

Conspiracy Theories Meet Classical Education

How Classical Education Separates Fact from Fiction

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Who really shot JFK? Do you buy the official explanation- that it was a lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald? Or perhaps Cuban agents acting on orders from Fidel Castro? Or hit-men sent by an angry mafia boss? Or even CIA assassins, in a plot hatched by Vice President Lyndon Johnson?

While we're at it, did Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin really land on the moon? Or was the Apollo 11 moon landing faked on a Hollywood soundstage? What about aliens? Did a spaceship crash near Roswell, New Mexico in 1947, and the government covered everything up at Area 51? Conspiracy theories like these have, over the last few years, crept out of small skeptical subcultures to increasingly take center stage in American culture.

Now, some conspiracy theories are so outlandish that they strain credulity. There's the "Phantom Time Hypothesis," which says that the early Middle Ages were faked, Charlemagne never existed, and our calendars are all wrong. There's the "Birds Aren't Real" conspiracy: birds are actually tiny CIA drones. (True believers ask, "Have you ever seen a baby pigeon?") There's the Reptilian Conspiracy, in which most world leaders are actually shape shifting lizard-like aliens. As bizarre as that theory sounds, a Public Policy Poll in 2013 reported that 4% of American voters believe the Reptilian theory is true.

While these conspiracy theories might sound wacky, others are much more serious. You do not need me to remind you of the many theories today about COVID, school shootings, climate change, elections, and vaccines. And then there are the cluster of QAnon conspiracy theories, which mostly center around the idea that devilworshipping elites run a child sex ring and are controlling the media and American politics.

I do want to point out that conspiracy theories are sometimes right. There are a number of examples, but here are just three. First, in 1975, the US government admitted that the CIA had run a program during the 1950s and 60s called "MK Ultra." In the program, the CIA secretly administered drugs to unknowing American citizens in an attempt to develop mind control. Second, in 2012, journalists confirmed the long-rumored, but seemingly unbelievable theory that Jimmy Saville, Britain's most beloved children's television host, was a sexual predator and pedophile. Third, the most famous confirmed conspiracy theory is the Watergate scandal from the early 1970s, where President Nixon and his allies abused presidential powers to cover up his involvement in a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters.

I cannot resist adding a fourth confirmed conspiracy theory. In 2019, players from a certain baseball team from Houston admitted to stealing pitching signs, often banging on trash cans to alert their batters of upcoming pitches. While simultaneously denying allegations of such signstealing, the Astros used their shameless system to win a tainted World Series against the Dodgers.

While most conspiracy theories are almost certainly false, some are true. How do we know which ones to believe? That question is pressing, because being wrong about conspiracy theories can have deadly consequences. During the Black Death pandemic in the middle ages, Europeans in many cities believed in false theories that Jews

were causing the disease. As a result, a series of massacres broke out against Jewish communities, including one in Strasbourg in 1349, where two thousand Jews were burnt alive. The Holocaust in World War II itself was the result of the "stabbed in the back" conspiracy, which claimed that the only reason the Germans lost World War I was that they were betrayed by Jews and other undesirable elements.

More recently, conspiracy theories inspired Timothy McVeigh to bomb a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 168 and wounding 680 others. Conspiracy theories also inspired Anders Breivik to kill 77 people in Oslo, Norway in 2012 and Brenton Tarrant to gun down 51 people in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019. In 2002, belief in conspiracy theories about genetically modified foods led the government of Zambia to reject food aid during a terrible famine, at a time when 3 million people in the country were suffering from extreme hunger. And from 2000 and 2005 the government of South Africa, motivated by conspiracy theories, denied the existence of HIV/AIDs, causing an estimated 330,000 deaths from AIDS.

The consequences of believing false conspiracy theories will hopefully not be a matter of life or death for our friends, our family, and ourselves. But false conspiracy theories do bind their believers into constricting circles of unreality, often producing a way of approaching the world, our country, and our neighbors that is filled with skepticism and fear. That is not an approach that Christians should have. Instead, as 2 Timothy 1:7 tells us, "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and sound judgment."

So that takes us to the central question of this essay: how can we tell conspiracy fact from fiction? That essentially is the same question as asking: how can we judge the truth in uncertain, controversial issues? And those are questions that Christian Classical Education is designed to help us answer.

As you may know, Christian Classical Education is centered on the liberal arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. In grammar, we teach students to learn the truth; in logic, we teach students to discern truth from falsehood; and in rhetoric, we teach students to powerfully proclaim the truth to others. We do this not just with the easy questions, but with the hardest questions humans have ever grappled with.

It is my privilege to aid in that process here at Trinity as a history and rhetoric teacher. In history classes, we teach students how to discern the truth about controversial historical events, where the facts are hard to come by and none of the historical actors are telling the same story. And in rhetoric classes, we teach students how to spot bad arguments, avoid being manipulated by seductive, destructive ideas, and create their own powerful defenses of the truth. My goal is to take a few of the lessons that we teach about seeking and knowing the truth here at Trinity and apply them to conspiracy theories.

Before we go further, I want to note that this essay is not using "conspiracy theory" as a pejorative or negative term, but as a technical description for a certain type of belief about the existence of conspiracies. To support that approach, I have included in the essay one or more conspiracy theories that I personally believe may be true.

Conspiracy Theories, Their Origin, And Their Rise

What are conspiracy theories, where did they come from, and how have they become so powerful today? Let us start with some definitions. A “conspiracy” is a secret plot, usually planned by a powerful group of people who have some kind of sinister purpose. There are many true “conspiracies” in history. In 44 BC, Julius Caesar was stabbed to death by a conspiracy of Roman senators. In 1605, a group of English Catholics led by Guy Fawkes attempted to assassinate the protestant King James I by blowing up the Parliament building. That conspiracy was discovered shortly before they could blow up the explosives, and the conspirators were captured and executed. And again, in 1972, the Watergate scandal began with a conspiracy of a handful of White House operatives to break into the DNC headquarters. Notice that in each of these cases, as in most actual conspiracies, there are small groups acting over a short time frame before they are either discovered or they achieve their goal.

A “conspiracy theory,” as the name indicates, is a hypothesized belief about the existence of a conspiracy. Conspiracy theories often have a certain set of shared characteristics. They typically oppose the standard interpretation about the potential conspiracy, often rejecting the interpretations offered by traditional experts and authorities, like scientists or historians. Conspiracy theorists often believe they have unique access to truths for which they might be persecuted by the broader society, but by knowing separates them from the masses who believe the official account. Conspiracy theories are generally unproven and, as we will see, perhaps unprovable.

Where do conspiracy theories come from? Conspiracy theories are by no means a recent phenomenon in American life. One of the oldest conspiracy theories emerged during John Adams’ presidency, in 1797. After witnessing the chaos and horrors of the French revolution, a Scottish scientist named John Robison wrote a book alleging an international plot to “[root] out all religious establishments, and [overturn] all the existing governments of Europe” by followers of “Illuminism.” The Illuminism movement was a pretty standard group of Enlightenment utopian idealists who wanted to “bring the human race under the rules of reason.” But Robison and his many nervous American adherents accused this group of being godless and wicked, bent on corrupting women and destroying property rights. Robinson also accused the group of secretly orchestrating the disorder and bloodshed of the French Revolution. He made their name synonymous a host of different conspiracy for future generations, calling them the “Illuminati”

In the 1830-40s, as hundreds of thousands of Catholic Irish and Germans immigrated to America, various anti-Catholic conspiracy theories swirled about, leading to many violent attacks on Catholic churches and monasteries, including the Philadelphia Bible Riot of 1844, which left over twenty people dead and hundreds injured. Jumping to the 20th Century, during the great depression, the “merchants of death” conspiracy alleged that the US had been forced into WWI by greedy munitions manufacturers

and bankers. This theory helped keep the US out of WWII, allowing Hitler to rampage across Europe mostly unchecked until 1941.

During the height of the Cold War in the 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy provoked the Red Scare by alleging the existence of a secret list of names of Communists who had infiltrated the heart of the American government. While communist spies actually did operate in the US during the Cold War, McCarthy's list was made up. And the resulting hysteria that his lies and congressional inquiries provoked created a climate of paranoia that unjustly ruined the careers and lives of countless innocent Americans. That takes us up to the JFK assassination in 1963, which shocked the nation and spawned endless conspiracy theories. And finally, the national trauma of the 9/11 attacks created a new level of willingness to consider conspiracy theories, including alleging that the attacks themselves had been an "inside job".

While conspiracy theories have been with us since the beginning of America, over the last few years conspiracy theories have surged into the mainstream of American culture. What explains this recent rise? How have they become so powerful? I believe that there are five main factors. First, conspiracy theories rise during times of crisis and social disruption. Theories are especially popular among groups who believe they are losing out or being marginalized as result of the upheaval. Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, we have had a series of crises and major social changes in America.

Second, the crises of the 1960s and 70s involving Vietnam, racial unrest, and Watergate led to a breakdown in trust in governmental authority and social consensus, that some historians have termed the "age of fracture." As part of the fracture, we have seen a collapse of trust in traditional sources of authority in America, like government officials, news media sources, and university-based experts. In the wake of that collapse and fracture, conspiracy theories of many types have flourished.

Third, we've also seen a significant rise in social and political polarization and suspicion. In this polarized climate, both conservative and liberal politicians and pundits have promoted and legitimized certain conspiracy theories to attack their opponents and score partisan points. For example, since the 1992 presidential election, the losing political party has embraced a conspiracy theory targeting the winning president: a few examples include the Clinton assassination theory, the Blood for Oil theory of Bush's Iraq invasion, the Obama Birther theory, and the Trump and Russia theories.

Fourth, the American educational system has mostly stopped teaching the intellectual skills needed to think clearly and resist the allure of false conspiracy theories. Unlike classical schools, American public schools no longer teach logic. They do not teach students how to think deeply about what is and is not scientific knowledge. They do not teach objective truths of morality—or even that objective truth exists. As a result, we have become a "post-truth" society where people make decisions on what they want to believe mostly based on their feelings.

Fifth, all these trends—the sense of crisis, the fracture of trust, the polarization, the loss of truth—have been powerfully intensified by social media networks. These networks also connect conspiracy theorists together. And to keep users on their sites,

social media algorithms actively push the curious to consume increasing extreme conspiratorial content.

So, with more and more conspiracy theories surging around us, how do we know which to trust and which to reject? We can get some clarity by using five principles for gauging the truth or falsity of conspiracy theories. None of these principles by themselves can prove or disprove a conspiracy theory. But they can help you know when to be more or less trusting.

Consider the Source

In my US History class, I teach students how to work through tricky historical controversies, like what was the real cause of the Civil War or was the US's entry into WWI justified. In these controversies, there are many contradicting pieces of evidence. So how can we tell what actually happened?

This is a standard problem in the field of history and one that we teach early on as part of the parts of historical thinking. To solve this problem, consider the following thought experiment. You are a school principal and you have heard that there was a fight at lunch. How do you find out what happened and who is to blame? First, interview the alleged fighters, their friends, and any bystanding students and teachers. Which of these will have a perfect account on what happened? None of them. Almost none of the witnesses will be completely unbiased; some will be very biased.

So, do we throw out the testimony of biased witnesses? No. School principals and historians do not discount biased sources; instead we consider the evidence in light of a source's bias. The fact is there are no infallible, unbiased witnesses in history, nor on today's controversial issues, including those related to conspiracy theories.

Discounting arguments or evidence based on their source not only is bad practice in history, it's also committing a logical error called the "genetic fallacy." The genetic fallacy occurs when someone bases the truth or falsity of an argument not on the strength of its evidence, but on the origin of the argument itself. For example, some people argue that smoking bans in restaurants and other public spaces are wrong, since the Nazis were the first ones to institute smoking bans. While that is a historic fact, it is a logical fallacy to say that the bans themselves are wrong only due to the first source of the bans.

Let's apply this principle about considering sources and avoiding the genetic fallacy to a recent conspiracy theory, involving a potentially nefarious, international organization that targets children: Chuck E Cheese. In 2019, YouTuber Shane Dawson started promoting a conspiracy theory that Chuck E Cheese employees across the country were taking multiple leftover pizza slices, putting them together, and serving these "recycled" pizzas to new customers. Numerous Chuck E Cheese employees immediately went on social media and denied the claims, saying any leftover pieces were eaten by

the staff or thrown out. These employees are clearly biased—they were motivated to protect the company they work for and keep their jobs.

But remember, a source’s bias does not automatically disqualify their evidence. We need to evaluate the truth of the evidence separately from the source. Just because we like someone and agree with their perspective does not automatically make what they are saying true. Just because we dislike someone and disagree with their perspective does not automatically make what they are saying false.

The Time and Numbers Test

This is a simple test, reflecting the reality of how hard it is for big groups to keep big secrets for a long time. As one writer puts it, history shows that “real conspiracies, even very simple ones, are difficult to conceal and routinely experience unexpected problems. In contrast, conspiracy theories suggest conspiracies that are unrealistically successful and groups of conspirators ... who can act with near-perfect competence and secrecy.”

For example, for a moon-landing hoax to stay secret, it would require about 411,000 people—the number of NASA employees in the 1960s—all to stay quiet. An Oxford University physicist named David Robert Grimes actually developed a formula for calculating the lifespan of big conspiracies. Grimes estimates that if over 400,000 people were in on the moon landing hoax, it would have broken down in under four years. Similarly, the conspiracy theory that big pharmaceutical companies have as a secret cancer cure would require over 700,000 people to keep the cure a secret—a feat that Grimes estimates would have become impossible after about three years.

Consider, on the other hand, how quickly the secret leaked in the real-life conspiracy for the Watergate scandal. Chuck Colson was a White House special counsel for President Nixon, who was jailed for his part in the Watergate conspiracy. As Colson later recounted, “here were the ten most powerful men in the United States. With all that power, we couldn’t contain a lie for two weeks.”

So, for any conspiracy, consider the number of people who would have to be a part of the secret and the amount of time that has passed without any proof of the plot leaking out. The larger the numbers and the longer the time, the less likely the conspiracy is real.

The Falsifiability Test

It may seem like the best theories have no holes. But actually, if a theory is unable to be disproved at all, that’s a sign of intellectual weakness, not strength. In philosophy and science there is something called the “principle of falsifiability.” This principle states that a healthy hypothesis should have a condition in which the theory can be disproved.

For example, the claim that “all swans are white” could potentially be disproved—by finding a black swan.

On the other hand, here is an unfalsifiable claim: “last night, aliens abducted you, gave you a new body, implanted you with someone else’s memories, and you woke up with someone else’s life this morning.” There is no way to disprove this hypothesis. It is not falsifiable. For that reason, we should be very skeptical about it.

It is important to add some qualifications to the idea of falsifiability. First, the principle of falsifiability does not mean you need to actually disprove your own theory; a theory simply needs to have the possibility of being disproved. Second, a theory being falsifiable does not prove that the theory is true. Third, some unfalsifiable beliefs may be true. But the point is that if a theory is unfalsifiable, it is a big red flag for that theory. We need to proceed with great caution in such cases.

Let’s apply the principle of falsifiability to a conspiracy theory. At the start of Barack Obama’s presidency in 2008, many accused him of being born outside the United States and conspiring to hide that fact. As support for this theory, conspiracy theorists pointed out that President Obama had never released a birth certificate. So, in 2011, Obama finally released his birth certificate. But then theorists claimed that the released birth certificate was forged. At this point, the theory gets close to being unfalsifiable. What would be enough evidence to prove that Obama had been born in the US? Even if Obama’s mother or the doctor who delivered him came forward, theorists could claim that they were lying. Again, the potential unfalsifiability of the “birther” conspiracy is not proof that the theory is wrong, but that we should now be highly skeptical of it.

Many conspiracy theories are deeply unfalsifiable, like the Reptilian conspiracy theory. When skeptics point out that there is no evidence for such theories, believers sometimes say “that’s just what we’d expect! They have destroyed the evidence!” In the 1997 movie *Conspiracy Theory*, Mel Gibson’s character expresses this viewpoint, when he says ‘A good conspiracy is unprovable. I mean, if you can prove it, it means they screwed up somewhere along the line.’

C.S. Lewis dealt with this kind of conspiratorial thinking in the realm of literary analysis. As he wrote in *The Four Loves*:

The very lack of evidence is thus treated as evidence; the absence of smoke proves that the fire is very carefully hidden. Yes—if it exists at all. But we must first prove its existence. ... Otherwise we are arguing like a man who should say, ‘If there were an invisible cat in that chair, the chair would look empty; but the chair does look empty; therefore there is an invisible cat in it.’

Lewis went on to point out that such a belief about invisible cats cannot be disproved through logic, but commits the believer to a damaging approach to reality.

This points to another side of conspiracy theories: they are often tightly logically consistent, but will not consider evidence from the other side, nor even a scenario in which they could be disproven. This way lies a peculiar form of intellectual madness that G.K. Chesterton wrote about in his book, *Orthodoxy*: ‘The madman is not the

man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.”

A good hypothesis needs to be falsifiable and needs solid evidence in support of it. But what counts as solid evidence?

The STAR test

In rhetoric classes, we teach a fundamental concept: arguments need evidence. Just because a theory sounds possible does not mean we should believe it. For example, reusing old pizza sounds like something Chuck E Cheese might do. It just “makes sense.” But is there any evidence for that claim? If not, it’s possible—it could be true—but there is no reason to believe it. If there is some evidence, it’s plausible. And the more evidence, the more probable it becomes that the theory is true.

Now, some conspiracy theorists love evidence. For example, in 2018 Flat- earther Eric Dubay published “200 Proofs Earth is not a Spinning Ball,” with all kinds of evidence. But not all evidence is created equal: some is stronger than others.

There is a tool for testing the strength of evidence called the “STAR test.” According to this test, strong evidence is Sufficient, Typical, Accurate, and Relevant. Let’s work through each of these points.

Sufficient: is there enough evidence to support the claim? The bigger the claim, the more evidence we need to support it. If we jump to a conclusion without enough evidence, we commit a logical fallacy called “hasty generalization.” For example, when Richard Nixon was elected president in 1972, New York film critic Pauline Kael is supposed to have remarked, “How can that be? No one I know voted for Nixon!” Another classic example are those who say something like, “who says alcohol is bad for you? My grandfather drank a six- pack of beer everyday and he lived to the ripe old age of 93.” In each case, there is some evidence for the claim, but not a sufficient amount to support it.

Typical: is the chosen evidence representative and typical? If we only pick the pieces of evidence that support our claim and discount the majority of evidence that does not, we commit the logical fallacy of “cherry picking.” For example, we might look at a list of successful high school and college dropouts—Thomas Edison, Walt Disney, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg—and conclude that dropping out of school is the path to great success! But that list is the most atypical list of dropouts possible; they certainly do not represent the average dropout experience. Good evidence is typical of the rest of the evidence about a claim.

Accurate: is the evidence accurate and true? This point might seem obvious. But with the spread of “fake news” and misinformation on the internet, it has become increasingly important to be sure the evidence we are using is actually accurate. For example, last year, during the debates about raising the national minimum wage in the United States to \$15 per hour, a Twitter user named “Legally Blonde” (@baddbeckie)

posted three pictures of multiple politicians dozing off during legislative sessions. She captioned the post saying, “If \$15/hr is too much for minimum wage then \$85/hr is too much to pay our senators to literally do nothing.” The post went viral, amassing over 55,000 likes and 18,000 re tweets. The only problem: the pictures she used as evidence did not show American politicians, but instead snoozing members of the British House of Lords. In our increasingly heated debates, we need to guard against untrustworthy evidence, especially when that evidence stirs up our emotions. If we let our emotions guide us instead of logic, we become prone towards believing all sorts of misinformation and lies.

Relevant: is the evidence relevant to the claim being argued? While we try to choose evidence that we believe will support our points, there are many different ways to give evidence that actually is not properly related to our claims. There are a number of different logical fallacies that result from irrelevant evidence.

Perhaps the most common is “post hoc ergo propter hoc,” which states that “correlation does not equal causation.” For example, a study done in Germany in the 1980s found that couples who kissed before leaving for work lived an average of five years longer than couples who did not. It sounds like those are some magical, life-giving kisses! But the correlation of kissing and living longer does not mean the kisses themselves were causing the longer lifespan. Both the kissing and the lifespan increase were likely caused by another factor, like being in a happy marriage or having a job, which might have paid for health insurance. In such questions we have to ask, what is the relevance of the two events—is the one really causing the other, or are they simply correlated?

A second common fallacy of irrelevance is called “ad hominem,” in which the speaker of an argument is attacked instead of the argument itself. For example, a few years ago the Heartland Institute posted a billboard with the mugshot of Ted Kaczynski, the domestic “unabomber” terrorist. Next to his photo, they put in big red text, “I still believe in Global Warming. Do you?” This is a classic “ad hominem” attack; there is little relevance between Kaczynski supporting the idea of global warming to the potential truth or falsity of global warming itself.

Now that we understand the STAR test, let’s apply it to the Chuck E Cheese pizza conspiracy theory. For “sufficient,” there are a few pictures posted online of suspiciously cut pizzas and the anecdotal evidence of one person online who worked at the store and claims to have witnessed the practice. Is that enough evidence to prove that this is a widespread policy throughout Chuck E Cheese across America? For “typical,” we need to ask if the pictures posted are typical of the way pizzas are cut at Chuck E Cheese restaurants, or whether these are a few worst cases. For “accurate,” can we be sure that these are actually pictures of pizzas from Chuck E Cheese? More importantly, is there any real evidence that these are pictures of recycled pieces of pizza? Finally, for “relevant,” in the YouTube expose, Shane Dawson devotes several minutes to violent fights caught on camera at Chuck E Cheese restaurants, as well as a few cases of

employees wearing the Chuck E Cheese mascot who were drunk. We might ask how these examples are relevant to the claim about recycled pizza.

When we apply the STAR test to the evidence for conspiracy theories, we can gain a stronger sense on how much we should trust the theories themselves. But sometimes both a traditional theory and a conspiracy theory equally explain the evidence. What should we do then?

Occam's Razor Test

Occam's Razor is a powerful intellectual tool for deciding between two seemingly plausible theories. But first, who was "Occam" and what's a "razor"? This tool was first credited to William of Occam, who was a Franciscan friar, philosopher, and theologian, who lived in Occam, in South East England in the 1300s. (By the way, he developed his famous theory after receiving a first-rate classical Christian education.) Next, a "razor" in philosophy is a logical tool for eliminating—or "shaving off"—unlikely explanations for a phenomenon.

What, then, is Occam's Razor? Here is the basic version: "other things being equal, simpler explanations are generally better than more complex ones." A famous analogy for this is: "If you hear hoofbeats, think of horses not zebras." Both horses and zebras are good explanations for hearing the sound of hoofbeats, so which explanation should we believe? All things being equal, horses are much more common than zebras, so the simpler explanation and more likely one to be true is horses. A practical example is the case of having a headache. What might explain that phenomenon? It could be cancer or stroke—both explanations would explain the headache. How terrifying! But what's the simplest, most likely explanation? It is probably just a little dehydration.

Like the falsifiability test, Occam's Razor requires a key qualification: the simplest explanation is not always true. Sometimes headaches are indeed caused by cancer; sometimes hoofbeats might mean zebras. But usually, in most cases, the simplest explanation is the right one. But why?

To understand why we should prefer simpler explanations and why they are usually right, we need to understand Occam's actual razor, which is slightly different from the simpler, common version given above. What William of Occam actually wrote was, when forming an explanation, "do not multiply entities beyond necessity." That is, the explanation that requires the fewest "entities"—i.e. causes or assumptions—is generally the correct one. Why? William argued that a wise, loving God created an orderly, non-chaotic universe, so he would have created it as simple and straightforward as possible, with the fewest needed causal mechanisms or entities. So, if God created the force of gravity to pull objects down to earth, he wouldn't have also created a second, redundant mechanism, like little angels who jump on every ball that's thrown, pushing it down.

A second reason to believe that the best explanations usually have the fewest number of entities is true—aka Occam's razor—is that history and observation shows us over

and over: it works! This is true especially in the sciences: scientists in physics, biology, chemistry have repeatedly applied Occam's razor to make strong predictions leading to major discoveries. The razor is also used all the time by doctors to make accurate medical diagnoses.

To make the razor more clear, let's apply it to the question of Leprechauns. These tricky, invisible, magical creatures can be successfully added to pretty much every explanation or theory. For example, imagine coming home and discovering that your beloved flat screen TV has been shattered—and your child is looking immensely guilty. When you ask your child what happened, he replies, "I didn't break the TV. It was a leprechaun!" If you reply that you've never seen a leprechaun in your house, your child might reply that leprechauns are invisible. If you ask why a leprechaun wanted to break your TV, your child might reply that the motives of leprechauns are complex and mysterious. Perhaps you have a trump card: a secret security camera in the TV room. You report to the child that the security video clearly shows the child breaking the TV. Yet the child replies: the leprechaun tampered with the video! The leprechaun theory explains the broken TV just as well as the theory that your child did it. Which should you believe? Clearly not the leprechaun theory, because it requires more entities and more assumptions: for a start, that Leprechauns exist, they are invisible, and for some reason they hate your TV

Here are a few practical examples of how Occam's Razor can help us decide between competing explanations. If you go outside and find that your car has a flat tire, should you assume that a random nail stuck into the tire wall or that a secret enemy slashed it? Which is the simpler explanation, requiring fewer entities and assumptions? Unless you know you have an enemy, the flat was most likely caused by an unfortunate nail. Next, let's say that you hear a loud sound and see a flash of light outside your bedroom window tonight. Is it an alien spaceship or a firework? The spaceship requires adding the unproven assumption that aliens exist and have spaceships that can visit earth, so it is probably just a firework. Finally, say that you send a text message to a close friend but receive no response for several hours. Are they secretly angry and holding a grudge? Or did their phone battery die? The second theory requires just one assumption (a dead phone); the first requires many assumptions (you said or did something offensive, your friend is angry about it, your friend holds grudges in this way, etc.).

How does Occam's Razor help us evaluate conspiracy theories? Conspiracy Theories often require complicated webs of assumptions, unproven entities, and causal explanations, compared to a much simpler official explanation. That complexity of explanation does not automatically invalidate conspiracy theories. But in such cases, it should drastically increase our skepticism and need for other evidence.

For example, consider the theory that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were actually an "inside job" perpetrated by the US government. In their book, *American Conspiracy Theories*, political scientists Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent evaluate this theory using Occam's Razor. Considering the claim that the real cause of the World Trade Center buildings collapses were not airplanes piloted by terrorist, but carefully set

explosive charges, what would such a plot require? First, dozens of agents secretly setting charges throughout the busy buildings completely undetected. Second, the charges would have to be set to blow up the building in a pre-specified location and height, which airplane pilots would have to hit exactly. Third, the two planes' impact and burning fuel could not affect the charges at all, thereby preventing them from exploding an hour after impact. Finally, thousands of people—including the president, the 9/11 Commission, FBI, CIA, NYPD, and all major news organizations—would need to work together to hide explosives, destroy evidence, and mislead the public. As Uscinski and Parent conclude, compared to the official explanation, the conspiracy is fairly complicated, and requires many more assumptions and causal elements, making the theory highly implausible.

Summary & Test Case

Now that we've learned about these five tests, it's wise to remember that none of them can fully disprove a conspiracy theory. But taken together, they offer strong guidance for whether we should trust certain conspiracy theories or not.

With this in mind, let's use the tests to evaluate one of the oldest recorded conspiracy theories: the theory that Jesus did not actually rise from the dead, but his disciples conspired to secretly steal his body in the night. We see this theory taking shape in Matthew 28:12–15, where the chief priests tell the guards of Jesus' tomb to spread this story.

Let's apply our tests. First, the source test. Both the high priests and Jesus' disciples are heavily biased, which should not surprise us and also does not mean we can discount either group's evidence. It is worth considering, however, that one of the earliest attestations to the Resurrection comes from Paul in his letters, written before the Gospel accounts, and that Paul was initially one of the strongest critics of the idea of the resurrected Jesus. The fact that Paul flipped sides makes his testimony carry more weight.

Second, the time and numbers test. For this conspiracy theory to be true—that the disciples stole Jesus' body and lied about seeing him as resurrected—how many people would have to keep the secret and for how long? We have the main twelve disciples, plus many other early alleged witnesses, including the women who visited the tomb and the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul lists the number of witnesses to Jesus' resurrection and claims that Jesus eventually appeared after his death to over five hundred people. And these witnesses continued to proclaim Jesus as resurrected until their deaths. So we are dealing with hundreds of people for decades and decades, which the time and numbers test tells us makes it highly unlikely that they are keeping a conspiratorial secret.

Third, the falsifiability test. Is this conspiracy theory falsifiable? Well, yes, the resurrected Jesus could—and of course one day will—physically appear before those

who believe in this conspiracy. So the theory passes the falsifiability test. Before moving on from this test, though, it might be worth noting that Christianity is a falsifiable religion. In particular, Paul clearly makes the faith falsifiable in 1 Corinthians 15, where he hangs the whole faith on the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus. As he writes in verse 17, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” Indeed, I know of no other religion that can pass the test of falsifiability.

Fourth, the STAR test. The testimony of four guards may be typical and not cherry picked, but it does not seem very sufficient to prove that Jesus’s body was stolen. Considering the accuracy of their testimony, we might wonder how they could know what happened if they were asleep at the time. Or if they were not asleep, how were they—trained soldiers with weapons and armor—overcome by a small group of mostly unarmed young men? Finally, is their testimony relevant? Here we must answer a clear “yes.” But overall, the STAR test should cast some strong doubt over the conspiracy theory.

Last of all, Occam’s Razor. Which theory is the simpler explanation? In the first theory, the disciples hatched a plot to pretend Jesus was still alive after seeing him be captured, tortured, and die a shameful death, with his promises of being the Messiah and the son of God all proven false. They then came out of hiding, risked the penalty for grave robbing—which would have been death—and rolled the heavy gravestone away. They managed this while all four Roman guards remained sleeping: skilled, well-trained guards, who knew that the penalty for sleeping while on watch duty was also death. The guards then somehow knew that the disciples stole the body, but decided not to round up the disciples for punishment. Finally, the disciples managed to inspire hundreds of people to lie and say that they had seen Jesus, including their enemy Paul—and then endure persecutions, torture, and horrific martyrdoms while keeping the secret. Not one of them ever recanted. Is it simpler to believe all that, or that Jesus actually rose from the dead?

Today, it is becoming harder to tell conspiracy fact from fiction. But, I hope that the principles presented here can help you determine where the truth lies. Now more than ever, we need to hold fast to the instructions given to us in 1 Peter 1:13: “prepare your minds for action, be sober-minded, and set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

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The Ted K Archive

Shea Rarnquist
Conspiracy Theories Meet Classical Education
How Classical Education Separates Fact from Fiction
November 11, 2021

Trinity U. Speaker Series. <<resources.finalsite.net/...TrinityReview.pdf>>
Archivists note: This essay has some fairly practical advice on critical thinking when
it comes to conspiracy theories, though I think it's mixed in with some unnecessary
advocacy for Christianity.

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