Penultimate version of paper to appear in *Journal of Philosophy* (March, 1999).
(Please cite that version.)

VERSION: 4.4
DATE REVISED: Wed Nov 11 1998
WORD COUNT: 7,133

Of Conspiracy Theories

Brian L. Keeley
(keeley@twinearth.wustl.edu)
Philosophy/Neuroscience/Psychology Program,
Dept. of Philosophy, Washington University in St. Louis

> "The only thought which philosophy brings with it, in regard to history, is the simple thought of Reason—the thought that Reason rules the world, and that world history has therefore been rational in its course."
>
> - Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 1837

> "Shit happens." - Popular bumper sticker slogan, 1998.

Abstract

As the end of the Millennium approaches, conspiracy theories are increasing in number and popularity. In this short essay, I offer an analysis of conspiracy theories inspired by Hume's discussion of miracles. My first conclusion is that whereas Hume can argue that miracles are, by definition, explanations we are not warranted in believing, there is nothing analytic that will allow us to distinguish good from bad conspiracy theories. There is no *a priori* method for distinguishing warranted conspiracy theories (say, those explaining Watergate) from those which are unwarranted (say, theories about extraterrestrials abducting humans). Nonetheless, there is a cluster of characteristics often shared by unwarranted conspiracy theories. An analysis of the alleged explanatory virtues of unwarranted conspiracies suggests some reasons for their current popularity, while at the same time providing grounds for their rejection. Finally, I discuss how conspiracy theories embody an anachronistic world-view that places the contemporary *zeitgeist* in a clearer light.

I

The Millennium is nigh, and with each passing year, the American consciousness is increasingly in the grip of conspiratorial thinking.[1] Some conspiracy theories are the stuff of legend. Every year best-selling books are published, block-buster movies produced, and high-rated television and radio programs aired which seek to convince us that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in the assassination of John F. Kennedy; that, in 1947, an alien spacecraft crashed near Roswell, New Mexico and the U.S. Government recovered the craft and its extraterrestrial occupants, then covered up with stories of crashed weather balloons; that the rapid introduction of crack cocaine into America's urban centers during the late 1980s was facilitated by CIA-backed, Nicaraguan Contra-affiliated, drug smugglers. This plot benefitted both the CIA (by channelling money to the Contras after Colonel Oliver North's Iranian arms deals had been uncovered) and their *status quo* seeking supporters (by keeping the economic and cultural boot firmly on the neck of black America).

Here is a test of your conspiracy literacy. How many of the following conspiracy theories have you heard about before? How many are you tempted to believe have merit?

(1) HIV, the virus that causes AIDs, was the product of U.S. or Soviet biological warfare research before it was released (either intentionally or otherwise) on an unsuspecting world.

1. Conspiracy theory has not been given much attention by philosophers. In fact, I am aware of only a handful of discussions, e.g., Karl Popper, *The open society and its enemies*, vol. 2: *The high tide of prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the aftermath*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 94-99, also Charles Pigden, "Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories?", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences 25* (1993), pp. 3-34. I believe that the reason for this omission is that most academics simply find the conspiracy theories of popular culture to be silly and without merit. However, I believe it is incumbent on philosophers to provide analysis of the errors involved in common delusions, if that is indeed what they are. I offer this paper in the spirit of Philip Kitcher's work on the philosophical difficulties of scientific creationism, *Abusing science: the case against creationism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982).

(2) Extraterrestrials regularly visit our planet, mutilating cattle and abducting humans (whose memories are then erased). Our Government is aware of this situation.

(3) Los Angeles once had an efficient mass transit system based on street-cars, but in the 1930s and 1940s automakers, rubber manufacturers, and oil companies colluded with city officials there to dismantle this system in order that LA could become a model city of automobile based transportation.

(4) TWA Flight 800 was accidentally downed by a U. S. Navy missile; a fact then covered up by a Government fearful of bad press in an era of post-Cold War military downsizing.

(5) All transatlantic communications are monitored and recorded by the U. S. National Security Agency.

(6) Significant aspects of the world economy are under the control of a small group of individuals, be they Freemasons, the Trilateral Commission, or a secret organization of Jewish bankers.

I could go on. The point of this list is to make clear just how pervasive conspiracy theory now is. Prognostication is a dangerous business, but I predict that future cultural critics and sociologists are going to have as much to say about our contemporary obsession with conspiracies as they now have to say concerning the implications of the 1950s American fascination with UFOs and extraterrestrial invasions.

However, the present essay is epistemological, not sociological. I contend that the study of conspiracy theories can shed light on the nature of theoretical explanation. Conspiracy theories, as a general category, are not necessarily wrong. In fact, as the cases of Watergate and the Iran-Contra affair illustrate, small groups of powerful individuals do occasionally seek to effect the course of history, and with some non-trivial degree of success. Moreover, the available, competing explanations—both official and otherwise—occasionally represent dueling conspiracy theories, as we will see in the case of the Oklahoma City bombing.

The definition of conspiracy theory poses unexpected difficulties. There seems to exist a strong, common intuition that it is possible to delineate a set of explanations—let us call them "unwarranted conspiracy theories" (UCTs).[2] It is thought that this class of explanation can be distinguished analytically from those theories that deserve our assent. The idea is that we can do with conspiracy theories what Hume did with miracles: show that there is a class of explanations to which we should not assent, *by definition*.[3] One clear moral of the present essay is that this task is not as simple as we might have heretofore imagined.

Before continuing, I should emphasize that at no point should the reader conclude that I am giving arguments for or against the truth of any given explanation. The issue here is not whether aliens are indeed visiting our planet, or whether Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. Ultimately, in these cases, there is an historical fact of the matter. However, these facts are not manifest, and we must theorize and speculate as to what has happened. The issue here is one of warranted belief. In other words, it may well be correct that, "the truth is out there," but given our epistemic situation, we ought not necessarily believe everything which is, in fact, true. In this respect, we are in the same situation as Hume. As Thomas Huxley observed, Hume cannot say that miracles have never happened, only that even if they have, we have no warrant to believe them.[4] Hume has no way of determining, with certainty, whether Jesus turned stone into bread and fed the multitude. Maybe He did or maybe he didn't. However, Hume *is* in a position to say whether we *ought to believe* this miracle occurred, given the evidence at hand (or even given the *possible* evidence at hand).

Understanding *why* we are not warranted in believing certain conspiracy theories can make clearer why we ought to believe the things that we should. In this essay, I propose to make a study of unwarranted conspiracy theories, and in determining where they go wrong,

2. Other, less charitable, readers have suggested such labels as "kooky", "weirdo", and "harebrained", among others. While colorful, I do not find such terminology conducive to serious discussion.

3. "Of miracles," (section *X* of *Enquiries concerning human understanding*, 1748). Reprinted in S. Tweyman, ed., *Hume on miracles* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), pp. 1-20.

4. "The order of nature: miracles," (chapter VII of Huxley's *Hume*, 1881). Reprinted in Tweyman, 1996, pp. 161-168.

attempt to tell a story about explanation properly conducted. In the following section, I will turn to a recent event that has spawned a significant number of conspiracy theories: the Oklahoma City bombing. This discussion of a real event and the conspiracy theories (some warranted, some not) will help me illustrate the analysis provided in the rest of the paper. In Section III, I will discuss the problem of trying to define unwarranted conspiracy theories and illustrate the difficulties for finding analytic criteria for distinguishing good from bad conspiracy theories. I turn to the alleged virtues of UCTs in Section IV in order to explain both their current popularity as well as the grounds we have for ultimately rejecting them. Such explanations feature significant degrees of explanatory breadth and are not simply unfalsifiable in nature. However, continued belief in a UCT requires more and more pervasive scepticism in people and public institutions. This leads me in Section V to a discussion of conspiratorial thinking in the context of competing visions of the nature of the world. I suggest that confronting UCTs force us to choose between the pervasive scepticism of entailed by these theories and an absurdist view of the world entailed by their rejection. I conclude by suggesting that it is philosophy's job to show us the way out of this dilemma.

II

To give us a concrete example of conspiracy theory in action, it is necessary to deal with one in some detail. The detail is relevant because it is from the details of such events that UCTs take their start. I hope the reader will excuse this short diversion.

At a few minutes past nine on the morning of Wednesday, 19 April, 1995, a Ryder rental truck—parked in front of the 9-story Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma—is torn apart by a powerful explosion. Some 168 people, including—most tragically—19 children in the building day-care center, are killed in what has since been designated the single worst act of terrorism ever carried out on American soil.

As emergency personnel move in to rescue survivors from the rubble, a huge federal investigation is launched. Initial suspicion falls upon possible Middle Eastern terrorists. This turns out to be a dead-end.[5] After tracing the destroyed truck to Elliott's Body Shop in

Junction City, Kansas, attention is soon focussed on two white males in their twenties. Composite sketches of "John Doe #1" and "John Doe #2" are released to the public on the following day. A nation-wide manhunt ensues.

Meanwhile, it happens that at 10:20 am on the morning of the bombing, Officer Charles Hanger of the Oklahoma State Troopers spotted a northbound 1977 Mercury Marquis on Interstate 35 approximately 60 miles north of Oklahoma City. The car was travelling at 80 mph and lacked visible license plates. Officer Hanger pulled the car over without incident, but as he approached the lone driver, he noticed a suspicious bulge under the driver's jacket. The driver volunteered that he was indeed armed, at which point the officer drew his own weapon, pointed it at the head of the driver and disarmed him of a loaded pistol and a sheathed five-inch bladed knife. The driver, 26-year-old Persian Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh, was arrested on charges of transporting a loaded weapon, carrying a concealed weapon, and operating a motor vehicle without license plates. McVeigh was still in a cell awaiting arraignment two days later, when he was identified as "John Doe #1" and linked to the Oklahoma City bombing.

The investigation continued and, some two years later, McVeigh, along with Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier were convicted in connection with the case. McVeigh and Nichols were tried on a charge of "Use of a Weapon of Mass Destruction", and several other counts, including eleven counts of First Degree Murder for the eleven federal agents killed in the blast. (The Government contends that the defendants intentionally set out to kill Federal agents.) Fortier plead guilty to lesser crimes in relation to the bombing in return for his testimony against McVeigh and Nichols. Nichols was convicted on manslaughter and conspiracy charges, but the jury refused to convict him of the more serious crime of murder. McVeigh was convicted on all counts and sentenced to death.

In its cases against McVeigh and Nichols, the Government contended that McVeigh, Nichols, and Fortier planned and carried out the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal

5. Although not before Oklahoma resident and American citizen, Abrahim Ahmad, is detained in London, strip-searched, and returned to the US in shackles. He is quickly ruled out as a suspect and released.

Building as an act of terrorism against what they saw as a powerful and dangerous governmental entity. (The Government claims that McVeigh and his co-conspirators were inspired in part by *The Turner Diaries*, a novel that describes a racial revolution in America and which begins with a small group bombing the FBI headquarters in Arlington, Virginia.[6]) McVeigh, so goes the story, was particularly upset by the deadly Federal raid of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas and sought to avenge the deaths of these victims of Federal heavy-handedness. (The Oklahoma City bombing occurred on the second anniversary of the fiery end of the Waco stand-off.) So, McVeigh (trained in explosives by the U.S. Army) and Nichols constructed a powerful ammonium nitrate and fuel oil bomb in the back of a rented truck and detonated it in front of the Murrah Federal Building.

The bombing provides us with a nice example of the dynamics of conspiracy theory. Within days of the event, questions were raised about the official account of the bombing (itself calling for a conspiracy): Did McVeigh, Nichols, and Fortier act on their own, or were they a small part of a larger team? Were they set up as "patsies" to take the fall for the crime, as Oswald claimed he was before Jack Ruby gunned him down? Was the bombing perhaps carried out either directly or indirectly by elements within the U.S. Government who wished to sway public sentiment towards greater law enforcement powers and against "far right-wing" ideologues who have been increasingly setting themselves at odds with Federal authorities? Many such questions have been raised in the years following the bombing.

The grounds for such conspiracy theories are investigated in a book entitled, *OKBomb! Conspiracy and Cover-up* by Jim Keith (perhaps best known for his 1995 *Black Helicopters Over America: Strikeforce for the New World Order*).[7] In this book, Keith does not endorse any particular alternative account, but instead raises many issues and questions for the official account. For example, he casts doubt upon the alleged guilt of the Government's prime suspect by listing eleven, "striking incongruities in the behavior of Timothy McVeigh prior to and during his arrest", including the following:

---

6. A. McDonald, *The Turner Diaries*, 1978. Reprinted in 1995 by Barricade Books.

7. Lilburn, GA: IllumiNet Press, 1996 and 1995, respectively.

(1) "Of high curiosity is the fact that McVeigh, even though reported to possess fake I.D. under [other names], chose to give his correct name and address to the owner of the Dreamland Motel he was staying at in Junction City [just prior to the bombing]. This is hardly the behavior of a man planning on committing a crime of the magnitude of the Oklahoma City bombing" [28-29].

(2) We are to believe that McVeigh was fleeing the scene of the crime in a car without license plates: "All the car seemingly lacked was a big sign saying 'Arrest me!'" [23].

(3) "If McVeigh had just taken part in the bombing of the Murrah Building […], is it likely that he, armed with a pistol, would have let a police officer approach his car without resisting him? As a man trained in the use of small arms, McVeigh would not have had much trouble in gunning the officer down from within the protection of the car" [30].

(4) When McVeigh was arrested, he gave as his address the property of James Nichols, the brother of Terry Nichols, allegedly the place where the bomb-making materials were stored: "Does it make any sense that McVeigh would have pointed the FBI to his alleged partner or partners in crime…" [31]?

Keith adds to the above observations the following: there were early news reports suggesting that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) had received prior warning of the bombing, a claim supported by the fact that no BATF employees were in the building at the time of the blast, but were on the scene within minutes. The BATF vociferously deny that they were forewarned, but no explanation has ever been given of the early reports. And there is the mysterious "John Doe #2"—never caught and left unexplained by the official story that led to the convictions of McVeigh and Nichols.

The answer to these questions and others raised in Keith's book are intended to lead the reader to the conclusion that all is not as we have been led to believe. Probing beneath the surface of the facts of the case as they have been presented in the mainstream media reveals

the real possibility that the Oklahoma City bombing may have been not been the act of a lone group of politically-motivated criminals, but rather suggests something much bigger and much more sinister. One popular conspiracy theory related to the bombing goes like this: A group of right-wing ideologues (including McVeigh, Nichols, Fortier and the mysterious John Doe #2) were indeed plotting to blow up a Federal building. However, their actions were being monitored by the BATF. (On some accounts, their actions were being influenced by the BATF. John Doe #2 was actually a BATF informer, or perhaps even a plant. The BATF hoped that swooping in and stinging a group of "dangerous, right-wing terrorists" at the very last moment would do much to erase their public image as an organization of bumbling incompetents resulting from the fiasco in Waco, Texas.) In any case, McVeigh and his friends were involved, but only tangentially. McVeigh helps assemble the bomb, but he is unaware of the exact plans for its use, or is actively misled. At the last moment, the BATF screws up, looses contact with the group or are outsmarted by them and the terrorists successfully carry out their act of terror. McVeigh—unaware that the bombing has occurred—is picked up by the police. The BATF realize that they have a public relations nightmare on their hands: they knew about the bombing, but through sheer incompetence and a desire to grandstand, failed to prevent it. When McVeigh is picked up in an unrelated incident, they see their chance to cover up their own involvement in and knowledge of the incident. He is the perfect patsy because he does have some involvement in the incident, but doesn't know the whole story.

Notice that this account is not completely without plausibility. The BATF *does* have a public image of incompetence and institutional insecurity. On most accounts, they fouled up the original raid on the Branch Davidian compound because they were more interested in national television coverage than in competent law enforcement. It makes sense to suggest that this is an image they are actively seeking to overcome. Also, this would not be the first time that a federal undercover agent has incited not-so-innocent citizens to almost carry out crimes they might not have without such encouragement. Finally, it certainly would not be the first time that a law enforcement agency has covered up the fact that it has incompetently allowed a crime to be committed.

III

What is a conspiracy theory? A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret. Note a few things about this definition. First, a conspiracy theory deserves the appellation "theory," because it proffers an *explanation* of the event in question. It proposes reasons why the event occurred. Second, a conspiracy theory need not propose that the conspirators are all powerful, only that they have played some pivotal role in bringing about the event. They can be seen as merely setting events in motion. Indeed, it is because the conspirators are not omnipotent that they must act in secret, for if they acted in public, others would move to obstruct them. Third, the group of conspirators must be small, although the upper bounds are necessarily vague. Technically speaking, a conspiracy of one is no conspiracy at all, but rather the actions of a lone agent.

This then might be considered a bare-bones definition of conspiracy theory, be it warranted or otherwise. Unwarranted conspiracy theories—at least the ones that concern me in this essay—have a number of additional characteristics:

(1) *A UCT is an explanation which runs counter to some received, official, or "obvious" account.*

Central to any unwarranted conspiracy theory is an official story that the conspiracy theory must undermine and cast doubt upon. Furthermore, the presence of a "cover story" is often seen as the most damning piece of evidence for any given conspiracy; the fact that someone has gone to such pains to create a false explanation points to a conscious effort to deceive.

(2) *The true intentions behind the conspiracy are invariably nefarious.*

I am aware of no popular conspiracy theory according to which some group of powerful individuals is secretly doing *good* and who desperately hope that their schemes will not be revealed.

(3) *Unwarranted conspiracy theories typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events.*

You might think that the Oklahoma City bombing had nothing to do the 1995 Sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway. However, what if I told you that the appropriate anniversary was not the Federal raid in Waco (which occurred two years earlier to the day) but rather the next day, one month to the day since the gas attack in Tokyo? The connection is that the attack in Tokyo was carried out by the CIA in retaliation for the Japanese bugging of the Clinton White House, all part of an ever-escalating Japanese-American trade war. So, the Oklahoma City bombing was a "pay-back" hit carried out by the Japanese…[8] As will be discussed below, this unifying aspect of conspiracy theories is a key feature of their apparent explanatory strength.

(4) *As noted, the truth behind events explained by conspiracy theories are typically well-guarded secrets, even if the ultimate perpetrators are sometimes well-known public figures.*

What seems to drive many conspiracy theorists is the deeply held belief that if only the truth can be publicly revealed (in much the way that Woodward, Bernstein, and "Deep Throat" exposed the Watergate break-ins), the conspirators' nefarious plans will be thwarted. Therefore, it is in the interest of conspirators to see to it that the truth is not revealed, or if it is, that it is not widely believed.

(5) *The chief tool of the conspiracy theorist is what I will call "errant data".*

Errant data come in two classes: a) unaccounted-for data and b) contradictory data. *Unaccounted-for data* do not contradict the received account, but are data which fall through

8. Let me note here that *I am not making this stuff up.* Throughout this paper, the examples I offer all come from sources other than myself. For example, see Keith's *OKBomb!*, chapter 21 for more on the "Japanese connection" to the Oklahoma City bombing.

the net of the received explanation. They are data that go unexplained by the received account. For example, the early reports that the BATF had prior warning of the Oklahoma City bombing and the fact that no BATF employees were in the building at the time of the explosion represent unaccounted-for data with respect to the received account of the bombing. *Contradictory data* are data which, if true, would contradict the received account. McVeigh's manifest idiocy in fleeing the scene of the bombing in a car without license plates is a contradictory datum with respect to the official account of him as conspiratorial ringleader capable of planning and carrying out such a terrorist operation. (The role of errant data will be discussed in more detail below.)

These criteria go some way towards distinguishing UCTs from conspiratorial explanations which are less epistemically problematic. I am not concerned here with conspiracies to throw surprise birthday parties for friends or attempts by parents to deceive young children about the existence of magical beings.[9] Such day-to-day conspiracies typically do not meet all of these additional criteria. Surprise birthday parties are not organized for nefarious purposes, nor are they meant to be kept secret perpetually. However, these criteria do not distinguish UCTs from all conspiracies we are warranted in believing. Both Watergate and the Iran-Contra Affair meet all of these criteria, yet belief in these conspiracies seem *prima facie* warranted.[10] There is no criterion or set of criteria that provide *a priori* grounds for distinguishing warranted from unwarranted conspiracy theories. The philosophical difficulties of unwarranted conspiracy theories require a deeper analysis, to which I now turn.

---

9. Although, I cannot help but wonder whether conspiracy's grip on Western thought can be blamed, at least in part, on the number of conspiracies we experience as children. As we grow older, we discover just how many things adults have been systematically lying to us about: Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, where babies come from, etc.

10. Some might balk at the "nefariousness" criterion. Presumably, Col. Oliver North and his colleagues believed they were serving some higher good by their attempt to circumvent Congress' prohibitions on funding Nicaraguan rebels. I do not wish to get into a debate over the semantics of "nefariousness" in the Machiavellian context of politics. Suffice it to say that however one characterizes what went on the Iran-Contra Affair and Watergate, they were not completely above board. If they were, secrecy would not have been so necessary.

IV

Conspiracy theories are attractive, a fact demonstrated by their current popularity. But their alleged virtues are subtly flawed. In this section, I will show how certain elements of conspiracy theory *appear* to be those of legitimate theoretical explanation, but argue that on closer analysis, they are not. Therefore, I am trying to do two things: (1) explain why it is that unwarranted conspiracy theories are so popular, but (2) explain why we should nonetheless fail to believe in them. They are popular, I suggest, because they exhibit several well known explanatory virtues. They are nonetheless unwarranted because they exhibit these virtues in ways that undermine the strength of those virtues.

The first and foremost virtue that conspiracy theories exhibit, and which accounts for much of their apparent strength is the virtue of unified explanation or explanatory reach. According to this virtue, all things being equal, the better theory is the one that provides a unified explanation of more phenomena than competing explanations. Unified explanation is the *sine qua non* of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories *always* explain more than competing theories, because by invoking a conspiracy, they can explain *both* the data of the received account *and* the errant data that the received theory fails to explain. So, for example, in our case of the Oklahoma City bombing, conspiracy theories explain the data of the official story. On the account discussed above, the bombing was carried out by terrorists that the BATF and other agencies were aware of, but, due to sheer incompetence, failed to stop. This theory explains why and how the Murrah building came to be bombed. Furthermore, it explains the various errant data, for example, why no BATF personnel were in the building (they were forewarned) and the bizarre behavior of McVeigh (who was innocent of the crime and hence not expecting to be framed by federal agents in search of a scapegoat).

This is the beauty of conspiracy theories. They offer wonderfully unified accounts of all the data at hand, both those the official story explains, plus those niggling, overlooked errant data. However, as I will now try to show, UCTs obtain unity of explanation at too high a cost.

The role of errant data in UCTs is critical. The typical logic of an unwarranted conspiracy theory goes something like this: Begin with errant facts, such as the observation that no BATF employees were injured in the Oklahoma City bombing and the early reports of prior warning. The official story all but ignores this data. What can explain the intransigence of

the official story tellers in the face of this and other contravening evidence? Could they be so stupid and blind? Of course not; they must be intentionally ignoring it. The best explanation is some kind of conspiracy, an intentional attempt to hide the truth of the matter from the public's eyes.

By invoking a conspiracy hypothesis, large amounts of "evidence" are thrown into question. This is one of the most curious features of these theories: To my knowledge, conspiracy theories are the only theories for which evidence *against* them is actually construed as evidence *in favor* of them. The more evidence piled up by the authorities in favor of a given theory, the more the conspiracy theorist points to how badly "They" must want us to believe the official story.

Let me note two things at this point: First, conspiracy theories are not alone in placing great emphasis on errant data. The history of science is replete with examples of theoretical innovation initiated by an investigation into data that did not fit the standard paradigm. It is a good pragmatic heuristic for scientific effort to be expended on chasing after errant data, in the hopes that these loose strings might lead to the unraveling of currently misguided theory. However, what conspiracy theories get wrong is that the existence of errant data *alone* is not a significant problem with a theory. Given the imperfect nature of our human understanding of the world, we should *expect* that even the best possible theory would not explain *all* the available data. One's theory should not fit *all* the available data, because not all the available data are, in fact, true.[11] Invariably, some of our measurements, some of our interpretations and other theories get something wrong about the nature of the world.

Second, the problematic of conspiracy theories goes beyond simple false data. If the only problem with UTCs was that they placed too much emphasis on small sets of data at odds with an official account, then that would not make them a very interesting phenomenon. However, conspiracy theories differ from most other theories in one very interesting way. A conspiracy theorist would rightly point out that she has one problem that scientists are not faced with. By hypothesis, the conspiracy theorist is struggling to explain phenomena that other, presumably powerful, agents are actively seeking to keep secret. Unlike the case of

11. I've heard this sentiment attributed to Francis Crick.

science, where Nature is construed as a passive and uninterested party with respect to human knowledge gathering activities, the conspiracy theorist is working in a domain where *the investigated actively seeks to hamper the investigation.* Imagine if neutrinos were not simply hard to detect, but actively sought to avoid detection! This is exactly the case the conspiracy theorist contends we are confronted with in the cases they seek to understand. This is why countervailing evidence and lack of evidence can and ought to be construed as supporting their theories.

This brings me to the most commonly voiced complaint about unwarranted conspiracy theories, namely that they are simply unfalsifiable. The worry is that given a situation where all potentially falsifying evidence can be construed as supporting, or at worst as neutral evidence, then conspiracy theories are by definition unfalsifiable. In favor of conspiracy theorists, it should be noted that this unfalsifiability is not as *ad hoc* as it might initially seem, due to the active nature of the investigated, just noted. It is not *ad hoc* to suppose that false and misleading data will be thrown your way when one supposes that there is somebody out there actively throwing that data at you. Just ask Kenneth Starr. As evidenced by any number of 20th century, U.S. Government-sponsored activities (take your pick), we have reason to believe that there exist forces with both motive and capacity to carry out effective disinformation campaigns.

My claim here is that unfalsifiability is only a reasonable criterion in cases where we do not have reason to believe that there are powerful agents seeking to steer our investigation away from the truth of the matter. Falsifiability is a perfectly fine criterion in the case of natural science when the target of investigation is neutral with respect to our queries, but it seems much less appropriate in the case of the phenomena covered by conspiracy theories. Richard Nixon and Oliver North actively sought to divert investigations into their respective activities and both could call upon significant resources to maintain their conspiracies. They saw to it that investigators were thwarted in many of their early attempts to uncover what they accurately suspicioned was occurring. Strictly hewing to the dogma of falsifiability in these cases would have led to a rejection of conspiracy theories at too early a point in the investigations, and may have left the conspiracies undiscovered.

No, the problem with UCTs is not their unfalsifiability, but rather the increasing degree of

scepticism required by such theories as positive evidence for the conspiracy fails to obtain. These theories throw into doubt the various institutions that have been set up to generate reliable data and evidence. In doing so, they reveal just how large a role trust—in both institutions and individuals—plays in the justification of our beliefs. The problem is this: most of us—including those of us who are scientists and who work in scientific laboratories full of expensive equipment—have never carried out the experiments or made the empirical observations that support most contemporary scientific theories. Unless we want to conclude that the vast majority of us are not warranted in believing that the platypus is a mammal and that gold is an atomic element, we need some procedure by which the epistemic warrant obtained by those who *do* make the appropriate observations can be transferred to the rest of us. In modern science, this procedure involves the elaborate mechanisms of publication, peer review, professional reputation, university accreditation, and so on. Thus, we are warranted in believing the claims of science because these claims are the result of a social mechanism of warranted belief production.[12]

In the public sphere where conspiracy theories dwell, there are related mechanisms for generating warranted beliefs. There is the free press, made up of reporters, editors, and owners who compete to publish "the scoop" before others do. There are governmental agencies charged with investigating incidents, producing data, and publishing findings. And there are, of course, various "free agents" (including the conspiracy theorists themselves) who are members of the public. Inherent in the claim that alleged evidence against a theory should be construed as evidence for that theory is a pervasive scepticism about our public, fact-gathering institutions and the individuals that make them up. Thus, as a conspiracy theory matures, attempt after attempt to falsify a conspiracy theory appears to succeed, and this apparent success must be explained as the nefarious work of the conspirators. As a result of this process, an initial claim that a small group of people are conspiring gives way to claims of

12. For more on the critical role of testimony in the epistemic process, see C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: a philosophical study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). For more on aspects on the social construction of warranted belief, see Helen Longino's *Science as social knowledge: values and objectivity in scientific inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) and "The fate of knowledge in social theories of science," in Schmitt, Frederick F. (ed.), *Socializing epistemology: the social dimensions of knowledge.* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 1994), pp. 135-157, also Philip Kitcher's "Socializing knowledge," *Journal of philosophy 88* (1991), pp. 675-676, and "Contrasting conceptions of social epistemology," in Schmitt, 1994, pp. 111-134.

larger and larger conspiracies.

In the case of the Oklahoma City Bombing, the initial conspiracy only involved the BATF agents and their immediate superiors. However, the FBI and other federal agencies were brought into the investigation, yet did not report a BATF conspiracy. Therefore, they must have been brought into the conspiracy. Ditto for certain members of the press who must have stumbled across evidence of the conspiracy, but who have not yet disclosed it in the national media. What began as a small conspiracy on the part of a few members of a paramilitary U.S. federal agency invariably swells into a conspiracy of huge proportions, as positive evidence for the alleged conspiracy fails to obtain. And, as more people must be brought into the conspiracy to explain the complicity of more and more public institutions, the less believable the theory should become.

It is this pervasive scepticism of people and public institutions entailed by some mature conspiracy theories which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted. It is not their lack of falsifiability *per se*, but the increasing amount of scepticism required to maintain faith in a conspiracy theory as time passes and the conspiracy is not uncovered in a convincing fashion. As this scepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes.

Consider another famous unwarranted conspiracy theory, the one claiming that the Holocaust never occurred and is a fabrication of Jews and their sympathizers. Robert Anton Wilson correctly notes that, "…a conspiracy that can deceive us about 6,000,000 deaths can deceive us about *anything*, and that it takes a great leap of faith for Holocaust Revisionists to believe World War II happened at all, or that Franklin Roosevelt did serve as President from 1933 to 1945, or that Marilyn Monroe was more 'real' than King Kong or Donald Duck."[13] In the process of holding onto a belief in an increasingly massive conspiracy behind more and more public events, we undermine the grounds for believing in anything. At some point, we will be forced to recognize the unwarranted nature of the conspiracy theory if we are to left with *any* warranted explanations and beliefs at all.

13. "Beyond true and false: a sneaky quiz with a subversive commentary," in Schultz, Ted (ed.), *The Fringes of Reason* (New York: Harmony Books, 1989), p. 172, emphasis in original.

V

In this penultimate section, I want to take a step back and get a handle on the broader philosophical issues raised by conspiracy theories and the implication of their current surge in popularity. I contend that conspiracy theories embody a thoroughly outdated world-view; a perspective on the meaning of life that was more appropriate in the last century. However, recognizing this anachronistic element of conspiratorial thought is useful if it reveals something about the contemporary *zeitgeist.* Furthermore, the present popularity of conspiracy theories suggests that we are now in the grip of a conflict between world-views.

Conspiracy theorists are, I submit, some of the last believers in an ordered universe. By supposing that current events are under the control of nefarious agents, conspiracy theories entail that such events are *capable of being controlled.* In an earlier time, it would have been natural to believe in an ordered world, in which God and other supernatural agents exercised significant influence and control. With the rise of materialist science and capitalist economies—peaking in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries—the notion of an ordered universe was still held to, but the role of the supernatural was either greatly diminished (as in Deism) or eliminated (as in Marxism). As Hegel puts it in the passage quoted in the epigraph, "world history has… been rational in its course". Therefore, on this view, there is some hope that humans can understand, predict and conceivably control the course of human events. This the conspiracy theorists believe, only they further believe that the wrong folks are at the helm.

Such beliefs are out of step with what we have generally come to believe in the late Twentieth century. The rejection of conspiratorial thinking is not simply based on the belief that conspiracy theories are false as a matter of fact. The source of the problem goes much deeper. The world as we understand it today is made up of an extremely large number of interacting agents, each with its own imperfect view of the world and its own set of goals. Such a system cannot be controlled because there are simply too many agents to be handled by any small controlling group. There are too many independent degrees of freedom. This is true of the economy, of the political electorate, and of the very social, fact-gathering

institutions that conspiracy theorists cast doubt upon. Even if the BATF were part of a large conspiracy to cover up their incompetence in the Oklahoma City Bombing, it is implausible to believe that not a single member of the BATF stationed in Oklahoma would be moved by guilt, self-interest, or some other motivation to reveal that agency's role in the tragedy, if not to the press, to a lover or family member. Governmental agencies, even those as regulated and controlled as the military and intelligence agencies, are plagued with leaks and rumors. To propose that an explosive secret could be closeted for any length of time simply reveals a lack of understanding of the nature of modern bureaucracies. Like the world itself, they are made up of too many people with too many different agendas to be easily controlled.

However, the rejection of the conspiratorial world view is not something about which I am particularly thrilled. If conspiracy theories are genuinely misguided, then I fear we are left with an apparently absurdist image of the world. A lone gunman can change the course of history when the President of the United States just happens to drive past the window of his place of work during the gunman's lunch hour. The conspiratorial world-view offers us the comfort of knowing that while tragic events occur, they at least occur for a reason, and that the greater the event, the greater and more significant the reason. Our contemporary world-view, which the conspiracy theorist refuses to accept, is one in which nobody—not God, not us, not even *some* of us—is in control. Furthermore, the world (including the people in it) is uncontrollable, irrational, and absurd in a way illustrated by the plays of Ionesco and Beckett.

It is not that the rejection of conspiratorial thinking entails that the world is *random*, only that it is without broad meaning and significance. One can reject conspiracies about Kennedy's assassination and still hold that Oswald's behavior was caused and fully deterministic in ways that science can get a grip on. However, such a scientific understanding of Oswald's behavior is absurdist in just the sense I intend here. There was no human or rational agency responsible for his behavior on such account, only the blind workings of brain chemicals and childhood emotional traumas. Events like Kennedy's assassination and the Oklahoma City bombing have had an enormous emotional and meaningful impact on our world, indeed they represent singularities after which American culture has never been the same. Conspiracy theories have as a virtue the attempt to preserve a human meaning—a

rational accounting—for these sea changes, that allow them to be understood in human terms. If the conspiracy theorists are wrong, then when considered from the human perspective, all we seem to be able to say is that "Shit happens".

Considered in this light, the challenge of conspiracy theory is that it forces us to choose between an almost nihilistic degree of scepticism and absurdism: The conspiracy theorist chooses to embrace the hyper-scepticism inherent in supposing dissimulation on a truly massive scale (by distrusting the claims of our institutions) over the absurdism of an irrational and essentially meaningless world. Until a third option is presented—and perhaps this is one of the jobs of philosophy—we should expect unwarranted conspiracy theories to continue enjoy significant popularity.

VI

What lessons should we take away from these musings on the dynamics of conspiracy theory? The story I have told here seems to point to three main, related morals:

First, the folly of conspiracy theories highlight the fact that we should not be overly bothered when our theories of social events fail to make sense of all the data. Invariably, not all the data are true. In particular, the irrational and fallible nature of humans should lead us to expect that some of the data generated by us are certainly wrong. Witnesses misremember the past or exhibit unconscious biases. Reporters and government agents will get things wrong in the early moments of a crisis, and will later be loathe to admit those mistakes. For this reason, a theory that has as one of its main features a unified account of all of the data in a variety of seemingly unrelated occurrences should be called into question on those grounds alone. We expect our explanations to be good, but we also expect them to be imperfect.

Second, we should be careful not to over-rationalize the world or the people that live in it. Rejecting conspiratorial thinking entails accepting the meaningless nature of the human world. Just as with the physical world, where hurricanes, tornados, and other "acts of God" *just happen*, the same is true of the social world. Some people just do things. They assassinate world leaders, act on poorly thought out ideologies, and leave clues at the scene of the crime. Too strong a belief in the rationality of people in general, or of the world, will lead

us to seek purposive explanations where none exist.

The third lesson of conspiracy theories is that we ought to recognize such theories as embodying an almost nihilistic degree of scepticism about the behavior and motivations of other people and the social institutions they constitute. To the extent that a conspiracy theory relies on a global and far-reaching doubt of the motives and good will of others, it is akin to global philosophical scepticism. These extreme sceptical stances should be dealt with in the same way. We should be wary of theoretical accounts that expend more energy undermining the epistemic warrant of competing explanations than on generating new, positive evidence.

So, in the end, what do I think of conspiracy theories? My initial motivation was to present an analysis of conspiracy theories in the spirit of Hume's analysis of miracles. For Hume, miracles are *by definition* explanations that we are never warranted in believing. However, if my analysis here is correct, we cannot say the same thing about conspiracy theories. They are not *by definition* unwarranted. (A good thing given that we want to believe in at least *some* conspiracies, for example Watergate and Iran-Contra.) Instead, I suggest that there is nothing straightforwardly analytic that allows us to distinguish between good and bad conspiracy theories. We seem to be confronted with a spectrum of cases, ranging from the believable to the highly implausible. The best we can do is track the evaluation of given theories over time and come to some consensus as to when belief in the theory entails more scepticism than we can stomach. Also, I suspect that much of the intuitive "problem" with conspiracy theories is a problem with the *theorists* themselves, and not a feature of the theories they produce. Perhaps the problem is a psychological one of not recognizing when to stop searching to hidden causes. Nonetheless, I suggest that the study of conspiracy theories, even the crazy ones, is useful, if only because it forces us to clearly distinguish between our "good" explanations and their "bad" ones.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my philosophical colleagues at Washington University in St. Louis, where this paper was originally presented. Special thanks to David Hilditch, Pim Haselager, Pete Mandik, Jim Moore, and Chase Wrenn for insightful comments and discussion.