The truth is out there

Is it irrational to believe in conspiracy theories?

Department of philosophy, Stockholm University. Spring, 2019

Bachelor thesis in theoretical philosophy

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## Contents

Abstract                                                                                     ................................................................. 3  

1. Introduction                                                                                      .................................................................................. 1  
1.1 Research questions and aim of the paper ...................................................................................... 1  
1.2 Disposition                                                                                     .................................................................................. 2  

2. The conventional wisdom and Pigden’s critique .............................................................................. 2  
2.1 The conventional wisdom ............................................................................................................. 2  
2.2 Challenging the conventional wisdom .......................................................................................... 5  

3. Discussion                                                                                      .................................................................................. 9  
3.1 Arguments for the conventional wisdom ....................................................................................... 9  
3.1.1 Conspiracy theories and official stories ..................................................................................... 9  
3.1.2 The testimonial argument against conspiracy theories .............................................................. 11  
3.1.3 Alternative approaches ........................................................................................................... 12  
3.2 The good, the bad and the ugly ...................................................................................................... 15  
3.2.1 Conspiracy theories and counter evidence .................................................................................. 15  
3.2.2 Conspiracy theories and cognitive deceptions ............................................................................ 19  
3.2.3 When Conspiracy skepticism becomes a conspiracy theory ....................................................... 21  

4. Conclusion                                                                                      .................................................................................. 24  

References                                                                                      .................................................................................. 26
Abstract

The conventional wisdom is the epistemological strategy of rejecting conspiracy theories prior to investigation based on the presumption that such theories are almost always irrational. However, if a conspiracy theory is simply a theory which posits conspiracies and history is chock-a-block with conspiracies, then why should we generally reject conspiracy theories prior to investigation? Charles Pigden argues that precisely because conspiracies are historically common in the realm of power politics there will be conspiracy theories that are importantly true. Hence, there is a prima facie case for adopting an epistemological strategy which obligates epistemological agents to investigate conspiracy theories and believe them if that is what the evidence suggests. The paper evaluates the epistemic consequences of the conventional wisdom through the lens of Pigden’s critique and addresses if conspiracy theories are associated with specific epistemological problems that could justify the conventional wisdom. As a theoretical contribution the paper considers an argument which could undermine the intended purpose of the conventional wisdom as an epistemological strategy. If most conspiracy theories are defunct then conspiracy theoreticians must either be generally paranoid and/or be intentionally pushing ideological rather than epistemological objectives. On the conventionalist view, many conspiracy theoreticians must therefore be part of a conspiracy themselves implying that the conventionalist has constructed a conspiracy theory as an unintended consequence of generally rejecting conspiracy theories.
1. Introduction

1.1 Research questions and aim of the paper

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the epistemic consequences of the conventional wisdom (the epistemological strategy of generally rejecting conspiracy theories prior to investigation). The paper will elaborate on if Pigden’s neutral definition of conspiracy theory (a theory which posits conspiracies) undermines the conventional wisdom and evaluates potential objections to Pigden’s alternative strategy that citizens should be epistemologically obligated to investigate conspiracy theories and to believe them if they appear to be well-founded. However, if conspiracy theories should be tested scientifically like any other theory, then it must be possible to determine when a conspiracy theory is credible. If it turns out that conspiracy theories are for example intrinsically immune to counter examples, then the conventional wisdom might be justified. It is therefore a further objective of the study to investigate what, if anything, distinguishes a promising conspiracy theory from a defunct one.

The research questions can be formulated as follows:

(i) If there are many conspiracies in the world and conspiracy theories reveal and explain those conspiracies, then why should we adopt the general epistemic strategy of rejecting conspiracy theories prior to investigation?

(ii) What, if anything, distinguishes a conspiracy theory which we ought to investigate from one which is defunct?
1.2 Disposition

The paper will first describe and problematize the conventional wisdom and then discuss the epistemic implications of Pigden’s alternative strategy. The paper proceeds by discussing what characterizes a defunct Vis a credible conspiracy theory to determine if there is something special about conspiracy theories that undermines Pigden’s position and justifies the conventional wisdom. The paper concludes by considering the argument that the conventional wisdom may have the unintended consequence of fueling new conspiracy theories about the agendas and intentions of conspiracy theoreticians.

2. The conventional wisdom and Pigden’s critique

This chapter introduces the conventional wisdom and how it has been defended by some of its main proponents. Furthermore, the chapter introduces Pigden’s definition of conspiracy theory and his arguments against the conventional wisdom.

2.1 The conventional wisdom

The conventional wisdom, as defined in this paper, is the epistemic strategy of generally rejecting conspiracy theories prior to investigation on the assumption that investigating such theories in generally irrational. In everyday talk Conspiracy theories tend to be employed by politicians and journalists as a prejudicatory term for exotic theories that shouldn’t be taken seriously. But conspiracies happen all the time, especially in the realm of politics, so why then, ought we in general to reject such theories prior to investigation?

One famous argument, which probably fueled the popularity of the conventional wisdom, is Karl Popper’s argument that conspiracy theories requires that the outcomes of political and social actions must be intentional.

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If outcomes of political, social and economic processes in general tend to be unintentional, then conspiracy theories are often wrongly taking certain outcomes as evidence of intentional acts, when they in fact aren’t. However, Poppers approach can hardly justify a general rejection of conspiracy theories since conspiratorial events such as political assassinations or military covert operations are obviously intentional. Popper’s critique seem applicable only to “grand conspiracy theories” where larger societal processes are explained as products of conspiracies. Hence there is a case for rejecting conspiracy theories such as the White genocide conspiracy theory which postulates that the demographic transformation of Europe and the US is a product of an intention by Western governments to replace the native white population of the West. It’s more plausible, Popper would argue, to view demographic changes due to migration as a long-term structural process which involves a loose network of different actors and decisions that are not coordinated such that they fit the definition of a conspiracy.

The Kalergi Plan that is a popular far right conspiracy theory resembles what Popper had in mind as well. The formation of the EU can be seen as a long-term structural process where the intention of the founders differed from the long-term outcomes as the EU became increasingly more supranational in character. The Kalergi Plan conspiracy theory presupposes that the development of The EU has followed a trajectory consistent with a 1920s pan European manifesto written by Count Kalergi, who according to the theory wanted to create a European super state and dismantle European national identities. It’s true that many of the most notorious and well-known conspiracy theories are “grand conspiracy theories” of the Kalergi type. However, I argue that many influential theories that are conspiracy theories on Pigden’s neutral definition involve intentional outcomes.

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3 https://www.nyatider.nu/forintelsen-av-europa-om-greve-kalergis-paneuropeiska-vision/
An example is the conspiracy theory that Al Qaida conspired against the US to execute the 9/11 attack. Thus, Popper’s argument can at best establish that conspiracy theories about larger social, economic or political processes are intellectually suspicious, but many conspiracy theories are targeting more narrow contexts where outcomes must have been caused by intentional plans.

Neil Levy suggests another route to justify the conventional wisdom by stipulating that a conspiracy theory is an explanation that conflicts with the consensus of epistemic authorities we generally should trust. This is after all a common feature of many major conspiracy theory networks, such as the Flat Earth Society. The 9/11 truth movement also positions itself against the commonly held view that Al Qaeda executed the 9/11 attacks and suggests instead that the US government executed it to legitimize government control and the invasion of Iraq. Nevertheless, there are reasons to doubt the feasibility of a criterion which demands that conspiracy theories must conflict with the official story which I will return to in chapter 3.1.

To summarize, the conventional wisdom obligates epistemological agents to ignore conspiracy theories either on the account that they have an irrational tendency to attach intentions to outcomes which are non-intentional, as Popper argued, or because they run counter to the commonly held view of epistemological authorities whom we ought to trust. Pigden challenges the conventional wisdom by arguing that there is nothing about conspiracy theories as such that makes it generally irrational to investigate and believe them.

We should in fact be epistemologically obligated to investigate the credibility of conspiracy theories, at least when they appear to be well-founded. The next chapter explains and evaluates Pigden’s arguments against the conventional wisdom.

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5 https://wiki.tfes.org/The_Flat_Earth_Wiki
2.2 Challenging the conventional wisdom

According to Pigden, a conspiracy theory is simply a theory which posits a conspiracy. A conspiracy is defined as a secret plan on the part of some group to influence events by partly secret means.\(^6\) Pigden’s definition can be made more precise by adding that a conspiracy has to be coordinated, explicitly intended and the conspirators have to actively try to keep the conspiracy secret. Pigden points out that a conspiracy theory doesn’t cease to be a conspiracy theory once the conspiracy is revealed. Hence the “cock-up theory of history” (the history of failed conspiracies) cannot replace conspiracy theories since “cock-ups” were none the less conspiracies till they failed.\(^7\) Pigden argues that if we accept his neutral definition of conspiracy theory, then we are rationally entitled to both investigate and believe in conspiracy theories if that is what the evidence suggests. If a conspiracy theory happens to be defunct, then it is not because it is a conspiracy theory but because the theory is logically flawed or supported by minimal empirical evidence, which is what we expect from defunct theories in general.

Something should be said about the definition of theory in this context.

In scientific terms a theory has to have clear assumptions, be empirically testable and apply to all items within its realm of explanation. Conspiracy theories rarely generalize beyond particular events expect for new world order conspiracy theories where secret societies such as Illuminati are believed to orchestrate the general policy of the great powers. The Nazi conspiracy theory that there is an international Jewish conspiracy behind the liberal world order fits that description while the 9/11 truth moment conspiracy theory doesn’t. Most conspiracy theories are therefore conspiracy hypothesis rather than theories, but I will use the word theory since that’s what the literature on the subject does, as to avoid confusion.

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\(^7\) Pigden (2007) p, 6.
It doesn’t necessarily follow directly from Pigden’s definition that conspiracy theories aren’t mostly irrational but by combining his definition with a few basic facts Pigden provides an argument for why it is at least sometimes and perhaps often rational to believe in conspiracy theories and irrational to refuse investigation of conspiracy theories in general. Pigden’s argument runs as follows:  

a) A conspiracy theory is a theory that explains some event or events as due in part to a conspiracy, that is, to a secret plan to influence events by partly secret means.

b) Every historically and politically literate person employs the strategy of sometimes believing (and sometimes being prepared to believe) in conspiracy theories in this sense.

c) It is not irrational to employ a belief-forming strategy that every historically and politically literate person employs.

d) Therefore, it is not irrational to employ the strategy of sometimes believing (and sometimes being prepared to believe) in conspiracy theories.

The first premise is a primitive definition of conspiracy theories which avoids the problem of adding criteria rigged to make conspiracy theories come out as irrational. The second premise can be justified on the grounds that history books and news are filled with stories about conspiracies. If one doesn’t believe in those conspiracies, then they must be fabricated, hence part of a massive conspiracy on the part of historians and journalists. Therefore, no matter if the reader believes or disbelieve the content of history books and news, they will end up subscribing to conspiracy theories.

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Pigden’s argument against the conventional wisdom is thus that if it is generally irrational to believe in conspiracy theories, then we arrive at the counterintuitive conclusion that most historically and politically literate people are irrational.

Pigden proceeds to argue that not only is it rational to sometimes believe in conspiracy theories but it is also irrational to systematically refuse to believe in conspiracy theories. The argument is formulated as follows.\(^9\)

a) Many conspiracy theories are not only true but importantly true (the kind of thing that the citizen of a democratic country needs to know about)

b) The strategy of systematically doubting, disbelieving and refusing to investigate conspiracy theories simply because they are conspiracy theories would inhibit us from believing or investigating conspiracy theories.

c) Therefore, the strategy of systematically doubting, disbelieving and refusing to investigate conspiracy theories simply because they are conspiracy theories would inhibit us from believing or investigating some theories that are not only true but importantly true.

d) A belief-forming strategy that would inhibit us from believing or investigating theories that are not only true but importantly true is irrational.

e) The belief-forming strategy of systematically doubting, disbelieving and refusing to investigate conspiracy theories simply because they are conspiracy theories is irrational.

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How does Pigden motivate the premise that many conspiracies are true and more crucially, importantly true? The argument is straightforward. We cannot deny that genocides have been planned and partly executed in secret, even if it appears strange that logistically massive genocides like the Holocaust could have been kept secret.\(^\text{10}\) Hence, theories suggesting that the Holocaust took place are not only true but importantly true due to the human costs involved in not investigating such extreme violations of human rights.

To round up, three major conclusions follow from Pigden’s critique of the conventional wisdom. First, the epistemic principle that most conspiracy theories ought not to be believed or even investigated is absurd unless conspiracy theories are much more likely to be false than their non-conspiratorial rivals, which is not the case according to Pigden.\(^\text{11}\) Second, history as documented by respectable historians is crowded with conspiracies, hence the conventional wisdom undermines history as an academic discipline and renders believers in documented historical events as irrational.\(^\text{12}\) Third, Pigden concludes that most political crimes are products of conspiracies, hence, to not bother investigating or believing in these crimes implies that the criminals would not be held accountable.\(^\text{13}\) In order to evaluate the force of Pigden’s argument against the conventional wisdom the next chapter will consider how proponents of the conventional wisdom might defend their position.

\(^{10}\) Pigden (2007) p, 12.


\(^{13}\) Pigden (2007) p, 16.
3. Discussion
In the discussion I will evaluate the force of Pigden’s critique of the conventional wisdom and examine if there something distinguishing conspiracy theories form other theories such that the conventional wisdom can be motivated as an epistemic strategy.

3.1 Arguments for the conventional wisdom

3.1.1 Conspiracy theories and official stories
In support of the conventional wisdom the conspiracy skeptic can argue along the lines of Levy that a conspiracy theory must contradict the official story and in so doing, tend to develop complex theories built upon tiny aspect of an event (the flag that wavered in the 1969 moon landing footage) while ignoring other aspects of the event where the official story does have explanatory power.\(^\text{14}\)

However, it is not clear that a conspiracy theory has to contradict the official story. Pigden argues that the official story principle is problematic for the following reasons. The principle can either be universal or relativistic and each version comes with serious epistemological costs. On a relativistic account we would be required not to believe in conspiracy theories that contradict the commonly held view and suggest evil intentions by one’s own domestic government. Hence, one would still be allowed to believe in conspiracy theories that contradict the commonly held view elsewhere in the world.\(^\text{15}\) Consequentially, one can be a domestic conspiracy skeptic but an international conspiracy theorist, which appears contradictory. On the other hand, if the principle is universalized then one would not be allowed to believe that North Korea is intentionally oppressing its population, since it contradicts the publicly expected story in North Korea.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{14}\) Wikforss (2017) p, 152.
\(^{15}\) Pigden (2007) p, 22.
\(^{16}\) Pigden (2007) p, 23.
However, there is a problem with Pigden’s argument. As he defines it, the official story appears to be equivalent to the view of the government or public domestic opinion. In contrast, Levy restricts the “official story” to epistemic authorities who we normally should trust. If conspiracy theories must contradict the views of credible epistemic authorities, then Pigden’s critique of the principle loses much of its force.

Yet, even if one limits the official story to what experts on a specific issue agrees upon, problems are still lurking. Coady, who defends Pigden’s position, argues that Levy’s conclusion doesn’t follow logically from his premises when he argues that conspiracy theories are irrational since they contradict official stories that would require us to irrationally reject the agreed conclusions of epistemic experts. According to Coady, Levy equates the statements of epistemic experts with official stories. Therefore, the conclusion that it is almost always rational to believe in the official story doesn’t follow from the premise that there is a class of epistemic authorities who we ought to believe in. As Coady points out, the statements of epistemic authorities rarely have official status. Coady takes the example of Lysenkoism, a campaign by the Soviet government against genetics and other sciences which caused them to be driven underground. Believing in the official story in the 1940s under the Soviet regime would have been at odds with the epistemic authorities that were eventually outlawed. As Coady emphasizes, this is not only true for authoritarian regimes since it is well-documented how US media used unnamed official sources to verify the claim that Iraq had large stockpiles of banned weaponry. To clarify, the official story doesn’t have to be the view of the government but can be institutions that have the power to influence what is widely believed at a particular time and place.

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19 Ibid.
The problem is then that institution can be influential for epidemically bad reasons. It could be that institutions have monopoly on dissemination of information or reward people sympathetic to their ideas efficiently.\textsuperscript{21} Furthermore, Levy’s position can be epistemically dangerous and potentially self-defeating since institutions that provide the official story would be under less pressure to be objective if they knew that the public dogmatically sticks to the principle that official stories should almost always be believed.\textsuperscript{22} However, arguments about official stories is not the end of the road for the conspiracy skeptic. The conspiracy skeptic can argue that even if we accept the neural definition that a conspiracy theory is a theory which posits conspiracies, the conventional wisdom can still be defended if we accept that testimony is a reliable source of knowledge.

\textbf{3.1.2 The testimonial argument against conspiracy theories}

Following Brian Keely, the conspiracy skeptic can argue that to believe in conspiracy theories entail epistemic suicide for the following reason.\textsuperscript{23} Testimony is a major source of knowledge and since conspiracies usually require large amounts of coordinated lying, conspiracy theories call testimony as a source of knowledge into question. To believe in conspiracy theories implies rejecting testimony as a reliable source of knowledge, which would be deeply unwise. Unfortunately for the conspiracy skeptic, the argument can easily be turned against the conventional wisdom. As Pigden argues, vertically every political crime is due to conspiracies, and to adopt the strategy of rejecting most conspiracy theories also means to reject much of recorded history. Since historical documents tend to be based on testimony, the conventional wisdom undermines testimony as a reliable source of knowledge as well.

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\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Keely (1999) pp, 45-60.
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However, the conspiracy skeptic can argue that even if states and media institutions are in fact blackmailing the public to exercise power and control in conspiratorial fashion, there might be better alternative explanations that render conspiracy theories supernumerary. In the next section, I will evaluate the merits of alternative approaches that could account for conspiratorial events without appeal to conspiracy theories. If these alternative approaches turn out to be more plausible, they would threaten the epistemological value of Pigden’s strategy.

### 3.1.3 Alternative approaches

An alternative approach to the type of events that conspiracy theories makes claim to explain is the coincidence theory. This theory holds that conspiracy theories tend to lack strong enough evidence that separate events that might be connected actually are connected such that they point towards a series of planned outcomes.²⁴ Next, there are the institutional theorists like Noam Chomsky who reject conspiracy theories by arguing that to the extent that media misinforms the public it is not due to conspiracies but because of impersonal institutional features that according to Chomsky are products of market forces, hence there is no intentional planning and therefore no conspiracy in action.²⁵ The coincidence theorist might argue that conspiracy theorists are unusually willing to believe in conspiracies and therefore exaggerate the extent to which conspiracies account for observed phenomena. If true, then a worryingly large portion of all conspiracy theories might be false. Unfortunately for the coincidence theorist, the epistemic consequences of being unusually unwilling to believe conspiracies appear to be even more problematic. Conspiracies are after all common practice in the political sphere (The CIA and affiliated institutions arguably conspire on a regular basis).

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²⁴ Coady, David (2007) s, 197.
²⁵ Ibid.
The stance of the coincidence theorists comes with the epistemic cost that whenever a conspiracy takes place, it won’t be detected and can operate behind a smokescreen of ignorance.\textsuperscript{26} I thus conclude that excessive willingness to believe in conspiracies is indeed irrational but so is excessive unwillingness to do so.

Given that conspiracies are common practice in the political sphere, it should be viewed as epistemologically costly to always explain observed patterns of for example public disappearances as a series of coincidences. The institutional theorist rejects conspiracy theories on quite different grounds. What makes conspiracy theories irrational on this view is that they explain for example media propaganda as caused by intentional rather than impersonal institutional structures. Chomsky and Herman argue that structural market forces largely account for why media would deceive the public on politically important issues.

Since the definition of a conspiracy is that a group of people intentionally undertake secret plans to affect the course of events, institutionalist explanations falls outside the definition of conspiracy theories. However, Coady argues that conspiracy theories are not inconsistent with intuitionist models of explanations since some institutions are products of conspiracies. The founding fathers of the US conspired against the English colonialist to later form the first US government.\textsuperscript{27} Institutional factors can also be seen as structural conditions that make conspiracies possible but are not themselves sufficient to explain outcomes that require intended coordinated action. Institutionalists might also overstate the extent to which individuals are a direct product of their institutional position, hence institutions might best be seen as constraints rather than determinants of individual or group action.

\textsuperscript{26} Coady, (2007) s, 197.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
Hence, Chomsky’s and Herman’s institutionalist “propaganda model” is not necessarily an alternative explanation but rather finds itself further back in the causal chain than conspiracy theories that start out with the preferences of the conspirators as givens.

To summarize, coincidence theorists can argue that conspiracy theories generally connect events where empirically evident connections are missing, but history shows that conspiracies are common practice and an unusual willingness to believe in conspiracy theories therefore appear to be an unappealing option. Institutionalists on the other hand argue that the structural features of institutions can explain political deception and propaganda without assuming intentional plotting, but institutions are formed by the intentions of the agent as much as the intentions of agent are formed by institutions. Therefore, conspiracy theories are not incompatible with institutionalist theories.

Nonetheless, the conspiracy skeptic can argue that while scientific theories are investigated by recognized experts with extensive training and knowledge there are no such recognized experts in the realm of conspiracy theories. Hence it will be up to the public to decide which conspiracy theories shall be investigated. If the public is not well-trained to judge the epistemological status of conspiracy theories, they might end up expanding their frontier of false beliefs contrary to Pigden’s conclusion. The problem invites the question of what characterizes a defunct conspiracy theory and if these characteristics are similar enough to those of defunct theories in the established sciences. If not, maybe the conspiracy skeptic has a case for general suspicions towards conspiracy theories on the grounds that they, in a bad way, differ from the theories of the established sciences. I will turn to this issue in the following chapter.
3.2 The good, the bad and the ugly

3.2.1 Conspiracy theories and counter evidence

If conspiracy skeptics can show that conspiracy theories are generally insensitive to counter evidence, then there is a case for suggesting that the public can easily be misled into believing in defunct conspiracy theories once obligated to investigate them. Consider The great replacement conspiracy theory launched by Renault Camus which assumes that a global network of liberal elites ranging from the European union to western government are plotting to replace native Europeans with people from other cultures to destroy western civilization. The theory is intuitively farfetched but what would be accepted as evidence against the theory? If academic authorities would conclude that no replacement of western culture is taking place and even if it does it`s not because of any global plot, then the conspiracy theorist can argue that it just shows that western academic institutions are puppets of the global cosmopolitan conspiracy. There are similar tendencies in the established sciences whenever a dedicated theoretician attempts to save his theory by introducing ad hoc hypotheses that can account for data deviating from the predictions of the theory.

Wikforss argues that conspiracy theories tend to have inbuilt *underminers*, implying that counter evidence is explained away as being a part of the conspiracy.\(^{28}\) The question is if *underminers* are general features of conspiracy theories or if they are better understood as symptoms of defunct conspiracy theories. Many of the most well-known and exotic conspiracy apparently feature *underminers*. New world order conspiracy theories typically assume that all major governments and universities around the world are part of a global conspiracy to enslave mankind.

\(^{28}\) Wikforss (2017) p. 152.
Hence, no counterexamples that comes out of established research institutions would be accepted as legitimate. Such conspiracy theories might therefore be rejected by default on the basis that they are not falsifiable.

However, *underminers* seem to be relevant only for conspiracy theories that contradict the commonly held view, and conspiracy theories about conspiracies that have not been revealed yet. On Pigden’s definition any theory which explains how and why Caesar was assassinated will be a conspiracy theory. Nearly all historians agree that Caesar was killed by a group of conspirators and the assassination plans are now known. *Underminers* appear absent in theories about the assassination of Caesar since the conspiracy was revealed and now accepted as fact by most historians. *Underminers* therefore mainly apply to conspiracy theories that (a) suggest a conspiracy that is presently ongoing and has not has yet been revealed and (b) contradict the commonly held view by epistemic authorities.

Importantly, *underminers* are only general features of conspiracy theories if Pigden’s definition is wrong. To see why, consider theories which suggests that the US government was behind the attack. Such theories tend to be depicted as conspiracy theories while the theory suggesting that Al Qaeda was behind the attack is considered not to be a conspiracy theory since it is commonly accepted and well-supported. However, if Al Qaeda was behind the attack then the attack was certainly due to Al Qaeda conspiring against the United States. If Al Qaeda was behind the attack, then the 9/11 conspiracy was blown shortly after 9/11. Therefore, *underminers* will not feature in the “Official story about 9/11 conspiracy theory” since there aren’t any counterexamples that have to be explained away by reference to a conspiracy.
It is a common mistake to believe that whenever a theory is commonly accepted and well-supported it is not any longer a conspiracy theory. However, once we recognize that well-supported official stories can be conspiracy theories, we also realize that much of what we believe to be characteristics of conspiracy theories in general are most of the time characteristics of bad conspiracy theories in particular.

While *underminers* might not capture a general problem for conspiracy theories they are valuable indicators for when a conspiracy theory should be taken seriously. In Popperian fashion, a conspiracy theory must show what empirical evidence would in principle falsify it. If the answer is none, then the theory should be considered problematic since no empirical test could tell us under what conditions the theory is implausible. Interestingly, there are *underminers*, although of a different sort, in various social science theories. Those social science theories also have strong conspiracy theoretical elements. Consider neorealism which is a theoretical approach to international relations that explain state behavior as a function of the military balance of power between states. However, states that invade their neighbors will not officially argue that they need to act to tilt the balance of power in their favor but will cover up their real intentions with liberal rhetoric.

According to neorealism, the US entered WW2 to prevent Germany from dominating Europe, not to defend human rights and liberal values. The official rhetoric suggests otherwise, but that’s just how international relations work says the realist. ²⁹ *Underminers* are also integrated in postmodern discourse theories which assume science itself to reflect power-relations in society. On this view, counterexamples in science can only strengthen one discourse at the expense of another and can never lead to objective scientific progress. ³⁰

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²⁹ See for example: Mearsheimer (2014) The tragedy of great power politics.
The postmodernist could point to how madness has been defined historically to justify isolation and treatment of behavior deviating from norms that benefit certain social power relations. Interestingly, scientists that identify with the positivist tradition in epistemology tend to argue that postmodern perspectives are at odds with science and ideals of objectivity, much like the conventionalist would argue that conspiracy theories are at odds with scientific rationalism. Nonetheless, postmodern perspectives are widely accepted in the humanities and social sciences. Keeley and Dentith argue that the question of how we know when a conspiracy theory is true or false does not reveal any crucial difference between conspiracy theories and science theories in general. Instead, the right question to ask is how we know which conspiracy theories call for investigation.31

Conspiracy theories tend to be improvised knowledge which raises the following epistemological problem. In the established empirical sciences there is a well-defined group of experts and methods the rest of us are supposed to rely on. This is not true in the same way for the kind of phenomena conspiracy theories are concerned with. Even though there are official agencies and reports that can operate as source material for a conspiracy theory there is still no group of experts that we recognize as legitimate conspiracy theorists. Hence, it is unclear to the citizens who can be considered a trustworthy conspiracy theorist.32 Could agnosticism towards conspiracy theories solve the problem? Keely argues that agnosticism about a claim is not necessarily called for when corroborating evidence is not forthcoming. However, if the process of investigation is more haphazard and fraught with challenges, as the case often is with exotic conspiracy theories, agnosticism might be a preferable approach.33

31 Keeley and Dentith (draft).
32 Keeley and Dentith (draft).
33 Keeley and Dentith (draft).
Agnosticism can still be consistent with Pigden’s strategy if it only calls for agnosticism in the process of investigation until the facts are settled. However, the conspiracy skeptic can argue that a common method for checking the reliability of sources is to investigate if several independent sources arrive at the same conclusions. The problem is that many conspiracy theory networks do arrive at the same conclusions but turn out not to be independent of each other.  

Could an epistemic duty to investigate conspiracy theories lead to public trust in false conspiracy theories? What if many conspiracy theory networks turn out to exploit public mistrust in media and trust in the method of equating trustworthiness with the number of sources confirming each other’s conclusion, although they are ideologically affiliated? I will turn to this issue next.

### 3.2.2 Conspiracy theories and cognitive deceptions

Wikforss argues that many sectarian and ideologically driven conspiracy theory networks exploit human cognitive weaknesses by appealing to public mistrust in media and make sure their conclusions are confirmed by other similar internet-based networks that promote likeminded ideas. Such networks can easily gain trust by people who deeply mistrust established media and the problem is reinforced by *hostile media effects*. The *hostile media effect* can be defined as the tendency to interpret media as systematically advantaging proponents of the ideologies they support and downplay arguments from opponent of those ideologies. The tendency to trust sources confirmed by other sources as if they are independent of each other when they are not combined with *hostile media effects* can lure the public into trusting problematic conspiracy theories.

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36 Ibid.
On the other hand, Wikforss also points out that there have been historical occasions where states have undertaken projects in line with wild conspiracy theories. One example is the US-government MK Ultra project during the 1950s, where the CIA conducted painful experiments on test subjects to see if mindreading was possible.\textsuperscript{37} Wikforss then goes on to argue that more “genuine” conspiracy theories after all can be recognized by their appeal to minimal evidence and minimal weight to counterevidence.\textsuperscript{38} If minimal evidence is thought to be a characteristic of genuine conspiracy theories than it seems like another attempt to defend the conclusions of the conventional wisdom. Sticking to the neutral definition, one can instead stipulate that maximum weight to supporting evidence and minimal weight to counter evidence is a characteristic of bad conspiracy theories, such as the moon landing conspiracy theory and secret society conspiracy theories claiming that the US president is a lizard.\textsuperscript{39}

Consider that authoritarian states conspire against the public on a regular basis by spreading propaganda, not to make the public trust false statements by the government but to the contrary to undermine public belief in anything that media says.\textsuperscript{40} Wikforss argues that Trump could be interpreted as using similar strategies of creating public mistrust in media to gain political influence.\textsuperscript{41} Interestingly, to assume that the US government intentionally misleads the public is a bigtime conspiracy theory and one that could exploit the cognitive weakness of citizens that are convinced a priori that Trump is a threat to US democracy. It could also turn out be an importantly true conspiracy theory which we ought to investigate, hence, it’s easy to see how the conventional wisdom can backfire.

\textsuperscript{37} Wikforss (2017) p, 155.  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{39} Wikforss (2017) p, 88.  
\textsuperscript{40} Wikforss (2017) p, 162.  
\textsuperscript{41} Wikforss (2017) p, 164.
To summarize chapter 3.2 *underminers* are common features of conspiracy theories about conspiracies that are yet to be publicly reviled and that contradicts the conventional view on the event that the theory is supposed to explain. The idea that *underminers* captures a general problem for conspiracy theories appear to be contingent on the view that once a theory is generally accepted and well-supported, it cannot be a conspiracy theory. Furthermore, several influential theories in the social sciences and humanities assume conspiracies to be a natural part of the domain the theory is concerned with. Such theories undermine counterexamples by suggesting that societal elites would never officially reveal their real intentions, and even academics that are supposed to investigate the intentions of elites might be caught up in discourses that favor the interests of those elites. Lastly, agnosticism might be a preferable approach when tendencies of underdetermination are present, but such strategy doesn’t conflict with the general idea that there are importantly true conspiracy theories that calls for investigation even if we might end up not believing them due to their fuzzy epistemological status. To make the best possible case for conspiracy skepticism, let’s assume for the sake of argument that most conspiracy theories are false. Wouldn’t the conventional wisdom then prevent epistemic agents from systematic deception? Well, not if turns out that conspiracy skepticism itself rests on conspiracy theories which will be the topic of the last chapter.

### 3.2.3 When Conspiracy skepticism becomes a conspiracy theory

At first glance, it appears as if the conventional wisdom implies a general rejection of conspiracy theories prior to investigation. However, it turns out that conspiracy skepticism has conspiracy theoretical foundations. If conspiracy theories are generally misleading, then conspiracy theoreticians must be pursuing ideological rather than epistemological objectives. Since conspiracy theory networks tend to present their theories as “the truth revealed” it follows from the conventional wisdom that conspiracy theory networks must be pushing a hidden agenda, hence we have a conspiracy skeptic conspiracy theory.
To illustrate my point, I distinguish between first order and second order conspiracy theories. First order conspiracy theories (FOCs) are theories about physical events that can be defined as conspiracies. FOCs can be empirically tested and whether they turn out to be true or false doesn’t matter for the definition. Second order conspiracy theories (SOCs) are conspiracy theories about conspiracy theories. SOCs are biproducts of the conventional wisdom which can be illustrated with the following example: Let’s assume that Edward Snowden was right and that the Patriot Act which granted the US government the right to surveil the US population on grand scale was enacted to maintain the supremacy of the government.

Let’s further assume that Snowden created a network of likeminded people to push his case. Then, If Bloggs refuse to believe in the Snowden community conspiracy theory on the grounds that a democratically elected government couldn’t possibly have such malicious intentions, then Bloggs have developed a SOC. The SOC in this case is to believe that the Snowden community intentionally tries to make the US government appear illegitimate for personal gain or recognition, when it is in fact is only telling the truth. Hence, by rejecting the Snowden conspiracy theory Bloggs has created a new conspiracy theory. Even if Bloggs did not believe that the Snowden community had a hidden agenda Bloggs would still wrongly believe that a true theory is false. Bloggs belief would be based on the a priori assumption that Snowden’s story is one of those irrational conspiracy theories flourishing in today’s digitalized world.

Besides potentially leading to belief in new irrational conspiracy theories about the purpose of importantly true conspiracy theories, the conventional wisdom can also fuel the survivability of conspiracies in the following way. A common objection to conspiracy theories is that if for example the moon landing of 1969 never took place 400 000 government employees would have had to engage in coordinated lying according to rigorous estimates.\(^{42}\)

\(^{42}\) Grimes, D.R. 2016.” On the viability of conspiratorial beliefs”. PLOS ONE 11 (3).
But if the conventional strategy is adopted, then a fair number of officials could come out and say that the moon landing was fake and yet would not be taken seriously. Likewise, ex-militaries who worked at Area 51 would hardly convince the conventionalist that aliens have been held captive by the US military since everyone who believe such stories must be irrational conspiracy theorists. Therefore, massive conspiracies could survive even if members engage in eavesdropping since they wouldn’t be trusted even if they told the truth. The prevalence of the conventional wisdom as an epistemic strategy can thus explain how a massive conspiracy that should require extensive coordinated lying could survive even if members of the conspiracy revealed the truth to the public.

It’s important to emphasize that the conventional wisdom doesn’t entail universal rejection of conspiracy theories. The conventionalist argument is that most but not all conspiracy theories are irrational, and one should therefore generally reject them prior to investigation. However, conspiracy theories are sometimes and maybe even often rejected not because the evidence suggests that they are defunct but because the normative beliefs of the investigator makes the conspiracy theory investigated appear implausible a priori. To firmly committed liberals, it can appear counterintuitive that democratically elected governments would intentionally abuse human rights but if it turned out to be true, then the conventional wisdom reinforces normative structures that prevents important facts from entering the realm of public knowledge.
4. Conclusion

The paper has argued that the conventional wisdom can only be a successful epistemic strategy if the definition of a conspiracy theory is rigged to make conspiracy theories come out as irrational. If a conspiracy theory requires that the conspiracy is a secret for everyone outside the conspiracy, and that the theory must conflict with the official view, then conventionalists have a case. However, such a definition appears to rather characterize defunct conspiracy theories then conspiracy theories in general.

Bad conspiracy theories tend to explain away counterevidence as part of the conspiracy, hence containing *underminers*. Furthermore, bad conspiracy theories tend to contradict the official view and have a narrow empirical focus on some part of an event not sufficiently accounted for by the official story. However, there are many officially accepted conspiracy theories. The 9/11 attack and the Water Gate incident were results of conspiratorial planning and execution that didn’t remain secret and have officially accepted explanations. Therefore, the conventional wisdom appears unwise even if the definition of a conspiracy theory is limited to conspiracy theories in conflict with the official story and for which the conspiracy the theory is supposed to explain is only known by the conspiracy theorist and the conspirators themselves. If the conventionalist retreats to a neutral definition of conspiracy theories, then many importantly true conspiracy theories that are both consistent with official stories and have historical importance threaten to be rejected. Therefore, it appears to be a more promising epistemological strategy to evaluate conspiracy theories by the same standards as any academic theory. However, the improvised nature of many conspiracy theories and the way some conspiracy theory networks appeal to human cognitive weakness can make it difficult for the average citizen to discriminate between credible and defunct conspiracy theories.
However, distinguishing between promising and defunct theories has historically turned out to be empirically difficult even in the realm of physics. Newton’s theory of gravity provided accurate predictions for centuries before it was discovered that it couldn’t account for the effects of space-time relativity. Furthermore, the epistemological costs of generally rejecting conspiracy theories a priori arguably outweighs the benefits. History shows that governments and corporations conspire on a regular basis to gain power and influence. To generally reject conspiracy theories prior to investigation therefore limits the realm of potential knowledge available to epistemic agents even if probing into the world of conspiracy theories implies deception at times.

As a contribution to the philosophy of conspiracy theories the paper identifies a further cost that comes with conspiracy skepticism. Surprisingly, conspiracy skepticism can fuel new conspiracy theories about how conspiracy theorists fabricate evidence to supports ideological agendas or gain recognition. If a 1950s conspiracy theorist would suggest that the US government conducted painful mindreading experiments on US citizens, the conventionalist would most likely interpret that conspiracy theorist as just another paranoid conspiracy theorist who wants to undermine the legitimacy of the US government. Thus, the conventional wisdom can make it easier for politically dangerous conspiracies to survive since anyone who informs the public about the conspiracy will be perceived as irrational and not to be trusted. To round up, the paper has hopefully clarified some common misconceptions about conspiracy theories and provided some philosophically interesting arguments for why conspiracy skepticism might be epistemologically costly. In everyday talk, conspiracy theories are often understood as empirically problematic theories in conflict with the official story. Once we recognize that a conspiracy theory need not be unscientific, nor contradict the official story, it turns out that the conventional wisdom is not that wise.
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