

A (NAIVE) VIEW OF CONSPIRACY AS COLLECTIVE ACTION

Whether or not you think we live in some “Golden Age” of conspiracy theory or conspiracy theorising, talk of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory theory (the academic study of these things called “conspiracy theories”) seems timely. From talk of fake news and the White House to misinformation being deliberately spread about the U.K.’s exit from the European Union, talk of conspiracy infuses a lot of contemporary political discourse.

Conspiracy theories are a form of explanation, where the conspiracy theorist seeks to explain the occurrence of some event with reference to some conspiracy. This is, at least, the general and widely-accepted definition found in the philosophical literature¹. Part-and-parcel of some theory being conspiratorial is that the event we want to explain is the product (in some sense²) of a group of agents *working together* in secret. That is, conspiracies are the result of agents working together with some shared purpose; for a group of agents working in secret to be considered part of a conspiracy we need to attribute to them some collective intention to achieve their chosen ends.

Conspiracy theories have a bad reputation though, when we think of them as theories. Unlike scientific theories or historical theories, which

we typically assess on their evidential merits, in common parlance it is said that conspiracy theories are the kind of thing right-thinking people should dismiss or pay no attention to³. Conspiracy theories are routinely dismissed as vapid or unwarranted, in part because conspiracy theorising is said to ignore the complexity of modern economics or politics. That is, one of the things which is said to be wrong about conspiracy theories is that conspiracy theorists mistake the *unintended* consequences of economic or political activity as evidence of some sinister plot.

Yet we know conspiracies occur (from the death of Roman dictators through Elizabethan intrigues to examples like Watergate) and that some—possibly many—conspiracy theories have turned out to be warranted (the Moscow Show Trials; the Gulf of Tonkin event; Watergate, once again). Maybe it is true that sometimes we see conspiracies in perfectly normal—albeit strange-looking—economic or political activity, but sometimes we see conspiracies because we have grounds to believe people are conspiring.

Indeed, conspiracy theories might even be one of the most interesting kinds of collective, intentional activity. After all, to conspire requires keeping some information about what you intend to do secret from certain eyes. Sometimes such secrets are hard to crack;

conspirators might keep what they are doing secret from everyone, or manage to ensure that whatever they are doing cannot be linked back to them. In some cases, however, working out what the conspirators intended can be as easy as looking at the public record (if, for example, the conspirators come clean—as the assassins of Caesar did—or the conspirators are caught—as happens with the prosecution of criminal conspiracies in the courts).

Now, I do not pretend in this paper to present a particularly novel thesis of either intentionality or collective action. Rather, I am interested in teasing out some of the interesting aspects of conspiratorial activity in order to make scholars of intentionality and collective action interested in the burgeoning field of the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories. What follows is, as the title of this paper happily attests to, a naive account, one I hope can be built upon in future work.

1. Intentions and conspirators

Let us start with an example. In 44BCE a plot was hatched by a number of Roman patricians to kill the dictator Gaius Iulius Caesar (Julius Caesar). This conspiracy (given it was undertaken by multiple actors working in secret towards some end) was ostensibly (as will be dissected later) *intended* to return Rome to to rule of law by the Senate

and the Assembly rather than rule of dictate.

Now, the intention of the conspirators is doing a lot of work here in this story. Yet given that conspiratorial activity is a form of secretive activity we should ask how we might justify talk of knowing the intentions of what are *secretive* agents, to wit the conspirators? Especially given that if you are not part of the conspiracy, how could you claim to know something about what the conspirators intend?

Sometimes we know what the conspirators intended just because they tell us. For example, when it comes to the death of Julius Caesar we have evidence as to what the conspirators intended because they told us. If we trust the letters and like of the conspirators to be accurate⁴, it is not hard to make claims about what they intended. After the assassination of Caesar the conspirators very publicly revealed themselves and explained why they intended to kill the dictator; they only kept their intentions secret up until the point of the murder itself. As such, whilst secrecy was necessary to achieve their intended end, it was not necessary to keep the secret afterwards, given that the person who they had to make sure was unaware of their plan was, by that time, dead by their hands.

However much of the worry about belief in conspiracy theories stems from claims about ongoing, contemporary conspiracies, cases in

which the alleged conspirators are keeping their plot secret *here-and-now*. For the sceptic of contemporary conspiracy theory the fact we might have to infer what the conspirators are intending in order to explain some event in the world is an issue. In part this is because the worry is that such inferences will be *post facto*.

One way to ascertain the intention of conspirators is to ask: “Who benefits?” (or use the familiar phrase of “Follow the money.”) Take, for example, the various 9/11 Inside Job hypotheses, which claim that the events in New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11th, 2001 were orchestrated by elements within the U.S. Establishment. That is, the events were part of a conspiracy by actors associated with the government who intended to create the appearance of a foreign-orchestrated terror plot in order to then justify a war they wanted overseas.

Asking “Who benefits?” here gives us an idea of the intentions of the alleged conspirators. If we assume that the event in question was not committed by members of Al-Qaeda, then we can ask who else would have wanted it.

This, of course, requires that we make claims about the “real” conspirators, which might be influenced by who we think would have intended such an event, or we might assume the intention and then

infer the most likely people who would desire that end. That is, it might be an example of circular reasoning where we assume something is a conspiracy in order to find evidence that it is a conspiracy. This is a problem, but note that it is a problem common to many social science explanations of complex phenomena; it is possible to assume some answer to a question and then go and look for evidence that answer is the best. This is a known problem in social psychology, sociology, anthropology, and the like: sometimes our theoretical assumptions drive our research in such a way that we are looking for particular answers. So, why think this is a particular problem for conspiracy theories? As long as there is some well-grounded inference at the bottom of this, claims about what conspirators intend (or intended) are not in-and-of themselves *prima facie* suspicious.

One way in which we can work out what mysterious or secretive conspirators want is by working out the “shape” of the secret. For example, if people avoid telling you certain things, then you can often work out a pattern of what you are not being told. This means you can know some secret is being kept from you (even if you do not know what is being kept secret from you), which is to say you can know there is a secret being kept from you even though you do not know the content of that secret.

Indeed, sometimes knowing that a secret is being kept from you is sufficient to infer something about the content of the secret. If family members regularly avoid talking about when a cousin was conceived, you might infer—given how soon they were born after their marriage—that your family are trying to keep secret the fact your cousin was conceived out of wedlock. In the same respect, if public officials go out of their way to avoid answering questions about their ties to foreign powers, you might infer that they are trying to keep such information secret. Indeed, this is a common feature in the discussion of conspiracy theories: the “shape of the lie” (or cover-up) is part-and-parcel of how conspiracies come to be suspected⁵.

2. *Situationalism*

Of course, we could just try to avoid talk of intentions at all, given that referring to the intentions of (sometimes) mysterious and secretive conspirators might be a problem. Instead, might we be better off shifting talk from *intentions* to the situations which give rise to conspiratorial (or conspiracy-like) activity?

This, at least, was the argument of Steve Clarke. He argued we should prefer situational explanations over intentional ones, given that understanding the situation—the overall context—of an event results in

a more unified explanation than trying to justify some claim someone intended for the event to happen⁶.

Returning to the death of the Roman Julius Caesar, the situational explanation of Julius Caesar’s assassination would likely place his death in the context of the series of popular uprisings and social disarray of the Late Roman Republic—a barely functioning government—which resulted in the rise of demagogues who were popular with the plebian populace but not-so-much with the patrician (aristocratic) class.

But this distinction between an explanation being either intentional or situational is a false dichotomy; it is not clear conspiracy theories are any more or less intentional than their situational rivals. As David Coady puts it, in response to Clarke:

«[I]t is not clear that there really is a tendency for conspiracy theories to be more dispositional than rival theories. ...The official explanation of John F. Kennedy’s murder, for example, seems just as dispositional as its conspiratorial rivals. All explanations agree that someone or some group of people intended the murder to occur and acted on their intentions. A disposition to murder the president seems to play an equally fundamental explanatory role in all accounts of that event, whether they are conspiratorial or not»⁷.

As with the assassination of JFK, we can explain the death of Julius Caesar in a way that places the intentions of the conspirators as primary to his death whilst also paying close attention to the historical situation which precipitated it. After all, the assassins *intended* to assassinate Caesar because of the political *situation* in Rome. In the same respect, more recently, perhaps the Russian Federation *intended* to sway the result of the presidential election the U.S.A. because of the political *situation*—the growing and heightened partisanship—in America?

Clarke's interest was not so much in exploiting issues to do with how we account for the intentions of the conspirators. Rather, if we were to accept that most rivals to conspiracy theories are situational in character, this would be grounds for a general scepticism of conspiracy theories⁸. Yet any explanation of a given event might be an example of both an intentional explanation and a situational one⁹. As such, whilst it might seem easier to talk about situations than inferring the intentions of secretive agents, this is not grounds to think that situational explanations exclude intentional aspects.

3. *Are conspirators of one mind?*

Of course, if we are going to talk about the collective intentions of conspirators we should ask whether we should consider conspirators to

be of one mind? For example, the death of Caesar was the result of the collective activity of Decimus Junius Brutus, Gaius Cassius Longinus and Marcus Junius Brutus (along with several other participating patri-cians). The official story of why they intended to kill Caesar was to liberate Rome from a tyrant who would be king. Yet, when in exile, Brutus expressed quite different sentiments in the letters he sent to his loyal supporters: he wondered why the Roman people had not, upon hearing of Caesar's death, installed him as the new Dictator?

So, were the assassins of Caesar of one mind, or was Brutus using their Republican sympathies in order to advance his own goals? The conspirators worked together to achieve one end (the death of Julius Caesar) but given what we know of Brutus' own intentions, were they really all of the same mind?

Take, for example, the various 9/11 Inside Job hypotheses which claim that the Twin Towers were brought down by a controlled demolition. For such a hypothesis to be a conspiracy theory we need there to be conspirators but we do not need everyone involved in bringing the plot to fruition to be a willing accomplice to the crime. Whilst some set of people had to formulate the plan and work out the logistics of planting the explosives in WTC buildings 1 and 2, the people who carried out the preliminary survey work of the towers

superstructure may well have been working for the conspirators (and thus, in some sense, involved in the conspiracy) but were not *knowingly* involved in the conspiracy.

Indeed, this is a feature easily exploited by the clever conspirator, because what way is easier to keep your conspiracy secret than by restricting who knows about what you are doing? That is, given the hierarchical nature of much governance, and the doctrine of 'Need to know' it is likely that much conspiratorial activity is top down in nature; the conspiracy is formulated at the top but actioned by the people working in middle and lower parts of the organisation. So who knows what, how much, and who is in or out of the conspiracy will be the result of decisions made by the conspirators at the top, reflecting the social and organisational setting in which their plot takes place.

4. Conspirators, dupes, and patsies

In 2015 it turned out that the Volkswagen corporation had systematically conspired to make their diesel cars pass environmental tests using cheat devices, in order to get government subsidies.

Volkswagen is a hierarchical institution. It was (relatively) easy for the executives in the corporation to control who knew about the cheating devices, whilst also ensuring that once news about the cheating broke

the corporation could control who would be blamed for it.

The Volkswagen Emissions Scandal of 2015 is an example of what Martin Orr and myself call a "monolithic" conspiracy¹⁰. A *monolithic* conspiracy is one where the conspirators are in a good position to control the flow of information about their activities because of the nature of the conspiracy's singular and shared governance. That is, the conspirators in a monolithic conspiracy conceivably can keep their activities secret because of the monolithic nature of their control over it.

Compare, then, a monolithic conspiracy with one involving actors in multiple organisations, none of which have any shared governance. That is, imagine a conspiracy in which the conspirators must not only manage their activity but must find some way to manage the members of other organisations as well. This is what we might call a "diverse" conspiracy. Some of the 9/11 Inside Job hypotheses fit this diverse type, given the conspirators must find a way to manage the various janitorial staff, guards, and building crews in order to cover up the fact that they planted the demolition charges to bring down the Twin Towers.

In the case of a monolithic conspiracy, the conspirators will have an easier (not to say necessarily easy) time controlling the flow of

information about the existence of the conspiracy, because they are dealing with a limited set of people who are already invested in what they intend to do. However, in the case of a diverse conspiracy, the conspirators must also manage the other participants so that they either do not work out what they are participating in, or—if they do work it out—control what they subsequently say.

Monolithic conspiracies imply that the participants in the conspiracy are—for the most part—of one mind. Diverse conspiracies, however, are cases where at least some of the participants are not of one mind because they are not aware of what the orchestrators of the conspiracy intend. That is, in a diverse conspiracy the result of the activity is the product of a collection of agents of which only some share the same intentions. That is, it is easier to intend to control a monolithic conspiracy than it is to control a diverse one.

Most of the conspiracy theories we tend to be interested in are political in nature, and often imply that a smaller (relative to the overall number of operatives) set of conspirators controls some greater set of actors. That is, they are typically *diverse*.

Yet these *political* conspiracy theories likely only spike our interest because they have a certain salience; we tend to be concerned about the possibility of political conspiracies because of the potential harm to the

polities in which we live if they turn out to exist. Yet many commonplace conspiracies which happen in our daily lives are undertaken by friends, family members, or acquaintances, and may typically involve only a few people.

Why is this important? Well, in an earlier work I argued that our knowledge of the past incidence of conspiratorial activity in society informs our judgements about the likelihood of conspiracies here-and-now¹¹. Yet the kinds of conspiracies which might inform our judgements about how likely conspiracies are *day-to-day* are likely to be of the monolithic type. That is, the commonplace conspiracies which we use to inform our judgements about the likelihood of conspiracies generally will be monolithic, and that raises the question of whether knowing about the incidence of monolithic conspiracies informs our judgements about the incidence of diverse conspiracies?

After all, some members of the conspiracy will not be conspirators. Rather, they will be lackeys, patsies, or useful idiots. The fact conspiracies can be diverse is important because whilst in the monolithic case it is relatively easy to attribute a collective intention to the conspirators, in the diverse case we encounter some interesting boundary issues, if not outright problems.

It would be easy, then, to say that commonplace conspiratorial

activity (like the organising of a surprise birthday party) does not inform our judgements about political conspiracies. Indeed, this is a standard response in the literature: proponents of this view will simply reject the idea that commonplace activity that fits the definition of something be a conspiracy—multiple agents working in secret towards some end—counts as conspiratorial. This is because what counts as the subject of a conspiracy *theory* will have certain characteristics, like being political, sinister in nature, and the like. I have argued against that position in numerous places, arguing that such a position mistakes saliency for conceptual analysis¹²). However, the way I have presented the problem in this paper is a more sophisticated version of that argument against conspiracy theories generally. This revised argument rests upon recognising that the attribution of collective intentionality gets complex as soon as you have to not only manage yourselves but also those who are (perhaps unwittingly) working for you.

We might, then, be tempted to reject the distinction, and say that there is nothing to it. Yet when it comes to talk of collective intentionality with respect to conspiracies, it seems that there is something to the distinction between those which are monolithic and those that are diverse.

In the case of a diverse conspiracy, it seems that if we are going to

hold anyone morally responsible for the conspiracy, it will be the conspirators, and not the patsies or dupes who are being controlled or manipulated. In that respect we want to talk about the *conspirators'* intentions, rather than the intentions of the larger set of diverse actors who are participating in the conspiracy.

Yet this might speak to a problem with the idea of the distinction itself. A group of friends conspiring to organise a surprise birthday (ostensibly a monolithic conspiracy-like, if not outright conspiracy) may very well hire out a room to hold that party (thus involving a third party), or even employ caterers to supply the food. Does this not make the conspiracy diverse, given that any of these participants might inadvertently reveal the existence of the party to the target of the conspiracy?

One reply to this objection is to say that diversity only counts if a) the members of the wider participants would—if they became aware they were involved in a conspiracy—be troubled by their participation or b) the fact they are told “This is a secret” makes them complicit in the conspiracy after all.

Conspiracies are, after all, made of different parts and varying levels of complicity or knowledge; the notion of just how involved people are in the conspiracy differs from case-to-case. Where a conspiracy is

monolithic in nature all the conspirators are, to some extent, aware of their role, whilst in the case of the diverse conspiracy some participants crucial to the attaining of the core set of conspirators intended end may well be dupes, or patsies.

Perhaps Servilius Casca and Cassius Longinus knew of Brutus' personal ambition, but justified ignoring it because they hoped either Brutus would see sense, or that he would be controlled by the other conspirators. That is, they—as I have previously termed it—might have engaged in 'doublethinking'¹³.

Doublethinking is of real historical and political significance. For example, the political actors who doctored the dossier about the *alleged* Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq back in 2003 may not have been consciously lying, even though some of them knew that what they were claiming was shaky, even possibly false. For the purposes of our discussion here, doublethinking allows people who might realise they are part of some grander plot to also think that they are not complicit in it. That is, they might well be working for the conspiracy but do not feel that they are *properly* participating in it because they do not share the same intentions as the conspirators. Yet even if we accept this kind of reasoning, this does not provide any *moral* justification for not being responsible for the resulting action. Otherwise what we have here is

simply a case of someone saying "I was just following orders."

After all, ignoring Brutus' end goal may well have served the other conspirators, but even if the assassins had not been run out of Rome (ultimately because they misjudged the mood of the Roman people towards Caesar), there is no guarantee Brutus would have achieved his intended end anyway. The existence of other intentions does not render what they did collectively any less conspiratorial¹⁴. This is, I think, an interesting consequence to a certain type of conspiratorial activity, because it shows that it has a special character when compared to other types of collective activity; not every participant in the conspiracy will necessarily know what the conspirators intend.

If there is utility to the distinction between a conspiracy being monolithic or diverse, it is how it informs our judgements about belief in the existence of conspiracies *generally*. Even if we admit that diverse conspiracies are harder to maintain, or explain with respect to the intentions of the conspirators, knowing about monolithic conspiracies still tells us people conspire *routinely* (as I have argued elsewhere¹⁵). Diverse conspiracies might be—in some sense—*harder* to explain with respect to the intentions of the overall set of participants, but this is, as we have seen, not an insurmountable problem.

Conclusion

As I warned at the beginning of this paper, I do not pretend to present a particularly novel thesis of either intentionality or collective action. Instead, I am interested in exposing the interesting aspects of intentions and collective action in conspiratorial activity.

Talk of intentions can be a tricky business, and talk of secret intentions of a collection of agents even more-so. Given conspiracy theories do not just refer to the intentions of individuals intending some end but a collection of agents intending some end, it is easy to understand why we might be cautious talking about such theories. My argument, though, is that the presumed problems with talk of conspiracy theories as explanations which make reference to the intentions of collections of conspirators are problems common to explanations of any kind of collective activity.

Indeed, the benefit of framing some of this talk with reference to conspiracy theories (and thus putative conspiracies) is that conspiratorial activity is a very special kind of collective action, with an interesting demarcation between what the conspirators intend and what the participants of the conspiratorial action know. It is my hope that some of what I have written will inspire future work on the topic looking into the wonderful world of conspiracy theories and conspiracy

theory theories.

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¹ See for example: L. Basham, *Joining the Conspiracy*, “Argumenta”, Early Access, pp. 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.23811/55.arg2017.bas>; D. Coady, *What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues*, Chichester (West Sussex), Wiley-Blackwell 2012; C.R. Pigden, *Are Conspiracy Theorists Epistemically Vicious?*, in D. Coady, K. Brownlee, K. Lipper-Rasmussen, eds., *A Companion to Applied Philosophy*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Chichester 2016, pp. 120-132, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118869109.ch9>; M.R.X. Dentith, Brian L. Keeley, *The Applied Epistemology of Conspiracy Theories* in D. Coady, J. Chase, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Applied Epistemology*, Routledge, *in press*; M.R.X. Dentith, *Expertise and Conspiracy Theories*, “Social Epistemology”, Early Access, pp. 1-13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2018.1440021>.

² In that conspirators might not necessarily achieve their *desired* end

³ Although this is increasingly disputed outside of philosophy; see, for example: M.J. Wood, *Some Dare Call It Conspiracy: Labeling Something a Conspiracy Theory Does Not Reduce Belief in It*, “Political Psychology”, 37, 5, 2016, pp. 695-705, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12285>; M. Orr, G. Husting, *Dangerous Machinery: ‘Conspiracy Theorist’ as a Transpersonal Strategy of Exclusion*, “Symbolic Interaction”, 30, 2, 2007, pp. 127-150, <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2007.30.2.127>.

⁴ Which is to say, we trust that they are not *post facto* explanations written to justify their acts after the fact.

⁵ This is not the entire story, however. As I have argued elsewhere, conspiracy theorists use a range of different kinds of evidence to show it is reasonable to suspect the existence of a conspiracy (M.R.X. Dentith, *Conspiracy Theories on the Basis of the Evidence*, “Synthese”, Early Access, pp. 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1532-7>) and this evidence can then be used—in a range of cases—to show that inferring to a conspiracy theory can turn out to be the best explanation (M.R.X. Dentith, *When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation*, “Social Epistemology”, 30, 5-6, 2016, pp. 572-591, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2016.1172362>).

⁶ S. Clarke, *Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing*, “Philosophy of the Social Sciences”. 32, 2, 2002, pp. 131-150, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004931032002001>.

⁷ D. Coady, *An Introduction to the Philosophical Debate About Conspiracy Theories*, in D. Coady, ed., *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, Hampshire (England), Ashgate, 2006, p. 8.

⁸ D. Clarke, *Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing*.

⁹ In more recent work Clarke has somewhat conceded this point, arguing that our suspicion of conspiracy theories is to do with the psychology of what constitutes belief in them rather than a problem with conspiracy theories as a kind of explanations. I have critiqued his follow-up argument elsewhere; see, for example: M.R.X. Dentith, *The Problem of Conspiracism*, “Argumenta”, Early Access, pp. 1-17, <https://doi.org/10.23811/58.arg2017.den>.

¹⁰ M.R.X. Dentith, M. Orr, *Secrecy and Conspiracy*, “Episteme”, Early Access, pp. 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2017.9>.

¹¹ M.R.X. Dentith, *When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation*. See also: L. Basham, *Conspiracy Theory and Rationality*, in C. Jensen, R. Harré, eds., *Beyond Rationality*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle on Tyne 2011, pp. 49-87.

¹² M.R.X. Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137363169>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Indeed, it suggests the existence of a conspiracy within the conspiracy.

¹⁵ M.R.X. Dentith, *When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation*.