

The Problem of Conspiracism

Matthew R. X. Dentith

University of Bucharest

Abstract

Belief in conspiracy theories is typically considered irrational, and as a consequence of this, conspiracy theorists—those who dare believe some conspiracy theory—have been charged with a variety of epistemic or psychological failings. Yet recent philosophical work has challenged the view that belief in conspiracy theories should be considered as typically irrational. By performing an intra-group analysis of those people we call “conspiracy theorists”, we find that the problematic traits commonly ascribed to the general group of conspiracy theorists turn out to be merely a set of stereotypical behaviours and thought patterns associated with a purported subset of that group. If we understand that the supposed problem of belief in conspiracy theories is centred on the beliefs of this purported subset—the conspiracists—then we can reconcile the recent philosophical contributions to the wider academic debate on the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories.

Keywords: conspiracy, conspiracies, conspiracy theory, conspiracy theories, conspiracism, conspiracist, epistemology

1. Introduction

When is a conspiracy theorist not a conspiracy theorist? When she is a government minister! Or, if that punchline does not work for you, how about: When she is a respected member of the press! Or: When she is an academic who writes on conspiracy theories! Typically, when we think of conspiracy theorists we do not think of people who theorised about the existence of some particular conspiracy—and went on to support that theory with evidence—like John Dewey (who helped expose the conspiracy behind the Moscow Trials of the 1930s), or Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (who uncovered the conspiracy behind who broke in to the Democratic National Committee Headquarters at the Watergate office complex in the 1970s). Instead, we think of the advocates and proponents of weird and wacky conspiracy theories like David Icke (who believes that shape-shifting alien reptiles control the world), or Alex Jones (who believes—among many things—that FEMA is setting up death camps all over America in preparation for a socialist takeover). As their particular views are considered—at the very least—strange, and—at worst—irrational, people often

come to the conclusion that conspiracy theories are the kind of thing deeply-weird people believe.

Associating conspiracy theories with the noteworthy advocates or proponents of such theories is understandable. Many of these proponents came up, or—at the very least—popularised the theories in question. However, it does not follow that our views about people like David Icke or Alex Jones tells us much, if anything, about the merit of their theories. This approach of characterising belief in conspiracy theories generally because of the faults of certain conspiracy theorists, I argue, gets the matter of analysing belief in conspiracy theories back-to-front. To show this, we will first look at the works of Karl Popper and Richard Hofstadter, which set the stage for this analysis. The work of these elder statesmen will then be contrasted with recent work on the issue in Philosophy, which is more sympathetic towards conspiracy theorising. We will then compare the current philosophical project examining belief in conspiracy theories with the work coming out from the social sciences, which centres discussion of belief in conspiracy theories in terms of conspiracy theorists suffering from a variety of epistemic or psychological vices, which is often put under the label of “conspiracist ideation”, or “Conspiracism”. My contention is that we cannot use the class of conspiracists as a general reason to be suspicious of conspiracy theorising in particular, and that the faults of the conspiracist are—should such theorists even exist—overrated.

2. Back to the Beginning: Popper and Hofstadter

Much of the contemporary discussion of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists comes out of replies to—or extensions of—the seminal works of Karl Popper or Richard Hofstadter. For example, Popper’s (albeit brief) discussion in “The open society and its enemies” frames talk of conspiracy theories with respect to the thesis of the “conspiracy theory of society”: conspiracy theorists believe that history can be explained as the result of successive and successful conspiracies. Popper’s argument against the conspiracy theory of society is that as it is obvious history is not the result of a succession of conspiracies, conspiracy theorists must be wrong. Belief in conspiracy theories turns out to be, by extension, irrational.¹

Richard Hofstadter—some twenty years later—characterised belief in conspiracy theories as being similar to paranoid ideation.² The “paranoid style”, as Hofstadter dubbed it, is an analogy between belief in conspiracy theories—characterised as the belief that sinister conspiracies are behind everything—and classical paranoia. Hofstadter was not making a clinical diagnosis that conspiracy theorists are paranoiacs. Rather, our suspicion of conspiracy theories *generally* is justified because of how closely such conspiratorial claims *resemble* paranoid ideation. If paranoiac ideation is irrational, then belief in conspiracy theories will, by analogy, be irrational too.

Both Hofstadter and Popper agree that conspiracies occur. Whenever two or more people plot (a conspiracy requires more than just a lone wolf), typically in secret towards some end, then we have a *prima facie* example of conspiratorial behaviour. For Popper, then, the issue was one of justification: conspiracy

¹ Popper 1972: 341-42.

² Hofstadter 1965.

theorists simply ascribe too much causal power to conspirators and their conspiracies, and thus do not have good reason to believe conspiracies are the motive force in history. Hofstadter's critique was phrased along folk-psychological lines: paranoiacs have a predisposition to think they are being persecuted when they are not, and conspiracy theorists see powerful conspiracies against them where none exist.

The central worry captured by Popper and Hofstadter, then—a concern which continues to resonate throughout the literature as we will see—is that while conspiracies may very well occur, the kind of people who believe in *theories* about conspiracies—conspiracy theorists—do not form these beliefs in the right way, or for the right reasons. That is to say, the problem with conspiracy theories is typically taken to be something to do with the character of the conspiracy theorist. But can we really explain away what, if anything, is wrong with belief in conspiracy theories simply by appealing to the character flaws of conspiracy theorists?

3. Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorists

The term “conspiracy theory”, at least in academic circles, is often used as a pejorative. Yet when broken down into its constituent parts, the term “conspiracy theory” merely suggests some theory about a conspiracy, one which attempts to explain the occurrence of some event with reference to a conspiracy as a salient cause. This is certainly the position of much recent philosophical work on the subject. Philosophers such as Brian L. Keeley,³ Charles Pigden,⁴ David Coady,⁵ Lee Basham,⁶ and myself⁷ have all argued for some variation of the following definition:

Conspiracy theory: any explanation of an event which cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause.

According to views which fit this definition, belief in a *particular* conspiracy theory will be rational when the conspiracy theory ends up being in the pool of the best, or most plausible, explanatory hypotheses for some event. Views which fall under the rubric of this kind of definition tend to share the following two features:

1. They allow us to analyse the different kinds of conspiratorial activity covered by the term “conspiracy theory”, and
2. The analysis of this broader class of conspiratorial explanations shows that belief in conspiracy theories is explicable—if not outright rational—in a range of cases.

Such a definition also allows ordinary users to escape the linguistic trap of saying say “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but...” since—by this definition—we all turn out to be conspiracy theorists of some stripe. As Charles Pigden has written (and reiterated in a number of papers):

³ Keeley 2007.

⁴ Pigden in press.

⁵ Coady 2012.

⁶ Basham 2011.

⁷ Dentith 2016.

Every historically and politically literate person believes and is prepared to believe some conspiracy theories, since both history and the nightly news present many conspiracy theories as facts and others as reasonable hypotheses. You can't be a politically or historically literate person unless you think that although history and the nightly news may have been distorted, they have *not* been systematically faked, that is, that they are reasonably reliable. So every historically and politically literate person believes that *some* of the conspiracies reported by history and the nightly news are real, and thus that the corresponding conspiracy theories are true. It is therefore a condition of being a politically and historically literate person that you accept some conspiracy theories.⁸

3.1 Particularism About Conspiracy Theories

The aforementioned philosophers are—in the parlance of Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor—“Particularists”, whose works on these things we call “conspiracy theories” critique endemic generalising strategies in the wider academic literature. According to Buenting and Taylor, we can contrast the particularist position with what they call “Generalism”.⁹ According to the Generalist, conspiracy theories can be assessed *as a class* without needing to first consider the merits of particular conspiracy theories. Generalists—by-and-large—take it that conspiracy theories are typically examples of irrational beliefs, pointing towards specific, and problematic examples of belief in conspiracy theories as emblematic of belief in conspiracy theories as a whole. For example, they claim conspiracy theorists commit basic errors in probabilistic reasoning,¹⁰ suffer from crippled epistemologies,¹¹ or that there are serious negative social consequences to belief in conspiracy theories.¹² From this they derive their justification for a *prima facie* suspicion that belief in conspiracy theories is *generally* irrational.

Particularists, however, argue that the rationality of any given conspiracy theory can only be assessed by considering the evidence for and against *particular* conspiracy theories. That is to say, we need to take each and every conspiracy theory and judge it on its respective merits. We cannot simply treat it as “another of those *weird* conspiracy theories”. Particularists will point to a litany of recent, and proven conspiratorial activities which had previously been pejoratively labelled as “conspiracy theories”: the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964; the Ford Pinto Scandal of 1977; the Snowden revelations of 2013; and the Volkswagen Emissions Scandal of 2015. Not just that; they will also point towards work by historians which shows that sometimes acting conspiratorially—but claiming suspicions about said activity are just vapid conspiracy theories—is part-and-parcel of our recent history.¹³

⁸ Pigden in press. See also David Coady's concise summation of Pigden's argument in Coady 2012.

⁹ Buenting and Taylor 2010.

¹⁰ Brotherton and French 2014.

¹¹ Sunstein 2009.

¹² Douglas and Jolley 2014.

¹³ For example, Kathryn S. Olmsted's book *Real enemies*, which covers the secrecy behind the US's entry into the First World War, the ills of the McCarthy Era, and the misrepresentations by authorities in the wake of 9/11 for political point-scoring (Olmsted 2009).

For the Particularist, then, there is no principled distinction between a conspiracy theory and the explanation of a historical event which cites a known conspiracy (such as the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44BCE), since they are all examples of explanatory hypotheses which cite conspiracy theories as salient causes of some event. The worry that the Particularist is attuned to is that we tend to express worries about conspiracy theories *generally* before we begin to even analyse them. That is, the generalist view that conspiracy theories are *typically* bunk trumps the realisation we should be assessing such theories—as we should any theory—on their evidential merits.

Particularists do not think that belief in all conspiracy theories is quintessentially rational. Rather, they argue that we cannot dismiss belief in conspiracy theories *generally* just because of the perceived faults of a few conspiracy theories, or theorists. As David Coady argues, it is a standard tactic to deride specific conspiracy theorists, and thus conspiracy theories in general. However, we cannot claim such theories or theorists are undesirable *merely* because they are *conspiracy* theories or theorists. Rather, we would need to establish a connection between being a conspiracy theory or theorist *and* said undesirable characteristics.¹⁴ As such, adopting a *prima facie* suspicion of conspiracy theories *generally* before assessing the particulars of a given conspiracy theory gets things back-to-front, which is to say that fronting “theory” with “conspiracy” should not make a difference as to how we go about assessing claims about the world.

Assessing particular conspiracy theories on their merits is no arduous duty, and Particularists argue not just that their position is epistemically defensible, but the generalist strategy—when considered carefully—is both inconsistent, and has a number of unfortunate consequences. For a start, Generalism relies upon a naïve understanding of the appeal to authority, as well as the role of officialness and endorsements in the rival theories to conspiracy theories, a point David Coady has stressed.¹⁵ For another, Generalists end up looking confused; they fail to principally accommodate both the conspiracy theories they take to be irrational, and theories which cite conspiracies as salient causes that they happen to endorse as warranted; Lee Basham has taken such confusions to task in his work.¹⁶ There is also the social cost of Generalism, a point Charles Pigden has pressed. Pigden argues that we can—and indeed should—expect certain segments of the population—such as investigative journalists, public prosecutors, and other officials who deal with the detection of corruption and malfeasance—to treat conspiracy theories seriously so we do not (necessarily) have to. There is, after all, an ethical case for Particularism, given that *if* conspiracies are occurring, we ought to be investigating them. The fact, then, that journalists, *et al.*, typically treat claims of conspiracy with disdain has the unfortunate consequence of making it all the easier for conspirators to get away with their work, the consequence of which sometimes is literally getting away with murder.^{17 18}

¹⁴ Coady 2012.

¹⁵ Coady 2007.

¹⁶ Basham 2011.

¹⁷ Basham argues that there are certain stories which are “too toxic” to be reported by the media or public officials, which is to say that generalism about conspiracy theories has

Still, it is easy to understand what motivates the various pejorative connotations of both “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist”. Nearly all of us have, at some point, said “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but ...” whilst advancing what is clearly a theory about some conspiracy. When we say “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but...” we are, typically, asserting some *theory* about a *conspiracy* which we happen to think is justified by the available evidence, whilst trying to avoid being lumped in with the weird and wacky conspiracy theorists of this world. Yet a careful consideration of the term “conspiracy theory” shows that this piece of linguistic gymnastics is unnecessary.

At issue, then, is a distinction between the merits of particular conspiracy theories, and the views of particular conspiracy theorists. We worry about being compared to certain conspiracy theorists, and so avoid talk of anything that could be construed as one of those “perfidious conspiracy theories”. Yet this is obviously a problem, because if belief in a particular conspiracy theory is rational according to the evidence, it should not matter who else happens to believe it.

The problem, then, is one of perception. It is not obvious that belief in particular conspiracy theories is irrational. Rather, the issue is being considered a particular *kind* of conspiracy theorist, one who seemingly believes in the existence of conspiracies *sans* evidence, good reason, or just happens to believe such theories as a matter of course.

3.2 Particular Problems with Generalist Positions

This distinction between talk of the peculiarities of certain conspiracy theorists, and the merit of particular conspiracy theories is curiously lacking in much recent work outside of Philosophy. For example, Karen M. Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton claim “[I]n the main conspiracy theories are unproven, often rather fanciful alternatives to mainstream accounts”,¹⁹ and argue that conspiracy theorists are likely to believe conspiracy theories because they are more likely to sympathise with conspirators. In a more recent paper, Douglas and Michael J. Wood write: “[T]he specifics of a conspiracy theory are less important than its identity as a conspiracy and its opposition to the official explanation”.²⁰ Alessandro Bessi, Mauro Coletto, George Alexandru Davidescu, Antonio Scala, Guido Caldarelli and Walter Quattrociocchi characterise conspiracy theories as “Narratives [which] tend to reduce the complexity of reality and are able to contain the uncertainty they generate”.²¹ These are all examples of generalist positions, which take the beliefs or behaviours of some conspiracy theorists as being indicative of what belief in conspiracy theories *generally* entails.

There are also conspiracy theory theorists who take it that the beliefs or behaviours of some conspiracy theorists naturally lead to negative social consequences, and this, then, is a reason to dismiss conspiracy theories *generally*.

produced a reticence to talk about real conspiracies by the very people we should expect to expose them (Basham 2017).

¹⁸ Pidgen 2016. See also his earlier piece, “Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom Revisited” (Pidgen in press).

¹⁹ Douglas and Sutton 2011: 544.

²⁰ Wood and Douglas 2013: 2. See also Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012.

²¹ Bessi *et al.* 2015: 2.

For example, Stephan Lewandowsky, Klaus Oberauer and Gilles E. Gignac claim their “results identify conspiracist ideation as a personality factor or cognitive style[.]” which is immune to evidence-based thinking.²² Karen M. Douglas and Daniel Jolley define conspiracy theories as “[A]ttempts to explain the ultimate causes of events as secret plots by powerful forces rather than as overt activities or accidents”.²³ Whilst they admit that there might be positive social consequences to belief in such theories (questioning who the appropriate authorities are for, what counts as evidence, et cetera) they choose to focus their attention on the negative social consequences of belief in conspiracy theories; they effectively analyse conspiracy theories through the lens of pathological belief in conspiracy theories, ignoring that this talk about the special character of *some* conspiracy theorists tells us nothing about the merit of their respective conspiracy theories. Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French have sought to explain why people believe such theories in terms of the perceived faults of some conspiracy theorists, investigating particular biases towards preferring conspiratorial explanations.²⁴ Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Michele Acker claim “accumulating research findings reveal a range of detrimental perceptions and behaviors that are associated with conspiracy beliefs, including health problems, decreased civic virtue, hostility, and radicalization”.²⁵

All these analyses of belief in conspiracy theories share the same underlying critique that belief in such theories is caused by factors other than arguments and evidence. Yet the arguments are presented as a generalist stratagem: if we can show that *some* conspiracy theorists believe in conspiracy theories for factors other than arguments and evidence, then that somehow shows that conspiracy theories—as a class—are suspect as well. These arguments, then, assume we have grounds to be suspicious of the broad class of conspiracy theories *before analysing whether the grounds for such a suspicion is itself warranted*.

4. A Problem with *Some* Conspiracy Theorists

The most charitable reading of the social science literature is something like this: “Even if we admit belief in particular conspiracy theories can be warranted, we need to respect the notion there exists some kind of pathological belief in such theories”. We can call this notion—which describes the supposed pathological belief in conspiracy theories—*Conspiracism*.

Conspiracism: The view that *belief* in conspiracy theories is typically due to, or caused by, factors other than there being good arguments or evidence in favour of such theories.

²² Lewandowsky, Oberauer, and Gignac 2013: 630. In a follow up paper (notably retracted (Retraction Watch 2014)), Stephan Lewandowsky, John Cook, Klaus Oberauer and Michael Marriott—‘Recursive fury: conspiracist ideation in the blogosphere in response to research on conspiracist ideation’—talk about belief in conspiracy theories as a ‘propensity to explain a significant political or social event as a secret plot by powerful individuals or organizations’ (Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013).

²³ Douglas and Jolley 2014: 35.

²⁴ Brotherton and French 2014: 238.

²⁵ Prooijen and Acker 2015: 1.

The thesis of Conspiracism is at the heart of the aforementioned critiques of belief in conspiracy theories by social scientists.²⁶ It is the thesis that we can explain away belief in conspiracy theories with respect to factors not to do with whether the conspiracy theory is warranted or unwarranted but, rather, an attitude of believing conspiracy theories without respect to the evidence.²⁷

People who suffer from Conspiracism are, then, “conspiracists”, and are the kind of people we typically think believe conspiracy theories for factors other than there being good arguments or evidence in favour of them. A conspiracist will always be a conspiracy theorist (since being a conspiracist requires believing some conspiracy theory), but not all conspiracy theorists will turn out to be conspiracists. Calling someone a “conspiracist” is to add a value judgement to the claim they are a conspiracy theorist by also claiming that they have no epistemic reason to believe said theory.

The terms “conspiracism” and “conspiracist”, then, reflect the common, pejorative labelling typically associated with conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists, which typically marks out that both the theory and the theorist are problematic. Perhaps helpfully (although maybe not) the terms “conspiracist” and “conspiracism” are recurrent in the academic literature, which we might be able to exploit to make sense of “We are all conspiracy theorists!” and the notion that “But I’m not one of *those* conspiracy theorists (aka a conspiracist)!”

Yet, if we are to take the thesis of Conspiracism seriously (which is up for debate, as we will see), we must realise that the issue concerns the putative existence of a certain kind of conspiracy theorists, and not necessarily the theories they believe. This is important, because the existing academic literature is largely insensitive to the distinction between the claims of some presumably *wacky* conspiracy theorists, and the larger, more general class of conspiracy theorists (a class Pigden rightly points out we all belong to). Let us then explore, then, the apparent distinction between conspiracy theorists and conspiracists.

5. Gullible Conspiracist Theorists

As we saw earlier, critiques of belief in conspiracy theories in conspiracist terms can be motivated by the thought such belief has negative social consequences—loss of trust in authority, potential apathy with respect to contemporary political arrangements, and the like—but these consequences may well be rational responses to evidence that the world is more conspired than some would either have us believe or like to think. More troublingly, some of these conspiracist-style analyses resurrect elements of both Hofstadter’s *paranoid style* and Popper’s *conspiracy theory of society*, whether or not the authors intend, or are aware of, it.

²⁶ Conspiracism might be more charitably captured by talk of certain conspiracy theorists mistakenly weighing, or taking as salient irrelevant evidence with respect to some conspiracy theory. However, the worry expressed by a great many social scientists when they engage in conspiracist-like critiques of belief in conspiracy theories is not so charitable. The aforementioned critiques typically claim that we can explain away belief in conspiracy theories *generally* with attitudes or predispositions, rather than an analysis of whether the conspiracy theory is warranted or unwarranted.

²⁷ According to Jack Z. Bratich the term “Conspiracism” became popular in the 1990s, and was a response to the folk-psychology of Hofstadter’s *paranoid style*. Conspiracist-styled critiques centered discussion about conspiracy theories with respect to political ideologies, and what might be considered “dangerous” sentiments (Bratich 2008).

However, if we take seriously the work of Particularists like Coady, Basham, and Pigden (to name but a few), then such generalist critiques of belief in conspiracy theories, especially critiques that posit there are negative consequences to such belief, need to be analysed again.

For example, Jovan Byford presents a Popperian gloss on belief in conspiracy theories, arguing that conspiracists wrongly assume that conspiracies are the motive force in history.²⁸ Bradley Franks, Adrian Bangerter and Martin W. Bauer characterise belief in conspiracy theories as a “quasi-religious mentality”, claiming that belief in conspiracy theories is akin to *magical thinking* and that such “thinking engenders uncompromising fundamentalism that decrease the prospects of fruitful inter-group dialog”,²⁹ which has shades of Popper’s analogy between belief in conspiracy theories and theistic belief.

However, it is the presence of Hofstadter’s thesis of the “paranoid style” that continues to rear its head in the dissection of belief in conspiracy theories. For example, Daniel Pipes characterises people who believe in conspiracy theories as being paranoid in nature, and suffering from some “fear of imaginary conspiracies”.³⁰ Joseph Roisman claims that “conspiratorial allegations filled a psychological need by helping the Athenians to understand and deal with discrepancies between expectations and reality”.³¹ Michael Barkun argues there is a similarity between paranoia and the plots imagined by conspiracy theorists—echoing Hofstadter—and claims that no matter how evidence-based a conspiracy theory might appear to be, “belief in a conspiracy theory ultimately becomes a matter of faith rather than proof”.³² Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule claim that conspiracy theorists suffer from what they call a “crippled epistemology”, which causes such theorists to question what should be considered basic sources of knowledge about the world.³³

Sunstein and Vermeule’s idea that conspiracy theorists are somehow crippled in their thinking has been echoed in two pieces by Quassim Cassam, “Bad thinkers”³⁴ and “Vice Epistemology”.³⁵ Cassam argues that our suspicion of conspiracy theories is justified because conspiracy theorists suffer from epistemic vices: intellectual character traits that impede effective and responsible inquiry. As Cassam puts it: “Intellectual virtues are cognitive excellences, intellectual vices are cognitive defects”.³⁶ Conspiracy theorists—in Cassam’s view—suffer *at the very least* from the epistemic vice of gullibility, and possibly are also cynical and prejudiced to boot.

Cassam’s argument about the gullibility of conspiracy theorists relies on us getting to know Oliver, his fictional conspiracy theorist. Oliver just happens to

²⁸ Byford 2011.

²⁹ Franks, Bangerter and Bauer 2013: 10.

³⁰ Pipes 1997: 26.

³¹ Roisman 2006: 160.

³² Barkun 2003: 7.

³³ Sunstein and Vermeule 2009. Sunstein and Vermeule want to cure conspiracy theorists via “[C]ognitive infiltration designed to break up the crippled epistemology of conspiracy-minded groups and informationally isolated social networks” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009: 227). For a lengthy reply to Sunstein and Vermeule’s prescription, see Kurtis Hagen’s “Is Infiltration of “Extremist Groups” Justified?” (Hagen 2010).

³⁴ Cassam 2015.

³⁵ Cassam 2016.

³⁶ Cassam 2016: 160.

be an adherent of the “Inside Job” set of conspiracy theories about the events of 9/11,³⁷ and he:

spends much of his spare time reading about what he calls the “9/11 conspiracy” and he regards himself as something of an expert in the field of 9/11 studies. He believes that [P] the 9/11 attacks were not carried out by al-Qaeda and the collapse of the World Trade Center towers on 11 September 2001 was caused by explosives planted in the buildings in advance by government agents rather than by aircraft impacts and the resulting fires. As far as Oliver is concerned, the collapse of the twin towers was an inside job and specifically the result of a controlled demolition (Cassam 2016: 162).

The way Cassam portrays Oliver is interesting: his fictional conspiracy theorist’s belief is not based on arguments or evidence, but *merely* an insistence that “it had to be an inside job ... because aircraft impacts couldn’t have brought down the towers”.³⁸ Oliver is one of these perfidious conspiracists!

Now, Cassam claims his interest is chiefly concerned with conspiracy theories that are baseless and false, yet he picks as Oliver’s chosen topic a conspiracy theory which is not, at first glance, either baseless or false.³⁹ No matter what we believe about the plausibility or warrant of the various Inside Job hypotheses, even the most cursory examination of 9/11 conspiracy theories will provide you with numerous examples of conspiracy theorists who use sophisticated arguments, and interesting pieces of evidence to show up the official theory.⁴⁰

The problem is this: it is just not obvious that proponents of such views are gullible in the sense Cassam would have us believe. While people like Oliver may well exist in the community of people who treat claims about 9/11 being an inside job seriously, it is more accurate to say they are—first and foremost—people who are gullible who—secondly—just happen to be conspiracy theorists.⁴¹ It is not clear that Oliver is gullible simply because he is a conspiracy theorist; it is just as likely he is a conspiracy theorist *who just happens to be gullible*. This is a problem because Cassam’s argument relies on characterising the adherents of such theories—the general class of 9/11 inside job conspiracy theorists—as being all like his fictional, deliberately conspiracist creation.

It is not clear, then, that Cassam’s Oliver is a typical *9/11 Inside Job conspiracy theorist*, let alone a typical conspiracy theorist *in general*. Then again,

³⁷ The various “Inside Job” hypotheses claim the U.S. either *made* it happen on purpose (MIHOP), or they *let* it happen on purpose (LIHOP). Either way, the responsible party was the U.S. Government, and the official theory—that Al-Qaeda were behind it—is false.

³⁸ Cassam 2015.

³⁹ Indeed, as Simon Locke has argued, even experts disagree on what counts as clearly plausible, implausible, baseless, or false when it comes to particular conspiracy theories (Locke 2009).

⁴⁰ The official theory of the events of 9/11 is also a conspiracy theory, at least with respect to the definition of such theories defended in this paper. It was the result of secretive activity undertaken by a group of plotters, to wit the Al-Qaeda terrorists.

⁴¹ Cassam’s view is a notably retrograde version of Hofstadter “paranoid style”. As Jack Z. Bratich has argued, Hofstadter talks about the paranoid style as *mimicking rational thought* (Bratich 2008: 32). However, Cassam presents people like Oliver as not even advancing arguments for their conspiracy theories, which makes Cassam’s conclusion terribly trivial.

Oliver is not a real person; Cassam has created him in order to prove a point, going to no lengths whatsoever to show that Oliver is a typical of his kind. Whilst Cassam cites Oliver as a “concrete example”,⁴² he later admits his position can be criticised on the grounds that Oliver is “a fictional case and that while it is open to me to stipulate that Oliver believes what he believes about 9/11 because of his traits of character, nothing follows about the viability of such explanations in the real world”.⁴³ Cassam argues his construal of Oliver fits with the research on belief in conspiracy theories coming out of social psychology, yet one cannot help but think Cassam is constructing a psychological portrait of Oliver to fit that work, all in order to bolster his own case. Certainly, claiming “My fictional creation resembles work in another field” does not, in turn, tell us that his construal of an archetypal conspiracy theorist is the best. Indeed, it suggests Cassam simply shares with the aforementioned social psychologists the same views on those “pernicious” conspiracy theorists.⁴⁴

Indeed, throughout both papers Cassam uses the existence of the fictional Oliver to charge conspiracy theorists as gullible. Of Oliver he says that:

- “[H]e thinks that 9/11 was an inside job because he is gullible in a certain way”.
- “[H]e is the last person to recognise that he believes what he believes about 9/11 because he is gullible”.
- “To describe Oliver as gullible or careless is to say something about his intellectual style or mind-set—for example, about how he goes about trying to find out things about events such as 9/11”.
- “Oliver is gullible because he believes things for which he has no good evidence, and he is closed-minded because he dismisses claims for which there is excellent evidence”.⁴⁵

Cassam repeatedly characterises Oliver as gullible in order to appeal to our intellectual vanity. We do not believe such theories, so those who do—like Oliver—must suffer from epistemic vices. Yet Cassam’s argument suffers from two, obvious faults.

1. The idea conspiracy theorists are, generally, gullible is the product of Cassam’s prejudices about certain conspiracy theorists, rather than something which follows from his arguments about belief in conspiracy theories, and
2. People are just as likely to be sceptical towards conspiracy theories because conspiracy theory theorists—like Cassam—keep telling them they are unwarranted as they are to have investigated said theories for themselves (and, presumably, found them generally wanting).

Cassam ends up using what is, in essence, a rhetorical move in order to get to a pre-ordained conclusion. By defining Oliver as a being a particular kind of

⁴² Cassam 2016: 161.

⁴³ Cassam 2016: 170.

⁴⁴ In early 2015 Cassam described Oliver as someone who researched his 9/11 conspiracy theories, (Cassam 2015) but, a year later, anything remotely resembling an epistemic virtue (for example, engaging in research) has been dropped from Oliver’s description; Cassam seemingly has dumbed down his fictional conspiracy theorist in order to support his conclusions.

⁴⁵ Cassam 2015.

problematic conspiracy theorist—the putative “conspiracist”—Cassam attempts to derive the more general claim that belief in conspiracy theories is predicated by intellectual vice. However, if this is a vice associated with belief in conspiracy theories, it is a vice suffered only by *some* conspiracy theorists. We are the ones who would be gullible—indeed, very gullible—if we believed conspiracy theorists *generally* suffer from epistemic vices. Cassam’s argument would only stand if he restricted his talk of epistemic vices to the set of *problematic* conspiracy theorists. However, if Cassam were only to focus on these putative conspiracists, his general argument about the dangers of belief in conspiracy theories would be seen for what it is, an overstatement.⁴⁶ Indeed, Cassam’s strident insistence about the necessity that the only proper explanation of Oliver’s belief in some conspiracy theory about 9/11 is gullibility seems itself to be the product of the intellectual character trait of *dogmatism*, an epistemic vice.⁴⁷

6. The Problem of Conspiracism

Recall Pigden’s adage: if we are politically or historically literate, then we are all conspiracy theorists of some stripe. So, why then are we so sceptical of conspiracy theorists *and the theories they believe*? Is the generalist position that informs arguments for scepticism of conspiracy theories merely motivated by the suspicion that *some* conspiracy theorists are weird? Are we just mistaking Conspiracism—a thesis that describes a potentially problematic kind of belief in conspiracy theories expressed by *some* conspiracy theorists—with belief in conspiracy theories generally? If that is the case, surely such conspiracy theory theorists should restrict their talk to this subset of conspiracy theorists—the putative conspiracists—who typically believe conspiracy theories *for reasons other than arguments and evidence*? That is to say, they should adopt a particularist position, and talk about the problems of belief for *particular* conspiracy theorists, rather than turning said worries into a scepticism of conspiracy theories generally.

The problem is that what constitutes talk of conspiracist ideation in the academic literature is much too broad; belief in conspiracy theories gets characterised by what we have called here “conspiracism”, and so conspiracy theorists are taken to be *de facto* examples of conspiracists. Now, while we might be able to single out a sub-set of conspiracy theorists who believe conspiracy theories for reasons other than arguments and evidence, the existence of such conspiracy theorists—the class of conspiracists—tells us nothing particularly interesting about belief in conspiracy theories *generally*. It is not obvious *all* conspiracy theorists are conspiracists, let alone that there really are many, if any, conspiracists.

If we end up assuming belief in conspiracy theories is irrational or pathological because *particular* conspiracy theorists appear to be irrational, or have some psychological predisposition to believe conspiracy theories, then we are performing our analysis back-to-front. We should not associate belief in

⁴⁶ Cassam—like Sunstein and Vermeule—advocates a cure for belief in conspiracy theories; his prescription is to encourage virtue epistemology in the education system, and teaching students that political piety (a term I borrow from Basham 2011: 55) is an epistemic good (Cassam 2015).

⁴⁷ For another critique of Cassam, see Pigden 2016.

conspiracy theories generally with a mere subset of believers in conspiracy theories, the putative conspiracists. While there is room for discussion about, say, the psychology of certain kinds of conspiracy theorists, we should not let theses about a subset of conspiracy theorists intrude on a discussion of conspiracy theories generally.⁴⁸

The problem here is this: if we talk about the general class of conspiracy theorists as being *merely* conspiracists, then we end up mistaking potential problems with belief in *particular* conspiracy theories by certain conspiracy theorists with talk of problems with belief in conspiracy theories *generally*. As such, worries about examples of seemingly weird conspiracy theorists—alleged conspiracists like Icke and Jones (or even Cassam’s fictional “Oliver”)—tell us little about the merits, or lack thereof, of their conspiracy theories.

There are two issues at stake here, and unrestricted talk about belief in conspiracy theories as conspiracist in nature confuses the matter. The first issue is the question of when is belief in a particular conspiracy theory warranted or unwarranted? The second issue is whether *some* conspiracy theorists believe conspiracy theories regardless of the evidence? Focussing solely on the second issue *without considering the first* is—it seems—a curious fault of many a conspiracy theory theorist.

This, then, is evidence of a curious double-standard in the literature when it comes to talk about conspiracy theories. For example, it would be silly to tar the thesis of atheism with the facile arguments of certain atheists, who might have been *merely* socially conditioned to be atheists, or turn out to have certain psychological attitudes which makes them think that god (or the gods) do not exist. After all, the truth or falsity of the thesis of atheism is a fact *independent of what we believe about the world*. Either there are gods, or there are not. What makes atheism a rational or reasonable belief for individuals to hold depends on both the available evidence and arguments, rather than the views of actual atheists. Yes, there are what we might call “unreflective atheists”—whose atheism is, say, political rather than epistemic—yet this should not count against the thesis of atheism. In the same way, what makes a conspiracy theory a reasonable belief for someone to hold depends on the arguments and evidence the conspiracy theorist is able to produce. We should not just dismiss questions about the merit of some conspiracy theory *merely* because of the existence of conspiracists.

7. Stipulating Conspiracism

So, how seriously should we take the thesis of Conspiracism? Certainly, it describes a *potential* kind of pathological belief in conspiracy theories, but “potential” is the operative term here. It would be a mistake to assume there is something special about the possibility that some belief in conspiracy theories is predicated on factors other than arguments and evidence. As we saw with the example of the unreflective atheist, people sometimes just believe things without adequate justification. The question, surely, is why would we hold people to a

⁴⁸ Peter Knight argues that critiques of belief in conspiracy theories in conspiracist terms seem to suffer from the faults of Conspiracism itself, as Conspiracism ends up not just being an ideology conspiracists suffer from, but a “mysterious force with a hidden agenda that takes over individual minds and even whole societies” (Knight 2000: 7).

higher standard when it comes to belief in conspiracy theories than we do the holders of other views, or theories?

For example, it is possible to be a conspiracist about perfectly legitimate, and warranted conspiracy theories. Perhaps you irrationally hate Messrs. Blair and Bush, and thus adopt the view that the stated reason for the invasion of Iraq in 2003—to stop the manufacture of Weapons of Mass Destruction—was the product of a disinformation campaign. You would be right, but if your only reason to endorse this particular conspiracy theory was irrational hatred (and not actual evidence) your belief looks conspiracist in nature, rather than the product of healthy conspiracy theorising.

As such, one potential objection to this talk of Conspiracism is that most of us turn out to be conspiracists of some sort. We might think there are two problems here:

Problem one: If we define a conspiracist as “someone who believes a conspiracy theory for factors other than there being good arguments or evidence”, then it might turn out we are all conspiracists.

Most psychologists and philosophers are happy to endorse some version of the following proposition: a great many (if not all) of us hold one belief that we think is true, but for which we lack justification. Justifying our beliefs can be difficult, and many of us believe a number of things that, if challenged, turn out to be unjustified.

For example, a friend keeps telling me that the Gulf of Tonkin incident is a real example of a false flag operation (and thus a conspiracy). I trust them, because they seem like an authoritative source. However, it is quite possible I do not have sufficient justification to trust my friend on this; maybe he has a long history of lying, and even goes so far to create or edit web pages to provide “evidence” for his theories. My belief that the Gulf of Tonkin incident is a false flag may well be one that makes me a conspiracist because I believe the conspiracy theory *despite a lack of adequate justification*.

Note that this particular problem has an interesting corollary: I can be a conspiracist with respect to one conspiracy theory, and be a perfectly normal conspiracy theorist with respect to some other. If we add to this analysis the idea we are all conspiracy theorists of some stripe (*à la* Pigden), then it seems probable (but not necessary) many of us are also conspiracists about at least one conspiracy theory that we believe.

Problem two: If we define a conspiracist as “someone who believes a conspiracy theory for factors other than there being good arguments or evidence”, then it might turn out there aren’t many conspiracists.

A common refrain when discussing conspiracy theories is the claim people believe them for any old reason. However, even a cursory analysis of what conspiracy theorists actually say in support of their theories indicates that they often have quite well-developed arguments for their theories. Richard Gage—a prominent advocate of one of the 9/11 Inside Job hypotheses—has detailed, even sophisticated arguments pertaining to the hypothesis that the Twin Towers were destroyed by a controlled demolition. We might, on close inspection, find fault in his reasoning, but his arguments are not baseless or false in any obvious sense.

As such, one worry about how talk of Conspiracism is being framed here is that many of the conspiracy theorists people might take to be quintessential conspiracists just turn out, on closer inspection, to be normal conspiracy theorists. If their theories are unwarranted, then it is because the arguments in favour of them suffer from problems of validity or soundness in a non-trivial (i.e. not immediately obvious) sense.

Problem one describes what we might deem a specific problem: depending on the conspiracy theory I might turn out to be a conspiracist in one case, and a conspiracy theorist in another. Problem two describes a general problem: as defined, there might not be many, if any, conspiracists. Yet both are bullets we need to bite; it may turn out that there are not that many conspiracists, or if conspiracists exist, most of us will turn out to be one. As long as we are aware of these issues, we can proceed to analyse belief in conspiracy theories, and ask whether Conspiracism is something we need to take into account when analysing the beliefs of individual conspiracy theorists and their particular conspiracy theories.

After all, despite what doubts we might have about construing belief in conspiracy theories *generally* in conspiracist terms, it may still be useful to study Conspiracism and putative conspiracists, given that such a study may well explain particular cases of weird belief in conspiracy theories. Working out why *some* conspiracy theorists—the putative conspiracists—might believe conspiracy theories for factors other than evidence and arguments could be informative. This would especially be the case if we could then link the explanation of conspiracist beliefs to cases where people also believe other theories for factors other than evidence and arguments.

It might also be the case that once we investigate Conspiracism, it will turn out to be a fairly useless thesis, especially if there are not many (if any) actual conspiracists. However, if we are going to treat the thesis of Conspiracism seriously—and investigate it—we need to keep in mind that conspiracists are simply one kind of conspiracy theorist. The putative existence of such conspiracists does not tell us that belief in conspiracy theories *generally* is problematic. The question should be “When, if ever, is a conspiracy theorist a conspiracist?” rather than presupposing that conspiracy theorists suffer from conspiracist ideation.

8. Conclusion

Conspiracy theorists—like most people—typically form their beliefs on the basis of the arguments and evidence available to them. Whilst there are some cases of seemingly irrational, or even pathological belief in conspiracy theories, the existing academic literature is often insensitive to the distinction between claims about the problems of *certain* conspiracy theorists, and claims about the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories generally. This has resulted in the masking of a sly shift of the burden of proof from conspiracy theory theorists on to the pejoratively labelled “conspiracy theorists”: rather than requiring conspiracy theory theorists to support their assertion that belief in conspiracy theories is—in fact—suspicious, talk of Conspiracism effectively requires conspiracy theorists to say “But, I’m not a conspiracy theorist!” in order to avoid being charged with acting irrationally, or suffering from some psychological defect.

We can avoid this unfortunate situation if we recognise that the problem—if indeed it is a problem—is merely found in a *subset* of conspiracy theorists, the so-called “conspiracists”. We would then be able to accommodate the conspiracist-style literature of much of the social sciences, without automatically buying into a pejorative gloss on belief in conspiracy theories generally.

My argument, then, provides additional support for Particularism with respect to conspiracy theories. By diagnosing what is really happening with much work in the social sciences, which mistakes Conspiracism—a thesis about *some* conspiracy theorists—for belief in conspiracy theories generally, we can show why Particularism about conspiracy theories is preferable. So, if someone alleges a conspiracy has occurred, we should examine the evidence for that conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are not the problem; conspiracism *might be*, especially if we end up construing belief in conspiracy theories solely in terms of the conspiracists.⁴⁹

References

- Barkun, M. 2003, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Basham, L. 2017, “Joining the Conspiracy”, *Argumenta*.
- Basham, L. 2011, “Conspiracy Theory and Rationality”, in Jensen, C. and Harré, R. (eds.), *Beyond Rationality*, Newcastle on Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 49-87.
- Bessi, A., Coletto, M., Davidescu, G.A., Scala, A., Caldarelli, G. and Quattrociochi, W. 2015, “Science vs Conspiracy: Collective Narratives in the Age of Misinformation”, *PLOS One*, February, 1-17. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0118093
- Bratich, J.Z. 2008, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Brotherton, R., and French, C.C. 2014. “Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Susceptibility to the Conjunction Fallacy”, *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 28: 238-48. doi:10.1002/acp.2995
- Buenting, J. and Taylor, J. 2010, “Conspiracy Theories and Fortuitous Data”, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 40, 4, 567-78. doi:10.1177/0048393109350750
- Byford, J. 2011, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cassam, Q. 2015, “Bad Thinkers”, *Aeon*, March. <http://aeon.co/magazine/philosophy/intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists/>.
- Cassam, Q. 2016, “Vice Epistemology”, *The Monist*, 99, 159-80. doi:10.1093/monist/onv034
- Coady, D. 2007, “Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational?”, *Episteme*, 4, 2, 193-204.
- Coady, D. 2012, *What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

⁴⁹ Thanks to Brian L. Keeley, Edmund King, Justine Kingsbury, Lee Basham, Martin Orr, Richard G Ellefritz, Tiddy Smith, and Victoria Cockle for feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

Matthew R. X. Dentith was supported by a fellowship at the Research Institute of the University of Bucharest (ICUB).

- Dentith, M.R.X. 2016, "When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation", *Social Epistemology*, 30 (5-6), 572-91. doi:10.1080/02691728.2016.1172362
- Douglas, K.M. and Jolley, D. 2014, "The Social Consequences of Conspiracism: Exposure to Conspiracy Theories Decreases Intentions to Engage in Politics and to Reduce One's Carbon Footprint", *British Journal of Psychology*, 105, 35-56. doi:10.1111/bjop.12018
- Douglas, K.M. and Sutton, R.M. 2011, "Does It Take One to Know One? Endorsement of Conspiracy Theories Is Influenced by Personal Willingness to Conspire", *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50, 544-52. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8309.2010.02018.x
- Franks, B., Bangerter, A., and Bauer, M.W. 2013, "Conspiracy Theories as Quasi-Religious Mentality: An Integrated Account from Cognitive Science, Social Representations Theory, and Frame Theory", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 242, 1-12. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00424.
- Hagen, K. 2010, "Is Infiltration of 'Extremist Groups' Justified?", *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 24, 2, 153-68.
- Hofstadter, R. 1965, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays*, New York: Knopf.
- Keeley, B.L. 2007, "God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theorist", *Episteme*, 4, 2, 135-49.
- Knight, P. 2000, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files*, London: Routledge.
- Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J., Oberauer, K. and Marriott, M. 2013, "Recursive Fury: Conspiracist Ideation in the Blogosphere in Response to Research on Conspiracist Ideation", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 1-15. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00073
- Lewandowsky, S., Oberauer, K. and Gignac, G.E. 2013, "NASA Faked the Moon Landing—Therefore, (Climate) Science Is a Hoax: An Anatomy of the Motivated Rejection of Science", *Psychological Science*, 24, 5, 622-33.
- Locke, S. 2009, "Conspiracy Culture, Blame Culture, and Rationalisation", *The Sociological Review*, 57, 4, 567-85.
- Olmsted, K.S. 2009, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pigden, C.R. (in press), "Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom Revisited", in Loukola, O. (ed.), *Secrets and Conspiracies*, Leiden: Rodopi.
- Pigden, C.R. 2016, "Are Conspiracy Theorists Epistemically Vicious?", in Coady, D., Brownlee, K. and Lipper-Rasmussen, K. (eds.), *Blackwell Companion to Applied Philosophy*, Wiley-Blackwell, Ch. 9.
- Pipes, D. 1997, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, New York: Free Press.
- Popper, K. R. 1972, *Conjectures and Refutations*, Fourth Edition, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Prooijen, J. and Acker, M. 2015, "The Influence of Control on Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Conceptual and Applied Extensions", *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 29, 5, 753-61. doi:10.1002/acp.3161
- Retraction Watch 2014, "Co-Author of Retracted Conspiracy Ideation-Climate Skepticism Paper Addresses Apparent Contradictions", <http://retractionwatch>.

com/2014/04/06/co-author-of-retracted-conspiracy-ideation-climate-skepticism-paper-addresses-apparent-contradictions.

Roisman, J. 2006, *The Rhetoric of Conspiracy in Ancient Athens*, Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Sunstein, C.R. 2009, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*, Oxford University Press.

Sunstein, C.R. and Vermeule, A. 2009, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures", *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17, 2, 202-27. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x

Wood, M.J. and Douglas, K.M. 2013, "What About Building 7? A Social Psychological Study of Online Discussion of 9/11 Conspiracy Theories", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 1-9. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00409

Wood, M.J., Douglas, K.M. and Sutton, R.M. 2012, "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories", *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 3, 6, 767-73. doi:10.1177/1948550611434786