

Critical Thinking About Conspiracies

I devoted three episodes of the Critical Thinker Podcast to the subject of conspiracy theories. I became interested in the relationship between conspiracy theorizing and critical thinking after coming to realize that both sides, conspiracy theory advocates and debunkers, emphasize the importance of critical thinking education. This document is based on the transcripts from those podcast episodes.

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Part 1: Critical Thinking About Conspiracies: An Introduction

1. What is a Conspiracy Theory?

What is a **conspiracy theory**?

In a nutshell, a **conspiracy theory is a theory that purports to explain an historical event or a series of historical events by appealing to a conspiracy of some kind.**

So, what's a **conspiracy**?

Minimally, to have a conspiracy you need a group of people (you can't conspire all by yourself) and that group of people makes plans and acts in secrecy, hidden from public view. Secrecy is an essential feature of conspiracies.

By this definition, there doesn't have to be anything sinister to make something a conspiracy. On this definition, when we plan a *surprise birthday party for a friend*, we're engaged in conspiracy. When we work at keeping the "magic of Santa Clause" alive for our kids, we're actively promoting and maintaining a conspiracy.

But in the sense in which the term "conspiracy theory" is normally used **there's an assumption that the conspirators have sinister or at least objectionable aims of some kind** — to engineer events and control public perception, to acquire money and power and influence, and so on. It's probably a mistake to build this in to the definition of a conspiracy, but in the cases we'll be looking at, the label "conspiracy" usually comes with a normative judgment that there's something objectionable about the aims of the conspirators.

Also, a conspiracy explanation of some historical event is **usually contrasted with other explanations that have "official status" at the time and place in question.** For example, the official explanation of the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on 9/11 is that it was the result of a surprise attack involving two hijacked planes that were flown

into the towers. 9/11 conspiracy theories challenge this official story. The most popular claim that the US government knew about the planned attacks and let them happen, and that the government may even have helped engineer the collapse by rigging the buildings with explosives to ensure that they fell when the planes hit them. So you've got the **official explanation**, and you've got an **alternative explanation** which involves a conspiracy among various parties, including the US government, to stage the event and a conspiracy to cover up the government's involvement in the event. This gives a nice example of the kinds of kinds of theories that we're talking about.

Another good example is the **moon landing conspiracy theories**, which claim that the first moon landings were faked. The idea is that during the 1960s, the US was in a race with the Soviet Union to develop space technology and be the first to land on the moon, but the moon landing turned out to be impossible, it was technologically too challenging. The political cost of this failure was perceived as too high, so the government, or NASA, or both, decided to fake the 1969 moon landing on a sound stage. The rocket was launched, but it re-entered the atmosphere soon after the launch and was ditched in the ocean. The actual moon landing pictures and video were faked in a studio.

The argument that conspiracy theorists make is that there are lots of anomalies in the photographs and videos that are hard to explain if they were actually taken on the moon where there is no atmosphere and only one dominant light source, but could easily be explained if they'd been shot on a sound stage. So once again we've got an official version of the story, and we've got an alternative version of the story that invokes a conspiracy.

2. Narrow vs Global (or Grand) Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories come in **different scales**, depending on the size and extent of the conspiracy, both in space and in time. **The moon landing hoax conspiracy is fairly narrow in scope**, since it's targeted at a specific historical event, but the conspiracy to cover up the hoax would necessarily have a long reach in time, getting on now close to 45 years since the event in question. But this is still small compared to what are sometimes called "global" or "grand" conspiracy theories.

Global conspiracies involve conspiracies among agents and institutions that stretch across the globe and that have influence in almost all aspects of modern life — governments, media, multi-national corporations, religious institutions, and so on. In terms of time scales, they can extend over decades, or centuries, or even millennia.

Among global conspiracy theories, the most prominent are so-called **"New World Order" theories**. Now, this term doesn't pick out a single theory, it's really **an umbrella term** for a bunch of different theories that share a set of core beliefs. The basic core belief is that **there exists a secretive power elite that is conspiring to eventually rule the world through a single world government that will replace sovereign nation-states**. This group operates in secret but has enormous influence through a wide network of public internationalist organizations that themselves have ties to the higher level organization.

Among conspiracy theorists the list of front groups and institutions changes depending on who you ask, but the names you commonly hear include the US Federal Reserve, the League of Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the UN, the World Health Organization, The European Union, the World Trade Organization, and so on. The agendas of these international institutions are established in secret meetings associated with elite figures and international power-brokers like the Bilderberg Group, the Council on Foreign Affairs, the Trilateral Commission, and so on.

Because these institutions have so much power and influence, New World Order theorists are disposed to see almost all of the major geopolitical events of the 20th and 21st century — including all the major wars — as the product of an orchestrated plan to eventually bring about a single world government that, while publicly espousing ideals of international citizenship and global community, would in fact exert a totalitarian control that strips away individual liberties.

These kinds of New World Order theories are popular among certain libertarian and conservative Christian groups, but they're also increasingly popular among New Age thinkers on both the far right and the far left. These groups vary in who their views of the actual identities and ultimate motivations of the secret elite, but structurally they have a lot in common.

3. Why Conspiracy Theories are Interesting (from a critical thinking perspective)

This gives us some idea of what we're talking about when we talk about conspiracy theories. I think you'll agree that the topic is fascinating in its own right, but **why is this topic interesting from a critical thinking perspective?**

I think there are some obvious reasons why they're interesting, and some not-so-obvious reasons.

(1) Should We Believe Them?

Belief in conspiracy theories of one form or another is very widespread among the general public, and have become increasingly so over the past 20 years. Surveys indicate, for example, that a sizeable minority of the general population believes that George Bush and/or the CIA knew about the Sept 11 attacks in advance but intentionally did nothing to prevent them, while a smaller (but still not insignificant) proportion believes the US government actually had a hand in orchestrating the attacks, with the express intent of using the attacks as a pretext for launching a global war on terror and justifying military incursions into the Middle East.

So the widespread belief in conspiracies of one form or another is an interesting phenomenon all by itself. A natural question to ask is, are there good reasons to believe any of these conspiracy theories? What attitude should we, as critical thinkers, have toward these theories?

(2) How to Justify the Default Skepticism of Most Academics

Among philosophers and indeed, I think, most mainstream academics, the most common attitude is a **default skepticism** about conspiracy theories of this sort. Among professional skeptics who advocate for scientific rationality it's mostly taken for granted that belief in conspiracies is unjustified and irrational. Not all conspiracies obviously, but the big conspiracies like the moon hoax, or the intentional demolition of the Twin Towers by the US government, or global conspiracy theories that posit that a small, secret elite is engineering world events — these are viewed by most academics as fundamentally implausible, if not outright delusional.

Now if this is right, then a question to ask is, how exactly is this default skepticism justified? Are there good reasons to adopt this view?

(3) The Relationship Between Conspiracy Theorists and Critical Thinking

There's another reason why conspiracy theories are interesting from a critical thinking perspective. It has to do with the attitude that conspiracy theorists have toward critical thinking itself.

It turns out that **many people who endorse conspiracy theories are also passionate advocates for critical thinking education**. They promote the teaching of logic and argumentation skills, they want us to understand informal fallacies and the difference between justified and unjustified beliefs. I know this because I receive emails from people, on both the right and the left, who say they're admirers of the podcast, they love what I'm doing, they want to spread the word about the importance of critical thinking, and who follow up with "have you ever looked at this website? I think you might find it interesting", and the website they refer me to is

associated with some socio-political movement that is predicated on a conspiracy theory of some kind.

For some of these groups, **the more global and all-encompassing the posited conspiracy is, the more importance they place on logic and critical thinking skills**. What's fascinating (and ironic) is that this runs **exactly counter** to what, for lack of a better term I'll call the "establishment" view of conspiracies and critical thinking, which is that the more global and all-encompassing the conspiracy is, the less plausible it is, and the more irrational it is to believe it.

Let me just pause and elaborate a bit about this last point, because I think I understand what's going on in the minds of conspiracy theorists, and I think it's interesting.

For a conspiracy theorist, to identify a conspiracy you need to be able to see beyond and behind the official story, which by hypothesis will be a misrepresentation of reality, a tissue of facts, half-truths and outright deceptions that is designed to hide the truth. Seeing past the lies and deceptions requires the ability to identify inconsistencies in the official story, follow sometimes long chains of inferences, and identify fallacies and techniques of intentional deception. **Hence, identifying a conspiracy, seeing it for what it is, is an act of successful critical thinking**. That's the way conspiracy theorists see it.

And consequently the more broad and encompassing the conspiracy, the greater the challenge for critical thinking, requiring even more vigilance and more rigor in our thinking.

Now, what makes the identification of conspiracies even harder still (and I've learned that this is a widely shared view, especially among New World Order theorists) is that one of the techniques that the powerful elite have used to maintain control is by a deliberate program of "dumbing down" the general public, **by suppressing the development of critical thinking capacities among the unwashed masses**.

They'll point to the distractions of Hollywood, or professional sports, or music and video games as tools for keeping us distracted and entertained. And they'll point to the systematic elimination of critical thinking education from the public school curriculum.

For example, classical liberal arts education used to be structured around three core disciplines that constituted the "**trivium**", which included **grammar**, **logic** and **rhetoric**. This core was part of basic instruction in how to think, how to learn and how to communicate one's understanding of a given subject matter. This material isn't taught in public schools anymore, and they'll ask, why not?

Here's why not (they'll say): The purposes of public schooling have been subordinated to the purposes of the elite ruling classes, which require citizens who are conformist, obedient, dependent on external guidance and direction, intellectually incurious, and easily controlled. We can't have the masses going around thinking for themselves and criticizing the status quo, that's not part of the elite game plan.

So, critical thinking education for the general public becomes important (again, on this view) because its suppression has been instrumental in maintaining and perpetuating the conspiracy.

It follows, then, that if the goal is to unmask the conspiracy and free people's minds to see reality as it truly is, then we need to promote critical thinking skills, and make critical thinking resources more available to the general public. And that's why so many conspiracy theory proponents are also strong advocates of critical thinking education.

You can see why someone in my position would find this view both attractive and ironic at the same time. It's a very romantic vision of the critical thinker as an anti-establishment culture warrior, whose special knowledge and skills can help us to see the behind the veil of appearances, free our minds and begin to live a life outside the "Matrix", as it were. I love this! It makes me feel like Morpheus.

At yet at the same time, **my skeptic friends view these sorts of grand conspiracy theories as classic examples of irrational and misguided belief.** They see a call for critical thinking education from these people as bizarrely ironic as astrologers or flat-earthers advocating for better science education in the public schools!

Well, that wraps up my introduction to this topic. Next we'll take a closer look at some of the more common arguments for default scepticism about conspiracy theories.

Part 2:

An Argument for Default Skepticism About Global Conspiracies

1. Default Skepticism

Let's remind ourselves where we left off. I was saying that among so-called "professional skeptics" — figures associated with the skeptical movement that encourages scientific rationality and secular values, especially in the public square — there's an attitude toward conspiracy hypotheses that is widely shared, that I called "**default skepticism**".

"Default skepticism" about conspiracy theories is the view that there's something about conspiracy hypotheses that justifies a certain default skeptical stance toward them, and the stance can be summed up like this: **the grander the conspiracy that is required, the less likely it is that it's true.**

"Grandness" isn't well-defined, but it's some function of the size and scope and depth of the conspiracy: **how many people** are involved and are required or forced to keep quiet, **how long** they have to keep quiet, and **how many layers of social and institutional structure** are implicated.

So, a conspiracy among, say, the members of a political party to **leak negative information about an opposition candidate** might involve only a small number of people at a particular level of organization. That's a conspiracy, but it's not a particularly grand conspiracy. By contrast, a conspiracy among pharmaceutical companies to **hide the cure for cancer for the past twenty-five years**; or a conspiracy among government and law enforcement officials to **hide the existence of a crashed alien spacecraft in Area 51 for the past 60 years** — these are much grander theories. Default skepticism would tell us that these grander theories are intrinsically less plausible, less likely to be true, than the smaller scale theories.

In some ways you can view this stance as a particular instance of a slogan that **Carl Sagan** popularized: "**extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence**". Default skepticism about conspiracy hypotheses

is motivated by the belief that there's something extraordinary about these hypotheses, that scales with the grandness of the conspiracy.

But of course it's not an argument to just say that conspiracy hypotheses are by their nature implausible. We want to understand what it is *about* conspiracy hypotheses that would justify this judgment, and in particular, the judgment that the grander the hypothesis, the more extraordinary the claim is and consequently the less likely it is to be true. What *reasons* do skeptics give to support this conclusion?

I'm going to try and unpack this one aspect of the skeptical stance, try to identify what it is that they take to be extraordinary about conspiracy hypotheses.

2. What is Implausible About Grand Conspiracies

The aspect of conspiracy theories that I want to highlight is best illustrated by talking through an example that most people are already inclined to disbelieve, the **moon landing hoax** theory. Jesse Ventura is generally sympathetic to conspiracy theories, he covered the topic on his Conspiracy Theory television show, and even he made a point of distancing himself from the idea that NASA and the US government faked the moon landings on a sound stage.

Of course there are lots of parts of the moon hoax story that are plausible. It's plausible that NASA didn't have the time or technological ability to fulfill John F. Kennedy's promise that he made in a speech in 1961 to put a man on the moon before the end of the decade. I'm not saying it's true, I'm saying that everyone understood that it was a serious technological challenge and that it was reasonable to doubt whether it would or could succeed in this time frame.

Also, it's plausible that the video of astronauts on the moon could be reproduced on a sound stage. That's the *least* implausible part of the theory, in my opinion.

And there's no doubt that NASA felt enormous pressure to pull this off, given the state of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and the political costs of either a failed mission or of the Soviets getting there first.

And given all this, it's also very plausible that the idea of faking the missions would have crossed somebody's mind at some point in the process; it would be a very natural thought to have under the circumstances, I would think.

Those are the plausible aspects of the moon hoax theory. **But what we're interested in is what skeptics regard as the *implausible* aspects of the theory.** To get at these, let's shift gears and consider what would have to be true if the theory is right and the landings were faked, and the conspiracy not only to fake the landings, but to keep it secret from the general public, was in fact successfully maintained for over 40 years, up to the present day.

Well, you'd need everyone **directly involved** in the conspiracy to agree to keep their mouths shut. Not just the top players in NASA and the US government, but all the subordinates, the engineers, the scientists, the crew, the staff — everyone. You'd also need everyone who was **indirectly involved** — those implicated in the cover-up in some way, but not directly aware that a cover-up was going on — you'd need all these people to remain in the dark, or to keep silent if they came to know about it.

Now let's think about human nature. Isn't it likely that **at least some of the people directly involved would be anxious and conflicted about what was going on?** The urge to tell someone would be strong, wouldn't it? In at least some people? Wouldn't it be likely that some of those people would feel compelled to confide in their spouses or friends? But if so, those spouses and friends would also have to have kept their mouths' shut.

But **wouldn't there also be a strong urge among at least some of these people, either directly or indirectly involved, to blow the whistle on this?** If this story broke, and it was confirmed, there's no doubt it would

have been the story of the decade, if not the century. Whoever broke it would be world-famous, overnight.

On the outside, **journalists who suspected a hoax or a cover-up would have an enormous incentive to pursue this story**, it would catapult them to fame as well. Think of Woodward and Bernstein, who became household names after they broke the Watergate scandal.

So there are psychological and financial incentive from both sides to break this story, from people on the inside and people on the outside.

Now, with these plausible background assumptions in mind, let's consider **the psychology of the high level officials who would have authorized and orchestrated the conspiracy**. Let's assume that they did in fact come to the conclusion that an actual moon landing was impossible or would fail. Imagine them beforehand, deliberating over whether to fake the landing, or find some other way to call off or postpone the mission. Sure, there would be a political cost to admitting that the US couldn't do it on the schedule that they had promised. But think about the political cost of the world coming to know that the US had faked the landing! The political fallout from that disclosure would be many orders of magnitude worse. It's not a stretch to imagine that this would be the end of NASA and the end of the government administration that authorized the hoax. It would have a devastating impact not only on international perception and confidence in the United States, but also on the confidence of the American people in their own government.

But according to the moon hoax conspiracy theory, **we're required to imagine that the officials who authorized this came to the conclusion that the benefits of this course of action outweighed the potential risks**. Now, if we're right about our basic background assumptions, then **this could *only* be a rational choice if they also judged the risk of the conspiracy *failing* to be small, EXTRAORDINARILY small**. They would need *enormous* confidence that this information could be almost be hermetically contained and controlled.

But what reason do we have to think that information can be controlled in this way, or that people can be controlled in this way?

And here, now, is the core premise underlying default skepticism. **If anything, all evidence seems to point in the *other* direction.**

Information is intrinsically *difficult* to control. Indirect effects and unintended consequences are the *norm* in complex social systems, not the exception. Unpredictable information leaks are themselves common and predictable. That's why governments and corporations have special offices dedicated to public relations and spin control; these are predicated on the assumption that information leaks are inevitable, and they need to be prepared to adaptively respond to those leaks.

3. An Example of This Kind of Reasoning

Here's an example that illustrates this line of reasoning. The summer 2011 issue of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine was the follow-up to the previous issue that focused on debunking 9/11 conspiracy theories that assert that the World Trade Center came down as a result of a controlled demolition. In the letters section of this issue a reader writes the following:

I found it easy to dismiss the demolition theories without requiring analytical refutation. These theories introduce far greater problems to address than anything they purport to solve. It seems the "mastermind" would almost certainly have to be the President of the United States. What would we do to such a President if he were found out? Clearly he would have to believe that absolute secrecy could be maintained forever. We can't even keep secrets in the CIA! Many people would have to be involved over an extended time period: demolition experts, hijackers, FBI and Interpol investigators, etc. What if one of the WTC aircraft hijackings had been thwarted by the passengers as in the case of Flight 93? One of the towers would still be standing with demolitions evidence that would have to be removed. Even a flight cancellation or a delay would have created havoc. What if WTC 7 hadn't caught fire? Certainly this could not have been guaranteed. Would they have proceeded

with the demolition? What if the demolition triggers failed due to damage from the aircraft? The list could go on for pages. All of this so we could go to war in Afghanistan? Give me a break!

The premise that underwrites this line of reasoning is a general one, it's not specific to 9/11 theories. The idea is this: For it to be rational to try and implement a grand conspiracy of this sort, you would need enormous confidence that a complex series of operations would go off without a hitch, that information about the conspiracy could be contained indefinitely, and that the behavior of dozens, hundreds, maybe thousands of a people can be controlled with a high degree of certainty.

And the objection is that, given what we know about human nature and the functioning of complex social institutions, and the difficulty of predicting the success of complex operations like the ones we're talking about here, **we just don't have any reason to think this level of control and certainty is possible.** As the conspiracy scales in size and complexity, the more likely it is to fail, and less likely that rational people would even attempt it.

Part 3: Mind Control, Falsifiability and Conspiracy Theories

In Part 2 I reviewed an argument for default skepticism about global conspiracy theories. Such theories assume that information about the conspiracy can be contained indefinitely, and that the behavior of hundreds or thousands of people can be controlled with a high degree of certainty. The objection is that we don't have any reason to believe that this level of control and certainty is possible.

1. The Conspiracy Theorist's Response: Mind Control is Possible

The common response of conspiracy theorists to this line of reasoning is to challenge the objection directly. They'll say that the levels of information regulation and psychological control that are required for grand conspiracies to be successful **are indeed possible**. And not *just* possible. This is a key component that you see in *every* grand conspiracy theory — the claim that there exist various methods of PERSUASION and MIND CONTROL that elite powers have at their disposal, and that these methods of mind control, coupled with carefully organized campaigns of DISINFORMATION and DISTRACTION, are the *means* by which grand conspiracies are successfully implemented and maintained.

Now, we might optimistically hope that we could settle the issue by carefully investigating these mind control methods and testing whether they can really do what conspiracy theorists say they can do.

But not surprisingly it's not that easy. Everybody grants there exist a wide range of techniques of psychological manipulation that are used by governments and businesses to influence our beliefs and decisions.

But conspiracy theorists will say that the existence of the most effective and powerful mind control techniques — the ones that the elites actually rely on to successfully implement their agenda — **is itself a well regulated secret**. They'll say that these are either very old methods that the elites have always deployed, or relatively new methods that have been

developed in secret government programs and intentionally kept out of the scientific mainstream, or some combination of the two.

2. Mind Control Methods

It's hard to generalize about mind control methods because there's a lot of variation among conspiracy theorists about which methods are used. Some are more plausible to skeptics than others.

Mind Control Methods That Are More Plausible to Skeptics

For example, conspiracy theorists will talk a great deal about the use of mass media as a propaganda tool for manipulating public opinion and behavior, and they'll cite the anti-democratic propaganda theories of prominent mid-century intellectuals like Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays and Harold Lasswell who thought that modern government required the manipulation of mass opinion by propaganda methods engineered by an elite ruling class.

The main idea here is certainly not a fringe idea. There's also a long tradition of academic writing on the left, for example, from writers influenced by Freud and Marx and Hegel, that is deeply critical of the control of media in the service of government and corporate propaganda. I'm thinking here of names like Theodore Adorno and Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Ellul and Noam Chomsky, who all have written extensively on the threat to democracy and human freedom posed by propaganda through the mass media.

Conspiracy theorists also write about the deliberate dumbing down of our education system as a means of public manipulation. But there are radical education critics who have argued for similar conclusions, so again, it's not just grand conspiracy theorists who are making these arguments.

Conspiracy theorists are also concerned about the increasing capacity of technology to track our internet activity and shopping behavior and online conversations, and worry about threats to privacy and personal

security that these technologies pose. But so are many technology watchdogs groups, there's nothing unusual or fringe about this worry either.

Mind Control Methods That Are Less Implausible to Skeptics

On the other hand, many conspiracy theorists also think that the government and corporations are adding toxins to our food and water supply with the express aim of altering our brain chemistry to make us more docile and apathetic and more susceptible to manipulation. And if you're diligent and eat only organic local foods and purified water, they'll still get you by **spraying chemicals from airplanes** in the atmosphere that do the same thing.

Others think that the electromagnetic radiation that we're constantly bathed in can be manipulated to alter brain states, and that the proliferation of cell phones and cell phone towers is a vehicle for exposing us to this mind altering radiation.

Switching gears again, there are many conspiracy theorists who think that the elite control of human civilization goes back to ancient times, that they employ methods of persuasion that have correspondingly ancient origins, with roots in pagan mystery cults and occult symbolism that (they claim) one can find hiding in plain sight everywhere up to the present day. Some believe that the presence of these archetypal symbols in our media environment has an effect on our collective unconscious, to use the Jungian term, and they're intentionally inserted as a tool of mass psychological conditioning.

These sorts of ideas are much harder for skeptics to swallow, and not all conspiracy theorists defend them all, so as I said, it's hard to generalize about what mind control methods conspiracy theorists are committed to. What we can say is that there is a spectrum of views that, from the skeptic's standpoint, range from more plausible to less plausible.

3. How the Issue of Mind Control Changes the Debate

What interests me about the debate over mind control methods is how raising this issue changes the nature of the dialectic between the conspiracy theorist and the skeptic.

As I said earlier, one might hope that we could settle the issue by carefully investigating these mind control methods, confirming that they exist and testing whether they can really do what conspiracy theorists say they can do.

But the problem is that, according to conspiracy theorists, **information about the existence and use of these methods is itself carefully regulated by the elites, using the very methods that are under discussion.** Some of it is publicly available but much of it is shrouded in secrecy, as one might expect.

And this is where the debate usually stalls. We might forgive the skeptic for thinking that there's a **threat of circularity** looming in this line of response. The skeptic is asking about the plausibility of grand conspiracies, they identify a core assumption about the controllability of information and human behavior that underwrites such theories, and the skeptic asks for evidence for this core assumption. But they're told that she won't find such evidence, at least not in the mainstream science journals or the halls of mainstream academia or in the mainstream news media, **because concealing the existence of the methods in question is itself central to the grand conspiracy,** and the elites have control over the content of these mainstream information sources.

What can be even more frustrating for the skeptic is the belief that you often encounter among conspiracy theorists, that mainstream media and science and academia have been infiltrated by so-called "**dis-informers**", people who at some level are aware of the truth about the elite agenda and the existence of these mind control methods, or who are being unwittingly manipulated by the elites, and who are helping to implement the elite agenda by sowing disinformation within their respective academic fields and within the public mainstream. So if you present evidence against the

existence of these mind control methods, you may find yourself accused being “one of them”, a dis-informer intentionally spreading lies to help maintain the conspiracy, or at best a dupe, a tool of the powers that be, whether you’re aware of it or not.

4. Are Grand Conspiracy Theories Unfalsifiable?

At this point its hard to see how productive dialogue between the skeptic and the conspiracy theorist can continue. A common skeptical response is to accuse the conspiracy theorist of indulging in unfalsifiable paranoid fantasies that are immune to rational criticism. Why immune to rational criticism? Because every bit of evidence that would count against the theory is either dismissed or reinterpreted as disinformation manufactured by the conspirators. This quality, that any bit of countervailing evidence can in principle be accommodated within a grand conspiracy theory, has been called “self-sealing” by some. Whenever the theory is poked by some bit of countervailing evidence, it seals itself by reinterpreting that evidence as consistent with the theory after all.

Philosophers of science might describe this as a case of **“unfalsifiability”**, in Karl Popper’s sense of the word. It’s not a compliment to call a theory “unfalsifiable”. Karl Popper was an Austrian philosopher of science, arguably one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century. He introduced the concept of unfalsifiability to identify theories that, in his judgment, didn’t really qualify as scientific theories at all, because they could never be open to a genuine empirical test. In a genuine test, you lay out the conditions under which an observation or an experimental result would count against the theory, would give us a reason to reject the theory. Genuine tests, for Popper, are always potential falsifications of a theory — the theory sticks its neck out and risks being chopped off by experimental or observational results. For Popper, the best theories are the ones that stick their neck out the farthest, the ones that are the most daring and specific in their predictions, and survive those tests.

To give a simple example, if your horoscope says that today “new opportunities will present themselves, but may come with costs that you’ll have to consider carefully”, that’s a virtually unfalsifiable prediction. It’s hard to imagine what sort of day you would have that would count as falsifying this prediction. Popper would say that it’s not an empirical claim at all, it’s not something you can assign a truth-value to that could be subject to empirical testing.

But what if your horoscope said that today, at 3:41 PM, a man wearing a two-piece suit and dark sunglasses will ring your doorbell and offer you a great deal on a time-share condo in Florida? THAT’S a falsifiable claim, and what makes it falsifiable is that it clearly specifies the conditions under which we could all agree that the claim is false. If a man shows up at 2:30 instead of 3:41, it’s false. If the man isn’t wearing dark sunglasses, it’s false. If the man offers a time-share in Mexico instead of Florida, it’s false. We all have a shared understanding of what would count as evidence that would falsify this claim.

For Popper, good theories, genuinely scientific theories, make falsifiable claims. Theories that don’t make falsifiable claims are not scientific, they’re “pseudo-sciences”, theories masquerading as genuine theories, but in reality aren’t really saying anything, or at least not saying anything that evidence can have any bearing on.

Now, there are a couple of different ways that theories can be unfalsifiable. They can be unfalsifiable because they make only vague predictions, like that first horoscope prediction. That’s not the major concern about grand conspiracy theories, though I suppose could be a concern in some cases.

But theories can also be made unfalsifiable in another way, by introducing revisions to the theory that are motivated simply to accommodate potentially falsifying evidence. Consider, for example, the claim that the hands on my wrist watch turn because there’s a little green demon inside my watch that makes them turn. You naturally ask, okay, let’s open the watch and see for ourselves. I open the watch but we don’t

see any little green demon. You say aha, we've falsified your claim. But I say not so fast — my little green demon has the property that *it turns immaterial and invisible when the watch is opened up*. I've revised the green demon hypothesis to make it consistent with the observational results, so the observation no longer counts as falsifying it. **But the worry now is that I might try to do this for any attempt to falsify the hypothesis, just keep revising the hypothesis to accommodate the new evidence, thereby rendering the hypothesis immune to falsification.**

This is much closer to the worry that skeptics have about conspiracy theories when they include claims about pervasive mind control. The worry is that when you question every source of information you hear from mainstream media or mainstream science, or suspect all mainstream information sources of being biased or compromised in a way that makes them untrustworthy, then it's very easy to make a conspiracy theory effectively unfalsifiable.

This gives support to the common complaint that conspiracy theorists are dogmatically attached to an ideological worldview that is immune to rational criticism.

5. A Defense: Appealing to the History of Real Conspiracies

So, how does the conspiracy theorist typically respond to this charge that their worldview is dogmatically ideological and unfalsifiable?

Well, conspiracy theorists will insist that it's just false to think that there's no publicly available evidence for their claims. They'll point to historical precedents then even skeptics have to grant.

MK-ULTRA and the CIA

On the subject of mind control methods, for example, it's now widely known that the CIA was involved in covert, illegal mind control experimentation on human subjects that began in the 1950s and continued at least through the late 1960s. If you search for "MK-ULTRA" on

wikipedia you'll find an entry under that name. MK-ULTRA was the code name for a project that

involved the use of many methodologies to manipulate individual mental states and alter brain functions, including the surreptitious administration of drugs and other chemicals, hypnosis, sensory deprivation, isolation, verbal and sexual abuse, as well as various forms of torture.

On the US Senate floor in 1977, Senator Ted Kennedy said the following:

The Deputy Director of the CIA revealed that over thirty universities and institutions were involved in an "extensive testing and experimentation" program which included covert drug tests on unwitting citizens "at all social levels, high and low, native Americans and foreign." Several of these tests involved the administration of LSD to "unwitting subjects in social situations.

Now, the existence of programs like this doesn't by itself show that they were successful at developing the sorts of mind control methods that grand conspiracy theories require. In fact the official line espoused by the government is that the science was poorly conducted and the results unreliable. But it does establish an interest and a willingness on the part of governments to invest time and money on secret projects of the sort that conspiracy theorists are worried about.

COINTELPRO and the FBI

Conspiracy theorists will also point to other covert government programs that reveal a willingness to engage in the sorts of activities that they believe are actually being implemented on a larger scale. For example, every conspiracy theorist is familiar with COINTELPRO, an FBI program that operated over the same time period, roughly mid-50s to early 70s. COINTELPRO is an acronym for Counter Intelligence Program, and its mandate was, as the wikipedia entry once again puts it, "surveilling, infiltrating, discrediting, and disrupting domestic political organizations" that the government believed to be subversive, typically communist and

socialist organizations, individuals and organizations associated with the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, anti-war movements, and various other radical movements on the political left and the right.

What's most interesting to conspiracy theorists isn't necessarily the targets of this program, but the methods they used. Government operatives didn't just spy on political activists. They infiltrated their organizations, they planted false media stories and other publications in the name of the targeted groups. They forged letters, spread misinformation about meetings, set up pseudo-movement groups run by government agents. They used the legal system to harass people, make them appear to be criminals. They gave false testimony and used fabricated evidence to arrest and imprison people. They conspired with local police departments to threaten people, conduct illegal raids and searches, commit assaults, vandalism, and instigate police actions that resulted in civilian deaths.

Now, the official line, once again, is that COINTELPRO was shut down after their operations became public in the early 1970s, but that hasn't kept people from speculating on the existence of continuing programs of government surveillance and infiltration.

For conspiracy theorists, what COINTELPRO and other programs like it demonstrate is at least the plausibility of an ongoing program of secret government activities that is by every measure illegal and immoral, yet authorized at the highest levels of government. They will remind us that COINTELPRO continued its operations and reported to the highest officials under four different White House administrations. Is it so implausible that such operations might not be continuing, or other operations like it or related to it, with the exponentially more powerful technological resources that are available today?

So, this is one common pattern of response from conspiracy theorists to the charge that their views are implausible. They're only implausible, they'll say, to those who are ignorant of history and ignorant of the wide and varied sources of information that are out there in the public square, that point to activities and programs being conducted in secret, with aims that we should at least be highly suspicious of.

And they'll throw back the charge of unfalsifiable dogmatism to the skeptics. They'll say that skeptics are in the grip of their own presuppositions and confirmation bias and tunnel vision, where any evidence that challenges the official or mainstream version of events is assumed to be false or unreliable from the outset, giving no room for this evidence to receive a fair hearing.

6. The Skeptic's Response

So, how does the skeptic respond at this point? Well, I think we should all be grateful for the education. The history of programs like MK-ULTRA and COINTELPRO is sobering, we should all know it and we should reflect on it.

But the skeptic is going to point out that, by their very nature, grand conspiracy theories make claims that go beyond what can be established by publicly available evidence. It's one thing to say that MK-ULTRA *investigated* mind control techniques, it's another thing to say that the government has *actually succeeded* in developing techniques that can do the job that conspiracy theorists require them to, and that they're currently in operation right now.

Similarly, it's one thing to say that the government uses the media as a propaganda tool, it's quite another thing to say that all forms of mainstream information are under the control of a cabal of elites that are using them to implement the agenda of a totalitarian world government.

At best, the skeptic will grant that the sordid history of secret government activities and covert scientific programs helps to establish the *possibility* of the sort of top-down control that's required, but possibility is

a very weak epistemic notion. Lots of things are possible, but still highly unlikely. It's logically possible that governments have been conspiring with aliens for decades, it's logically possible that the government is using cell phones to transmit mind controlling signals into our brains, it's logically possible that we're all living in the Matrix — but mere logical possibility doesn't give us positive reasons to think any of this is true.

So the ball falls back into the conspiracy theorists' court. The skeptic is asking for evidence for their more substantive claims about covert activities, evidence that will withstand critical scrutiny in the public square. And they're asking that conspiracy theorists not respond to challenges by continual ad hoc revision of their theory, or accusing the challenger of being a dis-informer or a stooge of the elites.

7. Advice to Both Sides

Now, not that anyone's asking me, but if I might offer some advice to those sympathetic to grand conspiracy theories, it's that you should take this request seriously. Because if you don't, then there's virtually no chance that your views will be taken seriously by a broader mainstream public. Now maybe that's not your goal, maybe you think the mainstream is compromised beyond hope and you're resigned to fighting a guerrilla war from the jungle and picking up defectors as they come. All I'm saying is that there are people who will listen to you if you engage them on terms that don't presuppose the truth of your worldview and the falsity of theirs right out of the gate.

And if I might offer some advice to skeptics, it's two-fold: one, resist the urge to label all conspiracy theorists as irrational and paranoid, at least if your goal is to have some kind of productive dialogue with them; and two, consider seriously the possibility that they may know more than you on certain subjects, like, for example, the history of covert government operations. This is necessary, I think, for beginning a dialogue in openness and good faith, rather than prejudging the conclusion at the very outset.