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Thinking about Trust? the primacy of the affective attitude

ABSTRACT

Some recent philosophical accounts of trust – among which Russell Hardin's features prominently – take trust to be a cognitively based propensity founded on rational beliefs concerning the extent to which we are convinced that our interests are contemplated by the interests of those we interact with. In this essay, I set out to press the advantages of a competing view, namely one which takes trust to be primarily an affective attitude. I argue that said account makes better sense of the available evidence on developmental, phenomenological and behavioral levels. I further maintain that more intellectual manifestations of trusting can be seen to be dependent and derivative of its affective dimension.

Key words: Affections; Trust; Trustworthiness.

RESUMO

Algumas recentes abordagens filosóficas da confiança – dentre as quais se destaca a de Russell Hardin – vêem na confiança uma propensão de base cognitiva fundada em crenças racionais quanto à extensão em que estamos convencidos de que nossos interesses são contemplados pelos interesses daqueles com quem interagimos. Neste artigo, apresentamos as vantagens de uma visão rival, a saber a de que a confiança é primariamente uma atitude afetiva. Sustentamos que a mencionada abordagem lida melhor com a evidência disponível nos planos formativos, fenomenológicos e comportamentais. Além disso, sustentamos que as manifestações mais intelectuais do ato de confiar podem ser vistas como dependentes e derivadas de sua dimensão afetiva.

Palavras-chave: Afetos; Confiança; Confiabilidade.

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A few prefatory remarks are in order before I set out to defend the view anticipated in the title of this essay. The meanings of the word 'trust', as applied in a variety of different situations, seem to defy all attempts at a unified categorization. One may hear such perfectly idiomatic constructions as 'I trust German cars completely', 'I trust you are keeping well', 'John always trusted his siblings', 'Mary should trust herself more', and, I would bet, numerous others. Talk of a single definition of trust, in the light of the vagaries of ordinary language use, seems to be out of the question. It is well, then, that philosophers should focus on one particular dimension of trust, which has the greatest relevance to people's lives and the social order, namely *interpersonal* trust.

Interpersonal trust is of paramount importance because, as limited creatures, incapable of single-handedly seeing to it that all our needs be satisfied, we often simply have to trust others to attend to those needs. In a number of contexts, we have to rely on other persons' good will towards us, as opposed to their other motives, as when their good will is all we can possibly rely on. And, in doing so, as Baier (BAIER, 1986, p. 233) would have it, we inevitably expose ourselves to the limits of the good will of those we come to trust.

Within this basic framework, the philosophically soundest account of trust is bound to be the one which offers the greatest explanatory potential – the one which accommodates the broadest range of data observed in connection with instances of interpersonal trust. Additionally, it should not artificially discount our ordinary intuitions in this domain, but rather let them have their say.

I believe that that the most promising account is the one which sees trust as being primarily an affectively loaded attitude. It situates trust in the same family of notions as hope and faith. In the remainder of this essay I will press the advantages of this view of trust. I will argue that it is preferable to rival cognitive accounts of trust in three ways: it makes better sense of the available data from the *developmental*, *phenomenological* and *behavioral* standpoints. This is not to say that intellectualist accounts, which take trusting to be based solely on rationally shaped beliefs about we are entitled to expect from others, have nothing to offer. My view is that these accounts may have their proper place. For one thing, the more intellectually based, cognitive instances of trusting may be shaped by our encounters with the realities of a world made up of people who are not necessarily responsive to our needs and concerns. Such realities, in due time, will prompt us to see that our affectively charged propensities to trust or distrust – even in the absence of evidence of the trusted party's trustworthiness – do not provide an infallible guide to the behavior of others. Interestingly, as we will see, cognitively informed instances of trusting, as exemplified by so-called "therapeutic trust" and other specially motivated instances of trusting investigated by Philip Pettit (PETTIT, 1995) may also come about as a result of our prior experience of situations in which we successfully invested others with our trust. In any event, the cognitive aspects of trusting are properly to be seen as dependent on their pre-existing affective realization.

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It seems indubitably right to say that infants trust their parents or guardians. When in distress, they find comfort in their parents' arms, but may very well have their distress further compounded if a stranger tries to come to their aid. Whether infant trust is an instinct which serves the best interests of the species in the long run would be an interesting question to investigate, but one which need not occupy us here. Given infants' lack of fully-fledged cognitive abilities, it would be a stretch to suggest that their form of trust issues from a belief , founded on some sort of evidence, that their caretakers are trustworthy. At the early stages, infants simply lack the concept of trustworthiness.

Cognitivists like Hardin (HARDIN, 2004), intent on bringing the concept of trust to bear on matters that are germane to their own concerns in connection with displays

of trust in the public arena, might wish to talk about only about trust as exhibited by rational adults who know better than infants. As adults, we may have learned to base our trusting on the belief that the ones we trust are in fact trustworthy, in virtue of appearing to take our interests to heart – or in Hardin's words, by encapsulating our interests in their own interests. Even as a treatment of instances of interpersonal trust among adults, such a view is far from presenting the whole picture, as I will argue below.

For the moment, I will insist on the distinct superiority of the trust-as-affective-attitude-account on developmental lines. In the very act of choosing to over-intellectualize the notion of trust, cognitivists bring about an unnecessary cleavage between infant trust and the more rationally motivated forms of trusting that may be exhibited by rational adults, and thus renounce the possibility of telling a story about how our trusting attitudes may evolve in the course of a lifetime.

Theorists who believe in the primacy of the affective attitudes are not similarly constrained. Non-cognitive infant trust is presumably the form of trust first experienced by every human being. But we are not stuck in childhood. We grow up and our cognitive powers increase. In the course of emerging from infancy, say, when going to pre-school, we will predictably come to realize that it can be safe to interact with our new peers. Some of the adult figures that would have seemed unfamiliar and unwelcome in the not-too-distant past will treat us with admirable kindness. On the other hand, one of our peers can slap us in the face for no particular reason. A teacher may aggressively shout at us because we didn't show up the day before (as happened once to the author of this essay). As a result, we gain experience. We come to see that the big wide world is not exactly the warm cozy place we lived in as children (for simplicity, I am restricting my attention to the children of non-abusive parents). However, most of us will have no reason to go all the way to the other extreme and regard the world as an altogether dangerous and horrible place.

The acquisition of experience will inevitably affect the extent to which we will be disposed to trust or distrust people gratuitously, in the absence of prior evidence of their trustworthiness or lack thereof, as we had done in infancy. It will, by the same token, affect the extent to which we will be prone to demand evidence of other people's trustworthiness before we may embark on the adventure of trusting them. In sum, we will hone our skills in assessing others' trustworthiness. With sufficient powers of introspection, we may additionally learn to take stances on our own trust, and in developing meta-trust, acquire some ability in assessing how much our trusting patterns are reliable.

Naturally enough, the acquisition of experience may affect each of us in different ways, causing some people to be more inclined to trust than others. Again, these are the sorts of individual developmental histories that cognitivists may lack the resources to deal with, but which can be addressed by those who believe in the primacy of the affective component of trust.

Our personal histories of trusting may also be shaped by successful past experiences of trusting others. As stressed by Pettit (*Op. cit.,* p. 202), one may have noticed that running the risk of trusting adolescents to take care of one's household may help them acquire a sense of responsibility they had previously lacked, and, in this sense, have a therapeutic effect on them, to the extent that the adolescents might mend their ways in the hopes of meriting their parents' trust and benefit from the new situation thus created. Of greater complexity are those scenarios investigated by Pettit, in which we dare trust strangers about whose record of trustworthiness we know nothing, while counting on them to merit our trust out of self-regarding concerns. The following quotation neatly reveals what Pettit has in mind:

> Even where others are not independently known to be trustworthy in the standard way – even where they are not known to have the desirable traits associated with trustworthiness – they can be presumed to be responsive to acts of trust. (*Op. cit.,* p. 203).

And this is so because they are concerned with the opinion of others. It is

true that the Pettit scenarios involve cold calculating stances. While they may be likely to appear to be over-intellectual as far as most trusters are concerned, they may well be true of a good many sophisticated trusters, who, having seen enough of the world, come to realize that investing trust on others may activate a mechanism of trust-responsiveness, based on the trusted party's concerned with her good name and social standing, and thus lead to the expected trustworthy behavior.

The superiority of the view that I am advocating here is further suggested by what we may call the *phenomenology* of trust. To trust someone is not necessarily simply to be disposed to act in certain ways that are compatible with a trusting attitude. In the case of *friendship* trust, for instance, there are inwardly perceived state mental states which accompany us when we are immersed in these trusting relationships. It *feels* good to trust our friends, and more generally, those we love. It gives us a sense of security. We find ourselves having warm feelings for them and experiencing a form of pleasure that seems to have affinities with what goes through our minds when we have strong hopes for the future or when we surrender to a religious faith.

Needless to say, cognitivists might claim that none of this poses a threat to their intellectualist accounts of trust. They could argue that these states are simply a consequence of rationally formed beliefs in other people's trustworthiness, whenever it reliably turns out to be the case, in the course of our trusting interactions, that the beliefs were initially well-founded. Accordingly, they could maintain that the direction of causality can only go one way: it is *because* we have well-founded beliefs in our friends' trustworthiness that we come to experience the accompanying mental states.

However, this cannot be quite correct. For comparison purposes, let us have a look at some indisputably affective notions. Because we love someone and it feels good to love, we may become unreasonably blind to her character flaws, which do not escape the notice of more detached observers. Because we yearn to be loved and to be loved is good, we may think that our love is being reciprocated, when in fact it is not. Our desires cloud our perceptions and we may be led to engage in wishful thinking and to misinterpret the relevant signs. Because a highly conservative mother cares deeply about her teenage daughter's virginity, she may cling to the absurd belief, even in the face of countervailing evidence, that she is still a virgin. Because an alcoholic's wife does not have the guts to divorce him, she may believe that someday and somehow he will get rid of his addiction, even if he takes none of the necessary steps toward this goal.

Similarly, since trusting can feel so good, it would come as a surprise if our trust could not shape our beliefs just as our beliefs can shape our trust. Trusting is not, or rather, not always, a matter of detachedly assessing the available evidence and forming our beliefs by reference to it. Trust may be like some peculiar sort of lens which impinges on the way we come to process the evidence and form the corresponding beliefs in the trustworthiness of others.

The lens need not be rosy, though. Again, developmental considerations have a great deal of importance here. Children growing up in environments where betrayal is common and love is scarce may grow up to be systematic distrusters. For them, trust can be experienced as bad, as they have learned to distrust their trust. This may be a legacy accompanying them through the remainder of their lives. Accordingly, their distrustful disposition may cloud their perception in such a way that they fail to believe in other persons' trustworthiness even when doing so would be entirely appropriate.

On the subject of trust – as encapsulated interest – between both friends and people who have no real affection for one another, Hardin offers the following account:

> I trust you because I think it is in your interest to attend to my interests in the relevant matter. This is not merely to say that you and I have the same interests. Rather, it is to say that you have an interest in attending to ***my*** interests because, typically, you want our relationship to continue. (HARDIN, 2002, p. 4).

I believe it to be trivially true that, when asked whether she thinks that the trusted person is trustworthy and takes her interests to heart, the truster would respond with a resounding 'yes'. I do take issue, however, in light of the developmental and phenomenological considerations I adduced above, with Hardin's way of formulating the relation between trust and belief.

If my view of the development and the phenomenology of trust is correct, it may give us some hope to get things right when attempting to explain the last feature under consideration here, namely the behavior exhibited by the vast majority of trusting (or distrusting) persons, in a way that a purely cognitive account like Hardin's cannot aspire to do.

For starters, it seems like a totally gratuitous assumption to suggest that my trust or distrust in *you* are necessarily shaped by those beliefs of mine that are centered on *you*. I may have a history of extremely successful interactions with very kind clinicians and, thus, be well-disposed towards a doctor that was introduced to me at a cocktail party yesterday, and express my desire to hear him in connection with medical matters in the future. My trust in him has nothing to do with my beliefs about *him*. On the other hand, I may have been severely let down by psychiatrists that I interacted with in the past. Suppose that at the same cocktail party mentioned above, a psychiatrist was introduced to me. It was only with the greatest effort that I succeeded in concealing my disgust and shaking hands with him. I will predictably not hear him on psychological matters. I may decide not to hear him on anything at all. Again, my distrust in him has nothing to do with my beliefs about *him*.

A cognitivist like Hardin could attempt to amend his account by saying that I did have beliefs about the men in question. In so far as I had beliefs about the members of their professions, I did have, in an indirect way, beliefs about both the clinician and the psychiatrist. However, this is not a very promising way of addressing the problem.

My belief that all clinicians are trustworthy and that no psychiatrists are is an unfounded generalization, which led to the formation of biases, which are themselves emotionally charged attitudes interfering with proper belief-formation. It seems much more natural to say that the biases thus formed were at the root of my trust in the clinician and my distrust in the psychiatrist, than to say that my trust or distrust can be couched in terms of singular beliefs entailed by rationally shaped general beliefs.

Confirmation that the behavior of trusters or distrusters may issue from trusting or distrusting attitudes that need not be based on beliefs is not hard to find, as a matter of empirical fact. A wife may blindly trust her husband and be disinclined to ask him why he smells of perfume. She may assume that he sat long enough next to his secretary at a business meeting, or something like that. The wife of another man might be willing to ask him where the smell came from. Why these women behave differently when confronted with the same sort of *prima facie* evidence of unfaithfulness presumably hinges on their psychological make-up, which in turn may have been partly shaped by their past experiences of trusting others and by how much they value the good of trusting in comparison with other goods, such as knowing the truth.

Parallel considerations apply to distrust. As an affective attitude, jealousy is typically accompanied by distrust. The distrust may be directed at those we love or at those we may believe to be making advances on those we love. In either case, it need not be rational and need not be based on fact. I know of a man who thought his wife, a gifted woman, and good-looking to boot, was interested in another man she politely talked with in a party. As it turns out, the man in question was a stutterer, bald and generally believed to be stupid. Quite apart from the wife's unimpeachable morals, she would never give the time of the day to that sort of fellow, for any reason other than mere kindness. I would suspect, though I do not know this to be true, that this jealous man could also be inclined to irrationally distrust males who, from his perspective, seemed to be making advances on his wife,

when in fact there were no such advances. To say that those instances of distrusting were shaped by beliefs, instead of shaping them, appears to be downright absurd. Of course, jealousy, with accompanying distrust, *can* be rational and based on fact. The extent to which different people may be rational or irrational distrusters is likely to be connected with their individual psychological make-ups, which in turn may have been influenced by their experiences of trusting and by how their own trust or distrust is perceived by them.

As we have seen, a view of trust which takes it to be *primarily* – and in the most fundamental instances an affective attitude – and only *derivatively* – and in a more narrowly circumscribed range of cases – a matter of cold, rational calculation, makes it possible to give a coherent of trust in general, by showing just how its purely rational manifestations may emerge from their prior affective reality – an account which has the important additional advantage of making good sense of the available evidence along the developmental, phenomenological and behaviorial lines I set out to examine in this essay.

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