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Why We Should Talk about Generalism and Particularism

A Reply to Boudry and Napolitano

Dentith, M R. X; Tsapos, Melina

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PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

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Why We Should Talk about Generalism and Particularism: A Reply to Boudry and Napolitano

M R. X. Dentith, Beijing Normal University, m.dentith@episto.org; Melina Tsapos, Lund University, melinagtsapos@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

The distinction between generalist vs. particularist approaches to how we talk about conspiracy theories (both with regard to the theories and belief in said theories) has been widely adopted in the philosophical work on conspiracy theory theory. This distinction has proven itself to be both useful with respect to differing intuitions on the defintion/meaning of 'conspiracy theory' (largely between pejorative/evaluative vs. non-pejorative/non-evaluative notions) as well as demarcating different kinds of research projects into conspiracy theories (i.e. how we operationalise either a pejorative or non-pejorative *definition* of conspiracy theory in our subsequent research, what our default view of the rationality of conspiracy theorising ought to be, etc.).

Now, the importance of definitions should be trivial to defend among philosophers, and yet recently the distinction between particularism vs generalism has been brought into question on the grounds that the divide between the two views is purely semantical. Not just that, but it has also been alleged that the distinction does nothing for research on or into conspiracy theories. This has been most notably expressed in an article by Maarten Boudry and M. Guilia Napolitano (2023), where they argue that the *apparent* distinction between generalism and particularism is preventing the debate over what to do about conspiracy theories from progressing beyond a simple semantic debate.

We disagree. As we show section 2, Boudry and Napolitano's presentation of the debate between generalists and particularists misconstrues particularist arguments over how we ought to define 'conspiracy theory.' Meanwhile, in section 3, we argue that Boudry and Napolitano's new taxonomy—between 'lumpers' (people who think there might be general patterns with respect to belief in mad, bad, or dangerous conspiracy theories that justify a dismissive attitude towards conspiracy theories) and 'splitters' (those who typically separate out individual cases of conspiracy theories and concentrate on the particulars of those individual cases)—fails to tell a better story of what philosophers interested in the study of conspiracy theories are already up to.

2. Is the Debate Between Particularist and Generalist Views Purely Semantical?

In 2010 Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor published 'Conspiracy Theories and Fortuitous Data,' which introduced the distinction between *Particularism* and *Generalism*. In it they distinguish between a generalist take on belief in conspiracy theories, where:

> [T]he rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories. On this view, conspiratorial thinking qua conspiracy thinking is itself irrational (2010, 568).

and particularism, which:

> [De]nies that the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories (2010, 568–569).

Particularism has become the dominant view amongst philosophers who work on the philosophy of conspiracy theory theory (see Dentith's 2023 as to how this came to be). That is, we cannot and should not assume that conspiracy theories are inherently or typically *mad, bad, or dangerous*. Instead, we should evaluate particular conspiracy theories on their merits and then decide whether suspicion of them—on a case-by-case basis—is deserved. However, Boudry and Napolitano suggest that the distinction between particularism and generalist approaches to conspiracy theory, is purely semantic in nature, writing that:

> The first problem is that either position can be trivially vindicated just by adopting the right definition of "conspiracy theory". As we said before, a minimal definition of conspiracy theory trivially vindicates particularism, as obviously one can sometimes have sufficient evidence to believe in a conspiracy. But, similarly, one can trivially vindicate generalism by semantic fiat. If a "conspiracy theory" is defined as any irrational or unfounded theory about a conspiracy, then it trivially follows that "the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories" and that "conspiratorial thinking qua conspiracy thinking is itself irrational" (2023, 23).[1]

They take it that—on a philosophical level—the particularist/generalist distinction is obfuscating the agreement between philosophers who work on conspiracy theory theory at the cost of highlighting where such philosophers disagree. Indeed, they claim there is more commonality than difference in the projects of so-called generalists and particularists, writing that:

> Both of them may for instance agree that beliefs about conspiracies are not necessarily, or even typically, irrational; that such beliefs deserve to be investigated and assessed on their individual merits (depending on time and resource constraints of course); they may even agree that irrational beliefs about conspiracies have no single common feature that explains their irrationality, that each one is defective in its own unique way. In other words, these two people may only disagree about semantics –about what the term "conspiracy theory" means—and yet the generalism vs. particularism distinction would place them on opposite sides [reference omitted] (2023, 24).

Boudry and Napolitano's construal of the *debate* over whether we should be particularists or generalists fails to note that the debate is not one of simply choosing a definition by fiat; rather, it hinges on arguments, largely about whether we should start our analysis of the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories with non-evaluative/non-pejorative definitions, or

[1] An earlier version of this argument is to be found in the work of Juha Räikka and Juho Ritola (2020).

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whether we should bake in pejorative/evaluative notions into our discussion and analysis of such theories. As Dentith summarises in their 2014 book, *if we are interested in diagnosing what (if anything) is wrong with belief in conspiracy theories, we cannot start out by assuming that such beliefs are deservedly suspicious*. If you're interested in the epistemological analysis of (belief in) conspiracy theories, then it is more theoretically fruitful to work with a non-pejorative definition of conspiracy theory (one that does not include an evaluative or normative aspect of belief in such theories) and then work out from that whether belief in conspiracy theories is as deserving of opprobrium as the folk might think.

Thus getting clear about the starting point of our research into conspiracy theories—the definition that captures what we are (or are not) looking at—is vital. If Boudry and Napolitano think that generalists 'may for instance agree that beliefs about conspiracies are not necessarily, or even typically, irrational', then they should not start off with a definition that would seem to define them as necessarily, or even typically, irrational.[2] That is, if we were to work with a evaluative/pejorative definition, then by fiat generalism seems to be entailed.

Now, it is true that there is at least one particularist, Dentith, who stipulates a simple and minimal definition of 'conspiracy theory' (any explanation of an event that cites a conspiracy as a salient cause). But this is no *mere* case of stipulation; Dentith devotes an entire chapter (2014, Chapter 4) to *argue* that the simple and minimal definition is the most theoretically fruitful option to work with if we are concerned about belief in conspiracy theories. That is, the definition Dentith ultimately adopts comes out of an argument; the *stipulation* is merely there to point out that the definition in use does not match an ordinary language understanding of what counts as a 'conspiracy theory':

> So, although it is true that the definition of a conspiracy theory defended here – any explanation of an event that cites a conspiracy as a salient cause – does not conform to ordinary (and pejorative) usage, it is going to be easier to address the question of when it is rational, or irrational, to believe such an explanation, *if we take an interest in the broad class of explanations covered by this definition* rather than operating with a pejorative reading of 'conspiracy theory'. … If people want to continue using the term 'conspiracy theory' as a pejorative, so be it, but we should not use that as a reason to dismiss belief in particular conspiratorial explanations out of hand (2014, 51–52).

Dentith recognises that there are other definitions available to the conspiracy theory theorist; they just do not enable us to do the work we should want them to.[3] We should also note that

[2] As we will see in the next section, both Boudry and Napolitano at least seem to work with definitions in their own work that would trivially vindicate generalism, and leave few options for belief in conspiracy theories to ever be rational.

[3] For example, as Dentith argues, such definitions often rest upon questionable definitions of what counts as a 'conspiracy' and thus build in features (such as the size of the conspiracy, who the conspirators are, the morality of said conspirators, etc.) which make conspiracy theories seem deservedly suspicious as a class solely

Dentith is not the only particularist advocating for simple and minimal definitions: Basham (2011) and Pigden (2007) (to name but two of the more prominent defenders of the same kind of simple and minimal definition) also *argue* for such a definition; they also do not just stipulate one by fiat to then argue that particularism is vindicated.

But there is another, perhaps more substantial, problem for Boudry and Napolitano: as alluded to earlier, there is more than one particularist definition; the minimal and simple definition that Basham, Dentith, and Pigden argue for is not the same as that argued for by particularists like Kurtis Hagen (2022), David Coady (2003), and Patrick Brooks (2023). They prefer—and argue for—some version of the 'contra official theories' definition, one that says that a given conspiracy theory exists in contention with some official theory or received view. For Hagen, Coady, and Brooks, the minimal and simple definition needs to be supplemented so that it respects some aspect of ordinary language (i.e. we don't call official theories that cite conspiracies as salient causes 'conspiracy theories'). For them ordinary language considerations are part-and-parcel of the particularist project—and should be respected—but this is not sufficient in itself to justify a dismissive attitude towards conspiracy theories.

This is not the only contention in the particularist literature: some, like Dentith, take it that conspiracies are not necessarily sinister states of affairs, but others add to the definition that they are; Dentith also takes it that conspiracy theories can apply to states of affairs like the arranging of surprise parties, yet others think whatever we classify as a 'conspiracy theory' must be of some pith-and-moment.[4]

This is all to say that *within* particularism there are arguments about the best way to define or refine a non-evaluative definition. This shows quite clearly that—since this is an ongoing debate—the definitions offered by particularists are not some mere semantical fiat.
Thus, the first prong of Boudry and Napolitano's argument rests upon a false equivalent: the particularist argues for and offers a definition, one that they claim advances the cause of conspiracy theory theory (at least in philosophy). Boudry and Napolitano, however, stipulate a proposal of *what is to be proven*. So they have not 'vindicated' generalism, nor have they shown that the particularist definition is itself trivial.

3. Aren't Lumpers and Splitters just Generalists and Particularists?

The second prong of Boudry and Napolitano's argument is that if the particularist/generalist distinction is purely semantical, then there should be a better way to taxonomise approaches to conspiracy theory theory in philosophy. As we argued in the previous section, Boudry and Napolitano fail to show that the existing taxonomic division is a mere argument over who gets to stipulate a definition, and thus on that account we could just conclude here. But it's worth looking at their proposed new taxonomy—between 'lumpers' and 'splitters' to see

because what is considered the proper subject of the label 'conspiracy theory' is so restricted as to make theories about conspiracies prima facie unlikely to ever be justified beliefs.

[4] Dentith advocates for a simple and minimal definition of 'conspiracy', a view that not all particularists share.

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what—if any—benefit it would have to the existing debates in the philosophy of conspiracy theory theory.

Initially Boudry and Napolitano consider three new terms that they claim map on to existing debates in the philosophy of conspiracy theory theory: the neutralists (AKA the particularists) who think the term 'conspiracy theory' can and should be defined along the lines of a non-evaluative definition), the colloquialists (AKA generalists) who think ordinary language considerations are important, and the eliminativists (largely Coady, who thinks we should give up on the label 'conspiracy theory' entirely as it acts as a slur [2012]).

As we saw in the previous section, particularists are not so much interested in the definition, but how we should talk about belief in conspiracy theories. As such, even though 'neutralist' captures the kind of definitions *some* particularists use, it rather elides the reasons for the particularist approach. Furthermore, even though Coady is an admitted eliminativist, he is also still a neutralist (at least on Boudry and Napolitano's view) since he argues that if we have to use a term like 'conspiracy theory' it should be a neutral conception (he would just prefer that we don't the label 'conspiracy theory' going forward).

At the same time, 'colloquialist' is not a good match to capture whatever the intention is for generalism and generalists-in-spirit. In the previous section we noted that Boudry and Napolitano say that generalists (and thus colloquialists) may agree:

> [T]hat beliefs about conspiracies are not necessarily, or even typically, irrational; that such beliefs deserve to be investigated and assessed on their individual merits (depending on time and resource constraints of course); they may even agree that irrational beliefs about conspiracies have no single common feature that explains their irrationality, that each one is defective in its own unique way (2023, 24).

Now, if Boudry and Napolitano believe this, this is not reflected in their own published research; Napolitano takes it that conspiracy theories are self-sealing beliefs that are irrational to believe (2021), and Boudry takes it that a chief problem of conspiracy theories is that they are epistemic black holes (2023). They seem to have snuck in provisos here about work that is not their own (appealing to 'other' generalists) but it is not clear who these other generalists are (for example, this does not seem to be the case for other generalists-in-spirit like Keith Harris [2022] or Quassim Cassam [2019]).

Thus, we have to ask who these colloquialists are? Are they the same as the authors (Boudry and Napolitano) who also claim in the same article that the ordinary meaning of the term 'conspiracy theory' is clearly pejorative? Or who have already argued that generalism could be trivially vindicated with a pejorative definition? Furthermore, not all generalists are colloquialists; Cassam stipulates a meaning for 'conspiracy theory' (his 'Conspiracy Theories'), after all, and so he's neither a neutralist, a colloquialist, or an eliminativist. There's an assumption here by Boudry and Napolitano that generalists (the colloquialists) are advocates of an ordinary language understanding of what the term or label 'conspiracy

theory' refers to, without asking whether that is true. As such, it isn't clear that this new taxonomy is going to do the business they want it to. So, whatever the problem with this particular distinction, they decide to work with another taxonomic option: a distinction between 'lumpers' vs. 'splitters.'

> We suggest that the epistemological disagreement is best captured as one between *lumpers* and *splitters*. Some people have a tendency to look for general patterns in (bad) CTs and lump them together, while others tend to separate individual cases and concentrate on differences. Lumpers and splitters should be seen as a spectrum of philosophical inclinations, rather than a neat dichotomy (2023, 25, original emphasis).

They claim that this distinction disentangles the epistemological from the semantic. They even suggest that this distinction between lumpy and splitter views is supported by recent work by particularists, claiming that 'many self-described "particularists" have recently embraced what we would label as moderately "lumpy" views, while remaining steady on their semantic neutralism.' (2023, 25) They cite as evidence three recent papers by Basham and Räikkä (2018), Dentith (2022), and Pigden (2018) (and one not-so-recent paper that is lumped in with the 'recently embraced' category, Brian L. Keeley's 1999), which might seem 'lumpy' on first glance, but are not lumpy in the sense Boudry and Napolitano suggest.

The particularist papers mentioned do look for patterns in particular clusters of similar-seeming conspiracy theories in order to ask whether such patterns are indicative of a reason to justify our suspicions of those sub-classes of conspiracy theories. However, the operating assumption in these papers—due to the authors working with a non-pejorative/non-evaluative notion—means these theories are not considered to be '(bad) CTs' (i.e. in the sense Boudry and Napolitano define 'lumpiness'). Rather, the question is whether certain features of some conspiracy theories are a reliable guide to their being bad (the answer being 'No, but it's complicated!').[5]

If being willing to consider clusters of particular conspiracy theories is sufficient to be a 'lumper', then this distinction is not doing any more work than the existing particularist/generalist distinction. Indeed, it seems to be doing less, rather than more, work, because the existing particularist/generalist distinction (which we have shown already is not just purely a case of semantics) is itself a successful epistemic project.

For example, Lee Basham looks at the role of information hierarchies and how treating conspiracy theories as likely false or typically unwarranted can license conspiracy theories (2018). Patrick Brooks discusses how our normative expectations affect belief in conspiracy theories, and how particularism lets us respond most effectively to cases where such expectations are perverted (2023). Dentith looks at how, under particularism, we are best

[5] As Dentith argues in their 2022, certain features of some conspiracy theories make said theories suspicious such that we might be inclined to think that they are *deservedly* suspicious. However, we cannot infer from the presence of these features in some conspiracy theories to a theory about conspiracy theories generally because sometimes suspicious-seeming theories turn out to be true upon investigation.

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placed to work out when a suspicious-seeming conspiracy theory is or is not *deservedly* suspicious (2022), how to understand both evidence (2019) and expertise (2018) when it comes to assessing the merits of particular conspiracy theories (2016), and the way in which generalism even affects the kind of examples we use to motivate our analysis of the 'supposed' problem of belief in conspiracy theories (2023a). Julia Duetz uses particularism to work out what we even mean by 'theory' when we speak of 'conspiracy theories' (2023).

Kurtis Hagen argues the idea that conspiracy theories are prone to failure itself relies on questionable generalist assumptions (2022), and has written extensively on whether theorising really is epistemically problematic (2018). Niki Pfeifer has shown how all forms of generalism are just forms of particularism (2023). Charles Pigden (the first particularist!) has shown how the very concept of generalism is Tonkish (2023), as well as reflecting on the ethics of belief both of believing and refusing to believe conspiracy theories (Pigden 2024).

Will Mittendorf uses particularism to illustrate the roles of epistemic norms in judging the legitimacy of our democratic institutions (2023) and how particularism usefully illustrates what is wrong with racist conspiracy theories (Mittendorf 2024). Matthew Shields has looked at both the kind of examples of conspiracy theories that generalists use, and why being particularists would be more theoretically fruitful (Shields 2022; 2023). Alexios Stamatiadis-Brehier uses particularism to illustrate the genealogy of conspiracy theories, and thus the role of second-order conspiracies (Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023; 2024), and Melina Tsapos has asked whether we should be worried about conspiracy theorists rejecting experts (Tsapos 2024b), who even counts as a conspiracy theorist (Tsapos 2023), and how the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories is not a priori irrational (in a Bayesian sense) if we use a decision theoretic approach (2024a); all of which rest upon showing that the particularist framework answers such questions more effectively than the generalist paradigm. This all goes to show that particularism is a fertile and theoretically fruitful research programme, on the back of a particularist definition that gets operationalised to give epistemological insights.

Furthermore, linguistically we have to ask 'Does this new terminology look significantly different from the existing terms used by particularists and generalists?' The suggestion that a better way to demarcate approaches to conspiracy theory theory in philosophy along the lines of lumpers and splitters *reinvents the wheel*: lumpers think there is something common or *general* to most conspiracy theories that explains why we think of them as typically *deservedly* suspicious (even if we admit that sometimes such theories will be rational to believe or even plausible/true); that is, lumpers *generally* think we have a case for a prima facie suspicion of conspiracy theories. Meanwhile, splitters think that we have to deal with *particular* conspiracy theories in order to ascertain whether they are or are not *deservedly* suspicious; splitters think that we have to treat *particular* conspiracy theories with care. Clearly Boudry and Napolitano are marking the divide along the same lines as the older, already fruitful particularist/generalist distinction, just with newer terminology that seems to do less work.

4. Conclusion

This all seems bad for both Boudry and Napolitano's construal of the particularist/generalist distinction in the philosophy of conspiracy theory, as well as their proposed solution. At best all their argument amounts to is that there is (yet) another way to taxonomise approaches to conspiracy theory theory, one that does not have the baggage of labeling some conspiracy theory theorists as 'generalists.'

This might be the real problem: some philosophers have recoiled from having their views labeled as 'generalist.' It is fair to say that particularists are happy to label themselves as so, but generalists seldom self-identify as 'generalists' (with Keith Harris [2024] being a kind of exception). Then again, particularists have also been labeled as 'apologists' for conspiracy theories/theorists (Cassam 2023), and Räikka and Ritola have even suggested that particularists might have ulterior motives for advocating particularism.[6] It seems, then, there might be some heat in the debate over the philosophical contribution to conspiracy theory theory. Thus, we can see the 'sting' in the particularist/generalist terminology, even if no malice is intended in applying the label(s). Philosophical debates can *appear* quite heated (see, for example, the historical debates between realists and anti-realists in the philosophy of science, or the contemporary debates in the philosophy of mind), but this is (perhaps unfortunately) a by-product of philosophical discussion. Given we are interested in *arguments* we are liable—in the process of arguing that a rival argument is either unsound or invalid—to make it look as if we are impugning the character of the arguer rather than the quality of their argument.

As it stands, the reason why the particularist/generalist distinction has stood since Buenting and Taylor's 2010 is that it not only adequately describes scholarly approaches to research into or about conspiracy theories, but also because it has been a very successful research programme. The divide between the two approaches is not one derived or vindicated by semantical fiat but, rather, arguments about theoretically fruitfulness when it comes to assessing what—if anything—is wrong with conspiracy theories, belief in such theories, and the people who believe them. Until such time that the particularist research programme fails, it is hard to see particularists wanting to give up on their research programme.

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[6] As they write:

> We fear that it is not an exaggeration to say that some philosophers have forgotten the principle of charity in their contributions to the debate, although truth-lovers (if that is what a philosopher can claim to be) should respect the principle. One explanation for the strong language is that many issues related to the epistemology and ethics of conspiracies have a political dimension. Possibly there are also other incentives not to find an agreement (2020, 63).

There is no explanation as to what these other 'incentives' might be.

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Co-Signers

Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier, University of Athens

I agree with most of what Dentith and Tsapos state in their reply. Most importantly, I find the particularist project methodologically useful for the very reasons Dentith and Tsapos state (and for other reasons; e.g., see Shields 2023, 2024). Still, and for what it's worth, it seems that my own view (what I call 'local generalism' in my 2023, 2024) seems to be 'lumpy' in Boudry & Napolitano's sense. I argue that there are clusters of deservingly suspicious CTs (in a purely epistemic, non-pragmatic, sense). Presumably this is where Dentith and I diverge (see, fn. 7) even though I adopt Dentith's minimalist notion of particularism.

Specifically, Dentith and Tsapos suggest (echoing other particularists such as Pigden and Keeley) that the answer to the question 'are certain features of some conspiracy theories a reliable guide to their being bad?' is 'No, but it's complicated!'. My answer would be 'Yes, but it's complicated!': if something like 'local generalism' is right then there are important commonalities between instances of certain types of CTs and one can appeal to such commonalities to treat certain theories as epistemically suspicious (specifically, I argue that this can be show by appeal to genealogical considerations). So, in a conciliatory gesture towards Boudry & Napolitano, I should note that I do find some value in the 'lumping/splitting' distinction as I do think that there are... 'lumps' in the landscape of conspiracy theories (although it seems that I have a much more localized conception of those lumps). Still, I would like to suggest that this distinction can be used alongside the particularism/genealism terminology. Specifically, there can (and, perhaps, should) be more nuanced and specific ways of characterizing one's particularism rather than simply abolishing the generalism/particularism terminology altogether. For example, one can be a particularist in the epistemological sense (i.e., in the sense that there is nothing inherently epistemically problematic with the class of, minimally understood, CTs), but not in terms of how one should investigate CTs. Given that there are 'lumps'/'clusters' of deservingly suspicious CTs, then one shouldn't investigate every CT (still, I admit, this issue largely depends on what we mean by 'investigating'). At any rate, I recommend that we should keep talking about generalism and particularism.

Charles Pigden, University of Otago
Chris Ranalli, VU Amsterdam
Kurtis Hagen, Independent Scholar

I agree with Dentith and Tsapos's main thesis: Boudry and Napolitano's critique does not convincingly undermine the continuing relevance of the particularist/generalist distinction. We *should* keep talking about it. Below I focus solely on the supposed absence of generalists. Boudry and Napolitano acknowledge that there are several philosophers who self-identify as particularists (and there are others who are clearly particularists even if they haven't explicitly self-identified). However, they imply that there are virtually no generalists. There is only a very limited sense in which this is probably true: there are no philosophers writing on this

topic that have explicitly taken the view that conspiracy theories, if understood according to the "minimal definition," ought to be dismissed merely for being theories of this kind.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of people who use the phrase "conspiracy theory" derisively, strongly suggesting that the theory in question should be dismissed. And worse, they often imply that anyone who does not immediately repudiate the theory so labeled should be criticized and perhaps punished. They typically do this without clarifying exactly what they take the phrase "conspiracy theory" to mean, which allows them to equivocate freely. Importantly, sometimes the views labeled "conspiracy theories" turn out to be true, or at least authoritatively acknowledged to be plausible. The authenticity of Hunter Biden's laptop and the lab leak hypothesis are two recent examples. In addition, it is not uncommon for social scientists to provide a definition according to which many true or plausible theories should count as conspiracy theories, and yet these scholars are highly selective in the theories they focus on and proceed to treat those theories as if they must be false. There are many people who act as though they are generalists, and their generalism as real consequences.

Further, several philosophers have tried to defend some form of generalism as it applies to contrarian conspiracy theories(Harris 2022; Levy 2007; Ross 2023). They thereby attempt, in Keith Harris's words, to "vindicate at least to some degree the dismissive attitude toward conspiracy theories so often criticized by particularists" (Harris 2022, 17). Harris has even suggested that generalist philosophers are the *silent majority*. He writes: "Assuming that a generalist skepticism toward conspiracy theories is the default position among philosophers, the dearth of material defending generalism may simply reflect the attitude that generalism needs no defending. From this perspective, the apparent popularity of particularism may actually reflect the view that generalism is commonsensical" (Harris 2022, 2). Harris might be right. For most philosophers may not have given the matter careful thought. Or they may not have read the particularist literature closely enough to realize that the "conventional wisdom" on this matter is wrong. And perhaps we particularists need to make our case still clearer.

Given all that, there does seem to be a real divide. And the particularist/generalist distinction does a fairly good job at capturing it, even if ambiguities remain and the two sides sometimes talk past each other. But the fact that people have talked past each other to some degree does not mean we should abandon the conversation. We should, instead, continue to strive to make the matter clearer.

Martin Orr, Boise State University

To very loosely paraphrase Shakespeare, generalism by any other name would still not pass the sniff test. They assume what needs to be demonstrated. How exactly do people in everyday conversation use 'conspiracy theory'? As the generalists do? Is it defined, as they would have it, in practice and in context, only to label a false theory, or is it sometimes recognized that the phrase can also be used to shut people down. That so many people, as Husting and I noted (2007), use the disclaimer "I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but...." (and that we all know what we mean when we say that), proves that people recognize that (1) yes,

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there are some incredibly suspicious conspiracy theories out there, and (2) people often exploit that fact to ridicule those who would point to the well-documented criminality of elites in politics and the economy, and to a commercial media that diverts attention from the misdeeds of their owners and advertisers. The generalists would have us believe that their research subjects can't handle contradiction and nuance in their conversation or their thinking, or that a word or phrase can't used in different ways at different times. We can say 'conspiracy theorist' with a dismissive scowl or a knowing wink. It can bond a relationship or tear a family apart. The assumption that everyone uses any word or phrase in this way and only this way in all contexts and situations is not a sound basis for a research program. Conceptualization by public opinion poll would be bad enough. Conceptualization by just assuming what the results of such a poll would look like seems an even less promising approach.

Patrick Brooks, Rutgers University

To suggest that we can vindicate either position by definitional fiat (as Boudry and Napolitano do) is to misunderstand the dialectic to this point. Generalists define CTs as irrational for a reason—namely, because that seems to respect ordinary usage. Particularists say "Okay, sure, but why is ordinary usage like that? In virtue of what are these things irrational?" Answers vary, but a good contender seems to be that there's something wrong with believing something other than the official/expert story. Again, particularists say "Okay, but is that always irrational? Can't there be times when it's permissible to disbelieve/question the official story?" A convincing reason for thinking that this is always bad has not been forthcoming, and this motivates a move away from the ordinary usage definition preferred by generalists towards something more like what Kurtis, David, and I prefer. Authors like M take things a bit further, dropping the requirement that the theory go against an official narrative. And they do this for a reason: official stories can be conspiracy theories, too!

Notice that, at no point in this brief summary, has any stipulation occurred. Generalists have a reason for their definition, and particularists have arguments against it. The generalists owes us a response to these arguments. If they can't give one, then generalism is false. There's no two ways about it. It's bad form to say "Yeah, yeah, fair enough. Let's talk about something else now" without first acknowledging that fact.

Will Mittendorf, Cerritos College

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