

Obstacles to Persuasion: Lessons from the Classroom

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From January to April 2008, I taught an unusual upper-level undergraduate Philosophy course on Argumentation Theory at McMaster University. The course focused on such questions as “What makes a good argument good?” and “What makes a belief rational?” - where an argument is understood as an exercise in rational persuasion aimed at inculcating rational belief. And approximately five weeks of the course were devoted to studying the arguments of the 9/11 truth movement.

I have two purposes in writing this essay. First, teaching this course was a very positive experience and, by writing about it, I hope to encourage other academics to explore ways of incorporating this kind of material within the curriculum at their own universities. My students enjoyed and benefited from this course, I believe, and teaching is one effective way of raising the profile of these important issues.ⁱ

Second, I want to discuss some of the more interesting ways in which some of my students responded to, and in particular resisted the arguments presented by David Ray Griffin in *The New Pearl Harbor: Disturbing Questions about the Bush Administration and 9/11* (hereafter referred to as NPH).ⁱⁱ Griffin has written extensively about the various reasons why so many people simply dismiss or refuse to examine critically, with a fair and open mind, the arguments of the 9/11 truth movement.ⁱⁱⁱ My students, however, did take the time to study these arguments carefully, and many of them responded in thoughtful and creative ways. In what follows, I will describe these responses in what I hope is a fair and charitable manner, as well as offer a few critical reflections of my own. (Of the six responses discussed below, I should note that the fourth alone is entirely my own response. It is also a more positive criticism, which explains why it is not followed by a rebuttal.) My aim, of course, is not to present the final, definitive word on any of these topics, but to stimulate further constructive debate that will promote the possibility of rational persuasion. I begin, however, with a brief summary of the structure and organization of the course in question.

0. *The Course*

Philosophy 3M03, Argumentation Theory, met for three hours, every Wednesday afternoon, for 13 weeks beginning on January 9, 2008. The class began and ended with just over 30 undergraduate students - half female, half male - virtually all of whom were third- or fourth-year Philosophy majors. No student was permitted to register in this course without having completed at least one prior course in (formal or informal) logic. Very few of the students, I later learned, had any substantial knowledge of the controversies surrounding 9/11, and a great many were

essentially unaware of the existence of serious challenges to the official 9/11 narrative.

Many people still find it difficult to engage in lengthy discussions of the events of 9/11. I therefore decided that I had an obligation to inform my students, from the outset, that we would be dealing with some very controversial and disturbing topics. To drive this point home, and in an effort to enable them to make a more informed decision as to whether they ought to take this course, after reviewing the course outline I devoted the first class to a screening of the documentary *9/11 Mysteries*. This powerful and lengthy documentary focuses in a serious and sustained manner on a variety of questions surrounding the destruction of the Twin Towers.

After the documentary ended, literally not a word was spoken as students left the room absorbed in their own thoughts and, in some cases, I think, stunned by what they had just witnessed. Curiously, for the next few weeks virtually no one spoke to me or e-mailed me with comments about the film. But, to the best of my knowledge, no one dropped the course after this first class, and I learned much later that a number of students immediately began reading NPH even though we weren't scheduled to discuss that book in class until late February.

The next five weeks of the course dealt with standard philosophical topics in epistemology and argumentation theory.^{iv} We developed a common vocabulary for analyzing and evaluating arguments in a rigorous yet charitable manner, and we examined competing accounts of rational belief. Our overall goal, in this part of the course, was to arrive at an understanding of the conditions under which an individual ought to be persuaded to believe the conclusion of an argument, on the basis of the evidence cited within that argument's premises. Quite deliberately, these abstract discussions were conducted without any explicit reference to the events of 9/11. However, we concluded this section of the course by exploring a number of questions of obvious relevance to the interpretation of those events: Is it possible for different individuals to arrive, in a reasonable fashion, at incompatible conclusions after surveying exactly the same body of evidence? And, if so, what is the significance of this kind of rational disagreement? That is, under what conditions, if any, can you justifiably maintain your own beliefs while recognizing that (perhaps many) others rationally disagree with you?

On February 27, March 5 and March 12, we worked systematically through each of the three parts of NPH. I chose NPH not only because it is a pivotal text within the 9/11 truth movement, but especially because it offers an exceptionally clear, comprehensive and argumentatively sophisticated introduction to the controversy in question.

Prior to this section of the course, I had a discussion with the class about the responsibility we all shared in creating a culture of mutual respect within the classroom that would allow for the free and uninhibited expression and exploration of any position whatsoever. We discussed why this was particularly important when dealing with politically charged and emotionally sensitive topics. I also informed the class that, although I did have a more or less settled general position on the events of 9/11, I had decided to keep this position to myself, for the duration of this

course, so as not to inappropriately influence the tone or direction of the class discussion. That is, while I certainly actively participated in our discussions of particular texts and arguments, the students knew in advance that at no point would I issue any personal verdict of my own as to whether, for example, 9/11 was or was not an inside job. In retrospect, I think that adopting this stance of neutrality worked well. The students understood, of course, that I believed that the material under discussion was fascinating and extremely important. At the same time, they weren't intimidated into conforming with the "authoritative" judgments of the classroom authority figure, and I was pleased to discover that my students evidently felt comfortable expressing a wide variety of reactions to NPH in particular.

Virtually all of the classes throughout the entire term began with student-run seminar presentations. This enables the students to focus on what most interests them. In an effort to further encourage the students to take ownership of the course material, I also did not assign any readings, on the course outline, for the final four weeks of classes. After finishing our three-week study of NPH and suggesting a number of possible further study options, we reached consensus on concluding the course by examining the following material: (1) Recent philosophical discussions of the nature and epistemological status of conspiracy theories. (2) An article on how so-called "visual arguments" can use images, as well as textual material, as instruments of rational persuasion. (3) The recent internet documentary *Zeitgeist* (the middle section of which deals with 9/11) and the 2001 Fox TV documentary *Conspiracy Theory: Did We Land on the Moon?*

It should be clear, then, that the students in this course were well-educated individuals with a strong background in Philosophy and logical theory in particular. What follows are some of their most interesting criticisms of NPH, arranged thematically and not in the chronological order in which these criticisms were expressed in class. In fact, a few of the following ideas were never discussed in class but emerged only later in some of the better final term papers.^v

1. *Missing Evidence*

It's important to state at the outset that my students were impressed by the rigor of Griffin's arguments and the professionalism of his prose. His writing is clear and careful, his judgments are balanced, and his research is well documented. Students are engaged and troubled by NPH precisely because they find Griffin's arguments to be *prima facie* compelling. On an initial reading, he appears to make a strong case for his conclusions and students who, for whatever reason, resist drawing those same conclusions themselves have a difficult time pointing to any serious argumentative flaws or factual errors within the text.^{vi}

It's therefore not surprising that one more or less immediate critical response to NPH was to speculate that Griffin may be overlooking - either intentionally or inadvertently - some significant body of evidence that would resolve the concerns he raises. The suspicion, in other words, is that the mysteries and anomalies associated with the official 9/11 narrative would

evaporate upon exposure to all the relevant facts. Some crucial evidence must simply be missing from Griffin's account.

In one sense, this is a very constructive response since it encourages the critic to investigate further and discover for herself the evidence that is (allegedly) missing. Some students in fact conducted this kind of research on their own, and in their seminars and term papers referred to additional data discovered either in some of the original texts that Griffin challenges, or in various published attempts to debunk Griffin's own work.

An instructor may, of course, share with students her personal opinion that NPH does not in fact overlook any crucial bit of readily available evidence that fundamentally alters the strength of Griffin's arguments. But there is no substitute for a critic arriving at this conviction after a diligent search of her own. In fact, perhaps my greatest strategic error in designing this course was that I did not insist that we should devote at least some class time to the writings of those who defend the official 9/11 narrative.^{vii} Towards the end of the course, some of my brightest students told me that they were not willing to accept the claim that the US government was complicit in the events of 9/11 *principally* because they felt that it would be irresponsible to adopt such a bold conclusion without also carefully examining firsthand the arguments on the other side.

2. *No Right to Know*

Some students acknowledged that Griffin is probably neither deliberately suppressing nor inadvertently overlooking any significant body of evidence readily available within the public domain. Nonetheless, they countered, some evidence must be missing since the official narrative clearly does not make sense given what we know. And so perhaps this evidence is being withheld from the public for good reason. That is, we should trust government officials to be acting in our best interest. We know from other contexts that governments must sometimes keep secrets. Military secrets, for example, are needed to ensure national security. Therefore, there must be a good reason why we should not be exposed to all the facts pertaining to 9/11. We have no right to know everything the government knows, and so pressing hard for answers to the questions Griffin raises may be dangerous and damaging to our personal welfare and the national interest alike.

This response raises interesting and difficult political questions, and the response may function in different ways within different political communities. Our discussion, of course, occurred within a Canadian classroom. So here I'll restrict myself to general comments that have some force within any democratic state. A student who raises the "No Right to Know" objection needs to be encouraged to think critically about the following questions.

First, is this kind of trust in your government warranted? That is, does your government have a strong track record of being trustworthy? Notice that this objection speaks of trusting your government to be acting in ways that are actually in your best interest. Of course, a genuinely

benevolent group of leaders may sincerely believe that they are acting in the best interest of their people while they are in fact causing serious overall harm to the citizenry. Therefore, withholding trust from government officials - the kind of trust, that is, of which the second objection speaks - doesn't necessarily involve attributing selfish, vicious or malevolent intentions to those officials. Withholding trust needn't be reducible to this kind of personal and somewhat speculative attack on authority figures. The question, rather, is whether your government has a strong track record of *actually* serving you well.

Second, should our trust in government officials be unconditional or are there limits to when and how far we should extend this trust? One might grant, that is, that there is a general presumption in favor of trusting government officials (within well-functioning democratic states) to be acting in our best interest, but insist nonetheless that this trust serves its purpose only when operating within a system of checks and balances that allows for critical scrutiny of government behavior if and when the need arises. And arguably the presumption of trust is defeated - even if critical scrutiny might somewhat jeopardize national security - when serious questions are raised about government complicity in a series of events resulting in the murder of thousands of its own citizens.

Finally, it's easier and more appropriate to trust a government that does not lie to its own people. If there are state secrets that would fully explain the events of 9/11 that cannot be disclosed for, say, security reasons, then perhaps that's what the American people (and the world) should be told. Perhaps this has been done on occasion. I don't know. But the prevailing strategy by far has been to vigorously promote an official narrative - an allegedly plausible and comprehensive explanation - that, for many, seems utterly incredible, if not downright incoherent on numerous fronts. Is it appropriate, one must ask, to extend trust under these circumstances?

3. Constructive vs. Destructive Argumentation

A third criticism acknowledges that while Griffin very effectively reveals serious problems with the official 9/11 narrative, he fails to offer any alternative account of his own that both provides an independently plausible explanation of the events in question and coheres well (or at least better than the official narrative) with all the available data. The concern, in other words, is that it is somehow illicit or irresponsible to engage solely in destructive argumentation. Identifying serious problems with one explanation does not justify you in rejecting that explanation since any competing explanation may suffer from comparable (or worse) problems of its own. Griffin's discussion is therefore inappropriately one-sided. He doesn't operate on a level playing field since while he repeatedly criticizes the explanations of others, there is no parallel opportunity for others to criticize Griffin's own explanation since, on this issue, he is silent. You can't credibly claim that something didn't happen in a certain way without plausibly establishing that something else happened instead.

In responding to this objection, it's important to note that Griffin argues for two main factual

conclusions throughout NPH. One has a negative thrust while the other is more constructive or positive in spirit. Griffin's negative thesis appears variously as follows.

(NT) The official account is "false" (122) or "implausible" (134).

His positive "revisionist" thesis appears on page xx as follows.

(PT) "[T]he attacks of 9/11 ... were carried out with the complicity of some officials of the Bush administration itself."

Both theses appear repeatedly throughout the book and Griffin goes to great lengths to distinguish carefully between these two claims.

It's true, of course, that while (PT) makes a substantive and startling claim about 9/11, it doesn't come close to offering a full-blown detailed account of what happened that day. As Griffin himself notes,

"The task of this book is not ... to develop a theory as to what really happened on 9/11, but merely to summarize evidence suggesting both the falsity of the official account and the likelihood of official complicity" (185).

Nonetheless, the charge that Griffin engages *solely* in destructive argumentation is simply false.^{viii} Griffin does propose a positive hypothesis of his own as to what actually happened on 9/11.

Notice, however, that even if Griffin had not proposed (PT), there would have been nothing illicit or irresponsible in engaging in an argumentative exercise aimed solely at establishing (NT). It's often worthwhile and entirely appropriate to argue simply that some claim is false or implausible. Significant scientific advances, for example, often occur when a seemingly plausible hypothesis is conclusively falsified. And in a murder trial, counsel for the defense is under no obligation to ascertain the actual cause of death. Rather, their sole responsibility is to establish, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the defendant is not guilty. Proving merely that some claim is false is a worthwhile endeavor, since this enables us to avoid (potentially serious) errors - the errors involved in the false hypothesis itself as well as the subsequent errors that we would infer from that hypothesis - and suggests more promising avenues of research for future investigators.

Establishing (NT) would therefore be a significant accomplishment in and of itself. Even if we have no plausible causal explanation at hand with which to replace it, knowing that the official 9/11 narrative is implausible would at least advance us to the point where we realize that we ought to suspend judgment as to what really happened on that day. Moving to a state of self-professed ignorance can be a major step in the right direction.

Perhaps the objection, then, has less to do with the mere fact that Griffin engages in destructive

argumentation, than with the perception that his discussion is not balanced insofar as it is *predominantly* destructive in nature. The concern here is that, compared with his extraordinarily meticulous and rigorous defense of (NT), Griffin's discussion of (PT) is brief, sketchy and highly speculative. Furthermore, so the objection runs, Griffin unfairly exploits an asymmetry existing between (NT) and (PT). The official account makes a great many very specific substantive claims about the events of 9/11 and various clearly identified individuals involved in those events. Griffin, however, does not offer a similarly detailed counter-narrative explaining exactly how certain clearly identified government officials were complicit in those same events. So Griffin enjoys an unfair strategic advantage in that he places himself in a position where he can launch criticisms of the detailed official account, without being vulnerable to any such criticisms himself because he doesn't commit himself to any comparably detailed account of his own. Griffin's positive hypothesis (PT) never moves beyond the level of vague speculation. And the less you say, the less there is for which you're accountable.

Griffin therefore fails to treat the two major competing hypotheses under consideration in a consistent fashion. Specifically, he doesn't subject his own official complicity hypothesis to nearly as rigorous a critique. And he's able to get away with this because he doesn't bother to explain *in detail* exactly how government officials were complicit in the events of 9/11. Were he (or someone else) to do so, the objection continues, (PT) would likely face at least as many problems as the official account. Therefore, NPH misleadingly casts (PT) in a far too favorable light. For a more evenhanded treatment of this topic, therefore, Griffin should have either restricted himself to a purely negative attack on the official narrative, or subjected his own official complicity hypothesis to a comparably rigorous critique.

Three things can be said in response to this objection. First, much of the evidence to which Griffin appeals in establishing the implausibility of the official narrative also, in and of itself, strongly suggests government complicity in 9/11. For example, if there is credible evidence suggesting that the Twin Towers were destroyed as a result of controlled demolitions, then it's hard to imagine how these demolitions could have occurred without government complicity. Similarly, if there is credible evidence suggesting that Flight 93 was shot down, or that a general "stand down" order was issued on the morning of 9/11, then it's hard to imagine how these events could have occurred without government complicity. In other words, Griffin's case for (NT) is closely linked or intertwined with the case for (PT), and so it would have been extraordinarily difficult, and arguably irresponsible to argue against the official narrative without simultaneously arguing for the likelihood of government complicity.

Second, in addition to his two main factual conclusions, one of Griffin's central aims in NPH is to argue in support of a third practical conclusion to the effect that there needs to be a thorough and legitimate independent investigation into the events of 9/11. While it is true that a demonstration of the implausibility of the official narrative would also suggest that a new investigation is warranted, the possibility of government complicity in 9/11 dramatically increases the stakes and the urgency of this concern. Griffin himself describes the situation as

follows.

“The most important question before the American people at this moment is whether we find the overall argument for this revisionist conclusion [(PT)] convincing enough, or at least disturbing enough, to undertake a thorough investigation of the various considerations used to support it” (127).

It’s precisely because this practical conclusion is so important that I suggested, in the last paragraph, that it would have been irresponsible of Griffin to restrict his own inquiry to a defense of just the more secure thesis (NT). To be sure, this would have been the safer and more cautious route, since the argument for (NT) is certainly stronger than the argument for (PT). But (PT) adds considerable weight to the call for a new investigation. One can therefore well understand Griffin’s decision to venture out on a bit of an epistemic limb.

Third, Griffin openly acknowledges that his argument for (PT) is not conclusive (see pages 134 and 146). This, of course, doesn’t mean that his argument is weak, or that Griffin’s discussion of this topic is purely conjectural. On the contrary, as noted earlier, Griffin believes that the evidence at hand supports the “likelihood” (185) of government complicity. But Griffin does not attempt to conceal the fact that there are serious unresolved problems surrounding this hypothesis, both in its current vague formulation and once one begins to ask detailed questions (of the sort alluded to earlier) about the specific roles of particular individuals during specific events. In fact, Griffin devotes approximately seven pages to a discussion of this very topic and admits that he cannot account for a fairly substantial body of anomalous data.

Part of the problem, of course, is that a great deal of evidence bearing upon the possibility of government complicity has been suppressed by that same government. So Griffin’s discussion - like that of any other private citizen’s at this point in time - operates under some very serious constraints. But, frankly, it’s hard to find fault with an author who builds a strong *prima facie* case for a certain conclusion, identifies problematic features of his own hypothesis, admits that his case is not conclusive and that he does not have access to all the relevant information, and calls for a thorough public inquiry that will allow others to reach more secure conclusions. Given his goals and circumstantial limitations, Griffin’s candid discussion of (PT) meets a high standard of rigor. And one of his main goals is to encourage others to engage in political action that will uncover more of the facts and allow his hypothesis to be subjected to an even more rigorous examination. The question critics should focus on is whether Griffin’s argument for official complicity is “strong enough to warrant a new investigation.”^{ix}

4. No Single Coherent Master Narrative

The argument for official complicity would be stronger, of course, if it was able to account, in a plausible fashion, for all the data currently available. However, as noted earlier, NPH contains a seven-page discussion of a number of anomalies or “rhetorical questions” that arise when we seriously confront the suggestion that senior US government officials were complicit in the

events of 9/11. The fourth response states that Griffin actually *underestimates* the strength of the argument for official complicity since he tacitly assumes - needlessly and implausibly - that any group of government conspirators would have been able to tightly control or manage the many discrete events associated with the attacks of 9/11. Once we drop this assumption, however, many of the anomalies surrounding the argument for official complicity become much less problematic.

Large and complex events involving many thousands of individuals easily, and often quickly spin out of control. This is true even when these events are carefully planned by a powerful, knowledgeable and competent group of individuals acting in a perfectly transparent fashion. Chaotic and unforeseen developments are all the more likely to occur, however, when conspirators, acting in secret, are forced to interact with and rely upon the (more or less unpredictable) behavior of a large number of non-conspirators. There is no reason to assume, then, that every aspect of a large-scale conspiratorial event will fit neatly into a single coherent master narrative that captures the aims and the intentions of the master planners.

One of the most significant puzzles surrounding the official complicity hypothesis involves the collapse, and presumed demolition of Building 7. Why, Griffin asks, would the administration have demolished WTC-7 “thereby undermining the claim that the Twin Towers collapsed because of the impact of the airliners combined with the heat from the jet-fuel-fed fires” (p.135)? But notice that the demolition of WTC-7 is anomalous, from the perspective of the official complicity hypothesis, only if we assume that the individuals responsible for that event were (exactly) the same individuals who conspired to bring about the other more tragic, and more widely publicized events that occurred on that day.

The suggestion that different individuals may have been responsible is not preposterous. Suppose that there existed a (relatively small) group of core 9/11 conspirators within the US administration.^x Suppose further that everyone within this core group agreed to participate in a certain restricted plan of action. In order for this plan to succeed, however, it’s likely that others - individuals beyond the core group - would need to perform certain unusual actions, or respond to various events in certain unusual ways. So it’s likely that these individuals would have been lied to, or told partial truths about the real plan of action. Serious suspicions may therefore have arisen, outside of the core group, that something unusual - possibly even something of historic significance - was about to occur. (And of course there is considerable evidence to suggest that foreknowledge of some of the very specific details of the 9/11 attacks was in fact quite widespread.^{xi}) It’s not unreasonable to suppose, therefore, that some individuals beyond the core group may have decided to seize the opportunity presented by the 9/11 conspirators and to extend their plan without the knowledge or consent of those conspirators. Alternatively, some of the core conspirators themselves may have broken ranks and either extended the original plan themselves or deliberately leaked information about that plan, without the knowledge or consent of their fellow conspirators. Different conspirators may have agreed to participate in the original conspiracy for very different reasons and the temptation to exploit and, in particular, profit from

this moment in history may have been overwhelming.

We know that WTC-7 contained a great deal of valuable and highly sensitive information. Certain individuals likely benefited tremendously from its destruction. It's quite possible, then, that those who planned the destruction of WTC-7 seized the opportunity presented by the group of core conspirators, without any concern for whether this event would undermine the official explanation of the collapse of the Twin Towers.

This argument can also be extended to the demolition of the Twin Towers themselves, which is significant since Griffin identifies this as another anomaly facing the official complicity hypothesis.

“[W]hy would [the administration] have risked exposure of the fact that the attack on the WTC was an inside job by having the buildings collapsed by explosives? Was ensuring the occurrence of several thousand deaths worth this additional risk of exposure”? (p.135)

In fact, some people respond with incredulity to the official complicity hypothesis precisely because they cannot accept that senior US government officials are capable of deliberate evil on that scale. But it's possible, once again, that the killing of thousands of American citizens was never part of the original plan. Perhaps some other group was responsible for the demolition of the Twin Towers. Or perhaps events spun out of control and, for whatever reason, these buildings were demolished prematurely, before being evacuated. Arguably, death and destruction on this scale was not required to advance the administration's political agenda. And certainly some private citizens benefited greatly from the destruction of the Twin Towers.

Other anomalous evidence, to which Griffin points, can be dismissed even more readily. He notes, for example, that government officials frequently told “needless lies” and made “foolish statements” and “totally ridiculous” claims (136 -137). Reflecting on the fact that official government accounts of 9/11 often changed significantly over time, switching from one implausible story to another, Griffin asks: “Given the massive planning that must have gone into the whole operation, why was there not a carefully formulated, plausible cover story that would be told by everyone from the outset” (136)? The worry, in other words, is that if government officials had orchestrated 9/11 in some fashion, they simply would not have botched its execution so badly. In particular, they would not have exhibited such an incredible level of incompetence when it came to communicating with the public and promoting the official narrative through such channels as interviews and press releases.

One can't assume, however, that every official statement concerning 9/11 was made by a government conspirator who was fully “in the know.” And it wouldn't be surprising, under the official complicity hypothesis, if the statements of conspirators conflicted with the statements of non-conspirators. Furthermore, it's not plausible to assume that the core conspirators could have controlled the speech and behavior of every other senior government official, forcing them to conform to a single coherent master narrative. Communication between different government

officials and different government agencies takes considerable time and effort at the best of times. Events unfolded quickly on 9/11 and the days thereafter, and there was much to attend to besides public relations. It would of course have been incalculably even more difficult to promulgate a consistent government narrative had events spun out of control. If major unforeseen events occurred on 9/11 - either through chance or as a result of the efforts of individuals outside the core group - then it would not have been possible simply to release a prepared cover story taking account of these events. Senior government officials would therefore have been left to their own resources, trying to make sense of a tragedy of monumental proportions while struggling to appear in control, to secure the peace, and to calm public hysteria. Under these circumstances, it's not difficult to imagine a government official making false or exaggerated or deliberately misleading claims.

One should also not underestimate the role of psychological factors during times of extreme shock and emotional distress. Even if government conspirators had planned and facilitated the major events of 9/11, they may not have anticipated every detail, or imagined, fully and vividly, what it would be like to live through these events, knowing that they bore some responsibility for them. (Imagine, in particular, a conspirator brought into the fold very late in the game - even on the morning of 9/11, perhaps, as the attacks were unfolding.) Would it be surprising if some conspirators made some preposterous statements under these truly awful circumstances?

Something as simple as hubris may also explain some of the more troubling anomalous statements. Apparently neither Donald Rumsfeld nor Rudolph Giuliani could restrain themselves from boasting that they had privileged advance knowledge of some of the events of 9/11,^{xii} a curious thing to do if you're trying to cover your tracks. Not so curious, however, if you yearn for opportunities to demonstrate your superiority over others. And of course these individuals did indeed hold positions of extreme privilege and power. So perhaps the core conspirators were simply not terribly concerned about how the events of 9/11 unfolded or with who said what -- confident that, from their positions of privilege and power, they could effectively control the media and manipulate public opinion whatever transpired.

Many of my remarks in this section are certainly highly speculative. The point of this discussion, however, is not to engage in idle speculation for its own sake, but rather to explain why some of the anomalies facing the official complicity hypothesis do not amount to devastating criticisms of that hypothesis. Revisionists are certainly not able to offer a detailed comprehensive account of what happened on 9/11. And anomalies *do* weaken the argument for official complicity - the argument would be stronger without them. But given the scope and magnitude of the events in question and the element of secrecy that is essential to the official complicity hypothesis, it's not surprising that these anomalies exist. And because we can construct plausible scenarios that would explain away (many of) these anomalies, the anomalies themselves do not constitute compelling reasons for dismissing the official complicity hypothesis. In fact, the argument for official complicity becomes slightly stronger each time we identify a plausible way of accommodating one of its anomalous features. Furthermore, because these speculations raise

additional intriguing questions about what really happened on 9/11, they considerably strengthen Griffin's argument in support of the practical conclusion that there needs to be a thorough public investigation into this matter.

5. *Less is More*

I close with a pair of objections pertaining to cumulative arguments. Griffin's argument for the official complicity hypothesis is a cumulative argument in the sense that it appeals to a great many separate bodies of evidence, each of which *independently* points in the direction of official complicity. Griffin therefore likens his argument to a cable composed of many interwoven strands. The entire cable strongly supports the official complicity hypothesis, and would continue to do so even if a few of the argumentative strands were to unravel (xxiv).

Griffin has commented on the fact that many of his critics have attempted to exploit his use of cumulative arguments in the following manner. First, they select a few of the weakest or most vulnerable strands, sometimes focusing on strands that are quite peripheral to the argument for official complicity, or even strands that Griffin himself does not endorse and that are controversial within the 9/11 truth movement. After criticizing or "debunking" these few atypical strands, they then jump to the conclusion that the remaining strands must be similarly flawed as well, and so the overall argument for official complicity is not compelling. Or they hope that their readers will subconsciously succumb to this hasty generalization on their own.^{xiii}

Clearly, this type of reasoning is illicit, and of course Griffin cannot be held responsible when others employ unfair argumentative tactics against him. However, critics will certainly be tempted to employ this strategy, and so this kind of attack can be expected when one employs a cumulative argument with an exceptionally broad evidential base. And one student raised an intriguing additional objection that appeals to a different sort of temptation, and that turns Griffin's use of cumulative argument against him in a somewhat inverted fashion.

This objection arose from a student who found Griffin's argument for official complicity to be very persuasive. At the same time, he felt overwhelmed by, and therefore became suspicious of the sheer *number* of arguments found within NPH for this conclusion. Griffin himself has said that the cumulative argument for official complicity is "comprised of dozens of arguments."^{xiv} The worry or objection, therefore, is that when someone is presented with a great many cumulative arguments in support of the same conclusion, one tends to focus on that conclusion and discounts the importance of (or ignores) the evidence cited within each separate argumentative strand. The greater the number of cumulative arguments, in other words, the more one is tempted to accept the overall conclusion without seriously questioning or appraising the evidential support. In the worst case scenario, one doesn't bother to critically evaluate the evidence within each strand at all, but is instead persuaded to believe the overall conclusion solely because it is supported by so many individual arguments.

If the overall cumulative argument is strong, then there is a significant chance that audiences

exposed to this argument will be persuaded for the wrong reasons. And this is less than ideal since, despite being persuaded, they may suspect nonetheless that something is indeed amiss, and so their confidence in the truth of the conclusion of the cumulative argument may be more hesitant or fragile than it ought to be. Worse still, if the overall cumulative argument is weak, audiences who feel defeated or overwhelmed by the sheer number of argumentative strands will be persuaded by weak arguments.

I call this the “Less is More” objection because the student in question went on to claim that Griffin would have presented a less manipulative argument if he had simply altered the specific conclusions of many of his cumulative arguments, thereby proposing fewer arguments for one and the same conclusion. (One cumulative argument, for example, could conclude that a Boeing 757 did not hit the Pentagon, another that Flight 93 was shot down, etc.) Fewer arguments, for each specific proposition *P*, would therefore yield a more persuasive case for each *P*.

In responding to this objection, it’s important to acknowledge that the use of a great many cumulative arguments in support of the same conclusion does indeed involve a trade-off of risks and benefits. On the one hand, Griffin wants to impress upon his readers that there are a great many defects within the official 9/11 narrative, and that these defects can be exposed by examining carefully virtually any component of that narrative. So his argument is all the more impressive by drawing upon an extremely broad and diverse evidential base in support of a single striking conclusion.

At the same time, not all of the evidence within that base is of equal value. This is true for two reasons. First, it’s quite likely that not all of the information to which Griffin appeals is accurate.^{xv} And second, different bits of (accurate) information will support the official complicity hypothesis to a greater or lesser extent. So it’s hard work sifting through an argument that incorporates literally dozens of separate cumulative arguments. So some readers may indeed feel overwhelmed by Griffin’s presentation and may succumb to the temptation of accepting his conclusion without properly evaluating, or even understanding, his various arguments in support of that conclusion. Alternatively, other overwhelmed critics may reject Griffin’s conclusion after rejecting only a handful of his weakest arguments.

Each response, however, illustrates a different kind of intellectual laziness. And both result from a failure to respond appropriately to Griffin’s explicit acknowledgment that some of his arguments - what he calls “smoking guns” - are stronger than others. In the first edition of *NPH*, Griffin states that some of the argumentative strands within his overall argument are such that “if the evidence on which they are based is confirmed, the case [for official complicity] could be supported by one or two of them” (xxiv). In the Afterword to the second edition of *NPH*, Griffin identifies no less than 40 such smoking guns (196 - 201). Therefore, since Griffin privileges certain of his own arguments above others, it’s irresponsible for critics to treat all of Griffin’s arguments on a par. In particular, it’s irresponsible to charge that Griffin has failed to establish the likelihood of the official complicity hypothesis without systematically refuting *each* smoking

gun.^{xvi} And conversely, if one feels overwhelmed by the sheer number of smoking guns then, if Griffin is right, it should be possible to rationally persuade oneself of the likelihood of the official complicity hypothesis by working carefully and systematically through a select few.

Anyone can, of course, suspend judgment about, or simply walk away from an argument that seems overwhelming, scary, offensive or just plain uninteresting. But one can't fairly pass a (favorable or unfavorable) judgment upon an argument without engaging with that argument on its own terms, and working through the evaluative questions that it raises. If Griffin's argument is overwhelming, then that's because it's based on a very large body of responsible research. A responsible critic has no option but to work through this material. And there's little to be gained by altering the conclusions of individual cumulative arguments so that there are fewer arguments for increasingly specific conclusions. At the end of the day, Griffin will still need to pull the pieces together and highlight the fact that a very large body of highly diverse evidence supports the single striking conclusion that US government officials were complicit in the events of 9/11.

6. *Contradictory Pools of Evidence*

Finally, one student was concerned that the evidential base that Griffin draws upon, while proposing his dozens of cumulative arguments, is actually inconsistent, and that this deceptively exaggerates the strength of his overall argument. For example, sometimes Griffin writes as if Flight 93 was shot down, whereas at other times he writes as if Flight 93 was not shot down. Sometimes he writes as if Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon, whereas at other times he writes as if something else (eg. a missile) crashed into the Pentagon. Sometimes that there were a number of Arab Muslim hijackers, and at other times that there were no hijackers at all. And so on. But these various pairs of propositions are contradictory. They can't both be true. And by drawing inferences from *each* of a pair of contradictory propositions, Griffin makes it seem as if there is more evidence for his conclusion than there possibly could be.

No one can rationally hold two contradictory propositions at the same time. Therefore, if Griffin wants to challenge the official 9/11 narrative, he needs to decide which specific alternative theory he believes in. He can't reasonably believe, and appeal to *every* competing non-official narrative. If he decides, for example, that Flight 93 was shot down over Pennsylvania, then that would generate a certain amount of evidence against the official narrative. If he decides that Flight 93 was not shot down but secretly landed somewhere else, then that would generate a different body of evidence against the official narrative. But since no one can rationally believe that Flight 93 both was and was not shot down, Griffin can't legitimately draw upon *both* of these two discrete bodies of evidence, making it appear as if his argument against the official narrative is much stronger than it possibly could be. The evidence against official complicity cannot be any stronger than the evidence that can be generated from a *single* competing account.

This response overlooks the fact that Griffin often, and quite appropriately engages in suppositional reasoning throughout NPH. Griffin never claims to know whether, say, Flight 93

was shot down. But it either was or it wasn't. One can therefore suppose, first, that it was shot down, and then argue that the official narrative makes no sense on that supposition. One can next suppose, as a separate line of reasoning, that Flight 93 was not shot down, and argue that the official narrative makes no sense on that supposition either. Reasoning in this way does not commit you to any claim about what actually happened to Flight 93, but it is one legitimate way of establishing that the official narrative makes no sense.

In general, then, one can prove that a certain hypothesis is false (or implausible) by arguing that it is false (or implausible) under every conceivable scenario - and working with contradictory pairs of propositions is an especially effective way of doing this. Suppositional reasoning, therefore, does not commit you to believing each of two contradictory propositions, but it does allow you to draw inferences from contradictory pools of evidence. As we've seen before, one can disprove a hypothesis without necessarily endorsing any competing hypothesis of one's own.

And one can also use suppositional reasoning to argue in support of a positive hypothesis. If official complicity is likely on the supposition that Flight 93 was shot down, and also likely on the supposition that Flight 93 was not shot down, then it's reasonable to conclude that it's likely that US government officials were complicit in the events of 9/11.

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As noted earlier, not every student in this course was willing to embrace the conclusion that US government officials were complicit in the events of 9/11. However, I think it's highly significant that, towards the end of the course, one student spontaneously polled the class to see how many were convinced that the official 9/11 narrative is false. The result was unanimous. Everyone present that day - and it was not an insignificant number - was convinced that this narrative is false. Undergraduate students, who are trained in logic and who study the arguments of NPH carefully, recognize that the official 9/11 narrative cannot survive rational scrutiny.

Notes

i. Clearly, this paper would not have been possible without the insightful comments of those students who participated so enthusiastically in the 2008 iteration of my Philosophy 3M03 course. To all these students, I express my heartfelt thanks and appreciation. Thanks are due to Graeme MacQueen as well for helpful and encouraging comments on a previous draft.

ii. All further references to this work are cited within the text.

iii. In the introduction to *Debunking 9/11 Debunking*, for example, Griffin discusses the problems that arise from paradigmatic thinking, wishful- and fearful-thinking, and what he calls "the betrayal of empiricism" (15 - 23).

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- iv. Most of the assigned readings for this course appear in the bibliography.
- v. Each student was required to participate in a group seminar presentation, write a final exam that (selectively) covered all of the course material, and submit a final term paper on a topic of their choosing.
- vi. These claims are of course generalizations, on my part, about the overall reaction of my students in this one class to NPH. There may be students in the class who would not accept these claims as an accurate characterization of their own reaction to NPH, but I myself can't think of anyone in particular who would likely do so. Furthermore, in this paper I'm not interested in quantifying student reaction to NPH. That is, I have no way of measuring the number of students who criticized NPH in some particular manner, or for some particular reason. What matters is just that these criticisms were indeed expressed and that they deserve a fair hearing.
- vii. This was one of the options that I presented to the class in March when we were discussing how we should wrap up the course.
- viii. At one point, some students criticized Griffin for merely suggesting, between the lines, that government officials were complicit in 9/11, without ever being willing (for whatever reason) to reveal his true intentions by explicitly making this claim. Clearly, however, this is an uncharitable criticism that is not based on a careful reading of the text.
- ix. These are the words Griffin himself uses, to summarize the argument of NPH, on page 2 of *Debunking 9/11 Debunking*.
- x. In raising his rhetorical questions about the official complicity hypothesis, Griffin assumes the existence of a "massive conspiracy" (135). But this assumption is already problematic insofar as it accentuates the following concern: If there really were so many conspirators, then why hasn't even a single individual come forth with a confession?
- xi. See NPH, pages 70 - 73.
- xii. See NPH, pages 3 - 4, 25 - 26, and 181 - 182.
- xiii. See *Debunking 9/11 Debunking*, pages 220 - 222.
- xiv. See *Debunking 9/11 Debunking*, page 221.
- xv. Given the breadth of his study, Griffin is forced to rely upon many secondary sources, and some of these sources are probably less reliable than others. Furthermore, since so much information pertaining to 9/11 has been deliberately suppressed, it's possible that some of the evidence to which researchers do have access has been misinterpreted.

xvi. We must, of course, also allow for the possibility of reasonable generalizations. If one were to discover that each of a representative sample of Griffin's smoking guns fell apart upon careful examination, then one would presumably be relieved of any obligation to examine all of the remaining smoking guns, or any of Griffin's weaker arguments.

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