What Kind of Morality is Trust?

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Trust is a central concept in the discourse of moral philosophy. On the more practical level of business ethics and of the philosophy of economic action, trust has become the focus of renewed interest. Thus, it has been argued, trust forms a kind of social glue, keeping humans together in an ordered society. Even more, you could say, organized economic action - the functioning firm - would be an impossibility without trust. On a very pragmatic level, organized action - especially the very sophisticated form found in the modern corporation - demands a high degree of inter-individual predictability. The modern corporation, you could say, consists of an extremely complex pattern of interconnected individual activities, constituting a vast "human machine". If, within this network, you cannot trust people to do what they are supposed to do, the idea of organized action becomes meaningless.

Trust is, of course, not restricted to economic action; its scope is much broader. Trust, in a way, forms the base for the good life as such. It is not only a question of the child trusting its parents or husband and wife trusting each other. It concerns any aspect of human existence - trusting your neighbours, your employees, your boss, the police, the bank manager, the stranger on the road. The more you can trust other people, the better your life. And if, on the other hand, you can trust nobody, then, indeed, you live in the Hobbesian shadow world, where every man is every manïs foe.

However, there is something funny in the concept of trust. It looks inherently moral, but on the other hand you could ask why so. Moral character manifests itself in action. An honest person shows his or her moral character by not stealing, cheating or

lying, a brave one by standing up against fear and danger, a good one by helping others, and so on.

Trust, on the other hand, is not manifested in action. Even if we accept the possibility of purely mental acts - decisions, choices - having no external bodily aspect whatsoever, trust seems to be something completely differerent, something which primarily is not a question of action. It is not related to decision or choice, but rather to a state of absence of choice. You do not decide to trust, you don not choose to trust after pondering the alternative of not trusting.

Nevertheless there seems to be something closely related to moral values inherent in trusting, too. Is it always good to trust, you could ask. Take a shopkeeper, naively trusting his customers, and displaying his wares in such a way that children are tempted to steal. Of course we could say that he is a nice fellow, having that kind of trust in everybody. We could, however, also say that such a naive trust is irresponsible, or even wrong, because it risks enticing weak persons into criminal acts they might otherwise have abstained from - maybe even leading them into a life of crime and evil.

So there seems, at the least, to be a limit to trust. It might be good to be a trusting person, but it might as well be bad.

The possible moral connection of trusting, then, might lie in the moral qualities - the goodness - of the persons and/or the phenomena it is directed to. Looked at from this perspective, trust seems not to be a moral category by itself, but a happy human state, perhaps a psychological "feeling", related in some way to the moral traits of others.

Trust, thus, may be seen as a kind of mirror image - reflecting the goodness of the other. You trust in the honesty, bravery, fidelity or goodness of somebody else. As noted above, honesty is goodness manifested in honest acts - or in the absence of dishonest ones. The same goes for all other virtues: goodness, in any dimension, is connected to good acts - good intentions, good deeds, good outcomes.

Trust, in turn, would be the belief in the possibility of this goodness in somebody else - even, maybe, in everybody else - or the expectation of good acts. (In a different way, and maybe better, trust might be described as the non-belief in badness, the non-expectation of bad acts.) In that way trust would be a little

like happiness, an individual or social state resulting from the moral character of others. I trust in the goodness, bravery, loyalty and honesty of my fellow men, because I have no reason to feel otherwise. For the same reason I am a happy man.

Moreover, it would seem, this happy state of trust is dependent of the stability of those virtues. If people surrounding me are not trustworthy in the long run, sooner or later I am going to perceive the truth, and stop trusting in them.

There seems, however, to be something wanting in this conception of trust as only a kind of happy emotional state depending on the virtues of others. Let us take one of the central areas of the phenomenon of trusting - trusting that somebody will keep his or her promises. As pointed out by Austin (1976) a promise is a very specific kind of an act, a "performative". The interesting point of this act is that you do it when you say that you do it. Basically, you make a promise by saying "I promise ...". There is, however, one more side to the promise, before it is complete: somebody has to listen to it, has to believe in it - somebody must trust you when you state it. Without that acceptance, the saying "I promise .." is of no effect - the words you uttered just fade into empty space. Without that acceptance, in fact, you made no complete promise, even if you tried to.

The hero of the moral tale is, of course, the honest, loyal and otherwise trustworthy person in whom we, the others, trust. Without that trust - possibly naive or even stupid - this hero could, however, not be such a hero. If nobody believes in your promises, there is no point in making a promise. You could as well stop making promises. And, more generally, in a society where nobody believes in promises, accordingly, nobody will have a reason to make promises.

Making promises is not a "natural" phenomenon. Animals do not promise, and they do not accuse other animals for breaking promises. Neither is a promise just a variant of communication, of telling something. Rather we can se it as a very specific language game in a Wittgensteinian sense - a game which gets its meaning from a certain frame of understanding, within which everyone plays the part he or she is supposed to play. A promise, we could say, is an element in a culturally evolved interpersonal network of understanding, whereby one person binds himself or herself, in relation to another person, to a given future activity. Making promises, thus, works within a network

of trust - it is a functional part of an organic whole.

Why do we promise? Why or how, can we ask, has such a socio-cultural technique as the habit of making promises - and the attached network of understanding promises - evolved? The answer might be inferred if we imagine to opposite possibility - a world where the socio-cultural habit and skill of promising does not exist. What would a world without promises look like?

If there are no promises, then there is no inter-personal predictability. A world, where there is no inter-personal predictability, is a world a world of insecurity. In that world you must be afraid all the time, and whatever you do, you must do it alone, because you can never depend on anybody else for giving you a hand. That is the world of Thomas Hobbesï nightmares. It is a bad world, and living there means living a bad life.

On the other hand, promises presuppose the possibility of acceptance, of somebody trusting in the promise. So, where there is no trust, there are no promises, and where there are no promises, there is no inter-personal predictability. And, as noted above, that world is one of confusion and insecurity. In it the only thing that remains for man, is insecurity, confusion and fear, in constant expectation of unpredictable violence. In that world there is no cooperation, at least not in a regular, rational and persistent way. Whatever you wish to do or to accomplish you must do alone, for the trivial reason that you cannot trust anybody else.

Trust, then, forms the whole within which social credibility can function. The general level of trust in a society or in a culture, thus, forms the precious chalice containing all goodness, all virtue. This means that not only virtues like loyalty, friendship and trustworthiness depend on trust; all virtues do. The point of the virtue of righteousness lies in the feeling that we can expect a righteous man, if need be, to be just that. The point of honesty, in the same way, lies in our expectations regarding the future actions of such a person. To think that somebody is brave, includes, as a central part, the feeling that he will not give up in the face of danger and fear. And so on.

It is also important to note that virtues as ascribed character traits always have a certain time-stability inbuilt. To say that somebody is honest, thus, is not only a historical description of a specific individual, or of her actions, at a given time and in a specific situation. Rather it is a generalizing statement about that

individual over time. To say that somebody is honest is the same as saying that she has been honest before, that she is honest now, and that she is going to be honest in the future. Honest action as a historical description only, is of little interest - a question for moral book-keepers, maybe.

In this way, virtues can be seen as semi-stable personality traits - as "character". They are, however, not exclusively individual personality traits. To the same degree they are networks of expectations, of trust. For a virtue to exist, there must be a possibility of somebody trusting in it, a willingness or predisposition whithin the social network.

We can also approach the question from a different direction. The opposite of trust is "distrust". In the same way as somebody may be trustful in excess - bordering to naievety or even stupidity - others may go to extremes in distrust, all the way to paranoia. An extremely distrustful person is not only an unhappy human, he is also a socially troublesome and disturbing one. His constant distrust, his propensity to look for covert plans, threats and conspiracies, often has an effect of hindering and even breaking down even reasonably uncontroversial rational and "good" cooperative activities. If you seek cooperation with him, he looks for hidden motives, if you want to help him, he reacts in the same way.

A compulsively distrustful person can cause much damage just by constantly sabotaging cooperative efforts. Even if he does not want the breakdown of goodness, even if he is not striving for it, evil will be the result of his actions. Excessive distrust destroys the good world of cooperation. It leads to the break down of society, it feeds despair and defaitism and a general inability for common action. The old Roman principle divide et impera carries the message that by sowing distrust among your enemies and by breaking down mutual trust between those you want to conquer, you can disable them by weakening both their resolve and their power to defend themselves.

As Fukuyama (1995) shows, among many others, trust and distrust can vary to a rather high degree between different societies and/or cultures. A case of specific interest is the former Soviet bloc. For reasons not very clear, the culture in the post-Soviet countries seems to have a very strong blend of cynical distrust in authorities, plans, and government as a whole. Almost any effort of common action is met with the same distrust. As a result of that, any successful reform is made

impossible - which in turn gives everybody empirical evidence for the realism in their distrust. Such a society becomes almost impossible to govern, except by force. Consequently, the only social structure said to be working well in Russia, is the Mafia - a network bound together by strong bonds of internal trust. Distrust destroys the fabric of society.

Like trust, distrust at first hand is not a moral category, but in the same way it has strong moral connections. Like trust, also, it is not only a question of individual realism or idiosyncrasy. Both trust and distrust can form social and cultural patterns.

As an individual trait or stance, trust, thus, is not a question of morality per se. It only mirrors the moral qualities, the virtues of others. On a social level, however, as a trait common for everybody, trust can be seen as a highly moral phenomenon, facilitating the happiness of society. Trust, thus, is not a one-person phenomenon, a question of an individual trait or tendency or feeling. It is not a question of indivual morality; it is a socio-moral concept.

The smallest human unit describing trust, accordingly, is the dyad. Mostly, it would seem, trust as a functioning phenomenon rests on much larger social networks - organizations, villages, societies.

Trust, moreover, should not be conceived as a static relation, as fragmented and disconnected expectations cut loose from the real actions of the other. Instead we should see trust as a living pattern of inter-subjective expectations, as a constant stream, a plasma of interactive trust/virtue kept up by the force of itself.

This means that the tendency, common in moral philosophy, to look at ethics and morality mainly as a problem of individual character and choice, may be leading us to search for solutions for the wrong problem. It is important to keep in mind that man is a social animal. We do not live alone, acting in a space devoid of other actors. Instead we live in a close web of fluctuating action/expectation/reaction. That web forms everything we call culture and human meaning. It is even difficult to imagine what life would be without it.

Better, then, might be to aim our interest at moral webs, at networks of moral action/expectation/reaction. The moral problems in organizations and societies are less a question of immoral individuals, and more of the moral quality och climate

in the social structure as a whole. When something goes wrong, thus, look for the flaws in the moral structure of the organization as a whole, not in the individual whose unethical action probably is produced by that structure.

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