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Nobody expects the Spanish inquisition!
More thoughts on conspiracy theory

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Abstract (word count= 164)

The event of Lee Basham's essay "Malevolent Global Conspiracy" is used to reflect further on the epistemic status of attempts to explain social phenomena by means of conspiracies. After presenting an update on the status of conspiracy theories surrounding the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, I synopsise the philosophical problem of conspiracy theories and amplify Basham's discussion. I agree with Basham that falsification and paranoia are not an effective way to criticize conspiratorial thinking. However, I am not convinced with the case he presents against worries that conspiracy theories often falter by overestimating the ability of large, public institutions to be secretly and effectively controlled. The historical record, upon which much of Basham's argument relies, can be read as suggesting that malevolent global action can be effectively carried out in full public view, obviating recourse to conspiracy. However, all told, Basham has introduced a number of interesting new arguments about conspiracy theories that merit further consideration by those interested in practical epistemology.

Introduction

Although Lee Basham ends his essay with the words, "Difficult theoretical work lies ahead," he has nonetheless advanced our understanding of these odd epistemic beasts known as conspiracy theories. Basham's essay is one of a number that have come to my attention since I first wrote about conspiracy theories in 1999.¹ What these papers all have in common is a concern with what might best be termed "practical epistemology"—the application of the often-esoteric concerns of academic epistemology to the everyday questions of modern life.² In the end, I am not won over to Basham's way

¹ Jones (forthcoming); Clarke (forthcoming). Keeley (1999) is my original paper.

² "Practical epistemology" is taken by analogy to the now established field of "practical ethics." The term was suggested to me by Karen Jones (personal communication). Schlick & Vaughn's (2001) excellent critical thinking text, *How to think about weird things*, is a compendium of practical applications of epistemology.

of seeing things, but his arguments have forced me to reconsider my views, hone my original ideas, and develop new responses.

First, an update: In my original essay, I used as an illustrative example the variety of conspiracy theories surrounding the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Timothy McVeigh has now been executed following a detailed confession of his role in the bombing (including his denial of a greater conspiracy). McVeigh’s confession is presented in *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh & the Oklahoma City Bombing*. Based upon many hours of interviews and correspondence with McVeigh and corroborated where possible, *Buffalo News* investigative reporters Lou Michel and Dan Herbert reconstruct McVeigh’s motives and actions leading up the bombing. McVeigh’s story is that he and he alone planned and largely carried out the crime, and that to the extent that others were involved, they were either kept ignorant of the details of the operation or were compelled to participate under duress. For example, McVeigh claims that he made threats of violence against the family of his convicted co-conspirator, Terry Nichols, when the latter attempted to back out of helping construct the truck bomb.

However, this is far from the end of the story. McVeigh’s trial lawyer, Stephen Jones, has recently published his own account of events, entitled *Others Unknown*. Jones’ account is based on McVeigh’s discussions with him. The lawyer explains that by firing Jones as his lawyer and accusing Jones of incompetence, McVeigh effectively waived his right to lawyer-client confidentiality. This, in turn, allows Jones to reveal to the world all that McVeigh confided in Jones and his defense team. According to Jones, McVeigh may have used the previously cited book to “take the fall” for the crime; both to aggrandize himself and to spare the other conspirators (including, as Jones’ title suggests, individuals who were never specifically indicted). Like the good soldier he reportedly was, by falsely confessing, McVeigh threw himself on a grenade to save his comrades. That McVeigh made this confession while facing an unavoidable death sentence—by this point, McVeigh had exhausted or rejected his remaining appeals—can only fuel the doubts Jones raises.

Further, as I write this, Terry Nichols awaits trial in Oklahoma State Court on charges that may result in his execution. Nichols has already avoided the death penalty once, in federal court. Oklahoma state prosecutors are apparently unsatisfied with the life

sentence he received there and are pursuing a separate case against him in state court. I think it is safe to say that this episode will continue to occupy the minds of many, in spite of government (and Timothy McVeigh's) assurances that all (and only) those involved have been captured and appropriately punished.

In my original paper, I ask whether there is a class of theories that matches well with a number of currently popular conspiracy theories, such as those concerning the Kennedy assassination, control of the world economy by a small group of individuals, or U.S. Government complicity in the Oklahoma City bombing, that we can determine *a priori* to be epistemically unwarranted. I took David Hume's discussion of miracles as my starting point. I wanted to know whether we could do with our culture's more extreme, if seductive, conspiracy theories what Hume did with reports of miracles: argue that while they could conceivably be true—it is impossible to say with certainty that historical miracles did not occur—nonetheless such reports are never credible. There is something about the very definition of a miracle that contravenes our justification for believing in it. After exploring a number of possibilities, I conclude that, unlike Hume's analysis of miracles, no such *a priori* analysis is available in the case of conspiracy theories. This is the case, in large part, because there are a number of conspiracies, such as those related to Watergate, that *are* credible. Nevertheless, I suggest that in the end, we do have grounds for rejecting the wackier of conspiracy theories, but on *a posteriori* grounds (as Basham summarizes well in his essay). As time passes and a particular theory is not substantiated by independent evidence, it is either the case that we simply reject the theory or the scope of the theory must be expanded to explain the lack of confirming evidence, e.g., that various members of the media must be "in" on the conspiracy, hence their lack of investigative interest in the story. Eventually, at some necessarily vague point, the degree of global skepticism required to continue to hold the theory becomes genuinely nihilistic; it can be rejected on the same grounds that we reject such global skeptical worries as that the world came into existence only 5 minutes ago.

Jared Diamond, in his *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (pp. 48-49), offers an argument with a structure that parallels the one I make concerning how the credibility of conspiracy theories erodes over time as corroborating evidence fails to turn up. As he discusses, the date of earliest human occupation of the New World is a matter of scientific debate. The

generally accepted date is approximately 11,000 B.C., in spite of the fact that a small number of sites that seem to point to a much earlier date have been discovered. Diamond argues that the main evidence against the earlier date of New World colonization is the ongoing *lack* of discoveries of subsequent sites despite diligent searching. One can point to a given site as evidence of pre-Clovis occupation; but as time has passed, not many additional examples have been found. This casts doubts on the interpretation of the previously discovered data. The nail in the coffin is that on *other* continents scientists have found *many* (over one hundred) pre-Clovis sites (using far fewer investigators, by the way).

It is generally true that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,” but this maxim is misapplied in cases where evidence is actively sought and is not discovered in spite of its discovery in other parallel situations. As time passes and evidence in favor of a particular conspiracy theory fails to manifest—in spite of the diligent efforts of many and in spite of the discovery of such evidence in other *prima facie* similar cases—a downward adjustment of that theory’s credibility ought to result.

In his essay, Basham essentially does two related things. First, he shifts the nature of conspiracy theories under discussion from relatively well-defined explananda (particular terrorist events or control of the world economy) to what he calls “malevolent global conspiracies;” truly vast, Orwellian conspiracies in which little that we feel that we “know” is as it seems. Second, despite my assurances to the contrary, he argues that, in fact, we have little epistemic justification for undermining such theories. In doing these two things, Basham has taken the bull by the horns. He has taken on the most *extreme* version of a conspiracy theory—the one that might seem *prima facie* to be the *least* plausible—and instead argues that it has, in fact, a far stronger epistemic standing than one might imagine.

One note of clarification before continuing: at several points in his paper, Basham suggests that the issue is the “possibility or likelihood” of a given conspiracy theory being true. I still feel it is important to keep the metaphysical and epistemic issues separate. The metaphysical issue is a question of truth; is it possible that a given conspiracy theory is true? The very fact that we give conspiracy theories any credence at all reflects our belief in their logical possibility. Even the most extreme malevolent global

conspiracies—e.g., that our sensory experiences are being manipulated by Descartes' evil demon—are logical possibilities. However, this issue is separate from that of the warranted believability of such claims. There is much in the world that is possible, but which nonetheless is literally incredible. What makes the issue of conspiracy theories one for practical epistemology is this latter epistemic issue: should we accede to the kinds of conspiratorial thinking Basham describes?

Basham considers and rejects four different alleged grounds for undermining the epistemic warrant of conspiracy theories: (a) unfalsifiability, (b) uncontrollability, (c) appeal to the trustworthiness of public institutions of information, and (d) paranoia. On the first candidate grounds—unfalsifiability—Basham and I are in agreement. Skipping for a moment to the final candidate grounds—paranoia—I again concur with Basham: To attempt to reject conspiracy theories on the grounds of their proponent's alleged mental condition is bogus; however, perhaps not for the reason one might suspect. At first glance, one might note that it smacks of an *ad hominem* attack. Surely, the validity or soundness of an argument is independent of such alleged facts about the condition of the arguer. A person in a straightjacket who utters the statement, "The earth is a spheroid" would be just as correct as a (sane) astronomer uttering the same sentence. Unfortunately, it is not this easy. The problem here is the metaphysical vs. epistemic issue mentioned above. The state of the arguer has no affect on the *truth* of a claim, but it does have a large affect on its *warrant* (especially if that testimony is all we have). If what we are interested in is the truth (accessible or not) of conspiracy claims, then the mental state of the claim's proponent would indeed be irrelevant. However, if the issue is the *credibility* of such claims (as I suggest it is), then the state of the proponent—her state of knowledge or ignorance concerning the issue, her ability or inability to make rational inferences, etc.—surely *is* relevant.

As Henry Kissinger famously observed, "Even a paranoid can have enemies." No, the problem with the accusation of paranoia is that it begs the question. What makes a given paranoid "paranoid" is the "unreasonableness" of her beliefs. This is exactly what is at question here. The diagnosis of paranoia and the rejection of the alleged paranoid's conspiracy theory are both justified (or undermined) by the same thing: an evaluation of

the evidence in favor of the theory. To label a conspiracy theory "paranoid" is merely to restate the claim that it is unwarranted; it is not evidence for rejecting it.

Indeed, one way of looking at his essay is that Basham has turned the Humean project on its head. I was looking for *a priori* grounds for rejecting some definable class of conspiracy theories. If Basham is right, there is something in the very essence of malevolent global conspiracy theories such that they *cannot* be refuted. By definition, any attempt to undermine them would necessarily beg the question.

His basis for this claim comes from his discussion and rejection of the remaining two criteria: uncontrollability and the trustworthiness of public institutions of information. According to the first, conspiratorial theorizing is increasingly unwarranted the more it relies on the necessity of some small group to effectively and secretly control the actions of larger human institutions. According to the second, conspiratorial theorizing is increasingly unwarranted the more it impugns the trustworthiness of public fact-gathering institutions. These criteria are responses to the kinds of worries I raised above. As time passes and the conspiracy is not publicly exposed, the would-be conspiracy theorist is forced to suppose that the allegedly "free" press and governmental investigative institutions are either being manipulated effectively by the conspirators or these institutions are part of the conspiracy. Basham argues that any attempt to undermine the credibility of malevolent global conspiracy theories on these two grounds necessarily begs the question. The controllability and trustworthiness of human institutions is exactly what is at question here.

In response, I would stress the importance of concentrating our attention on concrete cases rather than philosophical abstractions. The mere abstract metaphysical possibility of something being the case is not necessarily evidence for warranted believability. Further, the concrete cases that Basham does discuss do not, to my mind, support the case he builds upon them. For example, it is true that Allied commanders were able to prevent the Axis from learning the exact location and date of the D-Day invasion. However, note two things: First, the Axis were quite aware that an invasion was imminent and that it would likely come from the British Isles; such a large scale massing of troops was impossible to hide. Second, the height of World War II represents a very peculiar situation with regards to the role and options available to the free press

and other investigative institutions. Even in situations where there exists a large degree of control over communication and personal travel, not to mention large public willingness to allow the execution of conspiracies, conspirators find it extremely difficult to keep a lid on things. It is all the more difficult, one imagines, now.

However, the kinds of global malevolent conspiracies that Basham discusses are more extreme than these concrete cases.³ Although the details are obscure, they seem more akin to keeping secret a D-Day invasion where not only is the invasion itself a secret, but even the existence of the would-be invader is unknown to the victims! Notice that many of our world’s most secret organizations and institutions—organizations and institutions that do much to remain out of public view—the United States National Security Agency, Delta Force, Area 51, are nonetheless known to exist, even if the details of their operations are successfully kept secret. The kinds of global conspiracies that worry Basham are even more secret than these, in that their very existence is unknown (and even unsuspected by all but the conspiracy theorists).

In fact, it would seem that they are so successful at remaining secret that I think Basham has inadvertently defined a class of conspiracy theories for which the Humean analysis actually applies. The class of conspiratorial entities that worries Basham is, by definition, so successful at hiding any and all evidence of their existence that there is no possibility of any manifest evidence in favor of positing their existence. However, if there is no evidence of their existence, then there can be no grounds for epistemic warrant in favor of the conspiracy theories that posit them. If this were all there were to say, I would

³ Ironically, McVeigh himself was wary about global conspiracy theories. Michel & Herbert (2001) write, “...to investigate a tip, McVeigh drove hundreds of miles southeast to Gulfport, Mississippi. He had read in a right-wing newspaper that the town was being used as a staging area for U.N. troops and equipment, so McVeigh decided to run his own reconnaissance mission to investigate. Arriving at the location mentioned in the article, he hopped over a fence and began his inspection. He said he did find former Soviet and East Block utility vehicles at the site, but McVeigh noticed that the vehicles lacked weapon mounts or armor.... [A]s he would later discover, the transports were there being reconfigured... for use in U.N.-sponsored humanitarian aid efforts.

McVeigh felt it was important for somebody such as himself, with military experience, to check on such rumors personally. As concerned as he was about the New World Order, he also saw a danger in the increasing spread of mystified paranoia in the Patriot community. There were enough legitimate threats to worry about.” (157)

merely stop and thank Basham for doing what I originally set out to do. Alas, the actual situation is more complicated.

Basham presents an argument in favor of global conspiracy theories that does not advert to evidence in favor of any particular conspiracy theory. It is a version of the lottery paradox for global conspiracy theories: while no individual global conspiracy theory is warranted, we nonetheless have evidence that it is very likely (certain, even?) that *at least one* global conspiracy is in operation. Basham writes, "...the conclusion that conspiratorial groups exist *somewhere* in the public realm and are busy doing *something* far reaching and painfully nefarious is almost irresistible" (p. ***, emphasis in original). His evidence for this conclusion is a simple induction based on an unvarnished look at human history; a history replete with every kind of conspiracy from marital infidelities to "[m]ulti-player business betrayals, thieving trickery and cruel false rumors requiring the cooperation of others..." (Ibid.).

Two responses to Basham seem most compelling. First, it is a long way from adultery and insider trading to the kind of all-encompassing, world-controlling, global conspiracies that are the focus of his argument. What Basham's historical record proves is that there are certainly groups of individuals who are nefarious enough that they would love to pull off a malevolent global conspiracy if such a thing were possible. What marital infidelity and business skullduggery does not show, I believe, is that such a feat *could* be pulled off or that we have warranted grounds for fearing that such a conspiracy is currently in operation.

Second—and this will be my final thought—the historical record cuts both ways. It can be read, as Basham does, as an endorsement of the hypothesis that small groups of individuals secretly control of large segments of what we take to be the "free world." However, it should also be noted that when it comes to committing large-scale evil, secrecy is often largely unnecessary. Six million European Jews, Gypsies and homosexuals can be rounded up and systematically murdered without a global conspiracy. The "witches" of Salem can be tried and burned to death without a global conspiracy. And, as the Monty Python comedy team, quoted in my title, correctly points out, events such as the Spanish inquisition are entirely unexpected; however, I might add, the individuals that perpetrate such events can be amazingly effective in carrying out the

deeds they wish without much recourse to secrecy and conspiracy. If one wishes to be malevolent on a global scale, why waste time and energy maintaining a conspiracy when history shows that one can get away with it in the open?

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