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Commentary on “Conspiracy and Bias: Argumentative Features and Persuasiveness of Conspiracy Theories”

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1. Introduction

Steve Oswald’s paper is an illuminating application of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) to the rhetoric of conspiracy theories (CTs). The key move Oswald makes is to find in the argumentation profile of CTs characteristic strategies and tactics that are adjusted to the biases of followers so as to foreground in attention the strengths of CTs and weaknesses of the official stories (OTs) and to push into the background the weaknesses of CTs and the strengths of OTs. Relevance Theory is particularly well-suited for this kind of epistemic analysis since the central focus of the theory is on how people process inferences through the dynamics of cognitive environment and linguistic stimulus. In the spirit of encouraging this analysis, I make my comments.

2. Warning: Not all conspiracy theories are wrong or irrational

Perhaps this is more of a reminder than a warning since Oswald acknowledges this, and so do many of the authors he cites. Some CTs are right, and even when they are wrong, they may still be reasonable. Not all followers are nuts. I, like many other humans on this planet who have had direct, unmistakable observations, believe in UFOs and find it inconceivable that official government denials are part of some kind of cover-up.¹ I don’t know what kind of cover-up or why governments claim that UFOs are natural or otherwise familiar phenomena. I don’t know what the UFO I saw could be. But I know what I saw. And I know that it was not a natural phenomenon nor was it a technology that any government admits to possessing. And I’m not nuts. I do not ipso facto also believe that there are Lizard People, that the 9/11 attacks were an inside job by the Bush Administration, that Vince Foster’s suicide was staged by the Clintons, that fluoridation of drinking water is an Illuminati mind-control plot, or that Qatar won the bid for the 2022 World Cup soccer tournament by bribing FIFA officials. (Well, maybe I also believe that last one.)

¹ My own observation occurred while looking at the night sky with a colleague in Tucson, Arizona. I had not even realized what I had seen until my colleague asked, “Did you see that?” This occurred the weekend before the March 26, 1997 mass suicide by the Heaven’s Gate cult who expected to be transported to an extraterrestrial spacecraft following the Haley-Bopp Comet and the widely reported Phoenix lights event of March 27, 1997. Both events are summarized in Wikipedia.

Still, it is really hard to not think of all CTs as “crippled epistemologies,” to not focus on dysfunctional patterns of reasoning and rhetoric over the sensible and defensible patterns, to not highlight the nut cases. Certainly the peculiar cognitive susceptibilities of some people to fall prey to patterns of bad CT rhetoric is important to point out. Oswald is surely right that the alignment of rhetorical strategy and cognitive proclivity is an important part of the explanation for why some people buy into CTs and why some CTs are so persistent. And there is an urgent need to come to terms with this kind of crippled epistemology. Climate change denialists avow some patently false beliefs, make some shockingly unreasonable arguments, and the continued viability of this sort of rhetoric puts the whole planet at risk.

The danger is that the pejorative quality that dominates both the argumentation profile of the rhetoric and the personality profile of the follower may reflect not empirical properties but self-fulfilling artefact. Any sensible rhetoric or reasonable follower simply doesn't count as CT rhetoric or CT follower; it gets classified as a level-headed cousin. Moreover, an emphasis on crippled epistemologies foregrounds the diminished or distorted competencies of the followers and advocates and pushes into the background the defective or constrained conditions of the situations in which CT rhetoric thrives.

3. Reasonable strategies in unreasonable situations

Both the “just asking questions” and the “scientific inquiry” rhetorical styles that Oswald draws from Byford (2011) look very much like reasonable strategies in more limited but still difficult rhetorical situations.

One of the basic stock issues that an advocate may have to address is, “Why even open this controversy for (re)consideration?” Just asking questions is a well adapted style when the OS enjoys a strong presumption in its favor and, for various reasons, the OS is taken to be a settled matter not requiring defense in the face of sceptical dissent. This would be a particularly difficult situation where the OS is promulgated by powerful institutional actors and warranted by the authority of institutions with a monopoly on crucial information. Just getting a fair hearing and avoiding dismissal out of hand can be a real problem. The refutational preoccupation with “errant data” and the failure of OS proponents to answer questions is just the kind of cautious opening strategy we might expect from a reasonable skeptic. Of course, if there is uptake then the arguments need to progress into a serious and substantive defense of the CT. Continued probing of the OS does not provide positive support for the alternative CT.

Another basic stock issue that an advocate may have to address is, “Why should I believe you and your story?” This is especially so where the OS is backed by credible institutions, the CT has little strong factual support, and the standing and motives of CT advocates is itself murky. The style of scientific inquiry can help to dispel the doubts behind such a question. Of course, ultimately, style cannot substitute for substance. And in the case of “crippled epistemologies” it does not, even if some are gulled into accepting fraud and fallacy.

But bad arguments do not always signal bad actors, or just bad actors. Bad situations can also be the source of trouble. CTs, by their very nature, emerge in situations of inaccessible, incomplete, and ambiguous information. This is especially so when the OS is backed by institutions whose actors are unable or unwilling to engage CT proponents and when there are important asymmetries in power, expertise, or informational resources. For much of the public, even topics like climate change, electronic voting, the 9/11 attacks, or vaccines and autism fit this kind of situation. Inquiring minds want to know—but most have no ability to make a

remotely informed judgment based on information independent of the institutional authors of the OS. As an audience, all they have available are the kind of heuristics that Oswald has in mind when he cites Jackson's (1996) "failed diagnostic strategies." And CT advocates who are not institutional members are in just as difficult a position. They can't do research on the relation between autism and vaccination. They don't have access to the computer programs that stored the Ohio votes in the 2004 Presidential election (Fittrakis, Rosenfeld, & Wasserman, 2006). They can't examine Obama's birth certificate unless Obama and the state of Hawaii release the long form. Often, the best they can do is examine the available evidence, point out errant data and gaps and inconsistencies in the OS, ask questions, propose analogies to other cases of cover-up, make *ad ignorantiam* arguments, and raise *ad hominem* attacks that open the OS to suspicion. All these strategies, while weak as far as demonstrating a counter-theory to the OS, can be perfectly legitimate (Walton, 1998; 1999).

4. Conclusion

The point here is this: In these kinds of circumstances it is natural to expect legitimately frustrated CT advocates to sound much like illegitimate CT wackos, to expect that the public to be unequipped to tell the difference so that at least some find the CT rhetoric persuasive, and to expect that the situation to be deliberately exploited by those special interests with the resources to out and out manufacture doubt about the OS and to fabricate the appearance of telling inconsistencies, gaps, and motives to cover-up (Michaels, 2008; Oreskes and Conway, 2010).

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