

Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

Fall 2013, Northern Illinois University

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Handout 22: Conspiracy Theories

A conspiracy is a secret agreement among individuals to engage in some nefarious activity

An official explanation is an account offered by governments, experts, and members of the media for some widely known phenomenon

A conspiracy theory posits the existence of:

1. A conspiracy among a small and powerful group
2. An account of how the conspiracy brought about phenomenon X
3. An account of how the conspiracy brought about the (false) official explanation of X

Some common families of conspiracy theories:

JFK. Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in assassinating John F Kennedy, but was part of an elaborate plot orchestrated by powerful figures in the CIA, Secret Service, and other government agencies, which worked together to cover up their involvement.

Elite Cabal. Global economic events are under the control of a small and extremely powerful group of individuals who directly influence political events in most countries around the world (see, e.g., Jon Ronson's book *Them*).

Satanic Ritual Abuse. A powerful network of Satanists abduct children and teen runaways for sexual abuse, torture, and sacrifice in secret rituals. Many daycares and preschools are run by members of this network, who are also employed in key government and law enforcement positions in order to cover up their activities.

Aliens. Extraterrestrials frequently visit the earth, abducting human beings, mutilating livestock, leaving crop circles, and directly influencing global events. Key government figures are aware of and complicit in this situation, and cover it up.

9/11. Powerful figures in the US government helped to orchestrate the events of 9/11/2001 and have manipulated law enforcement, the media, and the general public to believe that they were carried out by terrorists acting alone.

Conspiracy theories can be more modest or more ambitious. E.g.,:

Modest 9/11. US government officials knew in advance that the 9/11 attacks would occur but allowed them to proceed anyway to provide a pretense for escalating of US military involvement in the Middle East and increasing security measures at home.

Ambitious 9/11. US officials orchestrated the 9/11 attacks and created the story of the plane hijackers, Bin Laden, and Al Qaeda as part of an elaborate cover-up.

In some respects conspiracy theorists are like skeptics:

1. Each proposes an alternative explanation for some large body of evidence
2. In each case, the proposal is something which you don't *sensitively* believe to be false: i.e., if it were true, you'd (still) believe it was false.

But in one key respect conspiracy theorists are unlike skeptics:

Skeptics want to convince you that certain beliefs you have are *unknown*
But CT's want (also) to convince you that certain beliefs you have are *false*

It's much harder to convince someone that something she takes herself to know is *false* than just that she doesn't, in fact, know it

A tension:

- Someone who accepts the `official explanation for X is likely to regard a conspiracy theory about X as false, ridiculous, or worse. This attitude can seem warranted.
- But there are true CTs! E.g., Watergate, Iran-Contra, various sexual abuse scandals.

Keeley identifies three epistemically relevant features of CTs:

1. They *explain more* than the official explanations: they explain not only phenomenon X but the existence of the official explanation for X.
2. They are likely to be *unfalsifiable*. Any evidence you might produce that seems to undermine the CT is likely to be accounted for by the theory itself.
3. Evidence 'against' the theories is typically turned into evidence for them. If powerful government agents were responsible for what happened on 9/11 and the means and desire to cover up their involvement, what would you *expect* to find? Evidence against the 9/11 CT! So the existence of evidence `against' the theory actually *confirms* the theory.

``[They] throw into doubt the various institutions that have been set up to generate reliable data and evidence. [...] In the public sphere where conspiracy theorists dwell, there are mechanisms for generating warranted beliefs. There is the free press. [...] There are governmental agencies charged with investigating incidents, producing data, and publishing findings. [...] Inherent in the claim that alleged evidence against a theory should be construed as evidence for that theory is a pervasive skepticism about our public, fact-gathering institutions and the individuals working in them. [...] 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)

Some CTs may imply that our usual sources of information are generally untrustworthy. But much of the information involved in the CT is based on such sources. So if the CT is true, we're not warranted in accepting it. This suggests a criterion for when accepting a CT is irrational:

Irrational CTs. If a CT implies that accepting the CT is unwarranted, then it is irrational to accept the CT.