Between Generalism and Particularism about Conspiracy Theory: A Response to Basham and Dentith

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The exchange on these pages between Lee Basham\(^1\) and Matthew Dentith\(^2\) has been largely one of furious agreement. That is, I hasten to add, no criticism. While we often take conflict to be the engine room of philosophy, we can sometimes overlook how productive philosophical agreement can be; the “yes, and…” species of reply can be just as fruitful as the “yes, but…” or “no, because…” varieties. Watching two outstanding philosophers of conspiracy theory engage in this way cannot help but be enriching and illuminating, even when they largely concur.

Specifically, both Basham and Dentith share the view that generalism about conspiracy theory – the view that conspiracy theories as a class of explanation are intrinsically suspect – should be rejected in favor of a particularism whereby “we can only pass judgment on individual conspiracy theories, assessing them purely on their respective evidential merits.”\(^3\) On Basham’s diagnosis, Dentith’s method of overturning generalism is an attrition approach, which knocks out various generalist positions one by one until particularism wins by default. Basham then articulates an approach that critiques the reliability of the primary information sources that generalism relies upon, and ultimately commends a combination of both approaches.

In this brief intrusion to their exchange, I want to put some pressure on this shared view that generalism must be exchanged wholesale for particularism. Instead I want to suggest that a move from naive generalism to thoroughgoing particularism misses important features that should guide our assessment of, and receptivity to, conspiracy explanations.

Conspiracy Explanation and Conspiracy Theory

As Dentith notes, the relevant literature is not voluminous. It is, however, both illuminating and characterized by a remarkable degree of consilience. Basham, Charles Pigden, David Coady, and Dentith have all arrived at the view that conspiracy theories are not inherently irrational, and that the pejorative connotations the term “conspiracy theory” has – at least in some quarters, though as Basham notes not all\(^4\) – are undeserved, unfair, and dangerous. Coady declares the current attitude towards conspiracy theorists “an intellectual witch hunt,”\(^5\) while Pigden\(^6\) forcefully warns us that reflexive dismissal of conspiratorial explanations that contradict official narratives is a gift to powerful actors who want to avoid scrutiny. This attitude towards conspiracy theory stands, as Basham notes with some vigor,\(^7\) in contrast to the widespread assumption in the social sciences and psychology that conspiracy theories and conspiracy ideation are necessarily irrational and pathological, and deserve to be combatted even by conspiratorial means if necessary.\(^8\)

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2. Denith, “Treating Conspiracy Theories Seriously.”
3. Ibid, 1.
5. Coady, What to Believe Now, 111.
6. Pigden, “Complots of Mischief.”
Central to this at least partial rehabilitation of conspiracy theory as a category is the philosophical literature’s very basic, and accordingly very capacious, definition of what a “conspiracy theory” actually is. Basham’s definition of conspiracy theory as any explanation of events in terms of “two or more persons intentionally cooperat[ing] to deceive others” is typical of the field. Hence, on Basham’s view, “The categories “conspiracy theories” and “conspiracy explanations” emerge as co-extensive.” This is the first step in what has become a standard move in the epistemological literature on conspiracy theory: define “conspiracy” in a very formal and minimal way, and then show how there is nothing intrinsically irrational, or even unreasonable, about explanations of that form. Conspiratorial activity is at least sometimes, perhaps even often, the best available explanation to infer to. Indeed, once we’ve taken that definition on board, as several writers in this area have noted, it turns out we’re all conspiracy theorists: we all believe that conspiracies are the best explanation of many historical events, from the murder of Julius Caesar to Stalin’s show trials to Watergate.

Philosophers acknowledge this definition clashes with the ways we generally talk about conspiracy theory. They like to remind us that, according to this definition, the “official” explanation for the 9/11 attacks is itself a conspiracy theory; that is, it explains the attacks as the outcome of a conspiracy on the part of al-Qaeda. Yet when we think of “conspiracy theories” we don’t generally think of such “accepted” explanations as falling under that heading. We don’t typically group officially sanctioned beliefs about al-Qaeda flying planes into buildings or Russian FSB agents murdering Kremlin opponents with polonium-laced tea with beliefs about the New World Order or the “Clinton Body Count.” Yet there’s nothing structural that differentiates the first set of beliefs from the second. If there is a formal difference between “Putin murdered Alexander Litvinenko” and “Bill Clinton murdered Vince Foster” it is hard to see what it might be. Appeals to the official status of one story but not the other don’t work, because an officially sanctioned story in one society might be considered a conspiracy theory in another. If we attempt to force that sort of solution we end up, as Pigden points out, with a blatantly gerrymandered and chauvinistic definition according to which a conspiracy theory is “a theory which posits a secret and morally suspect plan on the part of Western governments or government agencies to influence events by partly covert means.” We have obvious reasons to look askance at any definition of conspiracy theory that entails that conspiracies are something only other societies do.

Conspiracy Theorising as Practice and Tradition

There are, undeniably, risks involved in a naïve generalism that reflexively dismisses any explanation in terms of conspiratorial activity. But there is also a corresponding risk of allowing a legitimate target of critique to hide within an innocent larger category of “conspiracy explanation.” That target is conspiracy theorizing as a recognizable concrete social practice and tradition. When people dismiss something as a “conspiracy theory” they don’t do so in a vacuum. Nor are they necessarily referring to a specific and precisely defined epistemological category. There’s probably a quasi-Wittgensteinian story to be told about the

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10. Ibid, 7.
11. See e.g. Denith, “When Inferring to a Conspiracy might be the Best Explanation.”
role of family resemblance in our definition of conspiracy theory, but this is not the time or place to tell it. For now, let’s simply note that there is recognizable cultural practice of conspiracy theorizing. Conspiracy theory as the term is popularly understood has its own stylistic tropes, history, and patterns of accusation. Conspiracy theory is, as Jovan Byford puts it, a tradition of explanation.\(^\text{13}\) That tradition is a recognizable one, with a recurring cast of characters, narrative forms, and reflex moves and counter-moves – for instance, the tendency to accuse more and more people of involvement in the conspiracy in order to explain disconfirmatory evidence.

The boundaries of such a tradition or style of explanation are, naturally enough, fuzzy and ill-defined. But it’s clearly a far more concrete phenomenon than an explication of its basic epistemic form can capture. Accordingly, any critique of conspiracy theorizing as a real-world practice needs to resist an artificial simplicity that would strip it of precisely the content upon which we could judge such a practice. Viewed thus, both generalism and particularism turn out to take us further away from the concrete contexts in which we consider conspiracy theories. The generalist occludes the historical and cultural context in which conspiracy explanations have often turned out to be correct. The particularist, by insisting on viewing each conspiracy theory solely on its own merits, occludes the cultural, historical, and rhetorical context from which conspiracy theory as a tradition of explanation emerges. The generalist will refuse to even consider that the US government knowingly presented unreliable intelligence to justify invading Iraq, while the particularist will refuse to even acknowledge that “climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the UN and international bankers’ to bring about a socialist one-world government,” as a recently elected Australian senator apparently sincerely believes, is not a self-contained hypothesis worthy of at least cursory investigation but a recrudescence of various long-standing conspiracy tropes, including old anti-Semitic ones.\(^\text{14}\)

**Reasons to be Reticent**

A look at that tradition supplies several reasons to be reluctant to take part in it. Some of those reasons might only be applicable in certain cases and in certain contexts. For instance while conspiracies about “international banking families” are recognizably and uncomfortably close to their anti-Semitic antecedents (and antisemitism remains a stubbornly recurrent motif in a surprising amount of conspiracy material), other conspiracy theories don’t obviously have any such taint. In terms of the rationality of conspiracy belief, various concerns about non-falsifiability, and the generally degenerating character of conspiracy research programs might also be adduced here.\(^\text{15}\) Concerns have also been raised in the literature about the ways in which conspiracy theories corrode the trust essential to successful social and political life. (Again, there’s a story to be told about the foundational and non-calculative character of trust in ethical life, and the way in which philosophers of conspiracy theory instead treat trust as an Aristotelian mean and a matter of calculation, but this, again, is not the place.) Most fundamentally, however, I’d suggest we have reasons to be

\(^{13}\) Byford, *Conspiracy Theories.*

\(^{14}\) Roberts, “Why?”

\(^{15}\) Clarke, “Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing.”
wary of conspiracy theorizing as a practice simply because the internal logic of conspiracy explanation disconnects the morally serious act of accusation from the force of evidence. To defend a conspiracy theory over any length of time typically requires the conspiracy theorist to recruit more and more people to the conspiracy. This is not done in response to new evidence but simply to defend the theory. Conspiracy theory as a practice does not simply trade in suspicion, but in accusation without warrant. (To throw out yet another promissory note, I discuss this specific moral cost of conspiracy theorizing in a forthcoming paper.)

Particularists can in fact agree that conspiracy theories often have problematic origins and results. They simply insist that this tendency alone doesn’t entitle us to reject any conspiracy theory simply because it is a conspiracy theory. Individual conspiracy theories may be ludicrous, hateful, or destructive, but, as philosophers working in this area have demonstrated, that doesn’t entail that any conspiracy theory is just thereby necessarily wrong. That in turn would seem to suggest we should not denounce conspiracy theorizing as a practice or conspiracy theory as a tradition, because the theories offered by that practice and tradition may well turn out to be true. Frequently, of course, they won’t. What then? The confident assertion made by Basham, Dentith, and their co-signatories that “Poorly evidenced conspiracy theories will be quickly set aside” if only we look at the evidence simply isn’t borne out by experience. Conspiracy theories persist for years, even decades, in the absence of evidence, and can continue to cause harms while they do. There was never any evidence to suggest that AIDS was invented by Western drug companies and governments in an attempt to exploit and control Africa, yet this belief persisted long enough to kill over 330,000 people. The conspiracy theory that pharmaceutical companies are covering up widespread illness caused by vaccination has never been supported by any credible evidence; its persistence threatens herd immunity in communities throughout the world. If trust in democratic institutions is, in Basham’s phrase, a “political piety,” then the idea that weak conspiracy theories are quickly defeated by rational scrutiny is an “epistemic piety” that falls sadly short of reality.

Basham mentions, in passing, the firing of James Tracy from his position as a tenured professor of communications at Florida Atlantic University, and suggests this may be an “extreme example” of “pathologizing those who question official narratives.” Tracy was fired after harassing the parents of a child killed in the Sandy Hook shooting, demanding they provide proof their child had ever existed. Whether one regards dismissal as an appropriate or proportionate response or not, such behavior is hard to explain if we take it three things to be true:

1. Rational evaluation defeats weakly evidenced conspiracy theories;
2. A tenured professor of communication would, ceteris paribus, be reasonably good at rational evaluation; and
3. The evidence for the belief that Sandy Hook and other putative mass-casualty events are false-flag operations by the US government is weak.

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19. McPhate, “University in Florida Seeks to Fire Newtown Conspiracy Theorist.”
If Basham wants to defend 1), he would have to reject either 2) or 3). Given what passes for “evidence” for a Sandy Hook hoax, his best bet would be to use the *ceteris paribus* clause in 2) and point to some special circumstances in Tracy’s case. In that case, though, we’d still need to account for all the *other* people who hold to this belief; even if reason is the best solvent for un-evidenced belief, its efficacy still seems surprisingly limited. That being the case, we’re left with conspiracy theorizing as a practice that involves beliefs that are largely impervious to rational refutation, that characteristically encourages participants to level an expanding range of un-evidenced accusations, that is inimical to and corrosive of foundational trust, and that in some cases license behaviors (even among college professors) such as harassing and defaming grieving parents. One might reasonably be concerned about such a practice.

**Beyond Particularism**

What, then, might lie between, or beyond, generalism and particularism? Perhaps something that might be described as “defeasible generalism” or “reluctant particularism.” Such an attitude would not begin from the premise that conspiracy theories are always false. As such, it would not foreclose the possibility of ever investigating any conspiracy theory. It would, however, approach such theories with a certain reticence, given the social practice within which those theories are embedded and the moral costs associated with taking part in the conspiracy theory tradition. We would approach any claim that borrowed tropes or argumentative patterns from the conspiracy theory tradition with a particular suspicion, albeit a suspicion that could be countervailed in certain circumstances – namely where the growth of evidence passes a certain point (which, no doubt, cannot be specified ahead of time). We would apply an ethical heuristic in judging whether conspiracy claims are worth entertaining, much as we do when, for instance, we refuse to think badly of people until compelled by evidence to do so. Such a heuristic is not simply prudential – indeed it’s not hard to imagine how someone might take default suspicion to be more prudent – but rather reflects the need to avoid being caught up in patterns of thought that lose sight of the moral gravity of accusation.

It could be objected here that such an attitude would make us more vulnerable to becoming victims of conspiracies. A standing vigilance towards power (in all forms, including state power) is essential to any healthy society and polity, and maintaining such vigilance may seem incompatible with a standing reluctance to accept conspiratorial explanations. But equally we might note that a refusal to fall back on conspiracist tropes and patterns of thought may also help in such vigilance, by making it easier to avoid seeing patterns that aren’t really there.

None of that makes Dentith’s task of determining heuristics for when we should take conspiracy theories any less pressing – indeed it makes it all the more urgent. If both naïve generalism and naïve particularism are non-starters, then we need a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of when and under what circumstances the use of conspiracy explanation is justified. That must include not merely questions of epistemic and prudential rationality, but of ethical validity as well. We’re fortunate indeed that Dentith is engaged in such a project, and like Basham, I very much look forward to seeing his results.
Conflict of Interest disclosure: The author is an administrator of Stop the AVN, a group that campaigns against anti-vaccination activism.

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