1.4

PHILOSOPHY AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Introduction

Philosophers have always been interested in conspiracies, but the philosophical debate on conspiracy theories is a pretty recent phenomenon. Karl Popper (1950) wrote about the ‘conspiracy theory of society’, but his discussion concerned issues of intentional explanations in general rather than conspiracy theories proper. In this chapter, we will review the philosophical debate and distinguish between four questions that philosophers have considered. The questions we have in mind are (1) the conceptual question of what the appropriate definition of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is; (2) the epistemic question about the rationality and justification of conspiratorial beliefs; (3) the moral question of the ethical status of conspiracy theorising; and (4) the practical question of how decision-makers should deal with conspiracy theories. Obviously, the questions are closely connected to one another. Whether conspiracy theories are, generally speaking, plausible or implausible explanations depends on what is meant by the concept. The ethical status of conspiracy theorising in turn depends partly on the plausibility of conspiracy theories. Finally, whether we should fight against the spreading of conspiracy theories surely depends, at least to some extent, on the ethical status of the theories. Therefore, by defining the key concept suitably, one can try to settle most of the questions in the debate – not an unusual situation in philosophy.

The aim of this chapter is to explain how philosophy could help studying conspiracy theories. The best way to explain this is to review critically the recent debates in philosophy of conspiracy theories. We will concentrate mainly on approaches that represent ‘analytical’ philosophy rather than ‘continental’ philosophy.

The question of the definition

Examples of conspiracy theories include claims that deal with issues such as the death of Princess Diana, the origin of A.I.D.S. and the truth of 9/11. The concept of conspiracy theory is commonly used in a pejorative sense. According to common understanding, there is something suspect in being a supporter of a conspiracy theory. People may even blame someone whose view of the world resembles that of a conspiracy theorist (Dentith 2017). This suggests that, in ordinary language, people make a distinction between conspiracy theories and other explanations that refer to
conspiracies. The latter are conceived as unproblematic. For example, the attempt to murder Emperor Nero and the 1953 Iranian coup d’état are usually explained by referring to conspiracies, but people do not think that there is something strange in this appeal to a specific form of political action. They find ordinary historical explanations that refer to conspiracies appropriate. Similarly, in many cases, they find political explanations that refer to conspiracies as appropriate. For instance, the Volkswagen emission scandal is usually explained by referring to a conspiracy and a gross deception, yet people do not think that there must be a better explanation than the one that involves the concept of conspiracy. Normal adults usually know that conspiracies happen and that there is no more exoticism in conspiracies than there is, say, in corruption.1

Philosophers disagree about whether conspiracy theories should be distinguished from ordinary social explanations that refer to conspiracies. Some philosophers have defended the idea that they should (Keeley 1999: 116; Coady 2003: 206; Levy 2007: 187; Räikkä 2018). In their view, conspiracy theories are explanations that refer to conspiracies or plots, and are not supported by the appropriate epistemic authorities, such as mainstream media, investigative journalists, various state authorities and agencies, the scientific community and professional historians. This understanding of the concept reflects the common language intuition that conspiracy theories are ‘unofficial’, and that they are not supported by the received view. The understanding is consistent with the fact that some top politicians seem to defend conspiracy theories. To say that conspiracy theories are ‘unofficial’ is to say only that they are not supported by the epistemic authorities, not that political authorities could not support them.

However, some philosophers have suggested that all the explanations that refer to conspiracies should be called ‘conspiracy theories’ (Pigden 2007: 230; Dentith 2016a: 587; Basham 2018). Conventional terminology should be revised. It is not altogether clear what is the motivation behind the revisionist move, but there are two important arguments here. First, anyone who would like it to be true that ‘Many conspiracy theories are justified’ can make their wish come true by defining the concept of ‘conspiracy theory’ so that ordinary conspiracy explanations are counted as conspiracy theories. Second, the stigmatisation of conspiracy theories may influence the journalists’ and others’ willingness to evaluate those theories fairly, that is, by concentrating on evidence presented. By refusing to use the concept of conspiracy theory in a pejorative sense we can, perhaps, increase the possibility that all the explanations that refer to conspiracies get an appropriate treatment, and not only those explanations that are supported by the epistemic authorities (cf. Coady 2012: 122). It has been argued that:

We should not use the terms ‘conspiracy theory’, ‘conspiracy theorist’ or any of the language associated with these terms. Each time we do so, we are implying, even if we do not mean to, that there is something wrong with believing, wanting to investigate, or giving any credence at all, to the possibility that powerful people (and especially governments or government agencies of Western countries) are engaged in secretive or deceptive behaviour.

(Coady 2018)

Obviously, an explanation of a political event should not be rejected only by claiming that it is ‘merely a conspiracy theory’ (Dentith 2016a: 582). Arguably, conspiracy theories are rejected on irrational grounds every now and then, for instance, on grounds that their conclusions are unpleasant (Räikkä, Basham 2018).

Ideally, however, conspiracy theories would get fair treatment even if we do not reject the distinction between conspiracy theories and ordinary conspiracy explanations. Furthermore, it
is unclear whether philosophers’ decision to revise language would solve the problem (i.e. if there is one). Therefore, the grounds for the revisionist move fail to convince.

The epistemic status of conspiracy theories

It is often argued that, historically speaking, governments and business enterprises have frequently engaged in ‘morally dodgy’ conspiracies and that, therefore, it is not foolish to think that they do so, and foolish to think that they do not do so (Pigden 2006: 165; Dentith 2016a: 585; Basham 2018). However, for one reason or another, conspiracy theorists have not been successful in revealing conspiracies. Overwhelming evidence from history gives us a fairly clear idea of who has revealed conspiracies; usually they are revealed by historians, social scientists, research institutions, state agencies or investigative journalists. The role of leakers, who are either members of the plots or people who are otherwise close to the conspirators and know enough, have always been crucial. They have helped journalists and others. Therefore, the implication of the fact that we know of many conspiracies is that the conventional epistemic authorities seem able to reveal conspiracies and confirm their existence, not that conspiracy theories have managed to renew our understanding of the causes of social phenomena. If conspiracy theorists have any role in revealing conspiracies, it is that they provide others with a motivation to study further some political or economic issues.2

Are conspiracy theories, generally speaking, implausible – given that they challenge the views supported by the epistemic authorities (cf. Harris 2018)? One could argue that, as a group, conspiracy theories are neither plausible nor implausible, and that some conspiracy theories are plausible while others are not (Dentith 2016b: 29). It is implausible to claim that ‘Nobody Died at Sandy Hook’ school shooting tragedy (Fetzer, Palecek 2015), but this does not show that all the other conspiracy theories are implausible as well. However, there is a fundamental problem with the claim that we cannot estimate conspiracy theories in general terms: It is not true. Although it is obvious that conspiracy theories should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis (Räikkä 2018), it still makes sense to ask whether they are, in the main, plausible or implausible (cf. Byford 2011: 18). ‘Generalism’ (that allows us to make a general judgment about the plausibility of conspiracy theories) is completely consistent with ‘particularism’ (that encourages us to evaluate individual theories on the basis of evidence). The answer to the question of whether conspiracy theories are, generally speaking, implausible depends on our view about the trustworthiness of institutions that we normally use in the acquisition of our beliefs. That is, the question of whether conspiracy theories are implausible turns into the question of whether mainstream media, investigative journalists, various state authorities and agencies, the scientific community and professional historians are, in the main, trustworthy. As far as we accept that, generally speaking, fact-gathering institutions work tolerably well, we must conclude that every conspiracy theory is prima facie implausible and that the burden of proof rests on the side of the conspiracy theorists.

The question of whether the ordinary epistemic authorities are, generally speaking, trustworthy is far too large to be considered here, but three points are important. First, our reliance upon the expertise of others is very extensive and almost automatic (Adler 1995: 136; Fricker 2006: 225; Lehrer 2006: 145; Lackey 2011: 71). Although the epistemic authorities work imperfectly and make mistakes, they are still the main social institutions that we use in the acquisition of our beliefs. This is why they are ‘epistemic authorities’ in the first place. In badly corrupted countries, people find it completely irrelevant what major newspapers and national or local authorities say about this and that (Uslaner 1999) but, in democratic countries, the trustworthiness of media, scientific community and state agencies is a default stance in the formation of
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beliefs. If we are not justified in acquiring our beliefs in the way we do, then most of our beliefs are unjustified.

Second, critical and rational people often suspect the information provided by the epistemic authorities, but the suspicion is usually based on beliefs that are supported by the other views of the same authorities – and not, say, by the views of miracle-mongers. In general, we know about the failures of epistemic authorities because they have produced information that helps us to notice the failures, perhaps with the help given by ‘citizen scientists’. A list of the failures of the epistemic authorities tends to support the claim that they work tolerably well, not the conclusion that they are untrustworthy.

Third, the supporters of conspiracy theories often think that ‘it is possible that we live in a society that merely looks open’ (Dentith 2018). However, those who claim that media, research institutes and so on can be untrustworthy and insincere seem to trust in them when they reveal conspiracies. In these cases, the epistemic authorities are considered perfectly trustworthy. This sort of selective trust need not be problematic, but surely a person who finds mainstream media, state agencies and so on generally untrustworthy should doubt them also when they reveal conspiracies. A person who seriously claims that all the ‘official’ experts who deny the existence of a conspiracy can be liars (see Dentith 2018) should probably add that all the ‘official’ experts who confirm the existence of a conspiracy can be liars as well. Perhaps the CIA’s secret mind control programme MKUltra never happened? After all, we know about it only because we are told about it and have passively adopted mainstream news, without starting our own research on the issue.

It is sometimes argued that some conspiratorial scenarios ‘are too “toxic” for our usual institutions of public information to disseminate to the public’ (Basham 2018: 73) and that the epistemic authorities ‘might be interested in downplaying the evidence’ when the news concerns ‘toxic truths’ (Dentith 2018). These are interesting claims but, historically speaking, the ‘usual institutions of public information’ have been able and willing to publish news that must have seemed very ‘toxic’ at the time. Mainstream media, investigative journalists and historians have written about political corruption, targeted killings, questionable military programmes and reported on outrageous frauds and insolent deceptions committed by people in high and honourable positions. The Washington Post (which is certainly not the most radical newspaper in the world) revealed the Watergate conspiracy. Nothing seems to be too ‘toxic’. It is true, however, that, in some cases, conspiracies get publicity surprisingly slowly even if they are revealed. For instance, the NSA spying system (the Echelon system) was originally leaked in 1972 and then discussed again on many occasions, but got more publicity only in 2013, after Edward Snowden’s revelations (Jansen, Martin 2015: 665). Whether the delay was due to the ‘toxicity’ of the issue is unclear. Another interesting example is doping in sport, and in particular cycling (the Lance Armstrong case). There were rumours for many, many years, but they only developed into a scandal at a particular point.

Critics of conspiracy theories think that conspiratorial beliefs not only conflict with the received views but are also problematic in other ways. Conspiracy theorists are said to be inconsistent (Wood et al. 2012: 772), use only a ‘sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources’ (Sunstein, Vermeule 2009: 204) and, in general, suffer from epistemic vices. According to critics, a conspiracy theorist is ‘gullible, dogmatic, closed-minded, cynical, prejudiced, and so on’ (Cassam 2016: 164). Furthermore, in many critics’ view, conspiracy theories are irrefutable, and an acceptance of a conspiracy theory leads to the situation in which a conspiracy theorist must make ‘claims of larger and larger conspiracies’ – at least when the evidence for a theory fails to obtain and the believer wants to hold onto the view (Keeley 1999: 126). These kinds of claims, however, sound unfair. Although conspiracy theories seem, generally speaking, implausible,
this does not imply that they must always include contradictory claims, or anything like that. (It is not inconsistent to think that Osama bin Laden may have died much before his ‘official’ dying day and that he may be alive (cf. Hagen 2018). A politically aware person who thinks that both theories are ‘live’ options is not irrational, although some critics of conspiracy theories have suggested that one should not believe in ‘contradictory conspiracy theories’ (Wood et al. 2012) or anything similar.)

Some conspiracy theories are fairly fine-grained, and the ‘Everyone is involved!’ move is quite rare. It would be misguided to think that all conspiracy theories must be false (Basham 2001, 2003, 2006; Hagen 2018). Epistemic authorities make mistakes and scientific misconduct is not uncommon. Perhaps a conspiracy theorist will one day reveal a conspiracy that is not revealed by the epistemic authorities; maybe it will be one in which an epistemic authority (such as a state agency) is involved. A person’s general trust in the media, government agencies and the court of law is consistent with the view that some of them have a mistaken view (or have lied) about a particular issue (Clarke 2002: 141; Coady 2003: 203).

The ethics of conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theorising is a form of human action and is thus an appropriate object of ethical evaluation. It is useful to distinguish between the ethical evaluation of conspiracy theorising in general and the ethical evaluation of individual theories. Possibly, conspiracy theorising is, ethically speaking, an undesirable phenomenon, but, still, certain individual conspiracy theories are morally unproblematic. It is also useful to distinguish between the ethical evaluation of developing and publishing conspiracy theories and the ethical evaluation of their inadvertent dissemination (say, by forwarding e-mails or website links). Possibly, active conspiracy theorising (by developing and publishing theories) has a different ethical status from the passive and inadvertent dissemination of conspiracy theories.

Those who find conspiracy theorising ethically approvable have argued that people not only have a moral right to develop and disseminate whatever conspiratorial thoughts they might have but also that conspiracy theories can be societally important and helpful in many ways. In particular, it has been argued that conspiracy theorists challenge ‘us to improve our social explanations’ (Clarke 2002: 148); that the theories can teach us to be critical and conscious citizens; and that the prevalence of conspiracy theories ‘helps to maintain openness in society’ (Clarke 2002: 148). According to defenders of conspiracy theorising, critics of conspiracy theories ‘could be accused of being (no doubt inadvertently) enemies of the open society, because they discourage an activity that is essential to its survival, conspiracy theorizing’ (Coady 2006: 170). Critics of conspiracy theories have provided conspirators ‘with an intellectually acceptable smokescreen behind which they can conceal their conspiratorial machinations’ (Pigden 1995: 4). ‘History shows there is a significant probability of political tyranny’s development in any society which is not attentive to what its politicians are doing’ (Basham, Dentith 2016: 13). The idea in most apologies of conspiracy theorising is that mainstream media and investigative journalists (who get help from leakers) are unable to satisfactorily fulfil their function as watchdogs. Conspiracy theorists are indispensable for supplementing their work or taking it on themselves.

Many philosophers and social scientists have criticised conspiracy theorising. It is frequently argued that conspiracy theories can produce and have produced socially undesirable consequences. When a conspiracy theory gets publicity, some people usually start to believe in it and that, in turn, can influence their behaviour (Sunstein 2014: 32; Douglas, Sutton 2015). The list of potentially, or actually, harmful conspiracy theories includes the ones that deal with vaccination or the extent of anthropogenic climate change. Some of the negative consequences
have been rather serious. Violent programmes against the Jews have often been fuelled by murky conspiracy theories (Swami 2012). Campaigns against vaccination have probably caused deaths in some countries. Of course, not all conspiracy theories are immediately dangerous. Claims such as ‘Shakespeare was somebody else’ and ‘The moon landing was faked’ are conspiracy theories (as they go against official narratives and refer to conspiracies), but are probably rather harmless, considered as individual theories.

Possibly, the main problem of conspiracy theories is that, considered together as a whole, they cast a massive shadow over the institutions that have epistemic functions in our lives and lessen general trust in ‘the behavior and motivations of other people and the social institutions they constitute’ (Keeley 1999: 126). In totalitarian societies where general trust is low, for example, people are unable to make rational long-term plans and reasonable personal investments. Lessening epistemic trust is ethically questionable, given that there are no grounds for a general suspicion (as there are in totalitarian societies). Conspiracy theories can therefore be seen as morally problematic and, possibly, as more problematic than other forms of sowing confusion and doubt. As opposed to science denialism or creationism, for instance, conspiracy theories tend to involve libels and false accusations that surely raise moral questions. Quite often, conspiracy theorists not only place people in a false light in the public eye but do so for their own ideological or personal benefit (Räikkä 2014: 81). We could say that, by conspiracy theorising, a bad thing is realised in a particularly bad way, that is, through libels and accusations against innocent people. Some conspiracy theories, for instance the above-mentioned theory that ‘Nobody Died at Sandy Hook’, show no concern for the feelings of the family members of the victims of the tragedy (Fetzer, Palecek 2015).

Suppose that conspiracy theories are morally problematic, say, because they bring us closer to the dystopia of a society where the trustworthiness of the fact-gathering institutions and the information they provide is not the default stance. Does it follow that conspiracy theorists are therefore morally blameworthy and responsible for a moral fault? Not necessarily. It can be argued that ‘we should refrain from being excessively moralistic’ since, in the case of a conspiracy theorist, ‘we should also be willing to admit the possibility that he can’t help himself’ (Cassam 2016: 169). Conspiracy theorists can be non-culpably ignorant, and possibly they cannot control their vices (Cassam 2016). This argument, however, is unconvincing. If a person who develops and publishes conspiracy theories does not know what they are doing – that they spread claims that go against common knowledge as true claims – they certainly should know it. Similarly, in the case of disseminators, they should realise what they are doing, even if their intentions may be harmless (say, a worry about the safety of certain vaccines). Perhaps the ordinary dissemination of (very odd) conspiracy theories should be compared to littering. Litterbugs may appreciate a clean environment but refuse to do their own share to maintain a clean environment. Although a single litterbug’s contribution can be small and harmless in their own eyes, the overall effect may be quite unpleasant. Both the ordinary disseminators of (very odd) conspiracy theories and litterbugs are responsible for their conduct, as they should realise what they are doing (Räikkä 2020). Whether the conspiracy theorists are collectively responsible for their conduct is an open question, but a case can be made that they are (Räikkä 2020).

Defenders of conspiracy theories sometimes claim that conspiracy theorists are just asking questions and that the point of the conspiracy theory is to highlight the fact that, in the public sphere, very few determine the beliefs of almost everyone else – that ‘public knowledge’ of many issues is conservative, biased and aims to silence critical voices. Raising questions and demanding fair public debate, in turn, cannot be wrong (Husting, Orr 2007). This argument, however, confuses conspiracism to what can be called critical agnosticism. First, conspiracy theorists are not merely ‘asking questions’. On the contrary, they offer alternative answers – as
opposed to agnostics. Second, conspiracy theorists are not primarily interested in the structural features of civic debate and its problems (that are real, no doubt). On the contrary, they are participating in the debate, often with a vociferously loud voice. For instance, instead of the official side trying to silence conspiracy theorists, in the discussion concerning vaccines it sometimes seems as if the conspiracy theorists are aiming to silence the official side.

The fight against conspiracy theories

How to deal with conspiracy theories? This problem will also be addressed by various chapters in other sections of this handbook, but let us consider what philosophers have said about it. Those philosophers who find conspiracy theorising an important and desirable social activity encourage people to develop, disseminate and evaluate conspiracy theories open-mindedly. They warn people that they should not dismiss possible explanations of important political events simply on the grounds that the explanations are labelled conspiracy theories (Dentith 2017; Basham 2017). Those philosophers who are less optimistic about the constructive implications and desirability of conspiracy theories disagree how to deal with them, in particular, how the state should deal with them. Three approaches have been suggested: (1) prohibition; (2) direct fight; and (3) indirect actions.

1. **Prohibition.** The denial of ‘historical truths’ is illegal in some countries and many legal systems prohibit any denial of the Holocaust. It has been suggested that prohibitions should be extended to concern some other conspiracy theories, namely those that are plainly false and have a high probability of increasing seriously harmful behaviour. An example would be a conspiracy theory that includes the denial of anthropogenic climate change (cf. Lewandowsky et al. 2013; Lavik 2016). This suggestion is understandable in the sense that prohibitions would probably have some desirable social effects and the intentional misleading of people would decrease. However, according to critics, the idea of extending prohibitions to apply to certain conspiracy theories is problematic for various reasons. First of all, it is not clear which conspiracy theories should be classified as ‘plainly false’ and which as only ‘implausible’. When conspiracies are revealed, the news is often very surprising. (Think of the Volkswagen emission scandal, for instance.) Many conspiracy theories probably look ‘plainly false’, although they are merely unlikely to be justified, as they contradict the view of relevant epistemic authorities (Räikkä 2018). Another thing is that prohibitions would limit people’s freedom of speech on rather strange grounds. It is one thing to limit freedom of speech in order to protect certain vulnerable groups from hate speech, as well as the libels and actions that they may cause, and another thing to restrict speech on the grounds that presenting certain views in public may have harmful social or environmental consequences – although presenting the views does not directly harm or threaten anyone. (In general, if a person behaves in a certain irresponsible way because they believe in a conspiracy theory, the person responsible for the behaviour is not primarily the conspiracy theorist as the originator of the conspiracy theory, but the person him-/herself.)

2. **Direct fight.** It has been suggested that the state should actively fight against false conspiracy theories – without prohibiting the dissemination of them. One option is

   cognitive infiltration of extremist groups, whereby government agents or their allies (acting virtually or in real space, and either openly or anonymously) will undermine the crippled epistemology of believers by planting doubts about the theories and stylized facts that circulate within such groups, thereby introducing beneficial cognitive diversity.

   *(Sunstein, Vermeule 2009: 219; Sunstein 2014: 22–32)*
This suggestion would avoid the problems related to restrictions on free speech. However, in critics’ view, the suggestion has difficulties of its own. The idea that state agencies should engage in a conspiracy against groups that promote conspiracy theories would warrant the claim that there are conspiracies operated by the state (Hagen 2010: 154; 2011: 17). More importantly, to recommend cognitive infiltration is to ‘recommend policies which could never be successful in a truly open society, and which, to the extent that they are successful, would make our society less open’ (Coady 2018: 291). Such policy would be ‘inconsistent with the values of liberal democracy’ (Coady 2018). Notice also that the idea of cognitive infiltration is based on the assumption that conspiracy theorists work typically in groups and do not listen to alternative explanations. Both empirical assumptions are questionable, if not obviously false.

3. Indirect actions. The state can be indirectly active concerning conspiracy theories and other forms of sowing doubt and confusion among people. The state authorities can try to ensure that the views of scientific communities get enough publicity, and that people have sufficient skills to interpret the media. The authorities could certainly have an important role in educating people in critical thinking and argumentation. (For instance, people should be told that, when a journalist interviews both a medical expert and a conspiracy theorist, it does not mean that both views are equally likely to be justified – although they are treated in this manner by the journalist.) Furthermore, the state can ensure that truly diverse views are published and receive publicity in civic debate, so that there would be less need for specific conspiracy theory forums. It is difficult to say to what extent certain explanations are dismissed in public discussion simply on the grounds that they refer to an alleged conspiracy (rather than on the grounds that the conspiracy allegations are presented by sources that are generally considered untrustworthy). In any case, such dismissals should not happen, and the state can certainly enhance diversity, say, by supporting newspapers that cannot survive without financial backing. The indirect actions by the state should not be a problem to the supporters of conspiracy theories. After all, the supporters’ aim is to further critical democratic discussion, and the state’s indirect actions would promote just that.

Conclusion

In comparison to discussions in social psychology and political science, for instance, the reception of conspiracy theories has been rather positive among philosophers. A central contention within this reception has been that one is not warranted in rejecting a particular political explanation only on the grounds that it has been labelled as a conspiracy theory.

Unfortunately, the philosophical discussion on conspiracy theories has suffered from unnecessary antagonism and needlessly belligerent argumentation. For one reason or another, the willingness to understand the opposite side and the readiness to try to find the most sensible interpretation of the opponents’ arguments have been in short supply. We fear that it is not an exaggeration to say that some philosophers have forgotten the principle of charity in their contributions to the debate, although truth-lovers (if that is what a philosopher can claim to be) should respect the principle. One explanation for the strong language is that many issues related to the epistemology and ethics of conspiracies have a political dimension. Possibly there are also other incentives not to find an agreement.

In addition to the conceptual questions about the definitions of ‘conspiracy’ and ‘conspiracy theory’, an essential disagreement among philosophers seems to concern the question of how well the ‘fact-gathering institutions’ work in ordinary democratic countries. Those who have defended conspiracy theories are not optimistic about the present state of the ordinary epistemic authorities, while others assume that they are likely to reveal conspiracies, sooner or later, if
there is something to reveal. However, the question of how well the media, research institutes, state agencies, investigative journalists and historians do their job is largely empirical, and surely there are considerable differences between countries and time periods. This suggests that, in the final analysis, philosophers may have relatively little to give to the ‘theory of conspiracy theories’. Although the epistemic question of when and why we are justified in using testimony as a basis of our beliefs is certainly a deep philosophical problem, examining the present state of existing knowledge-producing institutions in different countries is not primarily a philosophical project.

Notes

1 In some cases, it may be difficult to say whether an explanation refers to a ‘conspiracy’ rather than to some other sort of confidential cooperation. However, secret cooperative activities whose aims and nature conflict with the so-called positive morality (that reflects our de facto moral commitments) or with specific prima facie duties are usually called ‘conspiracies’, especially if the members of the cooperation have a certain position, and if the goal of their activities differs from the goal they are authorised to pursue. Children may have morally questionable secret plans to influence events by secret means, but these incidents are seldom called conspiracies. Small children are not considered to be in a position to conspire. Secret military operations may be morally rotten, but as far as they have authorised goals, they are not usually called conspiracies. The members of an ‘official’ administrative meeting behind closed doors may secretly agree on issues they should not and start to pursue goals they should avoid. When this happens, the participants can rightfully be accused of conspiracy, as they have unauthorised goals now. Conspiracies involve secret cooperation, but that does not mean that the conspirators must meet secretly, so that outsiders do not know that they meet in the first place (see Räikkä 2018: 213).

2 It is not impossible that a member of an epistemic authority (say, a biologist or a climate scientist) earns a reputation for being a ‘conspiracy theorist’. This can happen when an expert suggests that there is a conspiracy, say, concerning genetically modified food, but does not get much support for her claims from the other relevant experts. Obviously, epistemic authorities do not form a unitary body, but are rather composed of heterogeneous bodies that may conflict. Of course, this does not imply that we cannot normally say who belongs to ‘epistemic authorities’ and who does not.

3 In contemporary democracies, trust in government is seldom strong. Although the E.U. has established itself as a major political entity, it can still be considered an emerging governmental body, which so far has not achieved full democratic legitimacy. According to Special Eurobarometer 461 from the year 2017, for example, while citizens’ trust in the E.U. shows signs of increase, still less than half of the respondents (47%) are inclined to trust the E.U. The corresponding percentage is even smaller at the level of its member states: Only 40% of the respondents tend to trust their national government. Not more than 52% of the respondents say they are inclined to trust justice and their national legal system. Obviously, the deficits of trust merit concern. Citizens who are overly distrustful of their government – whether national or international – are unlikely to be willing to adhere to its rules, to engage in cooperative projects presupposing its mediation, or even to have interest in sustaining it. Indeed, research suggests that what have been called high-trust societies have stronger economies, higher levels of wellbeing and stronger social networks than so-called low-trust societies, and that distrust in government lowers tax morale and increases corruption, for instance (see e.g. Uslaner 2018; Catala 2015; Melo-Martin and Intemann 2018).

4 A person may say (and even think) that they support a conspiracy theory just because they would like to protest against the official system and social elites that govern public space. By ‘supporting’ a conspiracy theory, a person is able to manifest their distrust in the system, although they may not have any view of the plausibility of the theory they say they support. Surely, people should have a right to these kinds of manifestations. However, this raises the question of how to struggle against such ‘supporting attitudes’ if a person who has them does not really believe that a theory they support is true. Their support is non-doxtastic in nature.

5 Coady (2018) writes that Sunstein’s and Vermeule’s position is based on an equivocation over the meaning of the term ‘conspiracy theory’. This equivocation reflects a widespread assumption that conspiracy theories tend to be false, unjustified and harmful,
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and that, as a result, we can speak as if all conspiracy theories are objectionable in each of these three ways.

Coady argues that 'this assumption is itself false, unjustified, and harmful' and that 'because people often conspire, we often have good reason to believe that people are conspiring, and there is often a significant public benefit in exposing their conspiracies'. Coady compares 'conspiracy theories to scientific theories' and argues that

just as most of us regard bad scientific theories (i.e. false, unjustified and harmful ones) as an acceptable price to pay for good scientific theories, we should regard bad conspiracy theories as an acceptable price to pay for good conspiracy theories.

References


