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OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES*

“The only thought which philosophy brings with it, in regard to history, is the simple thought of Reason—the thought that Reason rules the world, and that world history has therefore been rational in its course.”

—G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*

“Shit happens.” —Popular contemporary bumper-sticker slogan

The millennium is nigh, and with each passing year, the American consciousness is increasingly in the grip of conspiratorial thinking.¹ Some conspiracy theories are the stuff of legend. Every year best-selling books are published, block-buster movies produced, and high-rated television and radio programs aired which seek to convince us that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in the assassination of John F. Kennedy; that, in 1947, an alien spacecraft crashed near Roswell, New Mexico, and the United States govern-

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¹ Conspiracy theory has not been given much attention by philosophers. In fact, I am aware of only a handful of discussions: for example, Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Volume 2: *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (London: Routledge, 1966, 5th ed.), pp. 94-99; and Charles Pigden, “Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, xxv (1993): 3-34. I believe that the reason for this omission is that most academics simply find the conspiracy theories of popular culture to be silly and without merit. I believe, however, that it is incumbent on philosophers to provide analysis of the errors involved in common delusions, if that is indeed what they are. I offer this paper in the spirit of Philip Kitcher’s work on the philosophical difficulties of scientific creationism—*Abusing Science: The Case against Creationism* (Cambridge: MIT, 1982).

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.

Let me note two things at this point. First, conspiracy theories are not alone in placing great emphasis on errant data. The history of science is replete with examples of theoretical innovation initiated by an investigation into data that did not fit the standard paradigm. It is a good pragmatic heuristic for scientific effort to be expended on chasing after errant data, in the hopes that these loose strings might lead to the unraveling of currently misguided theory. 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.¹² Invariably, some of our measurements, some of our interpretations and other theories get something wrong about the nature of the world.

Second, the problematic of conspiracy theories goes beyond simple false data. If the only problem with UCTs was that they place too much emphasis on small sets of data at odds with an official account, then that would not make them a very interesting phenomenon. Conspiracy theories differ from most other theories in one very interesting way, however. Conspiracy theorists would rightly point out that they have one problem with which scientists are not faced. By hypothesis, the conspiracy theorist is struggling to explain phenomena that other, presumably powerful, agents are actively seeking to keep secret. Unlike the case of science, where nature is construed as a passive and uninterested party with respect to human-knowledge gathering activities, the conspiracy theorist is working in a domain where *the investigated actively seeks to hamper the investigation*. Imagine if neutrinos were not simply hard to detect, but actively sought to avoid detection! This is exactly the case with which conspiracy theorists contend we are confronted in the cases they seek to explain. This is why countervailing evidence and lack of evidence can and ought to be construed as supporting their theories.

¹² I have heard this sentiment attributed to Francis Crick.