Reluctance and Suspicion: Reply to Basham and Dentith

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http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3qM
I am grateful to both Matthew Dentith and Lee Basham for their thoughtful and generous replies to my barging into their discussion of particularism and generalism about conspiracy theory. An over-long reply is a rather poor way to repay that generosity, but here goes.

**Conspiracy Theory vs. Conspiracy Narrative**

A central part of my argument in Stokes is that there is a gap between how epistemologists use the term “conspiracy theory” and how the term is popularly used. My concern is that by defining “conspiracy theory” so broadly, epistemologists end up losing sight of the recognizable cultural practice of conspiracy theorizing. It’s well established by this point in the debate that there is no prima facie reason to reject conspiracy theories on the basis of their formal explanatory structure alone. But that level of abstraction is not, so to speak, where we live, and nor is it the level on which social critiques of conspiracy theory operate.

Dentith and Basham respond to this concern in different ways. Dentith argues that some of my worries about conspiracy theory are really concerns about certain types of conspiracy narrative. The problem is not the simple act of forming (or asserting) explanations of observed events that involve two or more actors conspiring in secret, but the deployment of particular narratives about specific conspiracies; for instance, the “Jewish World Conspiracy” narrative (or overlapping narratives, perhaps) promulgated by figures as diverse as the Tsarist Okhrana, Henry Ford, Nesta Webster, Adolf Hitler, and David Duke. “To theorise about a conspiracy—to wit, to engage in conspiracy theorising—is a different task from hooking into an existing conspiracy narrative to press a point,” and accordingly, the two should be evaluated separately.2

At first blush, such a distinction maps neatly onto my own concern to differentiate conspiracy explanation as a formal category from conspiracy theory as a recognizable social practice and cultural formation. And in terms of the debate between generalism and particularism, adopting this distinction would seem to leave open the possibility of maintaining particularism about conspiracy theorizing while adopting a generalism about certain conspiracy narratives—something very like the “defeasible generalism” or “reluctant particularism” I endorsed.

In practice, however, it’s not clear how clear a line we can draw between conspiracy theory and conspiracy narrative as Dentith construes these terms. Dentith invites us to “imagine someone in a room, dispassionately coming up with conspiracy theories, and then getting her lackeys to see if they have any merit.”3 But if this conspiracy theorist is anything like most conspiracy theorists, her theories, however dispassionate, are going to draw upon existing conspiracy theory tropes and narrative structures. It is remarkable how strongly the same tropes recur in otherwise disconnected conspiracy theories: for instance, the near-ubiquity of “false flag” explanations. Say Dentith’s speculator sees reports of a mass

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1 Stokes, “Between Generalism and Particularism about Conspiracy Theory.”
3 Ibid., 28, n.8.
shooting event, and wonders: “Perhaps this shooting is a false flag designed to prepare the ground for disarming the population.” That is not a stand-alone explanation, but one embedded in a tradition of “the government is coming take your guns” anxieties. It sits within a long, ongoing, evolving, recognizable history of interpretation. These day, it re-emerges, fully-formed, within minutes of any major mass shooting, regardless of context or location.

Of course, one could reply here that there’s no reason to think conspiracies won’t tend to resemble each other: the similarity of conspiracy narratives may simply reflect the finite repertoire of strategies available to conspirators. Moreover, conspiracy theories generally posit fairly powerful actors, which in turn limits the pool of possible perpetrators, so we’d expect to see recurring villains in these explanations. In short, there are only so many possible conspirators, and only so many possible ways for them to conspire effectively. Even so, in considering any individual act of conspiracy theorizing it’s difficult to see how we could differentiate between what is genuinely original (even if isomorphic with other conspiracy theories) and what borrows its form—and a large part of its sanction—from existing conspiracy narratives.

However, let’s assume that Dentith’s lackey-dispatching idle speculator is somehow oblivious to conspiracy theorizing as a social practice—perhaps she, in a nod to Frank Jackson’s “Mary,” has been raised in an environment where she has never been exposed to any existing conspiracy theories or conspiracy tropes. Her conspiracy theories are, let’s stipulate, self-standing and sui generis alternatives to “official” explanations of given events. Does that entitle all her theories to be considered in a particularist way?

### Accusation and Reluctance

This question connects us to what I described as “reluctance,” which should attach to both conspiracy theorizing and to indulging in particular conspiracy narratives. Dentith’s conspiracy theorist spins her theories “dispassionately.” But then, what motivates them? Dentith tells us that the question of whether mass shootings are a government plot designed to curb gun rights is “a perfectly interesting question” and that “entertaining that notion is something someone, somewhere should engage in.” It’s not clear however where the “should” emerges from here. Of course, one can “dispassionately” speculate about anything. I could, for instance, walk into any room and try to calculate the probability that anyone in that room is plotting to kill me. Despite being a fairly anxious sort I’d probably do so calmly, because I am not actually entertaining the prospect that some of these people want to do me in. I’m just idly playing with the idea. But it is far from clear why I should speculate like this, and likewise it is far from clear why I should speculate whether mass shooting events were hoaxed by the government.

Ok, we might think, but surely such speculation is both harmless enough on its own terms and potentially exposes genuine plots, however unlikely? After all, insists Dentith, “you can theorise about conspiracy theories without making accusations.” Dentith here specifies that

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4 Jackson, “Epiphenomenal qualia.”
6 Ibid., 30.
“the threshold for accusation here [must be] something higher than simply saying “They are up to something...”"\(^7\) But just how far can we go down that path before we’re making accusations? We can certainly avoid blaming anyone specific by offering explanations so under-described they barely seem to warrant the name “theory” (“Things are not as they seem,” “I’ll bet they are behind this” etc.). But this doesn’t get us very far. It’s not clear how far you can go with suggesting a mass casualty event was really a false flag exercise without impugning *someone*. We might try to find a redoubt here between accusation and non-accusation to hide in; we might want to call that redoubt “expressing suspicion” or, more commonly, “just asking questions” (less charitably known as “JAQing off”). But just asking questions *that call someone’s innocence into question* is not a morally neutral act. Dentith’s dispassionate speculator may not be doing very much practical harm, but she is nonetheless engaging in a practice with a moral cost. My walking into a room and idly wondering if you’re planning to kill me may not cause you much upset—mostly because I wouldn’t mention doing so, as that would make things pretty awkward—but I’ve still entertained the idea you might be a murderer, and thereby done you a passing wrong. There are of course circumstances where that’s a warranted suspicion or even a necessary prudent response; but those circumstances are, precisely because they violate the background trust intrinsic to human sociality (more on this below), abnormal, even when pervasive and persistent.

For Dentith, distinguishing between conspiracy theorizing and conspiracy narrative does allow us to avoid certain narratives that are discredited or problematic. But the motivation here remains, on his telling, fundamentally epistemological rather than ethical:

> After all, if the evidence is “This looks like a redressed version of a Jewish banking conspiracy narrative,” then the appropriate evidential response is to ask “Hasn’t this been debunked?” Because if it has, then we will have evidence to mount against the new version. If it has not, then we need to investigate the claim further.”\(^8\)

That may well be a perfectly valid evidential response. But we do not apply our evidential reasoning in a vacuum, but do so from within historically conditioned and epistemically finite situations, in a world already freighted with moral and political meanings. We do not step out of the world when we think and reflect; our thinking, reflecting, and suspecting are all actions we perform and so subject to moral inspection. In *that* context, an at least equally appropriate response is:

Entertaining theories about a global Jewish world conspiracy is a well-recognized anti-Semitic practice, and I will not engage in such a practice by taking this theory seriously enough to investigate it.

It remains *logically* possible such a theory is true, but not only are we not morally or rationally obliged to entertain every theory, we are morally obliged to reject some theories even at the

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\(^7\) Ibid., 31.

\(^8\) Ibid., 31-32.
risk of occasionally being wrong. Basham claims it is a virtue of particularism that it “directly confronts theories that are unwarranted (Jews are trying to destroy Western civilization),” but as he presents particularism here, it doesn’t look like this is the sort of confrontation he has in mind.9

**Generalism and Ethics**

Unlike Dentith, Basham evidently doesn’t want to buy into a distinction between conspiracy theory as a cultural phenomenon and conspiracy theory as a particular form of explanation. He instead defends a thoroughgoing particularism without even the evidentiary heuristics Dentith wants to develop, insisting that conspiracy theories “should be evaluated solely case by case, on the basis of evidence, without any epistemic mal-biasing.”10 Basham claims that my “reluctant particularism” or “defeasible generalism” is an unstable binary: it either collapses into generalism (given that generalists preserve some sliver of defeasibility) or is simply particularism.

Here’s the argument Basham attributes to me:

1) Epistemic generalism is true; epistemic issues are “off the table” except in extremely rare cases (traditional generalism);
2) Many popular conspiracy theories cause harm;
3) If a theory causes harm, it is morally suspect (consequentialism);
4) Particularism claims we should evaluate conspiracy theories on the evidential warrant of each;
5) Unwarranted conspiracy theories are popularly believed for long periods of time without evidence (the “unreasoning masses” gambit);

So, Particularism is not the correct approach to conspiracy theorizing.11

Basham also adds what he takes to be a missing premise here:

6) Our default analysis of conspiracy theories should not be in terms of evidential merit, but in terms of how they promote or undermine our political projects; those that undermine these should be rejected, those that promote these should be promoted.12

I don’t recognize my position in this argument, though I’ve no doubt this is down to imprecision on my part and not Basham’s. I do assert premises 2) and 3). Premise 5), as defined here, doesn’t really amount to an “unreasoning masses” gambit: conspiracy theorists rarely form a mass and are not necessarily irrational. For instance, with respect to my example of deaths from improperly/untreated AIDS in South Africa, it is of course no part of my original claim that the 330,000+ people who died necessarily believed in the conspiracy theory themselves, let alone that they were irrational; it is enough that the

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10 Ibid., 5.
11 Ibid., 9.
12 Ibid., 10-11.
government (or even senior figures in the government) believed it and acted accordingly in framing their policy responses to the HIV epidemic.\(^\text{13}\)

Premise 6) casts what is an essentially moral claim—show reticence in suspecting or accusing others of malfeasance—in political terms. Basham takes my view to be a version of the Public Trust Approach (PTA). But PTA is still an argument about the epistemic reliability of institutions; it’s “trust” in the sense of “I trust this ladder to bear my weight,” not trust in the sense of “I trust the people in this room not to kill me.” The latter is not merely predictive (“I’m 98% sure you’re not planning to kill me right now”) but an expression of a moral relation: I’m in your hands, and the fact I am so enjoins you not to act against me. This is not to deny that conspiracy theory can have dramatically corrosive effects on the body politic; indeed we’re arguably seeing that right now amidst the apparently tectonic shifts occurring in the relationship between media, politics, and citizenry. Nonetheless my point is primarily a scaled-up moral one rather than a scaled-down political one.

This brings us to the central point of disagreement here, which is premise 1). At least as phrased here, 1) seems to separate moral and epistemic issues that are in fact coimbricated right from the outset. That there is nothing prima facie epistemically false about conspiracy explanations simply as such is, to reiterate, now well established. But, as noted above, we never form our views in a moral vacuum, and that will (or should) have implications for the sort of theories we are prepared to entertain. In discussing my “reluctant particularism,” Basham notes that:

>If “reluctant” means we will not immediately embrace a theory, but seek significant evidence for or against, then this is simply the particularist position. We have the same “reluctance” towards any scientific theory. This reluctance doesn’t view the theory as prima facie false. Saying a theory is not yet warranted is not to say it probably never will be, just because of the sort of theory it is.\(^\text{14}\)

Quite right. But the comparison with science only goes so far, for we do not stand in a moral relation to the objects of scientific inquiry, at least as regards the purely scientific questions we pose of them; we do not do wrong by subatomic particles or nebulae by postulating theories about them that turn out to be false. Levelling a false accusation has a moral cost to it that proposing a flawed hypothesis in physics or chemistry, in itself at least, does not.

**The Payoffs of Particularism**

Basham takes it that when I discuss the moral cost of conspiracy accusation in this way, “the ‘immoral’ is a simple consequentialism.”\(^\text{15}\) Consequences matter, and that is why I noted

\(^{13}\) Hence I don’t see how my paper “implies the existence of popular conspiracy theory at work in the populace and then infers that this belief must be efficacious in apparent medication refusal” (Basham 2016, 10 n.23).


\(^{15}\) Ibid., 8.
them in the case of AIDS denialism\(^\text{16}\) in South Africa, but the claim is not fundamentally or solely a consequentialist one. If I publish a blog insisting without anything like credible evidence that Prince Philip had MI6 murder Diana, I’ve still wronged Prince Philip even if he never finds out or doesn’t care or suffers no other unwelcome effects of my accusation. But let’s dwell on consequences for a moment, as that is where Basham launches a defense of particularism.

Basham claims that particularism about conspiracy theory, characterized by “evidence-dissemination and open debate,” has in practice yielded various dividends, both in terms of confirming some conspiracy theories and refuting others. Two things need to be noted in response. The first is that all of the conspiracy theories Basham claims to have been defeated are alive and well: it will come as cold comfort to CDC employees harassed by anti-vaccination activists outside their workplace to hear that “The anti-vaccination movement has been profoundly undermined” and even less comfort to parents in places like the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, where vaccination levels, thanks to denialism, remain dangerously below herd immunity level.\(^\text{17}\) The President of the United States has publically supported the idea of a link between vaccines and autism, and has reportedly discussed appointing antivax activist Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. to chair a commission into the subject.\(^\text{18}\) If this is a movement that has been profoundly undermined, one shudders to think what it looks like in rude health. It may also be true that, as Basham claims, “Many of the tenets of the 9/11 truth movement have been abandoned by its own members,”\(^\text{19}\) but that movement has likewise hardly vanished; as Alex Jones has recently demonstrated, you can still go on TV and publically call 9/11 an inside job and Sandy Hook a hoax and still have the President-Elect of the United States call you to thank you and your viewers for their support.\(^\text{20}\)

Secondly, Basham claims that particularism has made it possible for certain conspiracy theories to be confirmed. Specifically, he claims that “the Iraq war is now widely recognized in the West to be an act of political conspiracy on the part of the US and other Western governments, particularly those of Bush and Blair.”\(^\text{21}\) But both “political conspiracy” and “widely recognized” (note that Basham does not simply say “widely believed”) are ambiguous here. If the claim is that the West unjustly pursued self-interested motives in invading Iraq under the cover of overblown WMD threats, that seems clearly true, but doesn’t necessarily rise to the level of a conspiracy. One can act in self-interested ways

\(^\text{16}\) Basham (2016, 10) is right to note that denialism per se is not the same thing as conspiracy theory. But AIDS denialism of various forms, much like other familiar forms of denialism—climate, vaccination etc.—does end up embedding conspiracy explanations either on the level of core theory or on the level of auxiliary hypotheses meant to sandbag the theory against disconfirmation. If I insist the world isn’t warming due to human activity, or that HIV doesn’t cause AIDS, and yet the knowledge-generating mechanisms of society (academia, government research bodies, public health authorities etc.) keep insisting the contrary, I am forced to conclude the people who populate these mechanisms are collectively deluded, incompetent, or corrupt. The denialists just mentioned tend, with dispiriting regularity, to plump for the last option, even if they are not logically required to.

\(^\text{17}\) Basham, “Between Two Generalisms,” 8.


\(^\text{19}\) Basham, “Between Two Generalisms,” 8-9.


without conspiring with others.\textsuperscript{22} If the claim is rather that Bush, Blair, and other actors actively and explicitly colluded to fake intelligence about WMDs to provide a false justification for invading Iraq, then this is far from a “widely recognized” fact.

The Chilcot Report, for instance, is comprehensively damning about the UK Government’s decision to go to war, yet even it stops short of alleging a conspiracy, unless we think that a grotesque combination of motivated willful ignorance, hubris, and negligence somehow meets the definition of conspiracy used by epistemologists. Of course, it may yet emerge someday that there was a conspiracy: a phone transcript might yet surface of Bush telling Blair “Let’s milk this 9/11 thing by pretending Iraq has WMD and then invading to take their oil.” But I’d be willing to bet that if that does happen, it won’t emerge from the ranks of those now popularly referred to as conspiracy theorists. It will come, as it usually does, from whistleblowers and journalists. (Until recently, I’d have included Wikileaks in that list…)

That in no way invalidates the important point made, by Pigden and others, that the pejorative use of the term “conspiracy theory” makes it easier for political actors to deflect attention from legitimate questions. But then, if we want to stop the term being used to shut down proper scrutiny, we need to be honest about why the term has the pejorative connotations it has: the tradition to which the term is characteristically applied, and the attitudes, tropes, and patterns of argumentation employed by that tradition.

\textbf{The Tracy Affair}

I raised the case of James Tracy as an instance of morally reprehensible behavior licensed by conspiracy theory. I think this case illustrates a very specific problem: the way conspiracy theories tend to (and note I do not say any more than “tend to”) cause conspiracy theorists to make purely defensive accusations. Basham insists however that while Tracy’s actions were “misguided” as well as “immoral and imprudent,” the Tracy affair has “no epistemic relevance to how we should approach conspiracy theories as such.”\textsuperscript{23} The “as such” clause here makes a degree of sense if, like Basham, one is committed to a purely epistemological analysis of conspiracy theory. But only a degree. The behavior in this case is not simply a matter of insensitivity or imprudence grafted onto an otherwise unrelated belief system. It’s a direct result of trying to defend that belief system from disconfirmation.

Imagine you meet someone who tells you their child has been killed. What would need to be the case for you to begin to suspect that they are lying not merely about the death of that child, but about the child’s very existence? Now imagine how strong those suspicions would

\textsuperscript{22} Consider the category of ‘quasi-conspiracies’: if all actors in a given context know that if they all act in certain ways the outcome will be better for all of them, and know that all the other actors know this too, they can act in a way that looks co-ordinated but in fact involves no actual collusion (Pigden 1995, 32 n.30; Coady 2006a, 5-6). Hence when an apprehended criminal gang all refuse to confess, this isn’t strictly a ‘conspiracy of silence’: they all just know if they \textit{each} keep their mouth shut, they’ll \textit{all} be better off than if any one of them spills the beans.

\textsuperscript{23} Basham, “Between Two Generalisms,” 12.
need to be for you to demand that the person you’re talking prove, to your satisfaction, that their child had existed. The evidentiary bar here would have to be very high indeed.

But now imagine that the story of the dead child (call this story or set of propositions $\mathcal{X}$) is flatly incompossible with another set of beliefs you happen to hold (call this set $\mathcal{C}$). You have four options:

1) Accept $\mathcal{X}$ is true and accept $\mathcal{C}$ is false;
2) Reject $\mathcal{X}$ and insist $\mathcal{C}$ is true;
3) Accept $\mathcal{X}$ is true but try to find a way to make this fact compossible with the truth of $\mathcal{C}$;
4) Remain agnostic as to which, if either, of $\mathcal{X}$ and $\mathcal{C}$ is true.

In this case, the more committed you are to $\mathcal{C}$, the stronger the reasons you’ll have for rejecting 1) and 4). That leaves you with either 3)—which is hard work and may turn out not to be possible in a given case—or 2). In this case, Tracy’s $\mathcal{C}$ was the belief that Sandy Hook was staged, and he took option 2). It strains credulity, to say the least, to claim that Tracy simply noticed, independently of his antecedent commitment to Sandy Hook being a hoax, problems with the Pozener’s story and accused them on that basis. He accused them because their story contradicted an interpretation of the events of 14 December 2014 that he accepted. Moreover, such an accusation of deceit is easier to make, because more parsimonious, if one is already committed to the existence of a conspiracy not simply to commit the act, but to hide the truth. That doesn’t mean such accusations are always and necessarily a feature of conspiracy theorizing.

Again, my claim goes to the typical features of conspiracy theory as a social phenomenon rather than a specific form of explanation. And it is frequent enough to be a particularly salient feature of the phenomenon. Tracy, after all, is not the only person to confront Sandy Hook parents and witnesses and accuse them of being crisis actors. Nor is Sandy Hook Trutherism the only form of conspiracy theory that generates this class of accusations. When journalist Alison Parker and her cameraman Adam Ward were shot dead on live television in August 2015, Parker’s boyfriend Chris Hurst found his grief compounded by conspiracy theorists insisting that Parker was a crisis actor, that she was not dead, that Hurst too was a crisis actor, that they had never had a relationship, and so on. Again, this doubt is motivated not by any evidence that would be compelling independently of a conspiracy theory, but solely by a pre-existing disposition to believe the shooting was staged and that

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25 [http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/13/what-do-you-say-to-a-roanoke-truther.html](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/13/what-do-you-say-to-a-roanoke-truther.html) This ‘the bereaved aren’t visibly upset enough in public so they must be lying’ trope is a depressingly recurrent one that extends far beyond conspiracy theory. Australians a few years older than myself will recall Lindy Chamberlain being accused of seeming too composed to be the grieving mother of a baby taken by a wild dingo she claimed to be. Chamberlain was convicted of murder, imprisoned, and subsequently exonerated when new evidence emerged; in 2012 a coroner found that a dingo had, in fact, taken baby Azaria. So much for the wisdom of crowds.
Parker and Ward (and by extension Hurst) must therefore be crisis actors—a claim made by, among others, James Tracy’s blog.26

As I understand it, Dentith’s current project seeks to develop heuristics for determining when a conspiracy theory claim is and is not worthy of being taken seriously enough to investigate it—in other words, something like the non-absolutist particularism I’m endorsing and Basham rejects. If we’re developing heuristics for when we should and should not investigate conspiracy claims, then

Does taking this theory seriously enough to investigate it require me to dismiss grieving parents as frauds, under conditions in which there exist no compelling theory-independent reasons to think they are? If so, don’t take this theory seriously enough to investigate it.

—isn’t a bad start.

A Final Word on Trust

One thing that this discussion has made clear to me is that radically different foundational views of the role of trust are in play here. In my initial reply I only alluded to this parenthetically, and it is clear that more needs to be said, if only to clarify what underlies the divergences. A fuller working out of this point will need to wait for another occasion. For now, it’s worth simply noting where the underlying views of the normativity of trust differ.

The philosophical literature on conspiracy theory largely embeds a calculative view of trust. When most philosophers ask “How much should we trust our society’s sources of information?” they are asking a question about reliability: “On past performance, how much confidence should we have that these institutions are telling the truth and/or acting in a way consistent with their stated commitments to acting in our interests?” There is, as Dentith notes, no way of determining in advance just how conspired the world really is.27 But nonetheless, it is not unconspired—conspiracies occur, and most philosophers working on this topic take conspiracy to be a more pervasive feature of social and political life than we usually assume, and think we should calibrate our suspicions accordingly.

David Coady, for instance, explicitly endorses a sort of Aristotelian account of trust, according to which “the intellectual virtue of realism is a golden mean between the intellectual vices of paranoia and naivety.”28 Thus, our phronetic judgement should aim to be just suspicious enough. Alasdair MacIntyre29 has offered a similar account of ideal trust as a mean between

26 http://memoryholeblog.com/2015/08/30/crisis-actors-alison-parker-and-adam-ward/ (Warning: on my most recent attempt to access this page [9 February 2017], Safari returned a malware warning)
27 Dentith, The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories.
29 MacIntyre, “Human Nature and Human Dependence.”
excessive suspicion and credulity, arrived at through a long process of moral training: learning who to trust, and when, and how much.  

Yet trust as an interpersonal and moral phenomenon is not simply a matter of calculating and responding to reliability. For one thing, it involves mutual responsiveness to need, taking the fact the other person knows I am reliant on them to be a reason for them to act consistent with my interests.  

We know that not everyone is trustworthy in that sense. Basham tells us that “Human life is conspiratorial. We can face this, embrace it, but if we deny it, we empower it in the worst way.” People lie, cheat, and steal, and sometimes they conspire in order to do so. But human life is also predicated on foundational, non-calculative trust. When I walk into a room I don’t mentally calculate the odds of you trying to kill me, not because I’ve previously assured myself that the odds too low to worry about, but because of that default background trust that is a condition for social life. As K.E. Logstrup put it, trust is both conceptually and ontogenetically primary, distrust secondary; without that foundational trust the sphere of human life falls apart. Accordingly, our judgments of what to believe of other people are guided by heuristics that are not merely epistemic in character, but also ethical. Giving “the benefit of the doubt” is not, or not typically, merely a judgement about the reliability of the other party, but an expression of that normative default attitude towards others.  

This picture of foundational trust sits awkwardly, to say the least, with the standing vigilance required to maintain a democratic polity. There are always good reasons to be suspicious of power of all forms, both overt and covert, explicit and intrinsic. The work of identifying and uncovering power relations is indispensable, and it seems to involve a relentless and remorseless hermeneutics of suspicion. That tension—between foundational trust and vigilance—is a real and seemingly permanent feature of political and social life. What I have called “reluctance” here is an expression of that tension, an awareness of being caught between the duty to view others as good faith interlocutors and the duty to uncover wrongdoing. The sort of generalized, eager suspicion involved in entertaining and advancing conspiracy theories abandons that reluctance, and thereby misses that central dimension of human sociality. In a world full of untrustworthy people, the demand of trust remains.  

Or, to quote the US President who presided over the Gulf of Tonkin conspiracy, himself misquoting W.H. Auden: “We must love each other, or we must die.”  

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References  


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30 On MacIntyre’s Aristotelian account of trust, which he offers in opposition to Logstrup’s view of trust as foundational, see Stokes 2017.  
31 Jones, “Trustworthiness.”  
33 Logstrup, The Ethical Demand.


