

The Believing Brain  
Michael Shermer

Mr. Shermer, what about your personal role in evolution?

What's good about it?

It is a good explanation of the workings of the scientific method, in this case through astronomy and astrophysics. Edward Derman uses electromagnetism as his vehicle in "Models Behaving Badly," and Pinker does a good job in "The Blank Slate." All of these guys advocate clear thinking and constant alertness to the dangers of self-deception.

Shermer surveys all kinds of beliefs, some more interesting (to me) than others. He does a good job with religion, but that ground has been well worked. I especially liked his analyses of the ways in which we hold our political beliefs, the differing interpretations of reality which separate conservatives and liberals, and the ways in which we filter information to make it fit our preconceptions. Conspiracy theorists drive me crazy. Shermer provides a concrete list of tests to throw at conspiracy theorists to shut them up. Such as, given the obvious incompetence of bureaucrats everywhere, how can anybody imagine they would be competent enough to pull off a conspiracy? Since I find myself often referring to his list, I add it to this review where it is easy to find:

"The term conspiracy theory is often used derisively to indicate that someone's explanation for an event is highly improbable or even on the lunatic fringe, and that those who proffer such theories are most probably crackpots. Since conspiracies do happen, however, we cannot just automatically dismiss any and all conspiracy theorists a priori. So what should we believe when we encounter a conspiracy theory? What are some of the characteristics of a conspiracy theory that indicate that it is likely untrue?

1. There is an obvious pattern of connected dots that may or may not be connected in a causal way. When the Watergate conspirators confessed to the burglary, or Osama bin Laden boasts about the triumph of 9/11, we can be confident that the pattern is real. But when there is no forthcoming evidence to support a causal connection between the dots in the pattern, or when the evidence is equally well explained through some other causal chain – or through randomness – the conspiracy theory is likely false.
2. The agents behind the pattern of the conspiracy are elevated to near superhuman power to pull it off. We must always remember how flawed human behavior is, and the natural tendency we all have to make mistakes. Most of the time in most circumstances most people are not nearly as powerful as we think they are.
3. The more complex the conspiracy, and the more elements involved for it to unfold successfully, the less likely it is to be true.
4. The more people involved in the conspiracy, the less likely they will all be able to keep silent about their secret goings-on.
5. The grander and more worldly the conspiracy is believed to be – the control of an entire nation, economy, or political system, especially if it suggests world domination – the less likely it is to be true.

6. The more the conspiracy theory ratchets up from small events that might be true into much larger events that have much lower probabilities of being true, the less likely it is to be grounded in reality.
7. The more the conspiracy theory assigns portentous and sinister meanings and interpretations to what are most likely innocuous or insignificant events, the less likely it is to be true.
8. The tendency to commingle facts and speculation without distinguishing between the two and without assigning degrees of probability of factuality, the less likely the conspiracy theory represents reality.
9. Extreme hostility about and strong suspicions of any and all government agencies or private organizations in an indiscriminate manner indicates that the conspiracy theorist is unable to differentiate between true and false conspiracies.
10. If the conspiracy theorist defends the conspiracy theory tenaciously to the point of refusing to consider alternative explanations for the events in question, rejecting all disconfirming evidence for his theory and blatantly seeking only confirmatory evidence to support what he has already determined is the truth, he is likely wrong and the conspiracy is probably a figment of his imagination.

### Why People Believe Conspiracies

Why do people believe in highly improbable conspiracies? I contend that it is because their pattern-detection filters are wide open, thereby letting in any and all patterns as real, with little to no screening of potential false patterns. Conspiracy theorists connect the dots of random events into meaningful patterns, and then infuse those patterns with intentional agency. Add to those propensities the confirmation bias and the hindsight bias (in which we tailor after-the-fact explanations to what we already know happened), and we have the foundation for conspiratorial cognition.” End of quote

What’s bad about it? Rather, what is left unexplained. Despite the fact that Shermer certainly has objective reality on his side, his forces are still losing. How? They are losing the demographic battle. Rationalists like Shermer are simply not replacing themselves, having kids and raising them to be little Shermers. Instead, the world is being repopulated by the very religious and people too indifferent or incompetent to control their fertility. Moreover, the better folks such as Shermer subsidize the irresponsible with public health care, schools and various welfare programs. Michael Shermer, if you are so smart, why does it appear that you and your ilk are headed for extinction, an evolutionary footnote?

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