

PhD Proposal: All-embracing But Underwhelming: A Philosophical Examination of Conspiracy Theories

Matthew Dentith

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1 Introduction

In 63BCE the Roman Senator Lucius Sergius Catilina conspired to overthrow the Roman Republic but was betrayed by his inner circle. Nineteen years later a group of Senators conspired successfully to assassinate the Dictator Gaius Julius Caesar in order to restore the Republic of Rome. More recently the American President Richard Nixon conspired against the Democratic Party and then the American People in an attempt to rig an election in his favour, whilst terrorists secretly planned and executed an attack on New York City, destroying the World Trade Centre and, apparently, attacking the American way of life.

These plots, the Conspiracies, are the subjects of Conspiracy Theories, theories that seek to explain the occurrence (or non-occurrence) of an event by reference to a cabal operating in secret. Whether it be a secret plot to assassinate a tyrant or a group of extremists feeling threatened by the West's 'Culture of Decadence' the Conspiracy Theory appears, at least, to be a common mode of explanation for historical events. Conspiracy Theories are popular, yet they are also treated with suspicion. Despite the fact that Conspiracies really have occurred, we distrust Conspiracy Theories; there is a popular intuition that seems to say that these are the wrong kinds of stories to tell as to why History has unfolded the way it has.

The purpose of this doctoral dissertation is to advance the analysis and evaluation of the Conspiracy Theory as a mode of explanation. I am interested in the circumstances under which inferring to the truth of a conspiracy theory is warranted. When is belief in a specific conspiracy theory warranted? Can we say anything general about the conditions under which conspiracy theories are warranted? Do conspiracy theories form an interesting class of explanatory hypotheses, or is there little to gain from studying them as a class? Finally, how should we assess the plausibility of an inference to the belief in a Conspiracy Theoretic world-view (that is, the view that there are lots of conspiracies happening out in the world right now which explain an awful lot of what's going on). I claim that unwarranted inferences to the truth of conspiracy theories

are adequately glossed as fallacious inferences to the truth of “Just So” stories and hence can be regarded as instances of the fallacious inference to any old explanation. This, I will argue, is why we are right to regard many of those who blithely endorse conspiracy theories as reasoning irrationally.

These considerations about the warrant of Conspiracy Theories may well inform our opinion of other, associated beliefs. Many beliefs are labeled as being conspiratorial or appealing to conspiracy theory-like reasoning. When commentators in the USA claim that the news media shows a bias for the Government detractors immediately respond, claiming that this is an example of a conspiratorial mindset. If a case can be made to explain why we find the associated beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and the Conspiracy Theoretic worldview so dubious, then this explanation may well be applicable to other similar or associated beliefs.

2 Chapter Break-down

2.1 Chapter One: The Meaning of the Term(s)

In the first chapter of my dissertation I will develop a careful taxonomy of the terms Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theory. This will be important for two reasons; on one hand a careful series of definitions will be essential for the later discussion of warrant and on the other hand the field that is the study of Conspiracy Theories is still young and thus it will be useful to come up with clear definitions so as to guide further debate on the subject.

Before we can explore the issue of warrant in respect to belief in Conspiracy Theories we need to know what the term ‘Conspiracy Theory’ means. This is rather problematic. There is confusion in the literature around the term ‘Conspiracy Theory’ which I claim can be analysed by appeal to the following tripartite disambiguation of the term.

One - The Pejorative: ‘Conspiracy Theory’ is often taken to be a pejorative term; it applies only to those explanations of events by Conspiracy that we think are unwarranted.

Two - The General: The term ‘Conspiracy Theory’ is sometimes used in connection with any Conspiracy; the assassination of JFK can be said to have two competing Conspiracy Theories associated with it. One is the Official View, the explanation most often taken to be true of the events under consideration, which is that it was a conspiracy on the part of the KGB and Lee Harvey Oswald whilst the other is the Unofficial View, that the American Government and the CIA conspired to kill President Kennedy.

Three - The Unofficial: Sometimes the term ‘Conspiracy Theory’ is only used in connection with an explanation that runs counter to the Official View. The attacks of 9/11 were of a conspiratorial kind but the purported explanation which implicates Al Qaeda in the attack is not labeled a Conspiracy Theory. The claim that the attacks were perpetrated by the American Government, however, is labeled a Conspiracy Theory as it goes against the Official View.

Clear definitions, or at least disambiguations, are essential for the guiding of my exploration of the warrant of Conspiracy Theories. Over the course of chapter one I will work on presenting a clear definition of the types of things called Conspiracy Theories.

2.2 Chapter Two: A Preliminary Conceptual Analysis

In the second chapter of my dissertation I want to taxonomise Conspiracy Theories, drawing out the important distinctions between different kinds. It will be important to set up distinctions informed by, but not necessarily hostage to, the literature so as to enable me to address questions about the warrant of Conspiracy Theories.

Conspiracy Theories are often characterised by, for lack of better terms (at this point) their ‘scope’ and ‘virtue.’ Both the terms and the distinctions are unsatisfactory and part of my brief in this chapter is to improve matters. The notion of scope is multiply ambiguous; it can refer to the size of the cabal, it can refer to the scope of the result of the conspiracy and it can also refer to the amount of data that the Conspiracy Theory encompasses or seeks to explain. For example, one explanation for this author’s surprise return to Auckland in May of this year can be considered as a Conspiracy Theory (as I deliberately, with the help of a small group of friends and family, withheld information to close friends and colleagues about my return). The size of the cabal was small, the scope of the result of the conspiracy was not large (whilst there was surprise on the part of a number of individuals there were no associated deaths, changes of government policy or toppling of regimes) and very little data, other than my return to New Zealand six months early, was subsumed under the Conspiracy Theory. In contrast, the assassination of JFK has a Conspiracy Theory associated with it which is very large in scope on some reasonable disambiguations of that notion. The size of the cabal, depending on which Conspiracy Theory you take ranges from relatively small, which is Oswald and his KGB minders, to large, which is the American Government, and associated organisations, conspiring to kill its own President. The amount of data that the Conspiracy Theory about the assassination of JFK encompasses is also very large in that the Conspiracy Theory explanation of the event seeks to explain more than the Official, or Received View of the event under consideration. The Conspiracy Theory seeks to explain the hypothesised ‘Magic Bullet,’ the presence of former President Richard Nixon in Dallas at the time and why JFK decided to take such an unusual route through the city.

The other important axis along which Conspiracy Theories are said to vary is their degree of ‘virtue.’ Conspiracies are often labelled as being benevolent or malevolent, a term taken from Lee Basham (Basham, 2003) (with a few being somewhere in-between). Take the assassination of Julius Caesar. In many histories the events of the Ides or March, 44BCE are regarded as a conspiracy of goodness; Brutus and his fellow Senators killed Caesar the Dictator not for their own power but for the liberation of Rome and the return of natural government. This has been called a benevolent conspiracy, even though the actions of that

day set in motion the events that would produce the Roman Empire, a state that none of the conspirators wanted. Contrast this with the New World Order Conspiracy Theory. This all-embracing conspiracy concerns an international consortium of groups such as the Illuminati, the Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral Commission who seek to replace individual state sovereignty with a One World Government. This conspiracy to create a One World Government is often taken as being a malevolent action for reasons such as it harbingering the end-times as prophesied in the Christian Scriptures or because it runs against the wishes of the individuals who constitute the sovereign states. Yet it may turn out that such a conspiracy would eventuate in benevolent ends with a single world government solving issues such as the poverty of the Third World and the end of warfare between countries. It is not entirely clear whether it is the actual result or the intention to produce a certain result that is important for the establishment of whether a given Conspiracy is benevolent or malevolent and I hope to clarify this issue.

However you disambiguate the troublesome terms it is Conspiracy Theories with large 'scope' and of malevolent type that provoke the most interest. Narrow-focus conspiracies we accept as happening all the time, whether it be my surprise return or the planning of a surprise birthday party. The larger conspiracies, which we will call All-Embracing Conspiracy Theories, with their large scope, seem to be intuitively thought of as being bad stories to tell about why the world is the way it is - not necessarily because of their virtue (or lack of it) but because we think that such All-Embracing Conspiracy Theories are unlikely for reasons such as the projected size of the cabal, the high risk of being found out and so forth. Such All-Embracing Conspiracy Theories are also often characterised as being malevolent because the subterfuge involved in the Conspiracy must be for malign ends; why else would the cabal need to be secretive? As is clear from the previous discussion there is much ambiguity in the notion of scope. There is also a question to do with the supposed results of such Conspiracy Theories; is it the desired ends or the actual end which are important in distinguishing the virtue of a conspiracy theory and how far we should cast our net in respect to when we classify a Conspiracy Theory as benevolent or malevolent or why we should bother?

2.3 Chapter Three: Conspiracy Theories as Explanatory

In the third chapter of my dissertation I want to examine the explanatory nature of the Conspiracy Theory, taking into account both notions that are in use, which are the idea that a specific Conspiracy Theory can be said to be explanatory of an event and the idea that the Conspiracy Theoretic world-view can be said to be, in some sense, explanatory of the world as we know it.

Conspiracy Theories, we can at least say, posit an explanation of the occurrence of an event by reference to the action(s) of a cabal operating in secret. They are examples of intentional, or motivating reason explanations. The answer to the question 'Why did this event occur?' is that some agents conspired to bring it about and their conspiracy was successful. The explanations Con-

spiracy Theorists posit rely on intentional claims and these claims are important for establishing whether or not the Conspiracy Theory under consideration is warranted. An examination of the role of intentional claims in explanations will be necessary to establish whether such claims rightfully belong in satisfactory explanations and how this affects Conspiracy Theories as explanations.

It may turn out, however, that citing a conspiracy as a reason for an event occurring is not very interesting. Whilst we can point to a number of historically verified conspiracies such as the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44BCE and the Trotsky Trials in the 1930s we might be tempted to say that these are adequate explanations not because they are some special species of historical explanation called Conspiracy Theory but rather because the research undertaken by historians has borne out the idea that these events were the result of a group of people plotting and executing a plan, one that happened to be made in secret. Conspiracy Theories do not seem to form a particularly interesting class of explanations. Yet it does seem that, in at least some explanations, the event we are explaining occurred because of a Conspiracy; Brutus, Cassius and the other assassins could only bring about the end of the dictatorship of Julius Caesar through Conspiracy. The Allies could only successfully invade Europe en masse if the plan was kept secret and the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 were only successful due to the plotters' ability to plan and execute their attack in secret. It seems that sometimes the notion of Conspiracy is necessary in the explanation of why certain events came about. The Conspiracies are necessary to these explanations but not in a way that makes Conspiracy Theories any kind of natural class.

2.4 Chapter Four: The Issue

In chapters four and, if necessary later chapters, I wish to contend that the issue for any study of whether Conspiracy Theories are warranted is the question of whether Conspiracy Theories are simply an example of the inference to any old explanation; even if claims of Conspiracy do seem necessary to some explanations of events it may turn out that the posited explanation is just an example of a 'Just So' story in that the posited explanation fits the data and is thus thought to be the actual explanation. An inference to any old explanation, though, is always a bad inference because it assumes that any given candidate explanation must be the true explanation rather than simply one of many rival explanatory hypotheses.

Take, for example, the Conspiracy Theory surrounding North Head, a former military installation in Devonport. The Conspiracy Theory provides a purported explanation as to why the installation's maps are missing, the large amount of anomalous eye-witness testimony and the Government's stalling tactics in the archaeological investigation. The story fits the facts but it may just be a 'Just So' story; whilst the Conspiracy Theory constitutes an explanation it does not tell us that this is the true explanation but rather one of many candidate explanations.

This claim that Conspiracy Theories are 'Just So' stories could be considered

as unfair for two reasons. The first objection is along the line of an argument run by Charles Pigden; Conspiracy Theories have been true in the past from the assassination of Gaius Julius Caesar to the Trotsky Trials in 1930s Russia. Whilst this does not tell us that present and future Conspiracy Theories, still less any particular Conspiracy Theory, will be true it does indicate that it is possible that cabals will conspire again. Past examples of Conspiracy Theories, this line of argumentation might run, have turned out to be more than ‘Just So’ stories. However, one can respond as follows: this does not tell us that the posited Conspiracy Theory is the true explanation. It is also possible that the circumstances under which Conspiracies were effective in the past no longer apply now. In societies that are now more open and prone to scrutiny you might argue that it is far harder for the Conspiracies of the kind that have been successful in the past to be successful now.

The second reason that you might question the claim that Conspiracy Theories are ‘Just So’ stories is that Conspiracy Theories do not exist in a vacuum. People (normally) posit Conspiracy Theories for events they feel are best explained by reference to a secret cabal plotting to bring about a certain end. The person who posits the Conspiracy Theory in the first instance may well be warranted in their belief that the Conspiracy Theory is the best explanation of the event(s) under consideration. This is because the Conspiracy Theory is the best possible explanation given their background and the context in which they are making their claim.

Still, we might argue that positors should have had more background knowledge. One could counter this by saying that in an ideal world, full background information should be required before making an inference but that some information might be permanently out of reach to the positor. Without an advanced theory of optics no matter what observations you make nothing will decide one way or the other whether it is the Earth which is stationary or the Sun. The Conspiracy Theory positor may be in the same situation; their access to crucial background information may be so limited that they can only make their best inference based upon, unbeknownst to them, limited data which is unrepresentative.

At any rate, even if the positor is off the hook, it is still possible that others who are persuaded by the conspiracy theory are making an inference to any old explanation. Mere adherents may not be as warranted as positors in taking onboard someone else’s Conspiracy Theory because the adherent may not have those background beliefs or be in the same context. Adherents often ‘jump onboard’ because the Conspiracy Theory fits their own background beliefs, not because the posited explanation is good in its own right.

Such adherence to Conspiracy Theories may well be an example of the fallacy of inference to any old explanation. A conspiracy to explain X is posited. The explanation is the best ‘story’ the positor can provide, given their background and context. The explanation is then passed on and gains adherents. The adherents find that the Conspiracy Theory fits their world-view and accept it not on its explanatory merits but rather because it fits other beliefs they hold. If the Conspiracy Theory were to be independently scrutinised it may turn out

to be bad.

This highlights yet another issue to do with warrant. We can discuss the warrant of specific Conspiracy Theories, such as the North Head Conspiracy Theory and such a discourse might find the purported Conspiracy Theory explanation either warranted or unwarranted, but there is a further issue which is the warrant of the Conspiracy Theoretic world-view. Is this belief warranted? Whereas specific Conspiracy Theories are often seen as competing with the Official View the Conspiracy Theoretic world-view is seen to be competing with a general world-view of historical processes called the Cock-up Theory of History.

The Cock-up Theory of History (a term coined by Sir Bernard Ingham) claims that the Conspiracy Theoretic world-view is wrong; rather than there being Conspiracies operating in the background that explain the state of the world today we should understand historical events as being more likely the result of cock-ups, accidents and the confluence of events, rather than being the result of design or intent. The Cock-up Theory of History is a theory about the normal course of events in history. If we are concerned with the Conspiracy Theoretic world-view then the Cock-up Theory of History suggests that we should be wary to infer conspiracies because cock-ups are more likely in general.

We should question whether the Cock-up Theory of History is any more warranted as a general belief about historical happenings than the Conspiracy Theoretic world-view. On what basis can we infer that as cock-ups do occur they occur more often than conspiracies?

Regardless of whether the Cock-up Theory of History is more or less warranted than the Conspiracy Theoretic world-view the contrast between Cock-up and Conspiracy is often presented as a dilemma: either the event under consideration was likely the result of planned human action or the event likely came about due to a cock-up.

This dilemma is false; whilst it is true that any historical event might be either the direct result of planning or the result of accident it is also quite possible that the event under consideration is the result of planning in public or plotting that went astray. Apart from the Cock-up Theory of History and the Conspiracy Theory there is a variety of intermediate positions. Many events that I desire to eventuate do not come about, not due to a lack on my part, but rather because of actions of others or the sheer inability for these events to occur.

Indeed, Conspiracy Theories and Cock-up Theories are not mutually exclusive. As an example take the attacks on the Twin Towers. If your explanandum is that the actions of the hijackers was to cause fear and terror by crashing two planes unexpectedly into the Twin Towers then the explanation might be a relatively straightforward conspiracy theory. If the explanandum is that the action of the hijackers caused the Twin Towers to collapse then your explanation is more likely to be that of the cock-up theory of history; the destruction of the Twin Towers may well have been an unforeseen consequence or undeserved success.

I contend that the issue with the warrant of Conspiracy Theories is that they

are examples of the inference to any old explanation and that the examination of this claim will be central to the remainder of the dissertation. Over the course of several chapters I will develop the idea that the warrant of Conspiracy Theories is found to be wanting because they are, at least in appearance, examples of ‘Just So’ stories.

Further concerns that will feed into this critical analysis are whether Conspiracy Theories are predictive or retrodictive in any interesting way, the explication of the middle ground in the false dilemma between the Cock-up Theory of History and the Conspiracy Theoretic world-view and whether there are methodological concerns which can help us to know when to give high credence to Conspiracy Theories.

3 Why this Project is worthwhile

The field of study that is the philosophical investigation of Conspiracy Theories is very young, as is the academic interest in general with Conspiracy Theories as a distinct notion. Earlier this year the book ‘Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate,’ edited by David Coady, was released; as far as I know this is the first collection of philosophical essays dealing with this set of issues in recent times. The study of Conspiracy Theories as a philosophically interesting topic is happening very much now. There is much profit to be made in a proper conceptual analysis and eventual taxonomy of the type of thing collectively known as the Conspiracy Theory as, at the moment, it is not clear that theorists are using the term unequivocally. Once a definition has been settled upon for the purposes of my project I will be able to investigate whether my hypothesis, that what makes Conspiracy Theories seem so dubious is that they are examples of the inference to any old explanation, is true.

Conspiracy Theories, as I stated earlier, are a common mode of explanation for events in History and seem very popular at this time. This dissertation seeks to explicate and explain this popularity and quite possibly suggest a remedy for what some think is a dangerous way of thinking.

Research Procedures & Approximate Schedule of Research

Producing written work in philosophy involves text-based research and systemic thought. Hence, my main research methodology requires reading and critically assessing the relevant literature in the field and drawing from it the philosophical ideas, identifying philosophical problems and positing my own solutions. For this purpose, I shall rely on material that is available in the libraries at The University of Auckland. This includes both written material (books and articles available in the different libraries at the university, as well as those I can order from overseas through the inter-loan service) and electronic material (which can

be obtained from the Internet, and various on-line university databases, such as the 'Philosopher's Index').

The actual methodology itself is quite straightforward. I shall read, critically evaluate, and incorporate the relevant literature into my written work.

Also, it is important to note that, essentially, my doctoral dissertation will constitute an exercise in epistemology as utilised by such philosophers as Charles Pigden and other writers in the emerging field of the philosophical study of Conspiracy Theories. My interest in writing a doctoral dissertation is, therefore, to evaluate various themes and concepts in Conspiracy Theories; I shall not be engaging in textual analysis, or providing commentary on specific Conspiracy Theories, or any such thing.

Here is the approximate schedule of research:

Late 2006 - Literature review, brainstorming, writing an outline of PhD thesis (e.g. number of chapters, word length, sub-headings, etc).

Early 2007 - Complete reading of primary works required for thesis. Complete drafts of one or two main chapters (around 20% of the thesis).

Late 2007 - Continue writing chapters of thesis.

Early 2008 - Continue writing chapters of thesis. Research should be coming to an end. Aim to complete approximately 75% of the thesis. Present thesis material at relevant seminars and conferences.

Late 2008 - Complete writing thesis. Start review process.

Early 2009/Late 2009 - Aim to finish review process and complete any minor changes (if needed) in time for submission date (late 2009).

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