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Investigating conspiracy theories – introduction to the special issue

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ABSTRACT

This introduction to this special issue of *Inquiry* looks at recent work in the philosophy of conspiracy theory theory. Looking at two related worries expressed in the wider conspiracy theory theory (the academic study of conspiracy theories) – the Problem of Conspiracy Theories and the Problem of Conspiracy Theorists – this special issue argues that recent work in the philosophy of conspiracy theories is getting all the more closer to not just an epistemic understanding of what, if anything, is wrong with belief in conspiracy theories, but also a framework for both investigating conspiracy theories and understanding how we should talk about the beliefs of conspiracy theorists.

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Introduction

The 2nd International Conference on the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theory (held at VU Amsterdam in June 2023) was a sequel (of sorts) to the 1st International Conference on the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theory held in 2022. As such, this special issue or proceedings is itself a kind of sequel to the special issue of *Social Epistemology* (Dentith 2023) that came out of that first conference. Whereas the first conference dealt with the *theory* of conspiracy theory theory, the second conference had a much more inter – and intradisciplinary focus: our interest, as conference organisers, was in both how we might connect the philosophical work on conspiracy theory theory to the wider literature, as well as how we might show that the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theory has implications for philosophy more generally.

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It is fair to say that conspiracy theory theory (the academic study of these things called 'conspiracy theories') has gone through its infancy, and is now in its young adult years. Whereas the first decade and a half of the philosophical interest in conspiracy theories produced a sparse but dense output of work by such philosophers as Lee Basham (2011), Steve Clarke (2007), David Coady (2012), Brian L. Keeley (1999), Charles Pigden (1995) and the like, we are now seeing a steady increase in interest by a growing group of philosophers, many of whom connect the extant literature to ongoing debates elsewhere in philosophy. There is also a renewed interest in producing work that fosters interdisciplinary work, either to bring the insights of the philosophical debate to disciplines like psychology and political science, or importing data from outside of philosophy in order to complete our understanding of both 'conspiracy theories' and belief in such theories.

This is to say that whilst this special issue is a selection of some of the best papers from the 2nd International Conference on the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theory, it is not in itself meant to imply that these were *the* best papers presented at the conference. As the authors of this article can well attest, there were many valuable and important contributions to choose from. In the end, we settled on a particular thread of papers, which means that this collection has a theme to it. As such, the papers we decided to include were selected due to them being thematically linked (which is to say that there were many papers we would like to have included that, unfortunately, did not fit the remit of this particular special issue).

The first half of the special issue looks at what we are calling 'The Problem of Conspiracy Theories'. These papers, by M R. X. Dentith, Alex Stamatiadis-Bréhier, Charles Pigden, Rico Hauswald and Will Mittendorf, examine both what we might take to be problematic instances of conspiracy theorising, and the appropriate epistemic response to such 'troubling' conspiracy theories.

The second half of the issue concerns a related issue; 'The Problem with Conspiracy Theorists'. These papers, by Attila Kustán Magyari and Róbert Imre, Brian L. Keeley, Catarina Dutilh Novaes, Julia Duetz and Patrick Brooks, Melina Tsapos, and Steve Clarke, look at questions around how conspiracy theorists reason and argue for their particular conspiracy theories.

It is fair to say that the papers in this collection are somewhat particularist in nature; a long-standing debate in the philosophy of conspiracy theory theory has concerned both what definition we should use when

talking about these things called ‘conspiracy theories’ and what the proper or default attitude should be towards them so-defined. Generalism (the view that there is something problematic generally about conspiracy theories) is often contrasted with Particularism (the view that there’s nothing inherently good or bad about conspiracy theories). Given that the editors and most of the authors of this special issue are particularists, or evince particularist arguments, our special issue concludes with a commentary by Keith Harris. Harris, who identifies as a ‘so-called generalist’, both seeks to draw together the themes of this special issue, whilst also replying to and critiquing the arguments within.

‘The issue (and the issues)’

Our issue starts with ‘A prolegomena to investigating conspiracy theories’, in which one of us (Dentith [inpress](#)) outlines the kinds of concerns we must keep in mind if we are to develop an ethic or framework of investigation into conspiracy theories. After all, although a consensus has emerged in the philosophical work on conspiracy theory theory (namely, that particularism is the most theoretically fruitful framework for talking about these things called ‘conspiracy theories’) it is curious that extant particularist accounts are (largely) silent on how we might establish the warrant of contemporary, suspicious-seeming conspiracy theories. That is, a benefit to generalism is that we have a kind of default view when we encounter a new conspiracy theory: it can be treated as suspicious such that we can also treat it dismissively. Yet particularists are stuck claiming ‘No, treat it seriously!’.

Now, as Dentith argues, it is not clear that it is actually necessary that particularists *ought* to provide an account of how to establish whether a conspiracy theory is, or is not *mad, bad, or dangerous*, but – nonetheless – when we are confronted with new and novel *suspicious-seeming* conspiracy theories, particularists can be rightly criticised for saying ‘We should treat such theories seriously, and investigate them!’ without necessarily telling us how such an investigation might work. Thus, in this introductory and framing article, Dentith outlines some of the considerations particularists need to keep in mind when developing a framework for an investigation of conspiracy theories.

Alex Stamatiadis-Bréhier ([inpress](#)), in ‘The power of second-order conspiracies’ looks at the role some known conspiracies play in developing and disseminating conspiracy theories we ought to treat with suspicion. Building on his earlier work concerning second-order conspiracies

(conspiracies that exist to create and disseminate suspicious conspiracy theories [2023]), Stamatiadis-Bréhier turns his focus to the structure of the genealogy of second-order conspiracy *theories*, which explain the occurrence of a particular conspiracy theory by appeal to a second order conspiracy. Understanding the structure of second-order conspiracy theories allows us to show that some conspiracy theories are false simply because a second-order conspiracy theory *about* them is true, given that they are the product of a conspiracy, which adds yet another epistemic tool to the analysis of suspicious conspiracy theories.

Charles Pigden ([inpress](#)), in 'How to make conspiracy theory research intellectually respectable (and what it might be like if it were)' argues many of the research questions we find in the social science of conspiracy theory theory often start with the presupposition that there is something *prima facie* wrong with conspiracy theorising and conspiracy theories. Yet people might believe in irrational conspiracy theories for much the same reasons that they believe in irrational theories of other kinds. Thus to understand irrational conspiracy theorising you must have a robust set of criteria for determining which kinds of conspiracy theories are irrational to believe, and which are not before assuming that such theorising is itself *prima facie* irrational. As such, the generalist preconception that undergirds so much social science of conspiracy theory theory needs to be abandoned if research into conspiracy theories and conspiracy beliefs is to become intellectually respectable.

In 'Heterodox conspiracy theories and evidence-based theories of error', Rico Hauswald ([inpress](#)) looks at a species of conspiracy theory that many particularists *might* think are tantamount to being *prima facie* suspicious: heterodox conspiracy theories (conspiracy theories that are *unofficial*, or even considered *deviant*). Looking at how our *theories of error* inform both our epistemic options and epistemic environments, Hauswald argues that there are cases where someone might have good reason to arrive at what the rest of us think is a heterodox belief. Under at least some theories of error, it is not clear that it is *prima facie* irrational to believe such heterodox views; indeed, sometimes we might even be better off epistemically if there are heterodox agents in our communities of inquiry.

Will Mittendorf ([inpress](#)), in 'Racist and antiracist conspiracy theories' considers a specific class of heterodox conspiracy theory: racist conspiracy theories. Mittendorf argues that, despite either our intuitions or what the existing commentary in the academic literature has to say, what we *label* as 'racist conspiracy theories' are not in-and-of themselves *prima*

facie suspicious. Part of this is due to the difficulty of defining what it is that makes certain conspiracy theories *problematically* about race, and the other is a worry about the role race plays in some conspiracy theories. If we are to diagnose what it is about the role of racism in conspiracy theories that makes them suspicious-qua-bad beliefs, then we need to get clearer about what, exactly, constitutes racial-animus in a conspiracy theory, especially in the face of conspiracy theories about race that end up being *antiracist* theories that challenge racist systems and ideologies.

Attila Kustán Magyari and Robert Imre ([inpress](#)), in 'Resisting the civilising mission: Analysing Hungarian conspiracy theories through standpoint theory' use the case study of Hungarian right-wing populists, who have applied what *at least* appears to be decolonial rhetoric in their conspiracy theories over the past three decades. They argue that such conspiracy theories in Eastern/Central Europe can be understood more broadly through the lens of standpoint epistemology, with such decolonial rhetoric best understood as a domestication of global conspiracy theories.

The role of insincere actors in the space occupied by these things called 'conspiracy theories' leads Brian L. Keeley ([inpress](#)), in 'Conspiracy theorists are not the problem; conspiracy liars are' to analyse the role of motivated lying in the production and dissemination of *some* conspiracy theories. As Keeley argues, whilst there are cases of warranted conspiracy theorising and even mistaken conspiracy theorising, sometimes we have to take into account that certain conspiracy theorists and their conspiracy theories take, as their starting position, bald-faced lies or tentative speculation that is raised to the level of 'fact' in their discourse. Keeley looks at some of the reasons why such motivated lying occurs, such as how it often is an attempt to change or influence events through the cultivation of fear in a particular audience, or how it provides 'grounds' for attacking ideological opponents. If we are interested in showing why some conspiracy theories are suspicious such that we should not believe them, then the way in which we treat the conspiracy theories promoted by conspiracy liars must necessarily be different from how we treat conspiracy theorists who are *merely* mistaken.

In 'How conspiracy theories spread or hide: attention and trust in belief-forming processes' Catarina Dutilh Novaes ([inpress](#)) discusses how the *three-tiered model of epistemic exchange* leads people to become exposed to and convinced by 'bad arguments' and 'bad evidence' with respect to some seemingly suspicious conspiracy theories. Yet, as she also argues, the same processes can also be in play when it comes to cases of known conspiracies, where evidence and arguments

for a conspiracy theory can *look* bad due to relevant evidence being hidden from public scrutiny, and the arguments of dissenting voices or whistleblowers being openly discredited by people in positions of power.

Patrick Brooks and Julia Duetz ([inpress](#)), outline how some conspiratorial claims, namely, certain ‘Conspiracy Accusations’, can be used to fuel political (network) polarisation in a way that narrows epistemic environments in terms of information uptake. As (conspiracy) accusations are morally laden, they tend to invoke strong responses, especially from those who think that the dissemination of conspiracy theories is inappropriate in political settings. Despite the fact that conspiracy accusations invite disdain from ‘the mainstream’, intentionally breaking the rules of political debate has its merits, depending on the context of the audience(s). To one audience, the accusations are plainly absurd. To another audience, the accusations resonate with more general political grievances and distrust towards those in power. What’s more, the fact that the mainstream is so quick to dismiss any accusation against one of their own, exacerbates these grievances. The effect of this rhetorical pattern – of breaking the rules in one context to be seen as a brave dissident in another – hinges on the foreseeability of the dismissive response of the mainstream, and so these kinds of responses should be considered with care.

In ‘Should we worry about conspiracy theorists rejecting experts?’ Melina Tsapos ([inpress](#)) looks at the concern expressed by conspiracy theory theorists that conspiracy theorists have a tendency to reject expert testimony. Yet if this concern is to be treated seriously, we need clarification as to who these experts are that conspiracy theorists are rejecting, as well as what it means epistemically to reject such experts. As Tsapos notes, sometimes rejecting expert testimony is little more than rejecting the claims of individuals society has deemed as experts, whilst sometimes it means challenging epistemically authoritative views. As such, without a clear identification of experts in the broader context of conspiracy theories, the concern that conspiracy theorists reject expert testimony seems overblown.

Steve Clarke ([inpress](#)), in ‘When conspiracy theorists win’ looks at a particular problem for generalist accounts of conspiracy theory: how to deal with cases of official theories that rely on claims of conspiracy that were once generally dismissed as ‘mere conspiracy theories’. Looking at the ‘false flag’ theory of the Mountain Meadows massacre of 1857, and the now official ‘Watergate theory’, Clarke shows that sometimes conspiracy theorists are both right to persist with their conspiracy theorising in the

face of widespread opposition and that sometimes what counts as sufficient evidence to warrant acceptance of a conspiracy theory might take time to emerge. As such, the generalist needs to cede ground on either conspiracy theories being generally epistemically defective, or that official theories that mention conspiracies were never conspiracy theories to begin with.

The issue ends with a commentary by Keith Harris (*inpress*). It is fair to say that this issue is particularist-in-flavour, and Harris' commentary is a necessary and useful counterpoint to the perspective in this special issue. In 'Where conspiracy theories come from, what they do, and what to do about them' Harris focuses on a theme that runs throughout not just the special issue but also the current (at least) philosophical literature: where conspiracy theories come from, what they do, and what we should do about them. As Harris shows, these issues are a running theme of the authors in this special issue, and each of them argues (at least to some degree) that particularism gives us a special vantage point *at least compared to the generalist* when it comes to answering this particular trifecta. Yet, as Harris goes to great lengths to demonstrate, the generalist (or, as Harris terms himself, the 'so-called generalist') still has plenty to say on these matters, and many of the insights found in these papers might well bolster a sophisticated generalist-yet-fallibilist view of conspiracy theories.

Conclusion

The academic interest in conspiracy theories is – at the time of writing – a growing concern, and philosophers are well-positioned to influence how we talk both about conspiracy theories and the way in which we investigate them. The papers in this special issue take it for granted that given we know conspiracies occur, how we approach views or theories labelled as 'conspiracy theories' is crucial. If we assume that conspiracy theories are *mad, bad, or dangerous*, then we are likely to investigate claims of conspiracy in a dismissive or skewed way. However, if we take it that, in a range of cases, conspiracy theories have turned out to be true (and we can be agnostic here as to whether that is 'a few', 'some' or even 'many'), then we can treat conspiracy theories seriously and investigate them.

However, as this special issue also demonstrates, just admitting that conspiracies happen, and that we should not treat conspiracy theories with a *prima facie* suspicion does not in itself guide us into how we

should investigate such theories, or understand the kind of thinking that leads to conspiracy theorising. Rather, if we adopt a particularist perspective like that of (most of) the contributors to this special issue, then there is still much work to be done to understand how such a sophisticated particularism can be applied to the plethora of new and novel conspiracy theories we will encounter in the future (as well as how we might understand how past investigations failed or succeeded). Thus, whether you agree with the tenor of the papers in this special issue, you should agree that there is still much work to be done not just in conspiracy theory theory, but in the philosophy of conspiracy theory theory.

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