**Conspiracist epistemology: a tentative assessment.**

There are many studies in psychology and sociology about who believes in a given or in some conspiracy theories, and why one may so believe – namely, which features of the human mind, and the human societies, make these beliefs possible and easy. Studies range from the detection and measure of those beliefs, to the political and psychological predictors of those beliefs, and the cognitive biases (regarding causal or intentional attribution) that make us prone to adopt conspiracy theories, including the social mechanisms that support their diffusion, in real world, like did Sunstein and Vermeule, or especially in the internet. However, conspiracy theories raise also a simple but difficult philosophical question: why should we not believe in them? As in the case of many philosophical problems, the question arises in the following way: hearing someone who claims that the moon landing was faked, or that princess Diana has been killed by the Mossad, we know that it is wrong and that those are silly fantasies; but what is the general principle according to which those theories are, indeed, wrong, or irrational? This is much less intuitive or obvious, and actually it’s very hard to make such a principle explicit. Here below are some remarks about this problem.

Psychologists used to talk about “conspiracist ideation”, or “conspiracy worldview”, to define their object when they study the class of believers in conspiracy theories. This notion is justified by the documented fact that chances one believes in a given conspiracy theory is higher when someone already believes in some conspiracy theories. Hence those theories in general make up into a system, and there should be some psychological underpinnings of such a system – which is a closed system, as Goetzel emphasized, hence it’s less likely to be discussed and debated than to be reinforced by other theories of the same kind.

Here I’ll argue that there is a specific epistemic stance taken by those who believe in conspiracy theories, try to underline it, and show that there is something intrinsically wrong with it. I’ll call that a “conspiracist epistemology” and will analyze some of its characters; of course, once one holds such a stance, she’ll be likely to believe in many theories of this sort, hence the “worldview” character of conspiracist ideation. Recently Quassim Cassam argued that, if one wants to understand why some people believe in the Illuminati plot or the 9-11 conspiracy, one should appeal to the notion of intellectual vices – which negatively corresponds to the intellectual virtues, required to understand how knowledge and truth are actually reached by some rational enquirers, in addition to the enquiry respecting some formal rules. Here, I’ll suggest that conspiracy theories could also be addressed in a sort of economic terms, namely, in terms of epistemic benefits and costs, adding an economic perspective to Cassam’s ethical approach.

Notice first that “conspiracy theory” may not be enough to characterize the faked moon landing view, the chemtrails idea, the suggestion that terrible shootings or bombings were hoaxes, etc. Actually, some of them were actual conspiracies – first of all, the 9-11 is a conspiracy led by Islamic terrorists - ; in fact many conspiracies occurred in human history, and especially in 20th century american history: hence some facts should be explained by theories that appeal to conspiracies, in the sense of collective plan secretly achieved by a group of agents with specific intentions and great powers.

Aaronovitch in *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History* (Vintage, 2009) defines a “conspiracy theory” as follows: “a conspiracy theory is the unnecessary assumption of conspiracy where other explanations are more probable”.

This seems common-sensical: we don’t, need, for instance a class of white evil males to explain the emergence of HIV epidemics, so this belief is a conspiracy theory. The problem is that whoever holds a conspiracy theory will never accept that her postulation of the conspiring agents is unnecessary! So why is the Illuminati fantasy an unnecessary hypothesis while the MK ultra plot is necessary to be hypothesized? Because the latter hypothesis provides a satisfyingly explanation of the data we have. Thus, the issue concerns what a satisfying explanation actually is: is there a rational way to assess competing hypotheses, including a conspiracy theory?

The dual face of conspiracy theories

Let’s acknowledge first that conspiracy theories don’t seem to rely on crazy elements. Considering a major theory, “the Illuminati rules the world”, which is obviously wrong and seems to be mocked even by some Truthers or other conspiracy theorists, it includes very general notions of human affairs that are commonsensical: some people have more power than others; high ability to influence the events in the world goes with fame, richness or political functions; often people colligate in order to act in a more efficient manner; often they act in a hidden manner because revealing their plans would preclude their chances of success. Stock exchanges are full of stories like this, where the wealthiest agents secretly get allied to perform very beneficial operations. However, ascribing to a general conspiracy the major events of human history is not plausible, because it forgets at least that in many cases, planned operations result in unintended effects; and, that the rich and famous have more often than not conflicting interests, which is also a fact from basic economics. Conspiracy theories take true facts on board, but what appears unnecessary is often the appeal to the conspiracy itself.

Yet this features is important for two reasons: first, under a too coarse-grained definition conspiracy theories may appear as well founded. A Counterpoint poll claimed that 51% of the French believe in conspiracy theories – however the question asked was “do you feel that someone pulls the trigger?” This is a much too general claim, and actually it’s hard to falsify it. Of course some people do influence the events more than others, and of course in general they are not well known: think of economic interests at play in political affairs or wars, etc. Actually, such feeling that the governing forces act in a secret fashion is at work in many of the movies or books we love, be it Don De Lillo’s novels or Jason Bourne’s series.

Second, such remark entitled many authors, starting with Hofstadter’s famous paper on the “paranoid style in American politics” (1964), to consider that even though conspiracy theories are wrong and sometimes crazy, they also perceive something right regarding the relations of power, classes and races in modern western societies, as Fenster argues in Conspiracy theories. Secrecy and powering american culture: “Similarly, overarching conspiracy theories may be wrong or overly simplistic, but they may sometimes be on to something. Specifically, they may well address real structural inequities, albeit ideologically, and they may well constitute a response, albeit in a simplistic and decidedly non-pragmatic form, to an unjust political order, a barren or dysfunctional civil society, and/or an exploitative economic system”. Many conspiracy theories entertained by black people in the US (such as the HIV created and diffused by white people to poison the blacks, or the deliberate flooding of New Orleans the Katrina hurricane, and other stories so collected in Conspiracy in American History, edited by Knight (2003)) are indeed a false representation of an oppression which actually does exist (think of the figures of recent killings of black people by police, or all forms of discrimination in professional life etc). An emphasis on this “core of truth” in conspiracy theories
contrasts with the view that they illustrate human cognition going awry, and the complexity of conspiracy theories as a philosophical object lies between those two poles. Here only I concentrate on the latter. So, what exactly does make a conspirationist epistemology and why does human cognition go awry when it subscribes to it?

Hyperbolic Doubt.

An obvious mark of conspiracy theorizing is the inversion of ordinary evidential weight. Details become significant, whereas major pieces of evidence are downplayed, because they are presented by experts or institutions seen as suspicious (i.e., the “official version”). This parallels the method usually employed by negationists of the Jewish genocide, who would take advantage of a minor contradiction between two reports about a truck delivering victims to an extermination camp to say that the whole extermination system is questionable. This is called “doubt” by their supporters, and often conspiracy theorists claim to be the genuine adepts of the scientific method. However it’s what commentators of Descartes call “hyperbolic doubt” and it does not have any role in science: scientific doubt is in principle limited, e.g. in biology, one will not doubt that there exists living beings, or that the laboratory itself may be unreal…

Such a doubt, a major ingredient of the conspiracist epistemology, has two features that make it irrational:

- the obsesional quest for any gap or conflict within the evidences on which relies the “received view;
- the systematic dismissal of any official discourse and experts (governmental reports, scientific institutions) of course something in common with science denial in all its forms: climate denial, creationism, vaccine hostility.

The first point is a principled mistake: one should never postulate that all the data proper to a phenomenon should be coherent; any curve fitting procedure in science will leave some data point out of the curve, which means that as data they will be overlooked. No absolute coherence between all data is required – it would even be something suspicious – exactly as, in any set of narratives of one’s day in life, no general coherence between all versions should be expected (which indeed would make one reasonably suspect a fake narrative). Any signal comes with some noise around it, as is said in computer science, and science is not about integrating everything in a coherent manner, but precisely about correctly partitioning signal and noise.

Conspiracist doubt is often introduced by the phrase “this can’t be there by chance”. However, here again it often relies on prescientific, wrong notions of what chance and randomness are. As has been made clear by mathematicians such as Chaitin or Martin-Löf and psychologists, genuine (mathematical) randomness is not always equal to homogeneous patterns, and many coincidences are precisely what should be expected if a process is indeed random. Here, a psychological bias (regarding our expectations of randomness) is co-opted in favor of a conspiracist view.

The second feature is motivated by the fact that, by definition of a conspiracy, evidences are precisely acted upon by conspirators and distorted in a purposeful way. If one assumes conspiracy it’s not irrational to be cautious with apparently convincing evidences. However, even leaving aside that at its limits there is a performative
of data are correct and model building processes are transparent and reliable. While those facts make for the rationality of some confidence in scientists, dismissal of expertise is irrational for the following reason: the very possibility of holding true some beliefs relies ultimately on our deference to some experts. After all, I know that there are innumerable galaxies in the universe and that there are 8 or 9 planets in our solar system because I believe in physicists. And my practical life is possible only because I trust the engineers who conceived my car and the computer scientists who designed my McAi. Even if there are (often) disagreements among experts, they occur on the background of a shared consensus – exactly like in evolutionary theory, where biologists disagree a lot about the weight of various factors in evolution, but do all agree that evolution occurred and that natural selection played an important role in it. But we are more likely to notice expert dissensus than expert agreement, since the latter is all over the place and grounds our ordinary knowledge. However, the well conceived notion of expertise includes that an expert in X is a non-expert in anything but X: it is crucial because conspiracists, as creationists or climate deniers, often present their own counter-experts, which lack the relevant expertise (biochemists will advocate creationism, paleontologists will discuss the collapsing pattern of the world trade center, etc) – which is another element of the conspiracist epistemology.

Epistemic costs and benefits.

More generally, this doubt about expertise is irrational because if I can doubt some experts, it's precisely because I rely on what I know from some other experts... If I genuinely doubted experts in principle, I could not even buy drugs prescribed by doctors, or trust newspapers! The cost would be very high indeed. This flaw in the conspiracist epistemology leads to its major problem, which is about epistemic costs and benefits. Think of Flat Earthism: admitting this theory that says that Earth is actually flat (surrounded by an anneal-like icy pole) would involve revising the whole astronomy, geology, geography, etc. Who would pay that price? Same for the faked moonlanding: believing in that, and still wanting to be coherent, would lead someone to doubt not only of the Apollo missions, but of the Nasa findings in general, astronomy, and also some ideas about sociology and psychology (which tells me that keeping a secret that involves so many people for such a long time is impossible). Conspiracy theories have in general a very high epistemic cost because they prescribe to revise many of our usual knowledge – while the benefit they provide is very low. Great scientific revolutions indeed forced us to revise many scientific notions (think of Darwin or Copernicus!) – but they provided huge benefits in return: much easier representation and calculations of celestial motions,
unique degree of integration of all biological sciences (taxonomy, biogeography and morphology) in the case of evolutionary theory, etc.

Quine’s view of science helps to make sense of that epistemic feature. For him, any knowledge can in principle be revised. But science is structured like an onion: there are more or less internal layers, namely the various disciplines or theories, upper layers using lower layers for justifying their assumptions or axioms. Any experiment is testing the whole theory as such (the so-called “Duhem-Quine thesis”), hence it does not tell us which layer should be revised if our predictions are infirmed. Modifying a layer affects only the upper layers, but not the ones on which it relies – for instance, volcanology is more external than biochemistry or quantum physics, hence any finding on volcanoes that contradicts our theories should first be dealt with by modifying volcanology, and only if it’s impossible should one turn to lower layers. Inversely, revising a core layer of knowledge such as mechanics may affect many other layers – as what happened with evolutionary theory, or relativity. The core of the ‘onion of science’ is mathematics and logics. Any modification in it would affect all the upper layers (physics, chemistry etc.); hence, even if they are not a priori immune to revision – as may attest the development of non Euclidian geometries after general relativity – the mathematico-logical layers should be revised only very parsimoniously. The cost of any revision of the system of science suggested to cope with experimental findings is therefore estimated by considering the amount of revisions to be done in other layers of the system – which means that, the more central the layer of knowledge involved, the more costly is the revision. It is therefore rational to maximize the epistemic payoff by weighting all epistemic benefits and costs – considering the maximization of a payoff of some kind as a requisite for rationality, in accordance with the way economists conceive of rationality as maximizing utility. Any testimony about ghosts, for instance, can legitimately be deemed very improbable because it’s less costly to assume some local hallucinations rather than to revise all the laws of physics and biology (that ghosts obviously transgress).

As to conspiracist epistemology, it obviously requires huge epistemic costs: dismissal of expertise, theoretical entities posited in order to provide a scenario replacing the official view (for instance, superpowerful agents such as the CIA secret agencies or the Illuminati, etc. – all that implies major revisions in many layers of our system of knowledge. Therefore it is less rational, in general than making fewer major revisions (for instance, accepting some level of randomness in events, or accepting that some data are just wrong and to be neglected). This does not preclude that in principle one day, a conspiracist view of a set of events would be rational – or that, adopting an epistemologist conspiracy (in which official data and experts are in principle doubtful and incoherencies in narratives have to be taken very seriously) would be warranted by the facts. Suppose indeed that one lives in North Korea – or think of the former soviet union: here, all what is reliably known of these regimes supports the idea that citizens are systemically deluded. This is part of our web of knowledge (it’s located somewhere in sociology and political theory). Therefore taking for granted all official versions in those regimes would impose a major revision of some parts of our web of knowledge, and incur a cost that is not incurred by people experiencing the system of expertise, medias, pluralist press and institutions which is seen in democratic countries.

Actually, the epistemic cost should not be evaluated only regarding specific revisions made to the web of knowledge – hence specific theories – but the methods to assess evidence can be themselves deemed more or less costly, in function of the systematic revisions or revision biases they impose onto the web of knowledge. This is a major element in our appreciation of conspiracy theories, and of the fact that a conspiracist
epistemology, with its inverted processes of assessing evidence (e.g., for instance, giving more weight to an anonymous blogger than to a professional scientist) is less rational than the ordinary stances.

Finally, the evidence-assessing protocol proper to the conspiracist epistemology recovers a crucial difference with what would a scientific method recommend, namely the nature of the initial assumption. Being in principle suspicious about experts and their reports on the basis that they may be distorting reality in order to hide a plot means that one already assumes that some conspiracy is going on. However, there is a crucial difference between starting from the hypothesis that historical events are sufficiently explainable by the explicit intents of agents, the laws of nature and some random circumstances, and then sometimes doubt of this explanation when some empirical data correctly weighted seem to challenge it — and starting from the hypothesis of conspiring agents and then doubt of any alternative hypothesis that would not admit this postulate. This latter methodological option is proper to a conspiracist epistemology. It puts the burden of proof on the shoulders of who does not hold a conspiracist worldview; however it is notably difficult, even impossible — to prove the non-existence of something (here, a specific or a general conspiracy), contrary to the proof of existence of some X, achievable by presenting an instance of X. Hence, once admitted the initial assumption, the often noticed robustness of conspiracist theses regarding empirical refutations.

Granted this methodological option, the epistemic benefits and costs of the conspiracist epistemology may be comparable to those of ordinary epistemologies. However the grounding hypothesis itself would globally impose a very high cost to the web of knowledge — because at least all layers of knowledge related to human and social sciences should be revised. For instance the Illuminati theory, the epitomé of conspiracist worldviews, requires that all the history told by professional historians should be trashed away.

The theory of cognitive vices and virtues should therefore be supplemented by a kind of economics of rationality. Conspiracist epistemology seems irrational because, like creationism or negations, it imposes extremely high costs not affecting the rival explanations.

Rationalities and the conspiracy theorist.

This raises a major question regarding the rationality of the conspirationalist. Suppose someone holding a conspirationalist epistemology. How comes that she is likely to pay the very high epistemic costs I sketched here? Wouldn’t it be fully irrational? The answer is not so clear and relies on our notion of rationality. Notice first that I focused on epistemic costs, regarding the web of knowledge as our sciences constitute it. However all beliefs of an individual constitute a web of belief that may also present this structure, namely, the fact that some beliefs support others, and that any revision of belief involves costs and benefits that are partly defined by the amount of overall revisions it imposes elsewhere in the web. Therefore, if our conspiratorialist may indeed hold beliefs that, would she aim at a coherent web of belief and therefore pay all the costs proper to her position, are not rational in the sense that they will not maximize the benefits, then a conspirationalist epistemology is irrational.

Yet rationality in the very minimal sense of economists, which is the sense implicitly used here, is notoriously value-free: whatever the preferences of the subject are, rationality is
about maximizing the utilities related to those preferences. Preferences themselves are exogenous to rationality, that is, they can’t be rational or irrational. (Economists can define the strategy a rational agent would chose, when she is a drug addict, having chosen heroin as her top preference.)

To this extent, one could also argue that the conspirationist is still rational. All her beliefs in her web of beliefs could indeed be ascribed a sort of utility in the economic sense, and an overall utility could be calculated for any change or addition of beliefs. Then, it might be that the revisions imposed by her conspiracist belief upon her total web of knowledge are not so costly, because a few beliefs, underpinning her admittance of a conspiracy theory, are so highly valued by her that their preservation compensates the highly costly theory she wants to support. For instance, suppose that the belief that the federal government is evil, or that the Jews rule the world, is given, in her web of knowledge, the most precious value – then, adopting a conspiracy theory, which is in phase with that views, would not be so costly overall because it preserves the most valuable beliefs, whereas the official version would be at odds which them and therefore be more costly.

That’s just an example it illustrating the fact that if a minimalist notion of rationality is used, which is neutral regarding the intrinsic value of beliefs, then the conspiracist epistemology may not be wholly irrational. It is however plausible to think that those key beliefs, highly valued and supportive of the overall benefit of the conspiracist views, are themselves poorly supported by evidences, and therefore initially require a conspiracist epistemology, which involves some vicious circularity.