Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate

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Scepticism toward conspiracy theories is widely taken to be a mark of intellectual sophistication. We associate conspiracy theories with the paranoid fantasies of the far right and the far left: fantasies alleging collusion between aliens and the United States government, or the existence of a secret society, consisting of Jews, communists or powerful businessmen (according to taste), which controls major world institutions. But until recently, little attention had been devoted to spelling out the epistemic deficiencies (if indeed deficiencies there are) characteristic of conspiracy theories. This volume, consisting largely of previously published essays, but supplemented by afterthoughts and additions from their authors, addresses this problem.

The volume begins (after an introduction by David Coady, mapping the debate) with the earliest philosophical consideration of conspiracy theories, namely, Popper’s widely cited denunciation of them. According to Popper, conspiracy theories are a secularized version of the view that our fates are ruled by the gods. Conspiracy theorists, unable to accept the fact that social events are usually best explained as the unintended consequences of uncoordinated individual actions, look instead to explanations according to which important events are the product of design. Since conspiracy theories explain events by reference to the plots of a group of people acting in secret, they satisfy the yearning for design. Popper’s essay represents a kind of orthodoxy, to which all the authors in this collection can be seen as responding. Their responses come in two kinds: those fleshing out aspects of Popper’s account, and those criticizing it.

In the former camp we can place Brian Keeley and Steve Clarke. Keeley concedes that conspiracies actually occur. He therefore attempts to delineate a class of unwarranted conspiracy theories. He concedes that the attempt to outline a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for an unwarranted conspiracy theory must fail: some true conspiracy theories will have just the features he lists. But, he insists, we are entitled to be sceptical with regard to conspiracy theories which (among other things) run counter to an obvious or official story, postulate the existence of a group of nefarious agents, and have as their key evidence the existence of errant data, i.e. data which is unexplained by (or even conflicts with) the official story. What the conspiracy theorist does not grasp is that though errant data is a problem for any theory, its existence is not devastating. Some of the data, as Keeley says, will not fit the best explanation, since some of the data will turn out not to be true. It will be the product of measurement mistakes, faulty recollection, and so on.

Keeley follows Popper in holding that conspiracy theories are the product of an inability to accept that social events occur without anyone intending or wanting them to happen. Human life, Keeley suggests, is subject to absurdity inasmuch as “shit just happens”. According to Keeley, the problem with conspiracy theories is that as they mature, they require an ever more pervasive scepticism. When evidence confirming a theory fails to turn up, the theorist is forced to postulate that more and more public institutions are in on the conspiracy. Eventually, she must suspect all the institutions which are the source of the testimony we need to function as epistemic agents. This, Keeley argues, is a form of intellectual suicide. Keeley comes in for a great deal of criticism from the other contributors to the volume for this suggestion, but I think they read him uncharitably. It is surely true, as Clarke, Pigden and Coady point out, that some, perhaps many, malevolent conspiracies do not entail this ever-growing scepticism. Nevertheless, it is plausible to think that Keeley has identified a flaw with some of the more spectacular conspiracy theories, which vindicates the contempt in which they are widely held.

The other philosopher who might be seen as following Popper in this debate is Steve Clarke. Clarke attempts to explain why conspiracy theorists put greater faith in their explanations than is warranted. He suggests that they may be in the grip, to a greater extent than others, of the fundamental attribution error (FAE). According to some social psychologists, variations in human behaviour are much more importantly the product of the circumstances in which people are placed than of their characters. We think that our characters explain why we act as we do, but it is in fact variation, often apparently minor, variation, in our circumstances that explains action.
The FAE is the supposed error of imputing people’s behaviour more to their characters than to the situation. Conspiracy theories, Clarke argues, are usually highly dispositional. They explain events by reference to the nefarious intentions of plotters. Thus, whereas Keeley builds on Popper’s legacy by focusing on the epistemic flaws of conspiracy theories, Clarke builds on it by focusing on the flaws in reason of conspiracy theorists. Conspiracy theorists look for purpose in events because they are more prone than the rest of us to look for evidence of intention.

This suggestion, too, comes under fire from other contributors, notably Coady and Pigden. Coady holds that the FAE is self-undermining, since it is itself a dispositional explanation. But the FAE holds not that dispositions do not play a role in explaining behaviour, only that dispositions play less of a role than circumstances in explaining differences in behaviour. I might note that Clarke himself, in an afterthought to his essay, now expresses doubts about his explanation, but his doubts can be dealt with in the same way as Coady’s. Even if he is right in thinking that behavior in psychological experiments purporting to establish the FAE can be explained in terms of the underappreciated disposition to save face, the fact (if it is a fact) that this disposition is held to be constant across agents implies that it is, after all, situational factors that explain differences in behaviour. Though I doubt the FAE can explain all conspiracy theories, it may well play a role in explaining the popularity of many of them.

Lee Basham, Charles Pigden and David Coady take a very different tack, defending conspiracy theorizing from Popper and his followers. Pigden, in both his essays here, amasses a great deal of detail about actual, and sometimes successful, conspiracies. Since so many events are the product of conspiracies, he argues, the reflex to dismiss them is a harmful intellectual superstition. Pigden’s delightful second essay, replying to Clarke and Keely, is written largely in blank verse, with the defence of conspiracy theories placed in the mouth of Coriolanus. Coady, like Pigden, holds that the rejection of a theory merely because it is a conspiracy theory is not only unwarranted, but dangerous, inasmuch as it makes conspiratorial activity that much easier to enact. Coady cites evidence from the lead up to the war in Iraq, in which the leaders of the United States and the United Kingdom dismissed (probably true) claims that they falsified intelligence as mere “conspiracy theories.”

Basham argues that global malevolent conspiracies, which postulate large-scale plots against the public interest, can neither be falsified nor shown to be irrational without begging the question against their adherents. Coady’s response to this claim seems correct: we are better justified in believing certain claims inconsistent with any global malevolent conspiracy than we are in believing in the conspiracy. Moreover, as Keeley points out in his own response to Basham, his argument establishes, at best, that we cannot reject conspiracy theories in the abstract: it does nothing at all to vindicate particular theories.

Practical epistemology, the application of epistemology to real world issues, is perhaps the single most important endeavour in which philosophers can engage today. Many of the most important questions facing us turn on questions of expert evidence and the weight that should be given to it: think of global warming, or the best way of fighting terrorism. This book presents us with a focused example of practical epistemology in action. The essays collected here succeed, both in laying out the faults of some conspiracy theories, and (perhaps more importantly) in showing that merely being a conspiracy theory is not a reason for dismissing an explanation. They also succeed in demonstrating, by example, the prospects for practical epistemology as a branch of philosophy which advances our understanding of genuinely important problems.