A conspiracy theory **purports[[1]](#footnote-1)** to explain an important social, political, or economic e…………. as being caused or **covered up** by a **covert** group or organization.

**Conspiracism** is a **world view** that is based on the belief that conspiracy theories have a central role in history.

**Michael Barkun,** professor of political science, has d………………… 3 kinds of conspiracy theories:

1. ***Event conspiracy theories***. The conspiracy is h………. to be responsible for a particular event or set of events. The conspiratorial forces are **alleged** to have focused their energies on a limited, well-defined **objective**. The best-known examples in the recent past are the Kennedy assassination, the faked moon landing, the September 11 attacks, the Smolensk plane crash or even Pope Benedict XVI’s resignation.
2. ***Systemic conspiracy theories***. The conspiracy is believed to have broad goals, such as securing control of a country, a region, or even the e…………. world. While the goals are sweeping, the conspiratorial machinery is generally simple: a single, evil organization **implements** a plan to infiltrate and **subvert** existing institutions. This is a common scenario in conspiracy theories that focus on the **alleged** machinations of Jews, Freemasons, illuminati or the Catholic Church. In Poland many people believed in the secret Round Table agreement of 1989 and the following division of power.
3. ***Superconspiracy theories***. Conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically. Event and systemic conspiracies are joined in complex ways, so that conspiracies come to be **nested** together. At the summit of the conspiratorial hierarchy is a distant but powerful force manipulating **lesser** conspiratorial factors. Examples: the global warming swindle, the financial crisis.

**attribute** *erroneously, falsely, incorrectly, mistakenly, wrongly*

Some other examples:

* the ‘Big Pharma’ conspiracy
* the ‘Chemtrails’ conspiracy
* the Roswell Conspiracy
* the 'Pizzagate' Conspiracy

**Hyperactive Agency Detection Device and Conspiracy Theories**

Something does not seem quite right. The most powerful man in the world, John F. Kennedy, was assassinated by a lone **nutjob** of no previous consequence? A jet flies into the pentagon and yet the expected debris is not visible. And why can’t I see stars in the NASA Apollo moon landing photos?

Some hidden agent must be at work, conspiring to **deceive** and carry out some **sinister** plot.

Lately I have heavily invested in my psychometrics library, which has resulted in a steady stream of book deliveries over the past week. However, when a book arrived yesterday, I was shocked to receive a message from my roommate showing my book **in tatters**.

Anger was the first emotion to shoot through my body, followed by suspicion. Why had this book **fallen prey**? I had 7 other packages all similar size over the past couple of weeks make it with no problem. Had the postman thrown it in the yard, perhaps in a hurry, perhaps with **nefarious** intention due to the number of packages delivered to this household?

None of the above are reasons for what happened; simply the package was in reach of my dog and being a puppy, he chewed it. So why did I **attribute** such sinister motives so quickly, why was I looking for a conspiracy?

The reason is simple: this is how our brains are **hardwired** to think, and some of us more than others. This tendency has been **termed** the “hyperactive (or hypersensitive) agency detection device” –  HADD – coined by Justin Barrett. Understanding that HADD is an **intrinsic** part of human nature is part of the core knowledge base of the sceptic.

The underlying idea is that humans attribute intentions (often harmful to the self) to agents in their lives. The hyperactive part of the device leads us to **attribute** great power and responsibility to such agents we see as maintaining control, which can lead to conspiracies (e.g. Moon landing, 9/11).

As a neurologist and a sceptic I am particularly interested in how brain function relates to human intellectual strengths and weaknesses and how such knowledge helps us to avoid common mental **pitfalls**. In other words, knowledge of how the human brain works helps us think better – to be more sceptical and avoid error.

Psychologists and neuroscientists in recent years have demonstrated that our brains are hardwired to d…………….. things in our environment that are alive from those that are not alive. But “being alive” (from a psychological point of view) is not about biology, but **agency** – something that can act in the world, that has its own will and can cause things to happen. Sure, this is a property of living things, but that’s not how our brain sort things out. We can perceive agency in non-living things if they are acting as if they are agents.

This is reflected even in our visual system, which separates out visual information …… different streams according to the type of information. One division is between information about actions and information about objects. The object stream is also divided into brain regions that deal with inanimate objects and other regions that deal with living things or animate objects. So on a fundamental level our brains treat agents as different from objects – from the moment we see them.

Bruce Hood, author of *Supersense*, goes over the psychological studies that have documented and described the human tendency to think of objects differently than agents. We **imbue** agents with an essence – a unique living force, even while infants. Objects are just generic things, totally interchangeable. While agents have their own unique essence. Interestingly, children can **come to** view a favourite toy (a stuffed animal, for example) as having the properties of an agent and will t…….. it like a living thing. This reinforces the **notion** that the distinction we make is not between living and non-living so much as agent vs object. This probably also explains why we can watch a cartoon and react emotionally to the characters as if they were real – they are not living, but we see them as agents.

According to Barrett, HADD works in part by detecting any movement that is **non-inertial** – something which seems to be moving of its own **volition**. We then assume it is acting with agency and react accordingly. This probably provided an evolutionary a……………. – it is better to assume the rustling in the bushes was not the wind but a hungry tiger. So we are **descended from** hominids who were more paranoid and had hyperactive agency detection, because they were less ………….. to be eaten by predators.

We can **extrapolate** from “non-inertial movement”, or movement that cannot be easily explained as a passive reaction to natural forces, to more and more complex “actions.” HADD detects more than movement, it can detect a pattern in otherwise unrelated events[[2]](#footnote-2), details that **defy** easy explanation, or consequences that seem out of proportion to the **alleged** causes. When HADD is triggered we tend to see a hidden agent working behind the scenes, making events **unfold** the way they do, and perhaps even deliberately hiding its own tracks.

For some people the perception of hidden agency becomes **overwhelming**, dominating all other thought processes. We know these people as conspiracy theorists. But there is a little conspiracy theorist inside each of us.

Studies have also demonstrated that HADD is more likely to be triggered when a stimulus is **ambiguous** – therefore it tends to be our **default assumption** – an object is an agent until we are sure it’s just an object. Also, in situations where we have less control our HADD becomes even more active.

Barrett and others have speculated that HADD is important to the development of religion – where God is the ultimate invisible agent. So far this hypothesis has not been significantly researched, but it does seem reasonable. Seeing natural or random events as the will of an agent is HADD.

HADD also leads to superstition – thinking that there is a cause and effect between unconnected events. The under……….. assumption of superstitions is that things happen for a reason (a vague ill-defined reason, but a sense that there is a hidden agency at work). I think it is **liberating** to understand that “shit happens.”

Scepticism, in many ways, is a filter on HADD. First, we have tor…………….. that our brains are not perfect perceivers and processors of information. There are specific and myriad ways in which the human brain is **biased** and **flawed**. Science and scepticism are methods for correcting or filtering out those biases. Sceptics ask themselves – is it really true. We see many patterns, but only some of those patterns represent underlying reality. We need a process to sort out which ones are real – that is science and scepticism.



1. claim or seem to be something or to do something, especially when this is **not possible or true** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **apophenia** (/æpoʊˈfiːniə/) - the tendency to perceive meaningful connections between unrelated thing. (Pattern recognition bias) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)