



# Skepticism, the Virtue of Preemptive Distrust

**ABSTRACT:** *How does trust operate under conditions of oppression? Little attention has been paid to how distrust may be both necessary and costly to its bearer. Distrust is clearly warranted under certain conditions, but do those conditions contribute to a reduction in one's overall well-being? More importantly, is there something about distrust itself (rather than the conditions that warrant it) that contributes to this reduction in well-being? In this essay, I explore these questions in depth. I explain what the costs of distrust are and how they impede our well-being. I argue that the weakened development of trust through oppression has some important downstream consequences: namely, it requires the cultivation of skepticism as a virtue of distrust, which I argue should be included as one of Lisa Tessman's burdened virtues—those that are required for survival but that do not necessarily lead to the agent's flourishing.*

## Introduction

Trust is a great boon to our lives. It is the foundation of enriching personal relationships; it enables us to accomplish things we could not do on our own; it builds communities and expands knowledge. A deep-seated lack of trust breaks down societies, hinders our ability to know things, and breeds animosity. Despite all its benefits, trust is not always warranted. People can be untrustworthy, for a variety of reasons. On the innocuous end of the spectrum, a person may be sincere but incompetent. They hold your interests at heart but just cannot seem to come through. On the other, more threatening end, a person may actively feel malice toward you. In individual cases, such people may be easy enough to avoid. But what do you do when a large swath of the population is untrustworthy, not out of incompetence but because of ill will, contempt, fear, disregard, or sheer indifference? Moreover, what if these feelings are directed at you simply because of who you are or the group you belong to? How do we explain the experiences of trust of people living under oppression?

Theories of trust need resources on how to deal with oppressive social conditions. While there are some theories of distrust (such as Hawley 2014; Jones 2013, 2019;

I thank the several people—Jason D'Cruz, Vita Emery, and Gwen Daugs, among others—whose critical comments on my concept of recognition trust drove me to explore the notion of burdened virtues of distrust. I also thank Laura Specker Sullivan and Nick Smyth for comments on early drafts of this essay. I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their encouraging comments and insights on how to reconceive certain sections of the paper. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Amy Monaco, who had many enlightening discussions with me on the topics covered in this essay.



Krishnamurthy 2015), they focus mostly on what distrust *is* and less on how it can help individuals survive conditions of oppression—Krishnamurthy is a notable exception with her theory of the democratic value of distrust. In particular, little attention has been paid to how distrust may be both necessary and costly to its bearer. Distrust is clearly warranted under certain conditions, but do those conditions contribute to a reduction in one's overall well-being? More importantly, is there something about distrust *itself* (rather than the conditions that warrant it) that contributes to this reduction in well-being?

In this essay, I explore this topic in depth—what the costs of distrust are and in what ways they impede our well-being. The weakened development of trust through oppression has some important downstream consequences: It requires cultivating distrust as a virtue, which, I argue, should be included as one of Lisa Tessman's (2005) burdened virtues—those that are required for survival but that do not necessarily lead to the agent's flourishing. Cultivating distrust as a virtue will help its bearers steel themselves against the disappointments of broken trust.

As a brief aside, I think it likely that there are multiple virtues of distrust. Distrust can take several forms. In some cases, we have ample evidence of someone's incompetence or malice and their untrustworthiness is not even a question. We might call this confident or certain distrust. In other cases, someone's trustworthiness is very much in question and distrust manifests as a wariness of them or a predisposition not to believe them. We might call this preemptive distrust. Distrust might also surface as a gut instinct and a desire to avoid any manner of grappling with the question of someone's trustworthiness. We might call this affective or avoidant distrust. I offer these forms as speculative suggestions. In this discussion of distrust, I am addressing *preemptive distrust*. I think this form of distrust is most relevant to life in socially hostile or oppressive conditions. I focus on skepticism as the prime virtue of preemptive distrust. Other forms of distrust may have different prime virtues. I leave it to others to theorize what these other virtues of distrust might be.

Oppression works to undermine trust, which means that we need a more robust theory of the value of distrust if we are to make sense of trust relations under oppressive social conditions. Under such conditions, distrust can be a virtue. Skepticism, the virtue of preemptive distrust, and its helper virtue, steadfastness, should typically be understood as burdened: skepticism is a typically healthy virtue that becomes burdened under oppressive conditions. It drives one to excessively verify before trusting, never entirely laying suspicion aside. This can lead to exhaustion and isolation from trustworthy people. Steadfastness helps us maintain the energy, focus, and resolve needed to keep in mind who ought not be trusted. But this easily slides into unreasonable intransigence. Skepticism need not always be burdened, however, and under certain conditions it might instead help us to flourish.

## 1. How Oppression Suffocates Trust

There is an inherent connection between trust and power. Because trust always involves some form of accepted vulnerability to those we trust (Baier 1986, 1996),

the very act of trusting implicitly acknowledges a power imbalance between truster and trusted, even if most of the time this imbalance is small. The trusted has the power to harm the truster—by betraying the trust, by neglecting to take care of the goods put in their care—in a way that the truster cannot avoid without withdrawing trust. Further, it is impossible to withdraw trust entirely. We cannot take care of all our goods (material and otherwise) at every moment. At some point or another, we need to trust other people (or at the bare minimum rely upon them), else social life cannot continue. As a result, questions of trust can never be separated from questions of power.

As Nancy Potter notes, as individuals we are shaped not only by our choices or our upbringing, but also by ‘the social, political, and economic structures which underlie our particular relationships’ (2002: 17). These structures are set up in such a way that they exploit members of some groups. Members of these oppressed groups find themselves in positions of perpetual powerlessness; they almost always have less power when they interact with members of other, more privileged groups, and as a result they have a strained relationship to trust: ‘In today’s world, where inequality, exploitation, and multiple oppressions are both everyday and systematic occurrences, distrust is endemic to many people’s lives’ (Potter 2002: xiv). Trust comes easier to those in privileged positions, in part because they are accustomed to people trusting them readily, in part because they are unaccustomed to being in positions of lesser power (systemically rather than in isolated moments), and in part because, Potter claims, they assume their own trustworthiness (Potter 2002: 18).

To simplify, to be oppressed is to have the choices of one’s life constrained by separate forces that form an interlocking system of barriers that penalize any decision or action (Frye 1983: 4). In Marilyn Frye’s famous imagery, oppression is like a birdcage: no single bar traps the bird, but if we step back and see how the bars intersect it becomes clear that the bird is not free to fly away. Further, to count as oppression, these forces must constrain one as a matter of the social group to which one belongs (1983: 7–8). Avishai Margalit (1996) calls these social groups ‘encompassing’ groups. An encompassing group is one that has a common character that shapes members’ lifestyles and relationships, in which members grow up to acquire the group culture and common traits. Membership within an encompassing group is a matter of belonging, of mutual recognition, and of self-identification (Margalit 1996: 138–40). Belonging to an encompassing group strongly shapes the identity and self-image of its members. Under oppression membership in an encompassing group is used to denigrate its members. Defining oppression in terms of membership in social groups is necessary because it distinguishes oppression from cases of temporary or isolated suffering and constraint. An individual will suffer, and their activities will be constrained, if they break their leg—but this unfortunate condition is not oppression (Frye 1983: 11).

Oppression is often characterized by *double binds*, where every available option penalizes the agent in some way—you are damned if you do, damned if you do not. According to Sukaina Hirji, oppressive double binds are characterized by situations in which, no matter the choice one makes, they become an agent in their own

oppression. Even efforts to resist an oppressive norm result in reinforcing the norm to some degree (2021: 652). As one such example, Hirji offers the case of a young, untenured professor of color who must choose between taking on extra service burdens of mentoring more students of color—which reinforces the oppressive structures that burden women and people of color with more uncompensated labor (especially emotionally taxing labor)—or resisting the extra service—which reinforces the oppressive structures that deprive students of color from receiving good mentorship from faculty who share their experiences, thereby contributing to discouraging such students from entering the profession (2021: 643–44).

Because oppression restricts and penalizes motion in any direction *as a matter of who you are*, it entails a denial of recognition, or at least misrecognition. As recognition is consistently denied through myriad venues—from mundane policies to unintended microaggressions to overt acts of hostility—individuals at the receiving end can have their hope (indeed their trust) that others will recognize them stifled. Oppression thus hampers trust at a deep level. This is important because oppression does not just subvert individual acts or relations of trust. It corrupts the very climate of trust that gives rise to and warrants individual instances of trust (see Baier 2004). Oppression disables what is often termed *basic trust*.

Accounts of basic trust offer powerful explanations: They seek to unify different strands of trust and explain how such a fragile, yet necessary, social phenomenon gets off the ground in the first place. Unlike theories of day-to-day trust, theories of basic trust seek to explain how and why there is a climate of trust in the first place. In earlier work (Brennan 2021), I proposed a theory of basic trust rooted in recognition. I argued that this ‘recognition trust’ is the trust we must have in others to recognize our personhood and that serves as a functional precondition for all other forms of trust—meaning that other forms of trust cannot satisfy their social function without also satisfying (if only in an abstracted, indirect way) the function of recognition. (For more on the idea of functional preconditions, see Fricker [2016; 2019]; Queloz [2020a; 2020b]). Recognition trust is an affectively laden construal of others as willing to recognize one’s personhood. It is the initial stance of trust required to make other extensions of trust possible, put in place through secure-enough parenting. If recognition of personhood is at the heart of trust, and if oppression denies that recognition, then oppression disables the germination of a climate of trust. As a result, individual instances of trust no longer seem warranted.

What do the realities of oppression imply for the very possibility of recognition trust? In my earlier essay, I made a brief comment on this score. We can get by simply by relying on others only when and to the extent necessary. Trust is not strictly needed to survive. Arguably, however, individuals harboring pathological levels of distrust are not living a full life—they lack something important to our well-being as social creatures. When confronted with others who deny our humanity, we may find solace in the company of those who do. But this solace does not make us whole. Having one’s humanity not recognized is not the same as not being esteemed; the hurt and threat linger in a way that continues to undermine one’s self-image (Brennan 2021: 3809–10). It is callous to say that oppressed individuals must still extend trust to people who do not, and likely will

never, recognize them. It is worse than callous to suggest that it is some kind of moral imperative to extend recognition trust simply because it is so vitally important to our social lives. I am not suggesting this. It is true that recognition trust will find some safe haven among people within one's social group (Bernstein 2015: 287), even if it cannot be nurtured between oppressors and the oppressed. But even this small consolation does not provide full compensation for the continual symbolic denials of recognitions that are omnipresent within contexts of oppression. I am thinking specifically here of the face of oppression that Iris Marion Young (1990) labels 'cultural imperialism'. Cultural imperialism falsely universalizes the dominant group's experience and culture, establishing itself as the norm and marking out minority experiences and cultures as 'other'. A 'foreign' culture is presented to the oppressed as the default, as normal, as unremarkable (Young 1990: 59). Under such conditions, the experiences and culture that are taken for granted by the dominant class scream out to the oppressed as a denial of recognition by making them invisible. Other than the short passage cited above, I left the tension between recognition trust and oppression underexplored. An exploration is needed, though, and I take it up here.

When recognition is systemically denied, it is easy to slide from trust to active distrust. Jason D'Cruz (2019) argues that being baselessly distrusted (a species of denied recognition in its own right) can lead us to become demoralized and recede from social life, feeling that we cannot trust others *to trust us*. When distrust is unwarranted or connected to irrelevant factors like race, gender, sexual orientation, or the like, it sends a message that there is nothing the person can do to be seen as trustworthy. They are distrusted as a matter of who they are taken to be, not their actual abilities or character. '[T]he stamina required to swim against the current is not without limit' D'Cruz (2019: 944) writes poignantly, and the 'mere anticipation of such mis-recognition diminishes the motivation to be responsive to trust' (2019: 946). One important way oppression undercuts recognition trust is to motivate baseless distrust of individuals from oppressed groups—simply *because* they belong to those groups. This baseless distrust is a form of misrecognition that works to demoralize the baselessly distrusted into withdrawing recognition trust. They cannot fathom how they could be recognized, since the possibility of that recognition has already been denied from the start. It makes no sense, then, to trust others for that already-denied recognition.

Another way oppression works to undercut trust is to give positive reasons for distrust. Meena Krishnamurthy (2015) argues that distrust is warranted in the face of tyranny. She uses the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. to make her case. In his famous 'Letter from Birmingham Jail', King expresses a distrust of moderate whites who professed support for his cause but did not stand with him in his acts of civil disobedience and even criticized his tactics as inciting violence. According to Krishnamurthy, distrust is a confident belief that someone will not act justly (2015: 392). Importantly for her theory, this distrust is the right stance in King's case. He had *good reason* to distrust moderate whites because, despite their sympathies for his cause, they consistently refrained from acting to help. They lacked a proper understanding of oppression, feared the consequences of

protesting with him, and were irrational in their condemnation of the civil disobedience practiced by King and his supporters (2015: 394-5).

King's distrust was motivated by moderate whites' misrecognition (or perhaps more precisely their only partial recognition). Recognition is not a purely conceptual or cognitive act. It includes a motivational component that, once another's personhood is fully grasped, will lead to action that respects that personhood (Brennan 2021: 3805). In contexts in which the personhood of a particular group is being actively denied, the motivational component of recognition should ideally drive us to fight for the acceptance of their personhood. In the case of moderate whites who professed support for King's cause, this would mean that full recognition of African Americans' personhood would entail concrete action to protect their civil rights. But they did not do this. One possible reason for their inaction is that their recognition was only partial or was faulty, and it bred a distrust within King. As he wrote, 'I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice' (King 2000: 72-73). He could not trust white moderates to recognize him fully, just as he could not trust overtly racist whites to recognize him at all. By providing positive reasons for distrust, moderate whites undermined recognition trust and made it harder to cultivate.

I do not mean to suggest that partial or misrecognition of personhood is a necessary condition for inaction. Many moderate whites may have viewed African Americans as full persons, but fear, selfishness, or self-preservation may have stopped them from sticking their necks out. And yet, in this case, such an explanation for inaction is still a legitimate ground for distrust on the part of African Americans, who counted on white action to support their cause. Furthermore, Krishnamurthy's account of distrust is instructive in how oppression works to undercut trust, but giving positive reasons for distrust is only *one* path among several for breeding distrust. Conceptually, I do not think distrust *requires* a confident belief about specific behaviors of others (or lack thereof). In agreement with Victoria McGeer and Karen Jones, I think that trust and distrust are attitudes that come prior to confident beliefs. As D'Cruz (2022) points out, a distrustful attitude often involves a general suspicion about how others will (or will not) behave, about their basic levels of attentiveness or inattentiveness. Distrust, especially under oppression, manifests as a nonspecific suspicion that others are unlikely to treat you fairly or decently in some (as yet unknown) way.

Shayla Nunnally (2012) provides empirical support for the varying levels of trust and distrust black Americans feel toward other races. She argues that race affects how others are perceived to behave and so race becomes a fundamental heuristic in understanding how, when, and in whom people trust (2012: 25). The conceptual mechanism through which this racialized trust is constructed is what she calls *discriminative racial-psychological processing*. There are six dimensions to this processing, the most important for my purposes here are: (1) how individuals learn about the low status of their racial group through socialization, (2) how racial stereotypes about group behavior shape one's perceptions about

how others will act, and (3) actual experiences of discrimination that in turn lead to fear about discrimination in the future. In short, ‘race and group-based *understandings* about other racial groups’ reputations and statuses in the American racial order influence blacks’ perceptions and socialized norms about trust’ (Nunnally 2012: 42). By analyzing the data from both historical surveys and ones she designed herself, Nunnally finds evidence for racialized trust. The data show that Blacks trust other Blacks more than they trust other racial groups, that Blacks trust whites less than they trust other groups, and that Blacks trust whites less than other racial groups trust whites (Nunnally 2012: 150). This for the most part falls in line with what we would expect from experiences of discrimination among members of the black community and the resulting self-protective messages meant to ward off future harms.

While Nunnally focuses on race, the differential trust that is filtered through perceptions of social groups, based on a mix of stereotypes and experiences, is not limited to race. It stands to reason that any oppressed group is likely to reduce their trust of members of dominant groups, through similar mechanisms as Nunnally describes. The experience of oppression has the downstream consequences of reducing trust (on a wide scale, but in particular when it comes to members of the dominant groups). At least one factor that causes this reduction of trust, I am suggesting, is that instances of oppression, in addition to being harmful materially, are at the same time a denial of recognition of personhood. If oppressed individuals cannot trust others to recognize their personhood, they will not be able to trust them in other ways, either—ways that presuppose a structure of accountability that is premised on seeing the other as a person. The more one is oppressed (the more one is caged in, to lean on Frye’s visualization again), the more one becomes seen as an object to be handled and managed without regard to their own desires, interests, or life projects. The problem for my concept of recognition trust is this: If oppressed persons are unable to reasonably place recognition trust in others, and if recognition trust is functionally necessary for other forms of trust, then how are oppressed persons able to trust at all? How is it that necessary trusting relations can function when recognition trust is not available, and what can one do instead? I now turn to these questions.

## 2. Skepticism as the (Burdened) Virtue of Preemptive Distrust

### 2.1 Making Room for Distrust as a Virtue

If one thinks of trust as a virtue, it is an understandable intuition to think of distrust as a vice. From an Aristotelian perspective, we would seem to have a tidy continuum with trust as the virtuous mean between gullibility as the vice of excess and distrust as the vice of deficiency. But this ignores the fact that trust and distrust are contraries, not contradictories (Ullmann-Margalit 2004; Jones 1996; Hawley 2014; Govier 1998; D’Cruz 2018; Krishnamurthy 2015). There is a good deal of liminal space between them. I can be skeptical, indifferent, or withhold trust from someone without actively distrusting them. On most accounts of distrust, this is because

distrust involves a positive belief that the distrusted *will not* come through or hold actual *ill will* toward one, rather than mere uncertainty about the other person.

Once we take into account the nuanced relation between trust and distrust, we can see that distrust could be its own virtuous mean between two vices. If trust is the mean between gullibility (vice of excess) and a pathological unwillingness to rely on others (vice of deficiency), then distrust is the mean between self-harmful isolation (vice of excess) and naïveté (vice of deficiency). Notice how both trust and distrust as virtues have near identical vices but the poles at which they are found are reversed. Aristotle's doctrine of the mean not only lays out virtues and vices but also outlines a domain of concern in which the virtue is most relevant (for example, bravery is the virtue concerning issues of fear and confidence). For both trust and distrust, the domain of concern is the same: matters of dependence upon others. The question of whether trust or distrust will be the relevant virtue will rely on the context of this domain.

Karen Jones argues that we cannot claim that a default stance of trust or distrust is warranted *a priori*. Instead, the default position will be sensitive to climate, domain, and the consequences of these attitudes (Jones 1996: 20). Distrust will be warranted as the default stance when the climate includes strong incentives to be untrustworthy, in domains that make one more exposed (such as divulging a potentially damaging secret), or when the consequences of betrayed trust are very high (1996: 20–21). Oppression is one such context that warrants default distrust. It is a climate that makes others (especially members of the oppressive class, but also, potentially, members of other oppressed classes) untrustworthy, either through incentives or by warranting doubts about others' goodwill toward one.

Distrust, then, has something in common with Heather Battaly's understanding of closed-mindedness (Battaly 2018a, 2018b). Battaly argues that closed-mindedness is an intellectual vice under ordinary epistemic conditions but an intellectual virtue under hostile epistemic conditions. (I say that distrust has something in common with closed-mindedness because I do not think that ordinary conditions will necessarily call for trust as the default, making distrust a vice. When the conditions do call for trust as the default, when the preponderance of individuals are trustworthy and the institutions are transparent, fair, and reliable, then distrust may be a vice. But these conditions are not exactly ordinary, and the absence of these conditions does not necessarily make an environment hostile. Ordinary conditions are more likely to be neutral regarding whether trust or distrust should be the default stance.) Battaly describes an epistemically hostile environment as one that 'is not minimally or moderately polluted, but extremely polluted—it is utterly saturated with intellectual options that are false, unreliable, or aimed at misdirection' (2018a: 39). By analogy, I suggest that distrust will be a virtue when conditions are hostile to recognition trust—that is, when the social space is utterly saturated by individuals holding prejudices against one's social group, when institutions are set up to disadvantage certain groups (even in the absence of prejudiced individuals), or when a combination of both reaches a preponderance of oppression. Under such conditions, cultivating a disposition of distrust of certain others and institutions will minimize bad effects for the agent, even if it does not produce good effects for them (see also Battaly 2018a: 41) (although, as I



argue below, there may be instances at the margins in which a disposition of distrust not only minimizes bad effects but also produces good effects). Distrust as a disposition will minimize the extent to which its bearers make themselves vulnerable to material, psychological, or emotional harm at the hands of others. When the climate, domain, consequences, or a combination of all three call for a default stance of distrust, then distrust will be a virtue rather than a vice. Distrust is just the sort of skill to give its bearers the best chance of survival.

I hope this makes it clear that distrust can be a virtue when the circumstances call for it. In the absence of a thriving climate of recognition trust, distrust will step in as the cardinal virtue. In what follows, however, I argue that even when distrust is a virtue, it is most often a burdened one.

## 2.2 Burdened Virtues

Lisa Tessman describes burdened virtues as those that might contribute to flourishing in the minimal sense that they help the bearer survive or resist oppression—but they have costs associated with them that detract from the bearer's flourishing in the fuller, eudaimonic sense (2005: 95). Burdened virtues are akin to what Aristotle calls mixed actions—for instance, being blackmailed into performing an atrocious act. There may have been no better option given the circumstances, but the virtuous agent does not come out of it unscathed. The costs of burdened virtues, such as the pain, guilt, or remorse that arises from having to perform actions out of them, weigh down their bearer. Tessman claims that it is possible that those who are excessively burdened will be unable to flourish (2005: 97). In this way, burdened virtues reveal a disconnect between virtue and flourishing: Virtue is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for flourishing (2005: 95).

Tessman focuses on three central examples of burdened virtues. The first, anger, develops and maintains resolve against oppressive forces. Anger is a burdened virtue because, even when it is righteous and warranted, it can very easily cross the boundary into excessiveness, leading one to lash out at fellow members of an oppressed group—that is, the wrong targets. In order to apply it to the right degree at the right times and to the right targets, one needs to extricate oneself from the effects of internalized oppression—a very difficult task (2005: 122). The second virtue Tessman focuses on, courage, drives one to face personal sacrifice in the name of liberation from oppression. Courage is usually seen as a proper virtue, but Tessman argues that this is because it is a virtue that is meant to be drawn on sparingly. When it is drawn on constantly, as it often must be by those living in oppressive conditions, it burdens the bearer because it incurs costs: It may crowd out other virtues, especially self-regarding virtues, and it is likely to lead the bearer to be unable to feel the full spectrum of emotions (2005: 125–26). Tessman's third focal virtue is loyalty, which functions to demonstrate one's fitness and commitment to fellow resisters (2005: 115–16). Loyalty, when demonstrated in the way often required by liberatory movements, is a burdened virtue because it leaves one vulnerable 'to the possibility that one's community is misguided or myopic or too filled with fervor to be thoughtful and critical and

compassionate' (2005: 129). At the extreme, loyalty can become a signaling device rather than a substantive virtue, requiring increasingly stringent tests that suffocate the critical reflection needed to correct one's course. Burdened loyalty can lead to complicity.

### 2.3 Skepticism

I offer a fourth virtue to Tessman's examples. Skepticism is a burdened virtue of distrust. (Again, in line with my cursory outline of different possible forms of trust in the introduction, I think there may be more than one virtue that could be classified as a virtue of distrust. For the remainder of the paper when I discuss skepticism as a virtue of distrust, I use distrust as shorthand for preemptive distrust.) It is costly because, as J. M. Bernstein aptly notices, distrust requires constant vigilance and maintenance; it is psychologically taxing (2011: 403). To the extent that oppressive structures force someone to develop distrust that is experienced as costly to them in some way, it takes on the character of a double bind: 'there is something necessarily self-undermining about the character of the choice available to the agent: whatever they do, they are forced to act against themselves' (Hirji 2021: 653).

A healthy skepticism is often considered a virtue, situated as the mean between uncritical acceptance and rejection of even the most basic facts of empirical reality. It is good to be wary of claims, especially radical and implausible ones. Having a finely tuned nonsense meter is instrumentally good. Skepticism is a proper virtue when it is sensitive to evidence both that things may not be what they seem and that things are as they seem. When it is a virtue that leads to the bearer's flourishing, skepticism must be open to being overturned. But skepticism becomes burdened when it is detached from positive evidence for distrust, or when it is closed off to evidence of trustworthiness. When one's social experience includes overwhelming instances of betrayals, tricks, deceptive and predatory practices (think of an advertising campaign that exaggerates the positive aspects of some product while neglecting the fine print, knowing that consumers are unlikely to read it and then holding them accountable to the obscure and convoluted by-laws), one may find one needs to turn a skeptical eye toward everything. Skepticism, in the context of oppressive social conditions, is a *preemptive* distrust of others, rooted in a concern about possible discriminatory behavior from them. Even double- and triple-checking does not completely lay to rest one's sneaking suspicion that the other party is up to something. In this way, skepticism shares something in common with courage. Under oppressive conditions, a proper virtue can become burdened.

Skepticism may manifest itself as a wary intuition that someone is up to something, not necessarily because of evidence one can point to in order to support that intuition, but because of the group the distrusted party belongs to. This is not to say the lack of evidence of untrustworthiness necessarily makes the stance of distrust unwarranted, or the skepticism a vice. The intuition may be spot on, and in the context of oppressive social relations, the distrustful intuition regarding other groups may turn out to be correct more often than not. But when

skepticism is unresponsive to evidence of trustworthiness it can easily miss its target; it can over-generalize and spillover onto inappropriate targets. Like anger, it is possible to misdirect one's skepticism at the wrong target. Skepticism can even be misdirected at one's own group when oppression is internalized. When a member of an oppressed group comes to believe—even subconsciously—some of the narratives about his or her group, this can lead one to turn a distrustful eye toward other members of one's own group or of other oppressed groups. It is important to note that this is borne out in Nunnally's empirical research on racialized trust. A number of respondents held negative views of other people of color, even of members of their own racial group, and trusted them less as a result. Heuristics based on how other racial groups behave and perceptions of how likely they are to discriminate against us can lead us to take up a skeptical, distrustful stance even when it may not be warranted. Burdened skepticism may indeed be a reasonable stance to take, given the historical realities of how some groups have continually exploited others. But it does not come without costs. It takes exhausting effort to keep one's guard up at all times. When every gift looks like a Trojan horse, life can become isolating.

But skepticism has a companion virtue. Steadfastness is a meta-virtue that supports skepticism. Steadfastness is the resoluteness to maintain one's distrust even when there may be some evidence that one's distrust is mistaken—that the distrusted person is in fact trustworthy. If skepticism is the virtue that is constantly on the lookout for a wolf in sheep's clothing, then steadfastness is the helper virtue that keeps one unshaken from the conviction that the wolf is a wolf despite calls that it sure looks like another sheep. Just as anger is useful and even necessary for maintaining the energy, focus, and resolve needed to make progress—and to keep clearly in mind who is the impediment to change—steadfastness helps one maintain skepticism. Steadfastness secures one's resolve; it prevents one from being shaken about who (typically, those in a position of power over one) ought not be trusted.

I call steadfastness a meta-virtue because it can help us hold steady in our practice of any virtue—burdened or not. Steadfastness can be a meta-virtue of trust, for instance, when we hold steady in our belief that a friend is innocent, despite evidence of guilt (Baker 1987). Steadfastness can also be a meta-virtue of anger when proper anger requires us to resist being placated. Sara Ahmed (2021) recounts the story of a group of graduate students seeking to make a formal complaint about bullying. In a meeting with the head of department, they were at first discouraged ('think about your future careers'), then they were threatened ('if you slander the university, you could have your funding withdrawn'). Finally, they were bribed. The department head offered funding for a conference to bring their 'dream list of academics': 'The student told me they began talking excitedly about how they could use the money, who they could invite to the conference, before it dawned upon them what was going on. The head of department did not need to say what she was offering explicitly; they realized what she was offering from how they were affected. In becoming excited about the offer, they had been distracted from the complaint' (2021: 99). The meta-virtue of steadfastness helped the students remained focused on their complaint, on the source of their warranted

anger. Steadfastness plays the same role when it helps virtues of anger, trust, or distrust.

Someone who is not steadfast in their distrust will be highly responsive to signals of trustworthiness and will be receptive to changing their mind about those they distrust. This may be a good thing if they were wrong about a distrusted person who turns out to be trustworthy. But it leaves one open to being manipulated and taken advantage of by individuals who present signals of trustworthiness without substance. It also leaves one vulnerable to well-intentioned people who are not aware of how institutional structures from which they benefit can disadvantage others. In other words, not being steadfast can leave one open to bitter disappointments from well-meaning people who seem unaware of the obstacles in one's way.

When steadfastness supports burdened skepticism, it, too, comes with a cost. Like anger, it is easy for steadfastness to slide into the related vice of excess: unreasonable intransigence. Cultivated, persistent steadfastness can leave one so unbendable that one becomes unreasonable, which can harm personal relationships and sacrifice self-regarding virtues. It must also be noted that pairing skepticism with steadfastness increases the chances that skepticism will become burdened. Steadfastness makes skepticism more resolute, which in turn makes it more likely that skepticism will be unresponsive to evidence (not just signals) of trustworthiness, thus spilling over into excess.

To give this virtue and meta-virtue some substance, consider the case of Rabia. Growing up in the United States surrounded by idealistic messages of equality and opportunity, Rabia nonetheless comes from a more-or-less traditional Muslim household. Her father did not encourage her intellectual development; instead, he strongly suggested that she should focus her efforts on being a good wife to a Muslim husband. Her mother, however, took Rabia to the library regularly as a little girl and instilled in her a conviction not to trust people who question her abilities. She insisted that Rabia go to college to get a good education, and in time her father begrudgingly allowed it (more to keep the peace in his own marriage than anything else). While in college, Rabia fell in love with engineering. Trying to make room for herself in a male-dominated field, she quickly faced both subtle and overt prejudiced attitudes toward her capabilities, either as a matter of her gender or her heritage. Keeping her mother's lessons in mind, Rabia ignored the snide comments, the cold shoulders, dismissiveness, and blatant hostility, graduating with high honors and landing a few coveted internships (which were no respite from the sexism and prejudice). After graduating, she landed a junior position in a respectable firm and spent the next two decades slowly and painstakingly developing her reputation. Along the way, she had to navigate the (by now very tired) sexist tropes and a more than few instances of male colleagues actively trying to sabotage her work by first cozing up to her. If she had not developed a strong sense of skepticism and a steadfastness to remain resolute in her distrust of her colleagues, she likely would not have lasted. After making a name for herself and building her resources, with the help of a couple of trusted female mentors, Rabia was finally in the position to start her own firm, which she specifically intended to staff as a majority-female firm.

Rabia's professional career blossomed (although not as quickly or easily as it should have), but the character traits that helped her survive the sexist work culture were not so helpful in her personal life. Her relationship with her father soured as she became more assertive and ignored what he thought was well-intentioned advice. She found herself visiting less often, and after her mother passed, she stopped talking to her father entirely. She found herself unable to put aside her distrust when developing personal relationships because of the constant belittling attitudes she faced in her home, educational, and professional environments. Friendships felt superficial and hard to maintain. Part of this may have been the long hours required by her career, but it had been difficult for her to open up and be honest with anyone, always worried that revealing her innermost worries would be used against her. Her skepticism and steadfastness have helped her survive, even thrive in certain areas of her life, but have also directly led to the enervation of other areas of her life important to her well-being.

I have mentioned above some ways in which skepticism can be burdened. But more important for my purposes here, skepticism as a cultivated virtue can have a corrosive effect on recognition trust. Distrust, as a perspective-shaping attitude, impedes relations of mutual recognition. Both trust and distrust are attitudes that act as filters through which we interpret others' intentions, reasons, and behaviors (Baker 1987; Hertzberg 1988; Jones 1996, 2019; McGeer 2002; Lahno 2001; Bernstein 2011). Rather than being sensitive to disconfirming evidence, trust and distrust as attitudes are a background against which evidence and reasons *appear as* evidence and reasons. As such, these attitudes quickly become self-confirming and self-perpetuating.

Once distrust settles in as the primary stance toward others, it leads us to interpret their intentions and behaviors as tending toward denying us recognition rather than affirming our personhood. Sustained distrust begins to push us out of a shared social and moral community. One effect of distrust (and, more importantly, of feeling distrusted) is a sense of demoralization. Demoralization, according to Baier, can manifest as 'fundamentally a loss of social confidence, of the courage to keep going as a functioning member of a group with a shared life' (2004: 184; compare to D'Cruz 2019: 944). The overpowering riptide pulls us toward self-fulfilling prophecies that retroactively justify the initially baseless distrust.

Margaret Walker (2014) notes that being part of a moral community requires that one has the authority to hold others to account. Moral injury involves the vulnerability of being disqualified or excluded from being a full partner in the moral project of accountability (Walker 2014: 112, 121). Being included in the moral community requires trust that others will see you as authoritative—an important element of recognition trust. Insofar as this is true, sufficiently broad and sustained distrust is a means of selecting oneself out of the moral community because it preemptively withholds trust that others will see you as an authoritative member.

Baier describes the costs of distrust as outweighing the benefits, even when our trust has been betrayed. She relates two anecdotes of broken trust. In one, a student tenant spending the summer in the Irish countryside is subject to an unsuccessful sexual assault attempt by her older male landlord. In the other, a

young, single assistant professor is fawned over by two male colleagues who are friends with the department chair. Instead of protecting her and seeing her as something more than just a tease, the chair labels her as a troublemaker and blames her for one of his friends' potential departures to a different department (to avoid temptation). In both cases, the young women were let down, fault lines appearing in their capacities to trust. Distrust would seem well warranted. Whether warranted or not, however, Baier argues that thoroughgoing distrust is too costly:

living . . . with sustained watchful distrust of those one sees daily and depends upon in normal daily activities is a high price to pay for avoidance of ugly let-downs. It is not clear that giving people and administrations the benefit of the doubt, as long as it still is *doubt*, not certainty . . . is not the better policy, even given the serious costs of this policy. There are few fates worse than sustained self-protective self-paralyzing generalized distrust of one's human environment (1996: 145).

This is a poignant point: even when distrust is the right thing to do, even when others are untrustworthy, there are harmful recoils for the victim. Self-removal from intricate webs of trust—webs that are the foundational netting of a thriving life—is a high price to pay. It is difficult to extract individual strands of trust with precision, without disrupting whole webs (Baier 1996: 149).

Another reason why skepticism as a virtue of distrust can be burdensome is that distrust forms a feedback loop with negative emotions like fear and contempt (Jones 2019: 961)—and contempt in particular hampers mutual recognition. Jones borrows a conceptual analysis of contempt from Macalester Bell: 'it focuses on the person as a whole rather than on some aspect of them, their character, or their behaviour. It holds the person in disregard in a distinctively comparative manner: when we hold others in contempt, we regard them as lesser, and as less than ourselves. Contempt prompts withdrawal, whether physical or psychological distancing' (Jones 2019: 962, citing Bell 2013).

Distrust breeds contempt, which (because of its totalizing and asymmetrical comparative nature) cuts off relations of mutual recognition. Contempt then reinforces distrust, starting an affective feedback loop. Taking a distrustful stance toward others—where this distrust generates a contemptuous attitude that depicts others as lesser—makes it too easy to vilify them, whether deserved or not. Such contemptuous vilification leads us to withhold recognition, cutting off any possibility of mutual recognition.

Again, to be clear, this may be the best option. Recognizing one's oppressors is not (cannot be) demanded as a moral obligation. But the point of my exploration of skepticism is to examine the consequences of doing so, which may involve reducing our opportunities to thrive. There is a negative feedback loop between recognition trust and skepticism: skepticism enters the picture when recognition trust wanes, and the more skepticism is cultivated, the harder it is to cultivate recognition trust.

## 2.4 Must Skepticism Always Be Burdened?

The costs incurred by cultivating skepticism involve removing oneself from the networks of social interaction and recognition that typically allow us to thrive. Given we are social animals who need social interaction and affirmation to lead a satisfying life, stripping away parts of our social lives will most often be experienced as a cost (see Guenther [2013] on the harms of social isolation). But what are the value-laden assumptions that stand behind this interpretation of skepticism as costly? Must such virtues necessarily be burdened?

The idea that skepticism is burdened is motivated by an assumption about how we thrive. Stated briefly, the thought is that one cannot thrive without the community thriving, that what it means to thrive as an individual is to be included as a full member within a community. In its strongest version, this relation is constitutive: one cannot thrive as an individual without being a full member of a thriving community. I think this is too strong. While I do think that, on average, most people will live better lives when they are part of a strong and supportive community, I do not think such social ties are a necessary condition. There are some who thrive on their own and who may find that a distrustful stance toward others is part of what makes them thrive.

Consider, as an example, the case of Amari, a junior data analyst in a start-up education technology company. Given the nature of each employee's roles, certain factions have formed, which at times fight over proposed policies and visions of where the company should head. While the company is not exactly toxic or utterly hostile, Amari's personal views do not align well with any faction; as a result, he is unwilling to make his opinions known because he believes they are unpopular and fears that one group or other will try to use him to their advantage. He thinks that some factions are too market-driven, without a strong enough sense of corporate social responsibility. At the same time, he finds himself out of step with his social justice-oriented colleagues. He finds their efforts to support social causes to be well-intentioned but over-zealous and at times self-contradictory, leading to policies that are bad for the company and its customers in the long term. He finds the constant posturing draining. Instead of playing an anxiety-inducing game of trying to figure out whom he can trust and with whom he can ally himself, he chooses to recede from workplace relations. He isolates himself in his professional life, focusing on his solitary tasks, only speaking up in team meetings or taking on special collaborative projects when he absolutely must. He cultivates a sense of skepticism by distrusting the sincerity of colleagues who argue for their favored policy as being in the interests of the company. He cultivates a sense of steadfastness to protect his distrust when other colleagues try, in his opinion, to woo him. He finds that he is much happier, more productive, and more able to develop the skills he thinks are important when he does this. What's more, he finds he enjoys the intellectual game of figuring out the inter-departmental politics while keeping his colleagues guessing about his own views, all from his cloistered position. He feels it gives him a small sense of personal power in an environment in which he otherwise feels at the mercy of forces beyond his control.

One could argue that Amari is mistaken about his subjective sense of happiness and is objectively not thriving as much as he could be because he has removed himself from workplace relations. One could argue that he would in fact be better off, both objectively (and perhaps in time subjectively as well) were he to insert himself into the company more and try to shape it into the image of the best company he thinks it could be. One could argue this, but I think we should take seriously that Amari knows himself and what he needs to have a good life, and that a finely tuned distrust is essential to doing just that. Despite using the language of (neo-)Aristotelian virtue ethics, I am not in favor of a teleology that assumes a particular set of values as the right or best ones. Skepticism as a virtue of distrust, I suggest, is commensurable with a value pluralism. It may be that, as an empirical matter, most people are not like Amari and would not thrive under these conditions. A different person might feel it necessary to cultivate distrust as a way of surviving a more toxic and hostile workplace culture but would wish that they did not have to and would feel that they are suffocating under such conditions. I think it is likely that most people fit this description. But I think it is important to keep open the possibility that there are some who are like Amari, who will find distrust not to be costly at all but in fact contributes to their flourishing.

### 3. Why This Matters

Recognition trust may be basic, but it is not guaranteed. When social conditions of oppression smother recognition trust, there are two things we can do: We can seek recognition from those who are more trustworthy (members of one's own social group or members of similarly disadvantaged groups), and we can cultivate distrust. (To be clear, this is not meant to suggest that members of one's own or similarly disadvantaged group are trustworthy simply because they are members of those groups. My suggestion is modest: that shared background, culture, upbringing, and experiences—including of discrimination—will make it more likely that one will find members of one's own group to be trustworthy than members of other groups.) But these options typically have their costs, as unfair as it may be. Skepticism as a virtue of distrust offers us some nonideal scaffolding for dealing with social relations within a structure of inequality. Understanding it is important for at least two reasons. First, conceptualizing distrust as a virtue in hostile conditions helps us see that the burdened virtue of skepticism—even when cultivated to the point of aggressiveness—is not a sign of a bad or broken character. It is a natural, rational, and at times necessary response to oppressive and unjust circumstances.

Second, understanding skepticism as a virtue of distrust provides us with conceptual resources for resisting one of Tessman's chief worries: that focusing on burdened virtues will result in victim blaming. Tessman rightly points out that one of the dangers of focusing on moral damage caused by oppression is that the privileged may look upon the oppressed as having broken characters stemming from personal vice (2005: 35). I think part of what is going on here, part of the motivation to misattribute broken characters as consequences of personal vice, is that the privileged often *distrust* the oppressed precisely because they are perceived



to have broken characters. This distrust reinforces the oppression not only because it turns responsibility for their plight wholly on the oppressed, but also because it reflects a lack of trust that the oppressed could become virtuous. If those living under oppressive conditions are not trusted to become virtuous, then their recognition trust—their sense that they morally matter to others—will deteriorate. Thoroughly cultivated skepticism is not an indication of paranoia or weakness, and individuals are not blameworthy for having to cultivate them. Rather, such virtues are self-protective reactions against baseless distrust. Skepticism as a virtue of distrust is a signal that something has gone wrong and that we have some collective responsibility for removing the conditions that make it necessary.

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