

Conspiracy Theories: What They (Particularists) Don't Want You to Know

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§1. Introduction

In everyday parlance, 'conspiracy theory' is a pejorative term, used to refer to an irrational and often outlandish explanation of world events. Some conspiracy theories (CTs) are ridiculous but relatively harmless (e.g., that the world is flat, or that subterranean lizard people control the world), while others are more insidious (e.g., that a Jewish cabal is instituting a new world order, or that liberal politicians traffic and kill children for blood sacrifices). Some CTs are relatively popular (e.g., the Kennedy assassination was a cover-up), while others are obscure (e.g., birds aren't real). As a category, however, CTs are largely seen as epistemologically suspect: they posit complicated, secret factors for which there is no compelling evidence, while ignoring or downplaying the evidence for more mundane explanations. This means that CTs are generally irrational, and that there is a *prima facie* expectation that any given conspiracy theory should not be taken seriously.

The preceding paragraph describes the *Generalist* view on CTs.¹ It is contrasted with the *Particularist* view, which holds that we cannot make any sweeping generalizations about CTs as a category, and should instead approach them on a case-by-case basis.² Many CTs, they argue, are in fact true, and many more are at least epistemically justified (in a minimal sense that one would not be epistemically culpable for believing them). Moreover, the Generalist approach can lead people to preemptively dismiss viable explanations that take the form of CTs, and hence impede rational inquiry. This does not mean that most people should believe most CTs, but it does mean that we should not reject them out of hand. Rather, each CT should be investigated on the merits.

This paper is limited to one foundational question in the debate between Generalists and Particularists. Particularists use a minimal definition of 'conspiracy' and 'conspiracy theory'. I argue that this minimal definition is problematic, both as an attempt to correctly analyze concepts, and as means to the Particularist's epistemic goals. After outlining the Particularist position in more detail, I will make a metaphilosophical point about the difficulty in engaging with the Particularist position directly. Consequently, I will instead offer an internal critique of Particularism: the

definitions they use undermine their stated goals of fostering inquiry.

§2. Particularism

Strictly speaking, Particularism can be divided into two components, one normative and one conceptual. The normative component is that one should treat CTs on a case-by-case basis: there is nothing about CTs as a class that entails that all or most are inherently irrational. This normative component itself rests, in part, on the conceptual component of Particularism, namely how to understand the definition of a CT.

The Particularist approach to defining CTs is minimal: a CT is simply any theory about a conspiracy.³ This prompts the question of what exactly counts as a conspiracy. Dentith (2014) argues that a conspiracy must meet three conditions, which he states “are both individually necessary and jointly sufficient” (Dentith, 2014, p. 23).⁴ For ease of reference, we can call this the *Particularist Analysis of Conspiracy Theories*, or PACT:

PACT

1. A Conspiracy Theory (CT) is any theory about a conspiracy.
2. A conspiracy is an activity that meets the following three conditions:
 - i. *The Conspirators Condition* – There exists (or existed) some set of agents with a plan,
 - ii. *The Secrecy Condition* – Steps have been taken by the agents to minimize public awareness of what they are up to, and
 - iii. *The Goal Condition* – Some end is or was desired by the agents.

Under this view, a great many activities count as conspiracies. For instance, under this view friends planning a surprise birthday party, or about parents arranging what looks like a visit from Santa Clause, would count as conspiracies.

One might balk at the consequences of such a view, and indeed could reasonably consider it grounds for a *modus tollens* argument against PACT. But Particularists are more than willing to bite the bullet: for instance, after introducing the definition quoted above, Dentith spends the next chapter defending this broad understand of the extension of the concept of a CT as outlined in PACT. He explicitly labels the ‘surprise party = conspiracy’ implication of PACT as a “feature” of the view (rather than a bug) (Dentith, 2014, p. 40. Cf. Dentith, 2018a, p. 8). Elsewhere he lays

out the Particularist strategy in clear terms:

If we stick to the minimal definition of conspiracy, then objectors might say that it rules in seemingly non-conspiratorial activities, like that of organizing a surprise party. If this is a bullet we have to bite with regard to the definition of what counts as a conspiracy, then so be it. Surprise parties – like conspiracies – are organized by agents who work in secret, and desire some end. While the minimal definition of what counts as conspiratorial makes conspiracies appear to be either commonplace or, at least, more common than we would typically think, this should not worry us.

After all, if we want to truly appraise whether conspiracies are really unlikely, we need to look at the wider and more general class of conspiratorial activity, one that is ruled in by the minimal definition. If we rule out certain kinds of conspiratorial activity for either not being secret enough, or not being of interest, then that affects our estimates as to how likely or unlikely conspiracies are. After all, one of the key features of the debate over the likeliness and warrant of conspiracy theories is how to account for cases of known historic and contemporary conspiratorial activity. (Dentith, 2018a, p. 9)

As this second paragraph shows, one of the larger goals of Particularists is to show that belief in CTs is not *prima facie* irrational. To reach this conclusion, they argue that CTs are widespread in history and in contemporary life. If there are, in fact, many real conspiracies, then the odds of a given CT being true will not be particularly low. This means that, as a class, we cannot reject CT as a class, but instead should approach them individually.

There is a second motivation to Particularism, however, one which developed from a particular point in our cultural history, and which may not be so obvious in the current socio-political climate. From our current perspective in the 2020s, CTs tend to look unappealing: many of the most popular CTs are either ridiculous, or harmful and malicious. And of course many of these CTs are thoroughly political, associating with anti-democratic (and often explicitly bigoted) right-wing reactionaries. So it may seem strange to us now why Particularists would be so concerned to defend the possible rationality of CTs broadly, given the problematic nature of these paradigm cases.

Part of the explanation comes from experiences in an earlier political era. Many Particularists draw upon their own experiences as opponents of the War on Terror in the early 2000s, when worries about domestic

surveillance, clandestine torture programs, and international war crimes were all dismissed as *just* a conspiracy theory.⁵ Some of these worries were later born out as facts, and others appear justified or plausible even if not (yet) confirmed. Since CT is often used as a pejorative term, it can be deployed in a way that silences critique, preempts inquiry, and calls into question the epistemic standing of its advocates. The label can be, and has been, misapplied in a way that was counterproductive to the epistemic status of the community and its members.⁶ It is this concern that leads Particularists to resist lumping all CTs together in a ‘guilt by association’ way. The goal of Particularists is not to play apologist for outlandish views, but rather to prevent the premature dismissal of viable beliefs. Seen from this perspective, Particularism has an admirable epistemic goal, independent of whatever we might think about its analysis of CTs specifically.⁷

§3. Some Metaphilosophical Concerns

The Particularist’s motivation to make CT as broad a category as possible makes it difficult to engage philosophically. I trust I am not alone in finding such a broad view of CTs to be problematic: examples such as surprise parties and secret Santas are, it would seem to an outside observer, counterexamples to the view. This in turn suggests that PACT’s three criteria are, at the very least, not jointly sufficient. This thought is corroborated by empirical work on the topic, which suggests that when the general public use the term ‘conspiracy theory,’ they do not use in PACT’s narrow and value-neutral way (Napolitano and Reuter, 2021).⁸

Here we need to pause for a quick digression on methodology. Typically, when engaged in conceptual analysis, one of the most important steps we can take is to question whether the suggested intension of a concept gets the correct extension. We can show that a given definition of a concept is flawed by pointing to counterexamples, either false positives (does not count as an example of the concept despite meeting its proposed criteria) or false negatives (does count as an example despite not meeting its criteria).

The approach taken by Particularists effectively removes this tool from our toolbox. And this makes it very difficult to engage with Particularism in a productive way. By stipulating from the outset that counterexamples don’t count, Particularism insulates itself from an important kind of criticism. And this makes it difficult to have a productive conversation about Particularism. We could try to find another counterexample that is more jarring and unintuitive, but it seems unlikely that Particularists would respond any differently. We could accuse them of begging the question,

or we could assert that their definition of CT is revisionary and stipulative and give one of our own instead. But this is not much of a debate, and is philosophically unsatisfying.⁹ Ironically, Particularism exemplifies one of the traits often held as a flaw in CTs: it insulates itself from critique, perhaps even to the point of unfalsifiability.

So while I do think that the Particularist definition of CT is flawed in being so broad as to include things that few non-Particularists would consider a conspiracy, in what follows I will not base my argument on this point. Instead, I will accept for sake of argument that the Particularist conception of CT is workable, and show how it conflicts with the motivations they have for advancing it.

§4. Particularism and Philosophical Inquiry

My strategy for critiquing Particularism is to show how PACT hinders the goals of inquiry that Particularists advocate. Rather than helping us to assess the rationality of a given CT on a case-by-case basis PACT actually makes it less worthwhile to spend time inquiring into the validity of CTs. There are several reasons why we should think this, which we'll survey in this section. I should say at the outset that this argument is largely pragmatic: Particularists have a goal, and there are a variety of considerations that hinder that goal. These considerations sometimes pull in opposite directions, but this makes the problem for Particularists worse, not better: rather than cancelling out, these problems affect Particularists in different, sometimes opposing ways.

Problem #1 involves a kind of symmetry between Particularists and Generalists. Particularists worry that the Generalist position excludes too many viable theories from consideration, theories which may in fact be true, but if not are still at least rational given the evidence available. If CTs are *ipso facto* irrational, then we will be unlikely to investigate any of them, even when some (admittedly few, from the Generalist perspective) might merit investigation. PACT gives us the opposite problem: so many events will count as conspiracies on this view that we will be overwhelmed by CTs that explain them. Given finite time and resources, we are not able to investigate everything, so we need some heuristic to help us know where to focus. Generalists have these kinds of heuristics: focus on the non-conspiratorial explanations that are more likely to correct, and commit to investigating a given CT only if it meets a burden of proof. Particularists do not have this kind of heuristic: the conditions in PACT are so minimal as to allow in almost any joint human activity.

Problem #2 also relies on the breadth of PACT, but in a different way. Because PACT sets such minimal conditions on what counts as a

conspiracy, a great many activities will satisfy it. One implication is that a large number of CTs will be true. For instance, PACT entails that any time a set of parental figures communicate in a way that is intended for their children not to understand, they are engaged in a conspiracy. The same applies for many other coordinated activities: the surprise parties and secret Santas alluded to previously, any time a professor and TA discuss writing exam questions for their students, any time a leadership team needs to make decisions that shouldn't go out to their members, any time two referees and a journal editor discuss a journal submission, and on and on. This likely also applies to the more intuitive, and more nefarious activities that laypeople would call conspiracy theories: companies trying to raise prices without customers noticing, governments engaging in clandestine activities, political actors using a false narrative to influence events to their liking, etc. In other words, PACT makes conspiracies a ubiquitous feature of human life. But this means that a large number of CTs aren't worth investigating after all, because they're so likely to be true that they can effectively be taken for granted. Inquiry into these matters would be a waste of time, given their initial plausibility. Consequently, the rational thing to do is to assume that most CTs are justified, undermining the motivation to investigate them. The result is that people will engage in inquiry about CTs less, not more.

Problem #3 involves the usefulness of comparison classes. As a category, CT is useful because it (i) picks out a unique kind of activity, which (ii) is especially important to know about and get right. This first point applies to any kind of useful taxonomy, but the second is unique to conspiracies themselves: they matter because they often involve nefarious ends or abuses of power, as evidenced by their essential secrecy (there would no need for it to be a secret if it wasn't problematic in some other way). This is part of why journalists and whistleblowers are seen as playing such an important role in public life. At least, all that is true given the layperson's intuitive sense of the referent of the term 'conspiracy'. But none of these considerations apply under PACT: so many different kinds of activities count as a conspiracy that the term 'conspiracy' loses its usefulness.¹⁰ And because so many of these activities are anodyne, everyday events, the category loses not only its taxonomizing power, but also its importance: so many of the activities that count as conspiracies under PACT just do not matter in the grand scheme of things, and hence do not merit special attention. So once again, the motivation to inquire into CTs decreases under PACT, contrary to Particularists' aims.

These problems have a feature in common, namely that PACT extends the boundaries of what counts as a CT to the extent that the concept ceases

to be epistemically useful. While this objection has not, to my knowledge, been levied at Particularists, some of their discussions on other matters suggests a response they might make in the present debate.¹¹ In concluding his book, Dentith argues that many of the questions raised about CTs actually apply to explanations generally, stating at one point “the epistemic issues we normally associate with conspiracy theories are epistemic issues for belief *in general*” (Dentith, 2014, p. 176). In later work Dentith surveys subclasses of conspiracy theories that might warrant additional skepticism (Dentith, 2022), and recommends a posture where Generalist concerns about CTs can be accepted, but only in a greatly truncated way such that they apply only to *some* CTs (Dentith, 2023). Applying that strategy here, we might postulate on the Particularist’s behalf the response that, while some CTs are *prima facie* unworthy of investigation (either because they are very plausible *or* very unplausible), other CTs are more likely to encourage inquiry in line with the Particularist goal.¹²

I do not believe that this strategy is a useful one for Particularists to pursue. The questions ‘Should I trust explanations?’ is a poorly-formed question: the category of ‘explanation’ is so broad as to be useless. What we need is a set of criteria to distinguish at least three subcategories:

- (i) features that tend to be shared by trustworthy explanations, and can therefore be relied on;
- (ii) features that tend to be shared by untrustworthy explanations, and can therefore be treated skeptically; and
- (iii) features that tend to be shared by explanations calling for further exploration.¹³

Once we have these sets of criteria, we can use them to determine which theories merit further exploration. Generalists have argued that most CTs fall under (ii), because their definitions of what a CT is include these features. And since (i) and (ii) are opposites, we can, for the most part, infer (i) from (ii) or vice versa; for example, if ‘lacks confirming evidence’ or ‘is statistically improbable’ is a feature of (ii), ‘possess confirming evidence’ or ‘is statistically probable’ would be a feature of (i).

To their credit, Particularists are correct in warning us not to think that (ii) is the only possible category, or that the category of (iii) is empty (not that any Generalists would make these claims either). But on the other hand, Particularists do not provide us any answers for how to delineate (i) or (ii), and in particular, give us no guidance on (iii). Generalists at least give us a heuristic: if an explanation does not fall into categories (i) or (ii),

it falls into (iii) and therefore merits further explanation. Particularists, by contrast, want to eliminate (i) and (ii) as categories, putting all CTs into category (iii). And if all CTs fall into the ‘merits further explanation’ category, then we are not left with any strategies to navigate within that category. And this is counterproductive: we cannot inquire into everything, and treating all theories as *prima facie* equally worth of inquiry would overwhelm us.¹⁴ So, in sum, ceding ground to the Generalists about ‘some’ of the more suspicious CTs does not change the Particularists standing in any noticeably helpful way.

§5. Conclusion

I’ve argued in this paper that Particularism about CTs is not as plausible as its proponents suggest. Their minimal definition of what counts as a conspiracy, and hence as a CT, is counterproductive to the Particularist goal of promoting inquiry. Particularists worry that prejudging CTs as irrational makes it harder to get to the truth; they don’t want you to know that their own approach fares no better.

Notes

¹ This terminology originated with Buenting and Taylor (2010). Generalism’s most famous proponent is Popper (1966). For more recent advocates, see Clarke (2002); Cassam (2019; 2016); Keeling (1999); Levy (2007); Mandik (2008); Stokes (2023; 2018a; 2018b); and Sunstein (2014).

² Advocates of the Particularist view include Basham (2018a; 2018b; 2011; 2003; 2001); Buenting and Taylor (2010); Coady (2023; 2012a; 2007; 2006a; 2003); Dentith (2023; 2022; 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; 2018e; 2016; 2014); Orr and Dentith (2018); Räikkä (2018); Räikkä and Basham (2018); Pfifer (2023); Pigden (2023; 2022; 2018; 2017; 2007; 2006; 1995); and Shields (2023; 2022).

³ For example, “Any explanation that refers to a conspiracy as a causal factor in events, past, present, or future” (Basham, 2018a, p. 55 n.1), or “a conspiracy theory is simply a theory which posits a conspiracy – that is a secret plan on the part of some group to influence events by partly secret means” (Pigden, 2022, p. 131). Coady (2003, p. 199) adds the criterion that a conspiracy theory must conflict with an “official story,” though this condition should be easily met in almost all cases in which secrecy is involved (e.g., the ‘official story’ is that Santa brings presents, or that the phone conversation planning a party was really about work). Räikkä (2018) and Buenting and Taylor (2010) follow modified versions of Coady’s formulation.

⁴ I focus on Dentith’s articulation here because it is the clearest and most precise. Dentith (2018f, p. 329) states that many leading Particularists, including Basham, Coady, and Pigden himself, “have all argued for some variation” of the same minimal definition.

⁵ For instance, in much of the Particularist literature, the Bush and Blair

administrations loom large as examples of institutions using the charge of CT as a way to stifle public debate and investigation. See, e.g., Basham (2018, pp. 3-4); Basham and Dentith (2018, p. 79); Coady (2003, p. 197); Dentith (2014, pp. vi-vii, 33); Pidgen (2007, p. 193; 2023, pp. 126-27).

⁶ See Husting and Orr (2007) and Orr and Husting (2019) for empirical documentation of this phenomenon.

⁷ See Stokes (2023) for a deeper consideration of the various motivations of the Generalist/Particularist debate. One unfortunate tendency of the Particularist side is to focus heavily on the motives of the Generalist side, in a way that is often irrelevant to the merits of the debate if not a full-on *ad hominem* fallacy. Instances of this trend appear, e.g., in Basham and Dentith (2018, pp. 90-92); Coady (2018; 2012); Pigden (2006; 2022, p. 156).

⁸ To be more specific, they find in their review that about 2/3 of people use the term ‘conspiracy theory’ in a (negative) evaluative way, and the remaining 1/3 use it descriptively, in a way which is much more restricted than what PACT holds. See (2021, p. 2045) in particular for a list of descriptions commonly associated with CTs in public parlance. Their conclusion, that ‘conspiracy theory’ is a thick concept (2021, pp. 2053-54), is a useful way of thinking about it.

⁹ Moreover, Particularists tend to see themselves as offering the neutral, common-sense definition of CTs, and accuse Generalists of being revisionary and stipulative. So even this argumentative move is subject to an unproductive *tu quoque* response.

¹⁰ For other discussions of the possibility that CT is not a useful concept, see Keeley (2023), and Tsapos (2023). These discussions are focused on CT as a concept more broadly, rather than trying to defend or critique Particularism specifically.

¹¹ It is interesting that in recent work, Coady (2023) suggests an eliminativist position on CTs, arguing that the concept was effectively invented in the 1950s by Popper, and is systematically ambiguous. He concludes the paper by suggesting we got along just fine without the concept, and should return to this state (2023, p. 759).

¹² Napolitano and Reuter (2021) reach a similar conclusion from a different direction, suggesting that we might reserve ‘conspiracy theory’ for the evaluative understanding of CTs, and advance a new term like ‘conspiratorial explanation’ for the descriptive version.

¹³ The open-endedness and defeasibility of “tend to be shared,” “trustworthy,” “relied on,” and “treated skeptically” are important not to miss. These are all, at bottom, probabilistic features that can be used as guides for our cognitive efforts but not strict entailments of truth or falsity.

¹⁴ Dentith (2018c) suggests using a Deweyan community of inquiry to overcome individual limitations of time, resources, and expertise when it comes to investigating CTs. This approach might help with the paradigm cases of CTs that Generalists focus on, it does not look to be very useful for the Particularist project. The community of inquiry will have all the same problems that individuals have: too many CTs and no constraints on where to focus.

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