Trust and Entrustment

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A Viennese Doctor named Sigmund Freud recorded this story. Two businessmen meet at a railway station in Galicia.

"Where are you going?" asks one. "To Cracow," is the answer. "See here, what a liar you are," roars the other. "When you say, you are going to Cracow, you actually want me to believe that you are going to Lemberg. But now I know that you are really going to Cracow. So why are you lying?"[1]

Also warum lügst du? What's happening on that Galician platform has a lot to do with trust, with its absence and its violation. It suggests that, even given rituals of deception, trust can develop and be betrayed. But—if you'll indulge a philosopher's question—what exactly does "trust" mean here?

Let me point out, first, that the verb "trust" can refer both to an act and to the attitude that typically accompanies it. I can trust some*one with* some*thing*—the keys to my car or a dark secret. I make myself vulnerable to them. I do so, of course, usually, having some degree of confidence that they will not, in fact, abuse my trust; but in trusting someone, in this sense, I make that person responsible for some specific interests of mine. If they are trustworthy and competent they will meet the responsibility; if not, they may betray my trust. In English, we say in this case that we have *entrusted* something to someone: the keys, the secret.[2]

So I'm going to use the verb *entrust* and the noun *entrustment* for this act, keeping the word *trust* for the attitude. Because I can *entrust* you with something without *trusting* you. Entrustment is often quite rational. If, we have a common interest, for example, I can expect you to secure my interest because it is also yours. In a well-made contract or treaty, I may have made myself vulnerable to betrayal, but I haven't risked much. So far, then, I don't need trust. If I can tell whether you have kept my trust, I can reward you for compliance or punish you for noncompliance, and because you know that, you have reason to keep my trust independent of whether you care for my interests.[3] Trust, the mindset, comes in only if I think you will give my interest some consideration *whether or not it matches your interests*.

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[1] „Zwei Juden treffen sich im Eisenbahnwagen einer galizischen Station. Wohin fahrst du? fragte der eine. Nach Krakau, ist die Antwort. Sieh her, was du für Lügner bist, braust der andere auf. Wenn du sagst, du fahrst nach Krakau, willst du doch, daß ich glauben soll, du fahrst nach Lemberg. Nun weiß ich aber, daß du wirklich fahrst nach Krakau. Also warum lügst du?" (Two Jews meet in a railway station in Galicia. "Where are you traveling to?" asks one. "To Cracow," is the answer. "Look here, what kind of liar are you," roars the other. "When you say you are travelling to Cracow, you certainly want me to believe that you are travelling to Lemberg. But now I know that you are really going to Cracow. So why are you lying?") Sigmund Freud *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (Vienna: Deuticke, 1905): 96. Freud says this belongs with skeptical jokes which "attack … the security of our cognition itself." ("was sie angreifen ... ist die Sicherheit unserer Erkenntnis selbst …")

[2] And there are pairs of words in other European languages that connect trust with entrustment: Vertrauen, Anvertrauen; confiance, confier; доверять, вверять.

[3] That's why economists sometimes argue that, if it is rational for you to look after my interests, I am not

Trust—this mindset—makes most sense in the context of an ongoing relationship. If the relationship is rich enough, it will be impossible to keep track of all the costs and the benefits, let alone to sum them. As a result, in normal human relationships the default response to entrustment is to look after the other's interest *without* calculating the costs and benefits for oneself. It may be in our long-term interests to be in a relationship of this kind, but in most of our everyday entrustments, we are not keeping track of our own interests at all. To be sure, even in a trusting relationship, the temptation to defect may become overpowering; I know my friends might betray me for a million dollars, or under threat of torture.[4]

Two more crucial points about trust. First, it can be focused: I can trust my banker with my investments, but not with my personal secrets. He may be a gossip, while being financially scrupulous. Second, trust is predicated on competence: I do not trust my infant nephew with the car keys, not because he doesn't care for my interests, but because he doesn't know *how* to care for them: he's easily distracted and may drop the keys somewhere where they're hard to find.

Now the kind of trust that we have in our friends and family—the realm of "strong ties"—tends to be based on sentiment rather than on evidence, and to be general rather than focused.[5] We're likely to think our friends are morally upright and so that they will secure our interests where morality requires it, without calculating their interest.

So what about societies where habits of trust extend well beyond the circle of strong ties? Some recent political sociology suggests that such communities are thereby endowed with a resource for effective public action. Robert Putnam conceives of social capital as something that makes for more successful politics. The social capital of an individual consists, among other things, of links with other people—connections—and of reputation, which may encourage entrustment. When Putnam claims that trust is an element of collective social capital, it's unclear whether he means more than that in successful societies people can engage regularly in entrustment, because they are richly embedded in social relationships. He may be leaving it open whether they do so out of trust, the mindset, on the one hand, or because, on the other, it is reasonable to do so, when social capital is high.

What's certain is that in a society where people are likely to respond to entrustment by not taking advantage of those who offer it, treating others as trustworthy will often led them to entrust things to you in return.[6] Mutual webs of vulnerability will develop that enable a great deal of cooperation without calculation. In a society of trustworthy people, I do not need to calculate how your interests and mine are interrelated, nor do I need to keep careful watch on what you do.

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really trusting you. See, e.g., Timothy W. Guinnane, "Trust: A Concept Too Many," Center Discussion Paper No. 907, February 2005, Economic Growth Center, Yale University, P.O. Box 208629, New Haven, CT 06520-8269, http://www.econ.yale.edu/~egcenter/

[4] Fiabilité, Vertrauenswürdigkeit, кредитоспособност: all have their limits.

[5] Economists may think that, once someone cares about us, it is in her interest to secure our interest, because she gains utility from doing so. I think this way of talking about interests is muddled, but I will not pursue the point.

[6] That is the self-reinforcing cycle that Philip Pettit called the cunning of trust. Philip Pettit "The Cunning of Trust," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Summer, 1995): 202-225.

But I may still be wary of those who seem to lack competence or to belong to some social group that is regarded as untrustworthy. (In my country, that might mean politicians or lawyers.)

Trust is often necessary to solve the challenges of cooperation. Even in the Prisoners' Dilemma—the simplest sort of case where cooperation can make us both better off, even though it is in our narrower interest to defect—if each of us believes the other has his interests at heart, we can get to the right outcome. All that's required is that I know you value advancing my interest as well as yours, and vice versa. But because trust is necessarily limited, when the question of entrustment arises, we must judge whether trust is appropriate. Entrustment makes us vulnerable.

Still, I can also be vulnerable just because I believe what others say. In believing others, we expose ourselves to the risk of having our grasp of the world manipulated to advance their interests.[7]

So far, I have been talking about trust and entrustment among private individuals. But we are here to talk about politics and about the *public* significance of trust. It is not obvious when one first thinks about it, why trust should matter for politics. Thomas Hobbes, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, thought politics began with the creation of the Leviathan; his state was a device for people who thought they had no reason to trust one another. His sovereign is there, in effect, to distribute rewards and punishments for respecting each other's legitimate interests, precisely because often we cannot rationally entrust things to one another in the absence of the state. Thomas Jefferson concluded that, "In questions of power, then, let no more be said of confidence in man, but bind him down from mischief by the chains of the Constitution."[8] The thought is Hobbesian: what makes the Constitution work is that we are fearfully suspicious of one another.[9] Jefferson thought that if the institutions were rightly structured, it would be in the interest of each of us to do our part. We could be *en*trusted with our social roles but would not need to be trusted. Indeed, the whole Madisonian theory of the American Founding could be seen as an exercise in the design of institutions created for people who do not trust one another.

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[7] In the individual case, then, entrustment may or may not require trust. But it usually *does* require belief in the competence of the trustee, the person trusted. Even when we do trust, our trust is limited. It is limited in its scope—we trust people with some things and not with others. And it is limited in its depth—we trust, but only so far. One context in which trust develops is where people are enmeshed in complex webs of relationship, where calculating interest is impossible. Here we are concerned not only with whom to trust but with being and being seen to be trustworthy ourselves. And here social signals of trustworthiness are important, as are the reputations not just of individuals but of social groups for being worthy of trust of various kinds.

[8] The context was his urging the Kentucky Legislature to find the Alien and Sedition Acts unconstitutional, which they did in passing the Kentucky Resolutions he had drafted. Thomas Jefferson, From the Kentucky Resolution of 1798, from: *Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution,* vol. 4, p. 543 (1907). http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1908

[9] Jefferson uses the word "jealousy:" "free government is founded in jealousy and not in confidence." (*loc. cit.)* Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary*, at about the same time, gives "suspicious fear" and "suspicious caution" as his second and third senses of the term. (The first refers to love.) (London, Vol. 1, 6th ed., 1785) http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/samuel-johnsons-dictionary-of-the-english-language-1785/

But this makes representative government a little bit mysterious. When we elect members of parliament, congressmen, or presidents, why should we think that they will have at heart the interests that matter to us? There are millions of us with our own bundles of interests, some shared, some consistent but distinct, some conflicting? How could it be reasonable for all of us to trust in this context?

Well, as John Lilburne, the Leveller chief in the English Revolution of the seventeenth century put it, speaking about the English parliament, they are "trustees of the people ... chosen and betrusted to be the great patrons and guardians of their liberties."[10] The interests that we place in the hands of political representatives are limited (as entrustment always is) both in scope and in depth. And what we need is to have reasons for this entrustment, not to have reasons for trust. There may sometimes be trust behind the entrustment: I may know my congressman, or believe that she has a religious faith that will keep her doing her duty. But if the institutions of society are working properly, as Jefferson saw, I can entrust things to them without trusting anybody.

An honest and well-informed free press, whose members have a vocation to cover what is relevant and to explain it, to uncover the hidden that should not be hidden, to be guided not by partisanship but evidence; political parties that bear the costs of breaking their promises and discipline their members in order to maintain a reputation for reliability; a political culture that respects the principle that, even if one *can* take advantage of the vulnerabilities of one's fellow citizens, one *should* not: these are the sorts of things that can make it reasonable to entrust the government to others. The grounding of what is sometimes called vertical trust—the citizen's trust in institutions—need not, in fact, be trust in any one. We just need, again as Jefferson argued, to structure the institutions so that this vertical entrustment is reasonable.

But the running of the state and of inter-state relations involves dense networks of relationships among officials. These are inter-personal relations of exactly the sort I started by talking about. How do Brussels, and the WTO or the G7 or NATO, or a score of other international military and economic arrangements and institutions, actually work? Why are they enabled by private institutions like the World Economic Forum? Because the officials who work in make up a sort of international political society, staffed with diplomats and military officers and civil servants and business people who regularly interact with their counterparts from other countries. These are the career internationalists; they can prevent tensions from turning into conflicts, and conflicts from turning into wars; they defuse and de-escalate, bargain and compromise. They bank trust and sometimes spend trust. And their interactions are too dense to be managed by a simple calculation of interest. Of course, it is part of their profession to represent, acknowledge and understand interests; and to know how to rank them. But in building trust with one another, one by one, they create a web of interpersonal trust that the states and other institutions they serve rely on.[11]

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[10] Cited in J. S. Maloy "Two Concepts of Trust," *The Journal of Politics,* Vol. 71, No. 2 (Apr. 2009): 499.

[11] Because the North Koreans have so few officials in these networks, they cannot call on them when they would be useful.

These are horizontal relations, which require the creation of mutual vulnerabilities to make cooperation possible. Here, so it seems to me, real trust is an enormous asset: it is how you know I will not tell you I am going to Cracow when I am going to Lemberg, even if it would advantage me to do so; it is why you can assume that we really can discuss our secrets. Many of you will be familiar with a sequence of scenes from Peter Ustinov's Cold War comedy, *Romanoff and Juliet*, set in the imaginary Mittel-European state of Concordia. Its leader, the General, is caught between the United States and the Soviet Union, each of which needs his vote at the UN. In the first scene, the General reveals what he thinks is a dark secret to the American Ambassador.

> GENERAL: Incidentally, they know your code.
> AMERICAN AMBASSADOR (beaming): We know they know our code ... We only give them things we want them to know.

In the next scene, he makes the same remark to the Russian ambassador.

> SOVIET AMBASSADOR (smiling): We have known for some time that they knew we knew their code. We have acted accordingly—by pretending to be duped.

In the final scene, the general goes back to the American ambassador again:

> GENERAL: Incidentally, you know—they know you know they know you know.
> AMERICAN AMBASSADOR: (genuinely alarmed): What? Are you sure?[12]

An equilibrium of trust, in short, is essential to the life of diplomacy. And there is here, I think, a profound paradox, with which we in the democratic societies of the North Atlantic are living today.

For when these denizens of international political society come home with the intricate deals they have negotiated with wily competitors, wary allies, even outright adversaries, they may find themselves distrusted by the very people on whose behalf they work. Rightly or wrongly, in other words, the citizens of our democracies see evidence of horizontal trust *among* elites as grounds for wondering whether it is reasonable to have vertical trust *for* those elites: trust within the elites generates skepticism among citizens about whether they should entrust us with anything.

The reason they have lost their faith in the capacity of elites to deliver what is entrusted to them is not that they think they know better than elites do what policies are in their interests. It is rather that they have seen that existing policies have not brought them what they hoped for, and they have lost confidence that the elites can be trusted with their interests. So, in many places, there are many people who don't believe what the government or the press tells them. In others, many doubt that the elites have the competence to deliver, even when they want to. And in yet others, they think that our trust in one another has turned us into a class that pursues its own interests, indifferent to theirs. They may suspect, too, in an age of large corporations and hyper-accumulation, that political elites are being bought off by the financial elites.

Skepticism about elite competence is not surprising, in the face of the failure to generate

[12] Peter Ustinov *Romanoff and Juliet* (New York: Random House, 1958): 83.

a recovery of European employment after 2008, or to solve the Greek financial crisis or the Syrian Civil War and the continuing refugee crisis. No one who has just watched the US House of Representatives pass a health-care reform bill that most of its members have not read and that clearly does things that the leaders of the majority party have sworn not to do, can feel confidence that our political officials will do the job we have entrusted to them. It is natural in these circumstances to wonder whether what we see is just a failure to be trustworthy, grounded in an unconcern with the interests of most citizens. Nor is the skepticism about the truthfulness of institutions so unreasonable when we discover, through WikiLeaks and the like, that officials don't believe what they have told us. *Also warum lügst du?*

But the corrosion of faith in institutions cannot simply be pinned on the failure of elites; it is at least as much the result of the circulation of nonsensical, paranoid narratives, especially through the new digital media. Russian "disinformation," it has often been observed, works not because we believe it but because it engenders a more generalized distrust, such that any news can be dismissed as "fake news." The so-called "information wars" are, in the end, wars on information: efforts to undermine the authority of fact. Trust is their intended victim.

Despite the populist resurgences, despite the crises of epistemic authority, we continue to benefit from great reservoirs of social capital that make our civic spaces work. People make themselves vulnerable to one another in small ways all the time in daily transactions, without needing to calculate the interests that guide others. These experiences give us no reason to believe that other people are normally untrustworthy; even the strangers we meet on the street every day. Still, citizens do not need to understand a political fact to notice it: and the willingness to entrust their affairs to existing elites is surely only rational when elites appear to be competent and aimed at the ends with which they have been entrusted.

And so I wonder if the answer to the decline of trust—especially the vertical trust toward our internationalist cadres—isn't simple enough: elites need to work together to earn back popular trust, telling the truth more often, even when it is uncomfortable and complex; being more honest about each other; rejecting the unreasonable demands of rich individuals and institutions; and creating structures that are reasonably transparent and effective in policing the behavior of officials. The people have often been sold the wrong solutions: but they are typically right in their awareness of the problems. You can trust them on that.

Further Reading:

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