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As-if trust

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ABSTRACT

A lot of what we understand to be trust is not trust; it is, instead, an active and conscious decision to feign trust. We call this 'as-if' trust. If trust involves taking on risks and vulnerabilities, as-if trust involves taking on surplus risks and vulnerabilities. People may decide to act as if they trust in many situations, even when they do not have sufficient warrant to trust – which is to say even when they do not trust. Likewise, people might decide to act as if they trust even when they have good reasons to actively distrust. The surplus risks of as-if trust may be worth taking in a number of different contexts and for many reasons. We argue that as-if trust is a concept that should be added to our theoretical, practical, and political vocabularies of trust and distrust. In doing so, we discuss the main reasons for someone to act as if they trust. We then show that the practice of as-if trust has been recognized by other scholars but treated as trust. In response, we clarify how as-if trust differs from trust, and we discuss the utility and ubiquity of as-if trust, especially in politics.

KEYWORDS Trust; political trust; distrust; conflict, social power, leadership, oppression

Introduction

Imagine someone who lives in northern England. Now imagine that this person, let's call him Albert, has a leaky roof. This is an urgent situation because it frequently rains in northern England. Albert quickly rummages around on the internet looking for reputable roofers who do emergency jobs. There are some available but the options are limited. When negotiating with a roofer he's told that he has to pay part of the cost of the job – which amounts to thousands of pounds – upfront. They will do a temporary repair and complete the job properly in two weeks' time. Should Albert trust them? They have some positive reviews online but there are some negative reviews as well. He does not actively *distrust* them, but he has few reasons to trust them. He is in a space *between* trust and distrust. And his leaky roof needs fixing! What does Albert do? He pays the money and hopes that the roofers

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will finish the job in two weeks' time. Does he trust them? No, he doesn't. He does not have sufficient warrant to trust them. Does he act *as if* he trusts them? Yes, he does.

In this paper we argue that a lot of what we understand to be trust – a lot of what we see *as trust* — is more like what Albert is doing in this scenario. A lot of what we take to be trust is not trust. It is, instead, what we call 'as-if trust.'

Trust always involves risk and vulnerability. When we are certain, we do not *need* to trust. We are, however, rarely certain. And we cannot be certain when dealing with other people. We often have limited information about the character, competence, and intentions of others. But the risks and vulnerabilities associated with trusting are reduced the more confident we are that those we trust are, indeed, trustworthy. If trust involves taking on risks and vulnerabilities, as-if trust involves taking on *surplus* risks and vulnerabilities. We might decide – as Albert has done – to act as if we trust even when we do not have sufficient warrant to trust – which is to say even when we *don't* trust. Likewise, we might decide to act as if we trust even when we have good reasons to actively *distrust*. When we have good reasons to distrust but we decide to act as-if we trust, we take on even *greater* surplus risk. But those surplus risks might be worth taking.

Our aim in this paper is to explain why we think as-if trust is a concept that should be added to our theoretical, practical, and political vocabularies of trust and distrust. We should note at the outset that we are not making strong claims about the way in which we might characterize trust as such. Trust has been defined in a wide range of ways (e.g. McLeod, 2020). There are theories of intuitive trust, such as Annette Baier's (1986) account of the trust between parents and infants, or Mark Coeckelbergh's (2012) theory of phenomenological-social trust, in which trust is a sociological or cultural phenomenon which already always exists (at least until it doesn't). In these forms of trust, people take trust for granted, until they have reason not to.

But there are also cognitive or reflective theories of trust, in which individuals or groups make conscious decisions to trust and trust is assumed *not* to exist until such decisions are made. Our theory of as-if trust assumes a cognitive or reflective theory of trust. We assume, for the purposes of explication, that it is not possible to unreflectively or intuitively pretend to do something.

But our theory is nevertheless consistent with various accounts of cognitive or reflective trust and trustworthiness. Onora O'Neill (2002), for example, argues that trustworthy people are those who are reliable, honest, and competent to do what they have been entrusted to do. If even one of these criteria is missing, on O'Neill's account, we should not trust. Hardin (2002) argues that we will have good reasons to trust if our interests are aligned with – or encapsulated by – the interests of those we are trusting. Hawley

(2017) gives us a commitment theory of trust, in which trust is grounded in the commitments that others make. When these (consciously-formed or articulated) commitments do not exist, a trust relationship does not exist either.

Our theory of as-if trust is consistent with each of these cognitive or reflective accounts of trust. We might not be convinced that our interests are truly aligned with others, or that others are reliable, honest, and competent, but we might nevertheless decide to act as if we trust. Likewise, even when someone has not made a trust commitment to us, we might act as if they had.

Following Mark E. Warren (1999), we say that trust is warranted when there are good reasons to trust (that is, reasons that the truster finds plausible). As-if trust exists in that space where people have reasons to pretend to trust even when they do not have good reasons to trust, they are unsure about whether their trust is warranted in particular circumstances, or where their distrust *is* warranted.

And we are not making any strong claims about where the line should be drawn between warranted trust and as-if trust – or, indeed, between warranted *distrust* and as-if trust. That is, we are not trying to identify the specific threshold at which one ceases to trust, and thus becomes open to the possibility of acting as-if one trusts. Our point is simply that there *is* a space defined by a lack of trust or even positive distrust, and in this space we have the option of deciding to act as-if we trust. We also make the claim that this space where as-if trust exists is larger than we normally think.

The paper is organized into four sections. In the next section we discuss some of the main reasons for someone to act as if they trust even when they do not. We then show that the practice of as-if trust has been recognized by other scholars but treated as trust. In response, we clarify how as-if trust differs from trust. After that, we discuss the utility and ubiquity of as-if trust, especially in politics.

As-if trust?

Why would someone take on the surplus risk associated with as-if trust? Why would someone act as if they trust when they do not, in fact, trust? There are many possible reasons. We are often forced to act or make decisions even when we are faced with limited options and information. In those circumstances, we may be compelled to act as if we trust even when we do not. Self-interest might lead us to choose the stance of as-if trust on an estimation of costs and benefits. But even when we have a range of options and good information we might decide to act as-if we trust for other-regarding or altruistic reasons. Or we might do so in an effort to induce others to act in trustworthy ways. Or we might decide to act as if we trust because the

probable consequences of active distrust are distasteful, potentially damaging, and even more costly than the risks associated with feigning trust. Indeed, these (and other reasons) are not mutually exclusive. We might decide to act as if we trust for several different reasons at once. Nevertheless, across this range of cases there is a similar thing going on: in each case we might decide to act as if we trust if we think that we might – possibly – obtain the goods of trust by doing so. In what follows, we unpack some of these reasons for why people might – and often *do* — decide to act as if they trust.

As-if trust is often, and perhaps most obviously, a response to limited options. In our previous example, Albert had a *few* options, but they were limited. There were only a handful of roofers who do emergency jobs. And the conditions for each were the same: each company had mixed reviews online and required upfront cash payments. And Albert's situation was urgent. His roof was leaking. He had to act. He could not afford to seek more information, or wait until he found someone he *did* trust. He did not trust but he acted as if he trusted because he had so few other options.

This is a common situation. Take for example the problem of navigating traffic. As motorists – but more pointedly as pedestrians or cyclists – we *have* to act as-if we trust other people to pay attention and drive carefully. There are many reasons why we should not trust other drivers but we act as if we do because we have so few options. It is impossible to move around our cities, as pedestrians, cyclists, or motorists, without acting as-if we trust other people to drive carefully. We simply have no other viable options. Either we act as if we trust other people to drive carefully or we must withdraw from society. We might even actively *distrust* other drivers. We might have good information that in general people are not good drivers (perhaps because they are getting distracted by their phones) and should not be trusted. We might have personal experiences that lead us to distrust other drivers. But we have to make a choice: Do we act as if we trust or do we withdraw?

This situation has typically been presented as a choice between trust and withdrawal. Consider this quote from Mark E. Warren:

> If I am unwilling to trust that the strangers I meet on the street will not mug me, I will be unable to leave my house. So the alternative to trust, particularly in complex societies, is not a transparent knowledge of risks and contingencies — which is impossible in any case — but rather generalized distrust, which offers a sense of security but at the cost of an impoverished existence. (Warren, 1999, p. 4)

In this passage, Warren is suggesting that we have only two choices: trust (even with insufficient information) or withdrawal. We are suggesting that there is another option: we can act as-if we trust even when we have insufficient reasons to trust, insufficient information about whether we should trust or sufficient reasons to distrust.

Indeed, as-if trust aligns more closely with what Warren is saying here. He is pressing us to admit that we probably will want to leave our homes even if we do not trust strangers. We *will* leave our homes because the costs of not doing so – the costs of withdrawal – are much greater than the costs of feigning trust. Although Warren uses the language of trust, he describes a situation in which people act *as if* they trust even when they do not. By doing so they take on a surplus risk – a risk that is higher than they would have to bear if their trust of strangers was thought to be warranted. One reason why people might take on the surplus risk of as-if trust is that they see the costs of withdrawal as being even higher than feigning trust.

So as-if trust can be grounded in self-interest. Where our options are limited and the costs of withdrawal are high, it might make sense to adopt a stance of as-if trust. But as-if trust may be an appropriate response to uncertainty even where we have other viable options and good information. Jane Mansbridge gives us an example of this which she calls 'altruistic trust.' This is when 'one trusts the other more than is warranted by the available evidence, as a gift, for the good of the other and the community' (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 290). She then identifies three potential benefits of altruistic trust. First, it may be a show of respect for others. Second, it may be extended to maintain positive (productive or valuable) relationships between oneself and others. Third – if altruistic trust does the first two things – it might also serve as a positive model of prosocial behavior for others to follow.

For example, imagine someone who has an untrustworthy brother. Let's call him Miguel. Miguel's brother asks to borrow some not insignificant amount of money. Miguel can afford to lend his brother the money but given his brother's history of not paying him back he has reasons to think that he'll never see the money again. In this situation, Miguel has good reasons to not trust. But he also has reasons to act as-if he trusts. Refusing to lend his brother money might ruin their relationship – a relationship that they both value. By lending the money to his brother – by acting *as if* he trusts his brother – Miguel can maintain the relationship which he values *more* than the money. What does Miguel do? He is free to make a choice. He has options. And he has information. Indeed he has very *good* information about the untrustworthiness of his brother – he knows him well. So, what does Miguel do? He acts as if he trusts his brother and lends him the money.

Mansbridge calls this altruistic trust. But we think a more accurate description is as-if trust. Miguel is not trusting. He is making a conscious decision to act *as if* he trusts. Mansbridge's concept of altruistic trust is of interest to us – even though it is not trust – because it shows that people might have good reasons to act as if they trust even when their options and information are not limited. They might act as if they trust for the benefit of others even when the risks are high. They might act as if they trust to benefit *themselves* even when the risks are high. They might act as if they trust to (hopefully) bring about

some prosocial or desirable political outcome, even when the risks of that outcome *not* being realized are high.

We might also act as if we trust in order to induce others to act in a more trustworthy way. This possibility is outlined by Philip Pettit in his article 'The Cunning of Trust.' He suggests that people are likely to act reliably when we invest trust in them in so far as they are motivated by the 'desire for the good opinion of others' (Pettit, 1995, p. 203). We might think that people are not trustworthy – because, for example, they are not reliable, honest, or competent – but we might nevertheless think that they are likely to care about their reputations. If we act as if we trust them, they, in turn, will be more likely to act in a trustworthy way because that is the best way for them to retain their good reputations (which includes being seen as being trustworthy), even if they lack the other qualities of trustworthiness. Pettit argues that this explains the ubiquity of trust in situations where we don't know enough about the characters of other people. In our view, however, what he is describing is as-if trust, not trust. Pettit hints at but does not explicitly develop the point when he says:

> There are situations where an act of trust will signal to a trustee, and to witnesses, that the trustor believes in or presumes on the trustworthiness of the trustee — believes in or presumes on his loyalty or virtue or prudence — and so thinks well of him to that extent. (Pettit, 1995, p. 216)

We are more explicit: as if trust involves pretending to trust. We might pretend to trust someone and hope that our act of trusting (and it is, in this case, *an act*) will initiate a self-fulfilling cycle. When we trust we may induce the other to act in a trustworthy manner. In Pettit's analysis, however, the motivation for the trustee is reputational: we pretend to trust the trustee and the trustee pretends to be trustworthy. There is a sort of double pretense going on – and yet, the result is the same as it would be if real trust were present!

To sum up, as-if trust, as we have defined it, involves acting in trusting ways *without sufficient warrant for trust*. People might act as if they trust when they do not have good reasons to trust or when they have good reasons to distrust. Those who feign trust take on *surplus* risks – risks above those that would be born *if* trust were indeed warranted.

We may decide to act as if we trust for social, self-interested, or altruistic reasons. We may decide to do so because our information or options are limited. We might act as if we trust in order to encourage others to act in trustworthy ways, thereby promoting a virtuous circle of trust behaviors. This list of reasons for acting as if we trust is not meant to be exhaustive. There may be many reasons for people to feign trust, and those reasons will not normally be mutually exclusive. When people act as if they trust they are often doing so for

a combination of reasons. For example, when Miguel acts as if he trusts his untrustworthy brother with money he does so for social reasons (because it is socially awkward not to). He does so for self-regarding reasons (because he values his relationship with his brother). And he does so for the benefit of his brother (who is then not deprived of the opportunity to *be* trustworthy).

The multiple reasons that people might have for feigning trust are often treated in isolation from each other. Mansbridge (1999), as we have seen, focuses on altruistic reasons, while Pettit (1995) focuses on psychological motivations and reputational considerations. We have mentioned a number of other reasons why people might decide to act as if they trust even when they do not. Across these different reasons, however, there is an underlying similarity in form: this is *one* phenomenon. Mansbridge, Pettit, and a number of other scholars are talking about the same thing: people often act as if they trust when they don't.

You might still ask: Why does this matter? It matters because as-if trust is distinct from trust and should be treated as such. But as-if trust – like trust itself – also has distinct benefits and utilities. In what follows, we discuss what others have said about the conceptual space between trust and distrust, we then discuss the distinctiveness, utility, and ubiquity of as-if trust.

Between trust and distrust

There are quite a few scholars who have dipped their toes into the conceptual waters we are talking about here. Many scholars (and others) simply refer to as-if trust as *trust*. Some do this *while* using the language of as-if trust. We have already mentioned Mansbridge's theory of altruistic trust. She calls it trust but she explains her theory using the language of as-if trust.

> Altruistic trust, as I understand it, thus comprises a spectrum that includes various combinations of belief and action. One end of this spectrum is anchored by an 'act beyond trust.' In an act beyond trust, one acts *as if* one believed in the other's benign intent, although one's actual belief is not strong enough to lead one to act in this manner without altruistic intent toward the other, (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 297. *Emphasis added*)

In this quote Mansbridge acknowledges that one's actions might be different from one's beliefs – that actors might *pretend* that they believe and demonstrate belief through their actions while actually not believing that the other is trustworthy.[1] She calls this acting 'as if' one believes. She describes a situation in which someone acts as if they trust when they are, in fact, acting 'beyond trust.' This is as-if trust as we have described it. But

Mansbridge calls it trust. We think it is more accurate – and clearer conceptually – to call it what it is: It is *not* trust; it is as-if trust.

In his article, 'Deciding to Trust, Coming to Believe' Richard Holton makes the argument that people can *decide* to trust even when they have good reasons not to trust. He gives the following example:

> Suppose you run a small shop. And suppose you discover that the person you have recently employed has just been convicted of petty theft. Should you trust him with the till? It appears that you can really decide whether or not to do so. And again it appears that you can do so without believing that he is trustworthy. (Holton, 1994, p. 63)[2]

Here, and elsewhere in the essay, Holton comes close to the language of as-if trust.[3] But he ultimately frames it as 'deciding to trust.' He argues that we can decide to trust even when we have reasons not to trust. We disagree. We cannot decide to genuinely trust when we do not (Hardin, 2002). But we can decide to *act as if* we trust.[4]

There are many other examples of scholars treating as-if trust as if it were trust. Philip J. Nickel (2007) gives us the example of parents 'trusting' their teenagers with the house or with the car. They do not actually trust them but they act as if they trust them in order to model trusting behavior. The hope is that by acting as if they trust their teenagers they will, in fact, make the teenagers more trustworthy. Nickel calls this 'therapeutic trust' because it is intended to have a therapeutic effect on the trustees – the act of trusting is supposed to help make the trustees more trustworthy. But this is not, on our account, trust. It is, instead, an example of feigning trust. The parents are acting as-if they trust. For the purposes of conceptual clarity, then, we should acknowledge this as an act of pretending to trust rather than treating it as the thing itself.

As mentioned above, Pettit (1995) makes an argument that is in some respects similar to Nickel's argument about therapeutic trust. In both instances, feigning trust is employed in the hope of bringing about trustworthy behavior in others. The difference is that Pettit, unlike Nickel, doesn't think that as-if trust will actually make someone more trustworthy. Pettit sees trustworthiness as a character trait and thus something that cannot easily be changed. But he also sees pretense in both the act of trusting and the act of being trustworthy. Nickel, by contrast, argues that acting as-if one trusts might actually make someone more trustworthy.

All of these scholars, Pettit, Mansbridge, Holton, and Nickel, are working in the conceptual space where as-if trust exists – the space between trust and distrust – but they use the language of trust to describe the feigning of trust, and they often treat it as if it were the real thing. Edna Ullmann-Margalit does not make that mistake. In her article 'Trust, Distrust, and In Between' she observes that most of the time, due largely to our limited

information, we find ourselves 'suspended between trust and distrust', and yet under pressure to choose a course of action (Ullmann-Margalit, 2004, p. 70). She then asks what sort of default rule we should follow in the absence of adequate reasons to trust or distrust. Drawing on rational choice theory she argues for a general presumption in favor of adopting the stance of trust. What brings her close to our approach is that she both recognizes the centrality of acting as-if one trusts and she is consistent in using the language of as-if trust.

However, our approach differs from Ullmann-Margalit in three ways. First, we do not seek or expect to find a general rule to guide our decisions about whether to feign trust. Instead of a general rule we argue that individuals (and possibly groups) must make trust judgments on a case-by-case basis. In some instances, people may have good reasons to trust or distrust. In many instances – and for a variety of reasons – people often decide to feign trust. But there is no general rule for which option is best. Instead, people must make those decisions based on their own judgments and judgments will often differ. Second, and relatedly, unlike Ullmann-Margalit, we regard rational self-interest as only one among many reasons for acting as if we trust. Third, in Ulmann-Margalit's analysis people pretend to trust only in response to the agnosticism we face when we are suspended between trust and distrust. We argue that people can also decide to act as if they trust even when they positively distrust, or have good reason to do so.

Russell Hardin (2002) also gives a brief intimation of what we are calling as-if trust in his book *Trust and Trustworthiness*.[5] Unlike Holton (1994), Hardin argues that trust cannot be a choice because it is wholly a matter of belief. Based on the evidence available to you, you simply do or do not trust. (Just as you simply believe it is or is not raining based on the evidence at hand.) However, actions clearly are chosen. Thus, he says, I *can* decide 'to *act* as I would if I did in fact trust or to take a chance on your being trustworthy beyond any evidence I have that you will be trustworthy' (Hardin, 2002, p. 59; our emphasis). And one can decide to 'act cooperatively beyond what one would do if one acted only from the degree of trust one had in another' (Hardin, 2002, p. 58).

Hardin thus comes close to the 'as-if' trust formulation, but his discussion is fleeting. Nevertheless, he does not make the mistake of calling as-if trust trust. Indeed, he criticizes John Dunn, Annette Baier, Kenneth Arrow and Niklas Luhmann for using the term 'trust' to describe actions. Our formulation of as-if trust not only clearly marks out that it is not the same thing as trust, but it also helps make sense of why others have described trust as an action. John Dunn, for example, describes trust as a 'more or less consciously chosen policy for handling the freedom of other human agents or agencies' (Dunn, 1988, p. 73). That formulation is consistent with our theory of as-if trust, but it is not consistent with Hardin's notion of trust as a belief. At the same time, our

formulation, where 'trust' is the noun and 'as-if' is the modifier, makes clear that we are not talking about something beyond the category of trust altogether, which is what is suggested by Hardin's language of an 'act beyond trust.'

Hardin's formulation draws a clear and impenetrable boundary between the belief (trust) and the act (the action motivated by the belief). Our formation of as-if trust allows for some permeability between this boundary, so that we can better make sense of actions which are clearly related to trust but are not underpinned by strong trust beliefs. Furthermore, as-if trust actions may themselves provide actors with good reasons to trust in the future, thus further blurring the clear boundary Hardin wishes to draw between trust and action.

A distinction without a difference?

At this point you might worry that we are making a distinction without a difference. What real difference does it make if we say that we have decided to act *as if* we trust rather than actually trusting? These two practices – trust and as-if trust – are often observationally equivalent. Furthermore, when we trust we are never *really* sure we should be trusting – we are always taking a leap of faith when we trust someone else with something that is important to us.[6] Is as-if trust simply another more complicated name for trust? We do not think so. At the most basic level, as-if trust involves a psychological or subjective experience that differs from that of trust. This is most obvious if we take trust to be an unconscious or automatic attitude – it is clear that we cannot consciously decide to have an unconscious or unreflective attitude. But it is also the case for other ways of thinking about trust. For instance, acting as if you trust does not mean you thereby *believe* that another 'encapsulates' your interest in theirs (e.g. Hardin, 2002), or that someone has made a commitment to you to act in trustworthy ways (e.g. Hawley, 2017). The experience of as-if trust involves a conscious pretense, and this makes it distinct from trust. As-if trust is characterized by a consciousness of the gap between one's internal lack of trust or even positive distrust, and the overt expression of trust. The importance of this difference is manifest in at least three ways.

First, recognizing the possibility of as-if trust changes the way we interpret *expressions* of trust and distrust. Take, for example, an argument that Onora O'Neill (2002) makes. She notes that people often tell pollsters that they do not trust. They do not trust salespeople, corporations, or politicians. And they say they do not trust each other. But then they act like they trust! They buy things from salespeople and corporations. They trust that strangers will not mug them. And they vote for politicians they say they don't trust. O'Neill takes this to mean that people are *more* trusting than they say they are. And she

argues that this is not just a matter of limited options. If I *really* don't trust the water company, I would boil my tap water or buy bottles instead. But most people don't go to those extremes: 'The evidence suggests that we still constantly place trust in many of the institutions and professions we profess not to trust' (O'Neill, 2002, p. 13). O'Neill takes this as an indication that there might not, in fact, be a crisis of trust even though some polls suggest that there is one. This is an actions-speak-louder-than-words argument: We should not necessarily take what people say to pollsters at face value. But perhaps we should not take what people *do* at face value either.

That is, we should not assume that what people *do* is more truthful than what they say. O'Neill implies that there is some internal inconsistency at play in these expressions of a lack of trust. People *say* that they do not trust but then they *act* in trusting ways. An alternative explanation – and one that does not require any assumptions about inconsistency – is that people do not in fact trust. They might be telling the pollsters the truth. But then they act as-if they trust because they have no other viable options[7] or they are in a position of epistemic uncertainty, or the costs of active distrust are judged to be too high. We do not know whether there really is a crisis of trust. The point we are making is that as-if trust is a possible explanation for the 'inconsistency' that O'Neill sees between what people say to the pollsters and what they actually do.

Second, the concept of as-if trust helps clarify the role of vigilance and monitoring in trust relationships. If we simply trust we do not have to verify. And when we feel compelled to verify it means we do not trust. If you trust you will not, for example, check your change when you pay for something at the grocery store. Vigilance and monitoring are inconsistent with trust because the very act of monitoring is an indication of a lack of trust. Vigilance and monitoring are thus more often associated with mistrust or distrust.[8] But we can – and, we think, often *do* — act as if we trust while staying vigilant. As-if trust is not inconsistent with vigilance and monitoring precisely because *it is not really trust in the first place*.

But there are two different forms that vigilance and monitoring might take when we act as if we trust. The first is surreptitious vigilance and monitoring. We might not check our change in front of the cashier because that would reveal our lack of trust – it would undermine the pretense. But when we act as if we trust we are likely to *want* to check our change, and we might do so once we have left the shop. In other words, we might continue to seek out more information to further test our as-if trust, but we will do it surreptitiously so as not to display any overt lack of trust and thereby undermine the pretense.

The other form of vigilance and monitoring involves a somewhat surprising *mutual recognition* of pretense. In this case, as-if trust might be practiced and sustained even when everyone involved knows it is a pretense. As

previously noted, Pettit (1995) argues that those who pretend to trust might thereby encourage others to pretend to be trustworthy. This is a double pretense – everyone is in on the game. It is, if you will, a pretense without pretense!

Something similar can be seen in the Russian proverb 'trust but verify,' which former US President Ronald Reagan was so fond of. The logic and wit of the proverb is most clearly revealed when we have access to the concept of as-if trust.[9] In using this proverb, Reagan was effectively saying to his Russian counterparts that he planned to act *as if* he trusted, because doing so would potentially produce some of the benefits of trust. At the same time, he wished to indicate that he did not *really* trust them.

What is surprising about the proverb is that it is so open about as-if trust. Indeed, Reagan used the proverb as an open invitation: if the Americans and the Russians pretended to trust each other they might get some of the benefits of trust. But they could protect themselves from the vulnerabilities of trust by remaining vigilant and monitoring each other closely. This would not be possible in a trust relationship because monitoring undermines trust. But it *is* possible in an as-if trust relationship. This, in our view, marks an important distinction between trust and as-if trust. Both involve taking on risks and vulnerabilities – and the risks of as-if trust are always higher – but only trust precludes the monitoring and vigilance which can help mitigate or manage those risks and vulnerabilities.

Third, although trust and as-if trust may be indistinguishable from each other in observational terms, they are likely to involve very different moral psychologies. In particular, we are likely to respond to failures of trust and as-if trust in quite distinct ways. When someone makes a commitment to us to act in trustworthy ways they take on an obligation. When they fail to fulfill that obligation the appropriate response is a sense of betrayal (Baier, 1986; Hawley, 2017). But what is the appropriate response when our as-if trust is disappointed? Our responses to failures of as-if trust may be conditioned by our reasons for feigning trust in the first place. If we felt compelled to feign trust in response to limited options, the experience might lead us to resent the circumstances which constrained our options. We might feel resentment rather than betrayal. By contrast, parents who choose to act as-if they trust their teenagers for 'therapeutic' reasons (Nickel, 2007), are more likely to feel disappointment than resentment when their as-if trust fails to produce the desired outcome.

Philosophers often make a distinction between reliability and trust (e.g. McLeod, 2020). We rely on objects or tools but we trust people. When objects fail to perform their functions, such as when our bookshelves fall down, we do not feel betrayed by the bookshelves themselves because they do not have any obligations towards us which can be betrayed. Failures (or whatever we wish to call them) of as-if trust do not fit neatly

into this picture. They are not failures of reliability because when we act as-if we trust we have good reasons to *expect* failures – that is why there are *surplus* risks associated with as-if trust. But nor are they betrayals because when we act as-if we trust we are not, in fact, trusting and others are not, actually, taking on trust obligations that might then be betrayed. Given these considerations, people might be more willing to endure failures of as-if trust and then continue to pretend to trust again, simply because it makes sense to do so. By comparison, they might be *less* willing to trust again after their genuine trust has been betrayed. Engaging these questions would take us further from our primary aim in this paper – which is to outline the concept, utility, and ubiquity of as-if trust – but it seems plausible to us that the moral psychology of as-if trust, in its various forms, is different from that of trust.

The utility and ubiquity of as-if trust

As-if trust is ubiquitous because it can produce some of the goods of trust – the utilities of trust – even when people are in situations that are not conducive to warranted trust. The potential benefits of as-if trust may be valuable enough to justify bearing the associated surplus risks. In our examples, by acting as if he trusts Albert gets his leaky roof fixed. By acting as if he trusts, Miguel maintains his relationship with his brother. By acting as if they trust, parents help their teenagers to better understand – and take on – the responsibilities and obligations of *being* trusted. Of course, there is always the possibility that these goods will not be produced. Nevertheless, people act as if they trust *because* they hope to get the goods of trust even when they are not confident that they *should* trust. They do so because trust, itself, is valuable or necessary.

Most of the examples we have discussed thus far have involved individual-level risks and benefits associated with trust and as-if trust. But as-if trust might also produce some of the social or political benefits that are normally only associated with trust – benefits which can be *hugely* valuable. For example, deep and sustained societal conflicts – such as those between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, Israelis and Palestinians, or labor leaders and employers – are often made worse by warranted distrust. The sides in deep conflicts have reasons to distrust one another, and when they act on that distrust it can make the conflict between them worse and more acute. Scholars such as Bo Rothstein (2005) have shown that when small acts of trust can be wrangled from the distrust that characterizes deep societal conflicts, societies can, sometimes, move toward peace and cooperation.

Indeed, there are many potential social, political, and economic benefits of trust. As Mark E. Warren explains:

> A society that fosters robust relations of trust is probably also a society that can afford fewer regulations and greater freedoms, deal with more contingencies, tap the energy and ingenuity of its citizens, limit the inefficiencies of rule-based means of coordination, and provide a greater sense of existential security and satisfaction. (Warren, 1999, p. 2)

Trust can also enable political actors to use their scarce resources efficiently. Each of us has limited participatory or political resources. We cannot be actively involved in making every collective decision that is likely to affect us (MacKenzie & Moore, 2020). Given this, we have to make decisions about when to participate and when to trust others to act on our behalf. If we can trust others to act *for us* on certain issues – such as where our material interests are aligned – we can spend our time, energy, and resources on actively influencing collective decisions where we have good reasons to think that others might not act in our interests (MacKenzie & Warren, 2012; Warren, 1999).

There are, in short, many good reasons to want to live in high-trust societies. The problem is that warranted trust is often hard to find, particularly in political circumstances. Politics happens when people live together – or want to live together – but they disagree about what should or should not be done. Politics is unavoidable because disagreement is unavoidable. Whenever people live together there will be disagreements because people have diverse preferences, objectives, identities and interests. This is the political condition.[10]

But the political condition makes trusting difficult. It is hard – and *unwise* — to trust people who have interests that are opposed to your own. Someone may be competent, reliable, and honest but it will not make sense to trust them if your interests, aims, or objectives are diametrically opposed to theirs. Since political relations typically involve conflicts of interests or identities, the circumstances of politics are circumstances that are hostile to trust.

Warranted trust is not absent in politics but the political condition makes it difficult to find. And yet, the benefits and promises of trust are especially valuable in politics. As we have seen, trust can help facilitate agreements or compromises among groups who have reasons to distrust each other It can make it easier to resolve political conflicts or disputes in humane and mutually advantageous ways. Trust can help make societies more efficient, free, innovative and democratic, precisely because trust can make divisions of political labor – such as representative systems – more legitimate and effective.

Furthermore, the costs of distrust in politics can be devastating. When we distrust or withdraw, we give up the potential goods associated with trust and social order. When we actively distrust, we can make bad or tense political situations or disagreements *worse* than they otherwise would be.

The political condition mitigates against warranted trust, but trust in political circumstances is especially valuable and active distrust is especially costly. So what is a political actor to do? One option is to pretend to trust in hope of getting some of the goods of trust in circumstances that are not conducive to warranted trust. The risks will be higher than they would be if trust was warranted. But the benefits will not be rendered unavailable as they would be if active distrust were the strategy.

On this account we should expect to find as-if trust wherever we find politics. It is as much a part of the political condition as disagreement and conflict. Indeed it *is* part of the political condition *because* of disagreement and conflict. We are likely to find as-if trust wherever we find politics because the conditions for trust are unfavorable but the benefits of trust – and the costs of distrust – are great. Given this, once we start looking for it, we should find evidence of as-if trust in many diverse political situations.

Consider, for example, Martin Luther King's relationship to white moderates. White moderates were those who publicly declared that segregation was a moral wrong but did not themselves join the movement actively struggling against it. Many white moderates counseled those who were active in the civil rights movement to moderate *their* actions. In an article titled, 'Martin Luther King Jr. on Civic Friendship and Faithful Distrust', Meena Krishnamurthy (2022) shows that this realization dawned on King over time, but that he had come by the early 1960s from a hopeful lack of trust to a position of positive distrust of white moderates. At the same time, King continued to recognize the need for trust and its benefits.

In Krishnamurthy's analysis, King wanted to prevent active distrust from forming a self-reinforcing cycle. He thought that adopting a stance of distrust would lead white moderates to resistance, denial, and even hostility. So he was reluctant to *show* his distrust publicly. King's choice seems partly strategic and partly, as Krishnamurthy emphasizes, other-regarding; he wanted to avoid inciting guilt and shame in others. In our terms, King was attempting to get the benefits of trust by acting as if he trusted.

Indeed, as-if trust seems particularly relevant in situations where oppressed or colonized people are fighting for justice. Those who have been colonized or oppressed will have many *good* reasons to distrust their oppressors. At the same time, there may be distinct benefits to be had through cooperation and reconciliation, especially if the formerly oppressed and their oppressors find themselves having to live together in close proximity. In these circumstances, it may make sense for formerly oppressed groups to cautiously act as if they trust in order to get some of the benefits of trust in conditions of warranted distrust, while keeping their options for monitoring and vigilance open.

Of course, as-if trust will not be a viable or attractive strategy in all situations involving formerly colonized or oppressed groups. The costs of as-if trust will tend to be higher for those who are more vulnerable or less powerful. Thus in some cases active distrust might be judged to be the better option. Nevertheless, formerly oppressed groups – like others – do not need to choose between genuine trust and active distrust. They can choose cautious as-if trust instead.

Coalition governments are another site where as-if trust is likely to be found. The interests of the different parties of a governing coalition will be aligned to some extent. Coalitions are formed when different parties do not have enough seats to govern alone but they have some shared interests and objectives. Nevertheless, members of a coalition government cannot ever *really* trust each other because their interests are only partially aligned. They may be aligned on certain policy objectives, and they will share an interest in maintaining the coalition, but only insofar as doing so gives them each the best options for retaining power and influence. At the same time, all members of a coalition government know that the other members would rather govern without them if that were possible. So while their interests in some respects – or on some objectives – may be aligned they are always opposed more generally. This means that the members of a governing coalition will have good reasons to not fully trust their coalition partners. They do not trust but they act as if they trust to get the benefits of trust, which in that case are the benefits of cooperative policymaking.

As-if trust is also common in deep conflict situations. In an insightful analysis, Read and Shapiro (2014) show that bold leaders often have to take on surplus risks to *try to* resolve deep conflict situations. One of their examples comes from South Africa during the apartheid era. In 1985, Nelson Mandela initiated secret 'talks about talks' with officials from South Africa's racist, apartheid government. These talks were aimed at bringing an end to the apartheid system but they had to be kept secret because Mandela knew that members of his own party – the African National Congress (ANC) – would never agree to talks without preconditions. Mandela also knew that demanding preconditions would lead to inaction and the continuation of the apartheid system. The secret talks about talks went ahead. They eventually led to negotiations with South Africa's new president F.W. de Klerk, who also had reasons to distrust Mandela and the ANC. As Read and Shapiro explain:

> In addition to conflicts among the constituencies they represented and between the deeply divergent constitutional proposals, there was little personal trust between Mandela and de Klerk during the negotiations process. Yet both were willing to take significant personal risks to bridge the racial divide, hoping but not knowing that the other would reciprocate. (Read & Shapiro, 2014, p. 46)

In their analysis, Read and Shapiro emphasize the risks that these leaders took in trying to negotiate an end to apartheid. Those risks were both personal and political. In our language, they are the *surplus* risks associated with as-if trust. Mandela and de Klerk did not trust. They had reasons to distrust and insufficient reasons to trust. But they acted as if they trusted, and they took on the risks of doing so. In that gamble, they won. But that is not, of course, always the case.

Read and Shapiro also briefly consider the efforts that Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat made to peacefully resolve conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians. In a famous picture taken in 1993, Rabin and Arafat shook hands under the watchful eye of the newly elected US President Bill Clinton. This was, to use our language, a show of as-if trust. They did not trust each other. They had good reasons to distrust. But they acted as if they trusted to get the goods of trust. They took on a surplus risk and took a gamble. In that case, the gamble did not pay off. The deep conflict in the middle east was not resolved. And Rabin paid with his life when he was assassinated by an Israeli activist who opposed any sort of settlement with the Palestinians.

So warranted trust is difficult to find in political situations. There are many reasons to *want* to trust, and many more reasons to distrust. But the costs of distrust are high. As such, political actors commonly – wisely and rationally – act as if they trust even when they do not really trust. They do so even though there are surplus risks associated with as-if trust, risks that are significantly less when trust is warranted. But political actors – like the rest of us – are often willing to pay those costs because the costs of active distrust and withdrawal may be higher still, while as-if trust keeps the possibility of obtaining the benefits of trust open.

Conclusion

The theoretical move that we advocate in this paper shifts our analytical focus from questions about trust – its value, its conditions of possibility, reasons for its decline or 'crisis', and so on – to questions about the causes, consequences, problems and potential benefits of as-if trust. We have argued that as-if trust involves taking on surplus risk in order to gain some of the benefits of a trust relationship. We have suggested that as-if trust describes a significant range of phenomena that are encountered in everyday life and are typically described as qualified forms of trust. We very rarely know enough about the character traits, good will, competence and intentions of others to have warranted trust.

The concept of as-if trust can neatly explain why in such situations – and especially in political contexts – we nonetheless frequently observe something that looks a lot like trust. We think that warranted trust – important as it

is – is the more marginal phenomenon in political and social life, and that more attention should be paid to as-if trust. When we have good reason to trust we are already in a happy situation. We have suggested that the more common situation is to lack those good reasons but to nevertheless value and seek to bring about the goods that come from trust relationships. People in these situations do not need to choose between trust and distrust: they might choose as-if trust instead.

Our analysis leaves open a range of questions. Are there any good reasons to think that the benefits of trust are any less likely to be produced if people are pretending to trust rather than genuinely trusting? Do we actually need to trust to produce the many benefits associated with trust? Perhaps we do, at least some of the time. Our analysis shows, however, that as-if trust may produce some of the goods of trust even though the associated risks will always be higher than those associated with warranted trust.

Other questions have to do with how as-if trust is related to inequalities of power, influence, and resources. As-if trust has its roots, we have argued, in a decision to take on surplus risk in order to have a chance of gaining the benefits of trust. But these risks are often unevenly distributed. We have suggested that having limited options is not the only reason we might act as if we trust, but we think it is a major one, and, importantly, it is one that tracks the distribution of social power. As-if trust that is the product of disempowerment is likely, it seems to us, to give rise to the feeling of being 'forced' to trust. Those who choose to act as if they trust for lack of better options and faced with worse alternatives in the form of withdrawal or overt expression of distrust may feel a resentful dependence even *when* they obtain some of the benefits of trust – even when their as-if trust gambles pay off. Furthermore, the surplus risks and costs of as-if trust will be relative to one's social position or resource base. As Katherine Hawley observes, 'whilst those with few resources may be forced to trust others, since they have no alternative, those who are more comfortably situated can afford to be more trusting, since they can more easily bounce back if they get things wrong' (Hawley, 2017, p. xx). What she is talking about here seems to us to be better described as as-if trust. After all, it doesn't seem likely that our different levels of social power would change our judgment of whether trust is warranted. But it would (and often does) condition our decisions to act as if we trust.

Another important question is whether as-if trust is a way of generating or creating warranted trust over time. This is suggested by Nickel (2007), and also by Pettit (1995), who both emphasize the circular, self-reinforcing quality of pretending to trust. Mansbridge (1999), as we noted above, suggests that the decision to accept the surplus risk involved in as-if trust can be more or less consciously motivated by a desire to cultivate one's character, so that one ideally becomes over time less intuitively distrustful of certain kinds of people. In so far as acting as if you trust can eventually affect even your

beliefs, as-if trust may be a way of building trust out of distrust. However, as the example of Mandela and de Klerk in South Africa suggests (Read & Shapiro, 2014), it is not necessary for actors to come to develop warranted trust in one another for the goods of as-if trust to be realized. In any case, people might act as-if they trust with no intention of creating a situation in which warranted trust might develop. Albert had his roof fixed even though he did not trust the roofers but he did not hope to create a trust relationship from that transaction – what he hopes, instead, is to not have to have his roof fixed again for a very long time.

A further question is whether as-if trust is more precarious or more robust than warranted trust. It is often said that trust is hard to gain but easy to lose. But it seems to us that this intuition might not be apt in situations of as-if trust. As-if trust may be easier to gain because one can lack trust and yet choose to act as if one trusts. As we noted above, it is reasonable to think that as-if trust may be more robust to some sorts of disappointment. And it seems to us that the temporal pattern of trust and as-if trust are also likely to differ. Intuitive forms of trust may have a sort of stickiness, as one is unlikely to be looking for, or especially sensitive to, evidence that would count against those forms of trust. Like Wile E. Coyote going off a cliff and continuing to run without realizing there is no ground beneath his feet, intuitive or unreflective forms of trust are likely to be robust to some counter-evidence but then at some point collapse in a heap. As-if trust, precisely because it is made with conscious awareness of the surplus risk, may be more sensitive to such changes, and in this sense more fragile. These, and other questions, are beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems to us that they might form the basis of a productive empirical and theoretical research agenda.

Notes

1. Although we use the language of 'pretending' and 'feigning' to describe as-if trust, it is important to note that for Mansbridge 'altruistic trust' involves someone making a more or less conscious attempt to develop their character, so that they might become the kind of person who tends to give the other the benefit of the doubt. While the 'acting beyond trust' described by Mansbridge is clearly a form of as-if trust, the language of 'pretending' may not fully capture the aspiration to the self-crafting of character that Mansbridge is thinking about. While we think the language of 'pretending' accurately captures the stance of the actor in the moment, it may be that it does not quite capture the longer-term work on one's character that Mansbridge has in mind. We come back to this point in the conclusion.
2. Holton follows this point with a couple of reasons why someone might 'decide' to trust an employee who is not trusted to not steal. 'Perhaps you think trust is the best way to draw [the employee] back into the moral community; perhaps

you simply think it is the way you ought to treat one of your employees' (Holton, 1994, p. 63). These are both other-regarding or altruistic reasons for acting as-if one trusts.

3. 'To ride a bicycle you do not need to believe that you can do so. You need to act as you would act if you did believe. You need to get on the bike and push off confidently' (Holton, 1994, pp. 63–64). Later, discussing an essay by Judith Baker, he says: 'It is surely right that when we trust a friend, we do not simply act as if we believe what they say; we really believe them. Yet have I not characterized trust as a kind of "acting-as-if"?' (Holton, 1994, p. 73). So Holton uses the language of as-if trust yet ultimately characterizes the phenomenon as 'deciding to trust'.
4. Our argument differs from Holton's in a further respect. Holton suggests (in his shopkeeper example) that 'if you really believe [your employee] will steal, you will not be able to trust him. But you can trust him without believing that he will not' (Holton, 1994, p. 63). We think that we can choose to act as-if we trust not only when we lack trust, but even when we positively distrust, though in cases where distrust is warranted the surplus risks of as-if trust are higher.
5. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this discussion to our attention.
6. As Annette Baier says: 'One leaves others an opportunity to harm one when one trusts, and also shows one's confidence that they will not take it' (Baier, 1986, p. 235).
7. Indeed, this problem is recognized by O'Neill. She explains that 'where people have no choice, their action provides *poor* evidence that they trust – or that they mistrust' (O'Neill, 2002, p. 14). Nevertheless, she does not recognize the distinction that we are making between trust and as-if trust, or the possibility that someone might act as if they trust even when they *have* choices.
8. Patti Tamara Lenard defines 'mistrust' in contrast to 'distrust'. 'Distrust', she tells us, refers to 'a suspicious or cynical attitude towards others' grounded in 'evidence that they cannot be trusted' (Lenard, 2008, p. 313 & 316). 'Mistrust', by contrast, involves being uncertain or unsure about whether someone is trustworthy, and is characterized by a cautious and vigilant yet open-minded attitude. Mistrust is, in her view, characterized by indecision, as we lack the information that might resolve our attitude into either trust or distrust. But from our point of view she is talking about the conditions of as-if trust. What she calls 'mistrust' is entirely consistent with acting as-if you trust. Furthermore, as-if trust can make sense of the presence at the same time of the outward appearance of trust and the motivation to surreptitious vigilance without introducing a distinction between mistrust and distrust that is at odds with common usage. Indeed, people do not normally make clear distinctions between distrust and mistrust. According to *Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (4th Edition): 'It is something of a cliché in lexicography that true synonyms do not exist, that no two words are ever interchangeable in the same context. While that rule does indeed hold good universally, *distrust* and *mistrust* possibly come closer than any other word to being synonyms' (Fowler & Butterfield, 2015, p. 227).
9. The proverb works even better in Russian because it rhymes: доверяй, но проверяй (doveryay, no proveryay).
10. As Jeremy Waldron puts it, the 'circumstances of politics' require both a need for common action and disagreement about what that action ought to be (Waldron, 1999, p. 102).

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