

Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories

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ABSTRACT: Conspiracy theories have a bad reputation. This is especially true in the academy and in the media. Within these institutions, to describe someone as a conspiracy theorist is often to imply that their views should not be taken seriously. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that philosophers have tended to ignore the topic, despite the enduring appeal of conspiracy theories in popular culture. Recently, however, some philosophers have at least treated conspiracy theorists respectfully enough to try to articulate where they go wrong.

I begin this paper by clarifying the nature of conspiracy theories. I then argue against some recent critiques of conspiracy theories. Many criticisms of conspiracy theories are unfounded. I also argue that unwillingness to entertain conspiracy theories is an intellectual and moral failing. I end by suggesting an Aristotelian approach to the issue, according to which the intellectual virtue of *realism* is a golden mean between the intellectual vices of *paranoia* and *naivety*.

Matthew: It's a conspiracy.

Jack: What's a conspiracy?

Matthew: Everything.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers, 1978

People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public

Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Book 1, Chapter X

In the months before the recent war in Iraq, Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, dismissed accusations that the war would be fought in pursuit of oil as mere "conspiracy theories." It is clear that this expression has come to have extremely negative connotations.¹ The small philosophical literature devoted to the topic tends to reflect this attitude; arguing that conspiracy theories, or an important subset of them, are epistemically flawed, and offering psychological explanations for their continued popularity.² I will argue that although many conspiracy theories really are flawed, this does not justify such

dismissive attitudes. While it is true that excessive willingness to believe conspiracy theories is an intellectual vice, it is also true that excessive reluctance to believe them is an intellectual vice. I submit that these vices are roughly equally widespread, and equally insidious.

Academic philosophical criticism of conspiracy theories seems to have begun with Karl Popper's criticisms of the so-called "conspiracy theory of history." I will not discuss Popper's writings on this topic, since I think they have already been very effectively criticised by Charles Pigden.³ I will instead focus on two more recent articles which are critical of conspiracy theorists and conspiracy theorizing; those of Brian Keeley and Steve Clarke.

WHAT IS A CONSPIRACY THEORY?

Keeley's definition of "a conspiracy theory," which is accepted by Clarke, occurs in the following passage:

A conspiracy theory is 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.⁴

This definition does not quite capture the ordinary usage of the expression "conspiracy theory."

First, the requirement that the number of conspirators be relatively small is quite counterintuitive.⁵ Many conspiracy theories, including those discussed by Keeley and Clarke, postulate vast networks of conspirators. Indeed it is natural to think that a conspiracy theory according to which there are many conspirators is *ipso facto* more of a conspiracy theory than one which postulates fewer conspirators. Someone who believed that absolutely everyone else was plotting against her would, I suggest, be a conspiracy theorist *par excellence*.

A more significant problem with the Keeley/Clarke definition is that it lacks any requirement of success. An explanation of the collapse of the Soviet Union in terms of the significant causal agency of the failed conspiracy by the communist old guard to overthrow Gorbachev in 1991 (to borrow an example Pigden uses to slightly different effect) is unlikely to be thought of as a conspiracy theory, because the conspiracy in question did not aim to bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union. Keeley's definition could easily be modified to accommodate this by requiring that the alleged conspiracy be intended to bring about the historical event in question.

Even a definition that is modified in this way, however, still seems too broad to capture our shared concept of a conspiracy theory (insofar as we have one). Take the events of September 11, 2001. I assume that most people, or at least most people reading this article, accept an explanation of these events that appeals to the significant causal agency of a conspiracy involving Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda to bring about those events. But this explanation is unlikely to attract the label "conspiracy theory."⁶ Why does it seem wrong to call "our" explanation of September 11th, despite its obviously conspiratorial nature, "a conspiracy theory"?

We could say that it is not a conspiracy theory, because it is not a theory at all; rather it is a fact. Sometimes the term “theory” is used in a way that is roughly synonymous with “unsubstantiated hypothesis.” In this sense, *mere* theories are contrasted with facts. Conspiracy theories, in this sense, are unwarranted, because all theories are by definition unwarranted.

But, obviously, no interesting debate about the epistemic status of conspiracy theories will use the term “theory” in this way; a way that prejudices the issue. Nor should we suppose that the many intellectuals who have a dismissive attitude toward conspiracy theories think that the problem with them is that they are just theories. Intellectuals of all kinds are accustomed to taking theories very seriously.

We would do better to define a “theory” as “any postulated explanation of an empirical phenomenon.”⁷ Theories, in this sense, cover an epistemic spectrum, from those that are so well-confirmed, such as the theory that the earth revolves around the sun or the theory of evolution by natural selection, that no well-educated, sane, and intellectually honest person will doubt them (outside a philosophy classroom), to those at the other end of the spectrum which are so incredible, such as the theory that Elvis Presley is still alive, that no well-educated, sane, and intellectually honest person will accept them.

Conspiracy theories can be found at both ends of this spectrum, as well as at various points in between. Holocaust denial is one, unfortunately widespread, example of a conspiracy theory at the latter end of the spectrum, and critics of conspiracy theories are often keen to cite this as a paradigm of conspiracy theorizing. But in doing so, they often seem to forget that the Holocaust itself was largely brought about by conspiratorial behavior. Both Holocaust acceptance and Holocaust denial fit the Keeley/Clarke definition of a conspiracy theory.

These examples suggest that the most important feature missing from the Keeley/Clarke definition is the requirement that a conspiracy theory conflict with an official explanation of the event in question. Consequently, I recommend the following three-part definition:

A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of an historical event, in which conspiracy (*i.e.*, agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event which it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an “official” explanation of the same historical event.

The last part of this definition rules out the possibility of an official explanation of an event qualifying as a conspiracy theory, no matter how conspiratorial it is.

KEELEY AND CLARKE'S CRITICISMS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Keeley identifies a subset of conspiracy theory which he calls an “unwarranted conspiracy theories” (or UCTs for short). UCTs have the following characteristics:

- (1) They are explanations that run counter to some received, official, or “obvious” account.
- (2) The true intentions behind the conspiracy are invariably nefarious.
- (3) They typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events.
- (4) [T]he truths behind the events explained by conspiracy theories are typically well-guarded secrets, even if the ultimate perpetrators are sometimes well-known public figures.
- (5) The chief tool of the conspiracy theorist is *errant data*.⁸

Although Keeley’s official position is that he is not criticizing conspiracy theories as such, this should be taken with a grain of salt. Keeley repeatedly calls the targets of his criticism “conspiracy theories” (rather than “unwarranted conspiracy theories”) and advocates of them “conspiracy theorists” (rather than “unwarranted conspiracy theorists”). Furthermore, as Keeley himself seems to concede, not all conspiracy theories which meet the conditions listed above are in fact unwarranted:

Both Watergate and the Iran-Contra Affair meet all these criteria, yet belief in these conspiracies seems *prima facie* warranted.⁹

I think Keeley is best, and most charitably, to be interpreted as saying two things about UCTs. First, that it is only possession of these characteristics which makes an historical explanation in terms of conspiracy truly a “conspiracy theory” in the generally accepted sense of that expression.¹⁰ Second, that conspiracy theories, so understood, warrant a degree of skepticism, rather than outright dismissal.

One of Keeley’s arguments against conspiracy theories concerns their reliance on errant data. Errant data is data which is either unaccounted for by a theory, or which would, if true, contradict that theory:

Conspiracy theories *always* explain more than competing theories, because by invoking a conspiracy, they can explain *both* the data of the received account *and* the errant data that the received theory fails to explain.¹¹

Clarke agrees with Keeley about this:

Conspiracy theories invariably seem to be based on more evidence than their immediate rival, the non-conspiratorial “received view.” This is because they explain all that the non-conspiratorial received view explains—the apparent plausibility of the non-conspiratorial received view is a consequence of the cover story or “cover up,” according to conspiracy theorists—and then go on to account for evidence that the received view is unable to explain.¹²

One’s immediate reaction to reading these passages may be to think that Keeley and Clarke are praising conspiracy theories. But they are not. Keeley and Clarke both use the word “explain” without the *success grammar* that often accompanies it.¹³ So, in these passages, they should be understood as saying that conspiracy theories *attempt* to explain more than their received, non-conspiratorial rivals.¹⁴ Keeley thinks that these attempts tend to be misguided:

What conspiracy theories get wrong, however, is that the existence of errant data *alone* is not a significant problem with a theory. Given the imperfect nature of our human understanding of the world, we should *expect* that even the best possible theory would not explain *all* the available data.¹⁵

Keeley is right that conspiracy theories often attempt to explain data which is not explained by, or which is apparently in conflict with, the received alternative. He is also right that we should expect our best theories to fail to explain all the available data, and (I would add) to conflict with some of the apparent data.

Keeley and Clarke are wrong, however, to claim that conspiracy theories always attempt to explain *more* than the received alternative does. Conspiracy theories do tend to offer putative explanations of data unexplained by, or apparently in conflict with, the received alternative. But the received alternative will also (unless it is a transparent fabrication) attempt to explain data unexplained by, or apparently in conflict with, its conspiratorial rivals. Gerald Posner's book *Case Closed*, for example, (a defense of the received, official, non-conspiratorial account of the assassination of JFK, roughly that provided by the Warren Commission) is filled with data which popular conspiracy theories of the assassination do not even attempt to explain.¹⁶ In other words, it is errant data in relation to those conspiracy theories. For example, according to the Warren Commission's version of this event Oswald fired a total of three shots. But some witnesses claimed to have heard more than three shots. Conspiratorial accounts of the assassination will typically seek to explain this data, which is errant in relation to the official account. But in doing so, they invariably create their own errant data. For example, about 88% of the almost two hundred witnesses to the assassination said that they heard exactly three shots. This is errant data with respect to most popular conspiracy theories of the assassination, including that of Oliver Stone.

Of course it would be possible to explain this data by, for example, hypothesizing that most of the witnesses to the assassination were co-conspirators. Keeley accurately points out that it is characteristic of many conspiracy theories that "an initial claim that a small group of people is conspiring gives way to claims of larger and larger conspiracies."¹⁷ I know of no actual conspiracy theory of the assassination, however, which does explicitly bring so many witnesses into the conspiracy. Furthermore, some data seems to be errant in relation to almost any imaginable conspiracy theory of this event. Why, for example, have there been no death-bed confessions by any of the conspirators? Not only is the Keeley/Clarke claim that conspiracy theories always try to explain more than competing theories mistaken, it would remain mistaken, if the claim were restricted to what Keeley calls "unwarranted conspiracy theories," since he thinks of conspiracy theories of the assassination of JFK as being paradigmatically unwarranted.¹⁸

Sometimes, of course, conspiracy theories do offer more explanation than the received view. Clarke considers the following example. Gail Brewer-Giorgio, author of *Is Elvis Alive*, has accumulated a vast body of evidence in support of her claim that Elvis Presley faked his own death:

The conventional explanation of the death of Elvis Presley, in 1977 at age 42, has a meagre evidential base, referring to Elvis's heart condition which is explained by appealing to facts about his lifestyle. The conspiratorial rival theory that Brewer-Giorgio mounts is rich in detail explaining . . . why Elvis's middle name is mis-spelled on his tombstone (Elvis was superstitious and wouldn't want his name correctly spelt on a tombstone when he was in fact alive), and why Elvis's casket was unusually heavy (it contained a wax dummy and an air conditioning unit to stop the wax from melting).¹⁹

Although Clarke is surely right that Brewer-Giorgio's conspiracy theory explains more, or at least purports to explain more, than the received view, this is not because it is a conspiracy theory, but because no one else has devoted a comparable amount of research into the circumstances of Elvis's alleged death. With all due respect to Elvis and his fans, neither his alleged death, nor Brewer-Giorgio's conspiracy theory, are important enough to prompt any detailed defense of the official story. By contrast, there are detailed defenses, not only of the official version of JFK's assassination, but also of the official version of Martin Luther King's assassination, and the official version of the so-called "Roswell Incident."²⁰ Each of these offer explanations of much of the data which had been errant in relation to the official stories they defend, and point out data which is errant in relation to the most popular conspiratorial rivals to those stories.

Another problem with conspiracy theorizing, according to Keeley, is that it threatens to turn us into radical skeptics. Although the following analogy is not made explicit by Keeley, I think it is a good way of thinking about his argument. Conspiracy theories resemble traditional sceptical hypotheses, such as Descartes's evil demon hypothesis, as well as the more modern brain-in-a-vat hypothesis. Sceptical hypotheses and conspiracy theories alike invite us to consider the alleged possibility of agents with both the power and the motive to deceive us in our beliefs about the empirical world.²¹

Of course, we should be careful not to exaggerate the similarities between conspiracy theories and sceptical hypotheses. Although some sceptical hypotheses involve an actual conspiracy, some do not. Descartes's evil demon is a deceiver so powerful that he has no need for co-conspirators, and therefore no need to conspire. Another difference between conspiracy theories and traditional sceptical hypotheses, is that the former are typically believed by those who devise them, whereas the latter typically are not. Sceptical hypotheses are not usually seriously advocated as explanations; rather their role is to challenge us to explain why we should prefer our commonsense view of the world to the alleged possibility described by the hypothesis. A third difference between sceptical hypotheses and conspiracy theories is that they challenge different sources of epistemic warrant. The former typically challenge our faith in our senses, whereas the latter challenge our faith in the testimony of others, especially the testimony of people and institutions in positions of authority.²²

Nonetheless, the similarities between conspiracy theories and sceptical hypotheses may tempt us to think that conspiracy theories should be dismissed out of hand for the same reasons, whatever exactly they are, that sane

people will dismiss skeptical hypotheses, at least when they are outside philosophy classrooms.

Keeley cites Robert Anton Wilson with approval about conspiracy theories that challenge the received account of, or the historical reality of, the Holocaust:

[A] conspiracy that can deceive us about 6,000,000 deaths can deceive us about *anything*, and 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.²³

But neither Keeley nor Wilson cite any evidence that actual Holocaust Revisionists are such radical skeptics. The most infamous Holocaust Revisionist, David Irving, seems to believe what he does, not because he suffers from the kind of irrational skepticism Keeley warns us against, but simply because he has an irrational hatred of Jews.

Keeley and Wilson may admit all this but insist that their point is not that Holocaust Revisionists actually tend to be radical skeptics, but just that their views entail radical skepticism, an entailment that they may or may not recognize.²⁴ I do not agree. As noted, a conspiracy theory, unlike a skeptical hypothesis, is offered as an actual explanation, not as an alternative possible explanation. The radical conspiracy theorist seeks not to undermine belief as such, but to replace our current beliefs with different beliefs. Although Holocaust Revisionism is a conspiracy theory that is unwarranted (and false), it is not unwarranted *because* it is a conspiracy theory. As I remarked earlier, the Holocaust itself was to a large extent brought about by conspiracy. Although here and now belief in the Holocaust does not qualify as a conspiracy theory, because it also has official status, there was a time and place (*i.e.*, Nazi occupied Europe) in which what would now be called “Holocaust Revisionism” was the official story, and belief in the Holocaust was belief in an accurate conspiracy theory. To believe in the Holocaust was to deny the official story that the Jews were merely being resettled.

Furthermore, as Clarke points out, a clever conspiracy theorist can resist the slide toward pervasive skepticism by pointing out that those in positions of authority will want to have a reputation for honesty, otherwise their cover story will not be believed.²⁵ The best way to acquire and maintain such a reputation is to be as honest as possible about all matters other than those involving the conspiracy. So the logical consequence of conspiracy theorizing may well be an increased, rather than a decreased, faith in people and institutions in authority.

Finally, and most importantly, whether the pervasive skepticism of people and institutions in authority that Keeley warns us against is warranted, depends on the kind of people and institutions in authority at the time and place in question. In a society in which the public service, universities, and military are independent of the government, for example, we may have little reason to be skeptical of official stories. In my own country, Australia, government has recently increased its control over these institutions. Consequently, skepticism

about what Keeley calls “the mechanisms for generating warranted beliefs in the public sphere” may be increasingly appropriate, and willingness to entertain conspiratorial reasoning increasingly justified.²⁶

This brings me to Keeley’s final criticism of conspiracy theories; that they are motivated by the Cartesian superstition that significant events cannot have insignificant causes; or, as Descartes put it, there must be at least *as much reality* in the cause of an event as in the event itself. Keeley portrays conspiracy theorists as people who fail to recognize that sometimes “Shit happens.” They cannot, for example, accept that someone as fundamentally insignificant as Lee Harvey Oswald could, acting alone, have caused a major historical event. Keeley suggests that once we free ourselves from the natural but false supposition that important events cannot have unimportant causes we will no longer see a problem here.

This is an insightful point that goes a long way towards explaining the enduring popularity of many conspiracy theories, especially those surrounding the assassinations of powerful people. But, as Pigden pointed out, some years before in response to Karl Popper’s criticisms of conspiracy theorizing, this same superstition can lead to the unwarranted downplaying of the importance of conspiracy, as much as it can lead to the unwarranted exaggeration of the significance of conspiracy, in historical explanation. The October revolution of 1917 cannot be understood without reference to conspiratorial behavior. Nonetheless, for many Marxists, *mere* conspiracy seems too trivial to play the role of *the* cause of such an important event. This has led them to downplay the importance of conspiracies by Lenin, Trotsky, and the German High Command; portraying the revolution instead as the result of a spontaneous popular uprising.²⁷

Although a conspiracy will tend to seem more significant than an individual acting alone, and therefore more appealing as an explanation of a significant historical event (for those in the grip of the Cartesian superstition), a mass movement, or an inevitable historic process, seems more significant than either. The Cartesian superstition therefore seems likely to lead people to deny the importance of conspiracy when they should affirm it, just as often as it will lead them to affirm the importance of conspiracy when they should deny it.

Clarke offers a quite different kind of argument against conspiracy theories. He argues that there is some entitlement in the intellectuals’ *prima facie* skepticism about conspiracy theories; an entitlement he grounds in what many social psychologists call “the fundamental attribution error.” This is an error which, they say (and Clarke agrees with them), most people make when attempting to explain and predict the behavior of others. It is the error of exaggerating the importance of *dispositional* factors, and, in the process, underestimating the importance of *situational* factors. We may think of dispositional factors as those concerning the character or psychology of the agent, and situational factors as those concerning the situation in which the agent is acting. Clarke suggests that those who hang on to conspiracy theories after it

has become clear to the majority that they should abandon them may be even more in the grip of the fundamental attribution error than the rest of us:

As explanations, conspiracy theories are highly dispositional. When conspiracies occur it is because conspirators intend them to occur and act on their intentions. The conspiratorial dispositions play the role of the cause in a typical explanation that involves a conspiracy. In most cases the received view, the conventionally accepted non-conspiratorial alternative to a particular conspiracy theory, is a situational explanation. . . . If you believe that the US military leadership are reluctant to discuss the Roswell Incident because there is no such incident to discuss, you are basing your belief on a situational factor. By contrast, if you believe that the US military leadership are conspiring to keep the public unaware of contact with alien species, which occurred at Roswell, New Mexico, you would presumably explain the US military leadership's persistent denials of knowledge of the incident by appealing to their disposition towards conspiratorial paternalistic behaviour.²⁸

So what is the evidence that people have this irrational tendency to commit the fundamental attribution error?

There have been far too many experiments claiming to provide such evidence for me to discuss them all. I will confine my discussion to one that is particularly influential and representative.²⁹ In the Darley-Batson experiment, a group of seminary students were asked to prepare a presentation, which was to be recorded. They were given directions to the location, which involved walking past a person slumped groaning in a doorway and in obvious need of assistance.³⁰ It was found that sixty-three percent of them stopped to offer assistance. These research subjects were examined on a number of dispositional criteria, none of which was found to significantly correlate with their behavior. When an apparently trivial situational factor was changed, however—the seminarians were told that they were late and needed to hurry—the rate of assistance dropped from sixty-three percent to ten percent. The difference between hurried and unhurried subjects was much greater than psychologists and members of the public, who were asked to predict the outcome of the experiment, anticipated. According to Darley and Batson this is evidence that we tend to exaggerate the importance of people's dispositions and underestimate the importance of their situation, when explaining and predicting their behaviour. Clarke agrees.

I disagree. The situational factor (the subjects being hurried) cannot do the explanatory work on its own, but only in combination with some dispositional factor (such as the subjects having a disposition to be punctual, or self-ish, or obedient). The fact that a small alteration in situational factors (or in plain English "the situation") leads to a surprisingly large alteration in behavioural patterns does not mean that we tend to underestimate the importance of the situation when predicting behaviour, it means that we have failed to identify correctly the dispositions which led to the original behaviour. We cannot hope to explain the surprising changes in behaviour of the subjects of the Darley-Batson experiment merely by appealing to the altered situation.

The explanation will not be complete until we have identified which characteristics of the people involved led them to change their behaviour.

The problem is not just that there is insufficient evidence for the existence of the fundamental attribution error, it is that belief in the phenomenon is itself deeply paradoxical. Those who say there is a widespread tendency to commit the fundamental attribution error themselves seem to be committing that very error. After all, if we do exaggerate the importance of dispositions in our explanations of behaviour as Darley, Batson, Clarke and others suggest, this is itself a disposition, which purports to explain a great deal of our behaviour. The more we explain by appeal to the fundamental attribution error, the more we will ourselves be committing the fundamental attribution error. Belief in the fundamental attribution error appears to be self-refuting, in much the same way that naïve set theory and logical positivism are.

CONCLUSION

Both Clarke and Keeley contrast conspiracy theories with their official non-conspiratorial rivals. But quite often the official version of events is just as conspiratorial as its rivals. When this is the case it is the unofficial explanation that will inevitably attract the label "conspiracy theory," with all its negative connotations.³¹ The degree to which this label deserves those connotations depends, to a large extent, on the diversity and transparency of the mechanisms for gathering and disseminating information in the society in question. The irony of this situation is that critics of legislation which leads to increased concentration of media ownership and of legislation which permits increased government secrecy are often dismissed as conspiracy theorists, when the effect of such legislation is to make conspiracy theorizing more warranted.

Although governments are obvious sources of what I have been calling "official stories," they are not the only sources. Both the media and the academy are, in virtue of their power to influence opinion, sources of official stories as well. It is not surprising, therefore, that conspiracy theories tend to be disparaged by representatives of these institutions. It is also not surprising that official stories are unreliable in societies in which the media and other sources of official information are directly controlled by the government. We are surely warranted in thinking that the more diverse the sources of official stories, the more credence those stories deserve. But the fact that the government does not directly control other sources of official stories in contemporary western societies, does not mean that these institutions are fully independent of the government. It has been plausibly argued, for example, that Rupert Murdoch's media empire has thrived by offering what is in effect a privatized state propaganda service to the governments of target countries, such as Australia, Britain, and the United States, in return for almost limitless government largesse.³²

The legitimacy of conspiracy theorizing is, therefore, highly dependent on social context. This means that we cannot hope to distinguish between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories on the basis of content alone.

On the other hand, our attitude toward conspiracy theories should not be entirely determined by our prior beliefs about the kind of society we live in. I propose an Aristotelian approach to the issue, according to which the intellectual virtue of *realism* is a golden mean between the intellectual vices of *paranoia* and *naivety*. Paranoids will be predisposed to believe that, in their society at least, official information is untrustworthy. Naifs, on the other hand, will be inclined to believe the opposite. Both groups will hold their attitudes sacred. A realist, by contrast, adopts an attitude of reflective equilibrium toward official information on the one hand, and conspiracy theories on the other. Her attitude towards conspiracy theories will depend on the extent of her prior trust in officialdom. But this trust will itself be open to the possibility of being undermined by warranted conspiracy theories.³³

This raises the issue of how much of herself the realist will devote to pursuing conspiracy theories. On the one hand, Lee Basham is surely right that the constant search for evidence of conspiracy can blind us to what is good in life.³⁴ Not only does paranoia endanger us epistemically, making both error and ignorance more likely, it can also undermine our happiness. On the other hand, naivety entails the same epistemic dangers, and its own distinctive moral danger. The moral danger of excessive willingness to believe authority, like the moral danger of excessive willingness to obey authority, is moral cowardice.³⁵ Naivety makes it too easy for us to think that we can avoid responsibility for a state of affairs by appealing to the fact that we were not told about it. We may have had a duty to find someone who can tell us. Internet technology has made it much easier for us to fulfill this obligation.

Endnotes

Thanks to Charles Pigden, Steve Clarke, and Brian Keeley for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

1. As Steve Clarke has pointed out this attitude is particularly prevalent among intellectuals. See his "Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (32, 2002), 131–50.

2. For a notable exception see Charles Pigden, "Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories?," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (25, 1995), 3–34.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Brian Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy* (96, 1999), 116.

5. Although Keeley does not explain what "relatively small" means in this context, I assume that he means small in relation to the group of people against whom the alleged conspiracy is targeted.

6. In fact it is the denial of this explanation that is likely to be thought of as a conspiracy theory.

7. I am ignoring theories which seem largely devoid of empirical content such as literary theory, and decision theory.

8. Keeley, 116–17.

9. Keeley, 118.

10. Keeley's UCTs are almost indistinguishable from what I have argued are conspiracy theories simpliciter.

11. Keeley, 119.

12. Clarke, 135.

13. I believe Gilbert Ryle is responsible for this expression.

14. Keeley and Clarke both presuppose that the received or official rival to a conspiracy theory will be non-conspiratorial. The events of September the 11th make it clear that this assumption is not warranted. Any sane explanation of the events of that day will postulate a conspiracy. The only controversial issues concern the identity of the conspirators.

15. Keeley, 120.

16. Gerald Posner, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Random House, 1993).

17. Keeley, 118.

18. I also think conspiracy theories of this event are unwarranted.

19. Clarke, 135. And see, Gail Brewer-Giorgio, *Is Elvis Alive?* (New York: Tudor, 1988).

20. See Gerald Posner, *Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1999), and James McAndrew, *The Roswell Report: Case Closed* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997).

21. In their most radical form skeptical hypotheses may deny that there is a "we" to be deceived. That is, they suppose deception to be so extensive that it could deceive you about the existence of other people.

22. Conspiracy theorists do not necessarily challenge testimony more broadly, because they often rely on testimony which conflicts with the official story.

23. Robert Anton Wilson, "Beyond True and False: a Sneaky Quiz with a Subversive Commentary," in Ted Schulz (ed.), *The Fringes of Reason* (New York: Harmony, 1989), 172.

24. Keeley has indicated to me in correspondence that this is his position.

25. Clarke, 141.

26. The dangers of politicizing the military were particularly evident during the last federal election campaign in Australia, when the government manipulated the military in order to promote a false story that asylum seekers had thrown their children into the sea. Of course, we must also be wary of going to the opposite extreme of allowing the military to be *too* independent of the government of the day.

27. Richard Pipes, "Seventy-five Years On: The Great October Revolution as Clan-destine *Coup d'état*," *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 June 1992.

28. Clarke, 145–6.

29. It is also the experiment which Clarke himself discusses in most depth.

30. J.M. Darley and C. D. Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behaviour," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (27, 1973), 100–19.

31. In fact the term "conspiracy theory" is sometimes used as if it were synonymous with "theory conflicting with an official explanation." A particularly striking example of this phenomenon appeared recently in an opinion piece in an Australian newspaper, in which columnist Glenn Milne accused a public figure of being a conspiracy theorist on the grounds that she denied that the individuals found guilty of the Lockerbie bombing were in fact guilty. But this so-called conspiracy theorist was

not advocating a conspiratorial explanation of anything, she was just denying an official explanation. In fact, in this case, it is the official explanation that is conspiratorial *i.e.*, that the Libyan intelligence service conspired to carry out the bombing. Of course, the denial of an official version of events often implies a conspiracy on the part of officials to keep the truth from us. But not always. The official story may just be the result of a mistake.

32. See Bruce Page, *The Murdoch Archipelago* (UK: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

33. Aristotle spoke of the importance of identifying exemplars of the virtues to model ourselves on. Not surprisingly, the people I think of as exemplars of the virtue of realism are frequently portrayed as paranoid conspiracy theorists in the media and in the academy. A shortlist of people I consider exemplary realists would include Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, and Gore Vidal.

34. Lee Basham, "Living with the Conspiracy," *The Philosophical Forum* (32, 2001), 265–80.

35. For more on the relation between excessive willingness to obey authority and moral cowardice, see David Coady, "Stanley Milgram and Police Ethics," *Australian Journal of Professional and Applied Ethics* (3, 2001), 16–28.

