

Lunchtime Seminar

Thu 3 November 2016 – Matthew R. X. Dentith (IRH-ICUB Fellow), *Expertise and Conspiracy Theories: On the improvised nature of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorising*

Abstract. Conspiracy theories are often taken to be examples of unwarranted beliefs that are put forward by pseudo-experts, and which typically rely upon suspicious kinds of evidence. Yet contemporary work in Philosophy challenges the idea belief in conspiracy theories is prima facie irrational, instead arguing that conspiracy theorising is both understandable – because conspiracies do occur – and that if we take an evidential approach and judge individual conspiracy theories on their particular merits, belief in such theories can turn out to be warranted.

Drawing on this recent work in Philosophy, I will examine the kinds of evidence typically put forward in support of conspiracy theories. I will then show how the evidential problems regularly with conspiracy theories are also potential problems for the evidence put forward in support of rivals to such theories. I will also look at how our prior beliefs about conspiratorial activity in the past informs our beliefs about what counts as evidence for or against claims of conspiracy here-and-now.

I will then argue that if there really is a problem with evidence and conspiracy theories, it is a problem which comes out of the largely improvised nature of expertise associated with conspiracy theories. Whereas there are recognised experts in the sciences, whose expertise we rely upon when it comes to assessing evidential claims in scientific theories, there are no such recognised experts when it comes to conspiracy theories. This makes the task of judging the salience of evidence with respect to particular conspiracy theories harder, although this turns out not to be an insurmountable problem.