eugene Cesar Killed Robert Kennedy says RFK Jr." *Daily Mail*, 12 September 2019. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/fb-7456957/THANE-EUGENE-CESAR-KILLED-ROBERT-KENNEDY-SAYS-RFK-JR.html.

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problematic, and if conspiracy theories might be right, and important, why should such theories be given a less than charitable hearing? Harris seems to suggest that the answer has to do with how pervasive the problems he has proposed are. The "epistemic errors" that he describes, he maintains, are "heavily implicated in conspiracy theorising" (Harris 2019: 257). And so, Harris argues that "[The particularist] position, according to which whether conspiracy theorising is irrational must strictly be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, fails to recognize the extent to which conspiracy theorizing may involve problematic reasoning patterns" (Harris 2019: 240). However, "the extent to which conspiracy theorizing may involve problematic reasoning patterns" remains uncertain and speculative. Harris's critique of probabilistic modus tollens turns out to be inapplicable. In addition, it is not clear that conspiracy theorizing involves less attention to one's biases than conspiracy debunking or other intellectually active efforts of conventionalists. And it is not clear that intellectual sloth, or blind acceptance of official stories, is preferable. Further, it is not clear that conspiracy theorizing cannot be grounded in judicious assessments of the credibility of relevant information sources.

But perhaps there are other problems with conspiracy theorizing. Indeed, Harris suggests that there are. He explains, "There is good reason to think that there are traits or reasoning strategies characteristic of conspiracy theorising. Belief in a given conspiracy theory strongly predicts belief in other conspiracy theories, even in cases where the conspiracy theories are incompatible" (Harris 2019: 240; citing Goertzel 1994 and Wood *et al.* 2012). Unfortunately, there seem to be problems with this too. Social scientists who study conspiracy theorists have been slow to recognize that believing a particular conspiracy theory to be true gives one a reason to increase one's assessment of the prior probability of analogous conspiracy theories, and thus *legitimately* increases one's likelihood of believing other conspiracy theories. The type of reasoning seemingly employed here – the argument to best explanation – is not only legitimate, it is pervasive, and thus does not suggest there is a noteworthy reasoning strategy characteristic of conspiracy theorizing. Further, one of the two studies Harris cites (Wood *et al.* 2012) misleadingly makes it appear as if conspiracy theorists are irrational, even though their evidence does not warrant that conclusion.[40] Wood *et al.* drew a conclusion about *beliefs* based on data about how "plausible, convincing, worth considering, and coherent" (Wood *et al.* 2012: 771) participants thought various claims were. Essentially, Wood *et al.* conflated *believing* with *giving some degree of credence*. It is not irrational, or in any way epistemically problematic, to find two contradictory theories relatively more plausible, convincing, worth considering, or coherent than some other people did.[41]

Still, while some of the relevant social science research may be flawed, other research suggesting that conspiracy theorists have a tendency to certain types of poor reasoning that is measurably greater than average may survive scrutiny. So, let's assume, for the sake of argument, that there is some truth in the notion that conspiracy theorizing often involves greater than average problematic reasoning patterns. What are the implications? Harris reasons as follows: "If there are problematic traits or reasoning strategies

[40]Juha Räikkä and Lee Basham explain, "An examination of the paper [i.e. Wood *et al.* 2012] reveals that its conclusion is based on a conflation of *suspicion* with *settled belief*. Suspicions do not generate contradictions" (Räikkä and Basham 2019: 186 n16).

[41]For a detailed critique of Wood *et al.* (2012), see Hagen (2018*a*: 305–10). This article also contains critiques of other social science treatments of conspiracy theories. For more such criticism, see Hagen (2018*b*); Räikkä and Basham (2019); and Dentith (2018*a*: Chapters 5–11), namely Dentith (2018*b*), Basham and Dentith (2018), Basham (2018*b*), Husting (2018), Hagen (2018*c*), Orr and Dentith (2018), and Raab (2018).

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characteristic of conspiracy theorising, there may be *prima facie* grounds for scepticism about the epistemic merits of conspiracy theorising even if certain instances of conspiracy theorising are epistemically unimpeachable" (Harris 2019: 240).

Even if there are measurable differences in the average quality of reasoning between conspiracy theorizing and coming to accept official accounts, that would not justify treating any particular case of conspiracy theorizing uncharitably or giving any particular conspiracy theory anything less than a fair hearing. (A fair hearing could still be a short one if the theory had obvious serious problems – such as implicating lizard-people.) For one thing, quality of thinking and degree of bias varies considerably from individual to individual, and from context to context. The existence and extent of poor conspiracy theorizing does not reduce the quality of better conspiracy theorizing; the existence of Alex Jones does not give us a reason to dismiss Peter Dale Scott, Nefeez Ahmed, or Jim DiEugenio.[42] The strength of the arguments provided by more careful and reflective conspiracy theorists does not depend on whether the number of sloppy and unreflective conspiracy theorists goes up or down. Just as we should not judge the arguments of St. Thomas Aquinas by reference to the thinking patterns of average Christians, we should not judge particular conspiracy theories by reference to the characteristics of average conspiracy theorizing.

8. Conclusion

Has Harris succeeded in showing that "a range of epistemic errors are pervasive among conspiracy theorists" (Harris 2019: 235)? Not really. While perhaps there are pervasive errors, Harris has not shown that conspiracy theorizing involves an invalid appeal to probabilistic modus tollens, or that errant data cannot constitute significant evidence. He has also not shown that the conspiracy theorizing is significantly more problematic than the belief-forming processes of intellectually slothful conventionalists, intellectually active conspiracy debunkers, or investigators embedded in institutions with conflicts of interest. And he has not shown that conspiracy theorists can have no basis for trusting their information sources or for making judgements between alternative theories.

Harris's arguments do suggest that conspiracy theorizing *can* be done badly, but that was already obvious. And while it may be the case that conspiracy theorizing *is* often done badly, conventionalist thinking can also be done badly, and probably is often done badly as well. Further, even if it turns out that conspiracy theorizing is statistically worse than conventionalist thinking (which is likely, but beyond the scope of either Harris's article or this one to determine), that would not provide us with a good reason to think conspiracy theorizing *itself* is problematic, nor would it give us a solid justification for dismissing conspiracy theories rather than being mindful of our biases as we evaluate the relevant arguments and evidence, and make judgments about the reliability of sources.[43]

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[42]Peter Dale Scott is a versatile academic, and a former Canadian diplomat, who has published books on both the JFK assassination and 9/11 at the University of California Press. Nefeez Ahmed is a British journalist/scholar who has provided a nuanced critique of the 9/11 Commission's account of 9/11. Jim DiEugenio has written extensively on the JFK assassination and manages the website KennedysandKing.com. He is one of many sober and extremely knowledgeable critics of the Warren Report.

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