21

THE APPLIED EPISTEMOLOGY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

An overview

M R. X. Dentith and Brian L. Keeley[1]

1. Introduction

In some sense, conspiracy theories have been around as long as people have plotted secretly in the attempt to bring about ends in situations where doing so publicly and individually would seem less likely to succeed. In other words, conspiracy theories have likely been around as long as humans have conspired, probably since *Homo* became *sapiens*.[2] However, with the coming of the twenty-first century, especially in a political context, concern over conspiracy theories has seemingly taken on an urgent tone. There have always been concerns over conspiracies, whether it be the Freemasons of the eighteenth century, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in the nineteenth century, or the Red Scare and the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy in the twentieth century. But now some feel the need to talk of conspiracy theories (and the conspiracy theorists who hold them) as a social problem in need of a solution. For example, in 2008, former Administrator of the U. S. White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, and current Harvard Law Professor, Cass Sunstein co-authored a paper with Adrian Vermeule that speaks of contemporary conspiracy theorists as suffering from a "crippled epistemology." In response, they seek "to offer suggestions for governmental responses, both as a matter of policy and as a matter of law" (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008: 203). Philosophers have also weighed in: Quassim Cassam (2016) has discussed conspiracy theorists under the rubric of "vice epistemology" (a play on the label "virtue epistemology"), presenting conspiracy theorists as people suffering from excessive epistemic vices.

This academic, professional, and philosophical attention to the phenomenon of conspiracy theories is relatively recent, although the negative and foreboding turn it has taken in some contemporary discussions harkens back to what may be the wellspring of twentieth-century philosophical concern with them. In a short passage in the second volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Sir Karl Popper warns against what he derides as "the conspiracy theory of society." This is a tendency to explain the events of history by (perhaps unfalsifiable) reference to the mysterious machinations of off-stage plotters: "It is the view that whatever happens in society… are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups" (Popper 1972: 341). Such explanations lack utility at best and promote corrosive cynicism at worst – they are bad history, bad politics, or both.[3] Similarly, starting in 1964, historian Richard J. Hofstadter warned

of the rise of "movements of suspicious discontent" within mid-twentieth century American politics and of the "paranoid style" of thinking, particularly among disaffected constituencies.

The upshot of these discussions of conspiracy theorizing is that there is something wrong with conspiracy theories themselves, or with the individuals who author, promote, or entertain them. While this is a hypothesis deserving of consideration, making good on what precisely is supposed to be wrong with conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing is a surprisingly daunting task. The chief difficulty for such a task is revealed by the equally plausible hypothesis that there are many theories involving conspiracies that appear to have significant – if not overwhelming – merit, from the role of U.S. President Richard Nixon's administration officials in the Watergate burglary and subsequent cover-up, the role of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation in infiltrating political opposition groups in the late 1960s, to the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. History is littered with examples of actual conspiracies, many of which were initially ignored because they were deemed to be *mere* "conspiracy theories." The task here, then, is to figure out how to separate the wheat from the chaff; to discover some "mark of the incredible" to help us distinguish those theories that we should reject from those that we should accept.

Our view is that such a simple-minded task is simply a mug's game, and our discussion below will point to why we believe this is the case. More significant, though, is our belief that the question of which theories to accept and which to reject is, in an important sense, ill-formed. To see why, one must reflect on the observation that perhaps unlike theories in the sciences, if there is knowledge of conspiracy theories, it is largely improvised knowledge.

2. Conspiracy theories defined

Our first order of business is definitional. Just what is a conspiracy theory? To answer that question, we need to get to grips with the most minimal definition of what counts as conspiratorial. We argue that the most minimal conception of what counts as a conspiracy should satisfy the following three conditions:

1. There exists or existed some set of agents with a plan;
2. Steps have been taken by the agents to minimize public awareness of what they are up to;
3. Some end is (or was) desired by the agents.

These conditions are both individually necessary and jointly sufficient for some activity to be classified as conspiratorial. Such a definition rules in a lot of everyday activity as conspiratorial; the organization of a surprise party, secret meetings about a hostile takeover of a company, and disinformation campaigns are all covered by this definition.

We argue that such a minimal definition is necessary when analyzing these things called "conspiracy theories." Such a definition, being general, means that there are no artificial restrictions on what counts as "properly" conspiratorial, and this is important, because restricting what counts as conspiratorial has flow-on effects when it comes to analyzing conspiracy theories. It is fair to say that many beliefs about the likeliness or unlikeliness of conspiracy theories hinge on the definition of what counts as conspiratorial. If you build into your definition of what counts as conspiratorial that such events are unlikely, as Karl Popper does (1962), or that what is properly conspiratorial – say, political conspiracies – is only a subset of conspiratorial activity generally, then that changes our understanding as to whether belief in theories about conspiracies (defined, for example, as either *prima facie* unlikely or restricted in scope to momentous, political activities) can ever be considered rational.

3. Generalist vs. Particularist approaches

The rationality of belief in conspiracy theories is, of course, the vexing question at the heart of the matter. Much ink has been spilt dissecting belief in these things called "conspiracy theories," and while there is no clear consensus on the matter, there is a sharp, dividing line between two camps of conspiracy theory theorists. In an article called "Conspiracy Theories and Fortuitous Data," Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor (2010) argue that when we look at the academic literature about these things called "conspiracy theories" there are, broadly, two camps of theorists: the Generalists and the Particularists.

According to the *Generalist*, the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories. On this view, conspiratorial thinking *qua* conspiracy thinking is itself irrational.[4]

The *Particularist*, however, denies that the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without first considering particular conspiracy theories. That is to say, the Particularist claims that no matter our views about conspiracy theories generally, we cannot dismiss particular conspiracy theories; rather, we must evaluate them on their individual merits (Buenting and Taylor 2010: 568–69).

So, when we talk about conspiracy theories generally being unwarranted, this kind of view falls under the rubric of Generalism. If we phrase talk of belief in conspiracy theories being warranted in a range of cases, and the only way to work out whether belief in a particular conspiracy theory is warranted is by looking at the evidence, then this is a Particularist view.

It is fair to say that the Generalist view is deeply embedded in much of the academic work on belief in conspiracy theories. From the work of Karl Popper (1962) and Richard Hofstadter (1964) to more recent work such as that of Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2008), Quassim Cassam (2016), and David Robert Grimes (2016), belief in conspiracy theories is taken to be generally pathological. It is also fair to say that much of the recent work in philosophy bucks this trend; philosophers such as Charles Pigden (1995, 2006), Lee Basham (2002), David Coady (2006), and ourselves (Keeley 1999; Dentith 2014) have presented a variety of arguments which share the common theme of challenging Generalist construals of the irrationality of belief in conspiracy theories by showing that, in a range of cases, belief in particular conspiracy theories turns out to be warranted.

4. Conspiracy theory theorists and conspiracists

Given the above, it is helpful in the analysis of these things called "conspiracy theories" to introduce some terms and concepts to help frame the discussion about what is going on when we talk about conspiracy theories and the various attitudes toward them in the academic literature. For example, one of us identifies the set of people named in the previous paragraph as "conspiracy theory theorists"; that is, academics who think that conspiracy theories are phenomena worth studying (Dentith 2014: 8). In other words, the conspiracy theory theorist thinks that the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing is worth developing theories about. Philosophers, in particular, are used to this somewhat "meta" stance, but there are also conspiracy theory theorists in political science (e.g., Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent), social psychology (Karen Douglas), media studies (Jack Z. Bratich), to name only a few scholars in a few academic disciplines. These conspiracy theory theorists do not promulgate (or denigrate) specific theories – at least, that is not their primary aim – rather, they are interested in explaining the nature of such theories, under what conditions they arise, what impact they have on other phenomena, etc.

As Dentith describes it, within academia there is a subset of conspiracy theory theorists – the conspiracy theory skeptics – who believe that there is not sufficient rationality underlying conspiracy theories such that any theory of them is worth pursuing. These skeptics are, in the parlance of Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor, Generalists (as they take it there is a general case of a *prima facie* suspicion toward these things we call 'conspiracy theories'). On this view, to believe in conspiracy theories is to be irrational. There is a bit of useful terminology, credited to historian Daniel Pipes (1997): Pipes observes that, "Conspiracy theories have a way of growing on a person, to the point that they become a way of seeing life itself. This is *conspiracism,* the *paranoid style,* or the *hidden-hand mentality*" (1997: 22, emphasis in original).[5] From this, Dentith takes the terms "conspiracism" and "conspiracist," which are meant to capture the contemporary, pejorative sense of conspiracy theory, as when one derides a proffered explanation by responding, "Oh, that's just a conspiracy theory!" As Dentith puts it, "A conspiracist is someone who believes in the existence of conspiracies without good reason. The terms 'conspiracism' and 'conspiracist', then, are pejorative labels which reflect a pathological belief in conspiracies *sans* evidence" (2014: 33, emphasis in original).[6]

The charge of conspiracism is a knock against a person; a charge that a given individual possesses the opposite of epistemic virtue; that they are guilty of a kind of *epistemic viciousness* (Cassam 2016; but see also Pigden 2016). It identifies the locus of concern with the person holding the theory, rather than with the theory itself. But this represents an important distinction in how one should go about studying the kind of improvised knowledge represented by many conspiracy theories. Should one focus on the theorists or on the theories? That is, if you think there is possibly a problem here, is the crux of this problem the people generating or believing the theories or is it rather with the theories produced? The charge of conspiracism implies the former.

5. How likely are conspiracy theories?

If we are concerned about evaluating particular conspiracy theories (as surely we are, no matter whether we sit on the side of "Conspiracy theories are typically unwarranted" or "Belief in conspiracy theories is justified in a range of cases"), one big question (as well as a potential significant problem), is the question of just how common conspiracies are.

For example, if we could state outright just how common conspiracies are here and now, we could then speak to the issue of how to set the burden of proof of people who propose conspiracy theories. After all, in a world where people rarely conspire, it would be understandable if we dismissed (or just played down) conspiracy theories upon hearing them.[7]

However, in a world where people conspire all the time, it would be inappropriate to dismiss talk of conspiracy theories *generally*. In such a world, the evidence and incidence of past conspiratorial activity should inform our judgments about the possibility of a conspiracy occurring here and now. This, in turn, means we should take any claim of conspiracy – a conspiracy theory – in such a world seriously. Nothing about this story tells us that the conspiracy theory in question will be warranted, because even in a highly conspired world, some – if not many – conspiracy theories may still turn out to be false.

Why is this important? Well, Lee Basham, for one, has explored how our idea of the prior probability of conspiracy affects our belief of whether theories about conspiracies are worth investigating. In discussing this issue, he presents an analogy of two families: one that "lives together in peace and high mutual regard; a family that supports itself in ways that are transparent to most of the members" and another "that has a history of stunning lies by its elders and

more influential members, a pattern of cliquish betrayals, a way of doing business in the larger society that makes deception and collusion a way of life" (Basham 2001: 65).

Basham takes it that the prior probability (or, more accurately, the perception by epistemic agents of the prior probability) "determines the birth and evidential development of conspiracy theories" (Basham 2001: 64). What we perceive to be the case about the kind of world in which we live – whether we come from the "good" or "bad" family – determines how likely we think certain kinds of theories are. If you live in a world chock-a-block with conspiracies, then you will think the world is highly conspired. Conversely, if you live in a world where conspiracies are rare, and even then seldom successful, then you will likely dismiss conspiracy theories in general as unlikely. As such, your beliefs about the prior probability of conspiracies in your society goes some way to motivating whether you will investigate or ignore putative claims of conspiracy. It is for this reason that we cannot make claims about the relative likelihood of conspiracy theories without considering claims about the probabilities of conspiracies themselves.[8]

This is all to say that our judgment of just how likely conspiracies are informs our judgment about whether we should take any particular conspiracy theory seriously. With this in mind, when we hear about some conspiracy theory, we need to ask the salient question: "Should we investigate it?" After all, if it turned out that there really is a conspiracy in existence, surely we ought to know about it. Therefore, what is the threshold for investigating such claims in order to find out?

This brings us back to those pesky definitions of both "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory." Our judgment of prior probability of how conspiratorial the world is depends to a certain extent on just what we think gets ruled in and out of both our definition of "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory." Take, for example, conspiracy: Pete Mandik (like Popper before him) claims that theories about known conspiracies should not be considered conspiracy theories. Why? Well, if a conspiracy has not been kept secret, then it is not the kind of thing we typically talk about when discussing conspiracy theories (Mandik 2007: 213).

The notion that a conspiracy is something that has been kept secret is not itself surprising. However, if we restrict talk of what counts as properly conspiratorial to cases where the conspiracy is never revealed, then we have a problem. Such a definition artificially restricts what counts as conspiratorial and has some strange corollaries. For one thing, if we accept such a stipulation, then there is a question as to whether conspirators could believe in the existence of their own conspiracies. Given that conspiracies are meant to be kept secret, if anyone knows about the conspiracy, then it is not being kept properly secret. Now, someone running a critique such as Mandik's could and should respond by saying that the conspiracy must be kept secret to people outside the set of conspirators. However, in this case, the only people who could reasonably posit a conspiracy theory would be the people who have good grounds to believe it to be true – to wit, the conspirators.[9]

It follows, then, that from such a definition, conspiracy theories themselves will be unlikely in a trivial sense, because if someone outside the conspiracy posits the existence of a conspiracy, then either the conspiracy was not kept properly secret – and thus is not, after all, a theory about a conspiracy – or the conspiracy – should it exist – was kept secret and thus the conspiracy theorist has no grounds to believe it. In either case, belief in the conspiracy theory will be irrational because it cannot, by definition, be a belief based upon good evidence for the existence of a conspiracy.

As we can see, an awful lot hinges on what is captured by the term "conspiracy." If we stick to the minimal definition of conspiracy defended earlier, then all that needs to be said when it comes to talk about the secretive nature of conspiracies is that conspirators will be more or less successful at keeping their existence and activities secret. If we rule out certain kinds of

conspiratorial activity for either not being secret enough (or as not being of interest), then that affects our probability estimates concerning how likely or unlikely conspiracies turn out to be.

Why is it important to make claims about the prior probability of conspiratorial activity? Well, a notable feature of the academic debate about the supposed irrationality of belief in conspiracy theories is how various theorists account for cases of warranted conspiratorial activity in the historical record. It turns out that whatever your definition of conspiracy, you might have to explain away how examples of known conspiratorial activity (and theories about that activity) are either not really conspiracies, or not the proper subject of conspiracy theories.

Of course, our estimates as to how likely conspiracies are will vary over time. In a closed society – such as that of the *Ancien Régime* in pre-Revolutionary France – conspiracies were not just common, but the standard operating procedure for the monarchical government. More open societies (presumably societies somewhat like ours, although any conspiracy theorist worth their salt will contest this) may well be less conspired. However, defining away particular cases of known conspiracies as *not secret enough* moves the problem of assessing the likelihood of conspiracy theories away from talk of the evidence to simply being a matter of definitions.

So, how likely – in an independent sense – are conspiracies? On one level this is not an easy question to answer, because we do not know. This is, after all, an empirical question. On another level, however, we can say that we typically artificially lower the independent likeliness of conspiracies just by defining away examples of conspiracies. As one of us has argued (Dentith 2016), it is fair to say that people either underestimate or underplay both historical and contemporary accounts of events which cite conspiracies as salient causes. Part of this relies on the definitional issue raised earlier. How we define what counts as conspiratorial, or what is the proper subject of a conspiracy theory heavily affects (a) just how common we think conspiratorial activity is, and (b) whether we have grounds to be suspicious of theories about conspiracies.

This, at the very least, suggests that conspiracies are more independently likely than most of us typically think. Of course, claiming we typically underestimate the independent likeliness of conspiracies does not mean that we should consider conspiracies independently likely as salient causes for all kinds of events.

6. Conspiracy theories as improvised knowledge

In some sense, conspiracy theories are theories like any other. Yet there is something special about the term "conspiracy theory." Take, for example, scientific theories. There are an awful lot of scientific theories being generated on a daily basis, many of which – in the fullness of time – will turn out to be false.[10] The process of assessing scientific theories is one of sorting out the wheat from the chaff. Yet we do not think of scientific theories as inherently or *prima facie* unwarranted. Rather, we realize that the process of discovering scientific truths requires postulating new theories, testing said theories, and abandoning bad theories for good ones.

So, one way in which conspiracy theories are different from other, related areas – such as the sciences – is that the issue is not so much about what we know or don't know, or even about what we are warranted or not warranted to believe, but, rather, it is about what calls for investigation, or perhaps even merits a skeptical response. And as the example of scientific theories underlines, saying that something *calls for investigation* doesn't necessarily mean that we, ourselves, are capable of carrying out the called-for investigation. This, in turn, points to the "improvised" element of the epistemology of conspiracy theories. In the case of science and medicine, there is a clearly defined group of experts, as well as a means of disseminating knowledge, and the rest of us non-experts are supposed to ingest and trust those results. But this is not the case when it comes to those phenomena conspiracy theories tend to be about.

Yes, there are investigative reporters, and official agencies, but it is a much more haphazard epistemic system because there are no recognized experts in these things we call "conspiracy theories." (For example, most of us are not climatologists, and thus claims about the complex climate models that underpin the claim that anthropogenic climate change is a serious and immediate threat – and not a conspiracy by the Reds posing as the Greens – is something most of us have to take on a certain amount of trust.) Since there are no equivalent experts in the case of conspiracy theories, it is up to citizens to make a stink and push for further investigation by the designated experts when the available explanations are unsatisfying in one way or another. This is especially true in a democracy. Notice that a significant amount of recent conspiratorial activity has been uncovered by the work of such loose-knit organizations as Wikileaks or Anonymous, or by such lone whistleblowers as Edward Snowden (apparently at great personal cost). That there aren't clear parallels to Wikileaks and Snowden in the world of science and medicine indicates the different epistemic situations at play here.[11]

The result of this situation is that there is a significantly higher degree of uncertainty in theories about the presence or absence of conspiracies in the social worlds of politics, business, and other social domains that, as we described above, are not uncommonly chock-a-block with opportunity, means, and motive for collective, clandestine activity. As one of us has argued elsewhere (Keeley 2007), agnosticism about a claim is not necessarily called for when one has investigated, and corroborating evidence is not forthcoming. However, in situations where investigation has not been carried out – or where the process of investigation is, in fact, more haphazard and fraught with inadequacies and challenges – agnosticism is concomitantly more merited.

This point is relevant to the further complaint leveled against some conspiracy theorists that they hold mutually contradictory theories. For example, it has been suggested that some conspiracy theorists actively entertain *both* the theory that President John F. Kennedy was murdered by the American "military industrial complex" (because of his, in their eyes, disastrous ideas about foreign policy) *and* that he was accidentally shot by a member of his Secret Service detail in the aftermath of Lee Oswald's wayward shots at his car (a fact later covered up by the embarrassed agency charged with his protection). On the surface, to entertain two such mutually exclusive explanations of the events of November 22, 1963, would appear to smack of incoherence. If, however, they are understood as *interesting avenues of investigation* rather than beliefs, then there's no *prima facie* problem with holding contradictory theories.

To see more clearly why this is the case, we need only to look at a related class of theories that hold a similar relationship to investigation: theories of criminal action (of which – no surprise – theories of political assassination are but one striking example). Take, for instance, the fact that a good homicide detective might investigate the possibility the husband had the wife killed *and* she accidentally stumbled onto a burglary in progress and was killed as a result. Both hypotheses cannot be true, but until you know which one (if either), the good detective should consider both. The improvised nature of belief and investigation into conspiracy theories is similar.

7. Investigating conspiracy theories

How would one, then, go about investigating some conspiracy theory? Even if we end up thinking that there might be an awful lot of conspiracies out there (a view informed by what kind of conspired or unconspired society we believe we live in), surely a great many of them are going to turn out to be unwarranted.

Now, there is a tendency among generalists to claim that if a conspiracy were going on, then we would know about it (presumably because conspiracies always leak), or that there are sufficient checks and balances in place to ensure that – by-and-large – those who hold power in Western societies will not get away with acting conspiratorially. Yet there is another approach to this issue we should consider, one philosophers such as Charles Pigden (1995) and Lee Basham (2001) have long challenged us to acknowledge, a point which really should be basic to anyone's understanding of politics and business: conspiracies are everywhere, and not just that; they are normal.

If conspiratorial activity is normal in everyday life, why would we think it is abnormal (and thus accusations thereof being deserving of ridicule) in corporate or political life? After all, we still live in largely hierarchical societies, where much information comes down from the top. If we acknowledge that those at the top act as conspiratorially as everyone else down the line, then we have to question how we evaluate the claims that emanate from such information hierarchies.

That is to say, if we accept (and surely we do) that conspiratorial activity is not exactly rare, why are we so loathe to talk about it when it comes to government and corporate activity? The answer is, we think, a combination of the common wisdom (everyone thinks this, because everyone has been told to think this by people who already thought it in the past!) as well as a certain kind of establishmentarian thinking (it is best people think of conspiracy theories derisively, because we don't really want people questioning the very underpinnings of our Western democracies).

In other words, the kind of thing we are told we are interested in when talking about theories about conspiracies turn out to be theories about conspiracies that are typically unlikely (or, at least, epistemically suspicious). This, at the very least, is the research project that drives much of the work in social psychology, wherein belief in conspiracy theories is taken to be *prima facie* problematic because the *truth* of such theories is taken to be unlikely. The project in the social sciences is often about getting to the root causes of belief in such theories. Given that it is trivial to list off examples of weird and wacky conspiracy theories believed by all sorts of people, it is understandable that social scientists have asked, "Why do people believe weird things?" However, the mistake, surely, is to then characterize conspiracy theories as *inherently* weird and unwarranted.

Characterizing certain kinds of conspiracy theories as unlikely seems fair enough (although that alone does not tell you that such theories are unwarranted), but restricting the definition of what counts as a conspiracy theory generally, such that all such theories are unlikely commits the same basic error as restricting the definition of what counts as a conspiracy. Not just that, but by restricting talk of conspiracy theories to a discussion of *prima facie* unlikely hypotheses, we end up dismissing conspiracy theories out of hand for just being conspiracy theories.

Now, the conspiracy theory skeptics are right to be interested in conspiracy theories, because such theories present an interesting problem. On the one hand, there are so many conspiracy theories that it is hard to know when – if ever – we should take any of them seriously, let alone expend resources in investigating them.

On the other hand, if some claim about the existence of conspiracy, say, involving the members of an influential, public institution turned out to be true, then we would be obliged to take action. The existence of conspiracies does not just threaten our trust in the influential institutions that make up our societies, they can also pose a direct threat to members of the public.

For example, imagine you've heard stories that the police and upper echelons of government are protecting a group of high-profile sexual offenders from investigation and prosecution. Such a conspiracy would seem unthinkable, because surely this kind of thing could not happen

(because it is unthinkable), and if it had happened, it would have been revealed to the public by the authorities (because who could keep such unthinkable acts secret).

Except it did happen. As the recent Operation Yewtree investigation in the UK has shown, prominent Britons (and at least one Australian) in the seventies and eighties not only successfully sexually predated on young men and women, but the attempts to expose this scandal were at best ignored, and at worse, covered up by influential members of British society.

There are numerous other examples, such as the Moscow Show Trials of the 1930s, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964, and, of course, Watergate (to name but a few). In each case someone or some set of bodies that claimed 'Conspiracy!' were charged with being conspiracy theorists and only later vindicated for being right in the first place.

Each and every one of us has a limited set of hours in a day, some of which are taken up with the necessities of day-to-day living, and others of which we apportion according to our needs and desires. Questioning each and every piece of information we hear, whether it be from the government, local business leaders, or just the odd neighbors who live across the street, would be both time consuming and arduous. What we need, then, is epistemic and ethical guidance on these issues. We need to know what we should be looking out for, and also who to trust. Not just with respect to what is said, or who said it, but also with respect to who can be reasonably relied upon to assess the claims that fall outside our epistemic remits.

The risks are real. In an environment in which people take a dim view of conspiracy theories, conspiracies may multiply and prosper. Conversely, in an environment in which conspiracy theories are taken seriously and investigated by journalists, police and the like, conspiracies should be much more likely to fail. Thus, influential institutions, and the people who run them, are more likely to be trustworthy if they are not automatically trusted, but, rather, are subject to the vigilance of, say, an investigative press which does not think it a mark of intellectual sophistication to dismiss conspiracy theories out of hand, and a public who know not just when they are obliged to ask questions, but when they can expect others to do likewise.

8. Conclusion

As we have seen, a lot depends on how we define "conspiracy," "conspiracy theory," and "conspiracy theorist," with much of the academic debate over the warrant of belief in conspiracy theories being very much predicated on which side of the definitional coin you take. This speaks very much to the improvised nature of conspiracy theories in general; there are no accredited experts, no institutions of learning devoted to studying such things, and, as such, there is little consensus on these things called "conspiracy theories." This has led some scholars – such as David Coady (2012) and Lance deHaven-Smith (2013) – to argue that we should drop the terms "conspiracy theory" and "conspiracy theorist." Rather, they suggest that we should focus on conspiratorial explanations and the evidence for and against them.

We advise against such a move. While it is tempting to wipe the slate clean, and approach talk of conspiracies in a fresh (less pejoratively labeled) light, all such a move does is further cement the pejorative take on these things called "conspiracy theories" in public discourse. Indeed, while there might be some debate over how we define both conspiracies and conspiracy theories, there is much interesting work to be done with them. The improvised nature of such theories – and belief in them – is fertile soil for the applied epistemologist. From the analysis of issues such as how our definition of what counts as a conspiracy informs how conspired we think society is, to talk about how we should appraise the merits of theories concerning conspiracies, the philosophical discussion of these things called "conspiracy theories" raises interesting – and, we argue, essential – questions. For example, what obligations – if any – do we

have when we find out about some putative conspiracy? Or how, exactly, should we proceed when investigating conspiracy theories? While conspiracy theories might sometimes be thought of as an unfortunate and undesirable epiphenomenon of political culture, an examination of issues such as these is of great interest to the applied epistemologist.

Notes

1 Order of authors is alphabetical. Both authors contributed equally to this chapter.
2 Perhaps it goes back even further than that, if what primatologists tell us about the social interactions and social intelligence of our ape relatives is true, e.g., as described in Frans De Waal's *Peacemaking Among Primates* (1990).
3 For a good exploration of how Popper's early discussions of conspiracy theories are misguided, see Pigden (1995).
4 It is logically possible that there could be generalists who argue that all conspiracy theories are warranted, but we can find no examples of academics espousing such a view.
5 The term "paranoid style" comes from the work of Richard Hofstadter (1964), but its current formulation in the social science literature on belief in conspiracy theories owes itself more to Pipes's reformulation of the concept than it does to Hofstadter's initial discussion.
6 For a more fulsome analysis of the terms 'conspiracism' and 'conspiracist', see Dentith's "The Problem of Conspiracism" (2017).
7 That does not mean that such claims should not be investigated, of course. Unless you are certain conspiracies do not occur in your society, the threat of a conspiracy even in a largely unconspired world is something worth taking seriously. We are merely committed to saying that in such an unconspired world, it is understandable as to why claims of conspiracy might be treated with due skepticism.
8 For further discussion of the role that prior probabilities play in judging our beliefs about the possibility of conspiracies happening here and now, see "When Inferring to a Conspiracy Theory Might Be the Best Explanation" (Dentith 2016).
9 For further discussion of the role of secrecy in understanding belief in particular conspiracy theories, see "Secrecy and Conspiracy" (Dentith and Orr 2017).
10 Within philosophy of science, this claim is discussed under the label of the "pessimistic induction" or the "pessimistic meta-induction." As glossed in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "If one considers the history of scientific theories in any given discipline, what one typically finds is a regular turnover of older theories in favor of newer ones, as scientific knowledge develops. From the point of view of the present, most past theories must be considered false; indeed, this will be true from the point of view of most times. Therefore, by enumerative induction (that is, generalizing from these cases), surely theories at any given time will ultimately be replaced and regarded as false from some future perspective. Thus, current theories are also false." The *locus classicus* of this position is Laudan (1981). For a more recent discussion of debates over this proposal, see Chakravartty (2011: Section 3.3), the source of the preceding quoted passage.
11 Although the computer hacker(s) behind the exposure of the "Climategate" emails may indicate that these situations aren't always as different as we are suggesting here.

References

Basham, L. (2001). "Living with the Conspiracy." *The Philosophical Forum*, 32(3): 265–80. Reprinted in Coady (2006).

Basham, L. (2002). "Malevolent Global Conspiracy." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 34(1): 91–103. Reprinted in Coady (2006).

Buenting, J., and Taylor, J. (2010). "Conspiracy Theories and Fortuitous Data." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 40(4): 567–78.

Cassam, Q. (2016). "Vice Epistemology." *The Monist*, 99: 159–80.

Chakravartty, A. (2011). "Scientific Realism," in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition). Retrieved October 27, 2016, from http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/scientific-realism/.

Coady, D. (ed.). (2006). *Conspiracy Theories: The philosophical debate*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Coady, D. (2012). *What to Believe Now: Applying epistemology to contemporary issues.* Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

deHaven-Smith, L. (2013). *Conspiracy Theory in America*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

de Waal, F. (1990). *Peacemaking among Primates*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dentith, M. R. X. (2014). *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dentith, M. R. X. (2016). "When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation." *Social Epistemology*, 30(5–6): 572–91. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2016.1172362.

Dentith, M. R. X. (2017). "The Problem of Conspiracism." *Argumenta*, 3(2): 327–43.

Dentith, M. R. X., and Orr, M. (2017). "Secrecy and Conspiracy." *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology.* Early access http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/epi.2017.9.

Grimes, D. R. (2016). "On the Viability of Conspiratorial Beliefs." *PLOS One*, 11(1): e0147905. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0147905.

Hofstadter, R. (1964). "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *Harper's Magazine*, 229(1374): 77–86.

Keeley, B. L. (1999). "Of Conspiracy Theories." *Journal of Philosophy*, 96: 109–26. Reprinted in Coady (2006).

Keeley, B. L. (2007). "God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory." *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology*, 4(2): 135–49.

Laudan, L. (1981). "A Confutation of Convergent Realism." *Philosophy of Science*, 48: 19–49.

Mandik, P. (2007). "Shit Happens." *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology*, 4(2): 205–18.

Pigden, C. (1995). "Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 25(1): 3–34. Reprinted in Coady (2006).

Pigden, C. (2006). "Complots of Mischief," in D. Coady (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories: The philosophical debate*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Pigden, C. (2016). "Are Conspiracy Theorists Epistemically Vicious?" in K. Lippert-Rasmussen, K. Brownlee, and D. Coady (eds.), *A Companion to Applied Philosophy*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Pipes, D. (1997). *Conspiracy: How the paranoid style flourishes and where it comes from*. New York: Free Press.

Popper, K. R. (1962). *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The high tide of prophecy: Hegel, Marx and the aftermath*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Popper, K. R. (1972). *Conjectures and Refutations: The growth of scientific knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Sunstein, C., and A. Vermeule (2008). "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and cures." *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17(2): 202–27.