

The Duty to Trust and the Duty to be Trustful

Gloria Origgi

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Gloria Origgi

CNRS – Institut Nicod, Paris

On the Duty to Trust and the Duty to be Trustful

Abstract: Trust is a complex attitude that has emotional, cognitive and moral dimensions. A difficulty to reduce trust to a simple emotional attitude is that trust raises normative pressures: if someone asks you to be trusted you feel the normative pressure of not letting him or her down, and if someone trusts you, you feel the normative pressure of honoring his or her trust. These normative pressures seem to have an irreducibly social character: pressures are effective insofar as they may raise emotions of shame in those who violate the norm of trust and resentment and contempt in those who are victim of the violation. In this paper I will investigate the relation between the affective dimension of these normative pressures and their moral dimension by arguing that an important moral asymmetry exists between the duty to trust and the duty to be trustful.

Consider these two fictional cases.

1. After a dinner at home in which Bill has introduced her new fiancée to his family, his mother says: “Oh, I know you will never marry such an ill-bred girl: I trust you not to spoil the last years of my life by doing this”.
2. President Obama declares to the Congress that he won’t pursue any hard line towards Iran nuclear plans. He says: “Mr. Ahmadinejad told me he has stopped his nuclear projects and I trust him”.

In the first case, Bill’s mother trusts him not to marry a girl that apparently doesn’t fit her ideal of daughter-in-law. She trusts Bill not to do so, she shows her dependence to his trustworthy attitude for her happiness in the future years and her trust raises a normative pressure on him: she will feel entitled to resent him if he chooses not to honor her trust and marry the girl he loves. He may love and respect his mother, care for her, thus feel a strong emotional pressure to be compliant with her trustful attitude and feel ashamed to let her down if he decides to do so, but has he any *moral* commitment towards her trustful attitude? Is the normative pressure raised by her trustful attitude towards him in any moral sense justified? Is the feeling of a “duty to comply” with his mother’s demands just as an emotional response, or is it also an appropriate moral response? Roughly and more explicitly: *Has Bill any moral duty to be trustful in this case?* Although a normative pressure is clearly raised by this trust relationship, it seems straightforward to reply to my

rhetorical question with an unquestionable “No”. Bill doesn’t have any moral obligation to honor a trustful attitude he doesn’t acknowledge as virtuous or morally justified. His mother’s trust is in this case a way of exercising a coercive power on him, to force him to endorse her values by pretending that they both share these values (values such as: “Good manners are a key ingredient for a successful marriage”). Thus, if trust is an emotional attitude that raises normative pressures, it doesn’t clearly *ground* these normative pressures by justifying them, at least not in each case. The fact that someone trusts us does not automatically engage us in a duty to be trustworthy and comply with his or her trust. More seems to be involved for the transition between the emotional and moral dimension of the trust relationship to be justified.

Now, consider the second example. Obama has been told by the President of Iran that he won’t pursue anymore his nuclear projects. This may have been taken place in a context of a frank conversation between them, where many reciprocal commitments have been taken seriously, that is, in a context that was set up to overcome the ordinary distrust that exists between the two countries. Obama may feel a moral obligation to trust the word of his interlocutor and feel also that his trustful attitude towards Ahmadinejad has the power of reinforce the reciprocal trust between them. That is, by trusting Ahmadinejad to commit himself to what he has declared, Obama thinks he can raise the chances that he will keep his commitments. Again, here we are in a situation that displays all the phenomenology of a trust relationship. But is Obama justified in this case to trust the President of Iran? Would his feeling that his trustful attitude may play a positive role in Iran’s future commitments on nuclear weapons constitute a *reason* that he can present to the Congress to pursue a certain policy in the future? Needless to say, the answer is, again, “No”. The Congress will rightly ask for evidence the President has of the cessation of nuclear plans in Iran, and the word of Ahmadinejad, even if given in the context of a sincere conversation, won’t be enough. Trusting others is not an intrinsic value: although an affective, emotional, optimistic disposition to trust may indeed help in making trust thrive in a social relationship (between persons, countries, business parties...), it doesn’t morally justify a “duty” to be trustful in every occasion.

These two examples illustrate the complexity of the trust relationship, in which emotional, cognitive and moral dimensions are intertwined in a way that is not easy to disentangle. Many have tried to reduce these three components to one of them: rational choice tradition (cf. Hardin) has insisted on the centrality of the cognitive dimension,

whereas a moral-philosophical tradition has insisted on the ethical dimension of the relation (cf. Baier, Jones) and of its irreducible affective dimension (Williams 2002 Faulkner, 2007). But reductionist accounts always seem to leave something out, as the rich phenomenology of the trust experience could be captured only by an instable cocktail of the three. That is because trust is a *social* relation, and its emotional, cognitive and moral dimensions are realized only by the social context of interaction among agents, and cannot be localized in the minds and hearts of each individual.

What I would like to do in this article is: 1) to show that there is no automatic transition from the emotional reactions that trust relationships raise to the justification of its moral dimension. Those who argue for introducing the affective dimension of trust against a “cold” treatment of the notion in pure cognitive terms should be careful of not extending the comfort of a “warmer”, affective relation of trust to any normative obligation. 2) to argue for an important *moral asymmetry* between the duty to trust and the duty to honor other people’s trustful attitudes towards us. As the examples above show, the difficulty in getting the phenomenology of trust relationship right is that each actor enters the trust relationship from a different cognitive, emotional and moral perspective. It will be part of my point to argue that if these perspectives fail to coordinate in the appropriate way they can be engender important misunderstandings, feelings of resentment and guilt.

In his *Elements*, Thomas Hobbes ranks trust among the *passions of mind*:

“TRUST is a passion proceeding from belief of him from whom we expect or hope for good, so free from doubt that upon the same we pursue no other way. And distrust, or diffidence, is doubt that maketh him endeavour to provide himself by other means. And that this is the meaning of the words trust and distrust, is manifest from this, that a man never provideth himself by a second way, but when he mistrusteth that the first will not hold.”¹

A special passion thus, that is raised by a belief about the moral attitude the other party will take towards us. A passion we think the other party will recognize and take into account in committing herself to the relation. But how my belief and optimistic stance in her goodwill can force her moral obligations towards me? Couldn’t it be just the case that my belief and my optimistic attitude were simply misplaced, as in the case of Bill’s

¹ Cf. T. Hobbes, *Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, 1640, ch. IX.

mother? We can feel obliged to have considerateness and respect towards someone who trust us and by trusting us puts herself in a situation of vulnerability, but not obliged to reciprocate her trust. Take another example - that could be labeled of “respectful distrust” - : At the airport we all accept controls of our hand baggages and heavier body controls such as scans (perquisitions) etc, because we trust the airport authorities and, in a general manner, our institutions, to act in our interest, to protect us. Still, we do not expect this trust to be reciprocated: we are inspected because we are not trusted and are treated as potential liars and criminals, but, insofar as the airport authorities deal with this ordinary distrust in a respectful way – for example by respecting through an appropriate physical distance, a threshold of privacy – and in a considerate way – by showing a caring attitude towards the individual needs and fragilities – we do not expect the policeman to trust our innocence just because we trust him.

In general, a positive and trustful attitude towards other people doesn't automatically create a duty to reciprocate, nor do we have a duty to display this attitude towards everyone. A balanced and fair response to our social environment implies a capacity of dosing the appropriate amount of trust in each situation: A mother who encourages her children to trust the stranger who approaches them in the street would be considered as irresponsible. A default trust is not an intrinsic positive value: we can have decent moral and social relations based on important social virtues, such as respect and considerateness, that contribute to the overall fairness of a society but that don't immediately end up in trust-based relations².

These considerations raise a central question: when trust is moral? When our emotional bet on the benevolence of others creates appropriate normative demands? Should we stick to sociological and cultural explanations that describe the different contexts in which different norms of trust and fairness stabilize or the question can be addressed in a more abstract way, as a legitimate moral and philosophical question? Can we have a “general test” for the morality of trust?

Annette Baier is one of the few moral philosophers who thinks that there is room in philosophy for a legitimate inquiry about the moral bases of trust. In a series of very

² For the values of considerateness and fairness in society, cf. E. Margalit (2006) “Family Fairness”, Discussion Paper Series of the Center for Rationality, Hebrew University, Jerusalem:
<http://ideas.repec.org/p/huj/dispap/dp427.html#provider>

influential papers³, Baier puts forward a kind of “moral test” for trust relationships, that should help to pry apart decent relationships from those we wouldn’t want to be involved into. According to her, a trust relationship is moral, or decent, if the truster relies on aspects of the trusted that the trusted would consider as morally positive and would be happy to display in order to honor the trust relationship. But if the truster relies on her threat advantage or on weaknesses she may know of the trusted, then the relationship is not morally fair. Take the case of a husband that trusts his wife not to leave him because he relies on her fear of being unable to sustain her children alone or of his violent reactions if she leaves. In this case, the trust relation is unfair: it is based on motives that both would be ashamed to confess to each other: even if they have a strong mutual dependence and hence vulnerability on this trust relationship, it is not the kind of relationship they are proud of and would encourage around them. Baier generalizes her point to an “expressibility test” she puts forward in her 1986 paper:

I tentatively propose a test for the moral decency of a trust relationship namely that its continuation need not to rely on successful threats held over the trusted or on her successful cover-up of breaches of trust. We could develop and generalize this test into a version of an expressibility test, if we note that knowledge of what the other party is relying on for the continuance of the trust relationship would, in the above cases of concealment and of threat advantage, itself destabilize the relation.⁴

That is, if a trust-based relationship is based on mutual reliance on motives and purposes that may play a major role in maintaining that relationship but that we would be ashamed to reveal to each other, then the relationship doesn’t pass the moral test for trust.

Baier’s suggestion for the morality of trust relationship is indeed a step forward towards a moral theory of trust, but I don’t think it is enough, and I would like to explain why. Many times we can feel an unjust pressure to honor trust even if the motives and purposes are perfectly expressible. Just we do not want, or (very often) *no more* want to share them with the truster, even if the truster believes we care for these motives. Take the first example I have introduced of Bill’s mother trusting him not to marry his girlfriend. In this case, the trust she puts on his shoulder is perfectly expressible. She

³ Cf. A. Baier (1986) “Trust and Antitrust”, *Ethics*, 96, pp. 231-60; (1992) “Trusting People”, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 102, 1992.

⁴ Cf. Baier (1986) *cit*, p. 255.

may sincerely believe that Bill shares the same values in which she has raised him about good manners and social etiquette. In trusting him, she may not be relying on any concealed coercive power she may still have on her son, such as the capacity of making him feel terribly guilty if he doesn't comply with her desires. Yet, it would be hard to think that Bill should feel a justified moral pressure to reciprocate her trust. Bill may not share anymore her mother's values, and feel perfectly justified in letting her down and marry the woman he loves against her mother's will. His awareness of her trustful attitude towards him may encourage him to act in a considerate, caring and respectful way towards her, like keeping an appropriate distance between his potential new wife and his mother, or even not informing his mother about his marriage with her, if he has reasons to think that such a news could be really life threatening for her.

The morality of the trust relationships and their "magic" potential to make trust thrive among people (the more I trust, the more the other people are trustworthy with me, in an escalation that reinforces the chances to see my own trust reciprocated at each round...) won't thus depend only on the expressibility of the motives people have to trust each other, but also on a mutual recognition of these motives as worth endorsing and a willingness of being part of a relationship that make us display such motives.

I will come back to this point later, but let me first try to tackle the moral asymmetry I wanted to point to at the onset with my two fictional examples.

Normative pressures generated by trust relationships are of two kinds: A pressure to be trustful and a pressure to be trustworthy. I think that both these normative pressures have an emotional basis and are not morally justified, but they differ a lot one from the other. Let's start with the first one, which is illustrated through my second example. Should we feel a pressure to trust others? And, if yes, in which occasions? Sometimes we have reasons to trust, sometimes not, sometimes our reasons are grounded in an already existent affective relationship, sometimes in the epistemic authority we acknowledge to our interlocutor or in her moral responsibility. But indicators of trustworthiness may be notoriously biased by our prejudices and emotional attitudes, they may be easily manipulated and faked by those who want to take advantage on us. In which circumstances we are entitled to accept the emotional, cognitive and physical vulnerability that is the consequence of our trustful attitude?

Here, I would like to take the opportunity to discuss the position Paul Faulkner puts forward in his 2007 paper “On Telling and Trusting”⁵ on the role of affective trust in ground an epistemic trustful attitude towards what we are told by others. His work is mainly a contribution to the debate on philosophy of testimony, which I have addressed in other works and won’t address in this paper⁶. He interestingly defends a variant of an “assurance” view of testimony, according to which believing the speaker may not be based on evidence, but on the hearer’s recognition of the speaker’s assumption of responsibility. His variant implies a sort of primitive relation of affective trust between hearers and speakers such that speakers are “moved” to trustworthiness by the recognition of hearer’s voluntary act of dependence on them. A point of his paper I would like to address here, that seems to go beyond the limits of the debate on testimony, is the centrality of the emotional dimension in justifying trust relationships. According to him, affective trust gives us a self-sustaining reason to trust our interlocutors in this way: “The audience’s reason for accepting the speaker’s telling is because in trust he believes that the speaker recognize his need to know whether p and presumes that the speaker’s telling him that p is a response to this {...} ‘Trustworthiness’ is being understood as the fulfillment by the trusted of the expectation the truster has in trust” (pg. 888) In the case of affective trust, the expectation is the emotionally based belief that the trusted will be moved by the truster depending on him”.

It is perfectly clear to me how this kind of emotional interaction creates normative expectations. But it is unclear to me why these normative expectations should be justified in any sense. To come back to my examples, Bill’s mother affective trust in her child does raise in her the expectation that he will be moved by her dependence on him, and poor Bill may indeed be moved by this. Still, this doesn’t ground the expectation in any normative sense: it wouldn’t be moral for Bill to fulfill her expectation and let her girlfriend, whom he truly loves, down just to be trustworthy towards his mother’s expectations. Note that just saying that expectations of trust may vary from a context to another, doesn’t eliminate the transition problem, from emotional attitudes to the moral dimension of the relation. That is because, in my example, Bill’s mother expectations

⁵ Cf. P. Faulkner (2007) “On Telling and Trusting”, *Mind*, 116, pp. 875-902.

⁶ Cf. G. Origgi (2004) “Is Trust an Epistemological Notion?” *Episteme*, 1-1; G. Origgi (2008) “Trust, Authority and Epistemic Responsibility”, *Theoria*, vol. 23/1, n. 61, pp. 35-44.

may be perfectly reasonable according to her knowledge and experience of previous trustful interactions with her son. Yet, Bill may have simply changed his preferences and beliefs, and by doing so, he makes his mother's expectations normatively inefficacious: there seems to be a moral conflict between the two that the mother may be not aware of. The same seems to be the case for the second example, the one in which the normative expectations are on the side of the trusted. I say something, I expect you to trust me, not to treat me as a liar. Thus, the president of Iran says something and, by doing so, he puts a normative pressure on Obama to trust his words. Should Obama feel any sense of obligation in fulfilling this expectation? Should he bet on the Ahmadinejad's being moved by his dependence on what he says? May be this is *actually* what happens: Obama may have strong contextual reasons to believe him given the emotional setting of their conversation. But it would of course be irresponsible to take these contextual reasons out of context and consider them morally grounded to take a particular course of action towards Iran's politics.

Yet, the two situations are not symmetric: the normative demand to be trusted puts the truster in a vulnerable situation: her resistance to comply is thus motivated primarily by considerations of self-preservation. On the other side, the normative demand on the trusted empowers the trusted by giving him control on the truster: her will to comply is motivated by moral/emotional considerations about the other's needs and vulnerabilities: it could be thus much more difficult to withdraw from this moral pressure in the second case.

But in both cases, the fact that trust raises normative pressures doesn't morally ground these pressures in any clear duty to give or reciprocate trust. The morality and responsibility of fulfilling these pressures depends on the circumstances and on previous moral commitments between the parties. In the case of honoring trust, Philip Pettit has argued that a possible reason for people to feel the pressure of honoring trust is reputation⁷. But caring about one's own reputation is morally virtuous if the reputation we want to display to the others is grounded in values we deeply care for and it's not just a problem of image.

Yet, I do not want to deny the special phenomenology of trust, that is, its power to generate "good" expectations about the other parties' behavior and thus enforcing the

⁷ Cf. P. Pettit, "The cunning of trust"

moral and emotional dimension of these relations. Rather, I would like to advance an alternative explanation of this rich phenomenology.

Trust is a way of betting not only on the possible benevolent response of the other party towards us, but also on the reasons he has to respond in this way. What moves the other is not just the awareness of our vulnerability, but the recognition of our intention of sharing with him a common world of values in which we both will feel comfortable and reassured. It's a bet on a common future, that we both will feel proud to make possible. In this sense, it doesn't have to depend on extra contextual information about the norms and values of the other party. The woman who trusts her neighbour not to denounce her for hiding in her apartment a homeless clandestine family is neither just relying on extra information about the norms and conventions they share, nor just relying on her recognition of her dependence: she is relying on her willingness to create a shared world of values together. This explains also the potential subversive power of trust relationships that may go beyond what people share as values and conventions in a given culture or a given community. It's the *momentum* of trust relationships that fascinates us: the fact that we either jump in with all the risks and uncertainties, or we give up: sometimes we jump in even if there is no ground under our feet: it's the common jump with the other that creates a common ground of values in which the new world made by our trust relationship will thrive.