

Richard Greene and Rachel Robison-Greene, eds. *Conspiracy Theories: Philosophers Connect the Dots*. Open Court 2020. 256 pp. \$19.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780812694796).

This book is a collection of philosophers' ruminations on conspiracy theories. It contains nineteen selections divided into four main sections. The four sections are: (I) 'If only you assume a big enough conspiracy, you can explain anything, including the cosmos itself.' (II) 'It's who's controlling the Illuminati that I'm more concerned about.' (III) 'The best kept secrets are those in plain sight.' (IV) 'The trouble with conspiracies is that they rot internally.'

- (1) M R.X. Dentith, 'From Alien Shape-shifting Lizards to the Dodgy Dossier.' The question of what, exactly constitutes a conspiracy theory is considered, and an account is provided of how a conspiracy theory (a theory that some event is best explained by appealing to a plan between two or more people who work in secret toward some end) differs from conspiracism (the situation in which someone believes a conspiracy theory without reason), making a case that this distinction is still not very helpful. Rather, we should focus on arguments for and against conspiracy theories, since some conspiracies do exist, and so not all conspiracy theories are unreasonable.
- (2) Mark Huston, 'The Greatest Conspiracy Theory Movies.' There are many movies having conspiracy theories as plot points. A review of some of these can advance understanding of what elements make up a conspiracy theory, and what varieties of conspiracy theories exist.
- (3) Charles Pigden, 'Everyone's a Conspiracy Theorist.' The term 'conspiracy theory' is sometimes used in a condemnatory fashion, implying that conspiracy theories are always or at least usually false or unreasonable. Definitional and historical considerations show not only that many conspiracy theories are true, but that every reasonably informed person accepts at least some conspiracy theories.
- (4) Brett Coppenger and Joshua Heter, 'How to Build a Conspiracy Theory.' Conspiracy theories are analyzed here in terms of Bayesian probability. Examples include Kurt Cobain's death (murder?) and Michael Jordan's suspension. One claim that is advanced and defended is that the psychological appeal of conspiracy theories often rests on the base-rate fallacy, which exists where people assign probabilities based on particular occurrences rather than actual statistical evaluations.
- (5) David Kyle Johnson, 'How Fallacies Fuel Conspiracies.' Acceptance of conspiracy theories is often fueled by motivated reasoning. Confirmation bias, denying or ignoring evidence, the availability error, and magical thinking, are especially noteworthy highlights of this chapter.
- (6) Courtland Lewis and Gregory L. Bock, 'Falling Off the Edge of the Earth.' Conspiracy theories centering on the belief that the Earth is flat provide an opportunity to examine some of the key principles of good science, especially falsifiability and respect for disconfirming evidence. The mantra 'think for yourself,' often repeated by adherents of conspiracy theories, is considered. In many cases we are actually better served by trusting qualified experts who may be better equipped to render judgment than we are by thinking for ourselves.

- (7) Jeff Cervantez, 'That's ... One Giant Joke on Mankind?' A set of criteria is proposed to evaluate situations where there are competing theories. The primary example considered is the theory that the moon landings were faked. The criteria of evaluation introduced are: 1. Clearly state the theory in question 2. Examine the evidence for the theory 3. Consider a plausible alternative theory and 4. Determine which theory is the simplest, yet most reasonable, explanation of events. A number of common claims alleged to support the moon-hoax hypothesis are examined in light of these criteria.
- (8) Alexander E. Hooke, 'Witch Hunts.' The Salem witch trials provide an interesting historical example of conspiracist thinking, showing that conspiracy theories have been around for a long time. The consequences of the conspiracy theories driving the Salem witch trials demonstrate the possibility of real harms that can result.
- (9) Rod Carveth, 'Racial Genocide Theories.' Black genocide and white genocide theories have been endorsed by prominent voices in the media and are exerting significant political influence. Nevertheless, there has been a difference in the ways black genocide theories and white genocide theories have affected the behaviors of their adherents.
- (10) Don Fallis, 'Do Climate Skeptics Have to Be Conspiracy Theorists?' Various conspiracy theories are invoked by deniers of anthropogenic climate change to account for the overwhelming scientific consensus that it is, in fact, real. Some views of David Hume have relevant application to this matter. Conspiracist and mundane explanations for scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change are compared. Fallis explains why the mundane explanation is more plausible.
- (11) Eduardo Vicentini De Medeiros and Marco Antonio Azevedo, 'Are Collectives More Conspiratorial than Individuals?' Conspiracy theories attribute responsibility for events to collectives rather than individuals. But why do people often think it is more likely that collectives are responsible? Because it is easier to assign intentions to collectives than to individuals with whom we are unacquainted. Some connections to important research from social psychology are explored.
- (12) Gary Johnson, 'Here's the Secret on Voter Fraud – It's Complicated.' Voter fraud does sometimes occur but is extremely rare in the US. Many people are drawn to conspiracy theories that voter fraud is widespread or orchestrated. People are more likely to believe a conspiracy theory if they already believe another. Conspiracy theories about voter fraud are especially appealing to those who have overly simplified views of political process. Psychosocial influences on voters should be more worrying than voter fraud.
- (13) Kendal Beazer, 'Vaccination, Autism, and Trust.' A large number of people accept the conspiracy theory that the government is covering up evidence of a link between vaccinations and autism. Trust is vital to a functioning society. But the US government has betrayed trust in the past (e.g., Tuskegee experiments). Social media have made it easier for false and misleading information to propagate.
- (14) Daniel Krasner, 'Leninism, Astroturfing, and Conservatism.' Astroturfing is the creation of illusory grass roots support for a movement. The creation and sustaining of the American Communist Party is an example of astroturfing. A connection with

conspiracy theories involves the astroturfing of one's opponents – portraying them as dangerous for having widespread or growing support when this doesn't reflect the reality.

- (15) Ron Hirschenbien and Amin Asfari, 'Elders and Brothers.' Conspiracy theories are often driven by fear. Anti-Jewish and Anti-Islamic conspiracy theories such as those attributing nefarious motives and far-reaching powers to the Elders of Zion and the Muslim Brotherhood play to fears of religious violence or social and political manipulation. Such conspiracy theories also allow adherents a feeling of power in encouraging the belief that they know the truth about what is really going on.
- (16) James Rocha and Mona Rocha, 'The Defining Conspiracy.' A dialogue about conspiracy theories between Socrates and Conspiratos. A progression of attempts is made to provide an adequate definition for what constitutes conspiracy theories, and to determine whether they can be reasonably defined as always false (a negative answer is suggested).
- (17) Michael Goldsby and W. John Koolage, 'Should You Be Wearing a Tinfoil Hat?' Every conspiracy theory is centered around an agenda that allegedly explains the extraordinary efforts and measures hypothesized by the theory. It also posits a conspiratorial group that provides the resources for the measures, a plot that explains how the conspirators will advance the agenda, and a cover story that is a false narrative advanced in place of what is really happening. Several examples are given to illustrate how these four components work. Tools from the philosophy of science are identified that can be applied to conspiracy theories, including falsification and predictive success.
- (18) Brendan Shea, 'The Wrong Thinking in Conspiracy Theories.' There are common psychological tendencies that can result in errors in reasoning. These can also contribute to one's willingness to embrace conspiracy theories. For example, the representativeness heuristic where the probability of one event is judged by its similarity to another that has already occurred. Such factors can lead people to skew subjective probabilities in favor of embracing conspiracy theories that are objectively poorly evidenced.
- (19) Paul Lewis, 'How Can I say This Without Sounding Crazy?' The narrative structures (visual depictions of networks or graphs) of Mark Lombardi provide a useful example of how conspiracy theories can be represented, but also can serve as a tool for understanding and diagramming different types of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy networks can be centralized or decentralized. Decentralized conspiracy networks are more resilient against breakdowns or defections, showing that secrecy can be easier to maintain in conspiracy networks than many suppose.

This collection is pitched toward the general reader or undergraduate, and would be worth considering for supplemental material for an undergraduate critical thinking class.

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