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Corresponding Conspiracy Theory Theorists, Parts I–III

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## Corresponding Conspiracy Theory Theorists, Part I

**P** (Patrick Stokes): Was there a particular aspect of the paper though that would serve as a good jumping-off point to structure the discussion?<sup>1</sup>

**M** (M R. X. Dentith): What has fascinated me about your work on conspiracy theory theory thus far is both how close and yet how far away we are. Generally, I think there is something interesting and important about taking seriously the moral considerations of accusing people of being involved in conspiracies: certainly I think we both agree that Alex Jones is, in Australasian parlance, a *drongo*,<sup>2</sup> and one of the reasons why he's such a drongo is because he has recklessly (if not falsely) accused people (like the families of the children slaughtered in the Sandy Hook shootings) of being involved in covering up a false flag event. I think you and Juha Räikkä (2009) raise the valuable point that we cannot separate out the social practice from the epistemic process of conspiracy theorising. Yet I also think that your solution (the 'reluctant' part of *reluctant particularism*) ends up being an untenable argument for a kind of generalism.

In your article (2023) you reply to Rico Hauswald (2023) about how introducing new alternative explanations into a conversation changes what we think the relevant alternatives are. Your reply is interesting because rather than focus on the (new) alternatives, you are interested in how the alternative explanations are generated: maybe the best explanation of the recent odd behaviour of Maureen—a behaviour that Maurice hasn't considered—is that she is having an affair. But Maurice's friend, who suggests this previously unconsidered alternative, is doing something more than idle speculation when they suggest this: this friend is implying that Maureen is, if not unfaithful, capable of infidelity (for why else would the friend suggest the possibility?).

You take it that this means the friend has impugned Maureen, and we should be careful of entertaining such accusations because such an accusation is irreversible: once its made, there's no taking it back. Once you think someone is capable of infidelity (an act most people think harms another), then you've accused someone of *at least being capable* of acting immorally. You link this concern to what you take to be fundamental of the debate between particularists and generalists:

But remember that the disagreement between generalists and particularists concerns whether we should *entertain* conspiracy explanations at least long enough to investigate them, not the broader question of whether we should *believe* them. The answer to that question will look different based on very different, and ultimately untestable, assumptions about how societies work, just as whether it's reasonable to wonder whether one's spouse is cheating will ultimately depend not on statistics about the prevalence of adultery, but about our relationship to the other person (2023, 8).

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<sup>1</sup> This correspondence started out as a reply piece to Stokes (2023).

<sup>2</sup> A *drongo* is someone who is not just stupid but very stupid indeed.

I want to tease out where we differ on what role accusations play, and what they entail, in order to understand where we differ (in part a project which started in our respective pieces in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously* (Stokes 2018a; Dentith 2018)). I want to start small here, and build up to the question of what, exactly, conspiracy theories play in this discussion. So, I want to start with something I'm sure we've both done: entertaining and then potentially accusing someone—whether it being a student or another academic—of plagiarism. After all, as academics and teachers we have to be cognisant of the possibility that the work we are reading is plagiarised, and thus it should always be in the back of our minds. That is, we *ought* to be entertaining the idea that plagiarism is a live option when, say, reading a student's work. Sometimes, and hopefully very rarely, we also have to formally accuse someone of plagiarism (an issue which has become even more difficult in the era of Large Language Models being used to generate work which isn't that of the student but also isn't obviously *cut-and-paste* plagiarism either).

If I accuse a student of cut-and-pasting, say, Lee Basham's work on toxic truths, or you accuse me of plagiarising an idea from Charles Pigden and then presenting it as novel, then someone is impugned in such a way that cannot be taken back. Plagiarism is considered a serious moral failing, and accusing someone of plagiarism is a big deal. It also seems that in your account even entertaining this has moral consequences. Which leads me to my question: when I read student work, or when I engage in peer review, and I keep at the back of my mind "This might be plagiarism..." am I doing something irreversible in the moral case? Or is the problem here one that is centred on making the accusation itself?

**P:** We do indeed agree that Alex Jones is a “drongo,” though it’s worth noting that term—supposedly the name of an especially unsuccessful racehorse of the 1920s—suggests a fundamentally well-intentioned buffoon, and that may be letting Jones off to easily here.

I’m not actually sure that it’s true that “we *ought* to be entertaining the idea that plagiarism is a live option when reading, say, a student's work,” even though it’s true that “sometimes (hopefully very rarely) we have to formally accuse someone of plagiarism.”

Consider the phenomenology of discovering a plagiarist, an experience most educators will have at least once and many will have quite frequently. Of course, any phenomenology is vulnerable to the retort “No, it’s not like that at all,” and perhaps others are more actively and consciously looking out for malfeasance than I am. But for me at least, the experience is less one of being on the lookout for plagiarism and more one of initial bewilderment at errant data (Keeley 1999) followed by dawning horror; less like playing hide and seek and more like the slow realisation you’ve stepped in dog poo and then walked inside.

You’re reading what appears to be a normal piece of student writing, but things keep jarring: the Turnitin report keeps showing up tracts of text that are taken from elsewhere but aren’t attributed, or the writing style suddenly shifts to a level that strongly suggests a different author, or you notice the text is peppered with non-idiomatic and even nonsensical phrasing characteristic of “synonym spinner” software. (Of course, what I’m describing here is a level of plagiarism more amateurish than what you get from either ChatGPT or contract cheating,

which are much harder to detect). Even so, you find yourself reading *against* the thought that the student has plagiarised—after all, most of the time plagiarism is more a question of poor referencing technique than copying and pasting with malice aforethought. But eventually the signs of plagiarism become inescapable, as does the looming necessity of raising the accusation. I don't suggest there's some neat tipping point where one has "enough evidence to charge", but then as with jury deliberations, the conclusion that someone is guilty requires a qualitative psychological act, not just crossing some quantitative threshold of accumulated evidence.

Hence the "reluctance" part of what I called reluctant particularism (Stokes 2018) does seem to be very much in play in instances of plagiarism just as it would be in cases of infidelity. Certainly, you would never accuse a student of plagiarism unless you had a watertight case. But that's not simply because we don't want the embarrassment of being proven wrong, or because we don't want the hassle of doing the paperwork unless we're absolutely sure of the outcome. It's because, quite simply, we don't want to believe such things of our students, unless and until we have no choice.

Of course, in both relationships and education, *cheating really does happen*. Quite a lot, in fact. The reported rate of infidelity, at least in the USA, has hovered fairly steadily around 20% over much of this century (Miller 2016). Plagiarism was certainly common enough even before students could get robots to just write their essays for them. Encountering either an adulterer or a plagiarist (or both) should therefore be neither particularly rare nor particularly surprising. Yet in both cases, one finds oneself *very* reluctant to make such an accusation until it has become unavoidable. The apparent frequency of the occurrence doesn't really lessen the gravity of either the suspicion nor the accusation, and nor does it seem like it *should* ("Now, honey, you knew there was around a one-in-five chance of this happening when you married me").

Here I just want to post two observations that I suspect will become relevant to our discussion further along. First, the reluctance to conclude that others are up to no good may seem hopelessly naïve, but I see it as something like a sort of Kantian postulate of practical reason. A relationship in which you assume or believe your partner to be an inveterate cheat, a classroom where you view your students with a pervasive or default suspicion, or a society whose observed events are reflexively or frequently interpreted as being the outcomes of powerful actors colluding in secret, is not a relationship, a classroom, or a society in which life can flourish. To draw on Løgstrup here, a society in a state of foundational suspicion is a society in the exceptional state known as *war*. There may well be social domains where localised suspicion is appropriate e.g. policing, courts, plagiarism committee meetings etc. But these domains exist against a massive and necessary background trust that people in general mean us well (Stokes 2018b, 201).

Secondly, as I've argued, reluctant particularism/defeasible generalism allows one to accept that conspiracies do happen and to conclude that a conspiracy is afoot under at least exceptional circumstances. It's worth probing these analogies with infidelity and plagiarism a little further here to see what the affective content of those experiences might reveal about

the moral dynamics of conspiracy accusation as a social practice. To that end, let me just point out something I've noticed, and which I could of course be wrong about: conspiracy theorists *never seem shocked*. There's no conspiracy theory equivalent to coming home unexpectedly, opening the bedroom door and yelling "How *could* you?!" or yelling much the same thing at a plagiarised essay. We never seem to hear conspiracy theorists incredulously saying "The CIA did *what?*" We could explain that simply by saying conspiracy theorists are either too savvy or too jaded to be surprised, which is perhaps what some jealous lovers and suspicious teachers might say about themselves too. But it may also be that conspiracy theorising lacks that phenomenological sense of evidence being imposed from the outside against one's will. Something analogous to what Sartre (1972, 8) calls the "essential poverty" of secondary mental images seems to be in play here: we cannot really be surprised, let alone shocked, by something we've thought up ourselves.

**M:** I think, at the heart of our disagreement, is a fundamental difference in how we view the world. Not to play the "better teacher" card, but I know an awful lot of good educators (who I won't name since some of them don't want their students to know this) who approach every assignment they mark as *probably plagiarised* and then are relieved when a great many of them aren't. As such, when you write:

A relationship in which you assume or believe your partner to be an inveterate cheat, a classroom where you view your students with a pervasive or default suspicion, or a society whose observed events are reflexively or frequently interpreted as being the outcomes of powerful actors colluding in secret, is not a relationship, a classroom, or a society in which life can flourish.

I'm just not sure that's true. Sure, living a life of eternal suspicion might be difficult, but societies where such suspicion has taken root (and for good cause in some cases; see former Soviet Republics and Eastern European polities during the Communist period) have still led to those societies flourishing... largely because by being suspicious the members of those societies rooted out the very things which prevented such flourishing; sometimes we are only able to flourish because we take such suspicions seriously.

At heart here is, I think, the seeming gravity of suspiciousness and the idea that engaging in such suspicion is morally unhealthy. Perhaps my Catholic upbringing is a doing a lot of work here, but since Aquinas it's been recognised that entertaining a serious suspicion does not entail engaging in a morally suspicious act; I don't know all that much about the work of Knud Ejler Løgstrup but I'm assuming there is a strand of Calvinism in it?

But I suspect the other thing which is going on here, and the chief reason I used the plagiarism example, is that we might end up buying the line that it's a hard, not particularly conducive to flourishing life for the general public to live under the spectre of always suspecting the other, but certain people in our societies probably need to take on that burden nonetheless. As an educator I'm suspicious of my students' work *because part of my job is that I need to check for plagiarism*. However, that suspicion does not in itself entail that I think

all that badly of the plagiarist themselves. After all, the reasons why people plagiarise are many varied: our students often work fulltime jobs whilst studying; they have caregiver obligations; family members or friends die... So, even though plagiarism is a mighty academic sin, being pre-emptively suspicious of their work doesn't necessarily mean that condemnation is instant, or that forgiveness is not forthcoming.

It might also be the case that we might never formally accuse a student of plagiarism unless we have good evidence that a paper *might* be plagiarised (I'm not sure we have to have watertight evidence; after all, these cases often go to a board or committee who verify the suspicions of the lecturer), but (unless things work different at Deakin) often we informally engage in a kind of accusation nonetheless by asking colleagues "Do you think this is plagiarised?" and "Have you even been suspicious of this student's work in the past?" Sometimes students are even called into one's office and asked to justify why we shouldn't go to the dean with our suspicions...

I'm pushing back on this because, like you, I've argued (2018), there are certain roles in society where we seem to expect individuals to be professionally suspicious (police officers; investigative journalists, etc.). But where we diverge, I think, is that arguably (and as someone who supports both defunding the police and is a prison abolitionist I'm aware I'm trying to weave an awkward path here), the reason why the general public feel they have no current need for not living in eternal suspicion is because we have farmed off that job to a subset of the population. If we hadn't, then we probably would have to cultivate suspicions of our neighbours because, well, sometimes people really do try to steal elections, board members will engage in corporate conspiracies, or that "nice-seeming" Nigel down the road really is covering up that Ethel, who is "out of town" was actually murdered.

But I also think it would also be incredibly naïve for us to think that we really have established *now* such a "massive and necessary background trust that people in general mean us well" exists or is justifiable. In which societies is this actually true? It certainly isn't a universal truth; many societies exist or have existed in which trusting others is not entirely wise (look at the history of Eastern Europe during the Communist Period or Russia today, for just two examples), so just how generalisable is this claim? Should, for example, US citizens trust their current government based upon their existing constitutional arrangements? Are Australians comfortable with their seemingly left-leaning PM wearing Rio Tinto merch at a press conference? Are New Zealanders happy that the leader of the Opposition swears that his religious beliefs will not play a role in deciding policy post the next election?

Perhaps I'm paranoid, but I think a recurrent fault of much conspiracy theory theory is that it is practiced by people who live comfortable lives in what seem like stable democracies that at least pay lip service to transparency. It is easy for Westerners to look at their world, forged in the post war period in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and think "We've basically got this right!" It is, also unfortunately, possible for Westerners to be shocked when it turns out the world in which they now live operates a little differently...

With that, let me end this increasingly, overly long response with some commentary on your claim that “conspiracy theorists *never seem shocked*.”

This might well be true of *some* conspiracy theorists, in the same way it is true of the professionally suspicious: police officers are sometimes nonchalant when it comes to yet another ram raid, or armed burglary... or even murder. Press gallery journalists often are unsurprised to find out that certain MPs are jostling behind closed doors to change the leadership. Investigative reporters might be predisposed to expect corporate malfeasance when looking into strange business transactions. So even if I think you’re working with a restrictive definition of who even counts as a “conspiracy theorist” (one that bakes in that lack of shock), this is not a feature unique to just *those* conspiracy theorists.

But your claim that “conspiracy theorists *never seem shocked*” also does not seem to include someone like, say, Alex Jones, who is breathlessly shocked all the time about the audacity of the elite paedophiles he claims have control of the West.<sup>3</sup> Even David Icke is aghast that political elites forced people to take vaccines which, apparently, are a form of population control.

Now, one might respond with “But that’s just theatrics on their part!” And, of course, it might be. Jones and Icke have media empires to maintain, and a constant litany of “I told you so!” probably doesn’t bring in new viewers/customers. But some of that shock might well be real (even if we have to leave to one side the question as to whether the shocking news is in anyway based upon the facts).

Even if we did accept that most existing conspiracy theorists aren’t shocked by what they find out, this is only true *once someone becomes one of “those” conspiracy theorists*. After all, unless we are committed to some claim that one is born a conspiracy theorist (maybe due to some royal bloodline or divine intervention?) most people *become one of “those” conspiracy theorist* due to shock at the idea that the world in which they live isn’t what they thought it was. At some point your hypothetical conspiracy theorist really did proclaim “The CIA did *what?!*”

Take the pandemic as an example: people talk about their friends and family members “going down the rabbit hole” or “being red-pilled” often in the sense of “But they used to be so normal!” For many of *those* conspiracy theorists something at some time shocked them into adopting or promoting some conspiracy theory. I find it hard to believe that *all* conspiracy theorists are born with some intellectual “essential poverty” in the Sartian sense. I also find it hard to believe that they can’t be shocked by new evidence or revelations. Whilst it used to be common to argue that once a conspiracy theorist, then you are every kind of conspiracy theorist (the Monological Belief System thesis), a lot of recent work has pointed out that the assumption that once you become a conspiracy theorist, then you believe all the conspiracy theories just isn’t justified by the evidence we find from polls and surveys of *those*

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<sup>3</sup> Jones is weirdly shocked all the time, because often his raging against the system is a repeat of last year’s rage; Jones, it seems, is shocked by the audacity of the conspirators largely because he seems to forget what they have (apparently) done in the past...

(damnable) conspiracy theorists. (Franks, et al. 2017; Enders, et al. 2021; Douglas, et al. 2019)

Am I missing something here? What I like about your thesis of reluctant particularism is I think it explains a certain reticence to engage with conspiracy theorising; I suspect many particularists are reluctant to be particularists because particularism describes a world in which we have to experience at least a little discomfort in order to be sure that our trust that people in general mean us well is warranted. But reluctant particularism is a version of particularism that rests upon us having grounds for a kind of background trust, a background I am not sure we are (yet) entitled to.

### **Corresponding Conspiracy Theory Theorists, Part II**

**P** (Patrick Stokes): As we’ve both argued (Dentith 2019; Stokes 2023), a lot of the disagreement between generalists and particularists seems to boil down to largely unfalsifiable assumptions about how the world is. In our case, however, I’m wondering whether the difference is really in “how we view the world,” as you say, or whether it is in how we think people *should* view the world. Here I think it’s important to stress that I’m talking about default trust as a sort of Kantian postulate of practical reason. For Kant, things like free will are a postulate of practical reason, in that even though we can’t prove them to be the case, we have to work on the assumption that they’re true if our agency is to make sense to us at all. (Of course we can disagree over *which* things are such postulates; Kant thought the existence of God was one, which as a non-believer I don’t find persuasive!).

That being the case, reluctant particularism needn’t be something that “rests upon us having grounds for a kind of background trust” where we are not (or not yet) entitled to such a trust. Each side in the conspiracy theory debate presents themselves, not unreasonably, as clear-eyed observers of how the world really is, pushing back against an opponent who is in the grip of illusion and deceit. But my claim here is rather about *normative* background assumptions about how the world and other people work, assumptions that condition the very possibility of successful social life. (Importantly, I don’t think that’s a choice between seeing the world through a sort of Vaseline blur of sentimentality versus seeing the world with cold-blooded realism. Sometimes looking at the other through charitable eyes is the only way for certain facts about them to present themselves (see e.g. Murdoch 2001; Singer 2009).

To advert to the analogy with adultery: I can know that a quarter of all spouses cheat at some point and yet find the idea of *my* spouse cheating unthinkable, not because I’m innumerate, nor because I’m deluded about my partner’s specialness, but because that assumption of trust is in some sense foundational to being *in a partnership*. (Of course there are other ways of being in a partnership that don’t involve monogamy, but my point is specifically about cheating contra partnership. A grey area may be the sort of couple where there’s a tacit understanding to tolerate clandestine affairs so long as they don’t impact on other areas of the relationship). Likewise, if a classroom is meant to be a place of shared



inquiry and meaningful teaching, then assuming from the outset that each assignment is likely to be plagiarised is to assume we're not in a classroom, *in that normative sense*, at all. And if everyone really *is* out to game the system such that default suspicion is the only tenable response, then we're really in a state of war in the sense I described above. We're not sharing knowledge and the mutually enriching encounter between student and teacher, we're engaged in an undeclared battle of cheat vs invigilator. (Incidentally, I think that the attitude of forgiveness of plagiarists that you describe—which is reasonable, for the reasons you cite—is part of that attitude of charity).

So in that sense, I don't think the reluctant particularist has to believe that our society has achieved anything like a perfected state of transparency and freedom from corruption. The reluctant particularist simply needs to believe that things are generally how they appear and that people are generally what they seem, and exceptions are extraordinary and require extraordinary evidence—not because this is what experience has taught them, but because these priors are necessary (but not sufficient) success conditions for our social projects. We can't flourish in a world where we're always second-guessing whether things are radically different from how they appear and the people we see are secretly malevolent. (As an aside, note that the forms of political awfulness you mention are all out in the open. I'm not worried that the Australian PM might be taking secret meetings with mining corporations in back rooms, I'm worried that he's standing there *literally wearing their logos on television*).

One obvious response is to question what a “flourishing” society looks like, and whether societies characterised by widespread distrust and systemic government deceit can still count as flourishing. Of course there's a sort of Foucaultian worry one can entertain here that “flourishing” will mean “whatever counts as success in our own society,” and so *of course* we'll decide societies are failing to flourish just to the extent that they differ from our own. (I've written elsewhere [Stokes 2017] about using Løgstrup to construct an epistemology of moral progress that allows us to say societies progress rather than merely change, but which hopefully also avoids a sort of Whig-Platonism that implies we're getting closer and closer to some universal standard of moral truth. But I've mentioned Løgstrup too much in this exchange already. He was Lutheran, incidentally, rather than Calvinist). You're right that a lot of the broadly generalist side in conspiracy theory theory assumes a reasonably open liberal democracy as a default, and that can lead to a certain kind of chauvinism. (*Of course* Stalin's show trials were rigged, and *of course* the Warren Commission wasn't, etc.).

Even so, I still think there's grounds to contest the claim that societies living under repressive, including epistemically repressive, regimes are genuinely flourishing, though as you say there are no doubt ways in which localised solidarity can arise in spite of the prevailing atmosphere of mutual suspicion and risk. In such societies under such conditions it may be *prudentially* normative not to trust people, but such trust is also ethically required if we're to live well with others. My worry is that without that foundational trust, instead of a society built around responsiveness to humans' inescapable dependence on each other (see e.g. MacIntyre 1999), you'd end up with, say, a society where people glorify a fictitious concept of rugged individualism, conflate the epistemic capacities of non-experts and experts

in a way that makes acting for collective goods like public health or emissions reduction impossible, and even arm themselves against each other. Far-fetched, I know.

With all that said: as I've argued elsewhere (Stokes 2018b), there's probably just an irresolvable tension here, between the standing suspicion of power that healthy polities require, and the foundational trust that societies also need. Such tensions need to be managed, and farming out suspicion to certain professional classes arguably is, as you say, one way to manage that tension. But we could argue that when it comes to things like government or corporate conspiracies, we *do* farm that suspicion out to relevant communities of inquiry: journalists, regulators, academics etc. As others have noted, where genuine conspiracies have been uncovered, that's who's done the uncovering.

As you say, some of those inquirers are probably quite jaded by the things they've seen, and not at all surprised to unearth yet another outrage. I'm not sure whether that really applies to conspiracy theories however, though I think prosecuting that point would drag us sideways into the ordinary language vs term-of-art debate over the use of the term "conspiracy (theory)." You're also right that the point about conspiracy theorists not being shocked is vulnerable to counterexamples (I'm not entirely sure I'd cite Jones and Icke as *genuine* counter-examples, but I'm more than happy to concede there will be genuine ones out there). Even so, to be "shocked" involves not just outrage, but also incredulity, and *that* seems to be the part that conspiracy theorists seem to tend to lack. Jones and Icke may well rant and rave, but they don't often seem to check themselves with a response of "wait, no, that can't be right."

**M** (M R. X. Dentith): I suspect we have a different idea of the role of assumptions in undergirding our social relationships, and so I'm going to pushback on this, as I don't really think I accept the framing here. I don't *assume* my partners won't cheat on me; in cases where relationships are formed discussions about past relationships are had, and I (at least) formed a justified belief on the *likelihood* of my partner's fidelity, one that sits alongside my general knowledge of how often relationships fail, etc.

Perhaps I have a more transactional, or kitchen sink view of social relationships, but I think it's useful to note that I'm still flourishing sans these assumptions or postulates. Indeed, (vain and possibly egotistical) people like myself who eschew such assumptions might even claim that there's more flourishing to be had by not making such assumptions, contra Kant, contra Murdoch, and contra Singer. (Although I guess a lot hinges of how we define "assumption" here as well; I can see an argument that even given my deliberations, what results is an assumption on a day-to-day level.)

Part of me thinks there is quite a lot of history tied into these normative assumptions; a necessary background and foundational trust seemed useful in a world of largely loveless marriages that nonetheless had to be sustained for financial and social standing. Trusting that the world generally works as people says it does is a good way to cope with the kind of opaque governmental relations and ruling arrangements that made up our (Western) political systems even into the early parts of this century (and possibly to this day, given how much

effort is being made by governments to either turn back or avoid official information access requests and the like). In certain contexts such foundational trust is sufficient for individuals to flourish, but the question is both “Is it necessary now?” and “Was it even necessary then?” I once again appeal to my genealogical story; people may have had trouble flourishing *fully* in despotic regimes, but a lot of flourishing societies emerged out of living through periods where having a background and foundational trust would have prevented a transition from an unjust society to be a more just one.

You say:

The reluctant particularist simply needs to believe that things are generally how they appear and that people are generally what they seem, and exceptions are extraordinary and require extraordinary evidence—not because this is what experience has taught them, but because these priors are necessary (but not sufficient) success conditions for our social projects. We can’t **flourish** [emphasis mine] in a world where we’re always second-guessing whether things are radically different from how they appear and the people we see are secretly malevolent.

At the risk of pulling in literature at the last minute (and then critiquing that literature rather than necessarily your own thoughts) this all seems like the argument around Just World Beliefs (and their counterparts, Unjust World Beliefs).

Just World Beliefs were first postulated and articulated by Lerner and Miller in 1978; in essence, a Just World Belief is a cognitive bias or coping mechanism that everyone gets what they deserve: good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. People who believe that they live in a Unjust World, in comparison, think that good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people. As Billy Joel might say, only the good die young.

The early work on just and unjust world beliefs was, rightly, criticised for victim-blaming; people who believe that they live in unjust worlds might not suffer from a cognitive bias; they might, in fact, happen to live in a manifestly unjust world. That is, whilst some unjust world beliefs held by rich white men with social media companies complaining they are the ones being oppressed appear to be a coping mechanism for, say, women, trans people, or people of colour getting a say in how things are run, the unjust world beliefs of women, trans people, or people of colour might be better explained as the result of them reacting to the evidence that the world they live in is, in fact, unjust.

Indeed, more recent work, largely spearheaded by Furnham (2023) takes a more nuanced view: just world beliefs might be a cognitive bias, but they are also social advantageous beliefs. If we want to cope with the world in which we live, thinking that good things happen to good people and bad people get what they deserve seems like a good coping strategy; indeed, according to the psychologists who measure these things, people who hold on to their just world beliefs *regardless of how the actual world is* do, on average, better than

people who think the world is unjust. Unjust world beliefs, however, are socially disadvantageous, because they are associated with anxiety, loss of trust, and the like. This means that unjust world believers end up doing worse, and so we should do something to encourage unjust world believers to become just world believers.

However, even the more nuanced form of talk around just and unjust world beliefs ends up looking like victim blaming; people who hold that just world beliefs are socially advantageous blame people who hold unjust world beliefs because such unjust world believers would have better lives if they started believing the world was just after all *regardless of whether the world is just*. Marginalised people should aim to be model minorities, etc, because individually they will do better on average if they think good things happen to good people...

So, when you write:

The reluctant particularist simply needs to believe that things are generally how they appear and that people are generally what they seem, and exceptions are extraordinary and require extraordinary evidence—not because this is what experience has taught them, but because these priors are necessary (but not sufficient) success conditions for our social projects.

then I worry about the kind of postulate that says that to flourish we *need* to make certain assumptions. I guess that's because I also disagree that “a lot of the disagreement between generalists and particularists seems to boil down to largely unfalsifiable assumptions about how the world is”, mostly because I think I've successfully argued that (on the proviso we agree that the minimal definition of conspiracy theory is the most theoretically fruitful definition to use) that conspiracies are a lot more common than most people think. The preponderance of evidence—Pigden's adage that if you are historically or politically literate you are a conspiracy theorist—strongly indicates that conspiracies happen a lot more than we are *willing* to think or admit; these postulates of foundational trust and just world beliefs are doing a lot of heavy work, a consequence of which *seems to be* the dismissing or downplaying the grounds of others to suspect that the world is more unjust than people would like to think.

My concern, then, about these normative background assumptions that underpin the “reluctance” in *reluctant particularism* is that they can lead to the chastising or dismissal of the concerns of people who not only don't share these assumptions, but have grounds to think these assumptions are counterproductive. Sometimes people don't have that background trust because a) it goes against the evidence and b) it's not actually necessary for personal or even societal flourishing. Such assumptions might even be getting in the way.

Thus, I suspect we are at a crossroads when it comes to a notion of foundational trust. Perhaps it's because I'm not a Kantian, nor am a fan of Kantian philosophy (give me Hegel any day!), but in my kitchen sink view trust is something earned, never assumed. That is, maybe such assumptions are (or have been) sufficient for a limited kind of flourishing, but—

I argue—they are not necessary. Thus, whatever grounds the reluctance in reluctant particularism might well be cashed out in pragmatic terms (i.e. Basham’s argument in 2011 that there might be a case for a *pragmatic rejection* of conspiracy theories), but the argument from ethics or epistemology seems one rooted more in (perhaps outdated) social mores than anything else.

It seems churlish at this point to bring something else up, but I do also want to pushback on your characterisation of conspiracy theorists. You write:

Even so, to be “shocked” involves not just outrage, but also incredulity, and *that* seems to be the part that conspiracy theorists seem to tend to lack. Jones and Icke may well rant and rave, but they don’t often seem to check themselves with a response of “wait, no, that can’t be right.”

The problem here is that I can point to (pejoratively-labelled) conspiracy theorists who do exactly this. I know you said that Icke and Jones might not be the most genuine examples of conspiracy theorists, but even so, it’s notable that Icke does talk about the conspiracy theories he is told he *ought* to believe that he *steadfastly refuses* to believe because they are too incredulous (even) for him. Notably, in 2012, he was arguing against conspiracy theorists who claimed 2012 was the year doom would come to us all via Mesoamerican deities and prophecies; he said these theories couldn’t possibly be true, because they did not fit with his worldview. That is, Icke met a conspiracy theory, considered it, and then bade it “Good day, sir!” And if you want more “sensible” conspiracy theorists, consider the infighting amongst certain 9/11 Inside Job conspiracy theorists who argue “That can’t be right” when it comes to claims of nanothermite, or holographic planes, or remote controlled aircraft. Lots of people who we might think should be fellow travellers don’t end up supporting each other; if you spend time on 9/11 Inside Job Facebook groups, you’ll find a lot of accusations of “You’re trying to make us look ridiculous!” flying around when even the most minor doctrinal difference is brought up.

The issue here is that if we end up assuming a pejorative notion of who gets labelled as a “conspiracy theorist”, then we’re typically working with a subset of people who believe conspiracy theories who just happen to have the features we think of as salient to our construal of belief in conspiracy theories. We really don’t know how often conspiracy theorists of one stripe go around rejecting conspiracy theories of another... It’s very tempting to think they are like Richard Dawkins (who seems to love just adopting one new reactionary view after another) but not everyone is as irrational as a New Atheist...

### Corresponding Conspiracy Theory Theorists, Part III

**P** (Patrick Stokes): I should stress that I too am no Kantian—though I’d still take Kant over Hegel, simply because life is too damn short to read Hegel. But it may be that there’s a certain deontic dimension to what I’m arguing here that’s getting lost in the admittedly loose way I’m using the word “flourishing.” The point isn’t simply that trust is normative because

if we trust other people our lives (tend to) go pragmatically better. If that were the case, if the world was different such that trust *didn't* (tend to) lead to flourishing, then trust would not be normative. (A similar problem bedevils virtue ethics per se, which threatens to collapse into either a prudentialist egoism or deontology.)

For one thing, the “default trust” claim doesn’t rest on the idea that we learn in advance that trust produces better outcomes and then start trusting as a result. One of the things that’s been discussed in both the economics and philosophical literatures on trust is the idea that trust is essentially non-calculative. It’s not simply a matter of *reliance*, which we would indeed calculate probabilistically. As Karen Jones (2017) for instance has argued, the distinctive ways in which we react to being betrayed wouldn’t make sense if trust was simply a probabilistic reliance on someone acting in a certain way. I may be annoyed that my seemingly reliable computer has broken down, but I’m not angry or hurt by it. We can’t answer a cheated-on spouse’s outraged “How *could* you?!” with “Quite easily, in fact: about a fifth of people do.” In that context, I’m not sure that we *do* form justified, evidence-based beliefs about how likely people are to cheat—or that if we do, those beliefs are decisive for our everyday trust of others. (Trust, we might say, is always a little gratuitous; it always goes a little further than the evidence would mandate). So to borrow one last time from Løgstrup, it’s not that trust is good because it leads to flourishing, but rather, the fact that trust leads to flourishing is part of how we know trust is good.

Hence I wouldn’t say the analogy is with Just World beliefs, *understood as beliefs that are advantageous* (and thus merely prudentially normative). You’re right that such beliefs are structurally very similar to Kantian postulates of practical reason, but the source of the normativity is different. To me the analogy with default trust would not be a heuristic like “everyone gets what they deserve” but one like “there’s a little bit of good in everyone”: a basically unfalsifiable belief that can sometimes lead you into harm, but which also captures something of how we should treat other people i.e. charitably.

We could of course object here that exclusive romantic relationships are different to most forms of social relationship, where the interaction can be so fleeting or insignificant that it may make little sense to even speak of “trust” at all. Yet even in those cases, I’d want to say that there’s a default posture of trust in play, such that when we *do* experience deceit, threat, or violence, it’s always experienced as something of a shock or an exception, something that provokes outrage. Something has gone badly wrong if we’re so used to being betrayed or lied to that we just shrug and accept it as part of how the world works—a point that I think is not inconsistent with your genealogical story about how some societies become more just. We know some groups and some entire societies have very good reasons to be more inclined to suspicion, reasons rooted in unjust power dynamics both historical and contemporary. But even then, there’s an implicit normative claim buried in there, a reassertion of a (no doubt mythical) default social and political order in which people just don’t treat each other like that. When governments do terrible things, you sometimes hear appalled citizens say “this isn’t who we are.” That phrase rightly invites mockery, and the retort “given we’re doing this, this clearly *is* who we are, and telling ourselves otherwise is just making excuses.”

But that phrase also functions as a reassertion of a normative order in which these actions are outside the bounds of moral thinkability.

In that sense, the reluctant particularist, living in a liberal democracy characterised by relatively open institutions, is not so much indulging in wishful thinking as defending an order in which actual conspiracy is something aberrant and exceptional, and not, as many particularists seem to assume, an everyday part of the human behavioural repertoire. Perhaps reluctant particularism is thus more Kantian than I realise, given this part is starting to sound a lot like the fourth formulation of the categorical imperative: act as though you *already* live in the “kingdom of ends.”

I agree that “We really don’t know how often conspiracy theorists of one stripe go around rejecting conspiracy theories of another.” But note that in the cases you cite here, the incredulity is over one specific conspiracy theory in relation to another, not about conspiratorial vs non-conspiratorial explanations. The instances you describe are, more or less by definition, cases of people rejecting a particular conspiracy explanation *in favour of another conspiracy theory*. In Icke’s case, he’s rejecting the 2012 end-of-days claims because they don’t cohere with other conspiracy theories he does accept. In the case of 9/11 Inside Job folks, they reject the wackier theories, but still adhere to what they take to be more credible conspiracy theories. (Indeed this occasionally seems to be presented as an opportunity for a *new* bit of conspiracy theorising: the person making the wacky claim must be a plant trying to make the others look bad.) Of course I’ll defer to your far more extensive experience with conspiracy discourse, but I don’t recall many instances of conspiracy theorists deciding some significant event or observation is probably innocent after all.

**M** (M R. X Dentith): So, I’m increasingly of the mind that where we disagree depends a lot on what we both think of as “trust” and particularly a notion of default and/or foundational trust.

Recently (well, relatively recently, given this is an email exchange over a lengthy period of time) I was talking to an academic colleague/friend in common about how people talk about their sense there has been a loss of trust in authority over the course of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and now well into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We both claimed that the problem isn’t necessarily the loss of trust but, rather, how we probably were too trusting of authorities before such authorities fell from grace.

So, maybe the problem isn’t one of a default or foundational trust<sup>4</sup> but, rather, the gratuitous way we (societies and individuals both) allocate trust and then fall back upon that notion of trust to defend a view of the world. So, let me concede, for the sake of argument, that we need some default state of trust in order to flourish. If so, I’m also happy to stake my personal view that *personally* I think that people are also *naively* trusting of institutions that do

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<sup>4</sup> Although I dispute we can’t answer a cheated spouse’s with “Quite easily, in fact: about a fifth of people do”; I know some people who have relationships where that would count as an adequate response... maybe my friends and I are just wired differently, and thus we treat trust in a more probabilistic fashion despite philosopher’s objections that we shouldn’t.

not deserve that trust, and that I *think* I've produced both arguments and evidence to support that contention over the near decade I've been publishing on conspiracy theories. Thus, my worry is that reluctant particularism rests *to some extent* on an misapplication of trust to institutions that do not deserve to be trusted at the very least *that much*. This, in turns, leads the reluctant particularist to think that they have a default *dismissive* attitude towards things labelled as “conspiracy theories” (even if the reluctant particularist can sometimes be inspired to treat some of these conspiracy theories seriously). After all, if the reluctant particularist just needs to believe things are generally how they appear to be, and therefore exceptions are extraordinary (and require extraordinary evidence), then we have to ask if we really know that things are generally as they appear to be? Or is *at least* part of that kind of belief a product or condition of the default and sometimes gratuitous trust we place(d) in institutions that, it turns out, we have evidential grounds to say we should either distrust, or at least not trust as much as we have?

**P:** I quite like that you use the word “gratuitous” there. As noted above, arguably *all* trust is at least a little bit gratuitous. Trust necessarily goes beyond the trustworthiness of the other party to some degree—otherwise it wouldn't be trust, but simple calculative reliance. The sheer fact of human interdependence engenders vulnerability, and the response to that involves a trust that goes beyond what we can predictively expect of each other. But I agree that *naïve* trust in institutions is a problem, and to reiterate, the standing tension between the suspicion of power we need for healthy civil society and the need for default trust is probably just irresolvable.

Where does that leave us? How do you hold institutions to account without abdicating the background trust that I've suggested is a requirement for successful ethical and social life? We might get a glimpse of part of an answer in a passage in Løgstrup (no no, stay with me here), in his reading of Sartre's play *Le Diable et le Bon Dieu*. Here, Løgstrup describes how the character Goetz von Berlichingen deals with the treacherous Weislingen:

He will neither trivialize nor disguise the fact, neither from Weislingen nor from himself, that it is a traitor he is dealing with. He will discover Weislingen's traps, thwart him whenever he is able, and take all precautionary measures. He will take up the challenge, acting prudently and shrewdly, narrowing the scope for Weislingen's treachery as far as he can. He will let Weislingen know that he is aware of what he can expect from him. Yet in all of this, he will still be giving him a chance—the chance which consists in his not washing his hands of him; and in so doing Goetz von Berlichingen will realize trust and openness—on his own terms and not on Weislingen's treacherous terms. The opportunity he offers Weislingen is that of being won over to his side against his own treacherous self. No matter how convinced Goetz von Berlichingen may be that this opportunity, too, Weislingen will abuse—he is to have it all the same. But he cherishes no illusions (Løgstrup 2007, 57–8).

Goetz knows Weislingen is not trustworthy, but he “trusts” him in the sense of not shutting him down, but maintaining a certain openness and receptivity to him, giving him the chance



to do better. (For more on this, see (Stokes 2020)). It's a difficult model, and it's one that's arguably better suited to interpersonal trust than trust in institutions. Still, it seems to me to capture part of that normative dimension of trust: we don't just bloodlessly evaluate how trustworthy people are and *then* decide to trust or not trust them, but rather we find ourselves in a world where trust is how things *should* be and then have to deal with having that trust periodically abused. There's a number of ways we can respond to that, from a defensive distrust that becomes corrosive, to a doomed attempt to retreat into naivety. I'd suggest that approach to Weislingen, an approach that holds the other to account without writing them off, might give us a clue as to what a post-disillusionment background trust in institutions might look like. (Perhaps it'd be useful advice for people who have been cheated on too. Given the sheer numbers involved, that could be quite a lucrative side-hustle for an entrepreneurially-minded philosopher...)

**M:** I'm tempted to end this correspondence with "You fool! You walked into my trap!" but, in truth, I think where we have ended up is not quite where we started, but still somewhere in that vicinity. But, like all good conversations, I think it's clearer now than before as to where we disagree. Not just that, but why, and—in these perilous and polarised times—that is worth celebrating.

As you say, there might be an irresolvable tension between the trust we need (although perhaps I'm more on the side of "assume" here) in others in order to flourish as individuals or members of communities, and the kind of trust we place in the institutional structures we have erected due to the fact our communities are now so large that we cannot establish interpersonal trust with all the people within them. I think that is the crucial difference: it seems that we might well need a default or assumed trust in others in order to survive, but a default trust in institutions is, I argue, been evidently misplaced. I think we can tell a story of interpersonal trust and social flourishing without having to necessarily drag in what I suspect is a related but not identical notion of trust in institutions.

Perhaps, maybe, this is also where the tension in our work on the ethics of accusation comes in. Accusing one's parent, one's friend, or even someone in your local community of being involved in a conspiracy is something we should be cautious of if our evidence is not firm. But accusing someone in an institution of conspiracy seems like it has a lower evidential threshold *given what we know about institutions*. Again, it is a tension that is not easily resolved (look at how many words we used to both talk and avoid talk of it), and such a tension is subject to abuse; whatever we think on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of such accusations (and thus their moral weight) in the institutional case, we both agree that people like Donald J. Trump and Alex Jones (drongoes both, but perhaps not well-intentioned ones) sometimes abuse such accusations (often, it seems, in pursuit of denying their role in some conspiracy). But we recognise that some people are licensed by their position in society to make such calls (journalists, the police, etc.), and in the case of the less powerful making those accusations, I think a lot hinges on how we cash out the (lack of) institutional trust in particular cases.

Maybe the path out of this is not reluctant particularism but, rather, optimistic particularism instead. Despite a host of academic credits to my name that would seem to cast me as the arch-pessimist (and which has earned me the moniker from at least one other philosopher as a “conspiracy apologist”, although I’m more worried my work makes me look like a libertarian...) in my day-to-day life I still *act* like an optimist. So, even though objectively I have little evidence to support such optimism when it comes to politics, it seems I have a certain *faith* (given my behaviour) that things can get better. With that in mind, perhaps the optimistic particularist is someone who thinks part-and-parcel of the particularist project is to grapple with the problems conspiracies present. Part of this is to remind people of the way the term “conspiracy theory” gets abused (sometimes to allow people to get away with conspiracies), part of this is to find a way to reform how we treat conspiratorial reasoning (to work out when it goes right and when it goes wrong), with the hoped for consequence of all this work that this will put us in a position *as a society* to reform (or perhaps replace) the offending institutions. The results of such an optimistic particularist project would, then, wipe away the original sin of those institutions, and give us a fresh basis (a new covenant, to push the religious analogy to breaking point) to establish our trust in them, knowing that (at least for a time) those institutions have earned the trust of the people.

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