

The Conspiracy of Theories

Stephen J Brewer, November 2014*

Download his free e-book "The Origins of Self" and other essays from www.originsofself.com

A dialogue in which Freya argues that conspiracy theories are illogical, but Orin is not so sure!

(An edited version of this work has been published in Philosophy Now)

Scene: A white room with two white chairs and a white table. Orin is sitting at the table feeling somewhat bad tempered due to a pain in his right leg and, as advised by his doctor, is on the second of his alcohol free days. Enter Freya, she sits at the table holding an open bottle of beer and looks annoyed.



Freya: Would you believe I've just had my ear bent for two hours by my idiot cousin telling me how 9-11, the crash in the world's economy, climate change etc. are all part of an 'all powerful elite' conspiring to control the world. When they've achieved this, they're going to kill us all off. Nothing I said would make him see reason, how can anyone be so unreasonable?

Orin: I think you'll find he's being entirely reasonable.

Freya: You don't mean you support him in believing this nonsensical conspiracy theory based on unprovable inventions of over active and paranoid minds?

Orin: I didn't say that, I'm saying that he can believe in it and still be entirely reasonable. Provided the reasoning process forms a consistent argument with each component being mutually supportive, then it is reasonable. It would only be unreasonable if one part of the argument contradicted another, but as I understand it, the theory is totally consistent.

Freya: But how can anyone believe such nonsense?

Orin: People like to have bad events explained by the action of some hidden evil agency. If it was presented as a story warning about the dangers of a totalitarian state, just as Aldus Huxley did with his '1984', you wouldn't have a problem with it. You might say it is a good story because by it raises these paranoid emotions in you to make you vigilant against the state or some corporation ruling the world. You see your problem is not with the reasoning process at all, you just do not like the story.

Freya: What you're missing is that this conspiracy theory is not just a story, it's supposed to be actual. They would have us believe that there really are a bunch of people organized in some secret cell causing all sorts of bad things to happen and who are going to take over the world and kill us all off, except for a few slaves they are going to keep. And you retirees and we scientists are first on the list, you can be sure of that.

Orin: So what do you think is the difference between a theory that is actual and one that is fictional?

Freya: Well, the actual can be proved true, like a scientific theory where you can repeat basic experiments. For example, you can roll balls down slopes then reproduce Galileo's 'laws of motion' then throw in Newton's law of gravity and use them to put a rocket on the moon.

Orin: But you are missing out a vital step; Newton's theories of motion required a leap of

imagination beyond the experimental results.

Freya: Well that was his great leaps of genius, he thought outside the box and imagined what would happen if there was no friction to slow things down.

Orin: Well, there have been conspiracies; there may well be many that we do not know about; after all you can 'fool all the people some of the time'. Combine this with the fact that people will do anything to hang onto their wealth and power, so with another leap of the imagination you can postulate 'an elite is conspiring to take over the world'. You see all theories require leaps of imagination to go beyond the facts and so enter into this theoretical world of abstract concepts. This is no different than inventing the 'principle of universal gravitation,' even though you have never travelled everywhere in the universe to test whether it is actually true.

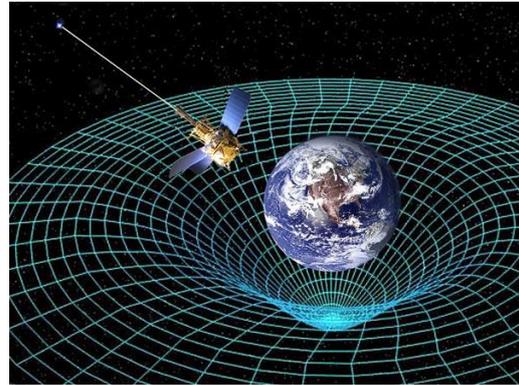
Freya: So now it gets even worse, you're saying theories are stories all with equal validity. You know that's not true.

Orin: Ah ha, now you are asking me to evaluate one theory compared with another. In terms of enjoyment, I would go for or a good paranoid story over science and mathematics any time. But that's just a matter of taste, I know of some mathematicians who get highly excited pondering about a proof of Fermat's Last Theorem.

Freya: Will you just stop that philosophical thing of deliberately missing the point! I mean ones that can be proved true, not ones that are untrue.

Orin: I suppose you mean scientific theories.

Freya: Yes, in science we are actively seeking critical experiments that disprove our theories so we can replace them with something better. The conspiracy theorist just ignores anything that doesn't fit. We scientists adjust or even drop our theories to incorporate new facts.



Orin: But just because there are a few facts not fitting your theory, you do not abandon it. If it helps you deal with the world, you keep using it. Newton's mechanics are still used for launching navigation satellites into orbit, but then we use Einstein's theory to correct the atomic clocks. You see, it's 'horses for courses', no one needs theories that are absolutely true instead, we are happy with the ones that do something useful for us.

Freya: In any case, this isn't about science is it? We can't reproduce the facts of 9-11, it happened once and once only. Instead the truth of the conspiracy theory is something that we can prove to ourselves. It's a court of law type of proof, with those accused of these atrocities in the dock, evidence like emails, witnesses and a jury to find a member of the elite 'guilty'.

Orin: Yes, but notice the term, 'beyond reasonable doubt', no one says you have to prove absolute guilt do they? The test is made by humans, and frankly that's no different from the test of validity of any scientific theory. The tests are in a laboratory, set up by humans with observations confirmed by other humans. You can't take the judgement of humans out of the equation can you?

Freya: Anyway, you can't prosecute the 'elite' because they are so powerful, all evidence has been eliminated and the Judge is one of them anyway! So, perhaps all we have to do is to show the error of their thinking by demonstrating that the argument is circular.



Orin: I'm afraid not, because once you've constructed the theory where everything is consistently connected to everything else, anything that's part of the logical network will be provable from any starting point. A theologian must find God in his theology because it was one of the postulates on which the system was constructed. An American citizen must find 'self-evident truths' such as personal freedom in the constitution and the

speed of light will always be a constant within the theory of relativity. If you believe in the conspiracy theory, then you will always find this conspiring elite.

Freya: So where does that leave us?

Orin: The belief that reason and logic allows you to determine what is true is wrong. In the end, your decision to accept or dismiss a theory is based on a judgement of its value.

Freya: Well then, on that basis I guess the conspiracy theory does nothing for me personally except to make me very annoyed and worried about the mental state of those who believe in such things.

Orin: Personally, I reject the 'elite conspiracy theory' simply because it does not fit with what I know about people in positions of power. They crave to be respected, admired and/or feared. The whole fun of being in power is to have a police escort stopping the traffic for you so your chauffeur can drive at high speed through red traffic lights! So, what's the point in being a member of this 'elite' if no-one knows you're one of them, where's the fun in that!

By the way, where did you get that drink?

"The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of a particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation. -- The success of the imaginative experiment is always tested by the applicability of its results beyond the restricted locus from which it originated." A. N. Whitehead, Process and Reality Corrected Edition, p 5, (eds. Griffin & Sherburne Free Press New York 1978)

*This essay is licensed for distribution under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. All images contain links showing their attribution and/or source.