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In defence of conspiracy theories

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Abstract

The purpose of this doctoral project is to explore the epistemic issues surrounding the concept of the *conspiracy theory* and to advance the analysis and evaluation of the *conspiracy theory* as a mode of explanation. The candidate is interested in the circumstances under which inferring to the truth or likeliness of a given conspiracy theory is, or is not, warranted.

“To understand conspiracy theorists, I now believe, is to first understand that civilization is a conspiracy against reality.”
(Vanakin, 1991, p. 259)

I would like to dedicate this work to my Great Aunt Girleen and my Uncle Basil, who, of all my family, would have been the most proud, and to Lek, who was not just some cat.

Acknowledgements

Te Namu: you made complete and utterly unrealistic demands as to when this thesis should be finished. Still, thanks.

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Introduction

Former American presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche believes that the psychedelic rock group, “The Grateful Dead,” were a front for the British Secret Service’s Occult Branch and were sent to the United States of America by direct order of the Queen of England to promote drugs to American youths. According to LaRouche, this is simply one fight in the grandest and most philosophical conspiracy of all time, which is the conflict between the Empiricists (whose philosophical leaders include such luminaries as David Hume and Bertrand Russell) and the Rationalists (whose most notable “founder,” apparently, is Immanuel Kant). The Empiricists (who, according to LaRouche, are the power behind the decadent United Kingdom and the European Union) are seeking to force their hedonistic ways on the American people and their American Way of Life, which LaRouche has identified as the most ideal form of Rationalism¹.

If LaRouche is to be believed, whether we are aware of it or not, philosophers are part and parcel of a grand conspiracy to decide what form our civilisation will take in the future.

¹Which he characterises as a philosophy in which we live our lives according to strict moral truths derived from reasoning rather than *mere* experience.

In 1774CE Adam Weishaupt founded a secret society, the Illuminati, a group which specialised in the infiltration and taking over of Freemasonic lodges in order to promote the ideals of the Enlightenment. Although the Illuminati were officially disbanded in 1785CE by edict of the Bavarian Government, the Illuminati merely went to ground and focused their attention elsewhere. Some of the Illuminati went to France, which was going through a period of political upheaval. They infiltrated the Bourgeoisie and, by fomenting anti-Church and anti-monarchal sentiment, they were able to orchestrate the First (and glorious) French Revolution of 1789CE. The Illuminati masterplan was simple: they would work towards the goal of overthrowing all aristocratic, non-democratic governments until the world was being governed by the people, for the people.

Or, at least, that was what the members of the Illuminati wanted us to believe.

By the time of the First French Revolution Weishaupt had emigrated to the Americas where he had replaced a now deceased George Washington (of whom he was the spitting image) at the Constitutional Convention of 1787CE. By playing off settler antipathy towards the British Crown he, and other like-minded Illuminati, brought about the formation of the United States of America.

The Illuminati's real plan was one that focussed on the long-term goal of bringing the entire world under one global synarchist (but not aristocratic)² government. Focussing mostly on the fledging nation of

²Synarchism is the political system where the people best suited to rule are given political power. It is taken to be a rival to Anarchism.

America, supported at the time by the new French Republic, a set of scandals around the ownership of slaves were created to bring the loosely knit collation of the individual States into one federally controlled Union. An economic depression was then orchestrated by the Illuminati in the early Twentieth Century to ensure that American-made goods would proliferate overseas and thus make the world reliant on American industry. Once this financial control was established, medical experimentation on ethnic minorities soon followed, allowing, in the late Twentieth Century, for a global, American-run, pharmaceutical concern to come into dominance with the specific intention of introducing fluoride, a chemical agent known to make humans docile, into foreign water-supplies, thus aiding the Illuminati in carrying out their masterplan of global governance.

Or so some claim.

In September 2001CE eleven Middle-Eastern nationals hijacked four flights flying over the continental United States of America. Two of the hijacked planes were then crashed into the World Trade Centre in New York, destroying the Twin Towers. These actions were designed to show the citizens and government of the USA just how vulnerable it was to external threats and, to a certain extent, remind the American people of their implicit support, through the deeds of their democratically-elected government, for their actions on foreign soil.

Many people believe this.

These are three examples of claims of conspiracy. One of them is widely considered to be the explanation of an important event, one of them posits godlike entities who control the apparatus of government

from behind the scenes whilst the other presents a grandiose scheme by a former empire to topple a new superpower. Depending on whom you talk to, one or more of these will be regarded as a conspiracy theories and, also depending on whom you talk to, some of them will be regarded as true.

Belief in conspiracy theories is remarkably common; it is likely that anyone who reads this thesis will either admit to believing some conspiracy theory or will be able to point at a close friend or family member who believes some conspiracy theory. For example, whether you believe Nixon conspired, along with other members of the Republican Party, against the Democrats or that he was set up to take the fall by his own party, you might be said to believe in a conspiracy theory. This is just one example; suffice it to say that a lot of, if not all, (historically literate) people hold to some such theory about an historical event.

Some of you will agree but still think “Well, yes, but. . .” In part this “Yes, but. . .” might be due to the common sense belief that the term “conspiracy theory” is vague, hard to define adequately and used mostly as a label for the contents of a set of suspicious or irrational beliefs. The term “conspiracy theory,” many have argued, picks out a class of suspicious, possibly paranoid hypotheses about secretive groups of non-existent conspirators. When confronted with the claim that the explanation of an event we have just presented looks like a conspiracy theory there is a temptation, I think, to try to justify such belief by defining it to justify one’s belief either by characterising it as an exception to the general rule that conspiracy theories are bunk or by explaining that this conspiracy

theory-like hypothesis is not really a conspiracy theory at all.

I, like some of the other philosophers who will be discussed in this thesis, think that there is nothing suspicious about conspiracy theories *per se*. Whatever problems there are with belief in conspiracy theories they do not arise from the *mere* fact that they are theories about conspiracies. Rather, the problem is that inferring to the existence of a conspiracy is a *prima facie* difficult task and even if we can show that there exists a set of conspirators who desire some end this does not mean that a claim of conspiracy explains the occurrence of some event.

This is a thesis in Philosophy. It is not a thesis in History, Political Science, Psychology or Sociology (some other academic disciplines that have devoted considerable time to talk of conspiracy theories), although I will refer to literature from these fields throughout this work. I will examine what conspiracy theories are, and what belief in conspiracy theories entails. I will also assess the common sense view that conspiracy theories are bunk.

The title of this thesis does, I think, give away the conclusion; I have written what I consider to be a defence of conspiracy theories, albeit a very qualified and conditional one. It is a defence of conspiracy theories because:

1. It is a defence of belief in conspiracy theories *as long as you can tell a good story about why particular conspiracy theories are likely to be true* and
2. It is a defence of the view that the fact that some theory is a conspir-

acy theory is not itself a reason for rejecting the theory.

My thesis

To situate my understanding of what a conspiracy theory is, what belief in a conspiracy theory entails and how conspiracy theories should be evaluated, I will begin, in Chapter One, by fixing terminology and looking at a variety of different accounts, by both philosophers and non-philosophers, of what a conspiracy theory is.

Conspiracy theories have been the subject of study by not only philosophers but also sociologists, psychologists, historians and political scientists. They are also widely talked about by media specialists and journalists, who sometimes present conspiracy theories as newsworthy items. Looking at specimen examples of what these various specialists have written about conspiracy theories will be useful when it comes to placing my debate in this wider context. It will also allow me to set up a rudimentary taxonomy of such definitions, which I can then use to show how my definition of a conspiracy theory, that it is an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause, fits into the existing literature.

My definition is a non-pejorative definition of a conspiracy theory. I do not think that, axiomatically, beliefs in conspiracy theories are irrational or unwarranted beliefs. I will mention certain features of my non-pejorative definition which will be useful for the development of my views. Note that since my definition rules in any account of an event that cites a conspiracy as a salient cause; any conspiratorial explanation, including one about the

organisation of a surprise party, will count as a conspiracy theory. This, I think, is a significant feature because it means I do not need to find a way of classifying certain good explanations as something other than conspiracy theories.

Another feature of my definition is that it does not require that we treat conspiratorial activity as either sinister or suspicious. Both of these features allow me to extend the analysis of conspiracy theories beyond the traditional purvey of allegations and explanations of political conspiracies. Both of these features will also allow me, as I will show later in the thesis, to compare and contrast warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories about the same event.

Having claimed that conspiracy theories are explanations I will, in Chapter Two, look at what kind of explanations they are. I will classify conspiracy theories as intentional, historical explanations. Conspiracy theories rest upon some claim of conspiracy which is taken to explain the occurrence of some event. For example, some of the conspiracy theories about the development of a police state in the United Kingdom explain the growing totalitarianism with a claim about the existence of a set of conspirators who are working to bring about an authoritarian world government.

Intentional explanations explain the occurrence of events, at least in part, by making claims about the beliefs, desires and intentions of agents: I will provide an account of who the qualified conspiracy theorists are that can reliably infer the secret beliefs, desires and intentions of conspirators. Who the appropriate experts are depends on the subject-matter of the

conspiracy and the kinds of people who are alleged to be conspiring, but very often, they will need to be people whose professional background has accustomed them to a methodical and rigorous procedure for ascribing mental states to people.

Historians (and quite possibly sociologists, psychologists and political scientists) do not, as a matter of routine, infer that an event occurred for any old reason but rather infer to the best available explanation. Many historians are, in their professional lives, conspiracy theorists³. For example, historians of mid-Twentieth Century Soviet history will treat as warranted the conspiratorial explanations of the Moscow Show Trials and the advocacy by the Russian state of the thesis of Lysenkoism. Many political scientists and sociologists who deal with the events of September 11th, 2001CE will endorse one of two conspiracy theories about the event, the “Inside,” or “Outside Job” hypothesis.

I will argue that to infer to some claim of conspiracy, either you must be an appropriately qualified expert or you need to be able to make an appeal to some appropriately qualified expert.

In Chapter Three I consider the question of whether we live in what Karl Popper has called “an open society” and whether, if we do, this gives us reason to be suspicious of conspiracy theories. Some people think so. They think that in a society as open as ours, political conspiracies occur only rarely and successful ones are extremely rare. Whilst we can point towards, say, Nixon and his cronies conspiring to hide the truth about

³Recognising, of course, that some historians may not specialise in areas which have any attendant conspiratorial hypotheses.

what happened at the Watergate Hotel, such examples are extraordinary. It is hard to conspire in the here and now.

As background to this discussion, I will look first at Popper's discussion of the conspiracy theory of society. Here, Popper rejects the contention that most of what happens in history happens because of successful, coordinated conspiring. In particular, he argues that there are too many checks and balances in a relatively open society to allow for much successful conspiring. I will then look at Brian L. Keeley's argument that belief in conspiracy theories results in a radical and misguided distrust of public data. I will suggest that his argument rests upon certain assumptions about how open our society is. That will lead me on to an analysis of Lee Basham's response to Keeley, which is an argument to the effect that our society is not as open as we might think.

In Chapter Four I will analyse one of the reasons why we might have a justified *prima facie* suspicion of conspiracy theories; many conspiracy theories have explanatory rivals with some sort of official status or authorisation. For example, a lot of people prefer the official theory about the Moon Landings to the conspiracy theory that says we never went to the Moon because the official theory has been endorsed by influential institutions which also take a dim view of the rival theories.

However, it is not clear what role officialness plays with respect to official theories because Official Status is a vague concept. To work out what role official status actually plays in the defence of any explanation, I will look at the role of endorsements by influential institutions.

To claim that the officialness of an explanation shows that the explan-

ation is one we should consider warranted we need to be aware of the different practices of influential institutions. I will contrast the practice of peer review in the academic realm with the process of political oversight and show how two seemingly similar practices result in different kinds of endorsements and thus tell us that having official status in one sphere does not tell us much about its status in another.

In Chapter Five I will discuss the role of disinformation and what I call “selectiveness” with respect to both conspiracy theories and official theories.

Disinformation is fabricated information put forward to discredit an explanatory hypothesis. Many conspiracy theorists allege that disinformation is put out by influential institutions to undermine a conspiracy theory. Advocates of certain conspiracy theories about the events of 9/11 claim, for example, that the government of the United States of America has spread disinformation about the way the Twin Towers collapsed. They have done so in order to cast doubt on rival hypotheses about the destruction of the towers by way of a controlled demolition.

Selectiveness, as I will define it, is the activity of deliberately selecting evidence from a more inclusive pool of information to make an explanatory hypothesis look warranted when, if all the salient evidence was considered, that would not be the case.

Understanding how explanations might contain disinformation or suffer from selectiveness is important for my analysis of the warrant of conspiracy theories because conspiracy theorists are worried that the people who confer official status often abuse their position to make their

explanations look warranted when they are not. These are, I will argue, legitimate concerns. I think my analysis will make sense of the conspiracy theorist's fear about official theories but will also show that the same fear applies to conspiracy theories as well.

In Chapter Six I will look at some issues about the transmission of conspiracy theories from one person to another and I will contrast the spread of conspiracy theories with that of rumours.

In the existing literature, a lot of people write as though most claims about the assessment of rumours apply equally to the assessment of conspiracy theories and vice versa. At the very least, rumour is often treated as a vehicle for the spread of conspiracy theories. Some of the evidence for a particular conspiracy theory might even be the product of rumouring.

I will argue that typical transmission processes for rumours and conspiracy theories are dissimilar in important respects. I will argue, controversially, that generally speaking, we should regard the transmission of rumours as reliable. I distinguish this normal sort of transmission from the insincere and epistemically suspect process of spreading rumours. The latter certainly exists, but it is not the norm, I will argue.

My argument is that, contra some of the literature, the process of spreading rumours and the process of spreading conspiracy theories are different. By illustrating what the difference is in their respective transmission processes, I think I can show why rumours can be considered reliable beliefs for epistemic agents to hold and why we need to assess whether the inference to the existence of a conspiracy is warranted before

we make any claim about the warrant of a particular conspiracy theory.

In Chapter Seven my interest is in the cogency of inferences to conspiracy theories. Many conspiracy theories seem as though they were designed *post hoc* to account for existing data. Since there are many hypotheses that will fit the same data, many conspiracies are “Just So” stories and this suggests that many of the inferences to them are Inferences to Any Old explanation. There is also a persistent worry in a lot of commentary about conspiracy theories that because conspiracies are unlikely to occur or claims about the existence of conspiracies end up being vague, most conspiracy theories are the conclusions of faulty inferences.

I will argue that a conspiracy theory can be warranted. That said, showing that a conspiracy exists is hard, and even if we can show that a conspiracy occurred we still have the problem of showing that said conspiracy is the most credible candidate explanation of the event. Showing that some claim of conspiracy is a plausible explanation is going to be hard but it is not impossible. If we can show that a conspiracy exists and we can show that it is the plausible explanation of some event, then we have a warranted conspiracy theory.

Summary

Over the course of this thesis I will examine what I take to be some important salient issues to do with the warrant of conspiracy theories.

In chapter 1 I will explain my definition of a conspiracy theory and

point out two important features that come out of it.

In chapter 2 I will look at the role of intentions in my gloss of conspiracies as causes.

In Chapter 3 I will look at the notion of the open society and whether belief in it gives us grounds to be suspicious of conspiracy theories.

In chapter 4 I will look at the contrast between conspiracy theories and their rivals, whilst in chapter 5 I will talk about the kind of problems we might have when we talk about the evidence that is used to warrant conspiracy theories.

In chapter 6 I will look at the transmission process associated with the spreading of conspiracy theories.

In chapter 7, I will consider the epistemic status of arguments for conspiracy theories, regarded as inferences to explanations. Worries about the epistemic status of such inferences are the basis, I think, for our worry about the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories, a worry that I think has been overstated in the literature but is still something of a concern.

Chapter 1

On definitions of conspiracy theories

In this chapter I will provide a working definition of conspiracy theories that I will use throughout this thesis. I will situate my definition within the existing literature, both philosophical and non-philosophical, by examining some of the other definitions in use by journalists, sociologists, historians, psychologists and political commentators as well as philosophers.

I will start by discussing what it is required that an agent believe if they want to say a conspiracy exists. I will then stipulate some terminology for the subsequent discussion of conspiracy theories.

1.1 Conspiracies

If someone makes a claim of conspiracy, then, I argue, they need to believe that:

1. There exists (or has existed) some set of agents who plan,
2. Some end is/was desired by the agents, and
3. Steps have been taken to minimise public awareness of what the agents are up to.

Now, even though it is necessary for the existence of a conspiracy that there exist some set of agents who plan, I do not think we need to be able to say much about the constitution of that group. Many conspiracy theories, for example, say little more than “There exists a mysterious and unknown group of planning agents¹.” All we need to say, in order to satisfy the first condition, is that there exist some agents who plan² whose identities are not known (or whose identities are suspected by not verified)³. Indeed, given that we would normally expect conspiratorial activity to be undertaken in secret, we should expect it to be difficult to know who and how many people are involved in the conspiracy, as I will argue when talking about the role of secrecy with respect to conspiratorial

¹Otherwise known as “conspirators.”

²I am deliberately avoiding the label “conspirator” in my definition of “conspiracy” as I think it would be problematic and circular to define “conspiracy” with respect to “conspirators.”

³We do not even need to know who these members are. The description of who is in the conspiracy might be the cryptic “them” rather than the specific “Wilhelm Most, Edith Webb, James Dentith and Norah Clarke.”

activity. This will be a potential problem for warranting any claim to the effect that there is a conspiracy, as I will argue in chapter 7.

Now, it is not sufficient to assert the existence of some set of agents who plan and then say “It follows that a conspiracy exists!” because we need to know something about what it is that these agents desire or intend to bring about. A mismatch between the desired end and the actual outcome of conspiratorial activity does not undermine that there was a conspiracy. Presumably the goal of Marcus Brutus and his fellow senators, when they conspired to kill Julius Caesar, was to end dictatorial rule of Rome, not to be run out of town and see power vested in a triumvirate made up of their rivals⁴.

The final condition necessary to substantiate a claim of conspiracy is that the plotters operated, for a time at least, in secret. This secrecy is often used to explain:

- a) the vagueness of claims about who the agents are and
- b) the vagueness of claims about what the agents desire to do.

If the agents have even limited success in keeping their plots and machinations secret, this could prevent people from knowing key details about who the agents are and what they are up to⁵.

⁴Some commentators on the events of September 11th, 2001 have argued that Al-Qaeda did not intend to destroy the Twin Towers but merely demonstrate that heartland America was not safe from terrorist activity. The fact that the Twin Towers were destroyed in the attack on New York was an unintended side-effect

⁵You could argue that a truly secret conspiracy is one that no one other than the agents themselves would ever know about but the notion of secrecy that I think is being referred to, at least by some conspiracy theorists, is usually a kind of imperfect secrecy. For example, some agents will be more successful at keeping themselves and

The vagueness of claims about who the agents are and what it is they intend is a potential problem, as I will discuss in chapter 7 under the heading “The Vagueness Argument.”

These conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for some activity to be conspiratorial. I will talk more about how one would go about warranting such a claim in chapter 7.

1.2 Some terminology

The agents who engage in conspiratorial activity are commonly known as “conspirators” (or sometimes “co-conspirators”⁶), which is the label I will use for the rest of this thesis.

I will call an explanation which cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause of some event a “conspiracy theory.” I will discuss this definition in more depth later in this chapter.

I will call the people who believe in some conspiracy theory “conspiracy theorists,” whilst I will refer to people who are in the business of analysing conspiracy theories and belief in conspiracy theories as “conspiracy theory theorists”⁷. I will refer to people who are skeptical of conspiracy theories **in general** as “conspiracy theory skeptics.” I will provide further glosses on these terms later in this chapter, once I have looked at some of the

their activities secret than others and some sets of agents will be caught out through no fault of their own. Some agents will be secretive for a period of time before proceeding to reveal all.

⁶For example, Charles Pigden uses the label “co-conspirator” in “Popper Revisited, Or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories?”

⁷A label which is, as far as I know, of my own devising and has, subsequently, been used to describe me in the media (Brown, Russell (Presenter), 2009).

definitions of conspiracy theories used by my peers.

1.3 Conspiracy theories: a survey of definitions and conceptions

My definition of a conspiracy theory, that is an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause, has come out of my reading of the philosophical and non-philosophical works on conspiracy theories. I will now summarise some of that literature, looking particularly at the definitions of conspiracy theories. I will cover the non-philosophical material first before moving on to the work of my philosophical peers. I will then conclude by comparing these definitions and present a rudimentary taxonomy of the various kinds of definitions currently in play.

1.3.1 Non-philosophical definitions of conspiracy theories

1.3.1.1 The Oxford English Dictionary on conspiracy theories

Dictionary definitions are useful for describing the common usage of a term. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a conspiracy theory as:

... the theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties; spec. a belief that some covert but influential agency (typically political

in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an unexplained event[.]⁸ (“conspiracy, 2011)

The dictionary definition arguably captures the ordinary usage of “conspiracy theory.” Generally, it is an explanation of an event that cites a conspiracy as a salient cause but, typically, we take it that it is an explanation which refers to sinister, political activity.

1.3.1.2 Political commentators

Robin Ramsay, a British investigative journalist and publisher of the political-conspiracy-oriented magazine “Lobster,” has argued that there are two different kinds of things we call “conspiracy theories.” First, there are hypotheses about the existence of conspiracies, belief in which suggests the believer is suffering from some form of acute paranoia: this is a pejorative definition of conspiracy theory according to which all such beliefs are *prima facie* irrational and unwarranted. Second, there are warranted explanations that happen to cite conspiratorial activity as a cause of the event. Ramsay is worried that we treat the term “conspiracy

⁸The first cited usage of conspiracy theory the Oxford English Dictionary gives is from from the American Historical Review in 1909CE:

The claim that Atchison was the originator of the repeal may be termed a recrudescence of the conspiracy theory first asserted by Colonel John A. Parker of Virginia in 1880. (Johnson, 1909, p. 836)

The term “recrudescence” typically refers to the outbreak of a rash, thus marking it out as something that is both symptomatic of a disease and unwelcome. This suggests, to my mind, that the first cited usage of a conspiracy theory is a pejorative one, although this may be neither here nor there; whilst the 1909CE reference could be a dismissive reference to a mere conspiracy theory this does not tell us much about the general usage of the term at the time and given the almost off-hand way in which the term is used here this suggests, I think, that the reader was expected to know what kind of thing a conspiracy theory was, which suggests, in turn, that the term was already in use.

1.3 Conspiracy theories: a survey of definitions and conceptions 21

theory” as though it refers solely to the first kind, and discount the second kind, warranted explanations which cite the existence of a conspiracy as a cause (Ramsay, 2006, ch. 1).

Ramsay’s view can be contrasted with that of another British journalist, David Aaronovitch. He argues that conspiracy theories are bunk. He defines conspiracy theories in his book “Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History” as:

[T]he attribution of deliberate agency to something that is more likely to be accidental or unintended. And, as a sophistication of this definition, one might add: the attribution of secret action to one party that might far more reasonably be explained as the less covert and less complicated action of another. So a conspiracy theory is the unnecessary assumption of conspiracy when other explanations are more probable.

(Aaronovitch, 2009, p. 5)

Aaronovitch believes that we have a warranted suspicion that belief in conspiracy theories is irrational because they are rivalled by better, non-conspiratorial explanations. On Aaronovitch’s definition, by definition conspiracy theories are not the best available explanation – if a theory citing a conspiracy was the best explanation of some event, it would not count as a conspiracy theory.

1.3.1.3 Historians

Geoffrey Cubitt defines a conspiracy theory in his book “The Jesuit Myth: Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth Century France” as an explanation which suggests that there is a hidden reality beyond the superficial appearance of the political world.

Considered at the most schematic level, then, a conspiracy theory does three things: it attributes the events of history or current affairs to conscious human volition; it sharply distinguishes between the human forces of good and evil; it implies a hidden reality beneath and at odds with the superficial appearances of the political and social world. (Cubitt, 1993, p. 2)

Whilst Cubitt accepts that conspiracies have occurred, for his book details several different conspiracies that influenced the French Revolution, he argues that that it is irrational to believe conspiracy theories because they are explanations which mischaracterise the nature of conspiratorial activity in history (Cubitt, 1993, p. 2 & 300-1).

Victoria Emma Pagán, another historian, defines a conspiracy theory (which she calls a “conspiracy narrative”) in “Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History” as:

... characterized by an epistemological gap caused by the secrecy and silence that shroud the event. (Pagán, 2004, p.109)

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Pagán's interest is in how narratives about conspiratorial activity spring up as explanations of events. Because conspiratorial activity is secret and her interest is in history as it was written after the fact (and often a long time after the fact), she focuses her analysis on several conspiracy narratives written about momentous events in Ancient Rome. She looks specifically at how ancient historians blamed convenient scapegoats for the trials and tribulations of Roman history. Conspiracy theories, in her analysis, are suspicious explanations because the agents who are blamed for the occurrence of the event are often convenient dupes rather than the real perpetrators. Pagán is not necessarily a conspiracy theory skeptic, but she is doubtful that conspiracy narratives, even if they identify some of the factors of why an event occurred, tell the complete story.

1.3.1.4 Sociologists

Mark Fenster, a sociologist, writes in "Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture" that their endorsement of conspiracy theories as explanations shows that conspiracy theorists are people who do not understand the complex nature of power relations in our society (Fenster, 2008, p. 89-90). Conspiracy theories are symptomatic of a paranoid belief that conspiracies are a powerful factor in history (Fenster, 2008, p. 10). That said, Fenster thinks the suspicion of such conspiracy theorists that the society they live in is unequal and unjust might not be completely unfounded.

[T]hey may sometimes be on to something. Specifically, [con-

spiracy theories] may well address real structural inequities, albeit ideologically, and they may well constitute a response, albeit in a simplistic and decidedly unpragmatic form, to an unjust political order, a barren or dysfunctional civil society, and/or an exploitative economic system. (Fenster, 2008, p. 90)

Fenster's thesis is in line with the seminal work of Richard Hofstadter, whose 1965 article "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (Hofstadter, 1965) set the tone for a lot of the sociological and psychological debate about conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories, for both Fenster and Hofstadter, are an excusable, but mistaken reaction to a world where it *seems* that all the political and social power is out of the reach of the common person.

Veronique Campion-Vincent, another sociologist, writes in her article "From Evil Others to Evil Elites" that conspiracy theories are an attempt to explain how we, as individuals, cope with a complex and ever-changing world. She defines conspiracy theories as being theories about the existence of immoral actions undertaken by powerful conspirators. Conspiracy theories are unwarranted according to Campion-Vincent because there is likely to be another and better rival candidate explanation for the event (Campion-Vincent, 2005, p. 104-5). However, Campion-Vincent also asks why it is that learned people (which we could read as "people who should know better") get involved in promoting and endorsing conspiracy theories. I will talk more about this issue in chapter 4 when I talk about

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the role of appeals to authority in the justification of conspiracy theories (see section 4.4).

1.3.1.5 Psychology

Dieter Groh's "The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory, or: Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? Part I: Preliminary Draft of a Theory of Conspiracy Theories" defines conspiracy theories as explanations which appeal to the actions of god-like conspirators who also happen to be fallible and thus whose activities are easily detected. According to Groh, belief in conspiracy theories is irrational, since it involves believing both that the conspirators are god-like and that they are fallible (hence, ungod-like) (Groh, 1987, p. 2-3).

Skip Willman, in "Spinning Paranoia," talks about conspiracy theories as symptomatic of a desire to explain the state of the world by postulating that there is at least one person out there who is responsible for what is happening in it (Willman, 2002, p. 23).

Fran Mason, in "A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping," argues that conspiracy theories are taken to be good explanations only by conspiracy theorists. To non-conspiracy theorists such theories are just the conclusions of fallacious reasoning (Mason, 2002, p. 44-5). Mason's argument is that only conspiracy theorists, with their poorly developed cognitive frameworks, find belief in conspiracy theories rational.

1.3.2 Philosophical work on conspiracy theories

Whilst you could say that the philosophical interest in conspiracy theories technically started in the 1930s with Popper's "The Open Society and Its Enemies" (Popper, 1969) it is, I think, fair to say that the sixty year gap between that work and Charles Pigden's "Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories?" suggests that the contemporary debate in epistemology and political philosophy about the warrant of belief in conspiracy theories is still fairly young. I will deal with Popper's discussion of what he labelled the "Conspiracy Theory of Society," which constitutes his seminal contribution to the topic, in chapter 3.

1.3.2.1 Brian L. Keeley

Keeley, in his 1999 paper "Of Conspiracy Theories," defines a conspiracy theory as follows:

[A] proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret. (Keeley, 1999, p. 116)

Keeley's definition is close to mine, although Keeley's chief interest is in what he calls "unwarranted conspiracy theories" which compete with rival, non-conspiratorial explanations, are invariably nefarious in intent and seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events (Keeley, 1999, p. 116-7). However, in his 2007 paper "God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theorist" he

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admits that there is no easy way to distinguish between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories at first glance:

My conclusion was that, alas, such an analysis fails. The chief problem is that there is a class of quite warranted conspiracy theories about such events as Watergate, the Iran-Contra Affair, etc., and that there is no principled way of distinguishing, *a priori*, the two classes from one another. There is no “mark of the incredible,” as it were[.] (Keeley, 2007, p. 137)

Keeley is worried that belief in conspiracy theories, because we cannot easily distinguish between warranted and unwarranted examples, will lead to a radical skepticism of public data. I will talk more about Keeley’s view in chapter 3.

1.3.2.2 Charles Pigden

Pigden defines a conspiracy theory, in his most recent paper, “Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom,” as follows:

[A] conspiracy theory is simply a theory that posits a conspiracy – a secret plan on the part of some group to influence events by partly secret means[.] (Pigden, 2007, p. 222)

although he stipulated in an earlier paper that:

... either the plan or the action must be morally suspect, at least to some people. (Pigden, 2006, p. 157)

Pigden's agenda in all of his papers to date has been to argue against the view that conspiracy theories are *prima facie* unwarranted beliefs. Pigden does this by pointing out that any literate person knows conspiracies occur.

“Conspiracy theories are widely deemed to be superstitious. To suggest, for example, that New Zealand's lurch to the right is due to a conspiracy between leading politicians, the Treasury, and big business is to invite the shaking of heads and pitying looks from sophisticated colleagues. Everybody knows that that is not the way history works. Yet, on the face of it, the evidence points the other way. History is littered with conspiracies, successful and otherwise” (Pigden, 1995, p. 3)

Pigden's contention is borne out by a number of recent history books that deal with conspiracies such as the previously mentioned work of Victoria Emma Pagán (“Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History”) and Thomas E. Kaiser, Marisa Linton and Peter R. Campbell's “Conspiracy in the French Revolution” (Thomas E. Kaiser and Campbell, 2007). Historically literate people accept that conspiracies have occurred and that some theories about them have turned out to be warranted.

1.3.2.3 Lee Basham

Lee Basham, in his 2003 paper ‘Malevolent Global Conspiracy,’ defines a conspiracy theory as:

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[A]n explanation of important events that appeals to the intentional deception and manipulation of those involved in, affected by, or witnessing these events. These deceptions/manipulations involve multiple, cooperating players. While there is no contradiction in the phrase “conspiracies of goodness,” the deceptions and manipulations implied by the term “conspiracy theory” are usually thought to express nefarious, even insanely evil, purposes. (Basham, 2003, p. 91)

Basham’s definition is similar to mine but he has it that conspiracy theories, because of the inherent secrecy of conspiratorial activity, are explanations involving suspicious activity.

He gives a developmental account of conspiracy theories, as evidenced by his 2001 paper, “Living with the Conspiracy.”

Conspiracy theories, warranted or not, follow a two-step pattern: First, they undermine official accounts via *striking incongruities*. Next, they offer plausible but conspiratorial accounts that incorporate the incongruities into a framework where these then become wholly congruent.’ (Basham, 2001, p. 266)

Basham’s two-step schema for conspiracy theories focuses firstly on the citation of errant data, data that is anomalous relative to the official or generally accepted theory, and then how this errant data, which is normally taken to be extraneous to some official theory can be incorporated into the conspiracy theory in question. I will talk about this in more depth come chapter 3.

1.3.2.4 Steve Clarke

Steve Clarke, in his 2007 paper “Conspiracy Theories and the Internet: Controlled Demolition and Arrested Development,” argues that conspiracy theories are Lakatosian research programmes.

A particular conspiracy theory needs at least to involve the identification of a specific conspiratorial group and to involve the specification [of] at least one motive to explain that group’s conspiratorial activities before the research programme formed around that theory can be assessed as progressive or degenerative. (Clarke, 2007, p. 170)

Clarke views conspiracy theories as being typically degenerating research programmes: they tend not to make successful or novel predictions and often incorporate auxiliary hypotheses which have been put into the theory to prevent it from being falsified by new evidence (Clarke, 2002, p. 136). Clarke admits that some conspiracy theories do turn out to be progressive, such as the investigation by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein into Watergate. He contrasts this with what he takes to be a clear example of a degenerating research programme, the various conspiracy theories about the death of Elvis Presley (Clarke, 2002, p. 136-7).

1.3.2.5 David Coady

In 2006CE David Coady put together a collection of the existing philosophical literature on conspiracy theories entitled “Conspiracy Theories:

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The Philosophical Debate.” In his own article in that volume, “Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories,” he defines a conspiracy theory in the following way:

A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of an historical event, in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event which it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an 'official' explanation of the same historical event. (Coady, 2006b, p. 117)

The first part of Coady's definition is similar to my own. I will talk to the issue of the linkage between the aim of a conspiracy and the event the conspiratorial activity brings about (the second part of Coady's definition) in chapter 7. Coady accepts conspiracies occur and that many generally accepted explanations of events are conspiratorial but he marks out conspiracy theories as different to conspiratorial explanations by claiming that an important part of the definition of a conspiracy theory is that they stand in opposition to some official theory. I will discuss this issue both later in this chapter and in chapters 5 and 6. Coady does not necessarily take it that conspiracy theories existing in opposition to official theories makes conspiracy theories epistemically suspicious because he does not take it that official theories are necessarily epistemically authoritative.

1.3.2.6 Neil Levy

Neil Levy, in “Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories,” specifies a conspiracy theory as being:

[A]n explanation of an event in terms of the plans and coordinated actions of a secretive group of conspirators[.] (Levy, 2007, p. 181-2)

He argues that when such theories exist in contrast to some official theory we should think the conspiracy theory is unwarranted.

A conspiracy theory that conflicts with the official story, where the official story is the explanation offered by the (relevant) *epistemic authorities*, is *prima facie* unwarranted. (Levy, 2007, p. 182)

Levy takes official theories to be theories which have been formed by appropriately qualified epistemic authorities and thus their very officialness means that they are the warranted beliefs of experts. I shall discuss this issue in chapters 4 and 5.

1.3.2.7 Pete Mandik

Pete Mandik’s 2007 paper, “Shit Happens,” defines five conditions that are all individually necessary and jointly sufficient for something to be a conspiracy theory:

Conspiracy theories postulate

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1. explanations of
 2. historical events in terms of
 3. intentional states of multiple agents (the conspirators)
- who, among other things,
4. intended the historical events in question to occur and
 5. keep their intentions and actions secret. (Mandik, 2007, p. 206)

This definition is similar to the one I am operating with. Where Mandik and I differ is on the issue of whether belief in such theories can be warranted. Mandik is defending a thesis that any theory satisfying all five of these conditions is one that can be considered *prima facie* irrational. According to him, taken together these conditions make conspiracy theories inadequate rivals to alternative explanations. His argument, in essence, is when given a choice we should always prefer the hypothesis that “Shit Happens” over a *conspiracy theory* (Mandik, 2007, p. 207). Mandik is defending the view that we should prefer to explain the kind of events that attract conspiracy theories with references to cock-ups and processes going awry rather than assume that things happened because conspirators desired them to.

1.3.2.8 Juha Räikkä

Juha Räikkä’s 2009 paper, “On Political Conspiracy Theories,” follows, broadly, Keeley’s definition of a conspiracy theory (Räikkä, 2009, p.186) but adds the following:

Conspiracy theories that aim to explain only limited historical phenomena are often warranted, i.e. they provide the (more or less) correct explanation of events. (Räikkä, 2009, p.187)

and:

Official explanations can be theories and they can refer to conspiracies, but they cannot be conspiracy theories (unless they are official explanations of wrong authorities). (Räikkä, 2009, p.187)

Räikkä's interest is in political conspiracy theories, specifically the total conspiracy theories which are long-ranging conspiracies which not only explain the occurrence of a particular event, say the election of a specific leader, but (almost) everything else connected to it. Total conspiracy theories suggest, to use his own terminology, "the existence of a *permanent* conspiracy or set of conspiracies" (Räikkä, 2009, p. 187). The kind of conspiracy theories Räikkä is thinking of here are examples like the claim that the Bavarian Illuminati, which was said to have been disbanded in the late 1780s CE, continues to exist today and runs the shadow world government. He considers belief in such conspiracy theories to be irrational.

1.3.3 Commonalities and a taxonomy of conspiracy theories

There are, basically, three different sorts of things that get called "conspiracy theories" in the literature.

1. There is the very general view that a conspiracy theory is just an explanation involving a conspiracy, a view that corresponds to my definition and is also captured fairly straight-forwardly by the definitions of, notably, Keeley, Levy, Mandik, Räikkää and and the more general, first, version of the Oxford English Dictionary definition which goes:

... the theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties.

2. A specific sub-type of the general definition which is about sinister political forces (captured in the second version of the Oxford English Dictionary definition):

... a belief that some covert but influential agency (typically political in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an unexplained event[.]

The idea of definitions that pick out this more specific class take a conspiracy theory to be a controversial explanation of a social or political phenomenon according to which that phenomenon is due to hidden, and perhaps sinister, agents acting in consort.

There are, I think, two quite different ways that such definitions might be considered controversial:

- a) It is built into these (more specific) definitions that explanations fitting the definition are controversial and that we should take a dim view of these kinds of theories. Aaronovitch, for example, offers an extreme variant of this type, because he defines conspiracy theories as not *merely* controversial, or *prima facie* suspicious, but downright irrational.
- b) In other variants, like the OED one, it might rather be that the definition itself is neutral on whether the explanations it subsumes are suspicious but it will turn out that most of them will seem suspicious and controversial once we start to evaluate them. Keeley's unwarranted conspiracy theories, for example, fall under this definition. Clarke, with his worry that conspiracy theories will typically be degenerating research programmes, also has a definition of this sort.

I will often draw attention to the salient feature of definitions of type 2 by describing them, somewhat loosely, as pejorative definitions.

3. Finally there is the idea that a conspiracy theory is some sort of explanation of a phenomenon that arises out of a more general tendency to think that unseen (and mysterious) agencies have control over a significant amount of our society. As I will argue in chapter 3, Popper's conspiracy theory of society is a version of such a theory,

and the theories discussed by Cubitt, Fenster, Hofstadter and Groh also fall under this general schema. Obviously, these writers take a dim view of these theories and I will sometimes describe these definitions, too, as pejorative.

This taxonomy, I think, makes it clear that many people are not disagreeing about conspiracy theories but rather talking about different things. Depending on what you take a conspiracy theory to be, that will result in your having a particular notion of what a conspiracy theorist is and what conspiracy theory skepticism entails⁹.

My defence of conspiracy theories, over the course of this thesis, will be based around evaluating conspiracy theories as explanations of conspiratorial events which, depending on the evidence, may or may not be warranted.

1.4 Some features of my definition of “conspiracy theory”

My definition of conspiracy theory is:

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

My definition is a type 1 definition. I take it that a conspiracy theorist is just anyone who believes a conspiracy theory, whilst a conspiracy theory

⁹There are other kinds of ways restricting the scope of “conspiracy theories”, for example by (as Coady does) excluding official theories, but these are not important for taxonomic purposes.

skeptic is someone who is inclined to doubt that conspiracy theories feature in the pool of credible candidate explanations for an event.

It will be apparent from this definition that, like Pigden, Levy, Mandik and the authors of the Oxford English Dictionary definition that I cited earlier, I want a definition that is very general. When I talk of conspiracy theories, I am not limiting myself to hypotheses about political events, or to hypotheses that have official rivals, or to hypotheses that manifest some more general paranoia or sense that society is controlled by concealed agents. I do, however, focus on theories that are explanatory, rather than theories about the way the world is that just happen to state that some conspiracy has occurred.

I want to look at two particular features of this definition before I proceed in subsequent chapters to an analysis of the conditions under which conspiracy theories, thus defined, are warranted. I will argue that my definition of a conspiracy theory will include some well-accepted and warranted explanations in politics and history, which are not normally considered to be conspiracy theories because they are the orthodox account or official theory. I will also argue that there is nothing inherently suspicious or sinister about conspiratorial activity or theories about such activity.

1.4.1 The First Feature: Surprise parties qualify as conspiracies

According to my definition of a conspiracy theory we are all conspiracy theorists. After all, each of us is surely committed to *at least one* explanation which features a claim of conspiracy as a salient cause of an event. For example, organising a surprise birthday party for a child is an example of a conspiracy and an explanation which cites that activity as the cause of the event will be a conspiracy theory.

The organisation and execution of surprise parties are conspiracies because:

1. They are hatched in secret,
2. They have, as their organisers, a set of agents who work together in secret, and
3. The organisers seek to achieve some end.

Now, if surprise parties are the result of conspiratorial activity, and thus explanations about such parties are conspiracy theories, then surely, some will argue, there is something wrong with my definition of a conspiracy. Perhaps I am setting the bar too low for what counts as conspiratorial activity, maybe we need to include in the definition of “conspiracy” a clause requiring conspiring to be a sinister activity, or claim that the term “conspiracy” refers to political, or political-corporate activity.

We tend to be more interested, or concerned, when a political conspiracy is alleged, than we are when the allegation is about a corporation. We

take even less interest in surprise parties. Now, corporate conspiracies are, arguably, worrisome but we are not in any real doubt that corporations conspire all the time.

Claims about political conspiracies, however, even if it turns out they too occur all of the time, are the kind of thing we should be concerned about. The existence of political conspiracies might undermine what trust we have in the political sector as a whole. They are the kind of thing we should hope do not occur.

This focus on political conspiracies is reasonable, I think, if we admit that it is because some of the most interesting examples of conspiratorial activity are political conspiracies. This does not, however, rule out the utility of talking about surprise parties as conspiracies. If we restrict our focus to the political kind of conspiracy we might end up ignoring other kinds of interesting conspiratorial activity and its associated explanations and we might miss important similarities.

If we are to rule out surprise parties as the kind of conspiratorial activity we are interested in, then we need, I think, to have some kind of criterion that allows us to distinguish the interesting from the uninteresting conspiratorial activity. It is hard to know where we should draw such a line and I worry that making such a demarcation is akin to arbitrarily drawing a line in the sand, something many conspiracy theory theorists seem to do. For example, Daniel Pipes, in “Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From” (Pipes, 1997), Mark Fenster, in “Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture” (Fenster, 2008) and David Aaronvitch in “Voodoo Histories: The Role of the

Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History” (Aaronvitch, 2009), all of whom have pejorative definitions of conspiracy theories, go to great lengths to argue that the conspiratorial explanations they offer for certain events, explanations they argue are warranted, are not conspiracy theories. I think they do this because the common wisdom is that conspiracy theories are **unwarranted** explanations. If you put forward a plausible conspiratorial explanation, then, you cannot be proposing a conspiracy theory.

This view is clearly seen in Rääkkä’s paper, “On Political Conspiracy Theories,” where he writes:

Given that peoples belief in God or childrens belief in Santa Claus are not caused by genuine conspiracies, the history of mankind is probably not familiar with any conspiracy that have involved hundreds of people and dozens of institutions. Large-scale secret actions, such as extensive military operations, should not be confused with genuine conspiracies. The Holocaust was planned and conducted with the connivance of many people and many organizations, as was the Great Terror of 1934-1939 in the Soviet Union, but it is contestable whether these should be called genuine conspiracies, as it was generally “known” what was going on. What was not known was who was responsible, how extensive the action was, and so on. (Rääkkä, 2009, p.193)

Rääkkä is not just denying that the explanation of the organisation and

execution of a surprise party would count as a conspiracy theory but he is also arguing that some clearly, under my definition, conspiratorial activity is not **genuine** conspiratorial activity.

This seems particularly problematic to my mind, in part because conspiracy theory theorists like Räikkä (along with the other aforementioned authors) often criticise their peers for claiming some conspiracy theory is not really a conspiracy theory at all. I think the problem here is that many conspiracy theory theorists are trying to show that they are not conspiracy theorists because, in common usage, this label suggests irrationality or worse, and so they go out of their way to argue that their own belief in in some particular explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause is not a belief in a conspiracy theory. Such authors are concerned with legitimising their belief in particular conspiracy theories, rather than justifying why it is that their particular inference to the conclusion that a conspiracy existed was warranted. It makes sense, if you accept a pejorative definition of a conspiracy theory, that you would feel the need to characterise your particular conspiratorial explanation as something other than a conspiracy theory. Defining conspiracy theories pejoratively runs the risk of clouding the debate, however. Unless we understand why certain conspiratorial explanations are unwarranted, then all this defining away of some conspiratorial explanations as being *prima facie* suspicious looks like favouritism.

I think that if you define a conspiracy theory as any kind of explanation that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause for the event, regardless of whether the explanation is warranted, then you can

escape this problem. For most kinds of explanation (e.g. psychological explanations, historical explanations) we tend to assume that some such explanations will be warranted and some not. We should regard conspiratorial explanations in the same way. I think we should set the bar for our interest in conspiracy theories at the lowest level of conspiratorial activity. At least, for my purposes, we should.

1.4.2 The Second Feature: Conspiracies are not necessarily a sinister kind of activity

I can understand why we might think that conspiracies are a kind of sinister activity: to conspire requires that conspirators act in a secretive manner, and we usually often have good reason to be suspicious of people acting secretly.

There are various reasons why you might keep some organisational activity secret – that is, not report details about it. Consider this non-exhaustive list of possibilities of reasons to be secretive:

1. The organising might only be successful if the resulting event or phenomenon is a surprise. Consider some theatre events, opening ceremonies, game plans by sports coaches and, of course, surprise parties.
2. Certain activities are private. Consider certain domestic situations, personal discussions between friends, or arrangements between a client and a professional.

3. If people found out about the activity before it was complete, they might (re)act inappropriately. This is why talks between Governments might be kept secret.
4. The activities might be regarded as dubious by somebody, though perhaps not everybody. This is no doubt why some people hide their political affiliations or preferences in music.

Kinds one through three show that secrecy might just be necessary for the obtaining of some end. It is, after all, hard to organise a surprise party if the “victim” knows what you are up to. Whilst it is true that acting in secret might suggest that something sinister is going on, this is by no means a strong inference. At best, we might say that acting in secret is suspicious.

The fourth kind, secrecy about dubious activities, however, is the kind of thing that some might consider to be sinister. For example, let us suppose that our Government is having secret meetings with a foreign power, say, to ensure that we will no longer require visas when travelling overseas. Both governments decide to keep the negotiations secret, so that citizens do not get their hopes up and start booking extravagant holidays. However, interested members of the public begin to notice that the Foreign Minister is constantly away and that deputations from both countries are meeting with unusual frequency. Journalists chase the story but the government refuses to comment.

Now, I think we could (and probably should) call the government’s secretive activity here suspicious, but that does this mean that we should

treat it as sinister? Now, you might take a hard line and argue that no matter what the benefits of such activity turn out to be, the act of keeping a secret from the citizens of the country is itself sinister, or you might take a less extreme, but still principled position, which is that the duplicitous relevant activity in the political case is *inherently* sinister because being duplicitous is something our elected representatives should never be. Politicians have a duty to be honest to their constituents, no matter the cost, and thus acting suspiciously in a political fashion is acting sinisterly. I am partial, I must admit, to this kind of argument. However, the act of being duplicitous in a political setting cannot reasonably be regarded as sinister, I would argue, until we know more about why the politicians are being duplicitous.

It is just as suspicious, I think, as a collection of family members planning a surprise birthday party for a five-year old and assiduously denying the impending occurrence of it to said child. I think we should agree that, in both cases, the activity is not sinister. We should deny that conspiracies, as a class of activity, are sinister. Some might be, but it is not necessary that they all are.

Indeed, there are numerous examples of conspiratorial activities which were suspicious but not sinister. Take, for example, the work by the women and men at Bletchley Park in breaking the ENIGMA cipher. This was (from the perspective of the Allied Forces, at least) a praiseworthy and non-sinister activity, despite the secrecy involved in keeping their work hidden from both the Nazi Command and the general British populace. It has all the hallmarks of a conspiracy but the activity itself was not sinister,

merely suspicious.

This view can be found in the work of numerous philosophers. For example, David Coady defines a conspiracy as not being necessarily sinister:

Conspiracies are usually thought of as sinister. This characteristic does not seem, however, to be essential . . . It may be that we only think of conspiracies as sinister if and to the extent that we think of secrecy itself in this way. (Coady, 2006c, p. 1)

Charles Pigden, in his 2006 article “Complots of Mischief?” argues that conspiratorial activity need only be considered morally suspect (and only to some people):

A conspiracy is a secret plan on the part of some group to influence events by partly covert action. I will add the proviso that either the plan or the action must be morally suspect, at least to some people. (Pigden, 2006, p. 157)

The proviso above means that Pigden counts fewer things as conspiracies than I do.

Brian L. Keeley, in his 2007 article “God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theorist” claims that conspiracies are “morally suspect if not morally wrong” (Keeley, 2007, p. 141), which is in line with Pigden, whilst Lee Basham also portrays conspiracy theories as, at the very least, suspicious (if not sinister) because the conspiratorial activity is kept secret and is the kind of activity that would presumably be opposed if the plot became public (Basham, 2006, p. 136-7).

If we accept that conspiracies, like the organisation of surprise parties, occur outside of the political realm and are not necessarily sinister activities, then suggesting there is a conspiracy in existence now and that it can be used to explain some event becomes a much less startling claim than it would be if we restricted our talk of conspiracies to a specific class of political and sinister activity.

I am of the opinion (one that I shall back up with arguments throughout this thesis) that there are a number of well-accepted, warranted explanations of events in history, politics and the like which cite conspiracies as a salient cause. The kind of analysis I want to perform, looking at the epistemic warrant of conspiracy theories, should apply to these examples. I also, to a certain degree, want to rescue the term “conspiracy theory” from *merely* being a pejorative label. I do not see why a conspiracy theory should suddenly become a non-conspiracy theory just because it is warranted.

1.5 Conclusion

To recapitulate, for the course of this thesis my evaluation will rest upon the following definition:

conspiracy theory: an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause.

My definition of a conspiracy theory has two especially important features. The first feature is that it includes any and all explanations

of conspiratorial activity, including the running of a surprise party. The second feature of the definition is that such theories need not be about sinister activities or states of affairs. There is no contradiction, I think, in talking about “conspiracies of goodness.”

I will now go into further detail as to what kind of explanations conspiracy theories are and talk a little about who are going to be qualified experts when it comes to inferring that a conspiracy exists.

Chapter 2

The role of desires and intentions in conspiracy theories

Introduction

In the previous chapter I defined a conspiracy theory as a kind of explanation. In this chapter I will show that conspiracy theories are historical explanations of a particular kind, the intentional explanation. I will then reject an argument for the following claim: if conspiracy theories are intentional explanations, we should regard belief in conspiracy theories as irrational.

I will then look at how we might infer the intentions and desires of conspirators. I will suggest that there exists a class of qualified conspiracy theorists who are the appropriate authorities to refer to if we want to show that some claim of conspiracy is justified.

2.1 Conspiracy theories as historical explanations

According to my definition, a conspiracy theory is an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause¹.

A historical explanation accounts for the occurrence of some event in terms of a sequence of prior events that lead to it. Some of these chains of events might be quite short. For example, you might ask for an explanation as to why Caesar's heart stopped on the Ides of March, which can be supplied by saying that it was caused by massive blood loss which was itself caused by Caesar being stabbed twenty-three times. Some chains, however, are long. For example, you might ask why the Roman Empire fell, the answer to which might well be a very long list of events going back six centuries (and possibly including a story about Julius Caesar being stabbed).

Historical explanations do not have to be explanations about History, conceived of as the study of development of human society; we can, for

¹Many events that can be explained by reference to a claim of conspiracy might also be amenable to an explanation which is not a conspiracy theory. For example, we might be tempted to ask "Why did Julius Caesar die?" One candidate explanation is that "He was stabbed," which certainly explains the death of Caesar. Another candidate explanation is that there existed a group of conspirators who desired Caesar's death and acted accordingly. These stories are complementary hypotheses which explain the death of Julius Caesar. Depending on your target audience and your purpose, you may prefer to present one or the other when asked "Why did Julius Caesar die?" For example, a forensic specialist might only be interested to find out the manner in which Caesar was killed whilst a historian might want to know who killed him. What counts as a successful explanation is contextual; a forensic specialist might reply "But how was he killed?" when presented with a conspiracy theory whilst an historian might ask "But why was he stabbed?" when presented with a forensic report on Caesar's death. As my interest is in conspiracy theories I am interested in how a claim of conspiracy can be used to explain the occurrence of some event.

example, give historical explanations for the evolution of the flagellum which will cite the flagellum's developmental history, give historical explanations that explain why a Department voted for a particular grade standardisation mechanism which will cite the order of events that occurred at one particular meeting and give an historical explanation for the occurrence of an earthquake which will cite the history of activity on some fault line.

For the purpose of talking about conspiracy theories as historical explanations it will be necessary to talk about the role of intentions in some historical explanations. Intentional explanations, as a variety of historical explanation, explain events by citing the intentions, desires and beliefs of agents as causes (via the causing of actions) of the event in question. Conspiracy theories are examples of such intentional explanations because they cite the existence of a conspiracy, which is an activity which is undertaken in secret by conspirators who **intend or at least desire to achieve some end**.

2.2 Criticisms of the intentional aspect of conspiracy theories

I have argued that a claim that a conspiracy is a salient cause of an event rests upon claims about the intentions of conspirators. Steve Clarke, in "Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing," worries about the role of intentions in conspiracy theories as explanations. He writes:

As explanations, conspiracy theories are highly dispositional. When conspiracies occur it is because conspirators intend them to occur and act on their intentions. The conspiratorial dispositions of the conspirators play the role of the cause in a typical explanation that involves a conspiracy. (Clarke, 2002, p. 145)

Clarke takes conspiracy theories to be “dispositional explanations.” A dispositional explanation (which, on Clarke’s gloss, seems to be another name for an intentional explanation) cites the dispositions of agents (for example, Marcus Brutus and his fellow senators had the disposition to kill Caesar) as being part of the chain of events which cause an event to occur. He contrasts dispositional explanations with what he calls “situational explanations” which cite the situation (the historical context, for example) in which an event occurred (for example, due to a series of popular uprisings and land grabs by the military, the social and political system of Late Republican Rome was in disarray and no longer functioned properly, leading to the rise of demagogues like Julius Caesar and Marcus Brutus) as being the cause of that event.

Clarke argues that we should prefer situational explanations to dispositional ones, because understanding the situation and context (say, for example, the social and political forces) which lead to some event leads to the production of a more unified explanatory account than you get if you simply claim that someone intended that event to happen. Clarke argues that as most of the rivals to conspiracy theories are situational in character we are entitled to a *prima facie* suspicion of conspiracy theories

because they are dispositional in character (Clarke, 2002, p. 145). He writes:

If you examine the circumstances of Elvis Presley's natural death closely enough you will be able to relate it to other natural events, and with sufficient persistence you will be able to relate all of these within the scope of physics, thereby furnishing yourself with an explanation with more unificatory power than any dispositional explanation can provide. (Clarke, 2002, p. 146)

According to Clarke, conspiracy theories are suspect because conspiracy theorists severely overestimate the role of dispositions in conspiracy theories and do not pay enough attention to the situation in which the event in question occurred.

I think there is a problem for Clarke's account because there is no straight contrast between dispositional and situational explanations. A given explanation might well be an example of both. Whilst conspiracy theories are intentional (and thus dispositional on Clarke's gloss) explanations this does not bar them from also invoking situational factors. However, it is not clear that conspiracy theories are any more dispositional than their rivals, or that these rivals are any more situational than conspiracy theories. As David Coady argues:

[I]t is not clear that there really is a tendency for conspiracy theories to be more dispositional than rival theories. Although Clarke cites examples in support of his position, other examples

seem to cast doubt on it. The official explanation of John F. Kennedy's murder, for example, seems just as dispositional as its conspiratorial rivals. All explanations agree that someone or some group of people intended the murder to occur and acted on their intentions. A disposition to murder the president seems to play an equally fundamental explanatory role in all accounts of that event, whether they are conspiratorial or not. (Coady, 2006c, p. 8)

Coady is right, I think: Clarke's thesis about the overly dispositional nature of conspiracy theories is not borne out by investigation of actual conspiracy theories and their rivals. Indeed, Clarke has retracted his thesis about the dispositional nature of conspiracy theories, albeit only slightly, in his 2006 article "Appealing to the Fundamental Attribution Error: Was it All a Big Mistake?" (Clarke, 2006), where he argues that the dispositional nature of conspiracy theories is really a problem to do with the psychology of belief in conspiracy theories rather than a problem with conspiracy theories *as explanations*.

My interest, in this thesis, is mostly in the question "Do we have good grounds for a *prima facie* suspicion of conspiracy theories?" It is important to separate out the psychology of conspiracy theorists from issues to do with the warrant of conspiracy theories. Just because some conspiracy theorists, due to a lack of critical thinking skills, paranoia or something of that ilk, will sometimes argue for very credible conspiracy theories by appealing to claims about the aims or intentions of some unspecified

“them,” this does not tell us anything particularly interesting about the nature of conspiracy theories as a kind of explanation.

2.3 Inferring to the desire to conspire

I have argued that we should not reject conspiracy theories *merely* because they are intentional explanations. However, I think there is an interesting question that has to do with the secrecy of conspiratorial activity, one that impacts on the issue of whether conspiracy theories are typically suspect. This question is: How do we infer to the specific ends or goals that drive the secret activities of conspirators and who are the qualified experts when it comes to making such inferences? Since we can regard an end (at least, for our purposes) as a desire that a certain state-of-affairs be realised, this is a question about the methods we ought to use to uncover desires.

We need to say something about how we might be able to infer the desires of conspirators or explain how such desires can reasonably be attributed by an analysis of how a conspiracy can be cited as the salient cause of some event. We also need to realise that conspiracies are the actions of multiple conspirators, so considering what it means to say that a group (rather than an individual) desires or intends to bring about some end will also be important. I will look at each of these issues in turn.

2.3.1 Linking desires of agents with the occurrence of events

Any explanation that treats an agent's desire to achieve or bring about some end as a salient cause of some event needs to demonstrate the connection: how does the desire help to cause the event? One way to do this is to talk about what it would be rational for an agent to do, given the desires, and other mental states that they might have had.

For example, the conspirators who killed Julius Caesar believed that this action of theirs was the most rational course of action available to them, because they believed it would fulfil their desire to return Rome to senatorial rule. Now, we know that the assassination of Caesar did not lead to power being returned to the Senate, but, suitably filled out, we can say that Brutus and his associates acted rationally² because:

1. They believed that the plebeians and the patrician classes opposed the now-permanent dictator status Caesar had awarded himself, and
2. They did not appreciate just how much support the plebeian class

²Perhaps Marcus Brutus and his fellow senators should have known that there was strong support for Caesar amongst the plebeian population of Rome and they acted rashly. If they acted rashly, then can we appeal to a notion of acting rationally to link a desire to a cause of some event?

William Dray, in "Philosophy of History," argues that as long as we understand that a rash action can be rationally understood in respect to its context, then we can say rash actions can be nonetheless rational (Dray, 1964, p. 13).

However, it is not obvious that we need to regard an action as rational, in order to postulate that it was caused by particular mental states. A murderer surely acted rashly (and not irrationally) and it is possible that historians can reasonably explain this (irrational) action in terms of a faulty deliberative process. My claim in the text does not require that all intentional explanations attribute rationality. I am merely using the fact that historians might attribute rational deliberation to some agents as an illustration of the way a mental state might be linked causally to an action by an explainer.

felt towards Caesar and how disenfranchised they felt under the old regime, and

3. They did not know that Mark Antony would use the sentiment of the plebeian class against the conspirators.

This general explanatory procedure consists in hypothesising that an action that is known to have occurred was the causal result of rational deliberation. Sometimes, the explainers will have access to information suggesting that certain agents (conspirators, say) had certain beliefs. Sometimes, the explainers must postulate the existence of particular mental states with very little to go on. Either way, the process smacks of *post facto* reasoning. Such an explanation seems to assume that the agents chose to act in a rational manner relative to their objectives and the beliefs they held at the time, and perhaps we can rescue any candidate explanation with *ad hoc* modifications to make the decisions of the conspirators look rational. Indeed, this is a complaint levelled against some conspiracy theorists by conspiracy theory skeptics.

2.3.1.1 Qualified conspiracy theorists

So how can we infer to the desire of some agent, or set of agents, to achieve some end?

I think we should look at what historians do when they provide explanations. A great many explanations in History rest upon claims that an event occurred because some agent, or set of agents, intended it. If we can give an account of why it is that historians can make reliable

inferences to the intentions of historical agents, then perhaps we can use that analysis to explain how a qualified conspiracy theorist could do the same and also why it is that we might be wary of such inferences when they are made by conspiracy theorists who are not suitably qualified.

Historians, when engaged in the study of their selected era of history, seem to be able to come to empathise with the historical agents of the period so that they can make reliable claims about the desires and intentions of such agents.

Michael Scriven in his article “Causes, Connections and Conditions,” refers to the historian’s special insight into or empathy with the mental states and motivations of historical agents (Scriven, 1966). Historians, he argues, are able, due to their training, to empathise with historical agents and thus infer their motivations for acting the way that they did.

The argument is that qualified historians have the expertise either to infer to the intentions of specific historical agents or to make general claims about kinds of historical agents. Historians immerse themselves in the era they study, reading the extant literature, the histories written by authors who were alive at the time, the commentaries on those histories and so forth. Whilst historians cannot know exactly what some historical agent believed at a particular time, they are better placed than a layperson to infer things about the past, including the kinds of beliefs, desires and intentions historical agents might have had. Likewise, they are qualified to pass judgement on another historian’s thesis that, say, Marcus Brutus and his fellow senators desired to kill Caesar because it would return power to the Senate. Political scientists, who might be the right kind of

expert to appeal to for contemporary conspiracy theories, are similarly qualified experts, as are sociologists, psychologists and the like.

If we grant that historians, sociologists and political scientists, with the aid of the right kind of training, can infer to the intentions, beliefs and desires of agents, can we grant that conspiracy theorists are similarly capable of inferring to the beliefs, intentions and desires of conspirators? The answer to this is a “Yes, as long as . . .” answer. Given that I define a conspiracy theory as an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause, a great many historians will be conspiracy theorists in their professional role³. Historians who are interested in the various treacheries of the Elizabethan Age will be conspiracy theorists because a great number of the explanatory hypotheses which account for those treacheries will be explanations of events that cite the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause.

However, whilst some historians will be conspiracy theorists, there are a great many conspiracy theorists who have no historical (or associated) qualification whatsoever and thus will not be qualified experts in a field relevant to the topic in question. To be an historian is to be a suitably qualified authority in an area of History, but there is no equivalent accreditation to be a conspiracy theorist. It is not clear that *mere* conspiracy

³As previously mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, not all historians will necessarily study areas of history which feature claims of conspiracy, so not all historians are necessarily conspiracy theorists (in the sense that an historian who is a conspiracy theorist is, one hopes, a qualified conspiracy theorist rather than merely someone who holds belief in some conspiracy theory. Given that I claim we are all conspiracy theorists, because we all hold belief in some conspiracy theory, it trivially follows that all historians are conspiracy theorists. However, I am using the term to refer to something more than a *mere* conspiracy theorist in this case.

theorists (conspiracy theorists who are not, say, qualified historians) can reliably infer the intentions of conspirators in the way some historians, sociologists and political scientists can.

Now, this is not, I will admit, an immediately obvious point. Arguably, ordinary people are good at inferring to the beliefs and desires of others from their behaviour. I know when the retail assistant I have just met is bored based upon her body language and the like. One plausible account of why we are good at inferring such things is that we develop a folk psychology from our daily interactions in the public realm. Conspiracies, however, are private; they are a subversion or pathology of normal public interaction. Without some further qualification as to how I, as a lay member of the public, can infer what some secret group desires (which might be as easy as saying “I found this document stating their intentions” or as hard as “Knowing the historical/sociological/political circumstances and some key facts about the figures involved, it seems they might well have intended to conspire at this time. . .”), we should be cautious of the claims of unqualified conspiracy theorists.

When it comes to specialist areas like history, sociology, physics, politics and the like it is reasonable to expect that explainers have some suitable accreditation, authority or expertise to warrant some potential audience member accepting the explanation as worth paying some attention to. This expertise does not tell us that the explanation on offer is, in fact, credible, just that the person offering the explanation is the right kind of person to be listening to. Part of the required expertise, when it comes to persuading someone that your conspiracy theory is warranted,

is showing that you have some ability to say something about the desires and intentions of the kind of agents and situations that you study.

This is not an arduous burden. If there is a conspiracy about my family, then being a member of my family may well be enough to warrant some claim about what my ancestors desired to achieve (as long as I have made some study of my family and its history). Of course, if a conspiracy theory is about some close friends of yours, whose behaviour together has often been successfully predicted by you in the past, then you may be a suitably qualified expert to rule on the credibility of that conspiracy theory. Not all qualifications are of the sort that can be framed or entered into a curriculum vitae.

Sometimes being an appropriately qualified agent will be easy. In some cases it may not be; conspiracy theories concerning the machinations of the Stasi in East Germany, with the elaborate conspiracies, double-bluffs and disinformation campaigns will likely require the explainer to be not just conversant with the history and sociology of Germany in the 1960s and 70s but also a qualified historian, sociologist or something similar. Indeed, given my claim that we are all conspiracy theorists of some stripe and that some of us have warranted belief in particular conspiracy theories, some of us will either be qualified conspiracy theorists or have acquired our warranted belief in some conspiracy theory from another qualified conspiracy theorist (as I will discuss in chapter 6).

2.3.2 Conspiring together: claims of conspiracy as claims about group activity

Conspiratorial activity is a group activity. We are not dealing with a single agent but rather a group of agents when we appraise a claim of conspiracy. I think this adds a further complication to providing an account of what the agents intended. This is not just a problem for conspiracy theories but rather a problem for explanations of collective action in general.

Here is an example to show the kind of concern I have in mind. Imagine that your Department is discussing how to standardise grades across papers of a certain level.

The Department has a meeting and a model for grade standardisation is put forward. It is rigorously debated and certain members of the Department are for it, some are against it and others are on the fence. Towards the end of the meeting a vote is held and the model is narrowly voted in as the new standard for a certain level of the Department's courses.

Six months later, the Dean of the Faculty realises that the Department's new model differs substantially from its previous version and does not match the offerings of other Departments in the Faculty. She contacts the Head of Department to ask about how the decision to adopt the model was arrived at and the Head of Department explains that the Department, as a whole, agreed to the new model.

Now, I do not think that when the Head of Department says "The Department, as a whole, agreed to the new model" she is, in any real

way, guilty of a sin of omission. A fleshed out story would have the Head of Department having to explain that the vote was narrow, but, assuming that the Department and its members agree that a democratic vote mechanism, with associated discussion, is an acceptable decision procedure for matters such as these, saying “The Department, as a whole, agreed to the new model” adequately describes what went on at the meeting.

Yet, it is also true that the decision, made at the Departmental level, might suggest to an outside observer a degree of consistency that we could not find if we were to poll each member of the Department individually. Some of the members might well have strenuously opposed the new model and think it abhorrent. Others may have voted for it merely because it was better than the previous model but not as good as the other options on the table, and so forth. The individual members of the Department, through a joint activity, could be made to look like they adopted the proposal due to a common want, which they did not actually have.

My point is this: given that the above state of affairs is fairly common, we should be very wary indeed to assume that conspirators all share the same wants, desires, dispositions, and so forth. Whilst they may jointly perform an action, their individual motivations for performing that action may not just be different but, in some cases, wildly different and some individuals in the group may not be motivated to perform it at all. Inferring what an individual conspirator desired will be difficult where there is no record of that individual’s desires. For example, we still have references and quotes from letters that Marcus Brutus sent to his disciples

following his exile from Rome after the assassination of Julius Caesar, and from this we can infer a lot about what Brutus desired as the outcome of the conspiracy he was a part of. Servilius Casca, however, one of the other conspirators, left behind no diaries or letters, so we cannot, outside of his complicity in the plot to kill Caesar, say much about his individual desires.

Now, problems to do with inferring to the individual desires of the conspirators which collectively make up some claim of what the conspirators *in general* desired to achieve is, as I stated, not just an issue to do with conspiracy theories but affects intentional explanations of any kind of collective activity. Given that this is a problem in general I do not think we need to be worried especially that conspiracy theories suffer from it. It is simply an issue to do with just how well the explainer, whether a *mere* conspiracy theorist, qualified historian or political scientist, is able to infer to the desires, either individually or collectively, of the conspirators.

Summary

Conspiracy theories, as explanations, cite the existence of conspiracies as the salient cause of some event where part of the “salient cause” being referred to is the collective desires of the conspirators to achieve some end. I have suggested that we should understand conspiracy theories as historical explanations, specifically intentional ones.

I looked at an argument by Clarke which suggests that we should reject conspiracy theories as adequate explanations because we should prefer non-intentional explanations. I rejected his argument, chiefly because it

rests on a dubious distinction between intentional explanations (which Clarke calls "dispositional") and situational explanations.

Given my definition of a conspiracy theorist, which is anyone who holds a conspiracy theory, I provided a gloss on what kind of expertise a conspiracy theorist should be required to have before we can refer to her as a suitably qualified authority in inferring to the beliefs, desires and intentions of conspirators. Such an expert, I suggested, is far more likely than anybody else to assist us with decisions about the credibility of conspiracy theories (a matter to which I will return in chapter 7).

I also argued that whilst conspiratorial activity is a group activity, suitably qualified conspiracy theorists will still be able to make claims about the beliefs, intentions and desires of the set of conspirators.

I will now look at a set of arguments for the claim that we are justified in having a *prima facie* suspicion that conspiracy theories, in general, are bunk. These arguments develop the idea that we live in an open society where conspiratorial activity is both rare and rarely successful.

Chapter 3

The Open Society and the issue of the Public Trust

Introduction

In this chapter I will look at a set of arguments about just how conspired our world is. These arguments have been used by some philosophers to argue that belief in conspiracy theories *in general* is suspicious. I will first examine Karl Popper's discussion of what he calls the "conspiracy theory of society." I will then look at the work of Brian L. Keeley who has produced an argument against the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories based on the claim that it results in a radical skepticism about the openness of our society. I will then look at an argument of Lee Basham's which suggests that the world is not as open as Popper and Keeley believe.

3.1 The conspiracy theory of society

Karl Popper's "The Open Society and Its Enemies" has been a highly influential work both in and outside of Philosophy. Popper characterises a kind of approach to explanations of social phenomena that he calls the "conspiracy theory of society," which he defines as:

... the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed), and who have planned and conspired to bring it about. (Popper, 1969, p. 94)

Popper is a type 3 on my taxonomy of conceptions of conspiracy theories (see section 1.3.3 in chapter 1). Whilst Popper admits that conspiracies are a typical social phenomenon (Popper, 1969, p. 94) he thinks the general approach to social phenomena that involves seeking to explain them in terms of conspiracies is based on superstition (which he takes a dim view of).

In its modern form it is, like modern historicism, and a certain modern attitude towards 'natural laws', a typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition. ... The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful—sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from—such as the Learned Elders of

Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists.

(Popper, 1969, p. 95)

Popper poses a dilemma; either History is the product of conspirators achieving that which they desire or it is not. Clearly, he argues, most events in the world are not the result of conspiracies and thus belief in the conspiracy theory of society is *prima facie* irrational. He writes:

[N]ot all consequences of our actions are intended consequences; and accordingly, . . . the conspiracy theory of society cannot be true because it amounts to the assertion that events, even those which at first sight do not seem to be intended by anybody, are the intended results of the actions of people who are interested in these results. (Popper, 1972, p. 342)

Charles Pigden, in "Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?" argued that Popper is erecting a straw man here. No one (read: no sensible people) really believes, Pigden argues, and I agree, that history is completely explained in terms of successful conspiracies. Rather, what people believe, if they think there are some examples of warranted conspiracy theories, is that conspiracies have occurred and that some of them are responsible for, and explain the occurrence of, some historical events. Pigden writes:

What the [conspiracy] theory [of society] claims is not that the explanation of a social phenomenon often consists in the discovery of men or groups who are interested in its occurrence but that it always does. If this is the theory, Popper is

right to deny it. . . . But, by the same token, it is a thesis that nobody believes. The denial of the conspiracy theory on this interpretation would be little more than a truism, for it is quite compatible with the denial of the conspiracy theory in this sense that the world should be choc-a-bloc with conspiracies, most of them successful. All that is required is that some phenomena result from other causes. (Pigden, 1995, p. 6)

As Pigden ably illustrates, conspiracies like the Ridolfi plot, the Throckmorton plot and the Babington plot (to name but a few Elizabethan examples) are part and parcel of our orthodox histories (Pigden, 1995, p. 3-4). We can believe that many conspiracy theories are warranted without endorsing the conspiracy theory of society.

3.1.1 Consummation

Part of the problem for Popper's thesis of the conspiracy theory of society is his insistence that even though conspiracies occur, they are rarely successful.

Conspiracies occur, it must be admitted. But the striking fact which, in spite of their occurrence, disproves the conspiracy theory [of society] is that few of these conspiracies are ultimately successful. *Conspirators rarely consummate their conspiracy.* (Popper, 1969, p. 95)

This is why the conspiracy theory of society cannot be rational, according to Popper: not only is the conspiracy theory of society an irrational

belief in conspiracies being behind everything but since conspiracies are very rarely consummated, belief in conspiracy theories is generally suspicious.

[N]ot all consequences of our actions are intended consequences; and accordingly, . . . the conspiracy theory of society cannot be true because it amounts to the assertion that all results, even those which at first sight do not seem to be intended by anybody, are the intended results of the actions of people who are interested in these results. (Popper, 1969, p. 96)

Popper seems to think that you could only believe the conspiracy theory of society, if you thought that there were lots of conspiracies and that they succeeded in their aims. After all, if you didn't believe this, you wouldn't have any mandate for attributing causal power to these conspiracies and saying that things happened because of the intentions of the conspirators. However, Popper is here assuming that we can only regard a phenomenon as the intended outcome of a conspiracy if that conspiracy achieved is ultimate goal, whatever that was. This, however, is not required.

. . . I assert that conspiracies are very rarely successful. The results achieved differ widely, as a rule, from the results aimed at. (Consider the Nazi conspiracy.) (Popper, 1972, p. 342)

His example of the Nazi conspiracy, as a conspiracy that was not consummated is an odd one, given what we know, say, about how the

Holocaust occurred under the noses of both the Allies and the Axis forces and the effect it had on the Jewish population at the time. The reason why Popper thinks the Holocaust was unsuccessful is because it did not go to plan. The conspiracy was revealed before it could be consummated (in the sense that the intended end of Hitler et al was the complete extermination of the Jewish people, and that end was never achieved).

Regardless of the extent to which a conspiracy succeeds in achieving its ultimate aims, there is a further question about whether a particular event can be regarded as an intended result of some conspiracy, which is what the conspiracy theory of society has to allege. After all, a conspiracy can fail in its ultimate purpose (perhaps because it gets discovered early; perhaps because it gets botched; perhaps because the conspirators change their minds about what they want) and yet a particular phenomenon might still be an intended result of the conspiracy. So, as we have seen, the torture, execution and mass migration of thousands of Jewish people can be explained as the intended results of the Nazi conspiracy, even though that didn't achieve its ultimate genocidal aim. Hence, it is odd for Popper's discussion of the explanatory role played by conspiracies to focus so much on the question of whether conspiracies achieved their aims. Even unsuccessful conspiracies like the Holocaust (under Popper's definition) can still play a big role in explanations in history. Popperian success is not required of a conspiracy for that conspiracy to be explanatory.

As Pigden writes:

So long as we do not set our sights too high, we do not have

to look too far for conspiracies that have succeeded in the long term. (Pigden, 1995, p. 14-5)

Hence, Popper should not have put so much weight in his criticism of the conspiracy theory of society on claims of conspirators rarely being ultimately successful in their plans.

3.2 The unfalsifiability of conspiracy theories

In “Conjectures and Refutations” Popper presents a worry about the conspiracy theory of society, which is that it entails the belief that we are kept ignorant of what is really happening behind the scenes of our political and social reality. He calls this subsequent belief the “conspiracy theory of ignorance,” which:

... interprets ignorance not as a mere lack of knowledge but as the work of some sinister power, the source of impure and evil influences which pervert and poison our minds and instil in us the habit of resistance to knowledge.” (Popper, 1972, p. 3)

Popper’s conspiracy theory of ignorance is a consequence of belief in the conspiracy theory of society. Citing the existence of a conspiracy as the explanation for some events or social phenomena in general, Popper argued, allows us to hide our ignorance about *how the world really works* with a thesis that the phenomena we cannot explain are the results of conspiratorial activity.

Popper was an advocate of the thesis of the open society, the idea that the existence of modern liberal democracies is of benefit to us all because only through the promotion of open societies can we escape totalitarianism and authoritarianism. Brian L. Keeley, in his seminal article “Of Conspiracy Theories” runs the argument that belief in conspiracy theories leads to a radical skepticism about the openness of our society and such a skepticism is inappropriate.

As I mentioned in section 1.3.2.1 in chapter 1, Keeley defines a conspiracy theory as:

[A] proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret. (Keeley, 1999, p. 116)

His interest, in his articles to date, has been on the class of what he calls “unwarranted conspiracy theories” (Keeley, 1999, p. 117). Whilst he does not deny that there can be individual cases of warranted conspiracy theories he does believe we have grounds to think that we have a justified and *prima facie* suspicion with respect to conspiracy theories in general because, as he remarked in his 2007 paper, “God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theorist,” there is no “mark of the incredible” that allows us at first glance to tell the difference between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories (Keeley, 2007, p. 137).

I will discuss his grounds for thinking belief in conspiracy theories commits conspiracy theorists to this skepticism later in this chapter. How-

ever, to understand his worry about belief in conspiracy theories generally I must first talk about Keeley's claim that conspiracy theories are immune to falsification and why, even if this is true, it is not a problem *per se*.

3.2.1 Errant data

Part of Keeley's discussion about conspiracy theories in "Of Conspiracy Theories" is about their use of what he calls "errant data" with respect to rival explanations. Errant data is information which is not part of the pool of evidence for a particular explanatory hypothesis. Keeley argues that there are two kinds of errant data which regularly come up in connection to conspiracy theories: "unaccounted-for data" and "contradictory data" (Keeley, 1999, p. 118).

Errant-unaccounted-for data: Data which supports one candidate explanation but is unaccounted for (is not mentioned or explained) by some rival candidate explanation.

For example, many conspiracy theories about the assassination of American President John F. Kennedy cite data which is unaccounted for by the rival official theory, known as the "Lone Gunman" hypothesis. This data includes statements about some witnesses hearing more than three gunshots (the number of shots Lee Harvey Oswald, the sole assassin, was said to have fired) which is data that is unaccounted for by the official theory.

Keeley contrasts unaccounted-for data with:

Errant-contradictory data: Data cited by one candidate explanation which contradicts another explanation.

For example, some of the conspiracy theories about the events of September the 11th, 2001CE, are based on data which contradicts the rival official theory (itself a conspiracy theory). The official theory for the events of 9/11 is based upon the claim that the cited evidence is consistent with the destruction of the Twin Towers having been caused by the impact of two planes, piloted by terrorists, flying into them. Various of the conspiracy theories, such as the “Controlled Demolition” thesis¹ cite errant data which is consistent with the claim that two planes flew into the buildings but contradicts the official theory by showing that the buildings collapsed due to a controlled demolition.

Both kinds of errant data raise interesting issues for the epistemic status of conspiracy theories. For example, Lee Basham, in “Living With The Conspiracy,” argues that the appeal to unaccounted-for data by conspiracy theories can make them look more complete, as explanations, than their rivals. This is because such conspiracy theories may not only account for the data cited by the rival but also show how the data which is taken to be unaccounted for or contradictory to the rival is not errant with respect to the conspiracy theory.

Explanatory completeness is often the decisive tool of theory

¹An explanation of the events of September 11th, 2001CE according to which the Twin Towers were destroyed by a controlled explosion and not because two planes flew into them.

choice in the sciences. Conspiracy theories secure their remarkable completeness in two ways. First is their ability to account for “errant data.” Errant data take two forms: unaccounted and contradictory. . . . Second, conspiracy theories also account for all the data that the official account explains. This allows them to always receive higher marks at explanatory completeness than official accounts can. (Basham, 2001, p. 268)

Not every conspiracy theory will be more complete than some rival explanation for the event. However, says Basham, when a conspiracy theory is more complete than some rival explanation of the event, because it makes what was considered to be errant data look salient, for example, then it does seem like we should prefer the conspiracy theory over less complete rivals. Now, in a case where we have such unaccounted for or contradictory data in play, we should hope, if we prefer the rival theory, that we can explain away that data as either not really being errant or not salient to the pool of the best available candidate explanations.

However, it is also the case that there will likely be some data in the overall pool of evidence which will be errant to **any** candidate explanation of an event. Explanations do not need to be complete in the sense that they take account of every single piece of data. For example, part of the data about the assassination of President X will be data about the colour of the socks she wore, which probably will not be salient to the explanation of her assassination. That there is data which is unaccounted

for by some explanation is something we should expect. If the conspiracy theories (or the rival theory) cites unaccounted for data which is not salient to either explanatory hypothesis (say, because it features *ad hoc* modifications to render the unaccounted data salient so as to make the candidate explanation look more complete), then even though the theory looks like a more complete explanation of the event, this completeness is illusory.

However, the existence of contradictory data is something we should be concerned about, because contradictory data could well falsify a candidate explanation. Keeley argues that this is because if there is a conspiracy occurring, then we should expect that there will be information put out by the conspirators to hide the work they are engaging in. He writes:

It is not *ad hoc* to suppose that false and misleading data will be thrown your way when one supposes that there is somebody out there actively throwing that data at you. (Keeley, 1999, p. 121)

Recall my list of conditions which must be satisfied before some claim of conspiracy can be considered believable (see chapter 2, section 1.1):

1. There exists (or has existed) some set of agents who plan,
2. Some end is/was desired by the agents, and
3. Steps have been taken to minimise public awareness of what the agents are up to.

The final condition suggests that the plotters (read: conspirators), aside from trying to minimise evidence of their conspiratorial activity, might put out information to discredit theories about the existence of the conspiracy. Some of the information they will put out might be fabricated evidence which contradicts the conspiracy theories. If the conspiracy theories predict or accommodate this fabricated evidence, however, it will render the conspiracy theory unfalsifiable. A given conspiracy theory might well include the claim that information designed to discredit it has been or will be produced. Hence, any data that seems to contradict the conspiracy theory can be redescribed by a holder of that conspiracy theory as disinformation put out to discredit it. If this move is available as part of the defence of the conspiracy theory, then the conspiracy theory is unfalsifiable. Some contradictory data *with respect to a specific* conspiracy theory might well have been fabricated by the conspirators². Keeley denies this is a problem for conspiracy theories:

Falsifiability is a perfectly fine criterion in the case of natural science when the target of investigation is neutral with respect to our queries, but it seems much less appropriate in the case of the phenomena covered by conspiracy theories. (Keeley,

²Steve Clarke, in his 2002 paper, 'Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing,' also agrees.

Once a conspiracy theorist has become committed to a conspiracy theory, she is able to account for almost any relevant evidence that is presented. It is either evidence of the cover-up, which the conspirers are attempting, or it is evidence of discrepancies in the received explanation. Strictly, none of this can be described as ad hoc. A theory that involves an attempt by some people to deceive other people is a theory that involves reasons both to expect a cover-up and flaws in the cover-up. (Clarke, 2002, p. 135-6)

1999, p. 121)

Basham agrees:

Falsified evidence is precisely what a conspiracy theory *predicts* will be produced by the government and other players in ample amounts. . . . Keeley is right to set aside this objection: “unfalsifiability is only a reasonable criterion in cases where we do not have reason to believe that there are powerful agents seeking to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter.” (Basham, 2001, p. 268-9)

Such falsified evidence could be an example of “disinformation.” Disinformation³ is fabricated data presented in support of a candidate explanation in order to make it look warranted when it might not be. For example, when evidence is provided which claims experts agree that the evidence for the destruction of the Twin Towers clearly shows they were hit by two Boeing 747s, causing the collapse (and that the evidence does not suggest a controlled demolition) holders of a rival conspiracy theory might well cry “Disinformation!” and claim this evidence which contradicts their conspiracy theory has been deliberately fabricated to discredit their explanatory hypothesis. Normally, evidence which contradicts some explanation should be taken (in a naive sense) as falsifying that hypothesis but, as Keeley argues, because the holders of some conspiracy theories often predict the existence of contradictory errant data, this makes it impossible for such errant data to falsify the conspiracy theory.

³I will talk more about disinformation in section 5.1 of chapter 5.

By invoking a conspiracy hypothesis, large amounts of “evidence” are thrown into question. This is one of the most curious features of these theories: to my knowledge, conspiracy theories are the only theories for which evidence *against* them is actually construed as evidence *in favor* of them. The more evidence piled up by the authorities in favor of a given theory, the more the conspiracy theorist points to how badly “They” must want us to believe the official story. (Keeley, 1999, p. 120)

Given how reliant we are on the testimony of others, this is a legitimate worry; as long as any individual agent is unable to judge each and every piece of evidence for some claim on their own, there will always be the possibility that someone is distorting the evidence (an issue I will look at in greater detail in chapter 5). Now, what I take to be interesting about this is that if conspiracies do occur, then belief in the existence of conspiracies surely leads us to this odd situation of some perfectly reasonable conspiracy theories being unfalsifiable because the existence of contradictory data is predicted by the conspiracy theory. Indeed, there is some historical precedent which bolsters this initially odd seeming situation. For example, the Russian State used disinformation in the Moscow Show Trials to discredit the Dewey Commission’s investigation into what really happened.

However, David Coady, in “Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories,” argues that errant data (of either kind) is not a special feature of conspir-

acy theories. He writes:

Conspiracy theories do tend to offer putative explanations of data unexplained by, or apparently in conflict with, the received alternative. But the received alternative will also (unless it is a transparent fabrication) attempt to explain data unexplained by, or apparently in conflict with, its conspiratorial rivals. (Coady, 2006b, p. 119)

For example, there is a set of conspiracy theories about a military complex in my hometown of Devonport (in Auckland, New Zealand), which includes claims that there are hidden tunnels deep within an extinct volcanic cone known as Maungaika (also called “North Head”). Part of the evidence for the official theory, which denies the existence of these hidden tunnels, is a series of archaeological reports and survey results which show there is no physical evidence for the existence of any additional and unknown tunnels (Veart, 1990) (Veart, 1998). Some of the conspiracy theories about Maungaika either ignore, or do not take into account, these pieces of evidence. Meanwhile, some proponents of the conspiracy theories claim that the official theory does not take into account the very large amount of eye-witness testimony which shows that people have been in these hidden tunnels in the recent past. Both the conspiracy theories and official theory have data which is errant from the viewpoint of the other⁴.

⁴Some of this discussion of errant data centres around the way we select data to support an explanatory hypothesis, a matter I will address in chapter 5.

Coady is right to argue, then, that errant data is to be expected when there are rival explanations in play rather than being a special feature of conspiracy theories.

However, this is not, in itself, a particular problem because even Keeley agrees that the existence of errant data is not a special problem for conspiracy theories *per se*.

What conspiracy theories get wrong, however, is that the existence of errant data alone is not a significant problem with a theory. Given the imperfect nature of our human understanding of the world, we should expect that even the best possible theory would not explain all the available data. One's theory should not fit all the available data, because not all the available data are, in fact, true. (Keeley, 1999, p. 120)

I think Keeley's central worry about the role of errant data in the evaluation of conspiracy theories is that the existence of such data might incline people to adopt a radical skepticism about publicly available data in general. Keeley thinks we should avoid this predicament because it means we will lose our trust in public institutions.

3.3 Public Trust Skepticism

In "Of Conspiracy Theories" Keeley identifies a particular problem for conspiracy theories in general, which is the increasing skepticism required to believe in them:

[T]he problem with UCTs⁵ is not their unfalsifiability, but rather the increasing degree of skepticism required by such theories as positive evidence for the conspiracy fails to obtain. These theories throw into doubt the various institutions that have been set up to generate reliable data and evidence. In doing so, they reveal just how large a role trust—in both institutions and individuals—plays in the justification of our beliefs. (Keeley, 1999, p. 121)

The central thesis of Keeley’s article “Of Conspiracy Theories” is an argument to the effect that belief in conspiracy theories engenders a radical skepticism of public data. This skepticism is inappropriate because it leads to a loss of trust not just in the institutions we suspect of being in on the conspiracy but also of other, related institutions.

Keeley’s work follows in the footsteps of Popper, who believed that as we live in a relatively open society it would be irrational to believe there were conspiracies occurring now because it would be difficult-cum-impossible for the conspirators to act in secret and consummate their plans. Popper did not think we lived in a completely open society but rather one that was more open than those of yesteryear:

Today, things may be different, owing to our slowly increasing knowledge of society, i.e. owing to the study of unintended

⁵Keeley, in this quote, is running his argument with respect to the class of unwarranted conspiracy theories, but, as he admits in “God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theorist,” as there is no easy way to distinguish between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories, this problem ends up being one that applies to warranted conspiracy theories as well.

repercussions of our plans and actions; and one day, men may even become the conscious creators of an open society, and thereby of a greater part of their own fate. . . . But all this is partly a matter of degree, and although we may learn to foresee many of the unintended consequences of our actions (the main aim of all social technology), there will always be many which we did not foresee. (Popper, 1969, p. 94)

He argued that one of the many benefits to living in a modern and open society is our ability to scrutinise its workings. Popper's position was that we live in a world of largely unconspired public institutions. Hence, he thinks, it will be hard for conspirators to keep their activities secret and our public institutions will be too open to allow for the existence of conspiracies. Keeley identifies the fact that belief in conspiracy theories entails skepticism about how open our public institutions are as a reason to consider belief in conspiracy theories, in general, suspicious.

It is this pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions entailed by some mature conspiracy theories⁶ which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted. . . . As this skepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes. (Keeley, 1999, p. 123)

I want to introduce a concept here that relates to Popper's notion of the open society and Keeley's worry that belief in conspiracy theories

⁶Well-established conspiracy theories which makes use of errant data.

engenders a skepticism of public institutions and their utterances, which I will label the “Public Trust Skepticism” thesis.

Public Trust Skepticism: Belief in conspiracy theories leads to an increasing distrust in our sources of public data.

which I identify with this argument by Keeley:

[One] lesson of conspiracy theories is that we ought to recognize such theories as embodying an almost nihilistic degree of skepticism about the behavior and motivations of other people and the social institutions they constitute. To the extent that a conspiracy theory relies on a global and far-reaching doubt of the motives and good will of others, it is akin to global philosophical skepticism. (Keeley, 1999, p. 126)

Public data, as used in my formulation of the thesis above, is information which originates from, or is transmitted by, public institutions. Why are public institutions of particular interest to Keeley? In part it is because the literature on conspiracy theories, both inside and outside of Philosophy, tends to be on political conspiracy theories. Most of us accept that businesses and private consortiums (perhaps quite frequently) engage in criminal conspiracies, but we should like compelling evidence before we conclude that this happens (with great frequency) in the public sphere. To a certain extent Keeley (and Popper) are not concerned about the conspiratorial activity of non-political organisations and individuals, which is why I construe this as a thesis about **public** trust skepticism, yet

both of these philosophers would, I think, grant that this kind of thesis is extendable to large corporations and lobby groups, especially those groups which have some kind of political leverage. However, even if we construe the claim that society is open as a claim that covers businesses as well as political institutions, I think we would still think it appropriate to focus our attention primarily on public institutions because conspiring is just more difficult when you are in the political realm or perhaps because politicians are meant to be noble. Whatever the reason, claims of political conspiracies tend to be treated as more important than non-political ones precisely because they call into question the status of our public institutions.

The public trust skepticism thesis Keeley advances is supported by a slippery slope argument. The first premise is this: If you believe some political conspiracy theory, then you will doubt some piece of public data and distrust the institution it originates from. This seems plausible.

The subsequent premises of this slippery slope argument are the following: If you doubt some piece of public data, then you will probably come to doubt some other, related piece of public data or you will come to doubt the utterances of other public institutions which make similar claims, which will, in turn lead to an ever increasing skepticism of public data in general.

Keeley writes:

Considered in this light, the challenge of conspiracy theory is that it forces us to choose between an almost nihilistic degree

of skepticism and absurdism: the conspiracy theorist chooses to embrace the hyperskepticism inherent in supposing dissimulation on a truly massive scale (by distrusting the claims of our institutions) over the absurdism of an irrational and essentially meaningless world. (Keeley, 1999, p. 125)

Keeley takes it that this skepticism is inappropriate not just because it amounts to a global skepticism but because it leads to a kind of conspiratorial thinking (“conspiracism”) which attributes as the results of conspiracies the complexity of the world we live in.

The rejection of conspiratorial thinking is not simply based on the belief that conspiracy theories are false as a matter of fact. The source of the problem goes much deeper. The world as we understand it today is made up of an extremely large number of interacting agents, each with its own imperfect view of the world and its own set of goals. Such a system cannot be controlled because there are simply too many agents to be handled by any small controlling group. There are too many independent degrees of freedom. This is true of the economy, of the political electorate, and of the very social, fact-gathering institutions upon which conspiracy theorists cast doubt. (Keeley, 1999, p. 124)

Now, I admit that it is very easy to point to examples of holders of particular conspiracy theories who certainly act as if they distrust large swaths of public data because of their belief in a set of conspiracy theories.

For example, the American media commentator and conspiracy theorist Glen Beck seems to believe any conspiracy theory about left-wing groups and politicians, as does Aotearoa me Te Wai Pounamu (New Zealand)⁷ journalist and publisher Ian Wishart and they are suspicious about any public data which originates from or is touched by left-wing politics. Many conspiracy theorists are highly skeptical about sources of public data, but, as I will show, I do not think that this argument for the public trust skepticism thesis is a particularly good.

David Coady also criticises the general tenor of the public trust skepticism thesis with a sentiment I wholeheartedly agree with: because conspiracy theories are put forward as *the* explanation of an event they are not the same kind of thing as a skeptical hypothesis about public data (Coady, 2006b, p. 122). Belief in a conspiracy theory might cause you to doubt some rival theory to the conspiracy theory (or some of the evidence for the rival theory) but this does not entail a general skepticism of, and lack of trust with respect to, the entirety of our public institutions and their data.

He writes:

[A] conspiracy theory, unlike a skeptical hypothesis, is offered

⁷The te reo Māori names for the North and South Islands of New Zealand are the subject of some contemporary debate. Whilst in recent history the name “Aotearoa” has been taken as being synonymous with both islands, there is now a growing movement to refer to the South Island by the name given to it by local iwi (tribes), which is “Te Wai Pounamu” and go back to the older meaning of “Aotearoa,” which refers solely to the North Island of New Zealand. Organisations like “Nga Maia O Aotearoa Me Te Wai Pounamu” and the the Anglican Church of New Zealand (with the Bishopric which covers the South Island and the lower North Island called “Te Pihopātanga o Aotearoa o Te Waipounamu”) are two examples of the resurgence of identifying the South Island by its local name.

as an actual explanation, not as an alternative possible explanation. The radical conspiracy theorist⁸ seeks not to undermine belief as such, but to replace our current beliefs with different beliefs. (Coady, 2006b, p. 122)

Steve Clarke, in “Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing,” (Clarke, 2002) argues along similar lines to Coady. His argument is that no matter how much doubt a particular conspiracy theory might cast on some public institutions it is unlikely to lead to a radical skepticism about all public data (Clarke, 2002, p. 141).

Take, for example, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s investigation of the Watergate Hotel break-in. They were vilified for their pursuit of what happened at the Watergate Hotel because, their opponents claimed, suggesting that the Republicans had conspired against the American people to hide their dubious activity would lead to serious political and social repercussions, namely a loss of trust in the political system. However, the evidence supported the claim of conspiracy and I think we all now accept that Woodward and Bernstein’s conspiracy theory was warranted and the terrible consequences of that revelation did not result in a radical skepticism about American politics.

Coady and Clarke are, I think, arguing along the same lines; whilst belief in conspiracy theories might well engender some skepticism it does not engender the kind of extreme skepticism that Keeley believes it does. We can, then, accept a version of the first premise of the public trust skepticism argument without needing to buy into subsequent premises.

⁸The kind of conspiracy theorist Keeley has in mind.

Recall my two conspiracy theorists, Glen Beck and Ian Wishart. Both of them seem to have taken the slippery slope from belief in a conspiracy theory to a skepticism about public data. However, neither of them have embraced a radical skepticism about all such data. They are skeptics about any data which they suspect comes from the institutions controlled by the Left but have not, as of this time, succumbed to a total skepticism about the utterances of all public institutions⁹. Whilst I am sure some conspiracy theorists start to doubt everything they are told, most conspiracy theorists restrict their skepticism, if indeed they exhibit any, to a particular area of interest.

My response to the kind of argument Keeley is running is this. No matter what we think about the openness of our society and the ability of conspirators to conspire successfully or to hide their plans, we should not be suspicious of conspiracy theories *merely* because believing some of them might lead to skepticism about some public data. Belief in a claim should be based, not on what would happen if we believed it, but on the evidence for it.

Recall my example of Woodward and Bernstein's investigation of Watergate. We now all believe the conspiracy theory they presented

⁹Glen Beck has, admittedly, advised people not to use Google for their searching needs, because Google is in bed with the government and the government is controlled by the Left (Matters, 2011). However, he still thinks there is enough public data out there which has not been tainted by Leftish groupthink to allow others to form a warranted belief in the existence of the massive Left-wing conspiracy which seeks to control our lives. Of course, this might just go to show how irrational some people are; Glen Beck, with his suspicion that the Left are in control of the government, probably should doubt the veracity of a lot of his information sources. They were educated in the same education system that he claims has been infiltrated by liberals and thus they may well be either dupes who aid the Left without knowing it or agents of disinformation.

because it was supported by the evidence, independent of any issues about the skepticism it might or might not have engendered. We should go where the evidence leads, rather than worry about what might happen if we believed the theory. This is an obvious objection, I think, to Keeley's thesis of public trust skepticism.

I will now consider one more response to Keeley, specifically Lee Basham's argument that the world we live in is not as open as Keeley (and Popper) might think it is.

3.4 The Openness Objection

Lee Basham, in his 2001 paper "Living with the Conspiracy" argues that unless we address the issue of just how open our society is we cannot tell whether the kind of skepticism Keeley is worried about is warranted. Basham starts by identifying the worry that conspiracy theorists have about our public institutions.

The background suspicion of most conspiracy theorists is that public institutions are and perhaps always have been largely untrustworthy where certain critical interests of the dominant powers—corporations and government—are at stake. (Basham, 2001, p. 270)

If these conspiracy theorists are right, then perhaps we should be skeptical, to some degree, about the utterances of our public institutions.

The conspiracy theorist presents us with a much more interesting and challenging background proposition: (1) We have only limited grounds on which to claim *positive warrant* for our confidence in public institutions of information where critical interests of the dominant powers are at stake, and (2) abundant *positive warrant* exists to suspect that public institutions of information are commonly used to deceive us in the pursuit of these interests. It is precisely this positive warrant that places many conspiracy theories in an entirely different league than the merely speculative schemes and concerns of a global philosophical skepticism. (Basham, 2001, p. 270-1)

Indeed, Basham thinks that we would be foolish in thinking that there is not a “fairly involved, long term, widespread, and shocking conspiracy involving an elaborate cover-up/disinformation campaign” (Basham, 2001, p. 272) occurring now. The question Basham considers is this: “How can we work out just how much trust we should have in our public institutions?” To avoid suffering from public trust skepticism we need to know that we have sufficient trust that our public institutions are not involved in conspiracies. Basham is concerned that we do not have good reasons to believe we can totally trust public institutions at this time because, whilst our society is open, it is not open enough.

The real issue haunting us is what a relatively conspiracy-free society that we would be *well justified in believing is relatively conspiracy-free* would look like. One thing is clear: it would

not look like ours, *whatever* the truth about our society is.

(Basham, 2001, p. 273)

Basham's argument is what I will call an "Openness Objection." The openness objection is the argument that as long as we accept that we live in a relatively-but-not-completely open society we can accept that conspiracies occur and not succumb to a radical skepticism about public data. In his 2003 paper "Malevolent Global Conspiracy" he gives three reasons for thinking this.

1. Not all the evidence for and against the claim for the existence of a conspiracy is socially-transmitted.

Basic claims, such as being an eye-witness to an event, can warrant belief in the existence of a conspiracy.

2. Conspirators are more likely to work within the constraints of public institutions rather than to exercise direct control over them and their output.

Rather than exerting the enormous effort required to create and maintain institutions as fronts for their activities, conspirators can maintain the same level of control more simply, by subverting existing public institutions.

3. The presence of real and open public institutions will attract those who are ambitious for power, thus providing the conspirators with recruits for their conspiracies (Basham, 2003, p. 98-9).

Basham does not believe that our public institutions are free of conspiratorial activity. Conspiracies are likely, on Basham's view, to occur as part of the operation of public institutions *rather than make up all of the activities of said institutions*. For one thing, whilst the individual field agents of the CIA may well be honest and sincere law enforcement agents who are acting for the good of America internationally, the Board of Directors of the CIA, who supervise such agents, may have their own agenda to produce disinformation and be answerable to no one. If some set of conspirators committed electoral fraud by artificially increasing the ACT Party vote in Epsom, then they could, should someone come to check the registry, have it altered. If the minutes of a meeting are kept by a secretary, then the council need only pay off the secretary, et cetera. *The process of disseminating public data is governed by a bureaucracy* and bureaucracies are, by and large, hierarchical. It may be true that we have no reason to think our public institutions are, in fact, fronts but the fact that most of our public institutions are hierarchical means that it is quite possible for our public institutions to look a lot more open than they really are.

I agree, then, with Basham: given what we know about the world in which we live, we have good reason indeed to be skeptical of some of the utterances of our public institutions. A more finessed version of the openness objection, I think, will point towards agents, like ourselves, having qualified reasons to be suspicious of both the pronouncements of public institutions **and** conspiracy theorists, as I shall show in the next few chapters.

Conclusion

In this chapter I looked at some of the arguments that have been put forward to justify our common sense suspicion that conspiracy theories are bunk. I looked at Karl Popper's *conspiracy theory of society* which is a claim about a suspicious tendency by some conspiracy theorists to posit conspiracies as the sole explanation of history as we know it. However, as Charles Pigden I think has shown, Popper's *conspiracy theory of society* is a thesis that nobody really believes.

I then looked at Brian L. Keeley's work. First, I considered his discussion of so-called errant data – data that comports well with some theories, but not with some of their rivals. I considered whether the existence of errant data gives us any special reason to accord low epistemic status to conspiracy theories, in general. I suggested that it did not: neither the charge that conspiracy theories are too complete to be true, nor the fact that many of them are unfalsifiable, gives us ground for taking a dim view of them.

I then discussed Keeley's thesis that belief in political conspiracy theories engenders a radical and inappropriate skepticism of public data (and thus a radical skepticism about how open our society really is), which I called the "Public Trust Skepticism" thesis.

I looked at two related objections to it, coming from David Coady and Lee Basham which shows that belief in conspiracy theories may lead to some skepticism but not the radical and global skepticism Keeley is concerned with.

I argued that even if belief in conspiracy theories engenders such skepticism we should not use that as an excuse to label belief in conspiracy theories as suspicious as we should always look at the evidence and ask “Is this conspiracy theory warranted?”

I also looked at a response to Keeley’s argument (which comes from the work of Lee Basham), which I called the “Openness Objection.” It raises the question of “Just how open is our society anyway?” I then talked about how closed an open-looking society might be, especially one like ours, which is still largely hierarchical.

I do not think that belief in such conspiracy theories leads to any form of radical skepticism about public data. However, as I will show in the next few chapters, we can show that there are issues we must be aware of when dealing with the evaluation of conspiracy theories, issues which show that many of the fears stereotypical “conspiracy theorists” are said to hold should be taken seriously.

Chapter 4

Contrasting conspiracy and official theories

Introduction

In chapter 1 I defined a conspiracy theory as:

an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause.

In this chapter I will look at one of the reasons why we might think we have a *prima facie* reason to be suspicious of conspiracy theories, which is that when they exist in opposition to some rival theory which has official status, the sheer officialness of the rival theory is a reason to prefer it over the conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theories often, but not always, have explanatory rivals¹. The existence of such rivals, which are often known as “official theories,” “official stories,” the “received view,” et cetera, is taken by conspiracy theory skeptics as a good reason to reject unofficial and rival conspiratorial candidate explanations of events because as official theories are endorsed by what is taken to be some relevant authority, they are taken to be the kind of explanations we should prefer.

I will argue in this chapter that it is only in a limited range of cases that the officialness of a candidate explanation suggests that the explanatory hypothesis is supported by the evidence. It is not clear that the common sense suspicion about conspiracy theories, which is that when they have official theory rivals, conspiracy theories should be considered unwarranted, is justified. To understand when an official theory trumps a conspiracy theory, that is, when it amounts to a better explanation, we need to look at the role endorsements play in warranting explanations. This will require us to analyse the relationship between the official status of a candidate explanation and its evidential support. I will argue that there is no tight connection between the two.

¹This follows from my definition. An official theory could be a conspiracy theory, so the well-accepted and uncontested (unrivaled) explanation of an event could be a conspiracy theory.

4.1 The Role of Endorsements in assessing explanations

A common reason for considering conspiracy theories to be a suspicious class of belief to hold is that they often have superior explanatory rivals. Often these rival candidate explanations are supported by evidence and are proposed by people with a certain kind of official status.

For example, the Lone Gunman hypothesis, the official theory concerning the assassination of the 35th President of the United States of America, John Fitzgerald Kennedy (aka JFK), has both superb evidential support and official status. The Lone Gunman hypothesis has official status because it has been endorsed by both the academic and political sectors. These two sectors² have accredited the theory with official status because the explanatory hypothesis, that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, is supported by the evidence. The various rival conspiracy theories concerning the assassination of JFK (which range from the minimal “Oswald did not act alone” to the more fleshed-out “Oswald was a patsy for CIA hit men”) are considered, by both the academic and political sectors, to be *mere* conspiracy theories which are to be *sneered* at. These conspiracy theories, it is argued by these influential institutions, have little to no evidence to support them, which is why they are *mere* or *unwarranted* conspiracy theories and, because of this, they should be *sneered* at.

I have been using terms like “evidential support” and “official status.”

²For the purpose of this analysis let us assume these are monolithic and homogenous sectors rather than disparate and heterogenous.

I have talked about *sneering at mere* theories and how some theories are *endorsed*. I shall now make it clear what it is I mean by these key terms by contrasting the evidential support of an explanation with whether it has any institutional support.

Whilst we can talk about how the evidence supports a candidate explanation, it is hard to give necessary and sufficient conditions for what counts as satisfactory evidential support for explanations in general. We can say that candidate explanations with plausible premises and logically good inferences are preferable to candidate explanations with controversial premises and weak inferences, and we can also agree that appeals to eye-witness testimony will need certain credentials to be considered warranted. We must, however, draw on particular facts of specific cases when deciding between candidate explanations that are supported by different pieces of evidence.

For example, I could explain why the sky is blue by saying it is because that is the colour God chose to paint the heavens. There is a fairly good rival to this candidate explanation which claims that the sky appears blue due to the refraction of the lightwaves from the Sun through our atmosphere. This rival candidate explanation is based upon the results of a rigorous research methodology, has been subject to testing, and is precise enough for it to be clear as to how it could be falsified; in general, it is superior because it is supported by the evidence³ and is testable.

The official or institutional status of an explanation, however, may be

³I will discuss the use of evidence with regards to explanations and how the use of such evidence can be selective in chapter 5.

independent of its evidential support. An explanation might have superb evidential credentials but be *sneered* at by some influential institution, which might persuade some agents to think the explanation is unwarranted, or the explanation might have little to no evidence to support it but, nonetheless, be *endorsed* by an influential institution, which might persuade some agents to think the explanation is warranted. An explanation which is *endorsed* by an influential institution is one which will have official status with respect to that institution, whilst an explanation which has been *sneered* at by such an institution is by definition one which is officially rejected by that institution⁴.

So, just because a candidate explanation has official status, this does not mean that it is supported by the evidence. Whilst academic institutions can be expected to confer a certain authority on many sorts of claims in a way that suggests, but does not entail, that the theory has the right kind of evidential support; such an endorsement of some theory may not just be recognised by the members of said institution but also by the lay public. In the same respect, the Government, as an influential institution in matters political, can confer endorsements upon many of its claims, although such authority might only be accepted by its citizens and might be *sneered* at by foreign powers. Members of particular Masonic Lodges might well accept the institutional authority of their Master Mason but *sneer* at the pronouncements of the Master Mason of a rival Lodge.

⁴Some explanations might be sneered at one by institution (say, a political institution) but endorsed by another (say, an academic one). For example, in the 1960s, the thesis of anthropogenic climate change was sneered at by the governments of many Western nations yet endorsed by many academic institutions.

4.2 Contrasting the endorsement of an explanation with its evidential support

I am interested, in this chapter, in what happens when a conspiracy theory is contrasted with a non-conspiratorial explanation of the same event which has official status but no evidential support, which is to say that I am interested in the contrast between conspiracy theories and candidate explanations which are *merely* endorsed. Some holders of conspiracy theories claim we not only often prefer official theories over conspiracy theories *merely* because of their endorsed nature but that there are clear cases of people in positions of power abusing our preference for such official theories so they can discredit warranted conspiracy theories.

4.2.1 The Moscow Show Trials

Take, for example, the official theory, in the 1930s, concerning the Moscow Trials. The official theory, as promulgated by the Communist Government of Russia, and believed by the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States of America, had official status. However, the hypothesis that these trials were free and fair was not based on the evidence as the trials were a sham.

In the 1930s Joseph Stalin, then leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, became very concerned that his former ally and now enemy-in-exile, Leon Trotsky, was plotting to return to Russia and take control in a coup.

So concerned was Stalin about this possibility that he ordered his agents to keep close tabs on Trotsky as well as his former allies. When the agents reported back, saying that Trotsky did not appear to be involved in a conspiracy to depose Stalin, Stalin ordered the arrest of the “sympathisers” anyway; the evidence be damned! Over the course of some nine months the arrestees were tortured and persuaded to testify that they were conspiring against the Russian state in order to sabotage Stalin’s regime and install Trotsky as the leader of the Soviet Union. A series of mock trials was held, a conspiracy by Trotsky to seize power and overthrow the Communist leadership of the Soviet Union was seemingly uncovered, the “conspirators” were executed, and a warrant for Trotsky’s “arrest” was issued⁵.

Stalin and his cronies assured the Governments of the USA and the UK that the trials were free and fair, and those Governments accepted that assurance. The USA and the UK believed in (what turned out to be), an unwarranted but *endorsed* candidate explanation of the event. This seems understandable, given the context; they assumed that the government of the Soviet Union was the relevant authority in matters of judicial investigations into treasonous acts by its citizens and, arguably, accepted the story told to them because of its official status, which had been conferred upon it by the political institution that was the Russian government and judiciary.

Now, you might be forgiven for asking “What is the issue here?” Presumably, whatever we think of a particular conspiracy theory, if we know

⁵Officially it was an arrest warrant but it was really an order for his assassination.

that a rival to some explanatory hypothesis is not supported by the evidence, then we should not accept it. However, and there is always a “however” in cases like this, many people think we should prefer official theories to conspiracy theories precisely because of their official status. Sometimes they will express this preference without considering the evidence for said explanatory hypothesis. On the other hand, some people might prefer certain conspiracy theories over official theories because they are suspicious of explanations which have been endorsed by influential institutions. Whatever we might think of the relationship between the official status of a particular explanation and its evidential support, it is true that some people prefer certain explanations *merely* because they have been endorsed by some institution.

For example, Brian L. Keeley, in “Of Conspiracy Theories,” (Keeley, 1999) argues that part of the core definition of a conspiracy theory is that it exists in contrast to some official theory. Our suspicion of conspiracy theories (which he thinks is justified) is, he argues, grounded, at least in part, in our preference for official theories (Keeley, 1999, p. 116-7).

Neil Levy, in his 2007 paper, “Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories,” claims that any conspiracy theory which conflicts with an official theory is *prima facie* unwarranted:

A conspiracy theory that conflicts with the official story, where the official story is the explanation offered by the (relevant) *epistemic authorities*, is *prima facie* unwarranted. (Levy, 2007, p. 182)

Levy's argument focuses on the attitude of intellectuals (which I take to mean the appropriately qualified epistemic agents in a field relevant to some discussion) and he argues that their suspicion of conspiracy theories is warranted when there exists an official theory rival to the conspiracy theory in question. His thesis is that appropriately qualified epistemic agents hold and produce warranted beliefs and thus any theory which is in conflict with such a theory and cites the existence of a conspiracy will be unwarranted. Levy admits that intellectuals can have warranted beliefs in conspiracy theories; the explanation of 9/11 is both a conspiracy theory and a warranted belief (Levy, 2007, p. 182), but if a conspiracy theory is up against an official theory, then the conspiracy theory will be *prima facie* unwarranted.

Whilst I think we can understand why agents might prefer explanations with official status if we think the issue is about agents making judgements regarding what to believe under conditions of imperfect information, this is, I would suggest, a kind of psychological excuse at best. If we do not know how well (or how badly) some candidate explanation is supported by the evidence, but said explanation has been endorsed by an influential institution and thus has official status, then perhaps it is understandable that agents might express a preference for that explanation. However, I think this preference has unfortunate consequences. To show why, it will be necessary to break down and specify the range of options in the space between what we might call "*unwarranted sneered at explanations*," which are rightly treated with disdain, and "*warranted endorsed explanations*," which could be considered to be the "gold standard" of explanations

because they have both the right kind of evidential support and the right kind of official status.

4.3 Finessing the space between *warranted endorsed* and *unwarranted sneered at* explanations

Here are two sets of questions we can ask to help us categorise the different kinds of explanations we might encounter:

1. What evidential support does the explanatory hypothesis have?

Is the explanatory hypothesis warranted or unwarranted, which is to ask “Should an agent accept the explanation based upon the available evidence?”

2. What is the relevant official status of the explanation?

Is it endorsed by some relevant institution? Is it *merely* unendorsed, which is to say that it is neither endorsed by some relevant institution, nor *sneered at* by some relevant institution? Or is it *sneered at* by some relevant institution?

I do not think I need to say much about *unwarranted unendorsed* explanations, which have no evidential support and have no attendant official status. However, the range of possibilities between these and *warranted endorsed* explanations are interesting.

Warranted Unendorsed Explanations Some explanations will have the right kind of evidential support but have no official status, in that they will be neither endorsed nor *sneered at* by any institution.

Many new explanations of a phenomenon, for example, might well fall into this category; the individual scientist generates her explanation of an event, using her best inferences, and, before submitting the explanation to the process of peer review, has an explanation which does not yet have official status.

Warranted Sneered at Explanations Some explanations will have the right kind of evidential support to be warranted but will have negative official status, in that the explanation is *sneered at* by some institution.

There are numerous examples of such explanations in the Natural Sciences. Whilst we all now accept Tectonic Plate Theory as an explanation for the shape and motion of the continents we must admit that when it was first proposed it was *sneered at* by geologists, despite the evidence for the explanatory hypothesis warranting the theory. The same story can be told about the candidate explanation that *H. pylori* causes peptic ulcers⁶, an explanatory hypothesis that was *sneered at* by the medical establishment because of the existence of another candidate explanation, which claimed it was stress that

⁶With regard to both of these examples of *warranted sneered at* explanations I think we can tell a reasonable story about why the warranted explanations were *sneered at*; in both cases the new explanation went against the “received wisdom” of its day and thus the new theories had to shoulder and discharge the burden of proof, which they subsequently did.

caused peptic ulcers, before becoming the new orthodoxy.

Unwarranted Sneered at Explanations Some explanatory hypotheses have no evidential support and have negative official status.

For example, the thesis that the events of 9/11 were caused by a conspiracy undertaken by the Executive Branch of the Government of the United States of America, using ultra-sonic weaponry and hologrammatic representations of two Boeing 747s to bring down the Twin Towers, is a candidate explanation for the events of 9/11 that has no evidential support whatsoever and has negative official status, in that it is *sneered* at by academic and other institutions.

Unwarranted Endorsed Explanations Some explanations have no evidential support but still have official status.

One version of the official theory as to why it was necessary to invade Iraq in 2002CE was that the Saddam Hussein regime was allegedly creating weapons of mass destruction. This was, it turned out, an *unwarranted endorsed* explanation; it had no evidential support but the explanatory hypotheses had official status because it was endorsed by two influential political institutions, namely the governments of the United States of America and the United Kingdom.

Warranted Endorsed Explanations Some explanations have evidential support and official status.

The official theory for the events of 9/11 – that cites the existence

of a conspiracy undertaken by the organisation known as “Al-Qaeda” to commit a terrorist attack on American sovereign soil – has both evidential support (because the way in which the buildings collapsed is consistent with their being struck by two hijacked Boeing 747s and the *mea culpa* which was delivered by Osama Bin Laden, one of the leaders of Al-Qaeda) but also with respect to detailed forensic evidence showing who the hijackers were, what training they had prior to the attacks and their links to Al-Qaeda. The official theory also has official status with respect to the government of the United States of America, the Secret Services of many world governments and, crucially, the leadership of Al-Qaeda. The official theory is a *warranted endorsed* explanation; it is *the* explanation of the event.

In an ideal world, a *warranted endorsed* explanation will be one where the evidence for the explanation will be readily available, should we want to look at it. This, however, is only sometimes true of the world in which we actually live. Some *warranted endorsed* explanations will have official status but we might not be allowed or be able to inspect the evidence for that explanation.

For example, immediately after the Second World War the Government of the United Kingdom assured its subjects that part of the explanation for the end of the war was the breaking of the ENIGMA cypher used by the Nazi Command. This explanation was endorsed by the War Office, a relevant and influential institution and it was also warranted. However, the average Briton was not able to inspect the evidence which warranted

said explanation until 1974CE, when the salient information about how the ENIGMA cypher was broken was released under the Official Information Act. So, for a period of time, the average Briton was told that one of the official theories of how the Second World War was won included the fact that it was due, in part, to the breaking of the ENIGMA cypher but they were presented with no evidence for that fact other than some claim like: “Trust the War Office in this matter!” The official theory was both endorsed and warranted, but the public only knew about the endorsement and were not allowed to inspect the evidence. The average Briton took it on trust that the endorsement meant that the explanation was warranted because, in matters of state security and issues of war, the War Office was not just an accrediting and influential institution but also **the** authority to refer to.

I want to say, and maybe I am going out on a limb here, that agents often assume endorsed candidate explanations are also warranted. If some influential institution has endorsed or accredited an explanation with official status, then said status indicates that the explanation is warranted. Why, we might be reasonably expected to think, would some institution endorse an explanation unless it was a good one?

Not being able to adequately distinguish between *mere* acts of endorsement and legitimate endorsements is a mistake holders of many conspiracy theories charge conspiracy theory skeptics with. Such conspiracy theorists are concerned that conspiracy theory skeptics *merely* trust the proclamations of officialdom and they will, by way of examples, point to a litany of candidate explanations which were not supported

by the evidence yet managed to be endorsed and have some kind of official status, such as the Republican Party's explanation of the Watergate Affair and the Nazi Party's "holiday camps in Switzerland" cover story for the Holocaust. These are all examples of *unwarranted but endorsed* explanations.

However, conspiracy theory skeptics will reply by saying that a lot of conspiracy theorists suffer from a similar problem. Such conspiracy theorists, they say, will reject a candidate explanation which has official status because such *endorsed* explanations are the kind of thing we should consider to be *prima facie* unwarranted.

Both of these positions, held by extreme conspiracy theory skeptics and extreme conspiracy theorists alike, are irrational. That being said, I can understand why we might think that an endorsed candidate explanation is a warranted one. The notion a lot of agents might have is that if a candidate explanation has some official status, then it should be warranted because, in most cases, members of the public and the press could inspect the evidence for the explanatory hypothesis to check whether the candidate explanation is supported by the evidence. Thus, it would not normally be in the institution's interests to endorse an unwarranted explanation because they could be found out.

Explanations, although they may come tagged with institutional credentials, do not usually come pre-identified as being either warranted or unwarranted. When we do not know the details of the evidence, it seems reasonable to take the endorsement of an influential institution as evidence for the candidate explanation being warranted. The catch is that

we need to understand what that means and what kinds of institutions that it will apply to; not all institutions are created equal, nor do they accredit explanatory hypotheses equally.

The question, I think is “What role is the endorsement of an authority playing in the officialness of an explanation?”

4.4 Appealing to Authority

In chapter 1 I mentioned the work of the sociologist Veronique Champion-Vincent, and how her analysis of conspiracy theories makes reference to learned people, those who presumably should know better, endorsing what seem to be unwarranted conspiracy theories. Champion-Vincent is highlighting cases where experts in one field endorse an explanation in some other area and how, sometimes, agents fail to recognise that specific expertise is not necessarily transferable. Whilst the following example is trite, it does illustrate this to a certain extent.

The members of the 9/11 Truth Movement, a fairly disparate group which shares a central thesis that the official theory of 9/11 – that Al-Qaeda was responsible for the destruction of the Twin Towers⁷ – is not true, will often point at experts and celebrities who endorse the various conspiracy theories that contradict the official theory. After the election of Barack Hussein Obama as president of the United States of America in 2008CE, the members of the 9/11 Truth Movement tried to persuade

⁷As I have previously stated, the official theory here is a conspiracy theory which has been endorsed and is, I think, warranted.

President Obama to meet with the actor Charlie Sheen, for a ten minute meeting about what they claimed really happened on September the 11th, 2001CE. Opinion pieces were placed in the national media to create a groundswell of support for such a meeting and one of the op-eds contained the following gem:

“But when someone with the gravitas of a **Charlie Sheen** issues a statement, anyone is forced to listen.” (Malcolm, 2009)

If Charlie Sheen were speaking on matters theatrical, where arguably⁸ he has some expertise, then maybe his gravitas might be a reason to listen to him. However, whatever gravitas Charlie Sheen has, it is not clear that he has the right training or background (as I discussed in chapter 2) to be the right kind of expert to infer the existence of a conspiracy and endorse candidate explanations about the events of 9/11. Thus, you might be forgiven for wondering why an actor, unqualified in such matters, would be considered an appropriate authority to advise the president of the USA on matters concerning the September 11th, 2001CE attacks.

There are three conditions for a legitimate appeal to authority to be considered warranted (which rules out Charlie Sheen as a qualified expert on matters to do with 9/11):

1. The appeal is to some legitimate authority in a field relevant to the enquiry and

⁸Very arguably.

2. The appeal is to an authority who is in substantial agreement with her peers that the explanation that has been endorsed is correct, and
3. The authority is testifying honestly.

The problem, as I see it, is that *unwarranted endorsed* explanations – explanations which agents might prefer due to an appeal to official status – can be confused with or taken for being explanations which we should prefer because some **relevant expert** has endorsed it. If a candidate explanation for an event has been endorsed by a relevant authority we should probably prefer it over a rival with no such endorsement **if we are in no position to inspect the evidence**. However, even if a candidate explanation for an event has official status, this tells us very little about what the experts believe, because official status can be bestowed upon a theory without that theory being endorsed by people with the right epistemic credentials⁹.

Whilst mistaking a theory having some official status for one that is supported by the evidence is irrational, it is, I think, an understandable move agents might make if they are required to express preferences about explanatory hypotheses in circumstances where they do not have access to the evidence. Recall my earlier example of the Moscow Show Trials: most agents either did not have access to the evidence cited in the trials or lacked the time to pore over the evidence to check whether it supported

⁹So, within the 9/11 Truth community, the fact that Charlie Sheen has endorsed the Inside Job/Controlled Demolition hypothesis is taken to be a reason by members of that community to think that the thesis has legs, evidentially-speaking despite Sheen's lack of appropriate qualifications.

the official theory. It seems understandable, in such circumstances, to prefer candidate explanations with official status when there is no time to look at the evidence or when the evidence is out of reach.

For many holders of conspiracy theories this move could be considered controversial for the following reason: if a preference for such *endorsed* explanations is understandable, then agents would be excused for preferring the official theory for the Moscow Show Trials, despite it being an *unwarranted endorsed* explanation.

This is important because, after the trials, concerned citizens of the UK and the USA, led by John Dewey, went through the trial transcripts and analysed the evidence. They came up with a rival explanation to the official theory which said that the trials were *merely* show trials and that the verdicts were a sham; Trotsky had been set up and innocent women and men had been executed, all to legitimise Stalin's attempts to get rid of his political enemy. This rival explanation was *sneered* at by the Soviet, USA and UK Governments as being a *mere* conspiracy theory despite the evidence presented by the members of the commission¹⁰. In the language of this chapter the Dewey Commission's report constituted a *warranted, sneered* at explanation. In 1956CE, when Nikita Khrushchev became leader of the Soviet Union, it could even have been called a *warranted* and *endorsed* explanation, seeing that Khrushchev then admitted that the trials were a sham and, by extension, that the Dewey Commission had been

¹⁰The Dewey Commission, for example, looked at the publicly available evidence used in the Moscow Trials and showed that a large number of the reported events were improbable; the eye-witness testimony was inconsistent and people claimed to have been in places and meetings that they could not have attended.

right all along.

4.4.1 Lysenkoism

Here is another example, also drawn from the pool of warranted conspiracy theories about Communist Russia.

Trofim Lysenko was an advocate of a Lamarckian theory of acquired characteristics who, in the 1930s CE, became the director of the “Soviet Lenin All-Union Institute of Agricultural Sciences.” His biological theories became the scientific orthodoxy in Soviet Russia; Mendelian genetics (and the studies of *Drosophila melanogaster*, the fruit fly) was considered a *bourgeois* pseudoscience and he subsequently lead a series of purges and executions of adherents to the rival doctrine.

Lysenkoism was endorsed for purely pragmatic reasons by the Soviet government; the peasantry were feeling disenfranchised and disempowered by the new collectivism because they no longer felt as if they were contributing to the rapidly industrialising Russian economy. Lysenko’s recommendations for agriculture seemed to have the effect of making the peasants feel as if they were contributing to Mother Russia, all despite the fact that Lysenko’s recommendations were constantly changing and were not producing the increase in the harvest he said they should.

Lysenkoism, as a theory, had no evidence for it whatsoever; the early results Lysenko saw in his work were simply accidental. The theory was, however, useful, politically speaking, because it kept the populace

busy and feeling productive and thus much less likely to question the government.

“Lysenkosim” is another example of an *unwarranted endorsed* explanation that had, as its rival, Mendelian genetics, a *warranted endorsed*¹¹ explanation which was portrayed by the Russian state as an *unwarranted sneered at* explanation.

Both of these examples show that the notion of official status is a deeply problematic one. In retrospect, the Moscow Show Trials were an obvious forgery. In retrospect, the push to recognise Lysenkoism as a paradigm in Biology was politically, rather than scientifically, motivated. But, I ask, what should a Muscovite in 1930s Russia have believed?

If you were a biologist who had smuggled in the most recent research from the West, you might have had good reason to suspect that Lysenkoism was pseudoscience. If you were part of the Central Planning Office you might even know that Lysenkoism had been pragmatically chosen and foisted on the proletariat to counteract a growing feeling of disenfranchisement. In the same respect, if you were an office worker in the Kremlin, or a senior aide to a Minister of State, you might know that the Moscow Trials were a complete fabrication, or that the evidence used to convict the traitors was not compelling, and so on. In very particular circumstances, in 1930s Moscow, you might work out that some of the explanatory hypotheses endorsed by influential institutions of state were

¹¹Mendelian genetics was a theory endorsed by the vast number of scientific academies of the day, largely because it was a successful research programme, the findings of which were being checked and rechecked by a system of peer review. It was, for its time, a *warranted endorsed* explanation.

not supported by the evidence.

But what if you were not a scientist, or a well-placed official? What if you were a peasant, or an ordinary factory worker? What would have been reasonable for you, as a humble Muscovite, to believe in 1930s Russia?

I think that if you were a humble Muscovite, it would have been understandable if you had accepted the official theories, which in this case were *unwarranted endorsed* explanations, of the Moscow Show Trials and Lysenkoism. They had official status and, if you trusted your government¹², then you might well be forgiven for thinking that if some theory had official status, then said theory was supported by the evidence.

I think, typically, most agents – certainly the average Muscovite of the 1930s – will appeal to an explanation having official status as suggesting that it is supported by the evidence. They will assume that if an explanation has official status it is because:

- a) It appeals to an authority, or set of authorities who are in substantial agreement with one another, that the explanation that has been endorsed is correct, and
- b) The authority or authorities are testifying honestly.

In chapter 2 I argued that being a *mere* conspiracy theorist is not a sufficient qualification for the warranting of any claim about what conspirators intend to achieve through their conspiratorial activity; you need some appropriate qualification, like being a trained historian or the

¹²And woe betide you if you did not.

like, to make plausible claims about what it was the conspirators desired to achieve.

A similar claim can be made about appeals to authority. The worry many holders of conspiracy theories share, and I argue we should be concerned about as well¹³, is that many official theories have been endorsed by inappropriate authorities, which is to say that they have been endorsed by experts in **irrelevant fields**. Conspiracy theory skeptics will reply in kind, as previously mentioned, and argue that many conspiracy theorists also mistake irrelevant experts for people with suitable qualifications.

For example, some claim that the general acceptance of the official theory about the events of 9/11 – that it was an act of terrorism committed by foreign nationals – is mistaken, for one or other of two reasons. Either people are mistaken in believing that the government of the United States of America was the right body to endorse such an explanation or, if that is not a mistake, they are mistaken in believing that the US government reacted appropriately to advice from the relevant experts. Opponents of the official theory will then point to their rival candidate explanation, say the theory known as the “Inside Job” hypothesis, which posits that the government of the United States of America (or a body that controls said government) was responsible for the events of 9/11 and say “You can’t trust the government; they’re not just inappropriate authorities but they actually caused the event to happen!” Instead, the proponents of the Inside Job hypothesis will recommend people like Richard Gage, an architect, and Dr. David Ray Griffin and say “These are the real authorities

¹³Given that I think we are all conspiracy theorists of some stripe.

and they have endorsed the Inside Job Hypothesis; this is the warranted explanation we should believe in!”

However, skeptics will point out that these experts are not authorities in fields relevant to the event being explained. Richard Gage is indeed an architect but he is not a structural engineer, whilst Dr. David Ray Griffin is a philosopher of religion; neither of these experts is an appropriately qualified authority in the fields of engineering, American governance or terrorist activity. They are not qualified to assess the evidence, let alone warrant some claim that the Twin Towers were destroyed by a controlled demolition orchestrated by the government of the United States of America.

So, under what conditions is it reasonable to say that the endorsement of a theory provides a reason for assuming that it has evidential support? What sorts of endorsers can forge such a relationship? These are interesting questions.

These questions are easy to answer when we think of an explanation having official status with respect to the academic sector; we (should) expect that the explanations and theories that are endorsed by academics and have official status within that community are supported by the evidence and thus warranted. This is because of the rigorous research methodologies and the process of peer review that work as a system of checks and balances in the academic realm. We would like to think, and I think we have good grounds for believing, that academic institutions do not endorse any old theory or explanation but only endorse the theories and explanations which have the right kind of evidence in support of

them. If the academic sector endorses an explanation, then we have some grounds for believing that it is warranted. We should, to be properly justified in our beliefs, examine the evidence ourselves but we still have an adequate justification based upon the appeal to authority alone. It seems reasonable to say that I, as a literate but not scientifically-inclined layperson, can appeal to the cohort of climatologists and say “I accept the thesis of Anthropogenic Climate Change because I trust in the judgement and endorsement of that theory by the set of relevant authorities, climatologists.”

Now, in this case I am not explicitly examining the evidence of the theory but rather taking it on trust that if the relevant experts agree, then the theory has evidence to support it.

The notion that the authorities are testifying honestly is, I think, doing a lot of work here, and as we will soon see, when relevant authorities do not testify honestly, then the appeal to authority is easily perverted. Even if we, for the time being, ignore issues to do with relevant authorities acting duplicitously, we can still show that the appeal to authority only suggests, but does not entail, that an explanation **with official status conferred by relevant authorities** is supported by the evidence.

For example, consider a layperson’s belief, in the 1930s, in the Solid Earth Theory¹⁴. If someone were to suggest to her that a better explanation of the distribution of the continents upon the Earth was a theory called Plate Tectonics, the layperson could reasonably have appealed to

¹⁴A thesis that claimed that the mantle of the Earth was solid all the way to the centre rather than a complex of plates sitting on a liquid layer surrounding the core of the Earth

the relevant authorities and rejected the theory because it was *sneered* at by such experts.

I think it is reasonable for an agent to assume that if the members of the academic sector endorse an explanation, then the explanation has, due to a rigorous research methodology and having survived the process of peer review, the right kind of evidential support to be warranted.

In the political sector, however, the parallel assumption is not one a rational agent can plausibly hold to. The *mere* fact that the government of New Zealand says it not only accepts but endorses, as an explanation of the current state of geophysical affairs, that Anthropogenic Climate Change is occurring does not mean that its endorsement is based upon the evidence. It is quite possible that the endorsement is due to entirely pragmatic reasons. Because the voters think Anthropogenic Climate Change is occurring the government, to secure votes, endorses that theory and gives it official status. The appeal to authority, in the political case, falls down because we do not know that:

- The political sector has appealed to relevant authorities, who are in substantial agreement with one another that the explanation that has been endorsed is correct.

We might also be suspicious as to whether:

- The political sector is honestly saying what they believe.

Are “they,” the politicians, trustworthy?

4.4.2 Can we trust political sources?

Dishonesty is a serious problem for academics because it can lead to career termination, and academics who have less than rigorous research methodologies will normally find their results being called into question by other, more rigorous members of their community. The story of how peer review works, when suitably finessed, does not guarantee that the endorsed explanatory hypothesis, the one with official status, is supported by the evidence; it merely tells us that the process of auditing academic theories is a reliable one when it comes to assessing the evidence for those theories.

However, there does not seem to be a similar process we can appeal to if we want to give a similar argument for trust in the political sector. The Moscow Show Trials and Lysenkoism, as examples of *unwarranted endorsed* explanations show this, I think; political endorsement does not even weakly suggest that the explanation has any evidential support. Politicians do not necessarily acquire their beliefs via rigorous research methodologies and are, unfortunately it sometimes seems, prone to changing their beliefs for unfathomable reasons. Politicians will sometimes have what might be good reasons to be deceitful, such as when engaging in sensitive negotiations with foreign powers, and might even act in an illegitimate fashion, such as covering up a scandal that could bring down a government.

It seems that we have good grounds to be suspicious of at least some of the endorsements conferred by members of the political sector. So, is

there a story we can tell which allows us to say that we can reliably trust the endorsement of explanations by the political sector? An argument such that we can safely assume a candidate explanation with official status **in the political realm** will be supported by the evidence?

The problem, you might argue, with examples like Lysenkoism and the Moscow Show Trials is that they are examples of the political sector *knowingly* and *insincerely* endorsing an explanation that does not have the right kind of evidential support.

This means, I think, that I need to add an additional question to my list from earlier in the chapter:

1. What evidential support does the explanatory hypothesis of the explanation have?
2. What is the relevant official status of the explanation?
3. *Was the explanation proposed sincerely by the relevant institution?*

This is what many holders of particular conspiracy theories are surely worried about; they suspect official theories (as rivals to conspiracy theories) to have official status which has been bestowed by an influential institution which **knows** that the explanation is unwarranted; the instrument of officialdom in such cases is being insincere, in a bid to discredit the rival conspiracy theory.

This returns me to the earlier discussion of the public trust skepticism thesis¹⁵ and the openness objection¹⁶ in chapter 3. There is an interesting

¹⁵See section 3.3

¹⁶See section 3.4

empirical debate to be had here as to how frequently explanations are *insincerely* endorsed by such institutions. Lee Basham's version of the openness objection is an argument to the effect that we do not live in a sufficiently open society to warrant any claim that such institutions are not involved in at least one major conspiracy occurring now. It is likely, he argues, that at least some contemporary influential political institutions are acting insincerely.

David Coady, in "Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational?" Coady (2007) argues that trust in official theories (or "official stories" as he called them) could be subject to manipulation. He writes:

It may be that in an ideal society official stories would carry an epistemic authority such that it would almost always be rational to believe them. But that is not our society, nor I suspect, is it any society that has ever been or ever will be. What is more, if such a society were to come into existence, it seems likely that it would be unstable, since the complacency about officialdom that it would engender would be exploitable by officials hoping to manipulate public opinion to advance their interests. (Coady, 2007, p. 199)

This is a live option, and this is why I think this kind of justification, when we talk about the political sense of "official," must be considered to be "weak." It is a weak justification in that it is a psychological excuse, rather than epistemic justification, for preferring official theories. At best, this justificatory story works where we have no access to the evidence and

we are being forced to choose between an *endorsed* and an *unendorsed* or *sneered* at explanation. Where we have that choice, I think we are justified in having a psychological preference for the explanation with official status *but that is all we can say*. This preference can only be expressed when we have no access to the evidence and is problematic even then. We should only trust officialdom to the extent that there is a good argument for the reliability of officialdom, and if we have no good grounds to trust officials we should be agnostic on the matter rather than prefer the official theory.

What grounds we have for trust in the political sector are shaky at best. Sometimes *unwarranted endorsed* explanations are examples of *unwarranted insincerely endorsed* explanations because the political sector can and does deceive and betray our trust in it¹⁷.

¹⁷We might be able to argue that we have a case for a kind of naive trust in the political sector because most of us feel that we have a handle on what politicians do, which is make decisions based upon the advice of their advisors; the decision-making members of the political sector are, in many cases, just like us. Contrast this with the case of academics, who seem to make issues seem more complex than the average Jane Doe or John Smith sees them. At the very least, politicians often portray themselves as applying the common sense of the masses to complex decision-making processes, which may lead to some thinking that we have a better case for trust in the endorsement of the political sector than we do for trust in the endorsement of the academic sector. Whether we express this via an analogy of politicians being just like us or by arguing that we feel disempowered by the complexities and requirements of academic endorsements, it is an understandable sentiment.

I do not think this is a good argument for trust in the endorsement of explanations by members of the political sector, but I do think it does explain why many people, especially in Aotearoa me Te Wai Pounamu (New Zealand) prefer, say, the Minister of Education's explanation about the utility of National Standards over the rival explanation by the academic sector that such standards will not improve education outcomes.

4.4.3 Individual vs. group trust

One possible response to the argument I have just given is to say that we need to distinguish between the trust we have in the individual members of the political sector and the trust we have in the political sector as a whole. Members of the political sector can be very, and frequently, untrustworthy in their private lives, but does the distrust we have in the individual member necessarily extend to the political sector, the group of such members, as a whole? We might distrust Bill English the MP, but does his insincerity with regard to his own fiscal responsibility reflect badly on his trustworthiness in the role as the Minister of Finance when he speaks for the Government having a moral imperative to act in a fiscally responsible manner? Individual politicians could be untrustworthy even in their political dealings, and yet what is endorsed by the political institution might incorporate sufficient checks and balances to neutralise this untrustworthiness¹⁸.

Indeed, the political sector has an auditing system of checks and balances which is often called “oversight” (or “political oversight”). Journalists and interested members of the public can check the public records, minutes, et cetera, of their elected representatives to ensure that everything they do is above board.

This is, really, the same move we might make for the general case for trust we have in the academic sector; a proper understanding of the peer review system, for example, allows us to admit that some academics might

¹⁸Whether the untrustworthiness is neutralised by the institutional processes is, of course, an empirical matter.

act unscrupulously (and even fabricate their data) and yet still allow us to say that we have a case for a *prima facie* trust in the academic sector's output (their research) in general. Political oversight, the argument would go, similarly allows us to claim that there is, at least, a case for a naive trust in the political sector.

This is not a strong analogy, however, because I do not think there is a good argument that political oversight is anywhere near as powerful a check-and-balance mechanism as the process of peer review. Why? Because, as I mentioned earlier, the openness required for political oversight to function properly:

- a. Might not exist or
- b. Might be overstated.

Our trust in political endorsements rides on our trust in political sources. There will be cases where some explanatory hypothesis is endorsed for pragmatic reasons when the evidence which supports it is known to be suspect (or non-existent) or where an explanation of an event with superb evidential support is rejected or is treated skeptically for entirely pragmatic reasons. My suspicion, which is backed by the argument I have just presented, is that political oversight only weakly suggests that the political endorsement of an explanation indicates that it is supported by the evidence.

Maybe we want to hold on to a naive trust in political sources. We could admit that bad things can and often do happen in the political world, but that the system *in general* only works if we assume that these

things happen infrequently (despite evidence to the contrary). There are lots of similar examples where we hold beliefs for similar reasons. For example, we do not automatically assume our partner will eventually cheat on us even though, statistically, they probably will.

Perhaps the best case, and this is cold comfort, is to think of politicians as being explanatory agnostics who just want to please their constituents. Politicians sometimes endorse explanations for purely pragmatic reasons, such as securing votes or paying their dues.

Because of this argument I find myself unsympathetic to both the thesis of public trust skepticism (as presented by Brian L. Keeley) and the kind of openness objection reply that Lee Basham runs. At best, I think, some variety of the openness objection allows us to explain a psychological preference for official theories but we should always go back to the evidence whenever possible. This may require us to become explanatory agnostics in some cases, but it is a well-reasoning and principled agnosticism which should not trouble us.

Conclusion

Whilst we can show there is a case for thinking that academic endorsement strongly suggests explanations are supported by the evidence there is no similar argument in the case of political endorsements.

Part of my case has to do with how we finesse what an appeal to authority is and how it bears on the epistemic credentials of *endorsed* explanations. I think it is reasonable to explain away an agent's preference

for explanations with official status because it is easy to assume that the availability of an official endorsement implies that the explanation is supported by the evidence. Of course, as we have seen, that is not always the case and we should expect agents, if they want to say they are properly justified in believing some explanation, to examine the evidence which supports it whenever possible.

There is also the issue of sincerity to think about here. The Moscow Show Trials and Lysenkoism are examples of insincerely *endorsed* explanations. Stalin and his cronies quite deliberately endorsed explanations they knew to have no appropriate epistemic credentials. This is a betrayal of the trust we have in such authorities, a trust that we have, presumably, only because we think such betrayals are infrequent.

A candidate explanation with official status may well be one that we prefer over a rival explanation which has no, or negative, official status. Such a preference could end up, however, being a problem for the average agent who simply does not have the time or expertise to analyse the evidence for each and every explanation she holds. This is a consequence of just how social our knowledge really is; we defer to one another all the time. Our trust, we would like to think, is well-founded, but, as Stalin showed us, sometimes that trust is misplaced.

I wish to spend some more time on the notion of trust, especially with respect to conspiracy theories. I want to argue that our trust is not just limited to the account offered here, which revolves around the legitimate appeal to authority and the notion of sincerity; it also applies to the transmission of such explanations. I will contrast, in chapter 6,

the transmission of conspiracy theories with something that I think at first glance resembles it, the transmission process of rumours, a process many agents think is unreliable. However, before I do that, I want to discuss a particular reason for being wary of accepting an explanation, one which certainly ought to undermine our trust in official political sources, which is the possibility that it contains disinformation or suffers from selectiveness.

Chapter 5

Disinformation and the selective use of evidence in conspiracy and official theories

Introduction

In this chapter I will look at the activities of deliberately selecting evidence and using disinformation to make an explanatory hypothesis look warranted when it might not be. I will argue that disinformation and selectiveness are real concerns when it comes to appraising explanations, conspiracy theories or otherwise, because they not only raise questions as to whether all the salient evidence has been cited in support of some explanatory hypothesis but also questions about whether the propositions put forward are evidence at all. Whilst inspecting the propositions put forward in support of an explanatory hypothesis, along with investigating

to see if there is further relevant information that is not being presented, is a partial salve to these worries it will become clear in this chapter that sometimes we also need to be able to tell a story about why it is we can trust the proponents of explanations, a story which is important both to the dissemination and warrant of conspiracy and official theories.

5.1 Selectiveness and Disinformation

We can probably all cite cases where either we, or someone we know, has put forward an explanation which is inadequate with respect to some set of what we take to be explanatory virtues. For example, we might be creative with the facts when trying to justify why we performed some action or we might tinker with the evidence so as to make an explanation look warranted. It is even possible, in (hopefully) very few cases, that we have lied in order to make some explanation look warranted. What I want to talk about in this chapter is two kinds of activity which sometimes, although not always, go together: the selecting of evidence in order to make explanatory hypothesis look warranted and the fabrication of evidence for that same purpose.

We select evidence in order to make our explanations look warranted all the time. For example, the explanation of why I had a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee for breakfast is likely to feature a pool of evidence which has been specifically selected to aid the ease of appreciating that the explanatory hypothesis is warranted. I will have selected, as the evidence I present, pieces of information which link the available food in my larder

to the decision to consume a portion of it as my breakfast. This is an example of what I am calling “selectiveness:”

Selectiveness: The activity of presenting an explanation which uses evidence which has been specifically **selected** from a wider pool of evidence to make a candidate explanation look warranted when it otherwise might not be.

Sometimes we introduce fabrications to make our explanations look warranted or to mislead people. For example, if asked by one of my parents why I failed to send them a birthday card, I might falsely claim I did send one but that it must have got lost in the post. The explanatory hypothesis I put forward to explain why they did not get a birthday card is supported by fabricated information. This is an example of what is commonly called “disinformation:”

Disinformation: The activity of presenting **fabricated** information in support of a candidate explanation in order to make a candidate explanation look warranted when it otherwise might not be¹.

A packet of information may well contain some outright fabrications and some “modified evidence,” which is to say evidence which has been tinkered with, say, to make it seem more or less important with respect

¹Whilst individuals can disinform others, disinformation could be taken to be the domain of influential institutions rather than individual agents because it requires the agents of disinformation to have the power and influence to get their fabricated “evidence” accepted as fact. This may or may not be part of an individual’s definition of “disinformation” and I will remain agnostic on this issue because it does not matter for my analysis.

to the other available evidence. In this way disinformation and selectiveness sometimes occur together². For example, it has been argued by commentators, on both the Left and Right, that the U.S. government's official theory which was used to justify the invasion of Iraq – that Saddam Hussein's regime was developing weapons of mass destruction, despite the Iraqi government's assurances to the contrary – was based on the use of selective evidence and disinformation. The government of the United States of America, these commentators say, deliberately misled not just its own populace but also the citizens of its allies in order to justify the subsequent invasion of Iraq³. Looking back to chapter 4, examples like the Moscow Show Trials show that the concern some conspiracy theorists

²Consider, though, some cases where we have examples of selectiveness which are not also examples of disinformation. For instance, a charitable organisation might advertise that, due to your donations this year, four thousand children were able to access clean drinking water, yet someone might claim this is a clear case of disinformation because said organisation is seeking to cover up, via good press, the fact that they have discriminatory hiring practices. This is a case of selecting evidence and is a case of propaganda but it is not, under my rubric at least, an instance of disinformation.

Propaganda, whether issued by the government, corporations, universities, trade unions or any other institution, could be considered to be an example of disinformation if the propaganda *is intended to mislead*. However, not all propaganda need be disinformation; some propaganda will *merely* be the dissemination of information as part of a political strategy and need not be in any way deceptive. For example, a union might engage in the spreading of propaganda so as to aid their case against a certain employer without being in any way deceptive with the information they present. This kind of propaganda is likely to be common.

³There are several rival explanations for the government of the United States of America's insistence that, despite reports to the contrary, Iraq was continuing to develop Weapons of Mass Destruction, including several claims that explain the discrepancy between reports from the CIA agents in the field of operations and the CIA's Board of Directors. The most likely explanatory hypothesis, as far as I can see, is that whilst the field-agents confirmed the Iraqi story, that development of such weapons had ceased after the 1st Gulf War, the Board of Directors, who directly informed the President George W. Bush, relied on intelligence briefings prepared in Washington, D. C. which played down the intelligence reports from the field agents. Thus, the American Government's insistence that Weapons of Mass Destruction were still being produced was a failure by the CIA to follow the evidence rather than a sinister plot by the American Government to justify invading Iraq.

have that we are frequently being fed disinformation by official sources will sometimes be justified⁴.

Selectiveness and the presentation of disinformation are pathological activities on the part of a proponent of an explanation. We should all be worried that some of the explanations out there in the wild suffer from selectiveness or disinformation. Whilst I am not a total skeptic of (so-called mainstream) media-derived information, I am concerned that a lot of public utterances by the Government, NGOs, wealthy tycoons or even union leaders have been designed or carefully selected to make it look as if right is on their side and anyone who opposes them must be crazy. Some of this might just be harmless exaggeration for the sake of effect, but sometimes it will be accompanied by a desire to warrant an explanatory hypothesis with evidence which has been carefully selected or fabricated. I am also worried that many conspiracy theories are backed up by carefully selected evidence or feature disinformation as well.

Let me start with an example of an explanation which features selected evidence and disinformation: a fictional explanation of the death of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

5.2 Example I: Rock Me, Amadeus

The storyline of “Amadeus,” a play written by Peter Shaffer (Shaffer, 1979), proposes that the death of the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was

⁴The English term “disinformation” comes from the Russian *dezinformatsiya* which was coined in the 1950s when news of what really happened at the Moscow Show Trials was finally released to the public.

caused by the machinations of a contemporary of his, the composer Antonnio Salieri.

Shaffer's play provides an explanation of the death of Mozart but whilst it is *an* explanation of the event, it is not *the* explanation, nor is it considered by historians to even be a member in the pool of likely candidate explanations for the death of Mozart. Shaffer, in order to get the narrative of his story to look like it is a plausible explanation of Mozart's demise, distorts the historical record in two ways.

1. The pool of evidence in "Amadeus" is carefully selected so that it supports the "Salieri killed Mozart" hypothesis, (for example, evidence by way of letters penned by both composers which indicated the existence of a warm, friendly rivalry between the two of them is omitted) and
2. Shaffer introduces several new and entirely false (read: fabricated) propositions about the relationship between Salieri and Mozart into the narrative (such as claiming that Salieri drove Mozart to the point of exhaustion during the composition of the Requiem Mass in D minor).

Shaffer is not arguing that Salieri was **actually** responsible for the death of Mozart; he is *merely* telling a story in the mould of speculative historical fiction. Shaffer is not trying to persuade his audience that his version of events is the most credible explanatory hypothesis of the death of Mozart. His aim, as a playwright, is simply to create a compelling

story for his audience to enjoy rather than challenging orthodox history⁵. Whilst some audience members may end up believing that what they witnessed over the course of the performance of the play was an accurate retelling of what really occurred in 18th Century Vienna between Salieri and Mozart, we should consider this to be a fault with the audience member's reasoning rather than a reason to think Shaffer was trying to assert that the story in his play is *the* explanation of the event.

What I find interesting about "Amadeus" is that Shaffer has not just selected but also fabricated information so as to make the central thesis of his play look warranted. Think of it this way: Shaffer presents enough of the actual history of Mozart's life to create a sense of verisimilitude and then he carefully selects which parts of the evidence to present, as well as fabricating information so that it seems very likely indeed that Salieri was responsible for Mozart's death.

Whilst "Amadeus" is a clear-cut example of fiction, people sometimes take such fiction seriously. For example, the central motif of Dan Brown's series of Robert Langdon novels (such as "The Da Vinci Code" (Brown, 2003)) is that encoded in our society's art and architecture are secrets which, when properly understood, tells us the true, but hidden, history of our society. Brown's work is treated by many readers not as fiction

⁵This is, of course, not necessarily the case with every piece of speculative historical fiction; Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's "Assassins," (Sondheim and Weidman, 1990) for example, could be said to provide a general psychological explanation of why people would want to assassinate politicians even if we agree that the authors are not providing the specific psychological explanation, for example, as to why Lee Harvey Oswald wanted to assassinate President John F. Kennedy. It is possible that, in cases like these, the agent putting forward the explanation is really trying to provide some kind of explanation, just not an historical one.

but as fact and as a plausible explanation of certain recurrent motifs and features of artworks worldwide.

Now, many people are afraid that there are people who are in positions of authority and are deliberately disseminating explanations that:

- a) Appeal to a limited pool of evidence which has been deliberately selected in such a way as to warrant an explanatory hypothesis which would be considered unwarranted with respect to the pool of evidence in general or
- b) Feature disinformation.

We should share this worry with them. Some official theories, which have been put forward in order to discredit or debunk particular conspiracy theories, are presented, along with evidence which has been selected such that it makes an explanatory hypothesis look warranted when the greater pool of evidence would suggest otherwise. Some of the propositions which have been put forward as evidence for the explanatory hypothesis might also be fabrications, to wit disinformation.

Now, in the case of “Amadeus,” Shaffer did not intend to mislead the audience of the play with respect to the how and why of Mozart’s death. Whilst he fabricated historical information to support the idea that Salieri was responsible for Mozart’s death, Shaffer cannot be accused of disseminating disinformation because he simply engaged in the writing of a compelling story, one which is incompatible with the history of Mozart’s life and death, in his role as an author of fiction.

However, given that some people have mistaken the central, but fictional, thesis of “Amadeus” for one which reflects what really happened in Vienna all those years ago, I think this shows that the presence of disinformation is a bigger threat than we might have imagined it to be. A lot of people believe that Salieri was responsible for Mozart’s demise because:

- a) For some all they know about the life of Mozart is informed by having seen, or heard about, “Amadeus” and
- b) “Amadeus” is a close enough retelling of the actual history of Mozart’s life that many people who may know something more about the life of Mozart than what is retold in the play/film might not know enough to be able to discern where Shaffer’s fabrications begin and the actual history ends.

If people are credulous enough to accept a fiction as an historical explanation, how are we to deal with actual cases where someone in a position of authority spreads disinformation to deliberately mislead their audience into thinking some unwarranted explanatory hypothesis is actually warranted?

For a compelling example, consider the duelling theories about what really happened in Aotearoa me Te Wai Pounamu (New Zealand) in the lead up to a series of raids in October 2007CE.

5.3 Example II: Operation 8

In October 2007^{CE} the members of the New Zealand Police Force, as part of an on-going investigation called “Operation 8,” raided the homes of several people they claimed were engaged in planning terrorist activities in Aotearoa me Te Wai Pounamu (New Zealand). The official theory, which was endorsed by both the police and the (then Labour) government, was that the arrests and the blockade of the rural settlement of Ruatoki were justified because not only was there a credible terrorist threat to the government of New Zealand, but plans by the accused to assassinate international leaders had also been uncovered.

The evidence which warranted the official theory⁶ was a dossier composed of intercepted phone calls, e-mails and SMS messages which had been collected by the Threat Assessment Group, a branch of the New Zealand Police Force⁷.

Rival explanations appeared in the weeks after the raids, and they explained away the events of Operation 8 with respect to hypotheses like “The events of October 2007^{CE} were an overreaction to misinterpreted evidence by the police” or “The events of October 2007^{CE} were an act of oppression by the state based on the deliberate misinterpretation of the intercepted evidence.”

An excellent example of one of these rival hypotheses to the official

⁶The official theory is, by my understanding, a conspiracy theory since the accused, it has been argued by the Crown, were engaged in a criminal conspiracy with the intent to cause harm.

⁷The Threat Assessment Group was set up under the 2002^{CE} Terrorism Suppression Act to investigate potential terrorist threats in Aotearoa me Te Wai Pounamu (New Zealand) after the attacks in New York City on September 11th, 2001^{CE}.

theory is proposed in the documentary “Operation 8: Deep in the Forest.” (King-Jones, 2011) “Operation 8: Deep in the Forest” is both the story of how the raids affected the people of the town of Ruatoki, where the biggest police action took place⁸ and the plight of the defendants, who were originally charged with being terrorists⁹.

The argument presented in “Operation 8: Deep in the Forest” is that the evidence cited by the police as the explanation of and justification for the October raids was:

- a) Selective by virtue of citing only the edited fragments of much longer, more mundane conversations, and
- b) Selective by virtue of placing said edited fragments of these mundane conversations out of context in a single document which then strongly suggested potential terrorist activity.

The first kind of selectiveness in the official theory, at least according to the documentary, is the reliance on small snippets of the evidential pool, fragments which may not be representative of the evidence as a whole. The pool of evidence has been deliberately selected by the explainer to make an explanatory hypothesis look warranted when otherwise it might not be.

The second kind of selectiveness that the proponents of the official theory are charged with is that by then bundling the edited fragments

⁸Ruatoki is the biggest town in the area which belongs to the people of Ngāi Tūhoe, a Māori iwi who did not sign the Treaty of Waitangi and thus claim to still be a sovereign nation, one that exists within the nationstate of Aotearoa me Te Wai Pounamu (New Zealand).

⁹These charges have since been dropped but the defendants are still charged with the possession of dangerous weapons and being part of a criminal conspiracy.

together, they made the cited evidence seem very connected indeed and thus strongly suggestive that the explanatory hypothesis of the official theory was warranted. The activity of choosing to only present fragments of the evidence (the first kind of selectiveness) is, itself, a malicious act. To then bundle said fragments in such a way to strongly suggest terrorist activity where the total evidence does not (the second kind of selectiveness), is, I suggest, to engage in the activity of trying to mislead or disinform the public.

The argument presented in “Operation 8” is that had these sorts of selectiveness not been resorted to, it would be clear that the overall evidence, from the intercepted material, was more benign, with the accused seeming to have *merely* been talking provocatively with no intention to act upon said statements.

Now, it is possible that both of the above examples of selectiveness are actually the result of unintended or unwitting activity on the part of the proponents of the official theory. They could be examples where the agent is not aware that they are engaged in an activity where they are attempting to justify an explanatory hypothesis which might not be warranted. However, even if it is possible that the (alleged) evidence selection and manipulation of the official theory was undertaken unwittingly, it would not be excusable, not just because it is bad trade craft on the part of the police but also because we can reasonably expect that the members of institutions, like the police, should be rigorous in the presentation and defence of their theories and explanations. Unwitting selection and misrepresentation of the evidence is an abrogation of the

duty of care the police have towards the public they serve.

In “Operation 8” the documentarians present an argument that the total evidence does not suggest that terrorist activities were being planned by the defendants but rather, at best, the defendants were engaging in angry rhetorical displays which the police misinterpreted, deliberately or otherwise. However, “Operation 8: Deep in the Forest” is itself, perhaps without its makers even realising it, a good example of an explanation which is itself selective in its use of evidence.

The nature of making a documentary requires the documentarians to select what evidence they are going to present with respect to what they take to be the narrative of the story. The documentarians in “Operation 8: Deep in the Forest” paint a picture which puts the defendants in a favourable light and casts police as a set of *agents provocateurs*.

For example, in the documentary David Collings, the then Solicitor-General, is shown at a press conference just after the events of the October raids, where he states that the evidence presented to him by the police did not warrant bringing in charges of terrorism under the terms and definitions of the 2002 Terrorism Suppression Act. The documentarians edit out what could be taken to be a very salient statement by Collings, which is that he believed, on the basis of the evidence that he had been presented with, that serious and dangerous criminal activity had been uncovered by the police, that the action the police took was justified by said evidence and finally that the problem of bringing a charge of terrorism in this case was due to terrorist activity being ill-defined under the 2002 Act.

Now, the documentarians chose not to present this part of Collings's statement at the press conference; they selected only the part of the evidential record that warranted their claim that the evidence collected by the police did not show a grave threat, terrorist or otherwise. Thus, regarded as an explanation, the hypothesis proposed by the documentarians rests on selected evidence. Wittingly or otherwise, its proponents:

- a) Relied on some unrepresentative, edited, fragments of evidence
- b) Wove these into a narrative that strongly suggested that the official theory was unwarranted.

Arguably, the documentarians deliberately withheld information which would have undermined their hypothesis that the accused were merely speaking provocatively with no intention to act.

There is, however, an important and salient difference between the official theory and the conspiracy theory in "Operation 8: Deep in the Forest." The official theory relies very much on the public trusting the police. The public cannot, legitimately, see all of the salient evidence which supports the explanatory hypothesis that underpins the official theory because the matter is *sub judice* and thus anyone who accepts the official theory has to take it on trust that the explanation is warranted by the evidence. Although the case is *sub judice*, some of the evidence has been leaked and proponents of the kind of conspiracy theory found in the documentary "Operation 8" claim that these leaked fragments have been selected to make the police's claims about what the sum total of the evidence represents look warranted.

Given the questions raised in chapter 4 about whether we can trust such political institutions, this requirement of the official theory (that we take it on trust) seems deeply problematic. In contrast, the evidence, no matter how selective it is, that has been presented by the documentarians can be looked at; we do not need to have trust in them because we can analyse the evidence for ourselves.

That difference makes the documentary seem like a more trustworthy account at first glance. The documentary's evidence is all in the public domain and is thus easily accessible in a way that the evidence for the official theory is not, as a good portion of the evidence for the official theory is inaccessible while the matter is *sub judice*.

However, some proponents and supporters of the official theory have claimed that rival hypotheses, like that in "Operation 8," are based upon disinformation. Indeed, both the official theory and the rival conspiracy theory put forward in "Operation 8: Deep in the Forest" claim that their rivals contain disinformation which has been used to make their explanations appear warranted.

For example, the official theory claims that the police are not just unable to tell the full story as to what it was the accused were up to because the case is still *sub judice* but that the defendants, knowing the police cannot tell the full story, have deliberately lied to or misdirected the public about what it was they were up to; the police claim that the defendants are putting out disinformation to discredit the official theory. Meanwhile, the story of "Operation 8: Deep in the Forest" contains the claim that police have leaked selected portions of the evidence so to

suggest the existence of a terrorist plot when the total evidence does not and that some of the leaked evidence is false; some proponents of the conspiracy theory claim that the police are putting disinformation out to justify the official theory.

The story of the October Raids of 2007^{CE} is, I think, both a good example of a contrast between an official theory and a conspiracy theory and an example of how selected evidence and, in particular, disinformation can be found in both official and conspiracy theories. If we accept my argument from the previous chapter that official status is not, in itself, a particularly useful tool for deciding whether the explanation is warranted, then we are left with the question of the evidence and whether it warrants some explanatory hypothesis. The worry some people have, that sometimes the evidence is carefully selected and may contain elements of disinformation, is a worry we should all share. This kind of activity should be of concern to us, because in cases where we have access to the evidence which seems to warrant some explanatory hypothesis, we need to ask:

1. Is this all the evidence and
2. Is some of the evidence actually disinformation (which is to say are the propositions being put forward actually true)?

We do not have to be concerned about conspiracy theories to be worried about the selectiveness of explanations; anyone who presents an explanation might carefully select evidence and introduce fabrications if their intention is to make an unwarranted explanation look like it

is a credible contender without needing to be involved in a conspiracy (children, for example, will select and especially fabricate disinformation to explain why it is that they need to buy a certain toy or be allowed to stay up an extra hour). Indeed, examples of this can be expected to be common in, say, arguments between family members and friends, where agents might be tempted to win an argument at the cost of being wrong.

5.4 Inspecting for selected evidence and disinformation

When only part of the evidence is presented for the explicit purpose of making an explanatory hypothesis look warranted, then you have an instance of evidence being **selected**.

For example, Shaffer, in “Amadeus,” ignores the evidence which shows that Salieri and Mozart had a relationship which could have been described as mutually respectful¹⁰. Shaffer selected the evidence which makes the play’s central conceit – Salieri being responsible for the death of Mozart – look warranted. This is not a particular problem because Shaffer is not asserting that the play “Amadeus” is in any way the actual explanation of the death of Mozart.

However, turning to my second example about the October raids, the official theory, which is alleged to suffer from selectiveness, has been

¹⁰Salieri eventually trained Mozart’s son in music, for example, which suggests that the rivalry between Mozart and Salieri was nowhere near as toxic as the thesis of “Amadeus” makes out.

asserted as *the* explanation. The official theory about the October raids is a good example of the kind of problems that can arise regarding the inspection and evaluation of evidence: how do we inspect the evidence presented to see whether any of it has been selected so to make some explanatory hypothesis look warranted?

We might think it is a sufficient check against selectiveness if we know we can look at the evidence when we want to. If the cited evidence is part of the public record, such an argument would go, then people in positions of authority will be less likely to engage in selectiveness because they could be found out. This is, I think, part of what makes some version of the openness objection (see section 3.4 in chapter 3) seem like a plausible view to hold. However, the worry that there will be disinformation in the public record is part of why I think the openness objection is not quite the salve it appears to be.

If we do not have the ability to access and analyse the evidence which is said to warrant some explanatory hypothesis, then this should be seen as a problem. We might be required to trust that the explainer has not engaged in acting selectively or introduced disinformation. In regard to the official theory about the October Raids, we are required to trust the assurances of the police that the evidence really does show that serious malfeasance was going on, which gets us back to the problem about trust in official sources, which was the focus of chapter 4.

Indeed, as I argued in that chapter, whereas the process of peer review in the academic realm should be a moderating influence, one which gives us good reason to believe that endorsed academic theories are *prima*

facie warranted, there is no similar process in the political sphere. There is a body of evidence which indicates that information that has been subjected to PR and spin is often put forward as evidence which warrants an explanatory hypothesis and and this may, though it need not, indicate that disinformation is deliberately pushed upon us to make it look as if certain explanations are warranted when they are not.

Summary

In this chapter I have looked at a particular problem for analysing explanations: the possibility that they might suffer from selectiveness. I talked about **selecting** evidence and the **fabrication** of disinformation so as to make an explanatory hypothesis look warranted.

The activity of selectiveness is a pathology of the presentation of explanations. Agents might sometimes inadvertently select evidence due to a lack of methodological rigour, the holding of certain preconceptions which makes them disregard salient evidence and so forth. However, the kind of worries I have been concerned with are the deliberate acts of **selecting** or **fabricating** evidence, activities which are more than just suspicious but, rather, morally wrong.

If we have access to the evidential pool, then we can, at least, check to see whether evidence has been selected in such a way as to warrant an otherwise unwarranted explanatory hypothesis. However, this is where the second worry of the conspiracy theorist comes into play: what if some of the information in the evidential pool is disinformation which has been

placed there to make explanatory hypotheses look warranted? Even if we think we can look at the pool of evidence to detect whether the cited evidence is selective, it may still contain disinformation.

So what can we do?

Much of this discussion, both here and in the previous chapter, has focussed on the issue of trust: can we trust official sources? Part of the story of the warrant of both official theories and conspiracy theories is to do with the transmission of such theories, and that story, as I will detail in the next chapter, is largely one to do with trust with respect to whoever it is who is speaking.

However, before I move on to that analysis, I think it will be useful to dissect the advice many people, especially some conspiracy theorists, offer when such evidence manipulation or fabrication is pointed out or suggested. Conspiracy theorists, in the pejorative sense I reject, are often characterised as claiming:

“Trust no one!”

Surely, according to the principle of charity, what such a conspiracy theorist must surely mean here is something like:

“Do not accept an explanation *merely* out of trust in the authorities which put it forward when you can look at the evidence they use to make their explanatory hypotheses look warranted.”

It is reasonable (at least sometimes) to have some measure of trust in an informant. This, on its own, can count as a reason to accept (or, at

the very least, not challenge) that informant's view. However, where you have access to the evidence, you should look at it and not let the trust you have in the informant do all the work. Whilst we might have a case for accepting endorsements from academic institutions, we do not seem to have much of a case for accepting them from the political establishment. If we are concerned that explanations are selective, then we should look at the evidence.

However, the worry about disinformation is not so easily overcome even if we do go and have a look at the evidence. Inspecting the propositions being put forward is one thing but being able to ascertain whether the propositions are actually true, which is to say they are pieces of evidence and not disinformation, is another thing entirely. In this respect, trust really is our only arbiter on subjects on which we know very little (or nothing at all). Historians might well be able to ascertain whether or not the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" were written by a sinister cabal of Jewish bankers but most historians will be unable to ascertain whether the latest claim by string theorists is the result of genuine research or a conspiracy to deny funding to researchers in Classical Mechanics.

Trust is a live issue when it comes to belief in conspiracy theories and the question of whether belief in conspiracy theories in general is warranted or unwarranted. I will look at this topic now.

Chapter 6

The transmission of conspiracy theories

Introduction

In the last two chapters the issue of trust has come up repeatedly. Can we typically place sufficient trust in official sources to justify our belief in official theories? Part of the story about when a hearer should accept some theory is to do with the transmission of that theory from a speaker to a hearer. Many hypotheses, conspiracy, official or otherwise, are things we are told and whether we accept them or not often depends on whether we, the hearer, trust the speaker.

In this chapter, I will look at the way in which issues to do with trust, relating to the transmission of conspiracy theories, play into questions about the justification for believing in conspiracy theories. It may well be that even though there is no *prima facie* justification for thinking that the

existence of official theories renders conspiracy theories unwarranted, we can still justify the common sense suspicion that conspiracy theories are bunk if the transmission process we typically associate with conspiracy theories is found to be unreliable.

Conspiracy theories are spread by speakers, who assert a particular conspiratorial explanation. Sometimes a conspiracy theory will be successfully transmitted from a speaker to some hearer because there is an argument for the conspiracy theory which persuades the hearer to accept the conspiracy theory, and sometimes a conspiracy theory will be transmitted successfully from some speaker to a hearer because the hearer trusts the speaker and infers that, if the speaker is trustworthy, then, all else being equal, the hearer should believe the conspiracy theory¹. Whilst we should expect the hearer of any asserted hypothesis to assess the grounds for believing it, there will always be the worry that either the hearer is not in a position to look at the available evidence or that the purported evidence cited by the speaker of some hypotheses contains disinformation. Sometimes agents do not have the ability or chance to assess the evidence for some theory but trust that its assertor:

- a) has done so and
- b) is sincerely passing their warranted belief on.

The role of trust in the transmission of hypotheses is a tricky issue, as I have already showed with respect to the role of selected evidence in

¹It will be evident that by "successful transmission" here, I mean that not only is there uptake by the hearer, but also that the hearer comes to believe what the speaker has asserted. This kind of success is, of course, consistent with the possibility that the speaker herself does not believe what she asserts.

chapter 5. In order to talk about the transmission of conspiracy theories I am going to contrast this process with the transmission of rumours.

Why rumours, you might ask?

Rumours, rightly or wrongly, are often thought to be the same kind of thing as conspiracy theories, or to be problematic in the same kind of way. Many conspiracy theories are either labelled as rumours, taken to be spread in the same way that rumours are or taken to be epistemically suspicious in much the same way that rumours allegedly are².

First, I will argue that the transmission of rumours is a reliable process, and then I will suggest that even if it was not a reliable process, the transmission of conspiracy theories is typically not similar to that of rumours; we need not say the same about both of them when we consider the ways in which their transmission influences justification. I will then end the chapter by arguing that the processes by which conspiracy theories are transmitted are reliable, but for different reasons than those that apply in the case of rumouring.

²For example, Cass Sunstein, current Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, thinks conspiracy theories typically originate and spread as rumours, as evidenced by his article “Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures” (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009) and his book “On Rumours” (Sunstein, 2009).

6.1 Rumours

I shall define a rumour as:

An unverified proposition which has been heard by an agent
and then expressed to another agent.

I take it that this definition is in line with how we commonly define a rumour. My concern, in this chapter, is with what it is rational or reasonable for a hearer to believe (rather than with whether what they hear is actually true). I will work with a notion of plausibility, rather than truth, when I am talking about the transmission of rumours and I will combine it with an appeal to trust in order to characterise what I take to be a reliable transmission process. Plausibility, as I use it, is a kind of coherence notion; a proposition conveyed by a speaker is plausible to some hearer when it does not contradict/is not defeated by the hearer's other beliefs. The transmission of a belief between the utterer of a rumour and the hearer of said rumour is successful when the hearer trusts the speaker and the content of the speaker's utterance coheres with the beliefs of the hearer.

Let me give an example which contrasts the act of testifying with the act of what I call "rumouring," the passing on of a rumour.

Amanda and Ewan are discussing office politics. Amanda knows that Cindy, their boss, is dating Alice, who was recently fired. Amanda is curious to know when Cindy and Alice started dating; was it before or after she was dismissed from the workplace? As Amanda knows firsthand

that Cindy and Alice are dating, she is able to pass this on to Ewan, who inherits the justified belief that Cindy and Alice are dating because Amanda has successfully testified to that fact³.

Ewan has heard that Cindy and Alice spent an inordinate amount of time in Cindy's bedroom at a party some five months ago so, when Amanda tells Ewan that Cindy and Alice started dating, he expresses what he has heard about Cindy, Alice, the bedroom and the excessive amount of time they spent not engaging in the party all those months ago.

Now, Ewan does not know that this occurred; it is not a justified true belief that he holds but *merely* something he has heard. Furthermore, he is not claiming to have any justified belief on this matter. Ewan, in this case, is spreading a rumour. This rumour will be plausible to Ewan because it fits with Ewan's other beliefs and is not inconsistent with Amanda's testimony which he has recently come to believe.

³The definition of testimony I am using comes from Jennifer Lackey's introduction to "The Epistemology of Testimony" (Lackey and Sosa, 2006), a recent survey volume which I take to be representative of the contemporary epistemological views of testimony. Lackey's definition of the act of testifying is as follows:

T: S testifies that *p* by making an act of communication *a* if and only if (in part) in virtue of *a*s communicable content, (1) S reasonably intends to convey the information that *p*, or (2) *a* is reasonably taken as conveying the information that *p*. (Lackey, 2006, p. 3)

The major debate in the epistemology of testimony is whether, when a speaker testifies, the hearer can inherit, by virtue of hearing some piece of testimony, a justified true belief.

If a piece of testimony is to be properly treated as warranted by the hearer it must, necessarily, be a justified belief that the speaker holds and this belief must not be one that is contrary to the beliefs the hearer holds. For the transmission of some piece of testimony to be successful the speaker must assert their justified belief and the hearer must trust the speaker. If a hearer trusts some speaker and the speaker testifies, then the hearer, should they have no defeater belief with respect to the piece of testimony, should inherit belief in the proposition; this is the trusting transmission of testimony.

I propose that what Ewan is doing here is a textbook case of the kind of thing that happens when we engage in rumouring: we express what we take to be plausible claims to other members of our community, effectively asking them if what we have said coheres with what they believe. Rumouring, I believe, is a kind of fact-checking.

Ewan thinks that his claim about Cindy and Alice is plausible, but should Amanda say “No, that can’t be the case; I know that Cindy and Errol were an item at the time, and Cindy is a serial monogamist!” then Ewan, if he trusts Amanda (say, as a reliable source of information about Cindy), should accept that the rumour is no longer plausible because it not only fails to cohere with Amanda’s beliefs but it now fails to cohere with his beliefs (because, accepting Amanda’s testimony to the contrary, Ewan now knows something more about Cindy, something that makes his rumour implausible). However, if Amanda says “Yes, that makes sense; I saw Cindy and Alice kissing at that party five months ago,” then what Ewan has heard will be all the more plausible to both Ewan and Amanda (because it now not only coheres with Ewan’s other beliefs but also with Amanda’s). If Amanda has nothing to contribute in this matter, then Ewan or Amanda might go and ask someone else, to test out the plausibility of the rumour.

6.1.1 CAJ Coady on the unreliability of rumours

To understand my argument as to why we should take the process of rumouring to be a reliable one it is, I think, useful to look at the work of

CAJ Coady, who characterises rumouring as an unreliable process, and a response to this argument by David Coady. An analysis of their arguments, I think, shows why we should take rumouring to be a reliable process.

CAJ Coady argues that the transmission of rumours is a misfire, or pathology, of the transmission process we associate with testimony. He gives two reasons for this verdict:

[R]umour can arise from the merest speculation. Furthermore, the speaker of rumour will often have no competence with regard to the “information” conveyed and may well be aware of that. If we think some degree of authority or competence, no matter how minimal, is a precondition for giving testimony then quite a lot of rumour will be disqualified as testimony. (Coady, 2006a, p. 265)

This is evident, according to CAJ Coady, in the way we introduce rumours, which is typically with some variant of the locution “Have you heard?” a locution which suggests the speaker of a rumour has no strong justificatory base to what they are conveying (Coady, 2006a, p. 262). By “no strong justificatory base” I take it that CAJ Coady means that the speaker of a rumour does not know either firsthand (or second-hand) that their proposition is justified nor are they in a position to assess whether said proposition is justified. He is also concerned that some rumours are the product of speculation. The utterer of a rumour might embellish a rumour (so as to make a better story) and they might, thereby, put forward a proposition which is false.

I think presenting rumouring as testifying-gone-wrong is a slight mis-characterisation of the act of rumouring. I think that when someone says “Have you heard?” they are typically asking whether the rumour they have heard is something you, another epistemic agent, can either confirm or deny. Whilst I think there are concerns that need to be addressed with respect to whether rumourers will embellish or fabricate rumours, and what this means for the reliability of the transmission process of rumours, I do not think that rumouring, the normal act of spreading a rumour, is a form of testifying. When you testify, you assert some proposition; you convey that you take it to be justified. However, rumourers express what they take to be plausible propositions in order to see if others find them plausible. When you assert a rumour you are making some claim that you have heard something you took to be plausible. As I will argue, this process of fact-finding or fact-checking is a reliable one. Its reliability is not due to its being like the act of testifying but rather because the longer a rumour survives the process of being audited by the hearers it is passed on to, the more likely it is to be considered plausible.

6.1.2 David Coady on rumours and reliability

David Coady, in his article “Rumour Has It,” (Coady, 2006d) argues that the transmission of rumours is a process that is more reliable than we might normally think. He argues:

... [M]any rumours are credible (that is, it is rational to believe them), and that in general the fact that a proposition

is rumoured to be true is evidence in favour of it being true.

(Coady, 2006d, p. 41-2)

David Coady argues that rumours are expressed in a community of speakers and hearers, all of whom are able to check and analyse the content of the rumours they hear and, potentially, then pass them on.

To begin with, for a communication to be a rumour, it must have 'spread' through a number of informants (i.e., [rumourers]⁴). ... Furthermore, the number of informants through which a rumour has spread must be quite large. No second-hand account of an event can be a rumour, though it may be more of a rumour than a first-hand account. In general, the further a rumour has spread, the more fully it deserves the name. (Coady, 2006d, p. 42)

David Coady thinks that the worry CAJ Coady has about rumours, that they will end up being embellished (or in the worst case scenario, be total fabrications) is reduced or even eliminated by the checks and balances of the transmission process.

[A]ll else being equal, the greater the reliability of those who spread a rumour, the more likely it is to survive and spread. Hence, if you hear a rumour, it is not only *prima facie* evidence that it has been thought plausible by a large number of people, it is also *prima facie* evidence that it has been thought plausible

⁴David Coady uses word "rumour-monger" rather than "rumourer" but I have reserved that term to describe something different, as will become apparent later in the chapter.

by a large number of reliable people. And that really is *prima facie* evidence that it is true. (Coady, 2006d, p. 47)

David Coady is arguing that if a rumour survives the checks and balances of its transmission process, then it is because at least some hearers in the community will be interested in either confirming or denying the rumours they hear and that this is a *prima facie* reason to think the rumour true.

The process of checks and balances in the process of rumouring assumes mutual trust; I, as a rumourer, express a rumour to you. You trust me to express it sincerely and I trust you to either confirm or deny the rumour (or, at the very least, say whether you think it coheres with respect to your other beliefs).

If we take our community of agents to consist of mostly trustworthy speakers, then, I argue, it is the plausibility of a given rumour that we should be concerned with. As a rumour spreads, the plausibility of it to the community of speakers and hearers as a whole will take on more and more importance. A single hearer might well find that the belief coheres with her other beliefs, but that hearer might be anomalous. They may not be normal, with respect to the group, in the beliefs that they hold. As the rumour spreads further through the community, however, it will be checked and analysed by more and more hearers and, should it not cohere with their beliefs, it is likely to stop being transmitted⁵.

⁵This is an empirical claim but one that I think is likely to be true. This is a line that Cass Sunstein runs (Sunstein, 2009, p. 21). Sunstein argues that a rumour can be countered by a defeater belief. As long as the hearer of some piece of rumour trusts the source of the defeater belief and the hearer does not have a strong commitment to the

So, with respect to David Coady's thesis about the likely truth of a rumour as it spreads further and further in a community, I say, given my coherence notion of plausibility, that if a rumour spreads widely through a community without encountering defeater beliefs, then such a rumour could be considered to be superbly plausible to the community as a whole. As a rumour spreads it will inevitably encounter more in the way of interested hearers who will not pass on the proposition unless it is considered plausible, which is to say it coheres with their own beliefs.

This is not to say that belief in rumours is always warranted, because the activity of what I will call "rumour-mongering" represents a pathology of the normally reliable transmission process of rumours, but, as I will argue, I think there is a case to be made that belief in the substance of particular rumours is generally warranted, all things being equal.

6.2 Rumouring vs. rumour-mongering

The normal and, I claim, typically reliable transmission of rumours, rumouring, can be contrasted with rumour-mongering, which is the pathology of rumouring. Rumouring, as I have argued, is typically a kind of fact-finding; we hear something, think it sounds plausible and then spread it on to someone else in the hope that they will confirm it, deny it, or pass it on so it can be confirmed or denied by another. Rumour-mongering, however, is not a fact-finding activity but rather the insincere and thus

truth of the rumour, then the presence of a defeater belief should stop the transmission of a rumour from a speaker to a hearer (Sunstein, 2009, p. 53-4).

mere spreading of a rumour. I say “mere” here because, unlike typical rumouring, which, when all goes well, is the trustworthy transmission of plausible beliefs between speakers and hearers, rumour-mongering can result in the acquisition, by the hearer, of a belief in a rumour, even when the speaker regards it as implausible.

Now, it is true that many rumour-mongers have an interest in whether the rumours they are spreading are plausible. I might, for example, want to believe Cindy and Alice are engaging in an office affair because that belief pleases me, or because Cindy rejected my advances and thus Alice, who I hate and detest, is the kind of person I now think she deserves because I am ill-disposed towards her. However, the act of rumour-mongering can bring with it the act of embellishing upon a rumour, and I think that this could be the pathology of the transmission process that CAJ Coady finds so concerning. In rumouring, remember, the speaker is engaging in fact-finding, and she will be unable to do this if she embellishes what she takes to be the facts, unless she also wants to suggest her own bold hypotheses. In the *mere* spreading of a rumour, however, there might be various reasons (to improve the story, for example) as to why a speaker would engage in embellishments.

Whilst I think that the transmission of rumours is generally reliable, I do think that rumour-mongering is a morally suspicious activity. Consider two related worries about rumour-mongering.

The first worry is that rumour-mongers, because they are not sincere in their utterances, might be mistaken for rumourers. The hearer might believe that the proposition they have just heard is one the speaker

believed.

This worry relates back to discussion in the previous chapter about the role of disinformation. Although I am not convinced that conspiracy theories and rumours are relevantly similar I will admit that some of the evidence cited in support of both conspiracy theories and official theories will be rumours, and if influential organisations engage in rumour-mongering, especially in situations where there is no official (and warranted) information available, then this is a serious problem.

The second worry about rumour-mongering is that hearers will not necessarily know if the rumour they find to be plausible has been embellished, been tailored to be plausible to the hearer or so forth. If we assume (for the sake of argument) that most people express rumours without embellishments, et cetera, then the fact that some people might not just embellish but even wholly fabricate the rumours they spread, can lead to what is otherwise a generally reliable transmission process being perverted. Indeed, some charges of disinformation focus on how “those who are in power” spread tailored or fabricated rumours, which appear plausible, to the general populace in order to make certain conspiracy theories seem unwarranted.

This may explain part of the story as to why conspiracy theories and rumours are often confused; some of the evidence used to make the explanatory hypothesis of either an official theory or a conspiracy theory might be the result of rumour-mongering. Arguably, a lot of the evidence cited by Anthropogenic Climate Change skeptics consists of rumours which have been mongered, just as a lot of the evidence that was said to

warrant the official theory that there were weapons of mass destruction being developed by the Hussein regime in Iraq was mongered as well.

Now, presumably embellished or totally fabricated rumours should not spread far because of the checks and balances of the community of speakers and hearers, but they might persist in some cases.

For example, although Herriman does not explicitly argue for this thesis, in his article “The Great Rumor Mill: Gossip, Mass Media, and the Ninja Fear” he suggests that some rumours will survive in a community, despite facing obvious defeaters, because even though they are false they accord with the general character or tenor of the situation the agents believe themselves to be in. He is concerned that rumours, when they are part of an official theory or are put forward by what are taken to be, by hearers, influential institutions, like newspapers, might be plausible to the hearers because they fit in with what they are meant to believe (Herriman, 2010, p. 739)⁶.

Rumour-mongering, I think, shows that the normally reliable transmission process of rumours can be perverted. Now, the extent of this problem is really more a topic for sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists and the like, who are better placed to tell us just how often people embellish or even fabricate rumours. Still, both the embellishment of rumours and the possibility that a speaker might spread rumours for the sake of

⁶Sunstein’s full model of rumour transmission, as expressed in “On Rumours”, is an example of what he calls a “social cascade.” He has it that hearers will ignore defeater beliefs with regard to a certain rumour if most of their peers find the rumour plausible (Sunstein, 2009, p. 22). Sunstein’s argument seems to be that there are social as well as epistemic reasons which bear on the plausibility of rumours to hearers and that the pressure to conform to the beliefs of your peers will often trump epistemic reasons to consider a given rumour as implausible.

spreading rumours are, I think, problems for my account of the generally reliable nature of the transmission of rumours.

Let me return to Ewan and his rumour.

Ewan has heard that Cindy and Alice spent an inordinate amount of time in Cindy's bedroom at a party five months ago. He then remembers that at an office party some five months ago he saw them in what can only be called a "compromising position" and infers that it is this particular party people have been talking about. He then starts a new rumour; he has heard that Cindy and Alice were already in a relationship five months ago. This is a kind of embellishment because Ewan is now adding content to the rumour. This move seems relatively unproblematic because Ewan's embellishment is simply a plausible addition as it is something that is consistent with the original rumour and may even confirm it. Ewan is not lying, although maybe he should, in this case, sign-post his addition to the rumour.

If Amanda says "No, that can't be right; Alice and Jo started dating at that party," then Ewan's embellished rumour should not spread any further. If, however, Amanda goes "Hold on, now I think about it, I remember Cindy and Alice sharing a taxi after the party," then Ewan's embellished rumour may well end up spreading further because it coheres all the more with Amanda's beliefs about Cindy and Alice and now seems all the more plausible. This again suggests that plausibility is a key feature of rumours; an implausible rumour, one that does not cohere with the hearers' beliefs, is unlikely to spread far⁷.

⁷The social media service that is Twitter (a micro-blogging platform) is a good

The transmission of plausible propositions by trustworthy speakers, which seems to be what we have in the case of rumouring, should show us that the transmission of rumours is, by and large, reliable, and thus we have a case for treating rumours as *prima facie* warranted beliefs. The fact that we have to put up with some (perhaps even a lot of) elaboration and embellishment of rumours by rumour-mongers is the price we should be willing to pay for a generally reliable process.

6.3 The transmission of conspiracy theories

The claim that conspiracy theories can be rumours is an interesting and recurring issue in the literature. Cass Sunstein, in his recent book on rumours, for example, is of the opinion that conspiracy theories are spread by rumouring (Sunstein, 2009, p. 7) but I think it is important to distinguish carefully between conspiracy theories and rumours, so that even if someone does not accept my argument about the reliability of rumours, they can still accept my argument for the reliability of the transmission of conspiracy theories. The epistemic credentials of conspiracy theories are

example of how such a process works. Given the short nature of tweets, many messages on Twitter are either a URL or a quote with a corresponding request for confirmation of the content of said quote. If the quote or the content of the URL is plausible, the message will be retweeted by another Twitter user and if the content of the quote or the URL is not plausible it will either not be retweeted or the respondent will reply to the tweet with either a correction or a denial. Indeed, the rumour that President Obama was to announce the assassination of Osama bin Laden started spreading on Twitter almost an hour before the White House Press Conference on the 30th of April, 2011CE, and the rumour, which became remarkably detailed in the minutes before the official announcement, was accurate; the rumour was plausible because it cohered with other information people had heard and no defeaters were presented during its spread. (Stelter, 2011)

different to those of rumours.

In “Rumour Has It,” David Coady draws an analogy between the lack of official-ness of rumours and a similar lack of officialness with respect to conspiracy theories as a reason for finding rumours and conspiracy theories suspicious. He argues that if a rumour is confirmed by some appropriate official source, then it will lose the status of being a rumour and that, in the same way, if a conspiracy theory is confirmed by some appropriate official source, then it loses the status of being a conspiracy theory.

His thesis on the unofficial nature of rumours is as follows:

[R]umours are essentially unofficial things. No public statement by a government or a government agency, for example, no matter how far removed it was from an original eyewitness account, could be a rumour (though, of course, it could confirm a pre-existing rumour or be responsible for starting another rumour). (Coady, 2006d)

This is a thesis which applies to conspiracy theories, as well.

No official account of an event, no matter how conspiratorial it is, is likely to be characterised as a conspiracy theory. Both rumours and conspiracy theories seem by definition to lack official status. (Coady, 2006d, p. 48)

Now, one of the reasons why we are suspicious of conspiracy theories is precisely because we take it that they lack a certain authority, to wit,

official status. In the same respect one of the reasons why we might find rumours suspicious is that they, too, lack official status. David Coady argues that this suspicion is misplaced and that a proper understanding of this suspicion of conspiracy theories will also shed light on why it is inappropriate to have a *prima facie* suspicion of rumours (Coady, 2006d, p. 48-9)⁸.

Time for another example.

Amelia and Steffi are talking in the cafeteria. Both are concerned about the reasons behind the invasion of Iraq by the United States of America. Amelia is a conspiracy theorist with respect to this issue. She firmly believes that the official theory about the invasion, that the American Government claimed that the Saddam Hussein-led regime in Iraq was developing Weapons of Mass Destruction, was not just a lie but that the real reason for the invasion of Iraq was that America secretly wanted to take control of the region's oil reserves. Amelia is asserting a conspiratorial explanation for the invasion of Iraq by American forces and is, thus, asserting a conspiracy theory.

Steffi, on the other hand, believes that the Government of the United States of America did mistakenly believe that the Iraqi Government was developing Weapons of Mass Destruction (and thus she denies one of the conspiracy theories of the event). She has also heard that a motivating factor for the invasion was that in addition to bringing down a Government which was developing WMDs it would also help America to take a

⁸As I mentioned in chapter 1, section 1.3.2.5, Coady does not take it that official theories are automatically better than their unofficial rivals.

controlling interest in the region's oil reserves, a proposition which she expresses to Amelia. Steffi is spreading a rumour.

Amelia believes that her conspiracy theory is the actual explanation for America's invasion of Iraq; she is asserting that it is the case. Steffi, however, is simply spreading a rumour. She is not asserting that her story is true but rather passing on something she has heard and found plausible. Should someone confirm Steffi's rumour with reference to some appropriately official source (say, leaked war documents), then not only would that make Steffi's rumour all the more plausible, it might, in fact, stop any of her further communication of this information from being a rumour because she could, now, testify that it is the case.

I think it is reasonable to say that rumours lack any form of official status. If a rumour had been endorsed by an appropriate authority, then it would not be a rumour⁹.

⁹David Coady's argument about rumours and official status is sound, provided that we appeal to an appropriate authority; if a rumour is endorsed by an epistemically suitable official source or influential institution, then the rumour will become a proposition which we are justified in believing. However, if the rumour is endorsed by an inappropriate authority, i.e. someone who lacks the right kind of credentials with respect to the content of the rumour, then it is not clear what that does to the status of the rumour.

This is a point I think Nicholas Herriman makes in his article "The Great Rumor Mill: Gossip, Mass Media, and the Ninja Fear," which is that a rumour can be treated as having been officially endorsed, and thus plausible, when influential media institutions report it as fact.

Nils Bubandt (2008) demonstrates that in North Maluku in 1999–2000, leaflets that contained oral rumors circulated. The information–conspiracy theories about Christian or Muslim "enemies"–was already hearsay, but gained authority through being written in the leaflets, and was a trigger for communal violence. (Herriman, 2010, p. 726)

This kind of endorsement, I think, amounts to endorsing rumour-mongering, as the rumour has not been assessed to see whether it is plausible but rather it is treated as being newsworthy and is transmitted on to hearers via a medium which (perhaps mistakenly) many hearers think is trustworthy. David Coady makes a similar point: in the right kind of society rumours might be considered more reliable than official

However, part of the the so-called “common sense suspicion” about the *prima facie* unwarranted nature of conspiracy theories is precisely that they lack a certain authority, to wit, they have no official status. As I have argued, I do not think this is part of the definition of a conspiracy theory (see chapter 1). Indeed, conspiracy theories can be official because all a conspiracy theory is is an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause and there is nothing in that definition that requires that a conspiracy theory not be an official theory.

It is true that our suspicion of conspiracy theories is often based upon comparing them to their rivals, which are sometimes going to be official theories. In a case where we have an official theory, where we have a theory which has been endorsed, we might be tempted to consider the official theory to be the better explanation because the endorsement inherent in its official status implies that there is an appeal to authority that underpins the rival to the conspiracy theory. If this is the argument, then the lack of official status is a factor in the common sense suspicion of conspiracy theories but this common sense suspicion is wrong, as I have argued in previous chapters¹⁰; unless we know that the appeal to authority is legitimate, then a theory having official status tells us nothing about whether belief in it is warranted or unwarranted¹¹.

information (Coady, 2006d, p. 48-9).

¹⁰I have already discussed the role of official status with respect to conspiracy theories and official theories in chapters 4 and 5 where I argued that the official status of an explanation does not, without understanding what “official” means, tell us whether we should prefer an official theory over a conspiracy theory or a conspiracy theory over an official theory.

¹¹Indeed, if this is a problem for conspiracy theories, then it is equally a problem for official theories, because, arguably, we need to be able to assess how much trust to place in the sources of official theories before we can say that they trump their rivals.

Yet, in the same way that the availability of an official theory could be said to provide a reason to doubt a conspiracy theory, a conspiracy theory could provide a good reason to doubt some official theory. Certainly, within certain communities conspiracy theories spread rapidly and widely and I would hazard that this is because the content of the conspiracy theory coheres so well with the pre-existing beliefs of that group. This suggests that we can be easily fooled into accepting some proposition because of its plausibility, or coherence with our other beliefs.

I think we can say that one of the reasons why conspiracy theories seem to spread regardless of their low *relative* plausibility (in comparison to rival explanations) is that if the conspiracy theory coheres with some hearer's existing beliefs they might be less likely to appraise the trustworthiness of the speaker. Nevertheless, this is not a problem with conspiracy theories *per se* but rather with the psychology of certain conspiracy theorists.

We need to be able to appraise the trustworthiness of official sources before we can claim that official theories can trump conspiracy theories. This is precisely what some people, often labelled "conspiracy theorists"

Neil Levy, in his 2007 paper, "Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories," (Levy, 2007) takes it that official theories are truth-conducive because they are transmitted between individuals and if the official theory is considered plausible, then it must have been produced and preserved in an epistemically appropriate way (Levy, 2007, p. 182). Levy's argument is that if official theories survive in what we might call the "marketplace of ideas" (a term Cass Sunstein, the Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, has used in his book, "On Rumours," a work which links rumours to conspiracy theories (Sunstein, 2009)), it is because they are not just endorsed by official sources but also transmitted in a trusting fashion between speakers and hearers.

The problem with official theories is that whilst they might well spread from speakers to hearers such official sources are not necessarily going to be epistemically authoritative and may be an influential institution which is *merely* political in nature. In cases like this, we need to ask questions about whether we have a case for trusting the utterances of said institution.

pejoratively, are concerned with when they downplay the institutional endorsement of official theories and, I think, there is a perverse plausibility to this move. If you think “they” are out to get you, then you should expect that they will endorse false theories expecting the public to treat such an endorsement as a reason to think the theory has the right credentials. Whilst rumours lack official status, this is not because rumours are denied by, or are in opposition to, some influential institution or authority but simply because rumouring is a case of finding out what is the most plausible thing to believe (often without asking the authorities directly)

Recall the example of Amelia and Steffi and the real reason behind the invasion of Iraq. Amelia asserted a conspiracy theory to explain the invasion whilst Steffi expressed a rumour about why the invasion occurred. Conspiracy theorists regard the theories they assert as the most plausible explanation of the event; if there is a rival explanation to the conspiracy theories, then we need to assess both said rival (say, an official theory) and what this means for belief in the conspiracy theories.

This difference is crucial to understanding why we should not conflate the spreading of rumours with the spreading of conspiracy theories; rumours are *merely mentioned* and conspiracy theories are **proposed** as *the* explanation. What makes the transmission process of rumouring a reliable one is that when a speaker transmits a rumour to a hearer we do not require the speaker or the hearer to believe the rumour is true, we only require that the hearer finds it plausible, which is to say it coheres with her other beliefs. Thus, when a speaker engages in rumouring and transmits a rumour to a hearer, the speaker should be prepared for the possibility

that the rumour will be considered implausible by the hearer; a defeater belief might be asserted which shows that the rumour is implausible. This should not be a problem for rumourers or the process of rumouring as it is a process of fact-finding or fact-checking. A rumourer should not stand by their proposition *if it is defeated or becomes implausible to them*. Defeater propositions, which show that the rumour is implausible, will be something, presumably, the rumourer should want to know. Indeed, the existence of a rival hypothesis with respect to a rumour may even be considered a good thing if it helps the rumourer to find out what is really going on.

Conspiracy theorists, however, will normally be prepared to assert their conspiracy theories; the conspiracy theory presented by the conspiracy theorist is what they consider to be the best explanation of the event^{12 13}.

¹²As a purely psychological point, some conspiracy theorists are unlikely to be easily dissuaded that their explanation is incorrect just because some hearer finds it implausible, especially if the conspiracy theorist has questions about whether the defeater propositions presented by said hearer in response to a conspiracy theory are based in what the conspiracy theorist considers to be disinformation (see section 5.1 in chapter 5 for more details) or an appeal to an official theory (see chapter 4).

¹³There is an obvious objection to my thesis that the spreading of rumours and conspiracy theories are importantly dissimilar, which goes like this:

Theorising about conspiracies is surely also a form of fact-finding, just like rumouring. It is an activity undertaken by an agent who wants to find the best explanation for an event.

I agree; theorising about conspiracies can be a kind of fact-finding but it is a different kind of activity to that of the spreading of conspiracy theories. The relationship between conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorising is not analogous to the relationship between rumours and rumouring. Rumouring is a kind of fact-finding, a fishing for information based upon agents testing propositions against what else they know, promoting plausible beliefs and rejecting implausible ones. Theorising about conspiracies might be similar (in that it is an activity where you seek to answer the question of whether some event could have occurred because of the existence of a conspiracy), but the spreading of conspiracy theories is not, typically, a fact-finding exercise because conspiracy theories are proposed as *the* explanation of an event. This is why the reliable transmission of conspiracy theories does not *merely* require that we trust speakers, but

The reliability of the transmission of rumours is based on trusting that speakers will not embellish or fabricate rumours as well as the plausibility of the rumoured proposition to the hearer. The degree of plausibility of a rumour that is heard by one agent may well differ from its plausibility to that of another agent in the chain of transmission. The transmission of a conspiracy theory is reliable, then, when the speaker and the hearer are in a trusting relationship with one another such that the hearer trusts the speaker and the justified belief of the speaker becomes the justified belief of the hearer.

Now, most people will say that this makes the transmission of conspiracy theories seem like it is a reliable process and thus prone to producing justified beliefs. However, our common sense suspicion about conspiracy theories has it that they are examples of unwarranted beliefs, so surely there must be something wrong with my analysis because it goes against something we regard as very plausible.

My response is that a transmission process is only as good as its inputs; if a speaker has a justified belief that a conspiracy existed and they pass that on successfully, then the hearer will also form a justified belief about said conspiracy. The question, then, is whether the inference to the existence of a conspiracy, which is at the beginning of the chain of transmission of the conspiracy theory, was itself warranted?

So when is a conspiracy theory going to be warranted? I think the answer to this question depends, in part, on whether conspiracy theories,

also requires that the speaker have a justified belief that some conspiracy theory is *the* explanation of the event in question. This task is not impossible but it may well be difficult in many cases.

as explanations, are formed in the right way. When it comes to assessing the transmission of a conspiracy theory for its reliability it is not sufficient to *merely* say that if a hearer trusts the speaker of some conspiracy theory, then the hearer is justified in taking onboard belief in said conspiracy theory because we might trust a conspiracy theorist to be sincere in their assertion but not trust that they have arrived at their belief in a rigorous manner. We need to look at the inference to the existence of a conspiracy, which underpins the conspiracy theory itself, and ask whether the conspiracy theorist who originally proposed the conspiracy theory inferred to the best explanation out of the range of plausible candidates rather than just engaged in inferring to any old explanation.

This does not mean we should discount the role that contrasting theories have on the warrant of conspiracy theories. We might be tempted to think that a conspiracy theory must do a lot of work to be considered warranted. Conspiracy theories must not only be transmitted in a trusting fashion but they must also be the best possible explanation (of a range of candidate explanations). The existence of competing explanatory hypotheses, as rivals to some conspiracy theory (or set of conspiracy theories), indicates that the conspiracy theory is controversial and thus must be backed up with an argument as to why the inference to the existence of a conspiracy, in this case, is the best explanation. I will discuss this in my final chapter.

Summary

In this chapter I have compared and contrasted the transmission processes of rumours and conspiracy theories which are sometimes considered to be unwarranted for the same reasons. I argued that we should not confuse the issue of the reliability of rumours with that of the reliability of conspiracy theories because they typically have different transmission processes.

Rumouring is, typically, a form of fact-finding or checking, where propositions we have heard stated are tested against the beliefs of others. I argued that, when it comes to appraising rumours, what is important is whether the hearer trusts the rumourer to be sincere and finds the content of the rumoured proposition plausible. If a rumour is implausible it is unlikely to spread far in the community of speakers and hearers because hearers, presumably, are interested in auditing the propositions which spread through their community. If a rumour is plausible to some hearer, then the hearer may well go and test the rumour out on some other hearer to see whether it is coherent with their beliefs. It is this set of facts about the testing, or teasing out, of the plausibility of rumours that leads me to think that rumouring is a reliable process.

The activity of rumour-mongering, the insincere and pathological counterpart of rumouring, explains why we might think of rumouring as an unreliable process. An agent who engages in rumour-mongering may well embellish or even fabricate the rumours they spread. Rumour-mongering is an abuse of trust because rumour-mongering is the insincere

transmission of a rumour. Now, the process of auditing, the checks and balances of the transmission process of rumours will, I argue, mean that embellished and fabricated rumours will typically end up being implausible to hearers but, in some cases, such rumours may well persist in a community. This is a bullet we have to bite when it comes to the transmission of rumours; the reliability of the process means we cannot guarantee that all rumours will be plausible.

I also argued that the transmission process associated with conspiracy theories can be reliable but that there is an important difference between rumouring and the spreading of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are asserted, rather than *merely* mentioned, as *the* explanation of an event. The conspiracy theorist does not *merely* believe their conspiracy theory is plausible, they believe it to be *the* explanation. It is in this way that rumours and conspiracy theories are different.

Whereas rumouring is a kind of fact-finding, the assertion of a conspiracy theory is an attempt to persuade a hearer that the actual explanation of the event is due to the existence of a conspiracy. The work of assessing what we need to do to show that a conspiracy existed will be the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 7

The Inference to the Existence of a Conspiracy

Introduction

My project, in this thesis, has been to consider whether the common sense *prima facie* suspicion of conspiracy theories is justified. My analysis thus far has, I think, shown that a number of the arguments usually cited as warranting this suspicion are, when properly analysed, not that strong. That said, I do think there is a significant problem for belief in conspiracy theories, which is that both belief in the existence of a conspiracy and the hypothesis that said conspiracy explains the occurrence of some event might, in many cases, be arrived at via what I call an “Inference to Any Old Explanation¹.”

¹Whilst this is a new term of art, I cannot claim sole credit for the name; my good friend, teaching colleague and supervisor, Dr. Jonathan McKeown-Green and I came up with the term whilst working out how to discuss conspiracy theories in the context of a

7.1 The Inference to Any Old Explanation

The Inference to Any Old Explanation is a fallacious move where some arbitrary candidate explanation which is not probable, but which happens to have been brought to an agent's attention, or which has some feature that makes it psychologically interesting, is mistakenly taken to be the *best* explanation. It might be the case that when the existence of a conspiracy is taken to be the most probable candidate explanation of an event it is only because it is the most satisfying account for some agent to believe, or because the inferring agent failed to consider other rival hypotheses. Whatever the case, the Inference to Any Old Explanation is a pathology of the process of inferential reasoning.

I will not argue that all inferences to the existence of a conspiracy are inferences to any old explanation, although I will argue that showing that a conspiracy exists **and** that it is the best explanation of some event is difficult. This chapter can be seen as my attempt to see if there is a defence of the common sense suspicion that conspiracy theories are bunk. According to some psychologists, people believe conspiracy theories for bad reasons. Now, whether or not we accept the claim of such psychologists², I want to argue that there are epistemological grounds for thinking that we have a *prima facie* reason to be agnostic rather than suspicious about conspiracy theories. This principled agnosticism, as we might call it, requires us to appraise carefully any argument according to which a

critical thinking course we designed and taught in 2004CE.

²As a colleague has noted, the psychological research in question might have been contaminated by the cultural assumption that it is irrational to believe in conspiracy theories.

conspiracy existed and is responsible for the occurrence of an event.

I will first argue that a charitable gloss on our common sense suspicion of conspiracy theories is to understand it as arising out of one or more of the following three objections to claims of conspiracy:

1. That showing that the conditions for conspiratorial activity are satisfied is difficult;
2. That claims of conspiracy are often vague and may consequently be unfalsifiable;
3. That showing that a conspiracy existed does not tell us that it explains the occurrence of some event.

To make sense of my analysis I will start by examining, via examples and commentary, the fallacy of the Inference to Any Old Explanation. In the examples, a candidate explanation is put forward as the actual explanation of some phenomenon or event, despite there being no good reason to believe that this particular candidate explanation (rather than some rival) is the actual explanation of the event.

7.1.1 Example I: Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell

The mathematician and author, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (also known as Lewis Carroll), based the character of Alice, in his books “Alice in Wonderland” (Carroll, 1967) and “Alice Through the Looking Glass and What She Found There” (Carroll, 2005) on Alice Liddell, the young daughter of his friends Henry and Lorina Liddell. In 1862CE a rift formed between the

Liddells and Dodgson and no explanation was ever given for this either by the Liddells or Dodgson³. This has led many people to speculate that Dodgson's close relationship with Alice was the cause of the falling out, with some biographers arguing that Dodgson had an inappropriate relationship with the then eleven-year old⁴. It has been argued that the discovery of this relationship led to the break-up of the friendship between Dodgson and the Liddells.

However, nothing in this story as it stands tells us that this explanatory hypothesis is the explanation. The evidence, as I have presented it, is perfectly compatible with a host of other candidate explanations⁵ such as one according to which Dodgson was simultaneously engaged in two affairs: one with Alice's nanny and one with her governess. This rival explanatory hypothesis – that Dodgson was having simultaneous affairs with two women (which was contrary to Victorian social mores, and thus something to keep hidden) – is consistent with the evidence and would also explain why the Liddells broke contact with Dodgson⁶.

The hypothesis that Dodgson was engaged in an inappropriate relationship with Alice Liddell has almost certainly been believed because of an Inference to Any Old Explanation. Such an inference has the following form:

³Indeed, Dodgson's diary entries for this period were, after his death, expunged by his sister, so there is no extant record of how or why the Liddells and Dodgson fell out.

⁴A number of biographies now allege that Dodgson had an affair with Alice, although there is some dispute among the biographers as to whether it was sexual. Morton N. Cohen's "Lewis Carroll: a biography" (Cohen, 1995) mentions the affair, for example.

⁵This is not, I think, an example of selectiveness, as everyone is working from the same evidence, but rather an issue to do with how the evidence is interpreted.

⁶It would also explain why Dodgson's heirs would have excised the relevant pages from his diaries.

1. We have some event we want to explain (such as the rift between Dodgson and the Liddells), and
2. We have some evidence (such as the missing diary pages, the reluctance of the Liddells to comment on the rift, et cetera) and
3. We might even have some related theories which pertain to the kind of thing we are trying to explain (such as psychological or sociological theories of the morés of Victorian culture⁷).

Nothing about the story I have told, however, strongly suggests that Dodgson had an inappropriate relationship with Alice Liddell and so it seems that should I infer that such a relationship explains the dissolution of his relationship with the Liddell's, then I am making an an Inference to Any Old Explanation.

I am not saying that this particular candidate explanatory hypothesis is any worse than the other available candidate explanations. The problem for the claim that Dodgson was engaged in an inappropriate relationship with Alice Liddell is just that those who do endorse it are doing so solely on the basis that it accounts for the evidence. They are not going through the proper and considered process of considering alternative explanatory hypotheses which would also account for the same evidence and then deciding which of them is the most probable candidate explanation. If we are after the truth, then we want to get the best (in this sense, most

⁷Such psychological or sociological theories of the morés of Victorian culture might be part of the explanation, of course, rather than part of the evidence to be explained, if we take it that such theories about Victorian behaviour are, themselves, explanatory hypotheses.

probable candidate) explanation rather than any old one.

We can understand this as part of the packet of issues that come with an understanding of the under-determination of theories (in this case explanatory hypotheses) by the evidence. Explanatory hypotheses provide a link between the known background facts and the specific event or phenomenon we want to explain the occurrence of. There might be a huge range, possibly an infinite variety, of seemingly plausible explanatory hypotheses that an epistemic agent can choose from that will fit the evidence, in the sense of rendering it probable, and which can then be used to explain why some phenomenon or event occurred (Quine, 1951).

I believe that if we elaborate on the kind of problems that agents might face when inferring to an explanatory hypothesis, we can then use this to explain why Inferences to Any Old Explanation are so troubling (and how people might mistake an Inference to Any Old Explanation for an inference to the best explanation).

7.2 Four mistakes an agent might make when inferring to an explanatory hypothesis

Agents, when inferring to an explanation, might fail to consider:

- a) The extent to which the available evidence that the phenomenon being explained renders the hypothesis probable (its posterior probability), or
- b) The degree to which the hypothesis is independently likely (its prior probability), or
- c) The likelihood of the hypothesis, relative to the other hypotheses being considered (its relative probability) or
- d) The possibility that there are some unexamined, but worthwhile contenders among the candidate explanatory hypotheses.

Three of these mistakes are to do with considering the probability of an explanatory hypothesis. We need to be careful, then, to separate out the prior, posterior and relative probability of the explanatory hypothesis we are considering as the explanation of an event.

The fourth mistake on my list is not about probability but rather the witting or unwitting failure of agents to consider other worthwhile explanatory hypotheses. Even if we appraise the probability of a set of rival explanatory hypotheses it is possible that a worthwhile candidate explanation might not be on that list. This might be an example of an unwitting failure to consider alternatives (say, lack of education or a

psychological disposition to ignore certain hypotheses) or it might be the result of a conscious decision to leave a candidate explanation off the list (say, because you want to restrict the pool of candidate explanations to a set which fits with some agenda).

Let me use two more examples to illustrate these four pitfalls.

7.2.1 Example II: Irvine and Mallory's attempt at the summit of Sagarmāthā

On June the 8th, 1924CE George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine made an attempt to reach the summit of Sagarmāthā (aka. Mt. Everest). They were last seen climbing towards the summit. Ever since, many historians and mountain-climbers have become obsessed with finding their remains, in the hope that their personal effects will include evidence about what happened to them that day.

The only established fact of the matter is that Mallory and Irvine were sighted at 1PM, several hundred metres from the summit. However, this has not stopped some historians and mountain climbers from claiming Irvine and Mallory died **after** reaching the summit. Various hypotheses have been put forward to explain why they did not return, which range from Mallory reaching the summit alone because Irvine died earlier to both Mallory and Irvine reaching the summit together and dying afterwards⁸. These stories are intellectual fancies, however, given not only that there is no evidence that they made the ascent but also what we know about the

⁸A 2010 New Zealand Herald article, "Campaign to knock Hillary off his summit" ably summarises these views (Johnston, 2010).

likelihood of their making said ascent given issues with the traverse they are (on record) as having chosen⁹. This has not, however, stopped some of the proponents of these theories from claiming that their explanatory hypotheses are the explanation of Irvine and Mallory's disappearance.

The problem for the different claims that Irvine and Mallory reached the summit of Sagarmāthā is that if such a flight of intellectual fancy is regarded as the explanation, then it looks as if at least one of the four mistakes mentioned previously has been made. The available evidence does not render this particular explanatory hypothesis probable given the evidence and the explanatory hypothesis is also improbable in a prior sense.

This example shows that we should want an explanatory hypothesis to be probable given the evidence before we consider it to be the best explanation. My next example, drawn from the annals of xenobiology, is about the probability of the explanatory hypothesis with respect to its rivals.

7.2.2 Example III: Not exactly Life on Mars

In 2005CE two astro-biologists, Chris McKay and Heather Smith, wrote a paper arguing for the following claim: if it was discovered that there was a lack of expected hydrocarbons on the surface of Titan (one of the moons of Saturn), then that might suggest methanogenic life was present there. In 2010CE a pair of studies were published which showed that there was

⁹There are also questions about the probability of their making the ascent given the technology available to them and their limited resources.

some process causing the active depletion of acetylene and hydrogen, two hydrocarbons, on the surface of Titan. The question “How do we explain the missing acetylene and hydrogen?” was subsequently asked and one answer was to refer back to McKay and Smith’s paper and hypothesise that it was because of the presence of methanogenic life on Titan.

Chris McKay was asked to comment on the hypothesis that some process on Titan was causing the active depletion of acetylene and hydrogen. He argued that whilst the evidence – the lack of hydrocarbons on the surface of Titan – might suggest the presence of methanogenic life, the explanatory hypothesis, that methanogenic life was responsible for the active depletion of those hydrocarbons, was unlikely.

The existence of methane-based life churning through hydrocarbons and gaseous hydrogen is the fourth most likely explanation . . . according to McKay. “This is a still a long way from ‘evidence of life,’” he wrote. “However, it is extremely interesting.” (Matson, 2010)

Whilst the evidence renders the hypothesis probable¹⁰ and thus might be said to be in the set of candidate explanations it is not more probable than the other available explanatory hypotheses. Whilst Titan has some of the necessary pre-cursors for abiogenesis and is certainly the kind of environment we might think is conducive to the emergence of life, the rival hypotheses – that there are atmospheric processes transporting hy-

¹⁰Its prior probability is, arguably, uncertain in the sense that we have no good reason, other than the fact that the evidence on Titan weakly suggests it, to believe that methanogenic life actually exists.

drocarbons out of the upper atmosphere, or there is some non-biological chemical reaction which is responsible for depletion of hydrocarbons on Titan's surface – are more probable. If you were to claim that methanogenic life on Titan explains the lack of hydrocarbons on its surface you would be guilty of inferring to any old explanation, because you would be failing to notice that it is relatively improbable compared to at least three of its rivals.

We should like our choice of explanatory hypotheses to be probable given the evidence and with respect to their rivals in the pool of candidate explanations. Of course, our probability estimates depend on the information available to us and this varies over time. For example, in the 16th Century CE it was thought that witches, through their magicks, were a significant cause of the unfaithfulness of spouses. This was an explanatory hypothesis in the pool of candidate explanations and was considered to be a good explanation of infidelity by people at that time. In the here and now, however, I think it is safe to say that this would not be considered anywhere near as probable as many other available candidate explanations because although acts of infidelity still occur in the 21st Century CE, the hypothesis that such acts can be explained with reference to magick no longer fits with our collective understanding of how the world works. The 16th Century hypothesis is now neither relatively probable nor antecedently probable.

7.3 Conspiracy theories and Inferring to Them

The above examples show that there are issues we need to be aware of when evaluating inferences which purport to be inferences to the best explanation. I now want to look at problems that we might take it are particular to conspiracy theories when making such inferences.

It is reasonable to expect, when an explanatory hypothesis is put forward as the explanation of some event, that a good argument has been offered in support of the claim that the explanatory hypothesis is probable in each of the three senses of probability and that other worthwhile candidate explanations were also considered.

In section 1.1 of chapter 1 I detailed what I take to be the conditions for something to count as conspiratorial activity:

1. There exists (or has existed) some set of agents who plan,
2. Some end is/was desired by the agents, and
3. Steps have been taken to minimise public awareness of what the agents are up to.

We must have good reason to think that all of these conditions are satisfied before we can say a claim of conspiracy is warranted (which is to say that we can justify a claim that a conspiracy exists or existed). Now, showing that all of these conditions are satisfied might be a difficult task, especially since the final condition, that of secrecy, means that evidence

which would show that first two claims are satisfied might be hard to come by. We might be tempted to argue that this makes the burden of proof on the person inferring to the existence of a conspiracy unusually difficult to discharge because the evidence will be scant.

The Burden of Proof argument: As a claim of conspiracy must show that all conditions of conspiratorial activity are satisfied, and as the satisfaction of the final condition (that of secrecy) makes it likely that evidence for the satisfaction of the first two conditions will be unusually hard to obtain, the evidential requirement for such a claim will often be difficult to discharge.

Because of this, many claims of conspiracy are not supported by an appeal to adequate evidence. In situations like this nobody should accept said claim on the assembled evidence, even though the final condition (if satisfied) would explain why adequate evidence might not be available.

This point is urged by Pete Mandik. He says that belief in conspiracy theories is *prima facie* irrational because they will be too hard to justify. This is at least partly because of the secrecy condition, which puts conspiratorial activity into the category of unobservable causes (Mandik, 2007, p. 207). Explanations that rely on such unobservable causes, he claims, are problematic.

Does this, then, justify our common sense suspicion of conspiracy theories?

I argue that it does not. Yes, if someone proposes a conspiracy theory but provides little to no argument for it, then we should be wary *as we*

would be about any claim that is proposed without evidence to support it. We should not, routinely, accept claims without some evidence (where that evidence might be documents, an appeal to an appropriate authority or so forth). Claims of conspiracy are no different.

In reply to Mandik's specific complaint, the secretiveness of conspiracy theories does not mean that evidence for them is never available. Indeed, if invoking unobservable causes is a problem, then it is one that is not peculiar to the evaluation of conspiracy theories. The same issue arises for scientific explanations that posit unobservable entities and these explanations are not usually regarded as especially hard to justify. Indeed, much Philosophy of Science is devoted to revealing the conditions under which they succeed.

However, we might be tempted to say that arguments like Mandik's show that warranting a claim of conspiracy will be difficult, which seems right. Claims of conspiracy are extraordinary in so far as they require that you show that all the conditions of conspiratorial activity have been satisfied.

To further my analysis I will now discuss the various theories which are put forward to explain the events of September 11th, 2001CE. All of the candidate explanations for 9/11 are examples of conspiracy theories but only one of these conspiracy theories is considered to be warranted, the official theory that the terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda were responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. I will use the analysis of the various conspiratorial explanations of 9/11 to illustrate my thesis about the difficulties of warranting an inference to the existence

of a conspiracy. I will also show that such inferences can be warranted, and thus that our common sense suspicion of conspiracy theories is only, at best, a reason to be agnostic about claims of conspiracy in particular cases.

7.3.1 Example IV: The Inside Job Hypotheses

Some of the most widely discussed and *sneered* at claims of conspiracy of recent note are to be found in the set of 9/11 conspiracy theories known as the “Inside Job Hypotheses.” These explanatory hypotheses cite the existence of a conspiracy, led by a group of conspirators within the USA, as a salient cause of events of September 11th, 2001CE. They range from “Some group in the USA allowed the events of 9/11 to happen” to “Some group in the USA was directly responsible for the events of 9/11.”

One of the conditions of conspiratorial activity, that the activity of the conspirators was undertaken in secret (given that there was no, or very little, warning of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.), seems easily satisfied by the available evidence. However, some skeptics of the set of Inside Job Hypotheses have argued the claims about who the conspirators were, and what it was they wanted to do, are vague and that the vagueness of these claims is a reason to reject the conspiracy theory of the event.

Now, some vagueness is to be expected when it comes to many claims that a conspiracy exists. The secrecy condition of conspiratorial activity, as previously stated, means that evidence for some of the conditions will be

either entirely lacking or inadequate. Consequently it will be difficult to support any precise claim about, for example, who the conspirators are or what is they intended. This, I think, gives rise to another reason as to why we might be tempted to say we are suspicious of claims that a conspiracy exists; the evidence cited in support of such a claim might be too vague to be considered as adequate support for a claim that a conspiracy existed (or caused the event to happen).

The Vagueness Argument: Claims of the existence of a conspiracy should be treated suspiciously because the secrecy condition of such a claim means that we should expect such claims to be vague.

One thing to note here is that any precisely formulated theory entails a vague theory. For example, the explanatory hypothesis that the events of 9/11 were the result of a conspiracy orchestrated by Al-Qaeda entails the theory that the events of 9/11 were the result of a conspiracy. The former explanation, which is precise with respect to who was behind the events of September the 11th, 2001CE, entails the vague, but still explanatory, claim that the events of 9/11 were due to a conspiracy¹¹.

Indeed, we might even prefer vague theories to precise ones in cases where the precise theory is implausible but the vague theory is not. For

¹¹One philosopher who talks about the vagueness of claims of conspiracy is Steve Clarke. His 2007 article, "Conspiracy Theories and the Internet - Controlled Demolition and Arrested Development" (Clarke, 2007) contains within it an argument that many contemporary conspiracy theories lack specific details as to the who and how of conspiratorial activity. His paper looks at the development of conspiracy theories on the internet, arguing that conspiracy theories have fared badly in the age of the internet because it does not take long for evidence to be presented against them and thus conspiracy theories, in general, have become vague and less precise in their details either due to criticism or by design of the proponent of the conspiracy theory.

example, before the evidence was in, we might have preferred the vague claim that it was a conspiracy that brought the Twin Towers down on September 11th, 2001CE to the much more precise but (seemingly) implausible claim that it was a conspiracy by the Knights Templar to bring down Twin Towers on September 11th, 2001CE.

Now, some people will say that the problem with vague claims is that they are unfalsifiable. In section 3.2 of chapter 3 I agreed with Brian L. Keeley that some conspiracy theories are immune to being falsified because the conspirators might be putting out disinformation in order to discredit certain claims of conspiracy (which I went into in more depth in chapter 5 where I talked about both the activity of selectiveness and the fabrication of disinformation).

I think we should consider vague and unfalsifiable claims as being different to *merely* unfalsifiable claims. Consider the Dewey Commission's report on the Moscow Show Trials. The report claimed a conspiracy had occurred and could have been interpreted as making unfalsifiable claims about the conspiracy as it predicted the existence of disinformation which would, in turn, discredit the Commission's report. Whilst the conspiracy theory the Dewey Commission produced was unfalsifiable, it was not vague: it singled out who the conspirators were and why they were covering up what really happened (and provided reasons as to why disinformation might be present in the official theory).

Claims of "They're out to get you!" are vague and we should be cautious about accepting them as part of an adequate explanatory hypothesis if there is no other supporting evidence or background information we

can bring to bear. A claim like “Stalin and his cronies will disseminate disinformation to discredit the results of our methodical research into the Moscow Trials” may well be unfalsifiable but it is not vague. As Keeley wrote:

My claim here is that unfalsifiability is only a reasonable criterion in cases where we do not have reason to believe that there are powerful agents seeking to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter. . . . Strictly hewing to the dogma of falsifiability in these cases would have led to a rejection of conspiracy theories at too early a point in the investigations, and may have left the conspiracies undiscovered.

(Keeley, 1999, p. 121)

Individual conspiracy theories can and will be warranted whenever it is reasonable to think that all the conditions of conspiratorial activity are satisfied. I will now give an example of a warranted inference to the existence of a conspiracy which does not suffer from vagueness.

7.3.2 Example V: The Outside Job Hypothesis

The official theory of the events of 9/11 – that they were the result of terrorist activity by Al-Qaeda – which is sometimes called the “Outside Job” hypothesis, is a conspiracy theory. This particular account is, especially when compared to the various Inside Job hypotheses, quite specific about who the conspirators were and what their desired end was.

With respect to the Outside Job Hypothesis we can show that:

1. There existed conspirators consisting of at least the named hijackers and the named members of Al-Qaeda who they worked with, and
2. These conspirators desired to attack mainland America and
3. Steps had been taken to minimise public awareness of the hijackers, including the use of false IDs and the like.

Indeed, we can also add that:

4. Work was undertaken by the conspirators to achieve this end, which culminated in a successful attack on the World Trade Center in New York and a less successful attack on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.¹².

Note that there is little vagueness in this claim of conspiracy with respect to:

- a) who the conspirators were and
- b) what it was they desired to do.

If we accept that the conditions for conspiratorial activity are met by the evidence put forward by the proponents of the Outside Job Hypothesis, then we have a credible claim of conspiracy which discharges the burden of proof and does not suffer from vagueness.

¹²The success of the Pentagon attacks is the subject of some debate; it is quite probable the intention behind the attacks was to show that American soil could be the subject of outside terrorist activity and that the hijackers never thought that their actions would actually bring down the Twin Towers. If this is the case, then the Pentagon attack was successful and the complete destruction of the Twin Towers was unintended (but not unwelcome, from the terrorists' point of view).

7.4 Linking a warranted belief in the existence of a conspiracy to an explanation

A claim of conspiracy entails that a set of conspirators intended some end. If you can show that the achievement of that end (or the attempt or even the want to achieve it) is causally related to some event you are trying to explain the occurrence of, you can say “Look, this conspiracy is a cause of that event!”

However, a warranted claim of conspiracy will only be explanatory if we can show that the conspiratorial activity is the salient cause of the event. We need to do more than fall back upon some claim like “There was a conspiracy!” to show that a conspiracy theory is a good explanation. For a conspiracy to be a salient cause of an event, we need to show that the conspirators’ intended goal was causally responsible for the event we are trying to explain.

One reason for thinking that inferences to conspiracy theories might typically be inferences to any old explanation is that even if there is a warrant for some claim of conspiracy, that does not mean it is part of the best explanation of some event. Having a warrant for a claim of conspiracy only means that the evidence shows a conspiracy existed.

Even if we can show that a conspiracy occurred, that does not mean that it can be used to explain the occurrence of some event; we need to show that there is a link between the conspiratorial activity and the event

in question.

Here are two examples to flesh out my argument. The first is an example of a conspiracy which caused an unintended consequence whilst the second is an example of a conspiracy which is not causally related to the event at all.

7.4.1 Example VI: The Oklahoma City Bombing

On April the 19th, 1995CE, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols detonated a truck filled with explosives outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The Federal Building was home to the local offices of several federal agencies, including the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (also known as the BATF). The official explanation for the event is that McVeigh and Nichols conspired to blow up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in retaliation for the federal government's (particularly the BATF's) handling of the Waco Siege two years earlier. Some, however, have argued that it was not a conspiracy by McVeigh and Nichols at all but, rather, a conspiracy by the BATF to gain face after their botched resolution of the Waco Seige. The argument goes something like this:

The Oklahoma City Bombing BATF conspiracy theory After losing face in 1992CE, when the BATF intervention at Waco left a large number of civilians dead, the BATF conspired to set in motion a putative terrorist plot to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Their intended goal was to dramatically stop the terrorist attack and thus regain the favour and respect they lost after Waco. Because the

terrorist activity had to look as authentic as possible, McVeigh and Nichols were suitably armed and prepared to ensure that they had the resources and motivation to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The plot went awry, however, when McVeigh and Nichols went off-script and put into motion the plan several days ahead of schedule. The BATF, who had hoped to gain favour by appearing to stop a major terrorist incident, ended up causing one instead¹³.

I do not think that the Oklahoma City Bombing BATF conspiracy theory is a good explanation, but, for the purpose of my argument, let us assume that we have reason to think the conditions of conspiratorial activity have been satisfied. This means that we can say that:

1. There existed a set of conspirators composed of members of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, as well as (possibly¹⁴) Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols,
2. They desired to set in motion a terrorist attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building which would then be stopped at the last minute,
3. Steps had been taken to not only minimise public awareness of McVeigh and Nichols's preparations for the bombing of the Alfred P.

¹³For more details about this particular theory, I recommend Brian L. Keeley's "Of Conspiracy Theories," (Keeley, 1999) which goes into much greater detail than I have here.

¹⁴Some versions of the conspiracy theory have it that McVeigh and Nichols were in on the plan and expected to be stopped, whilst other versions of the thesis have it that they were unwitting dupes in the conspiracy.

Murrah Federal Building but also to hide the link between the BATF and McVeigh and Nichols.

Now, if we accept this claim of conspiracy, then this conspiracy, whilst causally responsible for the destruction of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, is not the full explanation of the event. To explain the destruction of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building we must also explain how the conspiracy went awry. This is a conspiracy that did not result in the intended end of the conspirators¹⁵.

The conspiracy theory here is part of the explanation rather than the *full* explanation. This particular example shows, I think, that there needs to be a tight connection between the intention of the conspirators and the end that results from their conspiratorial activity.

Then again this may not matter all that much; if the Oklahoma City Bombing BATF conspiracy theory were true, then the conspiratorial activity of the BATF caused the Oklahoma City Bombing, despite the fact that their intended goal was to gain face by preventing said bombing.

¹⁵I would like to note here that this example of unintended consequences is importantly different from what might be taken to be another example of unintended consequences, the death of Julius Caesar. Some historians have argued that Marcus Brutus and his associates intended not only to kill Caesar but also to take control of Rome. If this is the case, then the conspiracy to kill Caesar had an unintended consequence, which is that Marcus Brutus and his associates did not gain control of Rome but were hunted down and executed for their role in the death of the dictator.

Now, in the case of the death of Julius Caesar the conspirators achieved what might be called “partial success.” In the case of the Oklahoma City Bombing BATF conspiracy theory what the conspirators achieved should be considered a total failure; the BATF intended to gain face by preventing a tragedy rather than allowing a tragedy to occur. Whilst both of these examples feature unintended consequences, the kind of unintended consequence I am interested in here is one where the intent of the conspirators is totally at odds with what the conspiratorial activity resulted in.

In this hypothetical case the conspiracy is a cause of the event but the best explanation is a story about how the conspiracy went awry. In this latter case the conspiratorial activity is not the best explanation unless we also have some story that links the failure of the intended end to obtain with the events that did occur due to the conspiracy. This story (about how the conspiracy did not result in the end the conspirators intended) is a more probable candidate explanation.

If we are going to infer to the existence of a conspiracy in order to explain the occurrence of some event, then we need to advance some argument that shows there is a connection between the conspiratorial activity of the conspirators and the occurrence of the event. I will come back to this point after my second example, which is an example of a conspiracy which is not causally related to the event being explained at all. My example will show that just because you can have a warrant for an inference to the existence of a conspiracy, this does not necessarily show that the conspiracy can be used to explain the occurrence of an event.

7.4.2 Example VII: A Paranoid Peer-Review Fantasy

For the sake of argument, let us assume that I have a warranted belief in the existence of a set of conspirators whose plan is to promote the interests of my nemesis. Not only do I have a warranted belief in the existence of this conspiracy, I am also of the belief that this conspiracy explains why a recent paper of mine, “Towards an Ontology of Jokes about Gaffing,” was rejected by the Journal of Accidental Thoughts because:

7.4 Linking a warranted belief in the existence of a conspiracy to an explanation

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- a) I think that the editors are in on the conspiracy, and
- b) I happen to know that my nemesis submitted a paper on the same topic at the same time as my own.

Now, I am claiming conspiracy because I can say that:

1. There exist conspirators comprising members of my academic peer community, including the editors of the Journal of Accidental Thoughts, and
2. They desire to advance the career of my nemesis and
3. Steps have been taken to minimise public awareness of the conspirators, mostly via the secrecy of the peer-review system, anonymous referees and the like.

Let us accept that I have the evidence to back up my claim that the conditions of conspiratorial activity have been satisfied. I have a warrant for my belief that a conspiracy exists and am subsequently using this to explain why my article was rejected. My explanatory hypothesis is that the rejection of my paper is due to the existence of a conspiracy.

Now, the story I have told about the existence of a conspiracy to promote the cause of my nemesis and its alleged role in the rejection of my paper is an explanatory hypothesis in the pool of candidate explanations for why my paper was rejected. However, I should consider other worthwhile contenders before I settle on this explanatory hypothesis as the best explanation of the event. For all I know it might be the case that my paper

was simply not good enough for publication. Yet, because I know there exists a conspiracy to advance my nemesis's career, I am assuming that my paper's rejection is to be explained in terms of a claim of conspiracy rather than for more prosaic reasons.

Let me put it this way: If we accept that a conspiracy to advance my nemesis's career does exist, then if my paper was superior to that of my nemesis's, then the conspirators would act in such a way as to ensure that my paper was rejected so my nemesis's paper could be published **and** if my paper turned out to inferior to the one my nemesis wrote, then my paper would be still be rejected and my nemesis's paper published (assuming that it is up to scratch).

There is nothing explicit in the evidence actually available to me that warrants an inference to the conclusion that it is because of the conspiracy that my paper was rejected. Unlike the previous example, where the warranted belief in some conspiratorial activity can be considered, at least, *a* cause of the event, in this case the warranted belief in some conspiratorial activity in this example may have nothing whatsoever to do with the event I am trying to explain. There is no tight connection between the existence of a conspiracy and the event in question; even with a warranted belief in the existence of a conspiracy under my belt, I am still inferring to any old explanation when I cite that conspiracy as a salient cause for the rejection of my paper *if I have not considered the other options*.

For a warranted claim of conspiracy to be considered *the* explanation for why some event occurred, we need to show that the conspiratorial

explanation is not just a member of the pool of candidate explanations but is the most probable explanation.

In the Oklahoma City Bombing BATF conspiracy theory example what we know about the event being explained suggests that there was a plan to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building which was undertaken by agents acting in secret, which means that the evidence for the event renders some conspiratorial activity as the explanation probable which means that the evidence about the event establishes a high posterior probability for an explanation in terms of conspiring. With respect to the Paranoid Peer Review Fantasy example, however, the evidence for the event being explained, the rejection of my article, does not render some conspiratorial activity the most probable explanation, even despite the fact that I know there exists a conspiracy against me.

It is tempting to say that, in the end, it does not matter what we think about how conspired the world may or may not be. Even if we think that conspiracies are common (from surprise parties to large-scale and sinister political shenanigans) or that there is a long historical record of conspiratorial activity, that might tell us nothing about how explanatory an individual claim of conspiracy is.

Whilst it is true that our belief about the incidence level of conspiratorial activity does little to shed light on whether our belief in a *particular* claim of conspiracy as being the salient cause of an event is warranted or not, it would be wrong to say that the past instances of conspiratorial activity has no effect on how likely, in an independent sense, conspiracies are generally regarded as causes of the kind of events we are interested

in. If history is filled with conspiracies, for example, then that raises the independent likeliness of a conspiratorial explanatory hypothesis being *the* explanation.

Now, in the case of the Oklahoma City Bombing BATF conspiracy theory, it is *relatively* likely that the Oklahoma City Bombing was caused by some conspiratorial activity, given the nature of the event that is being explained. If we assume, for the purposes of this example, that there is a warranted inference to the existence of a conspiracy by the BATF, then the conspiracy theory is more probable *relative* to the other hypotheses being considered (such as, say, spontaneous building collapse at the same time as a fire broke out in the foyer) and it is the best candidate explanation. Given the relative likeliness of the explanatory hypothesis we can, to a certain extent, be agnostic as to the independent likeliness of a claim of conspiracy being in the pool of candidate explanations. Compare this to the case of my peer review fantasy, where the more prosaic explanation, that my paper simply did not pass muster under the rigours of peer review, is more probable, independently speaking, than the hypothesis which explains that my paper was rejected due to conspiratorial activity intended to advance the career of my nemesis.

Warranted beliefs in conspiracy theories are often difficult to ensure but, crucially, not impossible. As has been repeated time and time again in this thesis, there are many examples of warranted beliefs in conspiracy theories, such as the Moscow Show Trials, the explanation of the death of Julius Caesar and so forth. If there is warrant for an inference to the existence of a conspiracy and you can show that it is not just probable

that there is a connection between the existence of the conspiracy and the occurrence of some event but that the conspiratorial activity is the best explanation, then you have a warranted belief in a conspiracy theory.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen, in detail, how a conspiracy theory can be warranted. There must be a warranted inference to the existence of a conspiracy and the whole conspiracy theory must be the best explanation of the event.

It should be noted, though, that this makes the burden of proof on someone trying to show that a conspiracy theory is warranted difficult to discharge. Does this, then, amount to an argument that our *prima facie* suspicion about conspiracy theories being bunk is warranted? Can we treat conspiracy theories as a suspicious class of hypotheses?

I do not think so. All a conspiracy theory is is a candidate explanation of an event that cites a conspiracy as a salient cause. Like any explanation, we must have good grounds for believing it to be the best explanation. Whilst we might be worried about claims that conspiracies exist because backing up such claims requires that all the conditions of conspiratorial activity have been satisfied or because they might be vague with respect to the who or the how, this does not mean that we have a warranted *prima facie* suspicion that conspiracy theories, in general, are bunk. At best it means we should be agnostic with respect to individual claims that a conspiracy is the explanation of an event unless we plan to investigate

those claims properly.

Why? Part of the answer to that question is to be found in earlier chapters of this thesis. I think that many of the suspicions we have about conspiracy theories really are part of the set of worries we should have about explanations in general. We need to be careful when assessing the evidence for some claim, especially in situations where we might not be able to check the evidence ourselves to see if it suffers from selectiveness or is disinformation. We should not accept a theory just because it has some official status and when we are told something we need to know whether the teller is trustworthy or an appropriate authority. In this respect I think that most of the arguments traditionally put forward for the suspiciousness of conspiracy theories point towards us needing to be suspicious, to a certain extent, about any explanation, conspiracy theory or otherwise.

The other part of the answer is this: if someone has an argument for some claim, then we should assess that argument. It does not matter whether it is a radical claim about String Theory or the claim that President Obama's recent backtracking on taxing the super rich was due to the Illuminati; if an argument has been put forward, we should look at the argument if we are going to pass judgement on it. When no argument is presented, then yes, we can be suspicious, but conspiracy theorists tend to have reasons for thinking a conspiracy exists and is the explanation of some event. This is why I think we should be conspiracy theory agnostics, admittedly agnostics with a duty to check, when presented with a conspiratorial explanation, whether the inference to the existence

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of a conspiracy is warranted and whether the right kind of connection has been made between the conspiracy and the event to generate a good explanation.

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