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Why We Should Stop Talking about Generalism and Particularism: Moving the Debate on Conspiracy Theories Forward

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It is highly unusual for philosophers to agree about anything. And yet, philosophers of conspiracy theories seem to have achieved this remarkable feat. For more than a decade, a campaign has been waged against a position called "generalism". Originally coined by Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor (2010), but later enthusiastically adopted by M R. X. Dentith (2023), Lee Basham (2018), Charles Pigden (2018), J.C.M. Duetz (2022) and many others, this refers to the view that there is something intrinsically wrong with conspiracy theories as a general class. Or as their original definition has it, generalists hold that "the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories" and that "conspiratorial thinking *qua* conspiracy thinking is itself irrational."

Most philosophers have now converged around the opposite view, called particularism, which holds that there is nothing wrong with conspiracy theorising *per se*, and that each conspiracy theory (CT) should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. By a rough head count, self-identified particularists are clearly in the majority, and the particularist camp has over the years been tempted to declare victory or at least a broad consensus (for instance, Dentith 2023): particularism has carried the day, at least among philosophers, with only a few hold-outs. Now we just have to convince those stubborn social scientists!

But who are these defeated generalists exactly? It has always been easy to find proud particularists, but a self-proclaimed "generalist" is a rare breed indeed (even in 2010). Indeed, more common is to find scholars who are *accused* of being (closet) generalists, but who strenuously deny the charge. Take Stephen Clarke, who was among the first generations of scholars working on CTs, and who was listed as one of three token "generalists" in Buenting and Taylor's original paper.[1] In a recent contribution subtitled "Why I'm not a Generalist", Clarke (2023) argues that he is not and never was a generalist. Why? Because even in his early work on CTs (Clarke 2002, pre-dating the particularism v. generalism divide), he mentioned the Watergate break-in as "a specific example of a conspiracy theory I regard as rational to accept". So, his position cannot entail a general dismissal of *all* CTs.[2]

But if all it takes to reject generalism is to admit of the rationality of belief in the Watergate scandal, then not only is Clarke not a generalist, but in our view not a single philosopher (or social scientist for that matter) has truly embraced generalism.[3] That's because, by the lights of the standard (minimal) definition of CT that particularists favour, "generalism" is just obviously false and particularism trivially true. If a "conspiracy theory" is simply a hypothesis revolving around a secret plot between at least two people, usually with nefarious intentions (though variations on this definition would work equally well), then anyone with a modicum of historical knowledge will acknowledge that *some* such CTs are true, rational, justified, and

[1] The other ones were Mandik (2007) and Keeley (1999).
[2] Brian Keeley is also sometimes portrayed as a generalist, but he too has resisted the label. Quassim Cassam (2019) has harshly criticised the positions of particularist philosophers, but that does not mean he embraces the term "generalism". Patrick Stokes (2018) has tried to have his cake and eat it too by defending a combination of what he calls "reluctant particularism" and "defeasible generalism". Perhaps Keith Harris (2022) has come closest, by pushing back against particularism and gingerly defending what he calls "a version of generalism".
[3] Even Mandik's (2008) paper admits that belief in the Watergate break-in by Nixon is rational, but he does not think it qualifies as a "conspiracy theory".

well-supported. If social scientists *seem* to have defended the position that "conspiracy theories" are always unfounded or irrational, that is because they implicitly adopted a different definition of CT, and that in turn is because they have different research agendas (they are interested in unfounded, speculative and harmful beliefs). In our experience, we have never met a single psychologist or social scientist who didn't immediately embrace "particularism" and reject "generalism" as soon as you clarify that the definition of CT being used is just "any explanation of an historical event involving a conspiracy". They would have to be historically illiterate or extremely naive to do otherwise.

So, on what seems to be a fairly common understanding of generalism, which is reflected by Clarke's piece, generalism is an obviously untenable position that nobody endorses. In other words: a straw man. But perhaps particularists should be understood as targeting a broader class of views that are not trivially false. Some have understood "generalism" to adopt a more narrow view of the term "conspiracy theories", namely as theories about conspiracies that have additional problematic features—such as being contrary to epistemic authorities, or unofficial, or self-insulated. Generalism is then the position that *that* sub-class of explanations involving conspiracies can be dismissed as a class, owing to their common flaws. This understanding of generalism avoids the unsavoury implication that one has to commit to the irrationality of accepting any theory about any conspiracy, including Watergate or the Al Qaeda plot on 9/11. On this broader understanding of generalism, the particularists' campaign against it is not trivial, and indeed people like us may well be labelled as generalists (Boudry 2023; Napolitano and Reuter 2023).

But we have come to doubt whether this broader understanding of generalism vs. particularism does a better job at mapping the philosophical landscape. Even on this broader understanding, we now believe, two different debates are conflated, and it becomes unclear what exactly the distinction is tracking by way of genuine philosophical disagreement.[4] Ultimately, we believe that the generalism vs. particularism divide should be abandoned in favour of alternative conceptual maps, in order to foster better, more constructive, philosophical disagreements.

A Semantic Disagreement

So, why should we get rid of the particularism vs. generalism divide, even on this broader understanding of generalism? 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."

[4] In his recent SERRC piece, Clarke (2023) argues that the trouble with the particularism vs. generalism divide is that it is being retroactively applied to earlier philosophical discussions that were taking place in a very different context and with different agendas, which leads to misunderstandings. We agree, but we think the problem runs deeper.

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The second problem is that, on this broader definition, the "generalist" with her narrow definition and the "particularist" with her minimal definition may well agree on many substantive issues regarding the (ir)rationality of belief in conspiracies. 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 (Raäikka 2023).

This is not to say that the semantic wrangle about how to define "CT" is completely empty and uninteresting. An important discussion that has been animating the debate is about how conspiracy theory *should* be defined (see for instance Napolitano and Reuter 2023; Shields 2023). Traditionally, particularists defend their semantic choice by pointing to how pejorative definitions of "conspiracy theory" have been weaponized by those in power, while generalists want to rescue the ordinary meaning of the term (which is clearly pejorative, see Napolitano and Reuter 2023) as well as the research project of social scientists. These are crucial and substantive disagreements that should be situated within wider philosophical debates on the role of conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics. But particularism and generalism are confusing labels to capture this disagreement.

Perhaps better terms would be *neutralists*—those who favour a neutral definition, such as the minimalist one—and *colloquialists*—who think 'conspiracy theory' should refer to suspicious or epistemically problematic theories about conspiracies. A third alternative, which hasn't received much attention perhaps because it is not neatly captured by the reigning particularism vs. generalism divide, is the view that we should stop using the expression 'conspiracy theory' altogether because it is an unsalvageable conceptual mess, and that we should rather talk about 'conspiracy belief' of 'conspiracy explanations'. We could call this view *eliminativism.*

Lumpers vs. Splitters

In the current taxonomy of generalism vs. particularism, the semantic disagreement is often intertwined with a different one, namely the question what, if anything, the "bad" conspiracy theories have in common that explains their defective epistemic status. This is not a semantic disagreement, but an epistemological one. By and large, self-professed "particularists" have adopted the view that the problematic conspiracy theories suffer from a variety of defects, while those labelled as "generalists" have tried to identify certain common flaws. While the respective positions in these two debates have often aligned, the two dimensions are really orthogonal to each other and should be kept separate: One could be a defender of a pejorative definition of conspiracy theories, while at the same time holding that there isn't one single factor explaining their badness. Or one could adopt a minimal definition, and yet think that the *unwarranted* theories about conspiracies we come across in the public sphere suffer from similar epistemic defects.

But where would these positions fall within the usual understanding generalism vs. particularism taxonomy? It's unclear. Philosophers disagree on how much we can "generalize" about the epistemic flaws of conspiracy theories, but contra Buenting & Taylor, this disagreement does not take the form of a simple dichotomy. 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.

Disentangling the semantic from the epistemological disagreement isn't just a remote theoretical possibility: many self-described "particularists" have recently embraced what we would label as moderately "lumpy" views, while remaining steady on their semantic neutralism. This is at least how we understand the arguments about problematic subcategories like "defectible" (Pigden 2018), "mature" (Keeley 1999), "fantastical" (Basham and Räikkä 2018) or "suspicious" CTs (Dentith 2022). On the other hand, those who favour a pejorative definition might well admit that no two CTs are ever exactly alike, and that sometimes we need to pay attention to individual details.

So, where does this leave us? On the understanding of generalism that emerges from Clarke's piece, the position is one that nobody in their right mind would endorse. But a broader understanding of generalism doesn't really do much better. "Generalism" and "particularism" as they are currently used seem to refer to two clusters of views that indeed often align—"generalism" being the combination of colloquialism combined with epistemological lumping, and "particularism" combining a minimal definition and a tendency to split the bad theories. And this leads to conflating two orthogonal disagreements which are and should be kept separate.

While it's conceivable that the generalism vs. particularism divide was a helpful way of mapping the debate over ten years ago when it was introduced, it is clear to us that it isn't any longer. The philosophical debate on conspiracy theories—and this will not come as a surprise to anyone involved—seems to us to have become rather polarized. The labels of particularism and generalism seem to be strong partisan signallers of a hostile conflict between two camps. Of course, as philosophers, we shouldn't shy away from fierce disagreement, or let it dictate what labels to use. But we hope to have shown here that the existing labels conflate two orthogonal disagreements, and perhaps more importantly, they often obscure the existence of substantive *agreements* between so-called "generalists" and "particularists".

The upshot of all this, we believe, is that it is time to retire the old labels, and to adopt different maps to navigate the philosophical landscape. We hope we have provided the first pointers in that direction. Ultimately, our hope is that of a more rigorously organized, constructive, and fruitful philosophical discussion.

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