

When inferring to a conspiracy might be the best explanation

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Abstract: Conspiracy theories are typically thought to be examples of irrational beliefs, and thus unlikely to be warranted. However, recent work in Philosophy has challenged the claim that belief in conspiracy theories is irrational, showing that in a range of cases belief in conspiracy theories is warranted. However, it is still often said that conspiracy theories are unlikely relative to non-conspiratorial explanations which account for the same phenomena. However, such arguments turn out to rest upon how we define what gets counted both as a ‘conspiracy’ and a ‘conspiracy theory’, and such arguments rest upon shaky assumptions. It turns out that it is not clear that conspiracy theories are prima facie unlikely, and so the claim such theories do not typically appear in our accounts of the best explanations for particular kinds of events needs to be re-evaluated.

1. Introduction

Whilst philosophers have been late in coming to the analysis of these things we call ‘conspiracy theories’, it seems that – as a discipline – many of us analyse them with much more sympathy than our peers in the social sciences. In a raft of papers and books, starting with Charles Pigden’s ‘Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories?’ (1995), philosophers like Brian L. Keeley (1999), Juha Räikkä (2009a), Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor (2010), Lee Basham (2011), David Coady, (2012), and myself (2014) have argued that as