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One Among Many

The self in social context
by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.



Joachim Krueger is a social psychologist at Brown University who believes that rational thinking and socially responsible behavior are attainable goals. [See full bio](#)

Conspiracy theories: Epistemology and entertainment

Conspiracy theories offer an alternate psychology.
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The idea of the enlightenment was to advance science and rationality as sustainable sources of human knowledge. Nature, including human nature, was supposed to become gradually demystified. As science cannot claim to arrive at final answers, its value lies in offering a rational process in which ideas and evidence perpetually interact. Ideas, such as hypotheses, beliefs, or inferences are perpetually challenged, refined, or even abandoned and replaced. The lack of ultimate certainty and the openness to new ideas allows rational individuals to disagree on the facts and what they mean. Yet, it is hoped that such individuals agree on the processes by which knowledge may be advanced. In other words, a rational scientific outlook assumes a greater willingness to tolerate dissent regarding the contents of beliefs than to tolerate dissent regarding how beliefs evolve towards a more accurate view of the world. Granted, even questions of method, that is, questions of how knowledge changes, are debated. There are many different philosophies of science with different ideas on what to do if one wants to know.

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Ideally, laypeople, that is, everyone who is not an expert on a specific topic of theory and research, can gather and appreciate the gist of what a field of study has to say. [Education](#) of the citizenry is-or should be-unthinkable without a grounding in science. Today, internet sources, including the blogs at Psychology Today, offer a wide range of opportunities for life-long learning.

Measured against its original promise, the enlightenment project has failed. There is no discernable mega-trend for society at large to become increasingly rational and for collective beliefs to become increasingly based on the best evidence of the day. There are many reasons for this failure. All too often, scientific opinion is not available in a format or language not requiring specialized knowledge. Even when such opinion is communicated clearly, the interested public can't help but notice disagreements among experts and their sometimes rapidly changing views. Such diversity of opinion violates fundamental needs for stability, finality, and certainty. When, for example, some experts claim that exercise increases [happiness](#), whereas others claim that happiness increases the willingness to exercise, the public may be befuddled. At least one claim would seem to be false (but which?). Or worse, both claims could be false or both could be correct. Without a proper understanding of how science works, any disagreements among those who should know best fuel the temptation to discard the entire enterprise and look elsewhere for epistemological satisfaction and entertainment.

Dogmatic [religion](#) has been pronounced dead many times, only to stubbornly survive. This may not be surprising. When faith trumps evidence-based belief, falsification is not only not the goal, it is impossible a priori. To the devoted mind, everything that happens makes sense, at least after the fact, because it is an expression of divine will. In its benign form, such faith is Panglossian. Everything happens for a good reason and all ultimate outcomes will be good, that is, pleasing to the individual. Human suffering is only temporary. We may not understand its purpose now, but that purpose will eventually be revealed to the faithful.

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A less sanguine variety of metaphysical certainty assumes an epic struggle between good and evil. The divine principle is pitted against the satanic principle. While it may appear that the battle hangs in the balance, the ultimate victory of the divine is commonly assumed. Hence, the dialectical version of metaphysics reduces to the Panglossian one.

In today's society, the personification of evil in the semi-divine figure of Satan does not enjoy the credibility it once had. In a nod to rationality, a believer in an almighty benign deity cannot at the same time endorse a belief in an equally almighty but malevolent opponent.

The belief that a secret, almost all-powerful human elite conspires to subdue the human masses for the sake of own profit is a variation on the theme of Satanic corruption. Imagine that all, or most, of the terrible things happening in the world are part of a grand oppressive design. Do not only assume that someone profits now from war, famine, or mere economic recession, but assume that such tribulations are secretly engineered for the ultimate goal of world domination. Events that could also be interpreted in a positive light, such as the civil unrest in Iran, must also be part of the grand scheme. Even with a rudimentary understanding of the scientific way of thinking, such ideas are suspect. First, there is no prediction other than "some terrible things will eventually happen," but only after-the-fact "explanation" of the "We-know-who-is-behind-this" type. Second, there is no model connecting distal causes (e.g., the plot to dominate the world) to the effects via proximal causes (e.g., plausible machinations that could actually cause complex societal events to come about in exactly the way they do). Third, there is no positive linkage between the imaginability or credibility of the causes and the observed events. Instead-and this is, I believe, the most astonishing psychological feature of conspiracy theories-it is assumed that the most improbable claims are taken to be the most persuasive ones. For example, three assassinations are taken as stronger corroboration of the grand-conspiracy idea than one. Indeed, if a grand conspiracy existed, it would be plausible that it claims the lives of many rather than a few of its opponents. But this reasoning begs the question of whether there is such a conspiracy. Perhaps there is none, or perhaps there are one or two or three unrelated mini-conspiracies-which are less exciting possibilities.

The third feature of conspiracy theories has a significant psychological corollary. Not only does the theory slake the thirst for certainty, it also brings the satisfaction of privileged knowledge. Believing what is conventionally deemed improbable allows conspiracy theorists to see themselves as an embattled epistemological elite. Those who have read the right sources have looked more deeply into the true fabric of life and the ultimate causes of human affairs. This is, I believe, a fundamentally narcissistic mindset, not unlike what Matthew (22:14) offered when announcing that "Many are called, but few are chosen." In true form, a conspiracy theory includes the eschatological idea that at some point-usually assumed to be within the lifetime of its proponents, the whole scheme will be evident to everyone. The theorists will then be exalted for their foresight and the rest of us will be humbled.

Science, we should remind ourselves, is never eschatological. It will just grind on as long we have the will to think boldly and the courage to take the risk of being proven wrong.

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