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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).

category, are not necessarily wrong. In fact, as the cases of Watergate and the Iran-Contra affair illustrate, small groups of powerful individuals do occasionally seek to affect the course of history, and with some nontrivial degree of success. Moreover, the available, competing explanations—both official and otherwise—occasionally represent dueling conspiracy theories, as we shall see in the case of the Oklahoma City bombing.

The definition of conspiracy theory poses unexpected difficulties. There seems to exist a strong, common intuition that it is possible to delineate a set of explanations—let us call them *unwarranted conspiracy theories* (UCTs).² It is thought that this class of explanation can be distinguished analytically from those theories which deserve our assent. The idea is that we can do with conspiracy theories what David Hume³ did with miracles: show that there is a class of explanations to which we should not assent, by definition. One clear moral of the present essay is that this task is not as simple as we might have heretofore imagined.

Keely does not endorse this.

Before continuing, I should emphasize that at no point should the reader conclude that I am giving arguments for or against the truth of any given explanation. The issue here is not whether aliens are indeed visiting our planet, or whether Oswald acted alone. Ultimately, in these cases, there is a historical fact of the matter. These facts are not manifest, however, and we must theorize and speculate as to what has happened. The issue here is one of warranted belief. In other words, it may well be correct that “the truth is out there,” but given our epistemic situation, we ought not necessarily believe everything which is, in fact, true. In this respect, we are in the same situation as Hume. As Thomas Huxley⁴ observed, Hume cannot say that miracles have never happened, only that, even if they have, we have no warrant to believe them. Hume has no way of determining, with certainty, whether Jesus turned stone into bread and fed the multitude. Maybe He did or maybe he did not. Hume *is* in a position, however, to say whether we *ought to believe* this miracle occurred given the evidence at hand (or even given the *possible* evidence at hand).

Understanding *why* we are not warranted in believing certain conspiracy theories can make clearer why we ought to believe the things

² Other, less charitable, readers have suggested such labels as ‘kooky’, ‘weirdo’, and ‘harebrained’, among others. While colorful, I do not find such terminology conducive to serious discussion.

³ “Of Miracles” (section X of *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding*, 1748), reprinted in S. Tweyman, ed., *Hume on Miracles* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1996), pp. 1-20.

⁴ “The Order of Nature: Miracles” (chapter VII of Huxley’s *Hume*, 1881), reprinted in Tweyman, pp. 161-68.

This brings me to the most commonly voiced complaint about UCTs, namely, that they are simply unfalsifiable. The worry is that given a situation where all potentially falsifying evidence can be construed as supporting, or at worst as neutral evidence, then conspiracy theories are by definition unfalsifiable. In favor of conspiracy theorists, it should be noted that this unfalsifiability is not as ad hoc as it might initially seem, due to the active nature of the investigated, just noted. 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. Just ask Kenneth Starr. As evidenced by any number of twentieth century, U. S. government-sponsored activities (take your pick), we have reason to believe that there exist forces with both motive and capacity to carry out effective disinformation campaigns.

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. 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. Richard Nixon and North actively sought to divert investigations into their respective activities and both could call upon significant resources to maintain their conspiracies. They saw to it that investigators were thwarted in many of their early attempts to uncover what they accurately suspected was occurring. 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.

No, the problem with UCTs 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. The problem is this: most of us—including those of us who are scientists and who work in scientific laboratories full of expensive equipment—have never carried out the experiments or made the empirical observations that support most contemporary scientific theories. Unless we want to conclude that the vast majority of us are not warranted in believing that the platypus is a mammal and that gold is an atomic element, we need some procedure by which the epistemic war-

It is this pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions entailed by some mature conspiracy theories which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted. It is not their lack of falsifiability per se, but the increasing amount of skepticism required to maintain faith in a conspiracy theory as time passes and the conspiracy is not uncovered in a convincing fashion. As this skepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes.

Consider another famous UCT, the one claiming that the Holocaust never occurred and is a fabrication of Jews and their sympathizers. Robert Anton Wilson correctly notes that “a conspiracy that can deceive us about 6,000,000 deaths can deceive us about *anything*, and that it takes a great leap of faith for Holocaust Revisionists to believe World War II happened at all, or that Franklin Roosevelt did serve as President from 1933 to 1945, or that Marilyn Monroe was more ‘real’ than King Kong or Donald Duck.”¹⁴ In the process of holding onto a belief in an increasingly massive conspiracy behind more and more public events, we undermine the grounds for believing in anything. At some point, we shall be forced to recognize the unwarranted nature of the conspiracy theory if we are to left with *any* warranted explanations and beliefs at all.

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I want to take a step back and get a handle on the broader philosophical issues raised by conspiracy theories and the implication of their current surge in popularity. I contend that conspiracy theories embody a thoroughly outdated world view, a perspective on the meaning of life that was more appropriate in the last century. Recognizing this anachronistic element of conspiratorial thought is useful, however, if it reveals something about the contemporary Zeitgeist. Furthermore, the present popularity of conspiracy theories suggests that we are now in the grip of a conflict between world views.

Conspiracy theorists are, I submit, some of the last believers in an ordered universe. By supposing that current events are under the control of nefarious agents, conspiracy theories entail that such events are capable of being controlled. In an earlier time, it would have been natural to believe in an ordered world, in which God and other supernatural agents exercised significant influence and control. With the rise of materialist science and capitalist economies—peaking in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the notion of an ordered universe was still held to, but the role of the supernatural was either

¹⁴ “Beyond True and False: A Sneaky Quiz with a Subversive Commentary,” in Ted Schultz, ed., *The Fringes of Reason* (New York: Harmony, 1989), pp. 170-73, here p. 172.

greatly diminished (as in Deism) or eliminated (as in Marxism). As G. W. F. Hegel puts it in the passage quoted in the epigraph, "world history has...been rational in its course." Therefore, on this view, there is some hope that humans can understand, predict, and conceivably control the course of human events. This the conspiracy theorists believe, only they further believe that the wrong folks are at the helm.

Such beliefs are out of step with what we have generally come to believe in the late twentieth century. 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. Even if the BATF were part of a large conspiracy to cover up their incompetence in the Oklahoma City bombing, it is implausible to believe that not a single member of the BATF stationed in Oklahoma would be moved by guilt, self-interest, or some other motivation to reveal that agency's role in the tragedy, if not to the press, then to a lover or family member. Governmental agencies, even those as regulated and controlled as the military and intelligence agencies, are plagued with leaks and rumors. To propose that an explosive secret could be closeted for any length of time simply reveals a lack of understanding of the nature of modern bureaucracies. Like the world itself, they are made up of too many people with too many different agendas to be easily controlled.

The rejection of the conspiratorial world view, however, is not something about which I am particularly thrilled. If conspiracy theories are genuinely misguided, then I fear we are left with an apparently absurdist image of the world. A lone gunman can change the course of history when the U. S. President just happens to drive past the window of his place of work during the gunman's lunch hour. The conspiratorial world view offers us the comfort of knowing that while tragic events occur, they at least occur for a reason, and that the greater the event, the greater and more significant the reason. Our contemporary world view, which the conspiracy theorist refuses to accept, is one in which nobody—not God, not us, not even *some* of us—is in control. Furthermore, the world (including the people in it) is uncontrollable, irrational, and absurd in a way illustrated by the plays of Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett.