

# Conspiracy;

*On the Nature of Beliefs, and What They Have to do with Honor.*

An essay by

Joshua Michail

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I am going to tell you that the beliefs you hold can affect your honor. I know this may seem odd, but I will explain my position. However, I want to also delve into some other issues regarding beliefs, most specifically on conspiracy “theories”. Recently, a friend of mine shared a link to a video lecture by Rob Brotherton, an Irish psychologist. The title of the lecture is Psychology of Conspiracy Theories, which happens to also be his doctoral thesis. I found the lecture to be quite interesting, and it got me to thinking on the issue, and beyond. It raised a few issues for me that I want to deal with here. One being the problem I take with calling conspiracy stories “theories”, and I believe you can start already to see where I’m going on that point. Another point is about beliefs based on emotional thinking versus beliefs based on evidence.

There is no such thing as a “conspiracy theory”. I know this is a bold statement, but soon you’ll see my point. There certainly are people who believe that there are secret plots, by a few allegedly extraordinarily-powerful interests, to take control of the world. And, it’s true that sometimes conspiracies occur. Though, you’ll never find the truth on sites like Info Wars, or Conspiracy Watch, and from people like Alex Jones and David Icke. In fact, there are some red flags sources like those raise, and alarm bells they sound. For instance, as a general rule, one should be quite suspicious of anyone who insists, without being questioned first, that they are telling you the truth, or that they have a secret that no other has. One should be, rightly, ready to dismiss those who make such ridiculous claims as the conspiracists do. For instance, if it’s a secret that some extremely powerful cabal of conspirators would kill to keep silent, then why is the person revealing the secret on media outlets, such as You Tube, or Facebook, spreading these “secrets” for so long with no interference? Why would such secret cabals do what they are being accused of doing, what do they really gain? Why can’t they use more reasonable approaches? Why is it taking them so long to accomplish their goals? If they’re so powerful and secretive, why is this secret even being talked about by anyone? You get the idea, the list of questions about the story tellers goes on for a long time.

The point, however, about the term “theory” that raises my ire, is that it’s not acceptable to use that term for such nonsense. The term “theory” is specifically scientific, and so should be limited to that use. The definition of which is this, Theory (n.): A stated set of ideas that; 1. coherently, 2. explain observed phenomenon, 3. and which is derived from a hypothesis that has been tested repeatedly by different groups who all found the same results. I make this point because there are two main ways people with questionable agendas tend to misuse the word. First, the conspiracy story tellers, who want

people to believe there is more veracity to their claims than really exists. After-all, “theory” sounds much more important and intellectual than “story” or “opinion”. The second way that it is misused for a particular agenda is among creationists, who actually use the term in another way. They like to say “theory” as if it means the same thing as “opinion” or “just a guess”. They use the word for such actual scientific theories as Evolution by Natural Selection in the context of their discussion in the hopes that they can discredit the veracity of such science. The common acceptance of people using the term in both ways actually harms the public understanding of science. I suggest, strongly, that everyone starts to call people out on this problem. We owe it to humanity to demand intellectual honesty. We must correct our friends on the misuse of the word “theory”, and this is why I say there is no such thing as a “conspiracy theory”.

To help facilitate this effort, I suggest a few terms that can be used to replace “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theorist”. So, one who proposes, endorses, or spreads conspiracy stories is a “conspiracist”. This term should not be confused with “conspirator”, which is one who conspires to commit whatever the story alleges. For instance, in Jenny McCarthy's endorsement of the false story that vaccines cause autism she, by extension, endorses also the claim that governments and doctors are conspirators attempting to keep their “conspiracy” a secret. In this sense Jenny McCarthy is a conspiracist, because she is spreading the conspiracy story that vaccines allegedly cause autism. It should be noted, by the way, that the original article making the claim was scientifically discredited and the publisher retracted the article, though the doctor who initially made the claim sticks to it, even after his medical license was revoked. Further, “conspiracism” is the term I use to describe the attitude or belief that conspiracy stories have some legitimate footing for consideration and deserve to be taken seriously. More specifically, I'd say conspiracism is an undue and excessive willingness to believe, or accept as plausible, such conspiracy stories.

In the lecture that inspired me to write this essay, Rob Brotherton discussed the psychology of conspiracy stories. I find psychology to be an astoundingly interesting subject, but I'll try to keep this discussion short since we all have busy lives. Among the particular issues discussed in the lecture were the personality traits of people who believe conspiracy stories. Some research has been done which indicates the possibility that people who believe one conspiracy story also tend to believe many other conspiracy stories. Additionally, there tends to be a sense of powerlessness in the world on the part of the person who believes such stories. The typical conspiracy story narrative is a perception that some evil and extraordinarily-powerful group is responsible for the bad things that in the world. Rob

Brotherton defines conspiracy “theories” as: (1) “an unsubstantiated allegation of conspiracy (2) pertaining to events of profound importance, (3) competing with a more plausible explanation (4) which assumes deception and misinformation [from the alleged conspirators], and (5) presumes malicious intent and hyper-competence, and (6) insulates the idea against correction”.

Moreover, there are some distinctive personality traits that are often quite evident. For one thing, most people who believe such conspiracy stories tend to be extraordinarily open to unusual ideas and are more willing to accept the stories that seem compelling to them. Additionally, believers of conspiracy stories tend to be mildly, or more, paranoid than most. They also tend to have quite a bit of bias. There's Projection Bias, in which a person presumes that most others think and behave like he/she does. Michael Shermer calls another bias “Patternicity”, which is an ability that most people have to see meaning in random stimuli. Though for the religious and many conspiracists this trait is more noticeable and usually not considered by the person who believes such things. A very common bias among conspiracists is Proportionality, they often believe that major events must have major players, such as the John F Kennedy assassination. Conspiracists often insist that because Kennedy was an important man the assassin must have been involved in a conspiracy that must have been far bigger than a lone mentally disturbed gunman. But, perhaps the most powerful and intractable bias is Confirmation Bias. People who believe in conspiracy stories usually ignore and reject evidence that does not support their existing beliefs but willingly and quickly accept anything they can perceive as supporting their presumptions.

One more very interesting point that I want to discuss is the difference between emotionally based beliefs and evidence based beliefs. Mr. Brotherton also raised this issue in the video lecture. And, as promised, here is where I'll begin discussing how one's beliefs can affect one's honor. Now, for Mr. Brotherton's sake I will state that he never mentioned honor. Rather, he talked about how in debating with someone evidence-based arguments will not be effective if that person formed his/her belief through emotions. You see, there are two basic ways people form opinions, or beliefs. One is through being presented evidence and logical arguments. The other is through appeals to emotions. Obviously the problem with emotionally-based beliefs is that they are not formed through critical examination of evidence. So emotionally-based opinions or beliefs tend all too often to not reflect anything resembling reality. Fundamentally there can be no honor in holding beliefs that are wishful thinking, that are discordant with reality.

But, worse still, some beliefs can be actually quite dishonorable. In fact, when one holds a belief that can motivate one to do harm, or to advocate others to do harm to themselves. And since there is no honor in ignorance, one cannot expect that being ignorant of the facts can excuse the dishonor one does to one's self by such dangerous beliefs. Such examples, sadly, exist. When someone like Jenny McCarthy tells parents to not vaccinate their children, she is actively giving medical advice. The problem in this sense is that she is nothing like a qualified doctor. This is a highly dishonorable thing to do. In fact, I will tell you this is the fundamental reason I say Jenny McCarthy is without honor. She has chosen to accept the already discredited claims against vaccinations, and she lends her cheapened celebrity status to support a most ridiculous conspiracy story. Her activism against vaccinations is, in plain fact, actively encouraging parents to harm their children. And, for this, there is no excuse. She has thrown away whatever degree of honor she might have had by holding fast to her beloved conspiracy fantasy.