Rethinking “God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory” ¹

Chad E. Brack
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Abstract: In ‘God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory,’ Brian Keeley (2007) proposes an analogy between belief in secular conspiracy theories and belief in Providence. Both belief systems proffer hidden or concealed activity, and neither can be rejected a priori. Keeley concludes that these epistemic similarities are sufficient to warrant agnosticism regarding the existence of God just as one should, rationally speaking, adopt agnosticism regarding conspiracy theories prior to investigating them. In this essay, I extract Keeley’s argument into a rigorous and transparent premise-premise-conclusion format. I then demonstrate Keeley’s reasoning to be unsound due to a false premise in which he commits a categorical error; Keeley conflates the qualified existence claims of conspiracy theories with the pure existence claim that God exists. Keeley also caveats belief in conspiracy theories with a stipulation for investigation but fails to do the same for belief in the existence of God. After analyzing Keeley’s premises, I offer an extraction of my own reasoning. I conclude with a recommendation to accept Keeley’s analogy between conspiracy theories and Providence, but I suggest an alternative view of the analogy’s value. Although Keeley’s argument is unsound, the analogy he provides does offer insights into how people choose to evaluate evidence.

I. Introduction

Whether God does or does not exist is an age-old question. Examining the potential problems associated with belief in conspiracy theories is more contemporary.² Both philosophical issues offer insights into interesting epistemological concerns ranging from how we acquire knowledge and what we count as evidence to how we evaluate what we do, should, or should not believe. Throughout this essay, I use the term should in a strictly rational sense. I do not mean should in terms of moral obligation. Rationally speaking, someone ‘should’ believe a claim

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² Although conspiracy theories per se are not new, the professional philosophical debate about the characteristics and effects of what we consider ‘conspiracy theories’ is relatively recent. The number of philosophy publications dedicated to the subject has increased exponentially over the past decade. In addition to philosophical literature, academic research from other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and political science has also skyrocketed since the turn of the century.
when the available evidence sufficiently supports the claim and the majority of rational thinkers would believe the claim. But what is the rational response when confronted with a claim that is hinged on hidden activity or concealed evidence? Such is the crux of the topics being considered throughout this essay.

Brian Keeley (2007) seeks to add a new perspective to the aforementioned epistemological questions in ‘God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory.’ Keeley proposes an agnostic stance on the existence of God by means of an epistemically useful analogy between Providence and the nature of secular conspiracy theories. Both belief systems proffer hidden or concealed activity and neither can be rejected a priori. Keeley (2007, 146) suggests that these epistemic similarities between the two beliefs are sufficient to warrant adoption of agnosticism regarding the existence of God just as one should, rationally speaking, adopt agnosticism regarding conspiracy theories — at least prior to investigating each conspiracy theory’s specific claims.

In this essay, I contend that Keeley’s argument is unsound due to at least one false underived premise. I begin with an introduction to the philosophical debate concerning conspiracy theories, as clear definitions are essential to this discussion and the issue is multifaceted. I then analyze ‘God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory’ and provide an extraction of Keeley’s argument in a rigorous and transparent premise-premise-conclusion format. I clearly illustrate Keeley’s reasoning and supporting evidence for each of his claims.

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3 A priori is a philosophical term denoting knowledge that can be deduced by pure reason, aside from empirical evidence or experience.

4 Keeley assumes the reader is not already a believer in the existence of God. Keeley means to propose to nonbelievers that agnosticism may be a more rational stance than atheism. Keeley (2007, 146) claims we are required to adopt an agnostic stance regarding conspiracy theories until “the evidence begins to roll in.”
subsequently demonstrate the argument to be unsound due to a categorical error situated within a conditional premise. I submit that Keeley conflates the ‘qualified existence claims’ of conspiracy theories with the ‘pure existence claim’ that God exists. Furthermore, Keeley qualifies agnosticism toward belief in conspiracy theories with a requirement for investigation but fails to expect the same from belief in the existence of God. I offer an extraction of my own reasoning to demonstrate how Keeley’s argument fails. I conclude with a recommendation to accept Keeley’s analogy between conspiracy theories and Providence, but I suggest an alternative view of the analogy’s value. Although Keeley does not earn the suggested utility of his argument’s conclusion, i.e. his analogy is not powerful enough to warrant a justified agnosticism with respect to God’s existence based on agnosticism regarding conspiracy theories, Keeley’s analogy does provide insight into how people choose to evaluate evidence. Specifically, believers in secular conspiracy theories and believers in Providence tend to adopt similar epistemic defense mechanisms.

II. The Particulars of Conspiracy Theories

In a 2007 edition of *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* (Volume 4, no. 2), several philosophers published contributions to the body of philosophical work concerning the epistemic characteristics of both the term ‘conspiracy theory’ and the nature of belief in conspiracy theories. David Coady’s (2007) submission, “Introduction: Conspiracy Theories,”

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5 P.J. McGrath (1985, 55) defines “qualified existence claims” as “claims that something exists at a certain time and place,” and “pure existence claims” as “claims that something exists simply.” I discuss McGrath’s work in greater detail in later sections of this essay.

6 Boudry and Braeckman (2011, 146) describe immunizing strategies and epistemic defense mechanisms as “bad arguments to deflect valid criticism.”
serves as a primer for the works to follow. Coady summarizes the (then) current philosophical literature regarding the epistemic attributes of conspiracy theories and discusses whether belief in one or more conspiracy theories is ever warranted. Coady argues for the particularist approach over the generalist view, meaning each conspiracy theory should be evaluated in terms of political and social context as opposed to judged purely on the superficial label ‘conspiracy theory.’ Coady (2007, 133) ultimately concludes, “the connection between epistemology and conspiracy theories ... cannot be settled a priori.” On the particularist view, acceptance or rejection of conspiracy theories can only be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Coady also discusses the ambiguity of the term ‘conspiracy theory.’ Conspiracy theories and those who adopt them usually suffer negative connotations even though historical and social evidence demonstrate that conspiracies are both widespread and frequent. Conspiracy theorists often acquire the label ‘irrational’ because the term ‘conspiracy theory’ tends to be identified with unreasonable explanations for historical events.7 Although people normally think of conspiracy theories as “explanations which conflict with officially endorsed versions of events,”8 Coady does not consider conspiracy theorists prima facie irrational. Coady (2007, 133) goes on to say that conspiracy theorists are not necessarily epistemically flawed, and he suggests they may even play a specialized role in society as monitors of institutions to ensure “significant conspiracies do not happen.” Coady concludes that one should not discount

7 Unreasonable explanations include conspiracy theories that proffer: (a) conspirators with almost supernatural capabilities, (b) implausible duration or number of participants for the conspiracy theory to remain undetected, (c) lack of sufficient motive, and (d) application of intention where intention is inappropriate. See Coady (2007, 133) and Keeley (2007, 138-139).
8 Coady (2007, 132)
conspiracy theories qua conspiracy theories because, depending on the circumstances, belief in particular conspiracy theories may be both rational and warranted.

**III. God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory**

The majority of philosophers agree with Coady’s analysis of conspiracy theories, including Keeley, who also adopts the particularist view. Keeley, however, defines the term ‘conspiracy theory’ in a slightly nonstandard way. For Keeley (2007, 140), a conspiracy theory is merely “a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons — the conspirators — acting in secret.” On this definition, conspiracy theories need not propose outlandish or improbable explanations for significant events. Conspiracy theories need only posit an explanation that cites the will of a group of causal agents acting together in secret. Though not explicitly stated in his definition, Keeley seems to retain an implicit expectation of conspiracy theories proposing unlikely explanations for events; but the veracity of a conspiracy theory’s claim is only peripheral to Keeley’s intended use of the term. For the purposes of this argument, conspiracy theories are simply explanations that posit secretive activities carried out by causal agents.

Of note when analyzing Keeley’s claims are two additional key terms: Providence, and agnosticism. Providence is a term that encompasses hidden or divine supernatural purpose. Providence can be used synonymously with God’s ‘mysterious ways’ or ‘divine plan,’⁹ and Keeley uses the term in just such a way throughout his argument. For Keeley, Providence serves

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⁹ Although Keeley (2007, 142-145) uses some Christianity-specific overtones in parts of the discussion and cites some well-known Christian scholars, Keeley does not seem to restrict the idea of Providence to Christianity alone.
as a means to describe the hidden aspect of God’s activities, i.e. God’s activities are either purposely hidden from us or they are inscrutable to human understanding. In either case, this hidden aspect of God — Providence — is essential to Keeley’s analogy. The other term, agnosticism, can fit various definitions. In this case, agnosticism describes a situation in which one does not hold a particular claim to be true nor does she deny the claim to be true; in other words, one who is agnostic toward a particular existence claim neither accepts nor denies the truth of the claim.

As a particularist concerned with the secrecy aspect of conspiracy theories, Keeley argues that Providence and conspiracy theories are epistemically similar in two important ways; both posit agents capable of concealing evidence of their existence or activities, and neither can be rejected a priori. In the case of conspiracy theories, Keeley argues that one should remain agnostic toward belief in conspiracy theories prior to any investigation. Due to the relevant epistemic similarities between belief in conspiracy theories and Providence, Keeley determines that the existence of God can be viewed as a type of conspiracy theory in the sense that God’s existence and activities may be concealed or hidden by design. Keeley concludes that, since one should adopt agnosticism regarding proposed conspiracy theories, it follows that one should also adopt agnosticism regarding the existence of God if indeed God’s existence can be viewed as a conspiracy theory.

With the stage set, Keeley’s argument can be extracted as follows:

(1) Conspiracies happen. (Basic claim)

10 Keeley (2007, 141) points out that it might not be the case that God is purposely being secretive; it might be the case that God’s plans are simply inscrutable to us, i.e. “we are constitutionally incapable of understanding.”
Conspiracy theories posit conspiratorial agents who conceal evidence of their existence or activities. (Basic claim)

If (2), then conspiracy theories proffer explanations involving hidden activity and conspiracy theories cannot be rejected a priori. (Implicit premise)

Thus, conspiracy theories proffer explanations involving hidden activity and conspiracy theories cannot be rejected a priori. (Modus ponens 2, 3)

Thus, (1) and (4). (&-introduction 1, 4)

If (5), then prior to investigation, one should adopt agnosticism regarding conspiracy theories. (Basic claim)

Thus, prior to investigation, one should adopt agnosticism regarding conspiracy theories. (Modus ponens 5, 6)

Providence proposes explanations involving an agent whose activities are concealed or inscrutable. (Basic claim).

If (8), then Providence proffers an explanation involving hidden activity and Providence cannot be rejected a priori. (Implicit premise)

Thus, Providence proffers an explanation involving hidden activity and Providence cannot be rejected a priori. (Modus ponens 8, 9)

Thus, (4) and (10). (&-introduction 4, 10)

If (11), then conspiracy theories and Providence are epistemically similar. (Implicit premise)

If conspiracy theories and Providence are epistemically similar, then the existence of God can be viewed as a conspiracy theory. (Implicit premise)

Thus, if (11), then the existence of God can be viewed as a conspiracy theory. (Hypothetical syllogism 12, 13)

Conspiracy theories and Providence can be considered epistemically similar because both proffer explanations of hidden activity and neither can be rejected a priori; therefore, according to Keeley (2007, 137), in both cases the absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence. Keeley suggests that the existence of God can be viewed as a conspiracy theory in the sense that evidence for God’s existence may be concealed or hidden in the same way that evidence to support the existence of conspiracy theories may be concealed or hidden. I will discuss both concepts in greater detail in later sections.
Thus, the existence of God can be viewed as a conspiracy theory. (Modus ponens 11, 14)

Thus, (7) and (15). (&-introduction 7, 15)

If (16), then one should adopt agnosticism regarding the existence of God. (Implicit premise)

Thus, one should adopt agnosticism regarding the existence of God. (Modus ponens 16, 17)

My charitable extraction of Keeley’s argument ensures his conclusion follows from valid inference rules. The argument appears obviously valid with strong basic premises. Premises (1) - (7) substantiate agnosticism regarding conspiracy theories. Premises (8) – (15) establish the strength of Keeley’s analogy, and premises (16) and (17) provide Keeley’s conclusion. At first glance, Keeley seems to have produced a sound argument, and Keeley clearly believes the underived premises to be true. I do not agree. After discussing each underived premise and considering Keeley’s supporting evidence for his claims, I will demonstrate why the argument fails after premise (12) due to a categorical error.

Premise (1) is simply a matter of fact. Conspiracies are both common and frequent in human societies. Premise (2) is also noncontroversial, as secretive conspiratorial agents are definitional to the term ‘conspiracy theory.’ Most philosophers would agree with both claims in premise (3), and both claims follow from premise (2). Premises (2) and (3) are integral to the nature of conspiracy theories by Keeley’s definition. As Keeley (2007, 137) suggests, “enemies

12 Keeley (2007, 146) does seem to recognize that his analogy has limitations, as demonstrated in his concluding remarks: “At the very least, I believe I have shown that this is all grist for the mill, that considering theological questions about the existence of God in the light of the strange epistemology of conspiracy theories enriches the discussion in interesting ways.”

13 Premise (2) in no way suggests causal agents must be capable of, or willing to, conceal evidence of their existence indefinitely. Premise (2) simply identifies the intentionally hidden or secretive agenda of conspirators.
are smart enough to act in secret; in other words, it is no accident that we do not know of them — they are actively evading detection.” Keeley (2007, 143) goes on to say, “One clearly central element of secular conspiracies is their secrecy. Indeed, it is a defining feature; a plan carried out in full public view with its goals explicitly stated with nothing hidden seems the very antithesis of a ‘conspiracy.’”

Keeley distinguishes two classes of conspiracy theories: warranted conspiracy theories and unwarranted conspiracy theories. Because conspiracies are so prevalent, and have been throughout history, Keeley (2007, 137) concludes,

[T]here is no principled way of distinguishing a priori, [unwarranted conspiracy theories and warranted conspiracy theories] from one another ... as time passes and investigation ensues, we will generally come to lump the given theory in either with the Watergates (the credible) or with the faked-lunar-landings (the incredible).

For Keeley (2007, 137), in the case of conspiracy theories, “the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”14

Because the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, Keeley (2007, 135) proposes, “contrary to being able to reject conspiracy theories out of hand, prior to any investigation, we ought to adopt an agnostic attitude with respect to conspiratorial claims” (emphasis added). This idea leads to the conditional, premise (6), which repeats Keeley’s call to rational agnosticism regarding conspiracy theories. Keeley’s claim is not a hard sell. By definition, conspirators are deliberately elusive.

Premise (8) is slightly more controversial, but Keeley successfully makes his point.

The notion of Providence suggests God either actively hides evidence of his activities or God’s plan is simply inscrutable. Either way, God’s activity is hidden from humans. As Keeley (2007, 140) describes, “an omniscient God knows what we would consider evidence for His existence and an omnipotent God could certainty leave only the evidence He wished to be found. Looking for a God that does not wish to be found would be quite a futile task.” Even a god that is not omnipotent or omniscient could conceivably conceal activity from human knowledge. Whether or not God does actively shroud evidence, Keeley (2007, 142) claims “God’s existence cannot be settled a priori; one has to consider the factual evidence.” I agree. As with conspiracy theories, Keeley asserts that in the case of Providence, the absence of evidence is yet again not necessarily evidence of absence. According to Keeley (2007, 141), “God as a Providential entity, is the ultimate unknown unknown.”

Premise (12) seems hardly controversial, but I do not believe the epistemic similarities are quite as powerful as they initially seem to be. Keeley (2007, 139) is quick to draw the analogy between Providence and conspiracy theories as follows:

My contention is that this invocation of a [sic] unknown (to us) plan that explains why things have happened the way they have has some elements of the kinds of secret plans that secular conspiracy theories use to explain why things have happened the way that they have.

Both cases posit secretive causal agents concealing evidence of their plans; both cases cannot be rejected a priori; in both cases absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence. Keeley and I agree that both cases are importantly epistemically similar. Later I will discuss why we differ on how those similarities are actually useful.

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15 Keeley (2007, 135-136) references a famous statement by former U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, in which Rumsfeld described ‘known unknowns’ and ‘unknown unknowns.’
Premise (13) is where Keeley and I start to disagree. In premise (13) Keeley implies that God’s existence can be viewed as a type of conspiracy theory in the sense that evidence for God’s existence may be concealed by design. Although the term ‘conspiracy’ usually entails multiple agents, Keeley presents a strong case for allowing God into the conspirator category. Keeley (2007, 144) suggests if God can be accurately “thought of as a kind of conspirator, He would be the ultimate conspirator,” as God “is by hypothesis omnipotent. As a result, He has no need to conspire with anybody to bring about Providence according to His wishes.” Additionally, Keeley (2007, 141) cites the traditional understanding of a benevolent God to add, “If anything qualifies as a ‘conspiracy of goodness,’ then one imagines Providence does!” I take no issue with the general idea behind Keeley’s premise that Providence can be understood as a kind of conspiracy theory; however, Keeley takes the concept a step too far and commits a categorical error by suggesting the pure existence claim of ‘the existence of God’ can be viewed as synonymous with the qualified existence claim of a conspiracy theory. Each type of claim has different evidentiary expectations. Furthermore, viewing Providence as a type of conspiracy theory is different from viewing God’s existence as a type of conspiracy theory. I will elaborate on both of these points in the next section.

Premise (17) is crucial to Keeley’s conclusion. Premise (17) claims that one should adopt agnosticism with respect to God’s existence if the existence of God can be viewed as a conspiracy theory. Keeley (2007, 145) backs up this proposition with the statement:

When dealing with conspiratorial elements — especially potentially powerful conspiratorial elements — then one always has a reason for at least being worried that the mere fact that you are not finding any evidence does not necessarily lend much credence to the claim that the existential claim is false. Then again, it does not give us positive evidence for the posit either. Hence, the proper response is a humble agnosticism in the face of such situations.
Keeley (2007, 135) makes a decent point; however, he also commits a second major error in reasoning by caveating agnosticism regarding conspiracy theories with “prior to any investigation” sans expecting the same from agnosticism regarding the existence of God. I suspect this is a result of Keeley’s categorical error; Keeley likely assumes one to be capable of discovering sufficient evidence to confirm or deny each conspiracy theory but does not expect the same capability with respect to discovering evidence for or against the existence of God.

Thus far, I have summarized both the overall philosophical debate concerning conspiracy theories and Keeley’s analogy between Providence and conspiracy theories. I also discussed Keeley’s proposal for viewing the existence of God as a conspiracy theory. I described Keeley’s argument and provided a rigorous extraction of his premises and inferences. I have briefly shown Keeley’s argument to be unsound by identifying weaknesses that render premises (13) and (17) untenable. Keeley’s proposed analogy does indeed provide interesting insights into the epistemology of conspiracy theories, the existence of God, and general questions about how we evaluate evidence or the lack thereof, but Keeley’s argument ultimately fails to earn the utility of his suggested conclusion. In the next section, I will expand on Keeley’s faulty reasoning. I will also provide an extraction of my own argument and describe an alternative view of the epistemic value in Keeley’s analogy.

**IV. Keeley’s Categorical Error**

Keeley offers a compelling argument at first glance, but his premises fall short of the desired goal. Although belief in the existence of a Providential God and belief in conspiracy theories do share interesting and relevant epistemic similarities, the two are not quite as similar as Keeley
suggests. In ‘Atheism or Agnosticism’ P.J. McGrath (1987, 57) argues that one should adopt atheism over agnosticism “in the absence of positive evidence for God’s existence.” McGrath situates his argument against Thomas Morris’ (1985) opposite claim that agnosticism is the more rational stance. According to Morris (1985, 222), when lacking positive evidence, one should deny an existence claim only when one is in “good epistemic position” to do so.  

16 Since ‘God exists’ is a metaphysical claim, and no one is in good epistemic position toward the proposition, Morris concludes that atheism is not justified. McGrath objects to Morris’ conclusion because such a rule would apply to all preternatural beings, and it seems unreasonable to adopt an agnostic stance on the existence of unicorns, leprechauns, etc. According to McGrath (1987, 55), Morris’ position “would lead to almost total skepticism about human knowledge,” as Morris’ stance is equivalent to saying “we know nothing except those things about which we are incapable of being mistaken.”

In response, McGrath (1987, 55) proposes two categories of existence claims: (a) ‘pure existence claims,’ which assert that something simply exists, and (b) ‘qualified existence claims,’ which assert that something exists at a certain time and place. McGrath suggests Morris conflates the two types of claims. On McGrath’s view, one can obtain good epistemic position relative to qualified existence claims but not in the case of pure existence claims. Investigation will surely provide evidence for or against qualified existence claims, and enough evidence to

16 According to Morris (1985, 222-223), “being in good epistemic position relative to a proposition is being in such a position that should there be any positive epistemic considerations for the truth of the proposition, one would have them, or most likely have them. It is possible to be in good epistemic position with respect to a proposition only if it is such that, should it be true, its truth would be indicated by some positive epistemic considerations in its favour.”
accept a pure existence claim may be available, but reaching good epistemic position to deny a pure existence claim is impossible.\textsuperscript{17} McGrath ultimately suggests applying Ockham’s razor to pure existence claims, as remaining agnostic to every existence claim that lacks positive evidence is irrational.\textsuperscript{18} For McGrath, the lack of evidence in such situations should be deemed a decisive consideration.

With McGrath’s work in mind, I suggest that Keeley commits a categorical error in the attempt to compare claims of conspiracy theories to the claim that God exists. All conspiracy theories are qualified existence claims because each conspiracy theory involves actual people and places, which are open to investigation. Every conspiracy theory posits a specific group with specific goals in specific locations at specific times using specific means toward specific ends. Conspiracy theories offer a variety of avenues for evidence collection, and conspiracy theories can be confirmed or denied based on the physical evidence available. Furthermore, Keeley’s first premise is critical to his reasoning. Political and social conspiracies do happen; people do conspire in secret. We know such behavior to be a matter of fact.

The existence of known conspiracies from the past is grounds to not discount conspiracy theories out of hand. The claim that God exists is different. As a pure existence claim, one cannot simply search for evidence or lack thereof.\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, the nature of God is pure

\textsuperscript{17} For example, one cannot search the entire universe to find a unicorn. McGrath also challenges the idea that one can be in good epistemic position relative to a pure existence claim in the sense that one cannot possess all of the information relative to something’s existence.

\textsuperscript{18} Ockham’s Razor is the principle that simplicity should be preferred over plurality when plurality is not necessary for simpler explanations. See https://www.britannica.com/topic/Occams-razor or https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/simplicity/.

\textsuperscript{19} Several types of evidence could provide reason to accept or reject the existence of a particular god, including specific scriptural, religious, or spiritual claims compared to accepted social, historical, and scientific realities.
conjecture because there is no hard evidence to support claims for any one of a number of gods that have been proposed to exist. The only available evidence for such pure existence claims exists in the form of hearsay via oral and written traditions, and each of those traditions are open to much interpretation. There is simply no way to codify what counts as negative evidence for the existence of God. As discussed previously, Keeley (2007, 137) ends up qualifying agnosticism with regard to conspiracy theories with the stipulation of “prior to any investigation,” yet this caveat is absent in the case of the existence of God. The lack of qualification for the latter is likely due to the categorical error, as Keeley seems to intuitively realize that there is a disparity between evidentiary expectations between the two claims.

When we clearly delineate qualified existence claims from pure existence claims, Keeley’s analogy fails as follows:

(14*) The existence of God can be viewed as a conspiracy theory. (Assumption for indirect proof)

(19) All conspiracy theories are qualified existence claims. (Basic claim)

(20) The existence of God is a pure existence claim. (Basic claim)

(21) Thus, it is the case that [(14*) and (19)]. (&-introduction 14*, 19)

(22) If it is the case that [(14*) and (19)], then the existence of God is not a pure existence claim. (Entailment)

(23) Thus, it is not the case that [(14*) and (19)]. (Modus tollens 20, 22)

(24) Thus, it is the case that [(14*) and (19)] and it is not the case that [(14*) and (19)]. (&-introduction 21, 23)

(25) Thus, the existence of God cannot be viewed as a conspiracy theory. (Completes indirect proof 14*, 19-24)
Premise (14*) is simply Keeley’s original premise (14) restated. I discussed premises (19) and (20) at length in previous paragraphs. Premise (22) is a rational conditional if we assume Keeley’s premise (14*), given the two types of existence claims. From there, valid inferences yield the conclusion that the existence of God cannot be viewed as a conspiracy theory.

**V. The Better Analogy**

I fully accept Keeley’s premises (1) – (12). The analogy between Providence and conspiracy theories could provide interesting and useful insights into similarities between religious beliefs and belief in conspiracy theories, namely how and why people choose to accept, disregard, or skew evidence. Religion and conspiracy theories already have a rich history of association.20 Viewing the world from a Manichean perspective, as religious believers often do, can result in conspiratorial thinking and,21 often in the minds of believers, conspiratorial theorizing can become a type of evidence in and of itself.22 Additionally, adherents of secular conspiracy theories tend to bestow supernatural attributes upon conspirators and frequently hold onto belief in particular conspiracy theories with religious fervor. Thinking about Providence from the perspective of belief in conspiracy theories and conspiracy theories from the perspective of belief in Providence will doubtless yield appreciation for certain epistemic realities that may not be as easily gained by considering each belief system independently.

20 See Bivins (2018, Ch. 6).

21 The term *Manichean* is a derivation of Manichaeism, a 3rd century C.E. Persian religious movement that taught all of creation reflects a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil. The modern term describes a worldview in which political and social events are understood as matters of good versus evil. See Rohmann (1999, 108-109).

22 For example, religious believers often cite conspiracies involving Satan, witchcraft, etc. or blame nonbelievers or other religious groups for societal ills. See Bivins (2018, Ch. 6).
Some of the rationalizations shared by believers in conspiracy theories and Providence seem to accord with Marteen Boudry and Johan Braeckman’s (2011) ideas about epistemic defense mechanisms. Boudry and Braeckman (2011, 160) cite immunizing strategies and epistemic defense mechanisms as explanations for why certain belief systems, such as belief in conspiracy theories and religions are “resilient in the face of adverse evidence, and why rational arguments are generally unavailing in debating believers.” Immunizing strategies are essentially fallacies that allow believers to pick and choose evidential support or change the rules as they go along; immunizing strategies are “bad arguments to deflect valid criticism” (2011, 146). Over time, and especially when a belief system faces a crisis situation, such strategies can evolve to become integral to the actual belief system itself as epistemic defense mechanisms. In this way, the associated belief system may become “completely immune from falsification” (2011, 151).

Although Keeley takes his analogy one step too far by suggesting that agnosticism regarding conspiracy theories can warrant agnosticism regarding the existence of God, Keeley’s argument through premise (12) is extremely useful. Providence and conspiracy theories do share interesting epistemic similarities, and the analogy may help us better understand how and why people develop epistemic defense mechanisms; perhaps the idea of Providence and conspiratorial thinking are both forms of epistemic immunizing strategies. If so, thinking about Providence as a conspiracy theory and vice versa could help answer questions such as why

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\footnote{\textit{As an example of an epistemic defense mechanism common to belief in conspiracy theories, Boudry and Braeckman (2011, 153) cite what they call “Turning the Evidence on its Head,” which describes the tendency of conspiracy theorists to discount evidence contrary to their claims as forged or planted to cover the secret plot.}}
people believe conspiracy theories in the face of better evidence or why people believe religious claims despite no evidence at all.

VI. Conclusion

Keeley presents a useful analogy between Providence — or the divine plan — and secular conspiracy theories to aid us in understanding epistemological questions about belief in both; however, Keeley also oversteps the efficacy of his claim by extending a recommendation for agnosticism regarding conspiracy theories to the same regarding the existence of God. I offered my response to the pros and cons of Keeley’s argument concerning the epistemic similarities between Providence and conspiracy theories, and I demonstrated where Keeley’s argument eventually fails. I claimed that Keeley’s categorical error of conflating the qualified existence claims of conspiracy theories with the pure existence claim of God’s existence results in absurdity. Additionally, I pointed out Keeley’s (2007, 135) failure to caveat agnosticism regarding the existence of God with “prior to any investigation” as he did with agnosticism regarding conspiracy theories. Finally, I presented a case for accepting the analogy of Providence as a conspiracy theory, not to justify agnosticism toward belief in the existence of God, but rather to possibly better understand epistemic defense mechanisms by comparing similarities between the two belief systems.

Keeley (2007, 144) suggests “that the domain of beings whose power and knowledge far outstrip our own are precisely the kind of domain where we ought to be especially careful in trusting the outcome of our reasoning.” I submit that believing in those types of beings without
strong evidence for their existence is an equally good reason to take extra care in examining the credence of our reasoning.

References

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