CONSPIRACY THEORY PHOBIA

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Many scholars and journalists have recently posed the question, "Why do people believe in conspiracy theories?" There is no consensus answer, but typical candidates include the suggestions that some people buy into conspiracy theories because they are cynical about politics and authorities, or because they commit epistemological fallacies, or because they believe in one conspiracy theory and are therefore likely to adopt a more encompassing set of conspiracy theories.[1] The question of why some people believe in conspiracy theories is commonly considered very important. The assumption is that if we know why some people tend to adopt conspiracy beliefs then we can develop effective measures to fight their spread. As many scholars have pointed out, some conspiracy theories are potentially dangerous (say, for religious minorities or political dissident communities), and it is important to adopt policy to make those theories less popular, rather than more.[2]

Bucking current scholarly trend, we will consider the reverse question and ask why some people do not explore or believe in conspiracy theories, and why they dismiss suspicions of conspiracy out of hand without appropriate consideration. This is a largely neglected question, and *conspiracy theory phobia* may be the answer.

A person suffers conspiracy theory phobia if (1) she rejects conspiracy theories without an appropriate evaluation of evidence that has been presented, or if (2) her reaction toward particular conspiracy theories is mockery, contempt, hostility, or a straw-person characterization of the argument presented.[3] There is no doubt that conspiracy theory phobia is irrational: Just as those who are a priori drawn to believe conspiracy theories over authoritative explanations exhibit a measure of irrationality when the evidence does not warrant it, a person who suffers from conspiracy theory phobia is also epistemically irresponsible.[4]

While social scientists have recently built many research projects based on the idea that too many people believe conspiracy theories, we seek to push back against the current trend. We want to shed some light on why, in many instances, too many people reject conspiracy theories.

Characterizing Conspiracy theories

Events and circumstances are often explained by referring to unintended side effects of intentional actions. When individuals decide to buy apartments in a certain area of a town, the prices of the apartments tend to rise in that area even if no one had a plan to raise them. The price rise can be explained by referring to the unintended effect of people's uncoordinated choices. Explaining data by pointing to unintended effects must be distinguished from explanations that refer to successful intentional actions. If the local government decides to dose some public libraries in order to open more golf courses, then the fact that the town has fewer libraries than before can be explained by referring to successful but perhaps misguided intentional action.

Intentional explanations can be separated into two categories, for some of them refer to public actions (i.e., passing legislation) while others refer to covert actions (i.e., secret military operations). A subcategory of intentional explanations, conspiracy explanations, refers to covert actions consisting of conspiracies. These explanations are widely used by professional historians, journalists, and jurists, among others. The fact that a bomb exploded on the 20th of July 1944 at the Wolf's Lair conference room near Rastenburg, East Prussia, can be and has been explained by referring to a conspiracy carried out by a group of conspirators who attempted to assassinate Adolf Hitler. The fact that one of President Hamid Karzai's bodyguards was arrested in Afghanistan in October 2011 can be and has been explained by referring to a plot to kill Karzai. As these examples show, there is nothing exotic in conspiracy explanations. Like all other

explanations of events and circumstances, conspiracy explanations are sometimes correct, sometimes not. All kinds of conspiracies have been rather common, not only in politics but also in the private sphere. There is no principled reason to dismiss all conspiracy explanations outright.

However, when it comes to conspiracy theories, many scholars and journalists say we should avoid them. For instance, we are told that we should not explain the death of Princess Diana, or the murder of Olof Palme, or the death of scientist David Kelly, by referring to a conspiracy. Conspiracy theories cannot be distinguished from other conspiracy explanations because conspiracy theories are always false while conspiracy explanations are not. Some conspiracy theories can be true. One reason why conspiracy theories are commonly distinguished from mainstream conspiracy explanations is simply that conspiracy theories tend to conflict with socially and politically recognized epistemic authorities-such as mainstream media, scientists, medical professionals, government officials, historians, and other experts.[5] (Sometimes the term appears to be a political tool of silencing, an attempt at "censoring" our larger epistemic resources.)

Usually, conspiracy theorists suspect two separate groups. On the one hand, they suspect a group of people who are claimed to be conspirators (say, representatives of Monsanto). On the other hand, they suspect the relevant, socially recognized epistemic authority that denies the alleged conspiracy (say, the health authorities). In certain specific cases, the epistemic authority is itself accused of engineering a conspiracy. Of course, to question the position of an epistemic authority in a special case does not mean that its position is questioned in general. Historically speaking, isolated individuals or at least investigative journalists have managed to show that "properly constituted epistemic authorities" can be wrong in specific instances.[6] It is reasonable to assume that our epistemic authorities can be wrong, at one time on another.[7]

In what follows, we focus on those explanations of events and circumstances that (1) cite an actual or alleged conspiracy, and (2) either conflict or conflicted

with the authoritative account.[8] The conspiracy theories of interest here are those that challenge or have challenged what people take to be the existing truths.[9]

Why Conspiracy Theory Phobia?

So why do some people not evaluate conspiracy theories in the way, they should, that is, by estimating the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence that is presented in support of a particular conspiracy theory? What makes them reject conspiracy theories at the outset, without rational reflection? What explains conspiracy theory phobia? We discuss four interrelated reasons.

Fly in the Ointment

Some conspiracy theories make claims so fantastical that they go beyond what most people can accept as true. For example, the claim that interdimensional lizard people secretly rule the planet is an extraordinary one, and therefore requires extraordinary evidence. While bizarre conspiracy theories like this are not representative of all or most conspiracy theories, they may spoil the whole, thereby driving people to reject, out of hand, more mundane and more evidenced claims of conspiracy.[10]

Preferring Conspiracy Theories to Be False

Conspiracy theories often include claims that many of us want to be false. We do not hope our food is poisoned, our cars damage the environment far more than the makers claim, political authorities spy on our texting, social media, and e-mails, politicians are ready to kill their own citizens to justify wars, or that

vaccines have deadly or dangerous side effects that are intentionally hidden from public view.

Conspiracy theorists frequently claim with their theories that unpleasant, even infamous states of affairs have prevailed, do prevail, or will prevail. This may well explain why some people tend to reject conspiracy theories and dismiss conspiracy theorists quickly and easily, without critical evaluation of the role of evidence in the theory or within the thinking of the theorists. Let us consider two psychological mechanisms.

Psychological Factors

Just as social psychologists have concentrated on people who have a disposition toward accepting conspiracy theories, we would like to focus on the people at the opposite end of that spectrum: people who are resistant to conspiracy theories. Both ends of the spectrum are irrational in the sense that they have a tendency to accept or reject conclusions based on predispositions rather than evidence.

Confirmation bias works to support existing dispositions by driving how people derive hypotheses and collect and evaluate evidence. When a person learns of a 9 /11 conspiracy theory, for example, she might test the hypothesis that "It is not true that authorities knew in advance what would happen to the twin towers:' After that, she will easily find evidence in support of this hypothesis and only little (if any) evidence against this hypothesis, as she searches for and interprets evidence in a selective way. This is a manifestation of confirmation bias-a very common psychological phenomenon. As a result, the person concludes that, fortunately, the conspiracy theory is clearly false-a "fanciful" or "absurd" story.[11] Her conclusion that the theory is false can be correct, of course, but her reasoning is faulty.

Pragmatic Hypothesis Testing

Suppose a person who suffers from a food allergy and cannot eat eggs is at the restaurant with her friend. She asks whether the portion she plans to order has eggs as an ingredient. The waiter replies that in his view it does not and that he remembers that someone else with similar allergy has eaten it. Her friend is convinced, but the allergic person wants more information, as she wants to avoid complications that eating egg would cause her. Her behavior is understandable-an error would be very costly for her-although she seems to have a very high confidence threshold for accepting the hypothesis that the food does not include egg. Imagine the waiter said, "I think it might have egg. I doubt it but I'm not really sure. I think I remember that someone got sick from it because of some allergy or something:' She would immediately reject the hypothesis that the food does not have egg. This suggests that, because of pragmatic reasons, she accepts one conclusion much more readily than another.

When a person hears a disturbing conspiracy theory, she considers it, in her mind, as a hypothesis. Likely, she tests the hypothesis from a pragmatic point of view. If the conspiracy theory in question is one that asserts things people do not want to believe, the person wants plenty of evidence in support of the theory before she is ready to seriously suspect or believe in it. For her, it is important not to believe in a conspiracy theory if there is no conspiracy-much more important than to believe in a conspiracy theory when there is a conspiracy. The error costs for her can be considerable if it turns out that she believed and acted upon a false conspiracy theory.[12] The social price can be extensive. She might be seen as subversive and antisocial. Her rationality might be called into question by those with whom she shares important professional and personal relationships. Avoiding such strongly discomfiting situations can be of prime importance for her. The error costs for her would be minor if she did not believe in a conspiracy theory that was eventually revealed as true. Since most others

(and the authorities) made the same mistake, the social price is minimal. If she did advocate it in the face of social rejection, accolades may follow if it turns out to be true, but the risks prior to public acceptance are severe. It follows that when a person evaluates a conspiracy theory, she accepts one conclusion much more easily than another. Her reasoning may be rational from a pragmatic point of view, but there is a considerable risk that she makes false conclusions.

Why Does Conspiracy Theory Phobia Matter?

Conspiracy theory phobia matters for at least three reasons: (1) it may allow some conspiracies to go undetected; (2) it may undermine vigilance and rational suspicion in functional democracies; and (3) it may distort social science concerning conspiracy theorizing.

In functional democracies, the salvation of the state lies in watchfulness of the citizen. A critical aspect of democracy is suspicion of societal powers, be they political, economic, or the entanglement of these. It is not just the emergence of extreme, overt tyranny citizens have to watch for. High-placed political conspiracies of lesser ambition are commonplace. In U.S. politics the evidence of spying by political opponents on each other is now known to be commonplace; the scandal of Watergate hardly abolished this tactic. Political enemies, like Anwar al-Awlaki, appear to have been executed by political authorities.[13] Historians have often confirmed that incidents are manufactured or falsely reported by political authorities to initiate wars that otherwise would not have been justifiable to the populace of a representational democracy. The false "Gulf of Tonkin incident," which led to the Vietnam war and the deaths of more than a million people, is now widely regarded by professional historians to be one instance.[14]

Just as proper empirical study of conspiracy theory and theorists must take rational and evidential elements seriously, serious accusations by citizens

enabled with evidence must in that measure be taken as seriously. They should not be dismissed as evidencing pathology. That is the price of a functional democracy. A proper understanding of the complexity of human cognition is important. If we want to understand humans-a social and highly organized, hierarchical, cooperative, and deceptive primate-we need to acknowledge all aspects of our practice of conspiracy theorizing. The point of departure should be historically literate. It should respect that many conspiracy theories have turned out to be true. If we are empirical researchers in the social sciences, this inevitably makes us appropriately situated theorists of conspiracy theory. Unfortunately, conspiracy theory phobia may distort these gifted research cultures. Both the factors of confirmation bias and pragmatic rejection can dispose researchers to neglect how rationality and evidence function in the cognitive practices of conspiracy theorists.

Let's Keep Our Eyes Open

People who suffer conspiracy phobia reject conspiracy theories without an appropriate evaluation of the evidence presented, and their reaction toward any particular conspiracy theory tends to be mockery, contempt, hostility, or a straw-person characterization of the arguments presented. We have argued that conspiracy theory phobia can be explained with non-rational psychological mechanisms.

Conspiracy theories challenge important truths. Our point here is not to say that, in general, it.is irrational to trust in epistemic authorities. However, if it turns out that a particular explanation provided by the relevant epistemic authority looks problematic in the light of a conspiracy theorist's message, then there is a reason to be cautious. Although the burden of proof lies on the side of the conspiracy theorist, her arguments and the evidence she provides should be evaluated open-mindedly.[15] The fact that the conspiracy theorist offers an alternative account is not sufficient reason to reject her claims. Established

epistemic authorities have made mistakes, and nothing guarantees that they won't make them again. If the issue looks scrappy and complicated, laypersons need not form any beliefs concerning the issue. Epistemic abstinence, a studied agnosticism, is often a virtue.[16]

Conspiracy theory phobia is closely related to ad hominem argumentation. A person who commits the ad hominem fallacy criticizes another person's character traits instead of trying to reply to the argument presented. Surely the defender of a conspiracy theory must believe in "demonic forces with transcendent powers" as suggested by some authors?[17] The question is about a silencing tactic.

Conspiracy theory phobia is also associated with the idea that people should evaluate conspiracy theories as a group rather than on a case-by-case basis, and with the claim that the state should act against all or almost all conspiracy theories.[18] These are dangerous suggestions.

Understanding the logic of conspiracy theory phobia is a matter of great significance. A precondition of a successful fight against conspiracy theory phobia requires that the root causes behind the phenomenon are well known and empirically studied. It is imperative that we reveal conspiracies threatening justice, democracy, public safety, and human rights. Without an open and careful evaluation of conspiracy theories, some conspiracies may go unnoticed. When conspiracy theories get fair treatment and receive serious attention, the likelihood of successful conspiracies declines.

Notes

[1] Goertzel, Ted. 1994. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories." Political Psychology 15(4): 731-742; Swami, Viren, and Rebecca Coles. 2010. "The Truth Is Out There." The Psychologist 23(7): 560-563; Wood, Michael J., Karen M. Douglas, and Robbie M. Sutton. 2012. "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories." Social Psychological & Personality Science 3(6): 767-773; Brotherton, Robert, and Christopher C. French. 2014. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Susceptibility to the Conjunction Fallacy." Applied Cognitive Psychology 28(2) 2014: 238-248; Sunstein, Cass R. 2014. *Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas*. New York: Simon & Schuster; Uscinski, Joseph E., and Joseph M. Parent, 2014. *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[2] Douglas, Karen, and Robbie Sutton. 2015. "Climate Change: Why the Conspiracy Theories Are Dangerous." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 71(2): 98-106. The anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that the Jewish people were responsible for the Black Death is a typical conspiracy theory that has been harmful for a religious group. See McConnachie, James, and Robin Tudge. 2005. *A Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories*. New York: Rough Guides.

[3] A parallel point applies to our reactions to those persons that report conspiracy theories to us and wish to explore these on the basis of evidence. Their evidence or lack of should guide our response. For a discussion see, e.g., Basham, Lee. 2017. "Pathologizing Open Societies: A Reply to the Le Monde Social Scientists." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6(2): 59-68.

[4] Cf. deHaven-Smith, Lance. 2013. *Conspiracy Theory in America*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 84; Husting, Ginna, and Martin Orr. 2007. "Dangerous Machinery: 'Conspiracy Theorist' as a Transpersonal Strategy of Exclusion." Symbolic Interaction 30(2): 131; Basham, Lee. 2016. "The Need for Accountable Witnesses: A Reply to Dentith." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5(7): 6-13.

[5] David Coady argues that, in order to count as a "conspiracy theory" the "proposed explanation must conflict with an 'official' explanation of the same historical event." However, the official explanations should not be confused with the explanations supported by the relevant epistemic authorities. The official explanation, supported by political elite and administrative authorities, need not be supported by the relevant epistemic authorities. It is possible that state authorities support a conspiracy theory, i.e., an explanation which is not supported by the epistemic authority. Coady, David. 2003. "Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories." *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17(2): 199. Coady has withdrawn his "contrary to official stories" as a necessary condition for being a "conspiracy theory," taking the view that there is no clear definition of the phenomenon.

[6] For a discussion, see Levy, Neil. 2007. "Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories." *Episteme* 4(2): 181-192. Levy thinks, wrongly, that "[r]esponsible believers ought to accept explanations offered by properly constituted epistemic authorities." For an engaging discussion and enumeration of conspiracy and its theory in world history, see Pigden, Charles. 2007. "Conspiracy Theories and Conventional Wisdom." *Episteme* 4(2): 219-232. For a compelling critique of Levy's epistemic authoritarianism see Coady, David. 2007. "Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational." *Episteme* 4(2): 193-204.

[7] Needless to say, what constitutes "properly constituted epistemic authorities" is a difficult question.

[8] We might argue it is difficult to say in certain cases whether an explanation refers to a "conspiracy" or to some other sort of merely "confidential cooperation. " However, secret cooperative activities whose aims and nature conflict with the so-called positive morality (that reflects our de facto moral commitments) or with specific prima facie duties are usually called "conspiracies" especially if the members of the cooperation have a certain position and if the goal of their activities differs from the goal they are authorized to pursue. Children may have morally questionable secret plans to influence events by secret means, but these incidents are seldom called conspiracies. Small children are not typically considered to be in a position to conspire. Perhaps they are correctly characterized as such, or not. Secret military operations may be morally rotten, but as far as they have authorized goals, they are not usually called conspiracies. (However, in some scenarios, like the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, they appear to be.) The members of an

"official" administrative meeting behind closed doors may secretly agree on issues they should not and start to pursue goals they should avoid. When this happens the participants can rightfully be accused of conspiracy, as they have unauthorized goals now. Conspiracies involve secret cooperation, but that does not mean that the conspirators must meet secretly so that outsiders do not know that they met in the first place.

[9] Cf. Räikkä, Juha. 2018. "Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction." Argumenta 3(2): 205-216; see also Räikkä, Juha. 2014. Social Justice in Practice: Questions in Ethics and Political Philosophy. New York: Springer, 61-64, 77-81.

[10] Our working assumption here is that people do not think that *most* conspiracy theories are insane merely because some conspiracy theories-for instance theories that concern the alleged actions of the Antichrist-are insane.

[11] Karen Douglas and Robbie Sutton have suggested that conspiracy theories are "fanciful" Douglas, Karen M., and Robbie M. Sutton. 2011. "Does It Take One to Know? Endorsement of Conspiracy Theories Is Influenced by Personal Willingness to Conspire." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 50(3): 544.

[12] Cf. Trope, Yaacov, Benjamin Gervey, and Nira Liberman. 1997. "Wishful Thinking from a Pragmatic Hypothesis-Testing Perspective." In *The Mythomanias*: *The Nature of Deception and Self-Deception*, ed. M. Myslobodsky. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 105-131. See also chapter 2 in Mele, Alfred. 2001. *Self-Deception Unmasked*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. The point about costs also applies to evidence determined conspiracy theories that are taken by the persons around her, for pragmatic reasons, to be false.

[13] Anwar al-Awlaki was the first U.S. citizen to be approved for targeted killing by the CIA. Awlaki was killed in September 2011.

[14] Hanyok, Robert. 2001. "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2 - 4 August 1964." Cryptologic Quarterly 19(1): 39. Hanyok's study, undertaken for internal use by the NSA, was officially released after a Freedom of lnformation Act (POlA) lawsuit.

[15] See chapters one and two in Dentith, Matthew R. X. 2014. *The Philosophy of Conspiracy theories*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

[16] For a discussion of studied agnosticism see, e.g., Basham, Lee. 2003. "*Malevolent Global Conspiracy*." Journal of Social Philosophy 34(1): 91-103.

[17] Hofstadter, Richard. 1964. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and other Essays.* London: Jonathan Cape, 29; Abalakina-Paap, Marina, Walter G. Stephan, Traci Craig, and W. Larry Gregory. 1999. "Beliefs in Conspiracies," Political Psychology 20(3): 637-647. Do people who believe in the Watergate conspiracy believe that demonic forces of almost transcendent powers control history? Forces like Richard Nixon?

[18] See Sunstein, Cass R., and Adrian Vermuele. 2009 "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17(2): 202-227.