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INTRODUCTION: BELIEF IN SUPERNATURAL BEINGS

Belief in conspiracies and extraordinary/supernatural beings (ghosts, our dead relatives walking among us, guardian angels, etc.) remains highly popular. Occasionally, such a theory turns out to be well supported, and indeed correct (the Iran/Contra and Watergate conspiracy theories are both well-supported and true).

However, in many cases, theories of this sort are positively irrational, despite their highly seductive nature. So how is it that the True Believers are able to convince themselves, and others, that what they believe is reasonable? Here's a suggestion.

The recipe for generating a successful new supernatural and/or conspiracy theory usually involves two key components.

1. Identifying supposed 'mysteries' that an appeal to your preferred *unseen being(s)* operating behind the scene easily solves (e.g. Q: Why did the twin towers came down like that? A: It was an 'inside job' – a controlled demolition by the CIA; Q: Why can't I find my keys – I was *sure* I put them on the sofa? A: Gremlins hid them; Q: Why do plants grow? A: Fairies make it happen). By positing hidden beings with exceptional – even magical – powers it's easy to explain whatever needs explaining (the existence of gremlins really does easily explain the disappearance of your keys, for example, and the existence of fairies does easily explain the growth of plants).

2. Be ingenious at *explaining stuff away*. Any apparent evidence *against* your theory can always be accounted for given sufficient ingenuity. For example, if you believe the royal family are alien shape-shifters, cook up explanations for why they're never spotted in alien form, how they could possibly have got here, infiltrated the royal blood line, etc. If you believe there are gremlins in your home, explain why you never see them by suggesting they're invisible, or

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extremely sneaky, etc. *Consistency* with the available evidence can always, by such means, be achieved.

So, you can now (often correctly!) declare:

(i) that your supernatural or conspiracy theory easily explains, by appeal to hidden agency, what orthodox theories supposedly struggle to explain, and

(ii) that your new belief system is *consistent with the evidence*!

If you think a belief system that posits such hidden agency is reasonable because it ticks boxes (i) and (ii), I suggest you think again. Clearly, pretty ludicrous belief systems can also tick both boxes. *That* can't be the reason the belief system is reasonable, if indeed it is . . .

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