

Conspiracy Theories and the Right to Believe

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Abstract : From the moment Covid 19 was declared a pandemic it became clear that conspiracy theories would significantly impact our response to the crisis that the virus was to become. Central to the interest in conspiracy theories evoked by a pandemic is a more general concern for the impact they have on society and social harmony. The specific brand of Conspiracy Theory that is in question is not any and all theories about conspiracies but rather those conspiracy theories which contradict official accounts. For example, where the official account on the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 is of a conspiracy involving 19 militants associated with the Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda against targets in the United States, the nature of conspiracy theory under study is the one contradicting this official account to the extent that its attributes the attacks not to al-Qaeda militants but to actors in the United States government itself. The study is not an investigation into the truth value of conspiracy theories but rather an attempt at observing the essential qualities of the type of belief that is belief in conspiracy theories compared to belief in official accounts provided by authoritative sources such as governments, experts and mainstream media. These qualities include the psychological, epistemic and socio-political foundations on which belief in conspiracy theories are established. Based on a foundational understanding of the sort of belief that are beliefs in conspiracy theories, we may then extrapolate implied ethical demands on both authoritative bodies and actors as well as believers in conspiracy theories. For example: in their unofficial 'non-factual' status, is there not some violation of epistemic right in the same way we observe in cases where people are prejudiced because of their religious beliefs? In other words, is there an epistemic injustice suffered by believers in conspiracy theories in the way their beliefs are rejected as illegitimate? Conversely, to what extent do believers bear an epistemic responsibility in their adoption of their beliefs in conspiracy theories. From this position, perhaps we can then develop responses to the problem that foster greater social harmony even in the midst of suspicion and distrust.

Keywords : conspiracy theories, subjugated knowledge, epistemic injustice, epistemic responsibility

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