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Implausible Conspiracy Theories: A Response to Juha Räikkä on Pejorative Definitions,
Part II

Kurtis Hagen, Independent scholar, kurtishagen@yahoo.com

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Vague evaluative terms, such as “implausible” and “unlikely,” are often used to describe conspiracy theories. In this essay, I argue that such vagueness facilitates equivocations that support unfounded negative generalizations about explanations called “conspiracy theories,” especially when the generalizations are based on extreme cases.

This essay is the second part of a three-essay series, framed as responding to Juha Räikkä’s (2023) defense of defining conspiracy theories pejoratively. In the first essay, I argued that pejorative definitions of “conspiracy theory” are resistant to objective operationalization, since the evaluative assessment on which the pejorative meaning is based would be inherently controversial, at least for popular conspiracy theories supported by at least some people with relevant competencies (see Hagen 2023a).

The present essay addresses the effect of the stigmatization inherent in the use of pejorative labels. This issue is impactful. Pejorative labels can be hurtful at a personal level, which becomes a serious problem if they stigmatize people *unfairly*. Further, even an implicit threat of such stigmatization may interfere with the public search for truth, thus being injurious at a societal level as well. This, at least, is a commonly expressed concern regarding the pejorative use and understanding of the term “conspiracy theory.” I argue that Räikkä’s attempt to address this concern misses the mark.

Overview

Räikkä maintains that a pejorative definition of “conspiracy theories” is unproblematic because “relevant experts more or less unanimously”¹ find claims that are called “conspiracy theories” to be unlikely, given the known facts (Räikkä 2023, 65).² Räikkä suggests that such claims are “implausible.” He writes, “When relevant experts have more or less unanimously determined that a particular conspiracy claim conflicts with established facts, the claim is certainly implausible” (67). He maintains that, for this reason, it is “acceptable to shun” such claims (65). Curiously, Räikkä’s argument for the acceptability of shunning conspiracy theories rests on the claim that it is possible for such theories to get a fair hearing. He motivates this by drawing an analogy between implausible conspiracy theories and implausible scientific hypotheses that may nevertheless be investigated fairly. The objection to pejorative definitions of conspiracy theories that he responds to is that such definitions make it impossible for conspiracy theories to be treated fairly.

While perhaps superficially appealing, there are many problems with Räikkä’s analysis. Briefly stated:

¹ I discuss the (appearance of a) consensus among the (seemingly) relevant experts in Part III of this series, namely, Hagen 2023b.

² Räikkä writes, “A claim about a conspiracy that ends up in this class is evaluated, at least to some degree, and typically relevant experts more or less unanimously conclude that the claim is unlikely in light of the facts that are presently known” (Räikkä 2023, 65). Hereafter I will refer to Räikkä’s article with just the page numbers, without repeating “Räikkä 2023.”

(1) Räikkä's framing of the objection to pejorative definitions is a strawman; it's an exaggerated version of the real objection. And thus, his response to this objection is a non sequitur.

(2) The word "implausible" covers a wide spectrum of degrees, and this facilitates equivocation. The same is true of similar words such as "unlikely."

(3) Räikkä does not clarify the meaning of "pejorative," which also facilitates what amounts to an equivocation.

(4) The phrase "acceptable to shun" is somewhat deceptive. It sounds vaguely pejorative, but it is only actually pejorative if it means "*should be shunned*"—but Räikkä's discussion militates against that interpretation. If what is meant is merely that it is permissible to ignore the theory, but also not criticizable to investigate it if one is so inclined, and perhaps okay to endorse it if one believes the evidence that one finds supports it, then being "acceptable to shun" is *not* a pejorative quality.

I elaborate on these issues in the sections below, after a section discussing other words that are often used pejoratively. In that section, I argue that the fact that "conspiracy theory" is very often used pejoratively does not entail that it is inherently pejorative. The notion that the phrase is not inherently pejorative is also supported by the fact that it is not *always* used pejoratively. I then maintain that legitimate concerns have been raised about the pejorative use of this term that Räikkä's arguments do not address, and a pejorative definition would facilitate problematic pejorative usage. Indeed, a *truly* pejorative definition seems to entail the problems that concern critics.

Pejorative Use of Non-Pejorative Terms

First let's address the fact that the phrase "conspiracy theory" is very commonly used as a pejorative. This may lead some people to think it is inherently pejorative. But this need not be the case. Consider a few analogous words, such as "terrorist," "narcissist," "extremist," and also "right winger." All of these words can be used pejoratively, and often are so used. But they are *defined* merely descriptively, not pejoratively.

For example, not only is the word "terrorist" generally used pejoratively, it could be argued that terrorism is always (or nearly always) wrong. But the wrongness of terrorism, and the stigma usually associated with being called a "terrorist," is not entailed by the definition of terrorism or terrorist. (Illegality may be part of the definition, but that is not the same as wrongness.) We can separate the meaning of the word "terrorist" from the evaluation of someone called that word, even if we would generally negatively evaluate someone fitting the meaning. It is not strictly *incoherent* to argue that terrorism is sometimes good.³ "Narcissist" is

³ For the record, I happen to think terrorism is wrong in principle and is generally strategically ineffective as well. Non-violence is much better tactic. Nevertheless, one could argue *intelligibly* against this position. In the case of conspiracy theories, not only is it intelligible to argue that some such theories are reasonable, I think that position is true, even if we restrict ourselves to theories that are commonly considered to count as conspiracy theories.

another example. It is often used pejoratively in everyday speech but can be used professionally in a merely descriptive way. It is the context that provides the difference, but the meaning of the word is itself non-pejorative.

Also consider the terms “right wing” or “right winger,” the former often being qualified by words like “nut,” similar to the way “conspiracy theory” is often qualified by “crazy.” If one uses the word “right winger” when speaking to one’s left-wing friends, and with a bit of a sneer, it is being used pejoratively. Such usage is not uncommon, either with or without explicitly negative qualifiers. But “right wing” is not *defined* pejoratively, and presumably this would not change if its pejorative use increased. “Fanatic extremist” is another example of this type. Similarly, “crazy conspiracy theory” is a pejorative, but it is the word “crazy” that determines this. “That’s a conspiracy theory,” said with a sneer, is a pejorative use of the term. But it is the context, emphasized by the sneer, that makes it so. This is, I maintain, the best way to view the phrase “conspiracy theories.” Put simply, it is often used pejoratively, but is not *inherently* pejorative, and so should not be *defined* pejoratively.

People often get defensive when they are called “conspiracy theorists,” and even when they merely fear that they may be so called. It is understandable that they seek ways of distancing themselves from what, in the context, is or would be an attempt to belittle them. That explains why people sometimes deny that the theory they espouse really is a conspiracy theory even when it is one that is generally classified as such, or why they use disclaimers such as “I’m not a conspiracy theorist but...” (see Husting and Orr 2007, 144). However, it is not *nonsensical* to say things like, “This is one conspiracy theory I believe,” or “It is a conspiracy theory, but is it true? Is there good evidence for it?”

Indeed, when one opens a discussion of conspiracy theories in a non-judgmental way, people are less defensive, and willing to use the term neutrally. Imagine a conversation starting with this: “Let’s talk about popular conspiracy theories, such as conspiracy theories about assassinations or false flag attacks. Are there versions of such conspiracy theories that you think might be true or warranted? How many of you believe some conspiracy theory or another?” There is nothing odd about using the term in this way. And such a prompt may lead to a conversation in which the phrase “conspiracy theory” continues to be used in a non-pejorative way. This seems to be a legitimate use of the phrase which can facilitate discourse.

Why Worry about Pejorative Definitions?

Räikkä uses an analogy between conspiracy theories and implausible scientific hypotheses to make the case that a pejorative definition of “conspiracy theories” does not entail the negative consequences that those who object to pejorative definitions worry about. He writes, “Their worry is that if conspiracy theories are considered implausible by definition, then the theories cannot get fair treatment and will be rejected for just being conspiracy theories” (63). The overly strong language here, “*cannot* get fair treatment,” subtly misrepresents the real worry. Let’s look at a few relevant expressions of concern as they are presented by scholars who oppose pejorative definitions, and the pejorative use, of the phrase “conspiracy theory.”

- Ginna Husting and Marty Orr write: “If I call you a ‘conspiracy theorist,’ ... I strategically exclude you from the sphere where public speech, debate, and conflict occur”⁴ (Husting and Orr 2007, 127). [The phrase] “allows those who use it to sidestep sound scholarly and journalistic practice, avoiding the examination of evidence, often in favor of one of the most important errors in logic and rhetoric—the ad hominem attack.” (Husting and Orr 2007, 147).
- Rico Hauswald writes: “[A]ll too often, *legitimate* beliefs, investigative hypotheses, forms of social criticism etc., are excluded from serious consideration by being dismissed in ordinary language and public discourse as ‘conspiracy theories.’ [This can] erode the kind of civic vigilance that is essential to detect corruption, fraud, or other forms of malpractice. If concerns about misconduct or wrongdoing by powerful actors are routinely dismissed as ‘conspiracy theories,’ this can lead increasingly to such concerns not being raised anymore and to those actors successfully evading public accountability. [It can] also undermine democratic deliberation more generally.” Among other things, this can also “lead to... the problem of premature conclusions”⁵ (Hauswald 2023, 500, emphasis in original; see also 498).
- Tim Aistrophe and Roland Bleiker write: “[W]hen a claim is *labelled* a ‘conspiracy’... [this results in] a strong delegitimizing discourse around conspiracy, which not only discredits specific claims but also acts as a powerful disincentive against engaging political controversies in the first place, when the personal and professional costs of challenging the established view is potentially high” (Aistrophe and Bleiker 2018, 171, emphasis in original).
- According to David Coady: Derisive usage of the term “serves to intimidate and silence” and “*makes it less likely* that such conspiracies will be exposed (or exposed in a timely manner), and *more likely* that the perpetrators of conspiracies will get away with them. Hence, there is reason to think that the fact that these expressions have pejorative connotations causes our society to be less open than it otherwise would be... [It] has *made it easier* for conspiracy to thrive at the expense of openness.” (Coady 2018, 182, emphasis added).
- I have previously put the objection this way: “[T]he ‘conspiracy theory’ label as a term of abuse *discourages the exploration* of [the relevant] evidence, and thus does a disservice to both truth and justice” (Hagen 2022a, 35, emphasis added; cf. 266).

⁴ I would qualify this (or perhaps clarify it) by saying that this is an *attempt* to exclude, which may or may not be successful, or may be successful in some degree.

⁵ In a response to Hauswald, David Coady suggests that the pejorative use of the phrase “conspiracy theory” can lead not just to premature conclusions but to *wrong* conclusions (Coady 2023a, 45).

- Similarly, Tim Hayward writes: “[T]he general denigration of ‘conspiracy theory’ *tends to discourage* a kind of practice [namely, competent investigation] that there is reason, in fact, to encourage.” (Hayward 2021, 1, emphasis added).

While these statements address the term’s *use* rather than its *definition*, defending a pejorative definition, in effect, supports its pejorative use; one can’t object to the pejorative use if one accepts a pejorative definition. So, the concern captured in these statements is both real and relevant. The objection, in other words, is that the pejorative use of the term serves as an *obstacle* to open and unbiased inquiry, not that it makes such inquiry *strictly impossible*.⁶

In addition, sometimes Räikkä seems to conflate “fair treatment” with research done “in accordance with good research practices” (63). These may not be equivalent, depending on how expansively one understands “good research practices.” For example, the reason that industry-funded research tends to favor the industry that funds it, compared to independent research, presumably involves bias embedded somewhere in a process that appears to be in accordance with good research practices, at least on the surface (see Goldacre 2012, 1–5; Krimsky 2012, 18).

Räikkä reasons as follows: “Accepting a pejorative definition of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ allows for individual conspiracy theories to be investigated properly and in accordance with good research practices” (63). What makes this claim true is the weakness of the phrase “allows for.” While it may be *possible* to investigate something given a pejorative label fairly and with an open mind, such a label may still be doing pernicious work by making such fair treatment *both psychologically and practically difficult* and thus *less likely* to occur. That is the concern. In the case of so-called “conspiracy theories,” when this term is used as a pejorative it is not merely to signal that the theory in question is implausible or unlikely in some degree, but also to discourage people from taking the theory seriously. In many contexts there are strong informal disincentives against expressing any sympathy for views labeled as “conspiracy theories.” The phrase is often used to prevent genuinely openminded inquiry; defense of a pejorative definition facilitates this use. However, pointing out that it is still *possible* to investigate such theories fairly does not address the problem.⁷

⁶ Hayward does seem to worry that a pejorative understanding of “conspiracy theory” could *lead to* policies that make unbiased inquiry nearly impossible. He writes, “[W]hen the pejorative understanding of ‘conspiracy theory’ is allowed to influence policy-making it can serve to legitimate policies whose effect is to impede or even outlaw the kind of civic vigilance that aims to uncover malfeasance on the part of powerful actors” (Hayward 2021, 1). There was a California law that would have punished doctors from expressing “misinformation,” that is, (ostensibly) false information that “is contradicted by contemporary scientific consensus” (see Myers 2023). This seems analogous to, and so seems to justify, Hayward’s worry. In any case, Hayward is not suggesting that the pejorative use of the phrase *itself* makes unbiased inquiry impossible.

⁷ Räikkä suggests that it is the non-pejorative “minimalist” definition that encourages researchers to stigmatize potentially real conspiracies (69). The minimalist definition, according to which conspiracy theories are just theories about conspiracies, is discussed in Part I of this series (Hagen 2023a). Presumably Räikkä means that, by including theories that don’t usually count as “conspiracy theories,” one thereby encourages the stigmatization of those theories. But supporters of the minimalist definition are explicitly trying to encourage a non-stigmatizing understanding of the term. Räikkä seems to be suggesting that adoption of their suggestion will have the opposite effect from what they desire. However, the term is *already* being used to stigmatize

Furthermore, for Rääkkä's analogies to work, the conception of a *pejorative* definition must be a very weak one, focusing merely on "implausibility." It includes merely being unlikely to some unspecified degree, but still being regarded as a potentially legitimate object of study. But this does not match the way the pejorative use of "conspiracy theory" works. As Husting and Orr persuasively argue, various authors "use the conspiracy theorist label as (1) a routinized strategy of exclusion; (2) a reframing mechanism that deflects questions or concerns about power, corruption, and motive; and (3) an attack upon the personhood and competence of the questioner" (Husting and Orr 2007, 127). It "serve[s] to set some issues, claims, and concerns outside the symbolic boundary of 'reasonable' deliberation and contestation" (Husting and Orr 2007, 147). This is their objection to its function as a pejorative. In short, the phrase "conspiracy theory," when functioning as a pejorative, delegitimizes and thereby strongly disincentivizes inquiry. In contrast, Rääkkä's analogies involving science assume no such exclusionary force.

Conspiracy Theories and Implausible Scientific Hypotheses

Rääkkä draws an analogy between implausible conspiracy theories and implausible scientific hypotheses. Regarding the latter, he writes, "Obviously, the fact that the hypothesis is understood to be implausible does not influence a professional's research practices and procedures" (66). But this is not obvious at all. The hypothetical professional researcher in question here is not just *a professional*, and not just *a researcher*, or *an anthropologist*, but also (presumably) *a human being*. And human beings *are* often influenced by such things, even if they are wearing lab coats.

Rääkkä's next move is equally dubious. He writes, "The same is true of unlikely claims that concern conspiracies" (66). But that's not at all clear either. While it might be true that unlikely claims are often investigated in an unbiased way in normal scientific research, it does not follow that theories labeled "conspiracy theories" will be treated likewise, especially if that label is considered in a truly pejorative manner. People don't want to be accused of doing something contemptible. The implicit threat of being potentially demeaned is a meaningful disincentive. Rääkkä's analogy between conspiracy theories (understood pejoratively) and implausible hypotheses in the sciences does not hold because hypotheses in the sciences, even implausible ones, are not classified pejoratively.

Further, consider the actual context here: some scholars, such as Quassim Cassam, have claimed that even "flirting with" conspiracy theories is tantamount to spreading racist or anti-Semitic right-wing propaganda. He suggests that this claim should be made repeatedly so as to shame people into refraining from such flirtations (Cassam 2019, 123). While Rääkkä isn't suggesting that conspiracy theories should be understood as functioning fundamentally as racist propaganda, the reality is that genuinely pejorative definitions facilitate such arguments, which tend to have a chilling effect on inquiry. And note that Cassam's rather extreme stigmatization effort is based explicitly on an idea very similar to the view that

unwelcome investigations into corruption and deceit, which supporters of the minimalist definition point to in their complaint. They are trying to discourage an association that is already being made.

Räikkä also starts with—that conspiracy theories are, in Cassam’s words, “unlikely to be true.”⁸

Räikkä could respond that he did not actually claim that a pejorative definition would not have a problematic stigmatizing effect. He made a much weaker claim, namely, that it would still be *possible* for such theories to be “investigated properly and in accordance with good research practices.” He merely denied that “if conspiracy theories are considered implausible by definition, then they *cannot* get fair treatment” (63; emphasis added). But this would be a retreat to the strawman version of the objection to pejorative definitions. The real objection is not that it is *strictly impossible* for someone to fairly, neutrally, and objectively investigate a theory that has been given a pejorative label. It is that doing so requires overcoming an unfairly placed obstacle. It is certainly *possible* to ignore slanderous slurs and the accompanying condemnation by peers, and to stick one’s neck out on an issue that is likely to be career damaging in order to conduct an investigation of a heterodox view impartially. But the fact that that is *possible* is hardly a good argument that the situation itself is fair and proper, that in such circumstances so-called “conspiracy theories” *would* get fair treatment.

Pejorative and Non-pejorative Understandings of “Implausible”

Räikkä seems to ground his defense of a pejorative definition not only in the way the term is used, but also in the fact that (in his view) conspiracy theories are implausible. However, implausibility comes in *degrees*, so defining conspiracy theories as implausible can be misleading if one does not clarify the degree of implausibility required to qualify. Without such clarity, it is easy to equivocate, even unintentionally. Cassam’s critique of what he calls “Conspiracy Theories” (capitalized) is a good example of how such equivocation can operate. Cassam equivocates between being (merely) “unlikely to be true” and having “virtually no chance of being true” (2019, 7; cf. 28–29) in order to conclude that Conspiracy Theories cannot even be *about the truth*. Various versions of such an equivocation seem fairly common, though usually implicit.

Suppose “implausible” suggests something is truly criticizable. It could be taken to mean, for example, that the theory is unreasonable, unrealistic, or fanciful, because what it describes is just not the kind of thing that happens—it is “crazy” or “wild” (64, n1). If a theory is *incredibly* implausible, then, being not credible, it is, one might ordinarily be encouraged to think, not the kind of thing that should be taken seriously. Perhaps one may be legitimately criticized for wasting one’s time on it, especially if one does so in one’s official capacity as a

⁸ Arguing from the premise that conspiracy theories are unlikely is a common strategy for discouraging people from taking conspiracy theories seriously based on their individual merits. For example, Cassam specifies several “special features” that, on his account, make Conspiracy Theories unlikely to be true (2019, 7, 16, 29). From this premise he argues that their primary function is to serve as right-wing racist propaganda, and thus people (at least those who aren’t racist) should be too embarrassed to even “flirt with” such theories (2019, 123). See Hagen 2022b for a response suggesting that these features are either epistemically unproblematic or are not adequately tied to conspiracy theories. As another example, Wagner-Egger et al (2019, 51–52) provide a “statistical argument” based on the premise that “most conspiracy theories are false.” They seem to imply that people should therefore consider all conspiracy theories to be false, since they will be right most of the time. I’ve responded to this argument (Hagen 2020, 428–430).

journalist, scientist, academic, law enforcement officer, or congressperson. If conspiracy theories are defined as implausible in this sense, then the definition could count as pejorative.

However, not *all* theories generally classified as conspiracy theories are so implausible. And most of Rääkkä's discussion militates against an extreme interpretation of "implausible." For example, he suggests that, though regarded as implausible, conspiracy theories are not necessarily untrue; indeed, he concedes that they are potentially *warranted upon investigation* (see his "Section 2," 66). It seems, then, that he is taking the word "implausible" to mean something like "unlikely," given what is currently known or believed. However, it is not clear that defining conspiracy theories as implausible in this sense amounts to a truly *pejorative* definition—one that implies that contempt or disapproval is warranted.⁹ After all, many scientific hypotheses are "implausible" in this sense, but taking such hypotheses seriously is not criticized or belittled. Similarly, detectives are not faulted for following up on leads that seem initially unlikely to pan out. That's just exercising due diligence. Nor are investors criticizable for looking into potentially lucrative investments that are, on the surface, likewise unlikely to pan out.

One reason it may be worth considering many such investment strategies is that if one finds one that does pan out, the returns might be especially substantial. This is arguably analogous to the case of conspiracy theories. It is pretty important that real conspiracies are exposed, and it might normally be comparatively unimportant that some people "wasted time" on false theories (though there could also be cases or circumstances in which this is not true). These observations parallel Rääkkä's own running analogy with scientific theories. As Rääkkä correctly maintains, scientific theories that are implausible (in the sense of unlikely to pan out) can nevertheless be pursued fairly, or at least "in accordance with good research practices" (63). But such fair treatment is only *likely to actually occur* when being "implausible" is *not* thought of pejoratively, that is, when that attribute does not render taking the matter seriously and fairly somehow contemptible.

In one version of his argument, Rääkkä suggests that "a hypothesis that clearly conflicts with the present established knowledge ... is unlikely to be validated" (66). He nevertheless admits that this does not mean that the theory does not deserve further investigation. That seems fair enough. But there are problems with using this line of thinking to support a pejorative definition of conspiracy theories.

First, it assumes that conspiracy theories clearly conflict with the present established knowledge. But that is something that conspiracy theorists generally contest. Often those theories merely contrast with the view of a (potentially conflicted) group of authorities (of some kind). Perhaps even this much makes these theories unlikely to be validated,¹⁰ but only in a fairly weak sense of unlikely.

⁹ As David Coady puts it, "Whenever we use the term 'conspiracy theory' pejoratively we imply, perhaps unintentionally, that there is something wrong with believing in conspiracies or wanting to investigate whether they're occurring" (Coady 2023b, 757). Coady argues that it functions like the word "heresy" to produce "an irrational prejudice" (757). It is *possible* to remain relatively objective even in the face of pejorative labeling, but it is not easy, nor can that be expected to generally occur.

¹⁰ It seems to me that being "unlikely to be true" is more relevant than being "unlikely to be validated." An influential group of biased authorities may be unlikely to validate something even if it is likely to be true, based

Second, the issue of *validation* raises questions. Does it depend on the *acknowledgement* of prominent (potentially conflicted) authorities? The fact that such authorities withhold their acknowledgement may not be a great proxy for truth or warrant.

Third, it is unclear whether the fact that a theory is “unlikely to be validated” implies that taking the theory seriously is somehow contemptible or should be discouraged. On the one hand, if it is not regarded as contemptible, and may even deserve further investigation, then being “unlikely to be validated” isn’t a pejorative quality. On the other hand, if it is regarded as contemptible, then it will be difficult for the theory to receive fair treatment (though this won’t be strictly impossible, of course).

Räikkä’s analogy with scientific practice, and his admission that such theories might deserve further investigation, suggests the former interpretation. But that interpretation seems to conflict with his suggestion that such theories should be labeled pejoratively and that they are appropriately shunned (65).

Räikkä maintains, “It is acceptable to shun a claim that is implausible in light of the best available knowledge” (65). But what does it mean to say, “It is acceptable to shun a claim”? Is he suggesting that conspiracy theories are the kinds of ideas that *should* be shunned? And is to shun *to reject with antipathy*? If so, this seems to be treating conspiracy theories pejoratively, and would tend to hamper inquiry into such theories. But if he is merely saying that it is *acceptable* (at least some of the time) for individuals to choose to shun (in the sense of *ignore*) a conspiracy theory, then that does not suggest that the term “conspiracy theory” is a pejorative label. For it leaves open the possibility that other conspiracy theories ought not be shunned. And even those that are acceptable to shun may also legitimately be investigated rather than shunned. It is acceptable to shun or not shun, as one chooses. If that is all “acceptable to shun” means, then it has little if any negative weight, and cannot reasonably be considered pejorative. So, either “acceptable to shun” is not a pejorative-making quality, or else a definition that entails it runs afoul of the concern regarding pejorative definitions.

Pursuing this issue further, Räikkä points out that not all hypotheses are investigated, and he suggests that there should be some “convincing reasons to start such investigations” (67). He further suggests that the same principle should apply to conspiracy theories. In this context, he maintains that an “alleged conspiracy of space lizards” would be “irrational, unethical, and unrewarding” to investigate (67). I would quibble with this just a bit. Yes, that is very likely to be unrewarding. And, certainly, ignoring such wild theories would be a perfectly reasonable thing to do. But it is not so clear that, when faced with such allegations, it would be positively irrational and unethical for *someone* to investigate the matter, especially if that can be done efficiently.

One reason to do so would be to expose the falseness of crucial underlying premises. But, as Dentith (2022) has suggested, in the highly unlikely event that there really is such a

on the evidence. Presumably, we want to believe things that are true, not just things that are likely to be validated by potentially biased ostensible epistemic authorities.

conspiracy going on, the importance of uncovering it would presumably be tremendous. So, while it is perfectly reasonable for one to choose to refrain from investigating anything without first having “convincing reasons to start [the] investigation,” it is not positively *contemptible* to explore unlikely possibilities, even if one does not start with convincing reasons to do so. Neither option is irrational or unethical, even if one is very likely to be unrewarding. Arguably, mere suspicion is sufficient reason for one to reasonably choose to investigate something. Alternatively, one may investigate with the intent to disprove a wild assertion.

In any case, and much more importantly, most conspiracy theories are not as wild as that one. It is not at all clear that using a pejorative label to cover both incredibly implausible theories and those that are more innocuously implausible is fair to the latter type. And some conspiracy theories are investigated by people who at least believe they have reasons that are convincing enough for them to justify further investigation. After all, one may not need *much* to justify *some* degree of investigation. And that may lead down a rabbit hole, for better or worse.

These considerations militate against defining conspiracy theories pejoratively. After all, if one wants to discourage the study of a theory that one believes is a waste of time and resources (perhaps where taxpayers are funding the researcher, for instance), one is free to make that argument about the particular case. One may even make the argument against a class of cases—such as those involving magical extraterrestrials. But many of the theories that have been labeled conspiracy theories are not unreasonable to investigate. Defending a pejorative definition of conspiracy theories tends to facilitate the equivocation between theories that may be deserving of condemnation and those that are not. And while there may be relatively clear cases on either side (e.g., space lizards vs. Watergate),¹¹ there are many cases which are unclear—including paradigmatic cases like those involving the JFK assassination. Which side of the line a theory is on should be decided case-by-case and may depend on the formal responsibilities of the would-be investigator. But it would be a mistake to discourage all investigation of all conspiracy theories just because they fall under an umbrella term that includes extreme cases.

Conclusion

While the phrase “conspiracy theories” is often used pejoratively, that does not mean it is inherently pejorative and thus that it should be given an explicitly pejorative definition. Although Rääkkä’s defense of the pejorative definition is an attempt to respond to a criticism of the pejorative definition or use of the term, he subtly misinterprets the criticism. Namely, it is not that a pejorative definition makes fair treatment *impossible*, it is that it makes it *more difficult* and *less likely* to occur. His analogy between conspiracy theories and implausible scientific hypotheses, which are presumed to receive fair treatment, fails because such hypotheses are not regarded *pejoratively*, that is, as contemptible to take seriously. Part of the problem with his analysis is that mere implausibility (in the sense of being, or seeming, unlikely) is not a genuinely pejorative quality. Investigating implausible theories of various

¹¹ By “Watergate,” I mean the theory of Watergate pursued by Woodward and Bernstein *before it became accepted as historical truth*. At that time, it was a conspiracy theory whose truth was in question and was perhaps unlikely or “implausible” in a weak sense, but not a theory that deserved to be treated pejoratively.

kinds is often unobjectionable. However, if one insists on a stronger sense of implausibility for conspiracy theories, then some so-called “conspiracy theories” are not actually conspiracy theories (since they are not implausible in a strong sense), and the status of many more becomes reasonably contestable.

In the final essay of this series (Hagen 2023b), I address the apparent consensus of epistemic authorities in opposition to conspiracy theories, which is central to Rääkkä’s argument, as it forms the basis for the judgement that conspiracy theories are implausible. I argue that the stigmatization of conspiracy theories itself alters the context in which they are judged, and that this contributes to a bias often already embedded in the incentive structures of the institutions in which the judging experts operate.

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