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Introduction: Conspiracy Theories

There has been a lively philosophical debate about the nature of conspiracy theories and their epistemic status going on for some years now. This debate has shed light, not only on conspiracy theories themselves, but also, in the process, on a variety of issues in social epistemology, political philosophy, and the philosophy of religion.

Conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists have a bad reputation. When asked to identify typical examples of conspiracy theories, most people come up with theories which are clearly irrational (or at least which they think of as irrational). Some will refer to theories involving conspirators who are virtually omnipotent or omniscient. Others will cite theories involving alleged conspiracies that have been going on for so long or which involve so many people, that it is implausible to suppose they could remain undetected (by anyone other than the conspiracy theorists who believe in them). Still others mention theories involving conspirators who seem to have no motive to conspire (unless perhaps the desire to do evil for its own sake can be thought of as a motive).

Such conspiracy theories are irrational, but it's not clear whether we should conclude that conspiracy theories are universally or even typically irrational. On the face of it, thinking of irrational conspiracy theories as paradigms of conspiracy theories is like thinking of astrology as a paradigm of a theory of celestial motion. The subject matter of a theory does not usually determine whether belief in the theory is irrational. Roughly speaking, contributors to this issue can be divided into those who accept the association between conspiracy theories and irrationality and go on to elaborate the nature of this irrationality, and those who argue that conspiracy theories (and conspiracy theorists) do not deserve their reputation for irrationality.

In the opening essay, Brian L. Keeley, whose 1999 article "Of Conspiracy Theories" started the recent flurry of philosophical interest in the subject, extends his original analysis to theological issues. Keeley argues that there are interesting epistemic similarities (and differences) between secular conspiracy theories and explanations of worldly events which postulate the activities of supernatural agents. This leads him to defend agnosticism about the existence of God against several authors who have argued that such agnosticism is logically untenable. The rough idea is that some critics of agnosticism and some critics of secular conspiracy theories have unreasonably tried to apply epistemic standards which may be appropriate in the natural sciences, but which are not appropriate when the object of investigation can be presumed to take an interest in the investigation's outcome. When you are searching for something which, if it exists, would be both powerful and unwilling to be discovered, you should expect

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evidence of its existence to be hard to come by. Indeed, you should expect there to be plenty of readily available evidence that it does not in fact exist.

The next essay is about "fundamentalist beliefs", rather than conspiracy theories as such. Michael Baurmann argues that in certain social conditions, especially those in which there is a high degree of mistrust towards other groups, belief in objectively irrational "fundamentalisms" can be subjectively rational. Although belief in conspiracy theories is often rejected as a form of fundamentalism, in certain societies belief in conspiracy theories can be objectively as well as subjectively rational.

In the next essay, Steve Clarke challenges the widespread view that conspiracy theories have flourished on the internet. It has often been argued that the difficulty of assessing the reliability of information to be found on the internet has led to a proliferation of conspiracy theorising. In fact, Clarke argues, the openness of the internet has tended to inhibit the development of conspiracy theories. Clarke's discussion is illustrated with a case study, "the controlled demolition theory" of the collapses at the World Trade Center. Clarke's analysis of the errors of this particular conspiracy theory is philosophically insightful and sophisticated. Readers must determine for themselves whether these errors are characteristic of conspiracy theories in general. As Clarke recognises, the alternatives to controlled demolition theory (and in particular what Clarke calls "the Al Qaeda theory") also postulate conspiracy, and hence they are also conspiracy theories according to many definitions (including Clarke's).

Of course we would not normally be inclined to think of the Al Qaeda theory as a conspiracy theory, because, as I have argued elsewhere (Coady 2003), we normally think of conspiracy theories as theories which conflict with officially endorsed versions of events. In the next essay, Neil Levy takes up this suggestion, arguing that conspiracy theories, so understood, should be treated with *prima facie* scepticism. He argues that conspiracy theorists typically fail to recognise how "radically socialized" our knowledge is and that as a consequence they are inclined to exaggerate their ability to identify the correct explanation of social phenomena without the help of relevant epistemic authorities.

In the next essay I take issue with some aspects of Levy's characterisation of conspiracy theorists. I argue that conspiracy theorists need not be particularly sceptical of epistemic authority as such. I also argue that the pejorative way in which the expression "conspiracy theorist" is currently used is highly undesirable, and consider a variety of possible responses to this situation. One possibility would be to stop using the expression altogether. Another would be to retain its use but without the connotations of irrationality. I argue that it may even be possible and desirable for the expression to acquire positive connotations.

In the next essay Pete Mandik develops an earlier suggestion of Keeley that we can apply an analogue of Hume's argument against belief in miracles to show that belief in conspiracy theories is also unwarranted. Much will depend here on whether one accepts Hume's argument against belief in miracles. Much will also depend on whether one accepts the analogy. Mandik goes on to develop Keeley's suggestion that conspiracy

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theorists go wrong by attempting to apply intentional explanations in contexts where such explanations are inappropriate. Like Keeley, he characterises conspiracy theorists as people who fail to recognise that sometimes shit just happens.

In the final essay Charles Pigden takes a very different line. Framing the issue as a problem in the ethics of belief, he argues against the conventional wisdom that conspiracy theories should neither be believed nor investigated. Pigden considers a variety of interpretations of the expression "conspiracy theory" and finds that on each of them the conventional wisdom is a mistake. Not only is it a mistake, it is an extremely dangerous mistake. Pigden argues that the conventional wisdom is inconsistent with the ideals of liberal democracy.

This connection between the epistemology of conspiracy theories and political philosophy suggests that the correct approach to the former cannot be settled *a priori*. Whether and to what extent we should be disposed to offer conspiratorial explanations (especially when those explanations conflict with officially sanctioned ones) depends to a large extent on political and social context. The more open one's society the less rational conspiracy theorising in it will be. This does not mean, however, that conspiracy theorising in our society is always irrational. We are inclined to move too quickly from the observation that contemporary Western societies usually have little formal censorship to the conclusion that we have no need to be concerned about conspiracy. The numerous well-confirmed conspiracies discussed in this collection attest to the irrationality of that attitude (Pigden's article is a particularly rich source of case studies).

The openness of a society is determined by several factors, including the diversity of its media, the effectiveness of its freedom of information laws, and, more broadly, the independence from one another of the institutions it relies on to gather and disseminate information. The important question is not whether conspiracy theories or theorists are irrational, which can be given no once-and-for-all answer, but rather what would a society in which conspiracies are comparatively rare or of little importance be like.[1] Being a conspiracy theorist would be *prima facie* irrational in such a society, but that is not to say that conspiracy theories would all be false or that conspiracy theorists would not serve a useful social purpose.

The appropriateness of conspiracy theorising depends not only on the kind of a society you live in, but also on the role you occupy in that society. A conspiracy theorist can be seen as the occupant of an important specialised social role. It comes with certain personal risks, including risks to the conspiracy theorist's own rationality. It is a role that people take on for a variety of reasons, some good and some bad, but it is clearly not a role which should be restricted to a group which has been officially authorised to engage in it (political journalists working at established media outlets, for example). This is because, to a large extent, the role of the conspiracy theorist is to investigate officialdom. So there is no potential utopia in which conspiracy theorists are unneeded because institutional arrangements are such that significant conspiracies do not happen. As more than one author in this collection observes, "the price of liberty is eternal vigilance".

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Note

1 Lee Basham has made a similar point, see (2003, 103).

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