

## Distrust | Routledge Handbook of Trust and Philosophy

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### 1. Preliminaries

It is initially tempting to think of distrust as the absence of trust, but this impression is misleading. One may neither trust nor distrust, but remain in the agnostic mode of “wait and see”.<sup>1</sup> So, trust and distrust do not exhaust the relevant options: they are contraries rather than contradictories (cf. Jones 1996: 15).

Just as distrust is not the absence of trust, so also distrust is not the absence of reliance. Distrust has a normative dimension that non-reliance lacks. A fitting response to the discovery that I have wrongly distrusted you includes remorse, apology, and requests for forgiveness. Such responses need not normally accompany mistaken judgments about reliability (Hawley 2012, 3). To apply the label “untrustworthy” is to impugn a person’s character. But to recognize that someone is not to be relied on in a particular domain need not amount to the recognition of a character flaw in the person. Indeed, you may decline to consider something to be a matter of trust or distrust for reasons that are orthogonal to your assessment of a person’s trustworthiness. You may simply recognize that someone prefers not to be counted on in a particular domain, and you may respect that preference. Making something a matter of trust or distrust can be an undue imposition.

To distrust someone is to think badly of the person distrusted (Domenicucci & Holton 2017, 150). Generally, people do not want to be thought of in this way. But even if a person prefers not to be distrusted, they may, quite consistently, also prefer not to be trusted in that same domain (Hawley 2012, 7). For example, you might enjoy bringing snacks to faculty meetings. But just as you prefer not to be trusted to do this (since you do not want your colleagues to *count on you* to bring snacks), so also you would not want to be *distrusted* in this matter (or to be perceived as *untrustworthy*). So, not being distrusted is something that is worth wanting even in circumstances in which you prefer not to be trusted.

It’s worth noting that the above discussion assumes that distrust has the three-place structure  $x$  *distrusts*  $y$  *to do*  $\phi$ , but there is reason to be skeptical.<sup>2</sup> Faulkner, for instance, denies outright that there is a three-place distrust predicate (2015, 426) and Domenicucci & Holton (2017) hold that there is no three-place syntactic construction of distrust: “We do not say that we distrust someone to do something. We simply distrust, or mistrust, a person.” (150) To my ear, distrusting someone to do something in particular does sound jarring. An interesting question is whether distrust can be “domain-specific” in the way that trust can be. Does it make sense to distrust a person in a delimited domain of interaction, or does distrust by its nature infect multiple domains of interaction? It would seem that the basis of distrust – whether it be skepticism or suspicion about quality of will, integrity, or competence – would have a bearing on this question. Distrust based on skepticism about competence may be confined to a particular domain of expertise. Distrust based on skepticism about quality of will or integrity seems by its nature general.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hardin (2002, 90).

<sup>2</sup> Krishnamurthy (2015), like Hawley, adopts “ $x$  distrusts  $y$  to  $\phi$ ” as the explanatorily fundamental form.

All of these considerations indicate that having an adequate account of trust does not straightforwardly give us an adequate account of distrust. There is still much work to be done in characterizing and taxonomizing distrust perspicuously, as well as in specifying the analytical connections between trust and distrust. In what follows I describe what I take to be the state of art and I lay out some of the challenges ahead.

## 2. The Concept of Distrust

Although there are many theories of trust, few theorists of trust in the philosophical literature have elaborated explicit theories of distrust. A recent account due to Katherine Hawley (2014) is a notable exception.<sup>3</sup> “To understand trust”, Hawley writes, “we must also understand distrust, yet distrust is usually treated as a mere afterthought, or mistakenly equated with an absence of trust.” (1).

Hawley offers “a story about when trust, distrust or neither is objectively appropriate” (9) in order to answer the questions, “what is the worldly situation to which (dis)trust is an appropriate response?” and “when is it appropriate to have (dis)trust- related normative expectations of someone?” (9) As has been widely noted since Baier (1986, 234), one may rely on a person’s predictable habits without trusting them. Hawley offers as an example relying on a colleague who regularly brings too much lunch to work because she is bad at judging quantities. Anticipating this, you plan to eat her leftovers and so rely on her. Hawley observes that if one day your colleague eats all her lunch herself, she would owe you no apology. Disappointment on your part would be understandable, but feelings of betrayal would be out of place. Just as trust is richer than reliance, distrust is richer than non-reliance. In another example, Hawley observes that even though she does not rely on her colleagues to buy her champagne next Friday, it would “wrong or even offensive, to say that [she] distrust[s] her] colleagues in this respect” or to think that they are untrustworthy in this regard (3). (All this on the assumption that they have not offered and there is no social convention). If her colleagues were to surprise her with champagne, it would not be appropriate for her to feel remorse for her non-reliance on them, or to apologize for not having trusted them.

Hawley proposes that what distinguishes reliance/non-reliance from trust/distrust is that the latter attitudes are only appropriate in the context of commitment. It is only appropriate to trust or distrust your colleagues to bring your lunch if they have a commitment to bring you lunch; it is only appropriate for you to trust or distrust your colleagues to bring champagne if they have a commitment to bring champagne. In generalized form, “To trust someone to do something is to believe that she has a commitment to doing it, and to rely upon her to meet that commitment. To distrust someone to do something is to believe that she has a commitment to doing it, and yet not rely upon her to meet that commitment.” (10)

But what about people who rely on the commitments of others cynically, like Holton’s “confidence trickster” (Holton 1994, 65)? Consider the case of a person who tries to fool you into sending him a \$1000 payment to “release your million-dollar inheritance”. Even though he relies on you to keep your commitment, it would be odd to say that he *trusts* you to do this. (Consider how ridiculous it would be for him to feel betrayed if you see through his scheme). Or consider a variation story

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<sup>3</sup> Another is Krishnamurthy’s (2015) account.

involving non-reliance. The confidence trickster starts to worry that you will not follow through on your commitment, and so decides not to rely on you to send the payment. Surely it does not seem right to say that the confidence trickster *distrusts* you. The example and the variation suggest that reliance or nonreliance, even when combined with belief in commitment, do not amount to trust or distrust.

Hawley anticipates this challenge. She points out that the confidence trickster does not believe that you have a *genuine* commitment; rather, he relies on your mistaken belief that you are committed: “Although you don’t realize it you do not have a genuine commitment, the trickster recognizes this, and this is why he does not trust you.” (12) Presumably Hawley could say the same thing about the trickster who anticipates you won’t follow through: he does not believe you have a genuine commitment, and so his withdrawal from reliance does not amount to distrust.

Hawley’s response to the confidence trickster objection is a good one. But we may still wonder whether the commitment account is sufficiently comprehensive. What if you (correctly) believe that someone is committed, but you also think that they lack the necessary *competence* to carry through on their commitment? For example, imagine that you face a difficult court case, and your nephew who has recently earned his law degree enjoins you to let him represent you. Despite your confidence that he is fervently committed to representing you well, you decline his offer simply because you think he is too inexperienced. Does this show that you distrust your nephew despite your faith in his commitment? There is still theoretical work to be done on how we should understand withdrawal from or avoidance of reliance based on skepticism about competence as opposed to commitment. On certain ways of filling out the story, your attitude *does* seem to be one of distrust. For example, if you suspect your nephew is just using you to jump start his new practice, distrust of him certainly seems appropriate. What if your nephew invites you to rely on him without ulterior motives, but you surmise that he ought to have a better reckoning of his own capacity to carry off the work? This, too, seems grounds for distrust. In each of these cases, you may have no doubt about his commitment.<sup>4</sup>

Belief in commitment, even when paired with non-reliance, may not be sufficient for distrust to be an appropriate response. Suppose you decide not to rely on a person, and you *hope* that person will not meet his commitment. Here’s an example: A financier buys insurance on credit defaults, positioning himself to profit when borrowers default. The financier seems to satisfy the conditions for distrust: he believes (truly) that the borrowers have a commitment, and yet he does not rely on them to meet that commitment, because he believes that they will fail. Does it seem right to say that the financier *distrusts* the loan holders even though the borrowers’ lack integrity represents for him a prospect rather than a threat? For those who are moved to say no, this example suggests a view according to which distrust is essentially a *defensive* stance that responds to another person as a threat. This practical, action-oriented aspect of distrust merits deeper investigation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Relatedly, Hawley remarks that “part of trustworthiness is the attempt to avoid commitments you are not competent to fulfil” (17)

<sup>5</sup> Karen Frost-Arnold (2012) offers an account where trust involves taking the proposition that someone will do something as a premise in one’s practical reasoning.

Drawing on the work of Martin Luther King, Meena Krishnamurthy (2015) advances an account of the political value of distrust that foregrounds distrust's practical aspect. Rather than offering a general conceptual analysis of distrust, Krishnamurthy aims to articulate an account of distrust that is politically valuable (392). Krishnamurthy focuses on Martin Luther King's distrust of moderate whites to carry out the actions required to bring about racial justice. She argues that King believed that though white moderates possessed "the right reasons" for acting as justice required, he thought that fear and inertia made them passive (395). According to Krishnamurthy, King distrusted them "because he believed with a high degree of certainty or was confident in his belief that they would not, on their own, act as justice required." (395) Krishnamurthy reconstructs King's conception of distrust as "the confident belief that another individual or group of individuals or an institution will not act justly or as justice requires" (391). King's distrust of white moderates, Krishnamurthy maintains, was a safeguard against white tyranny. Schematized, Krishnamurthy's account of distrust takes the form "x distrusts y to  $\emptyset$ " where distrust is grounded in the "confident belief" that X will not  $\emptyset$ . On this account distrust is isomorphic to the three-place structure of trust: "x trusts y to  $\emptyset$ " where  $\emptyset$  is some action, and the attitude of trust is grounded in the confident belief that y will  $\emptyset$ .

But is distrust always, or even typically, grounded in a belief that the distrusted party will fail to do something in particular? When we speak of distrusting a doctor or a politician, say, is there always, or even typically, a particular action that we anticipate they will fail to do? I find more plausible Hawley's view that "distrust does not require confident prediction of misbehaviour." (2) One's distrustful attitude toward a doctor, for example, might involve a suspicion of general inattentiveness, or of susceptibility to the emoluments of drug companies. But one need not anticipate any particular obligatory action that the doctor will fail to perform. While it is natural to talk of trust in terms of "two people and a task", it is not clear that this framework works equally well for paradigm instances of distrust.

Erich Matthes (2015) takes issue with Krishnamurthy's characterization of the cognitive aspect of distrust as "belief". He points out that understanding distrust in terms of belief does not capture distrust's voluntary aspect. There are contexts, Matthes maintains, where distrusting is something we *do*. A decision to distrust consists in a refusal to rely or a deliberate withdrawal from reliance. Matthes maintains that while Krishnamurthy is correct to highlight the political value of distrust, to understand how distrust may *constitute* a democratic value (rather than be merely instrumentally valuable) we must see how "to not rely on others to meet their commitments (in particular, when you have good reason to believe that they will not meet them) is part and parcel of the participatory nature of democratic society." (4) Matthes concludes that "the *process* of cultivating a healthy distrust, particularly of elected representatives, is constitutive of a well-functioning democracy, independently of whether or not it happens, in a given instance, to guard against tyranny." (4)

Distrust of government and of the state plays a prominent role in the history of liberal thought. Russell Hardin contends that "the beginning of political and economic liberalism is distrust" (2002, 73). On the assumption that the incentives of government agents are to arrange benefits for themselves, it follows that those whose interests may be sacrificed by state intervention have warrant for distrust. The idea that governments are prone to abusing citizens has led liberal thinkers such as Locke, Hume, and Smith, and in the American context, James Madison, to contrive of ways to arrange government so as to diminish the risk of abuse.

### 3. The justification, the signals, the effects, and the response to distrust

Trudy Govier describes the conditions for warranted distrust as those in which people “lie or deliberately deceive, break promises, are hypocritical or insincere, seek to manipulate us, are corrupt or dishonest, cannot be counted on to follow moral norms, are incompetent, have no concern for us or deliberately seek to harm us.” (1991, 53) The list may not be exhaustive, but it does seem representative. One thing to notice is that the basis of distrust can be quite variable, and so we should expect the affective character of distrust to vary widely as well. If distrust is based on suspicion of ill will, the reactive attitude of resentment will be to the fore. If distrust is based on pessimism about competence, then distrust will manifest itself more as wariness or vexation than as moral anger. If it is based on pessimism about integrity, it may be tinged with moral disgust.

It is noteworthy that even when we know distrust to be warranted and even when we ‘feel it in our bones’, we often take measures to conceal it. There is significant social pressure to refrain from expressing distrust: We are awkward and uneasy when we must continue to interact with a person after having expressed distrust of them. This poses problems when we find ourselves in circumstances in which we have no choice but to rely on those we distrust. Even when we try to conceal distrust, the attitude is often betrayed by subtle and non-voluntary aspects of our comportment (cf. Slingerland 2014, Ch. 7). As Govier puts it, “We are left, all too often, to face distrust as a practical problem.” (1991, 53)

Distrust that is revealed, whether deliberately or involuntarily, has the power to insult and to wound, sending a signal to the distrusted party and to witnesses that one regards the person one distrusts as incompetent, malevolent, or lacking in integrity. As a result, we have weighty reason to be wary of the pathologies of trust and distrust, including susceptibility to distortion by dramatic but unrepresentative breaches of trust, and vulnerability to bias and stereotype (Jones 2013, 187). Over-ready trust is perilous, exposing us to exploitation and manipulation; but so is over-ready distrust, which leads us to forgo the benefits of trusting relationships and to incur the risk of “acting immorally towards others whom we have, through distrusting, misjudged.” (McGeer 2002, 25)

In article for *Ebony* entitled, “In My Next Life, I’ll be White”, the philosopher Laurence Thomas relates with bitter irony that, “At times, I have looked over my shoulder expecting to see the danger to which a White was reacting, only to have it dawn on me that I was the menace.” (1990, 84). Thomas relates that black men rarely enjoy the “public trust” of whites in America, “no matter how much their deportment or attire conform to the traditional standards of well-off White males.” (84) To enjoy the public trust means “to have strangers regard one as a morally decent person in a variety of contexts.” (84) Thomas notes that distrust of black men is rooted in a fear that “goes well beyond the pale of rationality” (84). Thomas’s case illustrates that distrust, when it is irrational, and particularly when it is baseless, eats away at trustworthiness:

Thus the sear of distrust festers and becomes the fountainhead of low self-esteem and self-hate. Indeed, to paraphrase the venerable Apostle Paul, those who would do right find that they cannot. This should come as no surprise, however. For it is rare for anyone to live morally without the right sort of moral and social affirmation. And to ask this of Blacks is to ask what is very nearly psychologically impossible. (2)

Thomas picks out a feature of wrongful distrust that is particularly troubling: Distrust has a tendency to be self-confirming. Just as trustworthiness is reinforced by trust, untrustworthiness is reinforced by distrust. Distrust may serve to undermine the internal motivation toward trustworthiness of those who are wrongly distrusted (Kramer 1999). If the person who is distrusted without warrant feels that there is nothing he can do prove himself worthy of trust, he will lack incentive to seek esteem.<sup>6</sup> In addition, he will lack the occasion to prove *to himself* that he is worthy of trust, and thereby lack the opportunity to cultivate a self-concept as of a trustworthy person.<sup>7</sup> Finally, he is deprived of the galvanized effect of hope and vicarious confidence.<sup>8</sup>

Just as distrust confirms itself, distrustful interpretation of others perpetuates itself. McGeer (2002) claims that “trusting and distrusting inhabit incommensurable worlds” insofar as “our attitudes of trust and distrust shape our understanding of various events, leading us to experience the world in ways that tend to reinforce the attitudes we already hold.” (28) This echoes Govier’s (1992) observation that “[w]hen we distrust a person, even evidence of positive behavior and intentions is likely to be received with suspicion, to be interpreted as misleading, and, when properly understood, as negative after all.” (56) Distrust’s inertia makes it both morally and epistemically perilous. Govier describes how taken to “radical extremes, distrust can go so far as to corrode our sense of reality”, risking “an unrealistic, conspiratorial, indeed virtually paranoid view of the world” (55). As we systemically interpret the speech and behavior of others in ways that confirm our distrust, suspiciousness builds on itself and our negative evaluations become impenetrable to empirical refutation. Jones (2013, 194) describes how distrust functions as a *biasing* device (de Sousa 1987, Damasio 1994), tampering evidence so as to make us insensible to signals that others are trustworthy. Jones takes as a paradigm the frequency with which young black men in the United States are stopped by the police: “By doing nothing at all they are taken to signaling untrustworthiness.” (195)

Jones (2013) identifies two further distorting aspects of distrust understood as an affective attitude: recalcitrance and spillover. Distrust is *recalcitrant* insofar as it characteristically parts company from belief: “Even when we believe and affirm that someone is trustworthy, this belief may not be reflected in the cognitive and affective habits with which we approach the prospect of being dependent on them. We can believe they are trustworthy and yet be anxiously unwilling to rely.” (195) Distrust exhibits *spillover* in cases where “it loses focus on its original target and spreads to neighboring targets.” (195) Distrust easily falsely generalizes from one particular psychologically salient case to an entire group. It is distressingly familiar how this aspect of distrust can be leveraged by those seeking to stoke distrust of marginalized groups such as refugees and asylum seekers by fixating on dramatic but unrepresentative cases.

Consideration of distrust’s susceptibility to bias and stereotype, together with its tendencies toward self-fulfillment and self-perpetuation, may lead us to distrustful of our own distrustful attitudes.<sup>9</sup> Gandhi advocated in his *Delhi Diary* for a comprehensive disavowal of distrust: “we should trust even those whom we suspect as our enemies. Brave people disdain distrust” (1951/2005, 203). But a

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Pettit, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> cf. Alfano, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> cf. McGeer, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> In this vein, Ryan Preston-Roedder argues that having a measure of faith in humanity is central to moral life (2013) and articulates a notion of “civic trust” that involves interacting with strangers without fear while relying on their goodwill (2015).

natural worry about this stance is that a broad policy of disavowing distrust will have the effect of exposing vulnerable parties to hazard. What right do we have to be “brave people” on the behalf of others whose positions are more precarious than our own? How confident can we be that our trust will inspire trustworthiness?

H.J.N. Horsburgh develops Gandhi’s views to formulate more precisely a notion of “therapeutic trust” whereby one relies on another person with the aim of bolstering that person’s trustworthiness and giving them the opportunity to develop morally: “it is no exaggeration to say that trust is to morality what adequate living space is to self-expression: without it there is no possibility of reaching maturity.” (1960, 352) Horsburgh’s stance is more carefully hedged than Gandhi’s. But one might worry whether strategic “therapeutic trust” is really trust at all rather than the mere pretense of trust.<sup>10</sup> If it is the latter, therapeutic trust seems to rely on obscuring one’s true attitudes, possibly providing warrant for *distrust*. This worry is particularly acute if we are skeptical about the possibility of effectively concealing doubts about trustworthiness. Hieronymi (2008) points out that whether or not the person relied-upon is inspired by such reliance would seem to depend, at least partially, on whether the person perceives the doubts about her trustworthiness as reasonable. If such doubts are perceived as reasonable, then the decision to rely may well inspire someone to act so as to earn trust. On the other hand, if feelings of distrust are perceived as unreasonable, then the attempt to build trust through reliance may well be perceived as high-handed (Hieronymi 2008, 231) or even insulting.

Hieronymi articulates a “purist” notion of trust according to which “one person trusts another to do something only to the extent that the one trustingly believes that the other will do that thing.” (214) In contrast, McGeer maintains that “it irresponsible and occasionally even tragic to regard these attitudes as purely responsive to evidence.” (29) But this stance gives rise to a sticky problem: if the norms of trust and distrust are not purely evidential, how should they be rationally assessed? Can they be evaluated as they would by a bookmaker coolly seeking to maximize his advantage? According to McGeer, the desire for this kind of affective neutrality is the mark of a narrowly self-protective and immature psyche. The alternative paradigm of rationality that she espouses forswears this kind of calculation. Reason “is not used to dominate the other or to protect the self; it is used to continuously discover the other *and* the self, as each party evolves through the dynamics of interaction.” (37). Rather than offering fortification against disappointment and betrayal, reason provides “the means for working through and moving beyond disappointment when such moments arise.” (37)

Both Hieronymi and McGeer focus their analysis on norms relevant to the person who trusts or distrusts. It is worth noting that the moral and practical point of view of the subject who is trusted or distrusted is comparatively under-explored in the philosophical literature. Relevant questions include: What is the (or an) ethical response to being wrongfully distrusted? What is a rational response? How closely do these track each other?

One strategy that might immediately suggest itself is to try to offer proof one’s trustworthiness. But this risks backfiring, as it is a strategy known to be shared by confidence tricksters. In acting so as to bolster your credibility, you undermine yourself when the intention to appear credible is recognized by others. Indeed, it may not be wise to reveal your knowledge or suspicion of the distrustful attitudes of others toward you, since this could serve bolster the interpretation of your behavior as

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hieronymi 2008.

“trying to appear trustworthy”. Perhaps the best available strategy for the wrongly distrusted is to suppress any indication that they are insulted by wrongful distrust, and to make as if they take themselves to be trusted. But this strategy relies on a kind of misdirection that may be difficult to pull off, and perhaps also morally dubious. If there is a kind of generosity in being patient with distrust, then we should have a perspicuous account of the contours and of the limits of such generosity, as well as an understanding of when such generosity risks compromising a person’s self-respect.

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