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Shit Happens

ABSTRACT

In this paper I embrace what Brian Keeley calls in "Of Conspiracy Theories" the absurdist horn of the dilemma for philosophers who criticize such theories. I thus defend the view that there is indeed something deeply epistemically wrong with conspiracy theorizing. My complaint is that conspiracy theories apply intentional explanations to situations that give rise to special problems concerning the elimination of competing intentional explanations.

INTRODUCTION

There's little doubt that at least *some* conspiracy theories deserve dismissal on the grounds of their kookiness. But are *all* conspiracy theories dismissible? And are they dismissible on grounds intrinsic to their being *conspiracy theories*? Much fruitful recent discussion of these questions includes and builds on Brian Keeley's 1999 article "Of Conspiracy Theories" which takes more than just titular inspiration from Hume's "Of Miracles". Hume argued famously that we should lend no credence to reports of miracles and the lack of credibility attaching to such reports is due to their being reports *of miracles*. Keeley explores the possibility of doing for conspiracy theories what Hume did for miracles. Keeley raises serious doubts about *some* conspiracy theories, but argues that a case against conspiracy theories cannot be as strong as Hume's case against miracles.

Of particular interest for the current paper is a dilemma that Keeley raises toward the end of his 1999 discussion. The first horn of the dilemma is that the more we lend credence to conspiracy theories—theories postulating powerful agents cooperating to commit evil while succeeding in avoiding detection—the more we are pushed to a kind of skepticism about *any* of our institutions. The second horn of the dilemma is that the less we lend credence to the core idea that agents are able to control events, the more we are pushed to a kind of absurdism whereby historical events may happen due to causes, but not for any *reason*. The horns of Keeley's dilemma are foreshadowed by his paper's two epigraphs. The first is from Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*:

> The only thought which philosophy brings with it, in regard to history, is the simple thought of Reason—the thought that Reason rules the world, and that world history has therefore been rational in its course.

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The second is attributed to a popular contemporary bumper-sticker: "Shit happens." My aim is to argue for acceptance of the second horn of Keeley's dilemma.

The organization of the rest of the paper is as follows. First, I discuss the definitions of conspiracy theories discussed by Keeley and others, highlighting crucial vulnerabilities of conspiracy theories. Next, I briefly review Hume's key remarks on miracles. Finally, I exploit the vulnerabilities of conspiracy theories and argue that in any choice between a conspiracy theory and a declaration of "shit happens" we are no worse off for choosing the latter.

WHAT'S A CONSPIRACY THEORY?

Keeley (1999) supplies a definition of conspiracy theories which is accepted by Clarke (2002) and criticized and refined by Coady (2003). Keeley's definition is (1999, 116):

> A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret.

Coady's definition is (2003, 201):

> A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of an historical event, in which conspiracy (*i.e.*, agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event which it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an "official" explanation of the same historical event.

There are certain features of these definitions that will be of special importance to my arguments and I highlight them immediately below.

Conspiracy theories postulate

1. explanations of
2. historical events in terms of
3. intentional states of multiple agents (the conspirators) who, among other things,
4. intended the historical events in question to occur and
5. keep their intentions and actions secret.

Aspects of the Keeley and Coady definitions that I omit discussion of are not aspects I necessarily reject; I just don't think them especially pertinent to the points I would like to make. Thus, for example, I remain neutral on whether Coady is right to include in his definition that "the proposed explanation must conflict with an 'official' explanation of the same historical event".

I take it that these five elements are agreed by the mentioned authors to be individually necessary conditions on being a conspiracy theory. For the current purposes, I can remain neutral on whether the five are jointly sufficient for conspiracy theories. (Perhaps Coady is right that we need to add something about opposing an

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official story.) I aim to defend the view that any theory that satisfies all five of the criteria that constitute my working definition of a conspiracy theory is a theory that we have no more reason for believing than any of the possible alternate theories.

I would like to clarify the five elements of my definition of conspiracy theories. Regarding the first element, that conspiracy theories postulate explanations, there is much that could be discussed concerning the highly vexed notion of explanation, but as I intend it here, an explanation is (or is a true description of) an efficient cause of an event.

The second element—that the events in question are historical—means more than that they happened in the past, but also that what is being explained is a past event *token* (such as the assassination of JFK) not a past event *type* (such as past assassinations in general).

The third element, and this is perhaps most important to the points I want to make, is that the explanations posited by conspiracy theories attribute a large role to the intentional states—the beliefs and the desires—of the agents involved. The third element so stated is perhaps redundant since it is implicit in the fourth and fifth elements. But its importance makes it merit separate mention.

Intentionality is implicit in the fourth element insofar as it is required that the historical events explained were *intended* by the conspirators.[1] Additionally, intentionality is required insofar as it is required in being a *conspirator*. Being a conspirator involves working cooperatively and thus doing things that involve the co-conspirators appropriately adopting the intentional stance toward one another so as to, e.g. give, receive, and understand orders, formulate plans, and agree to act in accordance with plans. One of the most significant activities of conspirators that involve intentionality is to engage in the fifth element: agree to keep their plans and activities *secret*.

Call the idea that intentionality is required for deceptive activities such as keeping secrets *the intentional analysis of deception*. The idea here, as accepted by various researchers,[2] is, as Andrews (2007) puts it: "[F]or me to deceive you is for me to intend that you believe something that is not true." One consideration in favor of this intentional analysis of deception is that it helps explain the difference between telling a lie and other utterances of falsehoods such as mistaken expressions due to ignorance.

Of course, the intentional analysis of deception is not entirely uncontroversial. Andrews (2007) offers counterexamples to the intentional analysis of deception in the form of non-human animals that deceive without meta-representation. However, it is not clear that these sorts of counterexamples undermine the applicability of the intentional analysis of deception to the sorts of cases most relevant to the current discussion, namely the sorts of deception intentionally performed by and against moral agents.

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HUME

It will be useful to briefly review Hume's case against miracles (or, at least, a case worth considering Humean), in order to assess the degree to which an analogous case can be made against conspiracy theories. In keeping with Humean empiricism, *if* one were to be justified in believing that a miracle occurred, the justification must come from one of two sources, both of which are grounded in experience. The first is to be an eyewitness to the miraculous event. The second is to rely on the testimony of others, which, on the Humean view, itself is trustworthy only insofar as its reliability has been established by direct observation. However, because of what it is about miracles that makes them miraculous, namely that they are events contrary to the laws of nature established by patterns of experience, miracles run afoul of both sources of justification.

Miraculous events supposedly experienced by one's own self raise doubts about the veracity of the experience. Since the experience breaks the pattern of what is *usually* experienced—the pattern that establishes a law of nature which would be broken if something miraculous was indeed observed to occur—doubts arise concerning whether the experience was, for example, illusory or hallucinatory. I will have little else to say about analogies between Hume's points about the observability of miracles and any putative reasons one might currently have for believing in conspiracy theories, since being *historical* explanations, the events in question happened in the past and are unlikely to be observed in our lifetime yet alone observed at the current moment.[3] More important, then, are analogies between miracles and conspiracies that have to do with reasons for believing them based on testimony.

Miraculous events alleged by the testimony of others raise doubts about the reliability of the testimony. Hume puts the point concerning, for example, an allegation of resurrection, as follows:

> When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened (section 21).

I turn now to consider an analogous question asked of the claims of a conspiracy theorist promoting his or her pet theory: for any allegation of a conspiracy by a conspiracy theorist, is it more probable that the theorist is either deceiving or deceived or that the conspiracy posited never really happened?[4] Modifying slightly yields the question: for any proposed conspiracy-theoretic explanation, is there another explanation at least as probable as the one being proffered? If, for any conspiracy theory, there is, in virtue of its being a conspiracy theory, always another explanation that is at least as probable, then the conspiracy theory cannot be known to be true.

Hume's case against the warrant of accounts of miracles was that sufficient credence in miraculous occurrences could not be gained from either testimony or apparent direct observation. I turn now to construct an analogous case against the warrant of conspiracy theories. Central in the remaining discussion will be problems raised by the roles of intentional states in conspiracy theories.

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CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS EXTREMELY PROBLEMATIC INTENTIONAL EXPLANATIONS

Each of the five elements of the definition of conspiracy theories gives rise to distinct problems for the believability of any given conspiracy theory. And jointly, they make any theory that satisfies all five criteria a theory for which we have no more warrant than any other theory alleging to explain the same data (including other theories that satisfy all five criteria).

I want to spend very little time describing the sorts of problems that the first element raises for conspiracy theories, for I have nothing original to contribute here and there is a large literature on causation, including, of course, Hume's famous contributions. It's worth keeping in mind, of course, Humean problems concerning the observability of causes *qua* causes—problems concerning whether one can perceive an event alleged to be a cause *as* a cause or whether instead coincidental event conjunctions are perceptually indistinguishable from cause-effect pairings. But, like I said, I have little else to contribute to discussions of such issues.

I'm happy, however, to spend considerably more time on the second element of the definition of conspiracy theories, namely that the causes posited concern historical events. Some of the main Humean worries that the second element gives rise to concern the difficulty in gaining justification concerning the occurrence of singular past events.

For some event particulars, we are justified in believing in their occurrence because they are instance of some generalizations of experience. Though I haven't checked for cars parked on my street today, they've been there every other day and I'm thus confident that they are there now. Past events that we regard as historical, like particular battles or assassinations, do not instantiate generalizations of experience relevantly analogous to the car example. Whatever my justification is in believing that Kennedy was shot on November 22, 1963, it isn't a generalization based on him having gotten shot on the day before, and the day before the day before. This is not to deny that this particular event doesn't fall under *some* generalizations. Of course there are generalizations about bullet trajectories or wounds that are applicable. But the particular event, the shooting death of JFK, doesn't fall under a generalization as such, that is, *qua* shooting death of JFK.

Jerry Fodor (2007) raises similar points in his argument that historical explanations seldom subsume events under laws:

> Napoleon lost at Waterloo because it had been raining for days, and the ground was too muddy for cavalry to charge. So, anyhow, I'm told; and who am I to say otherwise? But it doesn't begin to follow that there are laws that connect the amount of mud on the ground with the outcomes of battles.
>
> I suppose, metaphysical naturalists (of whom I am one) have to say that what happened at Waterloo must have fallen under some covering laws or other. ...[However,] it isn't remotely plausible, that whatever explains why Napoleon lost at Waterloo likewise explains why Nelson won at Trafalgar; i.e. that there are laws about the outcomes of battles as such, of which Nelson's victory and Wellington's are both instances. 'Is a battle' doesn't pick out a natural kind; it's not (in Nelson Goodman's illuminating term) 'projectible'.

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Our reasons for believing in certain statements about event types can be grounded in our own patterns of experience. In contrast, my reasons for believing in some *token* event are either that I experienced it myself or that it was reported by some observer whose reliability I have reason to accept. Perhaps this latter reason can be tied to induction based on experiences of the reliability of the observer. However, historical explanations aren't descriptions of observed historical events. They are descriptions of causes (*qua* causes) of historical events, and as such, their observability is highly dubious. That is, besides being currently unobservable because they have already happened, historical events are unobservable *qua* causes for Humean reasons concerning the perceptual indistinguishability of causation and coincidence.

Because of the second element of the definition of conspiracy theories, conspiracy theories are at least as susceptible to being *post hoc* as any other historical explanation. However, we see that things are even worse for conspiracy theories when we move on to consider the third, fourth, and fifth elements of the definition of conspiracy theories.

To set the stage for the problems that the third, fourth, and fifth elements raise for conspiracy theories as explanations, I'd like to briefly review points that can be raised against folk psychology's usefulness for *predictions*.

I assume here a symmetrical relationship between prediction and explanation whereby what's cited in the explanation of an event that has already occurred can just as well have served to predict the event prior to its occurrence and vice versa.[5] Thus, whatever skepticism may be raised about the *predictive* power of folk psychology has a basis that can also be a basis for skepticism about the *explanatory* power of folk psychology.

Morton (1996) raises various problems for the view that the function of folk psychology is to serve as a predictive device. Part of his case concerns two features of intentional states that make them especially ill-suited as bases for the prediction of human behavior. Morton discusses these features under the labels of "holism" and "entanglement".

Morton's worry about holism is that *if* one were to predict an action of an agent in terms of beliefs and desires, one cannot do it in terms of a single belief-desire pair but must instead advert to whole systems of belief and desire. Thus, to adapt an example of Morton's, a prediction that a person will leave the building through the front door cannot be based simply on an attribution to her of a desire to leave and a belief that the front door is the only exit, since one must also rule out the possibility that, for example, she believes the front door to be connected to a trigger for a bomb.

We see that things are even more complicated when we consider what Morton calls "entanglement," namely, the fact that, as he puts it:

> We want to produce, or to avoid, situations which are defined in terms of what other people want, believe, and feel. ....[M]any of the decisions a person makes are directed at outcomes which depend not just on that person's actions plus the way the world is, but on those actions plus the way the world is *plus the decisions of other people*. And those other people's decisions are directed at outcomes which depend in part on what the first person decides.

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> So each decision-maker has typically to take account of several other decision-makers, and of how each of these may take account of each other's taking account of their deciding, and so on. (122–123)

Given the relationship between prediction and explanation, holism and entanglement raise problems for intentional explanation as well as for intentional prediction. If someone does leave the building, explaining her leaving in terms of her having a desire to leave will require attributing a whole host of other desires as well as beliefs. And if she leaves the building with friends, entanglement requires us to cite the many beliefs and desires of each of her friends, many of which will be beliefs and desires about the beliefs and desires of the other friends (not to mention people outside of the circle of friends).

Due to the holism of intentional explanation, even when a single agent is involved, the attribution of a single belief-desire pair will be consistent with a wide range of competing intentional explanations that differ with respect to what other beliefs and desires are attributed. Any given attribution of a belief-desire pair is thus highly likely to simply be *post hoc*. We already know that the event happened, and distinct competing intentional explanations may seem equally plausible with no real basis for choosing between them. Things certainly get no easier when multiple agents and the concomitant occasions for entanglement are thrown into the mix. Further, due to holism and entanglement, for any belief-desire pair attributed, there are equally plausible explanations that don't attribute that belief-desire pair. The negation of the belief-desire pair can be made consistent with the available evidence by making adjustments to the auxiliary intentional hypotheses.

These points apply not only to our hypothetical lady who left the building. It is easy to see how holism and entanglement raise serious problems for conspiracy theories, especially in virtue of the third and fourth elements of the definition of conspiracy theories.

Consider a conspiracy theory described by Keeley concerning how members of the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) were allegedly behind the April 19, 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City:

> [A] group of right-wing ideologues (including McVeigh, Nichols, Fortier, and the mysterious John Doe #2) were indeed plotting to blow up a federal building. Their actions were being monitored by the BATF, however. (On some accounts, their actions were being influenced by the BATF. John Doe #2 was actually a BATF informer, or perhaps even a plant. The BATF hoped that swooping in and stinging a group of "dangerous, right-wing terrorists" at the very last moment would do much to erase their public image as an organization of bumbling incompetents resulting from the fiasco in Waco.) In any case, McVeigh and his friends were involved, but only tangentially. McVeigh helps assemble the bomb, but he is unaware of the exact plans for its use, or is actively misled. At the last moment, the BATF screws up, loses contact with the group or are outsmarted by them and the terrorists successfully carry out their act of terror. McVeigh—unaware that the bombing has occurred—is picked up by the police. The BATF realize that they have a public relations nightmare on their hands: they knew about the bombing, but through sheer incompetence and a desire to grandstand, failed to prevent it. When McVeigh is picked up in an unrelated incident,

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> they see their chance to cover up their own involvement in and knowledge of the incident. He is the perfect patsy because he does have some involvement in the incident, but does not know the whole story. (Keeley 1999, 115–116)

Note that in order for the conspiracy theory to be true, many intentional states must be truthfully ascribed. For example, to the BATF must be attributed

1) the desire to monitor McVeigh et al
2) the hope that swooping in and stinging a group of 'dangerous, right-wing terrorists' would help erase their public image as an organization of bumbling incompetents
3) the belief that they had a public relations nightmare on their hands
4) the desire to solve their public relations problem
5) the belief that they can cover up their own involvement in and knowledge of the bombing
6) the desire to cover up their involvement
7) the belief that McVeigh doesn't know the whole story

Additionally, to McVeigh must be attributed

8) the desire to blow up the building
9) the desire to help assemble the bomb
10) a lack of knowledge about the bomb's exact use[6]

Attribution of all of these intentional states brings up concerns about holism and many of them additionally bring up concerns of entanglement. Due to holism and entanglement, the set of ten intentional states described above is consistent with a vast number of distinct sets of auxiliary intentional states. Further due to holism and entanglement is the fact that the *negation* of all ten intentional state attributions (the negation of the disjunction) is consistent with the available evidence given appropriate alterations in the auxiliary intentional attributions. There are thus a vast range of possible alternate intentional explanations and very little basis for choosing between them. This makes the initial conspiracy theory look *post hoc*.

THE LOST ART OF KEEPING A SECRET

In ordinary cases of intentional explanation, one sort of thing that can sometimes be appealed to for the elimination of alternate hypotheses is the testimony of agents whose actions partially constitute the explananda. We can gain support for various hypotheses concerning what the agents were thinking by *asking* them what they were thinking. Of course, the utility of such testimony depends largely on a presupposition of veracity. And thus does the fifth element of the definition of conspiracy theory present its special problem, since the aforementioned supposition of truthful testimony is completely out of place when the agents in question are hypothesized to be engaged in various acts of deception.

Of course, part of the trouble the fifth element raises for conspiracy theories has to

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do with the way the intentional account of deception further raises concerns of holism and entanglement. In keeping with holism, there are many beliefs and desires that must be attributed when describing someone as a liar. In keeping with entanglement, describing someone as a liar will involve their beliefs about what the beliefs of those who are lied to will be. Further in keeping with entanglement, many of the beliefs and desires attributed to the liar will involve those concerning their co-conspirators. However, the *main* problem raised by the fifth element is that in calling certain agents liars, one is thereby cut off from a possible means for reducing the amount of difficulty that would otherwise be raised by holism and entanglement. This is the *main* problem raised by the fifth element because the other problems raised by deceit—the ones concerning holism and entanglement—are just special cases of problems raised under the headings of the third and fourth elements.

One way to appreciate the main problem raised by the fifth element would be by way of illustration concerning the hypothetical lady who left the building discussed in the previous section. Because of holism, there are many different sets of intentional states that are consistent with the woman's behavior of having left the building. One way we might seek to rule out competing hypotheses is by *asking her*. Now, since people aren't infallible experts about their own mental states, this method isn't perfect. However, it helps. But whatever help might be gained is thrown out the window if we suspect the person might be *lying*.

My central claim may be summarized as the following conjunction of conditionals. If something is a conspiracy theory, then it has all five elements of my working definition. If something has all five elements of my working definition, then it is unwarranted, or at least no more warranted than a declaration of "shit happens". I don't anticipate that there will be many objections to the first conjunct, since it is apparently agreed to be true by many if not all of the philosophers writing on the subject since Keeley's 1999 paper. Especially interesting, then, is the question of what plausible objections may be raised against the second conjunct.

One place to look for such counterexamples is in claims that various parties to the current debate have made to the effect that there are conspiracy theories (and thus things satisfying the five elements) which are nonetheless warranted. Keeley (1999, 118) offers as prima facie warranted conspiracy theories Watergate and the Iran-Contra Affair. We might likewise regard as prima facie warranted conspiracy theories the common belief that Al Qaeda was behind the 9/11 attacks and that the Nazis perpetrated the Holocaust. We can focus the concern that needs to be addressed in terms of a pair of questions. Aren't we warranted in the common belief that, say, Al Qaeda blew up the World Trade Center? And isn't the common belief that Al Qaeda blew up the WTC a conspiracy theory?

The strategy I currently find most appealing is to answer the first question positively and the second negatively. The next question that immediately arises is: Why aren't these prima facie warranted conspiracy theories really conspiracy theories? My answer is that they fail the necessary condition of keeping secret. However, this point needs to be made with special care.

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The need for care arises because there are several ways in which one can fail to keep secrets, not all of which are useful in discussing conspiracy theories. One way is by getting caught and being compelled to testify in a criminal investigation. In this case one may have tried and then failed to keep the secret. A related way of failing to keep secret is illustrated by terrorists broadcasting their involvement in a plot in order to take credit for its success. In this case the sense in which they fail to keep a secret is by no longer even trying to keep it secret. Another way is of failing to keep secret when direct evidence (video tape of someone building and planting a bomb) renders the secret no longer kept.

Now, not all senses in which there are failures of keeping secret should count as violations of the fifth element of the definition of conspiracy theories. Let us discuss these senses in terms of keeping secret the proposition P. If you believe P and, despite my torturing you, you keep your trap shut and don't spill your guts by saying P, then that seems like a pretty standard sense of having kept your secret. And this can be true even though I've managed to discover by other means both that P and that you know P. Now, there's another sense of keeping P secret wherein my knowing P logically entails that P has not been kept secret (even though you and your conspirators all kept zipped lips).

It is important that the first and not the second sense of keeping secret is the one utilized in formulating the fifth element of the definition of conspiracy theories. To appreciate this, consider the following. If conspiracy theorists believe their own theories to be warranted, then if the interpretation of "keeping secret" is in terms of the second sense, then in believing their own theory, conspiracy theorists would not be believing in a conspiracy, since, in a sense, they don't believe the secret has been kept.[7] We can avoid this problem by insisting on interpreting the fifth element along the lines of the first sense of what it means to keep a secret.

A conspiracy theory attempts to leap over a wall of posited secrecy via attempts at inference to the best explanation. The main problems arise in establishing that the proffered explanation is indeed the best instead of swamped by multiple equally plausible explanations. In cases that we are warranted in believing, perhaps cases such as the belief that Al Qaeda planned the 9/11 bombings, we aren't stuck making such a leap. And thus, in such cases, we aren't really buying into a conspiracy theory.

AVOIDING BOTH THE CONSPIRACY THEORY CONSPIRACY AND THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR ERROR

My main complaint about conspiracy theories may be summarized as the view that they are multi-agent intentional explanations of historical events that give rise to problems of holism and entanglement that cannot be resolved by the testimony of the conspirators, since the conspirators are liars. It is difficult to see, then, how conspiracy theories can be anything other than *post hoc*.

Given the heavy emphasis that my complaint puts on the attribution of intentional states, it will be useful to compare my complaint to one that Clarke (2002) makes

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against conspiracy theories, a complaint which similarly involves intentional states. My interest here is to see whether my remarks are vulnerable to the sort of criticism that Coady (2003) raises against Clarke.

In brief, Clarke diagnoses conspiracy theories as being rife with commissions of something referred to by various social psychologists as the "fundamental attribution error." The fundamental attribution error is supposed to occur in explanations that give an inappropriate emphasis to "dispositional" as opposed "situational" factors. As Clarke illustrates the distinction:

> When I ask you to explain what caused Manfred's motoring accident, you could provide a dispositional explanation by citing what you take to be features of Manfred's personality. For example, you could tell me that Manfred is (disposed to being) careless. Alternatively you could appeal to relevant features of the situation that Manfred was in to explain the occurrence of the accident. You would be doing this if you told me that the accident was caused by the difficult driving conditions presented by the wet road that Manfred's car was on. (2002, 144)

The fundamental attribution error is supposed to be relatively widespread in human thinking (Nisbett and Ross 1980, 1991; Ross and Anderson 1982). Clarke sees it as especially widespread in conspiracy theorizing and cites the fundamental attribution error as an explanation for why conspiracy theorists would persist in their theorizing even in the face of evidence that they are perpetuating a degenerating research program.

As Clarke puts the main point:

> As explanations, conspiracy theories are highly dispositional. When conspiracies occur it is because conspirators intend them to occur and act on their intentions. The conspiratorial dispositions play the role of the cause in a typical explanation that involves a conspiracy. In most cases the received view, the conventionally accepted non-conspiratorial alternative to a particular conspiracy theory, is a situational explanation.... If you believe that the US military leadership are reluctant to discuss the Roswell Incident because there is no such incident to discuss, you are basing your belief on a situational factor. By contrast, if you believe that the US military leadership are conspiring to keep the public unaware of contact with alien species, which occurred at Roswell, New Mexico, you would presumably explain the US military leadership's persistent denials of knowledge of the incident by appealing to their disposition towards conspiratorial paternalistic behaviour. (2002, 145–146)

Coady (2003) rejects Clarke's explanation in terms of fundamental attribution error. Coady raises a concern that would apply to *all* explanations that attributed commissions of the fundamental attribution error. As Coady puts the point:

> The problem is not just that there is insufficient evidence for the existence of the fundamental attribution error, it is that belief in the phenomenon is itself deeply paradoxical. Those who say there is a widespread tendency to commit the fundamental attribution error themselves seem to be committing that very error. After all, if we do exaggerate the importance of dispositions in our explanations of behaviour as...Clarke and others suggest, this is itself a disposition, which purports to explain a great deal of our behaviour. The more we explain by appeal to the fundamental attribution error, the more we will ourselves be

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> committing the fundamental attribution error. Belief in the fundamental attribution error appears to be self-refuting, in much the same way that naïve set theory and logical positivism are. (2003, 208)

If Coady is right in his criticism of Clarke, then we might call the error made by Clarke and others the "fundamental attribution error error." My concern in the remainder of this section is to address the worry that perhaps my own complaints against conspiracy theories are vulnerable to a similar charge—a charge that my complaint is self-refuting.

Like Clarke's complaint against conspiracy theories, my own complaint focuses quite a bit on conspiracy theorists' attribution of intentional states to the conspirators. Is my own complaint against conspiracy theories self-undermining? It would be if what I was hypothesizing conformed to the definition of conspiracy theories. That is, my complaint would be self-undermining if what I was hypothesizing was a conspiracy theory conspiracy—a collection of conspirators hell-bent on churning out conspiracy theories and actively covering up their true motives. However, my complaint against conspiracies diverges in important ways from conspiracy theories themselves.

Consider, for example, that what I am offering conforms to neither the first nor second elements of the definition of conspiracy theories. That is, I am not offering either a causal explanation or an account of a particular historical event. I am not offering an explanation of why any particular conspiracy theory was ever put forward. My aim is instead to say what it is about the content of conspiracy theories in general that makes them prone to being *post hoc* and thus not particularly credible.

The following question arises, of course. Just how far does the lack of credibility of conspiracy theories serve to push us toward the "shit happens" horn of Keeley's dilemma? To what degree must we agree with the point of view Keeley expresses as follows?

> Rejecting conspiratorial thinking entails accepting the meaningless nature of the human world. Just as with the physical world, where hurricanes, tornadoes, and other "acts of God" *just happen*, the same is true of the social world. Some people just do things. They assassinate world leaders, act on poorly thought out ideologies, and leave clues at the scene of the crime. Too strong a belief in the rationality of people in general, or of the world, will lead us to seek purposive explanations where none exists. (1999, 126, emphasis in original)

One way of approaching the question of whether we must thereby embrace Keeley's lesson is by comparing conspiracy theories to non-conspiracy theories that differ only with respect to whether they conform to the fifth element of the definition of conspiracy theories. Such non-conspiracy theories would thus be theories that postulate (1) causal explanations of (2) historical events in terms of (3) intentional states of multiple agents who, among other things, (4) intended the historical events in question to occur but *do not* (5) keep their intentions and actions secret. Examples would include just about any historical explanation involving multiple people. How big is the gap in credibility between these kinds of non-conspiracy theories and conspiracy theories?

The answer to this latter question depends on the degree to which the fifth element

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exacerbates the problem with conspiracy theories. If the overwhelming problems with conspiracy theories are pretty much just due to the first four elements of the definition, then we really do have to embrace the horn of Keeley's dilemma and declare that in the course of human history, time and again, "shit happens". If, on the other hand, the non-conspiracy theories which satisfy only the first four elements do fare quite a bit better for not postulating the veils of deception essential to their conspiratorial counterparts, then grounds can be given for resisting an absurdist worldview. My own view of the matter, and the case I have tried to make in the current paper, is that the elements prior to the fifth one create most of the trouble and the prospects for resisting absurdism are quite slim.

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NOTES

1 As Coady correctly points out, an explanation of events due to the failed plans of a conspiracy "is unlikely to be thought of as a conspiracy theory" (200).

2 See, for example, Dennett (1978) and Wimmer and Perner (1983).

3 Witnessing a conspiracy is unlikely but perhaps not impossible. Brian Keeley (personal communication) raises an interesting issue that I am unfortunately currently unable to say much else beyond the current note. The issue concerns whether a conspirator would be in a position to justifiably believe in the conspiracy they are a member of. Perhaps the right thing to say here is that only if there *were* conspirators would they be warranted in their beliefs in their conspiracy. In keeping with attempts to draw analogies between miracles and conspiracies, perhaps an analogous thing to grant is that only if there were gods and angels would they be warranted in believing in the miracles they performed. However, in both the conspiracy and the miracle case, the concessions amount to very little, since the crucial questions concern whether we, being neither gods nor conspirators, are warranted in believing in the existence of beings who have performed certain feats.

4 One point worth noting, though not one I'll spend much time discussing, is that an analogy might be drawn between the motives of those who relay reports of miracles and those who concoct conspiracy theories.

5 See Hempel and Oppenheim (1948, 138).

6 As David Coady (personal communication) correctly points out, a lack of knowledge seems not to be an intentional state, but an absence of one. Nonetheless, attributions of states of ignorance to persons depend on attributions of other intentional states in a way that, for instance, saying of a rock that it lacks knowledge does not. Thus are such attributions to persons prone to problems concerning holism and entanglement in ways that homophonic attributions to rocks are not.

7 I am grateful to Paul Gowder for raising this concern.

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