

On the Epistemic Value of Conspiracy Theories

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In his book *Conspiracy Theories*, Cassam argues that conspiracy theories are not epistemically valuable because they distance their believers from the truth, and often generate doubt and create barriers to understanding. He further argues that most motivation behind conspiracy theories is political propaganda, not discovering the truth. Thus, he concludes that if conspiracy theories are not primarily aimed at finding the truth, they are not an epistemically valuable tool for knowledge.

In addition to his definition of conspiracy theories, Cassam takes conspiracy theories to be defined by having five special characteristics: speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish, and premodern. I will approach this paper by arguing against the assertion of these characteristics as Cassam defines them. Conspiracy theories by nature are speculative and contrarian, but I will argue that they are not esoteric, amateurish, or premodern. These three terms are often used by anti-conspiracy theorists and the result is conspiracy theories become a form of a self-fulfilling prophecy. **After rejecting Cassam's definition of conspiracy theories, I will then argue that conspiracy theories are epistemically valuable because they provide diverse perspectives that are useful to consider, and thereby put one in a more knowledgeable position to discern the truth.**

Conspiracy theories are, by nature, speculative and contrarian. In fact, every new theory, whether labeled conspiracy or not, must start out speculative and contrarian to the accepted view by definition. If new theories were disregarded on this basis, there would be scant new ideas that surface and challenge traditional thought. For clarity, I will explain this idea in terms of scientific theories, however, I believe that new ideas are, by nature, speculative and contrarian, and this

characterization can be generalized to most subjects. Every new scientific theory must start out speculative, because any new idea will at first appear strange and encounter skepticism until further evidence supports the view. Consider quantum theory in opposition to classical physics. If a new scientific theory is not at first speculative, then it is probably not new. Similarly, scientific theories often question the status quo, making them contrarian by nature. By questioning the standard view, scientists and innovators have historically produced ideas that have demonstrated that the world was not the way we thought it was.

Cassam further defines conspiracy theories as esoteric, amateur, and premodern. These three terms are not inherent to conspiracy theories themselves, but rather, describe the ways they are portrayed in society. Cassam takes conspiracy theories to be esoteric because only a select population know and understand the intricacies of the theory and often, conspiracy theories are specifically directed at a certain group of people. However, if mainstream sources reject conspiracy theories by refusing to acknowledge them, then the theories are esoteric by virtue of a lack of their publication, not by nature.

Similar to being esoteric, conspiracy theories are faulted for being amateur; that is, practiced by non-experts, often outright rejecting information from experts. Being contrarian by nature, these theories often do have to reject the status quo proposed by various experts, that is the nature of a new theory. What makes them appear amateur in the negative sense of that word is that they are being shut out from any discussion by experts who do not question the accepted view.

Cassam describes conspiracy theories as being premodern, defined as, “the view that complex events are capable of being controlled by a small number of people acting in secret, and this is what gives these events a deeper meaning. From this perspective, everything happens for a

reason (26). Cassam bases his definition on Keeley's argument that conspiracy theories "embody a thoroughly outdated worldview and perspective on the meaning of life that was more appropriate in the last century" (26). This is absurd. Essentially, Cassam seems to be generally asserting that because we live in a post-modern society, our thoughts have shifted from believing some events have special, interconnected (perhaps divine) meaning to believing that events are often meaningless or simply accidental. Conspiracy theories do rely on detecting deeper meanings, and while it is true that some conspiracy theories attempt to find meaning where there is none, most scientific theories also organize and assign meaning where there may not be one. For example, a scientist with a certain hypothesis in mind will often find a way to assign meaning to abstract data in a way that aligns with his hypothesis. Therefore, it is easy to see how this is very relevant concept today.

If we reject the notion that conspiracy theories are esoteric, amateur and premodern, then they should be considered with appropriate merit just as any other new theory that is at first, speculative and contrarian.

While I do think all conspiracy theories should be considered, I do not mean to say all of them should be believed, or that they all have equal merit, they are theories after all. What I mean by "considered" is that conspiracy theories should be acknowledged, their evidence evaluated, and one should research the agenda and motives of the sources. Flat earth theorists, for example, can easily be shut down by the vast amount of evidence from thousands of sources, so there is no need to consider the theory for a long period of time. However, other theories with more evidence and credible theorizers should be taken more seriously in proportion to the amount of evidence, the plausibility of their possibility, relative to the strength of the standard view.

Similarly, consideration of different views can evoke thoughtfulness, causing a person to think about something differently or view the world in a different way, even if they do not necessarily believe it to be an accurate representation of reality. For example, I might consider the possibility of UFOS and alien life on other planets. While I do not believe there really are UFOs, thinking about the possibility of their existence allows me to view the world not only from my own perspective on earth, but from a broader, otherworldly perspective. If I consider this view, I can think about the philosophical implications, such as how we would interact with life on other planets, how we view human “universals” (which may not actually be universals) or the morality of interplanetary travel and resources. This is a far-fetched example, but it is important to note that it is not the belief itself that matters, but the contemplation of the implications and possibilities. It is epistemically valuable to consider and ponder possibilities, because this allows you to see the world from multiple perspectives, which puts you in a better position to find the truth.

Most importantly, conspiracy theories tend to create a community of skeptics that distrust the way the world works and questions the standard view. For a multitude of reasons - political, economic, ideological or otherwise - certain groups in power do not always engage in acts that are beneficial to everyone. This is seen historically; when a conspiracy is proven, it is no longer a theory. If the general populace is not attentive to the actions of the more powerful, freedom will be at risk, at which point it might be too late to reverse. This of course, is a practical problem more than an epistemic one, but I think it is important to demonstrate the fine line between where theory ends and reality begins. Considering conspiracy theories is not only important for diverse thinking, encouraging conspiracy theories provides varied worldviews which is important for a functioning society.

Objection: Cassam argues that conspiracy theories actually restrict the amount of knowledge a person can attain. For example, a person with a particular worldview will perceive the world in congruence with their established worldview, organizing the sensory data as it enters the brain. Consider a person who believes that the government is always against their best interest (a common theme among conspiracies) this person now believes that all the information from the government is false, thereby decreasing their capacity to get new information. Additionally, conspiracy theories tend to discredit reliable sources. Without reliance on experts with credentials, we have no foundation on which to build our knowledge. Because conspiracy theories often rely on illogical evidence that can impede logical acquisition of knowledge. Thus, conspiracy theories are epistemically hindering to knowledge.

Reply: This objection assumes that the government is reliably providing accurate information, and that experts with a strong media presence in the mainstream always have ethical motives. This itself is not always easy to prove. However, even if we assume experts usually have ethical motives, conspiracy theories are necessary to counter the standard view. Without alternative theories to test with the standard view, how can we be sure the standard view is true? It is important to have contrary beliefs to challenge and verify the validity of the standard view. Thus, conspiracy theories are necessary on a larger scale, even if they may be epistemically hindering to select individuals. This is an unfortunate consequence of viewing conspiracy theories as an epistemic tool, however, it is far better than the alternative, a society that never questions the standard view and is not required to think for themselves.

If the primary goal in epistemology is to find the truth, and the best approach to getting the truth is through the acquisition of knowledge, then conspiracy theories are epistemically valuable tools to allow people to see the world in different ways through a variety of lenses.

Conspiracy theories just add another lens in which to see the world. While many conspiracy theories do lack merit, they still provide a different perspective which encourages critical thought and consideration, and therefore has the potential to advance knowledge, which is the ultimate goal of epistemology.