

A Philosophical Interest in Conspiracy Theory Literature Review

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The philosophical interest in Conspiracy Theories is relatively recent, with most of the literature revolving around Brian Keeley's 1999 article, 'Of Conspiracy Theories' (which saw reprint, along with the associated replies, in the 2006 anthology 'Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate,' edited by David Coady (Coady 2006)). Whilst Keeley was not the first philosopher to tackle Conspiracy Theories his article, first appearing in the *Journal of Philosophy*, was the first to tackle the epistemic question of why people think that Conspiracy Theories, in general, are unwarranted. It is a truism to say that Conspiracies have occurred but those things we call Conspiracy Theories, theories that explain the occurrence of an event in the terms of a Conspiracy, do appear to be epistemically dubious. Keeley is interested to know whether there is some systemic flaw to the concept of the Conspiracy Theory that accounts for our intuition that belief in them is not justified.

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).' This, I claim, is uncontroversial and captures the ordinary use of the term 'Conspiracy Theory,' an important point as whilst the philosophical interest in Conspiracy Theories might well be new there is a large, pre-existing literature on the subject in the Social Sciences. Steve Clarke, in his 2002 article 'Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing,' agrees with Keeley's definition but fills it out by arguing that Conspiracy Theories are dispositional explanations; the causal agency of the conspirators is described in regards to their intentions and wants to secretly bring about the event under consideration (Clarke 2002, p. 145). This too is uncontroversial. Nothing in this definition indicates that there is any systemic flaw to the concept of the Conspiracy Theory per se as we can list many instances of historically verified Conspiracies (such as Watergate and the Iran-Contra Affairs) that look exactly like Conspiracy Theories.

Keeley wants to know what systemic flaw Conspiracy Theories express that makes us find them so epistemically dubious but he bases his analysis

upon the sub-type of Conspiracy Theories he calls Unwarranted Conspiracy Theories, the Conspiracy Theories we already think are epistemically dubious. This is problematic as Keeley admits that the many Warranted Conspiracy Theories (Conspiracy Theories that refer to historically verified Conspiracies and were warranted beliefs, such as the aforementioned Watergate and the Iran-Contra Affairs) we know of look just like Unwarranted Conspiracy Theories (Keeley 1999, p. 118). Keeley's interest in Unwarranted Conspiracy Theories is well motivated, however. In his 2003 article, 'Nobody Expects the Spanish Inquisition!: More Thoughts on Conspiracy Theory,' Keeley argues that there is a difference between the ontological question of whether there was a Conspiracy from the epistemological question of whether belief in a given Conspiracy Theory is warranted (Keeley 2003, p. 106).

I suspect that Keeley thinks we should treat all Conspiracy Theories as *prima facie* unwarranted beliefs. He argues that there is a systemic flaw in the concept of the Conspiracy Theory, which explains our intuition as to why they are unwarranted beliefs, and it is that their unfalsifiability engenders a pervasive Public Trust Skepticism.

Keeley argues that Conspiracy Theories are unfalsifiable. If there is a group of conspirators engaging in secret plots then we should expect that these conspirators will, as part of their activities, hamper investigation into their affairs. Not only this, but a clever group of conspirators will produce disinformation, fraudulent information that indicates that the Conspiracy Theory explanation is incorrect, which might be well supported (via, perhaps, a deliberate distortion of the media record, or through the training of a Board of Directors to lie consistently on an issue) or that is independently confirmable (creating a complete fraudulent paper trail of an election). As Keeley says:

'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).'

Falsifiability is a fine criterion for the Natural Sciences because the phenomena under investigation are not prone to having lies told about their status but it seems intuitively correct to think that in the domain of the Social Sciences, whether or not you are dealing with a Conspiracy, sometimes the evidence for the phenomena being investigated is deliberately misleading. Information which contradicts the Conspiracy Theory is labeled disinformation and thus ends up being used as support for the Conspiracy Theory as disinformation will only occur when there is need for a cover-up. However, to then use this disinformation as evidence for a given Conspiracy Theory is to make an ad hoc move. Suspicion that the evidence for the Official View, for example, is being constructed to discredit your given Conspiracy Theory is not proof that that is the case. Without further supporting reasons this is just an inference to any old explanation.

Defenders of Conspiracy Theories will argue that as Conspiracy Theories are more complete explanations this is a good reason to prefer such explanations, a line Lee Basham critiques in his 2001 article, 'Living With the Conspiracy.' The argument here is that Conspiracy Theories make use of errant data, information that the Official (usually non-conspiratorial) View of the event under consideration does not take into account or is contradictory to.

Basham develops this notion of errant data use by explicating a developmental schema of Conspiracy Theories. Conspiracy Theories begin by showing

that there are striking incongruities in the Official View. Then the Conspiracy Theory offers up a plausible, but conspiratorial, account of the event under consideration where the errant data becomes congruent with the data of the Official View (Basham 2001, p. 265). This is an ad hoc move, however; because one explanation looks more complete than another it is thought to be the better explanation. Keeley uses as an example the postulated link between the Tokyo Sarin Gas Attack and the Oklahoma City Bombing, which occurred on the same date, two years apart. At least one Conspiracy Theory cites the Sarin Gas Attack as a causal factor in the choice of when the Oklahoma City Bombing took place. This Conspiracy Theory unifies two apparently separate pieces of data. Consider the following illustration: the Chinese Basketball player, Wang Zhizhi, was born on the same day in the same year as I was but if I were to claim that this means our fortunes are forever intertwined I would expect a lot of raised eyebrows. Without the supporting evidence of auxiliary theories the supposed link between the two events should look like mere coincidence; this is simply the mistaking of correlation for causation and is not a feature peculiar to Conspiracy Theories. Such a move is indicative of the fallacy of the inference to any old explanation as the theory merely fits the evidence; post hoc ergo propter hoc. Conspiracy Theories certainly look unfalsifiable if you assume the likelihood of disinformation but to decide whether we should accept a particular conspiracy theory we will need an auxiliary theory that tells us whether it is likely that disinformation is being produced. Keeley argues that the kind of move that requires us to accept this position on the lack of falsifiability of Conspiracy Theories entails what he calls Public Trust Skepticism.

Conspiracy Theories, Keeley argues, engender too much skepticism about the various institutions that society has set up to generate reliable evidence and data about our world. We have procedures in place in the Natural Sciences, such as peer review, accreditation and so forth, and the same is true of similar claims in the Social Sciences, from the journalists who want the first scoop on governmental malfeasance to public sector agencies that investigate not just themselves but also the private sector. In addition to this there are the various members of the public, like Conspiracy Theorists, who can check court records, electoral lists and the like to perform their own investigations into the truth of claims in the Public Sphere. The unfalsifiability of Conspiracy Theories, Keeley argues, leads to a pervasive skepticism that means we can no longer trust any of the claims in the domain of the Social Sciences. The move to claim that any evidence that would entail the denial of the Conspiracy Theory as being true could be construed as disinformation seems to require that we become more and more skeptical (Keeley 1999, p. 122).

‘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 (Keeley 1999, p. 123).’

Keeley’s argument is that belief in Conspiracy Theories entails an eventual skep-

ticism of beliefs about the world and that this is the systemic flaw of Conspiracy Theories. Basham argues that Keeley is making too much of Public Trust Skepticism for two reasons. The first is that the kind of skepticism Keeley envisages is not as pervasive as Keeley thinks it is. Keeley claims that a conspiracy theory such as those found in Holocaust Denials, which claim that the death of six million Jews was a pure fabrication, can fool us of anything (Keeley 1999, p. 123). He seems to be saying that the kind of skepticism entailed by a distrust of public institutions leads to a general skepticism about any kind of seemingly-warranted belief. Basham argues that this should not be the case; one hoax does not show that everything else is a hoax (Basham 2003, p. 98). I think that Basham is largely right here; whilst skepticism in public institutions will result in skepticism elsewhere it is not clear that this leads to a general skepticism but rather a specific skepticism of certain kinds of knowledge.

Basham's second point is that even if Keeley is right to say that Conspiracy Theories engender some kind of skepticism in our Public Institutions this skepticism may well be warranted because we have, historically, been deceived by such 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).'

Basham is arguing along the lines of Charles Pigden, who argues that bona fide Conspiracies are a feature of history and that we should expect, from this, that conspiracies are, at least, occurring now (Pigden 1995, p. 3). Basham uses this kind of inference from past instances to argue that, historically, people and governments have conspired to deceive the public. He further argues, in his 2003 article, that a feature of public and private institutions is their hierarchical nature and that this makes it easy to control the flow of information that the general public gets from its sources (Basham 2003, p. 93).

Basham posits the following problem; the world we live in exists on a spectrum between a largely unspired (that is, fairly free of conspiracies operating in the background) or a world which is heavily conspired (there are conspiracies, possibly large, malevolent ones) and we are in no real position to discern at which part of the spectrum our world is. Basham argues that we have positive warrant, in the form of past instances, for believing that our public institutions have conspired against us in the past and that such whilst this should not engender total skepticism about them on our part we should, at least, admit the possibility that there is, at least, one major conspiracy going on right now being promulgated by a Public Institution (Basham 2003, p. 94-5).

However, Basham also argues that whilst we do have grounds to be suspicious of our Public Institutions we should not distrust them outright. He argues that the public institutions in our society are increasingly open; should I want to

check if there has been electoral fraud then I can check the various registries. Should I desire to know what Parliament has been debating I need only check the Hansard, and so forth. The more open the institutions the less likely we are to be living in a conspired world (Basham 2003, p. 99).

Basham, I think, fails to take into account his own criticism of Keeley. If Basham is committed to the belief that hierarchies can control the flow of information from public institutions to the general public then these self same hierarchies could very well make public institutions look open when they are not. If my cabal has committed electoral fraud by increasing the ACT Party vote in Epsom with votes from dead philosophers (such as Albert Camus and John Stuart Mill) then I can, when someone comes to check the registry, alter it. The process of obtaining public information is governed by a bureaucracy and this bureaucracy is hierarchical. A judgment of the level of openness in our public institutions seems to be subject to the same concerns as judgments as to how trustworthy our Public Institutions are, especially considering past instances. I should point out at this stage that I think Basham would largely agree with this criticism; he does seem to think that our society is not sufficiently open at this stage to warrant belief that we live towards the unconspired end of the world spectrum but merely that we are closer to it than we are to the conspired world end (Basham 2003, p. 99).

Keeley is correct in his argument that Conspiracy Theories engender too much distrust and that this is a reason to be suspicious of them. Without a theory as to how open (or conspiring) our society is the assumption that our Public Institutions are reliable producers of basic claims or purveyors of disinformation is just an example of the inference to any old explanation where you invoke a principle to explain the relevance of your data without any good reason for doing so. Such explanations are 'Just So Stories.'

Keeley claims that we do live in an open world, but only because to think otherwise would lead to disastrous skepticism. Yet it seems that the proper attitude here should be one of epistemic caution. We can be skeptical of some basic claims of our Public Institutions yet still think that others are warranted because of our relative ability to scrutinise them. We can thus construct a view that gives us a basis to the warrant of the basic claims we encounter and if we want to explain why some Conspiracy Theories end up being warranted then that answer will, in part, come from some solution to the Public Trust Skepticism position that Keeley argues for.

I think the epistemic concern goes further, however. Like Keeley, I am interested in the epistemic concerns presented by Conspiracy Theories. Keeley thinks that the problem is one of skepticism but I am not so sure. Whilst the question of skepticism in respect to Conspiracy Theories raises interesting questions as to whether such theories engender a distrust of information in the Public Sphere I think the major issue is whether your given Conspiracy Theory is a 'Just So Story.'

Even in a world where we can say that we are skeptical of information from Public Institutions individual Conspiracy Theories will still be warranted or unwarranted on their individual merits. A position on Public Trust will inform our initial epistemic position in regards to the warrant of Conspiracy Theories in general but there is still the question of whether this particular Conspiracy Theory is warranted or unwarranted. I argue that the question here is whether the Conspiracy Theory being considered as an explanation of the event under

consideration is an inference to the best explanation or is merely an inference to any old explanation. If my family conspires to hide the true origins of my birth and adoption it may not matter whether I, upon investigation of this matter, have faith in the Government or the media. My distrust of those organisations and individuals might not tell me anything about whether I can trust my Father and Mother over mad Aunt Ilda who tells strange stories about my parents being from the Old Country and possessed of the blue blood. Is Aunt Ilda mad? Should I find warrant in her story? Does my belief in her tale constitute an inference to any old explanation? Well, I hope, through this thesis, to be able to answer those questions and more.

References

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