



<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Particularism and the Conventional Wisdom Revisited

Scott Hill, Wichita State University, hillscottandrew@gmail.com

Hill, Scott. 2025. "Particularism and the Conventional Wisdom Revisited." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 14 (3): 12–17. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-9Dt>.

I thank Kurtis Hagen for his reply (2025). It is valuable for people with very different perspectives like us to candidly lay out our disagreements. While Hagen makes several points that merit engagement, I focus here on Hagen’s defense of Charles Pigden’s diagnosis of the Blair example and Hagen’s argument that I have not met Pigden’s (2007) challenge.

Pigden’s Blair Example

Charles Pigden discussed a case in which Tony Blair was pressed by the media on a document in which George W. Bush allegedly suggested bombing *Al Jazeera*. Blair suggested that the allegations were a conspiracy theory. I argued that Pigden misdiagnosed the example. I said that although Blair called the idea that Bush considered bombing *Al Jazeera* a ‘conspiracy theory’, no one was moved by Blair’s comment to dismiss the relevant idea. And the only reason the document allegedly confirming the allegations didn’t come to light, if Pigden’s speculations are correct, is that Blair ordered the document to be classified. So the problem is Blair’s power to classify whatever documents he wants and not Blair’s use of conspiracy theory talk. Pigden’s example, therefore, isn’t significant evidence of the dangers of the commonsense pejorative account of conspiracy theories. And it provides us with no reason to revise the definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ so that it is not pejorative. Hagen (2025, 43) says:

Hill implies that the term “conspiracy theory” signals that the theory is preposterous (Hill 2024, 50). At the same time, he doubts that calling a theory a “conspiracy theory” is an attempt to get people to dismiss the theory on that account. He writes, “I have yet to see evidence that such claims are dismissed *because* they are counted as conspiracy theories.” (Hill 2024, 50). Really? What exactly does Hill think Blair was trying to do when he said, “But honestly, I mean, conspiracy theories,” if not to dismiss the accusation and encourage others to do likewise?

To clarify: I did not deny that people sometimes use ‘conspiracy theory’ in “an *attempt* to get people to dismiss the theory” as Hagen puts it. Instead, I denied, and continue to deny, that Pigden’s example provides evidence that using the phrase in this way *succeeds* in causing people to dismiss it. As to what I think Blair was trying to do: I think he was grasping for something to say when pressed, had nothing substantial, so he just blurted out this line about conspiracy theories. The reporter then highlighted Blair’s comment and mocked him for it.

Zooming out from the Blair example for a moment: Wood (2016) conducted a series of experiments in which he tested whether calling something a ‘conspiracy theory’ reduces belief in it. He found that it didn’t. I know of no other convincing studies in which this was tested. Show me a convincing study with results that conflict with the results of Wood’s studies and I will happily change my view.

Returning to the specific example about Blair: Obviously Blair was hoping the media would dismiss the relevant claim about Bush. But if you look closely at the example and read Pigden’s source, Blair’s hope was completely impotent. The reporters he was talking to did

not believe him and painted him as weak, pathetic, and not to be believed. So it really isn't an example in which calling something a 'conspiracy theory' reduces belief in it. Hagen (2025, 40) also says:

Hill ... treats this as if it means that politicians can thereby *successfully* shut down debate *completely* and *at will*. But nobody suggested anything that strong. Instead, "conspiracy theory" is a term that politicians, and others, can use to attempt to devalue unwelcome viewpoints and shut down debate, with mixed results. Sometimes all that is needed is to dampen critique to some degree for some period of time. Attempts to discourage critiques of the Iraq war by suggesting that it was substantially about oil fits this model. After all, the war did take place.¹

Assume Hagen is right about this. Nevertheless, Pigden's Blair example fails to provide support even for the more modest claim that calling something a conspiracy theory merely dampens critique to a small degree. In the Blair example, it didn't dampen anything. The author of the article highlighted Blair using conspiracy theory talk to illustrate how pathetic Blair's response was. Even if Particularists merely claim that 'conspiracy theory' just slightly dampens critique, the Blair example offers no support for their claim. Hagen continues:

The reason Blair would make such an attempt is because he believed he could rely on a common (at least ostensible) understanding of conspiracy theories as theories that should not be taken seriously. That is what it means to suggest that Blair's remark is an appeal to "the conventional wisdom." The degree of significance attributable to such delegitimizing strategies, such as dismissing legitimate critiques by calling them "conspiracy theories," is unknown.

I think that if Particularists retreat to saying that the degree to which such techniques are successful is unknown, then the anti-Particularist has won. Particularists claim that the normal pejorative use of 'conspiracy theory' should be revised because of its bad consequences. If someone tells me I should stop drinking coffee because it causes cancer, and when pressed for evidence they say that the degree to which it causes cancer is unknown, I would not be moved to stop drinking coffee. In the same way, when Particularists tell me that the pejorative definition of 'conspiracy theory' needs to be revised because of its bad consequences, but then when pressed for evidence they say that the degree to which it has these bad consequences is unknown, I am not moved to support changing the definition of 'conspiracy theory'. Furthermore, I would say that in Pigden's Blair case we *do* know the degree to which this tactic was successful. It was successful to degree zero. Again, I encourage the interested reader to take a look at Pigden's source.²

Pigden's Challenge

¹ I disagree with Hagen's assertion regarding critiques of the Iraq war. Please refer to—<https://social-epistemology.com/2022/11/10/substantive-disagreement-in-the-le-monde-debate-and-beyond-replies-to-deutz-and-dentith-basham-and-hewitt-scott-hill/#comments>—the comments section for Hill (2022).
²<https://web.archive.org/web/20071017114640/http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=%2Fnews%2F2005%2F11%2F27%2Fnjaz27.xml&sSheet=%2Fportal%2F2005%2F11%2F27%2Fixportal.html>

Pigden challenged defenders of the Conventional Wisdom to offer a definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ that has “roughly the right extension” and such that “neither investigating nor believing conspiracy theories makes epistemic sense.” I don’t think you have to offer such a definition to vindicate the Conventional Wisdom. This is because the idea that “neither investigating nor believing conspiracy theories makes epistemic sense” is not a part of the Conventional Wisdom. The Conventional Wisdom is that MK Ultra is a conspiracy theory. The Conventional Wisdom is that it makes epistemic sense to investigate and believe MK Ultra. So, Pigden’s challenge to the Conventional Wisdom attributes to it a commitment that it doesn’t have. And so you can vindicate the Conventional Wisdom by pointing out that Particularists mischaracterize it. Hagen (2025, 40) thinks I am mistaken:

When Hill accuses Particularists of misrepresenting the conventional wisdom, he misrepresents what we mean by the phrase “the conventional wisdom.”... Hill... writes, “Particularists make it sound like the conventional wisdom prohibits belief in and investigation of conspiracy theories” (Hill 2024b, 45; emphasis added) ... Hill must be referring to me, and to Pigden, who I quote in this regard. But Hill’s interpretation of the implication of what is meant by “the conventional wisdom” is an exaggeration that constitutes a straw man. ... The conventional wisdom, as Pigden and I described it, doesn’t prohibit anything. And we never suggested that it does. Indeed, the idea that Generalism prohibits belief and investigation hardly even make sense. Rather, the conventional wisdom is the view that conspiracy theories “should be neither believed nor investigated,” and they are “not worth discussing” (Pigden 2007, 219; see also Hagen 2024, 13). The conventional wisdom, so understood, is implicit in the common pejorative usage of the term. Incidentally, the fact that the pejorative use is so common justifies referring to the assumption underlying such usage as “the conventional wisdom.”

I think Particularists do, in fact, sometimes say what I have attributed to them. Consider the first two lines of Pigden’s (2007, 219) paper “Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom.” Remember, this is the paper in which Pigden issues his challenge. He (2007, 1) says:

Conspiracy theories should be neither believed nor investigated - that is the conventional wisdom. I argue that it is sometimes permissible both to investigate and to believe.

Now, in this passage, Pigden is suggesting that he can refute the Conventional Wisdom merely by showing that it is sometimes permissible to investigate and believe in conspiracy theories. But showing that it is sometimes permissible only refutes the Conventional Wisdom if the Conventional Wisdom is that it is never permissible. So the passage doesn’t make any sense unless Pigden thinks the Conventional Wisdom prohibits belief in conspiracy theories. Pigden (2007, 18) also says things like this:

[Y]ou *must not* believe that Bush considered bombing al-Jazeera (let alone that the earlier bombings of alJazeera offices were intentional) for that theory involves evil schemes on the part of a Western leader and contradicts the official view, which is that this allegation is 'outlandish' (BBC News 22/11/05).

Again, Pigden's use of the phrase "you *must not* believe" seems like a strict prohibition on belief.

But let's assume I am mistaken. Perhaps what Hagen is suggesting is that while my term 'prohibit' implies an absolute ban, the terminology Pigden uses implies only some *prima facie* suspicion. If that is what Hagen is suggesting, then I think Pigden's Challenge is still easy to meet. Pigden, and the Particularists, try to refute the Conventional Wisdom by giving lists of alleged conspiracy theories that it makes epistemic sense to investigate and believe. But if the Conventional Wisdom is only to regard conspiracy theories with some *prima facie* suspicion, then the existence of conspiracy theories that it makes epistemic sense to investigate and believe would not in any way be a problem for the Conventional Wisdom. And so the Particularists lists of alleged conspiracy theories would not in any way be a problem for the Conventional Wisdom.

Hagen (2025, 37-38) also says:

Regarding whether "the conventional wisdom" is a misnomer, some further clarifications are necessary. First, attentiveness to the Particularist literature reveals that the primary concern is with the opinion of (ostensibly) sophisticated people, not the opinion of the folk, as Hill seems to think (Hill 2024, 46). I've repeatedly indicated that my concern is with the Generalist attitude of people who take themselves to be sophisticated, as opposed to ordinary laypersons. In the essay to which Hill is responding, I specifically targeted "the way they are generally treated by (ostensibly) sophisticated people in the academy and those appearing in the mainstream media" (Hagen 2024, 17).

Assume Hagen is right that when Particularists talk about 'the Conventional Wisdom' they are not talking about what the folk believe but only what the media and academics believe. Nevertheless, in the earlier paper, I denied *both* the claim that the folk are Generalists *and* "that there is a significant number of implicit or silent Generalists among scholars or the media as Hagen suggests." After all, it is not just the folk who think MK Ultra is a conspiracy theory and that it makes sense to believe in and investigate it.³ It is also academics and the media.^{4,5} And in Pigden's Blair example, it is the media and not the folk who are reported as being unmoved by Blair calling the claim about Bush a 'conspiracy theory'. So my argument goes through even if the Conventional Wisdom just concerns what

³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conspiracy_Theory_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conspiracy_Theory_(film)), <https://history.howstuffworks.com/history-vs-myth/11-unbelievable-conspiracy-theories-that-were-actually-true.htm#pt2>.

⁴ https://books.google.com/books?id=qMIDrggs8TsC&newbks=0&hl=en&source=newbks_fb.

⁵ <https://bigthink.com/surprising-science/how-the-cia-used-ld-to-try-and-find-a-mind-control-drug/>.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_Committee.

‘sophisticated’ people and not lay people believe about conspiracy theories. Hagen also (2025, 39) says:

Pigden can’t have mischaracterized what he himself defined “the conventional wisdom” to mean in this context (unless he was inconsistent, which doesn’t seem to be the case). When Pigden says two conditions must be satisfied “to vindicate the conventional wisdom” he does not mean that they must be satisfied to *vindicate whatever view happens to be commonly accepted*, but rather to vindicate the view that “neither investigating nor believing in conspiracies makes epistemic sense.” This is very clear. And it implies that this is what “the conventional wisdom” refers to in this discussion. If Hill is merely complaining about the phrase, suggesting that it is a misnomer because that view is not actually commonly held, that would not address the challenge even if he were right. Indeed, it is tacitly acknowledging that the challenge probably cannot be met (emphasis in original).

I don’t see myself as merely complaining about the phrase Pigden uses. I see myself as presenting a dilemma: If Pigden is using ‘Conventional Wisdom’ to talk about something either the folk or the elites believe, then his claim about the Conventional Wisdom is false and so his challenge is easily met. On the other hand, if Pigden is using ‘Conventional Wisdom’ to mean something that no one believes, then the fact that no one has met his challenge is insignificant.

Compare: Imagine I claim that the Conventional Wisdom about math is that $2 + 2 = 5$. Imagine I issue a challenge to mathematicians and the public to prove that $2 + 2 = 5$. After decades, I proudly proclaim that no one has ever met my challenge. It would be fair for someone to point out that I have mischaracterized the Conventional Wisdom about math. No mathematicians believe it. No members of the public believe it. And in this way my challenge would be trivially met. Now suppose I reply by saying that I am using ‘Conventional Wisdom about math’ to mean the view that $2 + 2 = 5$ whether or not anyone actually believes it. This would rob my challenge of significance. Perhaps there is some respect in which my challenge can’t be met. But it would be a challenge to prove an obviously false view that no one holds. In the same way, I think if Pigden is, as Hagen suggests, using ‘Conventional Wisdom’ to mean something no one believes, then Pigden’s challenge is as irrelevant to the epistemology and politics of conspiracy theories as my challenge to prove that $2 + 2 = 5$ is irrelevant to math.

So, I would ask two questions of Particularists who wish to make use of Pigden’s Challenge. First, if they maintain that some people, whether it be the folk or the “elite”, believe the Conventional Wisdom, what is their evidence? Second, if Particularists maintain that no one believes the Conventional Wisdom, why is Pigden’s Challenge important?

Conclusion

To be clear, I am making two very specific points.

First, I am making a narrow point about the Tony Blair example. My point is that the Blair example provides no evidence for the Particularist claim that the common pejorative understanding of conspiracy theories is dangerous and that the definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ should for that reason be revised. Maybe Particularists have better examples. If so, I am happy to see them and be refuted.

Second, I am making the point that Pigden's Challenge can be met either because Pigden mischaracterizes the Conventional Wisdom or because it is a challenge to a view that no one really believes. Even if I am right about the Blair example and even if I am right about Pigden's challenge, that does not settle matters. It might be that Particularists have other, better arguments for their position.

References

- Hagen, Kurtis. 2025. “Generalist Denialism and the Particularist Critique.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 14 (2): 35–45.
- Hagen, Kurtis. 2024. “Particularism as the Corrective to the Conventional Wisdom Regarding Conspiracy Theories.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 13 (12): 12–24.
- Hill, Scott. 2024. “Particularism and the Conventional Wisdom.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 13 (12): 44–51.
- Hill, Scott. 2022. “Substantive Disagreement in the *Le Monde* Debate and Beyond: Replies to Duetz and Dentith, Basham, and Hewitt.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (11): 18–25.
- Pigden, Charles. 2007. “Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom.” *Episteme* 4 (2): 219–232.
- Wood, Michael J. 2016. “Some Dare Call It Conspiracy: Labeling Something a Conspiracy Theory Does Not Reduce Belief in It.” *Political Psychology* 37 (5): 695–705.