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Understanding Contemporary Societal Challenges with Philosophy of Trust

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Abstract: We argue that philosophy of trust can be employed to counter the paralysis of action ensuing out of the experience of polycrisis in the current state of international social life. Philosophy of trust can recognize the impact of the polycrisis on contemporary societies all the while that an analysis of trust inevitably takes the concrete life world experiences of humans as a central part of the analysis. Using the philosophy of trust as an analytic tool involves digging into relations of trust and distrust situated in concrete social environments which takes humans' concrete experiences of trust, distrust, and breaches of trust into account all the while that its theoretical conceptualizations can pay heed to overall societal challenges. As such it provides a means to study our contemporary world of polycrisis without simplifying the social world or succumbing to paralysis. This is shown in short discussions and presentations of the five articles included in the special issue.

Keywords: relations; trust; CRISIS

1 A Humane World of Trust Relations

Our times are, according to Tooze (2023 Tanner Lectures), characterized by being times of polycrisis. We are not only faced with war in Europe ever since Russia in 2022 invaded Ukraine and a new and highly deadly war in Gaza after that erupted spurred by Hamas' attack on Israel on the 7th October 2023. We also face wild weather conditions and climatic emergencies due to humanly produced climate change, which again drive social problems and migration streams as people seek to escape the now unlivable conditions in their home countries. Furthermore, the big tech race to reach the most powerful new AI tools and digital hegemony threatens to undermine democratic deliberations within Western democracies and other countries. The influence of digital tools of persuasion was visible in Brexit as United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in 2016. The same year Donald Trump

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started his presidency in the United States, which ended with the Attack on the Capitol January 6th 2021, an event which shook the foundations of the world's oldest democracy and was based on the lie which flooded the internet and conservative news outlets that Trump had won the election. According to Tooze,

A problem becomes a crisis when it challenges our ability to cope and this threatens our identity. In the polycrisis, the shocks are disparate, but they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts. At times one feels as if one is losing one's sense of reality. Is the mighty Mississippi really running dry and threatening to cut off the farms of the Midwest from the world economy? Did the January 6 riots really threaten the US Capitol? (Tooze 2022).

While human societies always have been blemished by some crisis or other, the new situation of the polycrisis is distinguished by the fact that there is no possible simple solution. In societal crises in the 20th century, one could, from one's preferred ideological standpoint, envision and explain how the crisis was instigated by one cause – let it be capitalism, corrosion of tradition, or migration – and by implication one could also point to a single fix – let it be a final showdown with capitalism, a new traditional life form, or a complete stop of migration. This is not an option anymore according to Tooze, as the polycrisis cannot be attributed to one single root.

If we stick to the grand views of crises and polycrisis, we become faced with a “growing anxiety that economic and social developments are hurtling us toward catastrophic ecological tipping points” (Tooze 2022). This will inevitably lead to feelings of incapacity and bleakness. Therefore, in order not to succumb to desperation, we need a theoretical viewpoint that recognizes the real impact of polycrisis on our contemporary societal problems without, however, ending in a paralysis of action. Exactly this, we suggest, is the advantage of employing philosophy of trust to analyze the societal challenges we are confronted with today. Focusing on trust relations the analysis concentrates on the entangled human relations in the societal problems. Trust relations vary from close interpersonal relations shaped via intimate collaboration over trust or distrust in institutions and in technology to generalized trust within a social group, a society, or a geographic area. Thus, while the crisis and polycrisis outlook underscores all the faults in the make-up of the societal systems, an analysis of the trust relations – who is trusting and why, who is distrustful toward whom and why? – immediately puts human interaction at the center stage. Instead of focusing merely on systemic failure, an analysis that employs philosophy of trust as its epistemic starting point can underline how disconnections and failures in human relations are reasons for exercising distrust and the existence of untrustworthy actors. As such a philosophical analysis of trust relations will also be able to offer possible solutions to these challenging circumstances by pointing to how it could be possible to restore

trustworthiness and legitimate trust in for example governmental actions. In order to function as such an analytic tool, the philosophy of trust must describe how relations of trust and distrust, experiences of trustworthiness, and breaches of trustworthiness play out against each other and function in complex (normative) environments.

The normativity of all human interactions calls for a meticulous analysis of when expressions of trust and distrust are warranted. Whenever a trustee is not trustworthy, it is not only legitimate but also rational for trustors not to trust or to display open distrust toward the trustee. Thus, it is not the case that trust in and of itself is a morally positive attitude or relation – but whenever trust is warranted and the actors are trustworthy, relations of trust enable human beings to collaborate and plan future actions with much greater ease and probability for success because all actors work toward the same prospected future outcome and are actively listening to each other. Distrust impedes social interaction and as such it is a powerful tool to object to or even protest actors who are deemed untrustworthy. Just as unwarranted trust obstructs positive societal developments, unwarranted distrust does the same only in a different manner. Unwarranted trust in, e.g., political actors may support social relations and societal developments that go against attending to resolving societal crises or the polycrisis situation of contemporary world politics. Unwarranted distrust, on the other hand, can also hinder that we collectively can work toward sustainable solutions.

It might sound as though trust and distrust are binary attitudes. But the philosophy of trust engaging in concrete analysis of societal challenges and social experience displays how one and the same actor may have a trusting relation to some peers while distrusting others. We all encompass intricate relations of trust and distrust toward the numerous social relations we build with others and with human institutions and human constructs and technology in the world. As Luhmann (1968) in his seminal work on trust underscored, systematic distrust toward powerful institutions – let them be governmental or private – is a very effective way of building trust in the same institutions given that the population can trust the systematic distrust toward the institutions as a guaranty for their trustworthiness. We may thus use trust and distrust to work in tandem toward building trustworthy societal systems and we can, of course, also abuse trust and distrust to exercise fraud and scam. As such any philosophy of trust that aims to contribute to the comprehension of contemporary societies' crises or polycrisis must pay acute attention to the concrete societal developments. By doing so, philosophy of trust can combine general theoretical insights with concrete social occurrences and provide important perspectives on contemporary societal challenges.

2 Trust and Distrust as Direction Finders Within Societal Developments

To employ the philosophy of trust to concrete societal situations, it is mandatory to break down the situations to understand the web of trust relations underpinning them. We need to understand who trusts whom and who is inclined to display distrust toward which actors, institutions, or technological interventions. Thus, for example, in this issue, Bjørn Muskja undertakes a detailed examination of what it would require for trust in biotechnology to be warranted. This includes examining how proponents of biotechnological solutions are trustworthy when claiming that biotechnological interventions are not harmful. While Muskja thus investigates what *ought to be in place* for trust in biotechnology to be warranted, he does this by meticulously highlighting what must be included in order for trust in biotechnology to be something we might oblige each other to assume. The focus is on the actual and concrete societal dependencies rather than lofty arguments claiming either that biotechnology will always be beneficial or harmful. The very abstract question of the value of biotechnology is condensed to concern how interdependent human relations must unfold for citizens to be morally obliged to trust biotechnology. Thus, the analysis undertaking with philosophy of trust as the analytic tool enables us to understand how relations of trust and distrust and considerations of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness can function as highly specific direction finders that can be used to evaluate the normative value of each actor's attitudes of trust and distrust as well as the trustworthiness of actors and institutions.

When confronted with groups of citizens who apparently, at least according to scientific consensus and from the official point of view, insist without reason to distrust governmental initiatives and requirements, the official explanation often tends to go in the direction of rejecting these citizens as irrational. However, there might be a more complex story behind such distrust, and if the government and officials generally do not aim to alienate these groups, they need to understand what motivates them. Here, an analysis of the web of relations of trust and distrust that unfolds within these groups is an effective tool to reach behind a seemingly stubborn irrationalism. In this issue, Antoinette Butler-Fage does exactly this by examining how trust and mistrust plays out across different actors in relation to skepticism toward the MMR vaccine, a skepticism which started to unfold in the late 90s after Andrew Wakefield stated that the vaccine could induce autism. Butler-Fage undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the discursive utterances of, on the one hand, a vaccine skeptic and, on the other hand, a doctor who promotes vaccines in order to show how trust and mistrust play out in the utterances of both

protagonists, thereby revealing that both rely on arguments that have similar structures. Thus, the skeptic cannot simply be reduced to an irrational actor.

The experience of a decline and a crisis of trust is perhaps not just a specific trait of the contemporary situation of polycrisis but rather something that constitutes a reoccurring phenomenon in modern societies. However, combined with the feeling of incapacity that follows from the many interrelated crises characterizing contemporary societies, the decline of trust in essential institutions within modern democracies are sensed to be more acute and have graver influence nowadays. For example, the crisis of the credibility of journalism has led some groups of citizens to distrust traditional media in a way which by others is viewed as a fundamental blowback for democracy and for democratic deliberation. In his article in this special issue, Ejvind Hansen tries to tackle this crisis by introducing new forms of trusting and hospitality journalism. Instead of merely reacting by sticking even more rigidly to ideals of objectivism or promoting more explicitly subjective forms of journalism the journalist, Hansen suggest, ought to open herself to the other of her sources so that she can listen to the unexpected in a trusting manner. Similarly, Arman T. Niknam and Leif H. Pedersen investigate how trust and distrust can be positive as well as negative factors in democratic political life. T. Niknam and H. Pedersen explain how proper democratic parties include a rational or virtuous trust toward the state and its core institutions. At the same time, these parties can move their deliberative outlooks by meeting specific cases and situations with distrust. This sometimes leads to a beneficial development, but as the authors show with a specific Danish party as their case study, it can also lead to a trust crisis between the party and its constituency. Thus, decline of trust in one specific environment may have repercussion in many other environments and in relation to numerous institutions that are core parts of a well-functioning democracy. As such the study of the development of specific trust and distrust relations in one area may well function as a direction finder to understand other related societal challenges.

One major influence on the polycrisis environment on our contemporary society is the expeditious digitalization of modern societies. This development also includes high stakes for how citizens trust or distrust governments and official institutions in society. In the ongoing IT scandals of the post office in the United Kingdom and the tax authorities the Netherlands, relations of citizens' unwarranted trust toward institutions who unlawfully claimed the same citizens to be fraudsters plays a crucial part as Esther Oluffa Pedersen shows in her article in this special issue. Here, the various formations of ingroup trust and distrust toward outgroups and complete blind trust in IT technology are analyzed to illustrate how official institutions could end up harming the citizens they are supposed to serve. While the two cases are extreme instances of governmental harm in the wake of

digitalization, the philosophical analysis of the trust relations that unfold in the scandals also serve as a kind of road map for any governmental body to comprehend what *not to do* when seeking to digitalize core services without harming citizens. Again, we can see how one specific case study may help as a direction finder for citizens, NGOs, and government officials when evaluating how our societies should develop in the future. As such, we argue, various philosophical analyses of trust relations – exactly because they *must* take in concrete life experiences of the involved actors – can help us find paths to move beyond the paralysis of action accommodating the experience of living in a time of polycrisis.

3 Five Analyses of Trust Relations in Our Contemporary Societal Situation

Following this introduction are five articles that – in line with the ideals of *SATS – Northern European Journal of Philosophy* – in an interdisciplinary and societally engaging manner offer concrete analyses of trust relations that are connected to our contemporary critical societal situation. While all of the five articles engage in a thorough manner with both theoretical considerations and more practical, empirical analyses, the first article by Bjørn Muskja may be said to be a great deal more theoretically oriented than the final article by Antoinette Butler-Fage. Readers of the whole special issue will thus experience that the issue involves an increasing amount of practical and empirical orientation, as this also fits well with the idea of using a philosophy of trust to form action during times of polycrisis.

In “Public trust in technology – a moral obligation?”, Bjørn Muskja draws on Kant’s moral and political philosophy to discuss the need and the conditions for seeing trust in nonformal institutions such as biotechnology in food production as a duty. Muskja demonstrates that reflexivity is a requisite for having a moral obligation to place (justified) trust on Kant’s account. This includes checks and balances to ensure that citizens’ trust in the biotechnology is neither lazy nor unreflective while at the same time the same citizens need to trust the institutional setup rather than being able to understand and evaluate the science as well as the commercial interests behind the technology. Kant has argued societal institutions should actively be supported and uphold by the citizens in a nondogmatic way. Muskja uses this line of thinking to show what is entailed in order for there to be a moral duty to trust technologies deemed essential to our societies’ functioning (and future flourishing), as food biotechnology may prove to be, without letting go of the need to place this trust well and thus the need of installing proper control mechanisms. Muskja’s article combines Kant’s thoughts on friendship, virtue, and

moral duties to construct a Kantian theory of trust. This Kantian theory of trust is then employed for considerations about what the conditions would be for there to be a moral duty or obligation of trusting contemporary technologies, such as biotechnologies in food production.

A less technology-optimistic approach to new technologies occurs in Esther Oluffa Pedersen's contribution to the special issue, "A Panoramic View of Trust in the Time of Digital Automated Decision Making – Failings of Trust in the Post Office and the Tax Authorities." In her article, Pedersen points to how the Post Office IT scandal in the United Kingdom and the Child Daycare Benefit Scandal in the Netherlands both show the way in which conditions within the social environment in crucial ways shape the possibilities for individuals' exercise of trust and distrust in others and in themselves. According to Pedersen, the panoramic view of trust thus enables one to grasp how environments of trust to a large degree predetermine the ways individuals place trust. An asymmetrical power-knowledge relation between citizens and state institutions worked to the detriment of citizens that were wrongfully accused in the IT scandals, thus hurting and destroying interpersonal trust relations in local environments in ways that even made the accused start to doubt themselves and led to diminished trust in themselves, although they had been innocent. This all leads Pedersen to highlight the dangers of blind trust in new digital technologies and computer systems. While Oluffa Pedersen underscores that it indeed often is valuable that individuals are regarded as fraudsters when they are accused of misdeeds by state institutions, her analysis precisely points to the dangers of using (erroneous) computer systems for checking citizens, as this can have devastating effects, both for the persons wrongfully accused, but certainly also for individual citizens general trust in precisely such institutions.

On a perhaps more optimistic note, Ejvind Hansen establishes a way forward for a more hospitable and generous journalism in his article "Journalists Gaining Trust Through Silencing of the Self." The article builds upon the premise that the health of democracy depends on the delivery of legitimate information from journalists. Hansen then confronts the views that the contemporary crisis of trust in the journalistic profession must either be handled by a more objective or an explicitly subjective approach. Instead, Hansen says that both these positions are inadequate and he turns to Løgstrup and Derrida as well as Deleuze to argue for a more hospitable journalism that both stays radically open to the strange and the unknown, and which also more or less uses a silencing of the journalist in order to stay open to different perspectives and other new voices and stories to be led to the end-user of journalistic products. Hansen believes that such a hospitable journalism can challenge prevailing horizons of understanding and open up new horizons, to see and to share that which normally falls outside of attention. In

Hansen's view, the openness, silence and thus what must be a willingness to engage with and listen to new, hitherto untold stories, that is involved in hospitable journalism, can change the nature of trust relations, not just between journalists and specific end-users of journalistic products but perhaps even broader in a democracy in general, enabling greater forms of change and contingency.

Dealing also with democracy but in a more explicitly political context, Arman Teymouri Niknam and Leif Hemming Pedersen offer an analytical model that captures balances of what is called virtuous trust and distrust within the unfolding of democratic ideologies as compared to nondemocratic ideologies (like fascism), which they find to inhabit ultimate distrust positions in their article "Between Virtuous Trust and Distrust: A Model of Political Ideologies in Times of Challenged Political Parties." The model sketched out by Teymouri Niknam and Hemming Pedersen describes the connection between rising levels of distrust toward societal institutions in modern democracies and how such developments has challenged traditional and long-standing political parties in the Western world, such as the Danish political party Radikale Venstre [the Danish Social-Liberal Party]. By using a tripartite model of trust developed by Teymouri Niknam during his interpretation of Mary Wollstonecraft's attitudes toward trust brought together with different aspects of Axel Honneth's social-philosophical framework, Teymouri Niknam and Hemming Pedersen show how distrust may act as a progressive tool in the creation of a more just, diverse, and equal future and also how a virtuous and healthy form of democracy is an ideal that can be challenging to realize in practice. Teymouri Niknam and Hemming Pedersen point to the ways in which a healthy democracy needs a balance of virtuous trust and distrust in order to achieve a good amount of both stability and progress, thus pointing to a difficult balancing act that many traditional political parties find themselves struggling with especially at this point in time in contemporary democracies.

The difficulties as well as the value of connecting different perspectives and trust positions is also a theme in Antoinette Butler-Fage's article "Trust and mistrust in the MMR vaccine: Finding divergencies and common ground in online communication." Butler-Fage's article examines the relatively low levels of trust in the MMR vaccine that followed Andrew Wakefield's controversial, retracted study about dangers of the vaccine in 1998. Butler-Fage's article uses and analyses data from an article on a web media platform that contrasts opposing perspectives of two individuals on MMR vaccination – one doctor and an anonymous anti-vaxxer – in order to explore how trust and mistrust are expressed by opponents and supporters of the vaccine. Butler-Fage's article shows that both camps can be inclined to argue through knowledge claims and a positioning of themselves through moral values while both camps also present themselves as trustworthy. Butler-Fage thus offers an insight into how seemingly very opposite positions are using a similar

form of moral argumentation, thus creating hopes for what could become a meeting ground between fierce opponents.

This special issue thus offers both detailed analyses of various theoretical concepts of trust and case examinations of how trust relations play out as well as hopes for action and common dialog in our times of polycrisis. The articles underscore in different ways that philosophy of trust is an open field in which the analysis of trust relations depend on a meticulous examination, which moves interdependently back and forth from theoretical conceptions of trust to concrete case studies of how trust unfolds in contemporary societies. Thus, the analytic tool of the philosophy of trust only functions if the concrete social environments within which trust relations unfold are given due theoretical scrutiny and if the theoretical conceptions stay open to the challenge from concrete life experiences.

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