The Internet has altered how people engage with each other in myriad ways, including offering opportunities for people to act distrustfully. This fascinating set of essays explores the question of trust in computing from technical, socio-philosophical, and design perspectives. Why has the identity of the human user been taken for granted in the design of the Internet? What difficulties ensue when it is understood that security systems can never be perfect? What role does trust have in society in general? How is trust to be understood when trying to describe activities as part of a user-requirement program? What questions of trust arise in a time when data analytics are meant to offer new insights into user behavior and when users are confronted with different sorts of digital entities? These questions and their answers are of paramount interest to computer scientists, sociologists, philosophers, and designers who confront the problem of trust.

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Acknowledgments

All books are completed with forbearance by colleagues and friends. Edited collections are completed with the willing compliance of contributors. In this case, the former, this was true on the part of my colleagues in the Socio-Digital Systems group at Microsoft Cambridge. While this collection was being compiled, my contributions to their activities were diminished. Whether those activities were better because of this is for them to judge. More widely, my role at Microsoft Research Cambridge diminished equally – whether for better or worse is again not for me to say. Because friends and family, meanwhile, seem to treat my distraction as normal, they can hardly be said to show forbearance, but only tolerance. On the subject of compliance, I must thank all the contributors, who, in various ways, had to oblige my cajoling and pestering. A particular achievement has been to get them all to acknowledge the differences in the views of the other contributors, differences that are not so much about evidence as about starting places: “interdisciplinarity” is a modish formula these days, but what has been sought here – and what I chased the contributors for – was not the blurring and merging of their views with half-baked views of other disciplines, but clear, apposite articulations of their own. The result is this book: a collection of dialogues from different points of view.

The motivation for this – quixotic though it might be – derived from explorations outside the usual domain of my research; that is, in the subfield of computer science known as human computer interaction. Current debates across the gamut of social sciences led me to inquire into the current thinking on the nature of ideas-in-action in philosophy because here, I imagined, I would find some root and stock examination of central ideas in many of these debates. PhDs were funded and collaborations with various philosophy departments initiated. One such work led to a workshop titled “Trust and Cloud Computing” at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge. This was wonderfully organized by Tom Simpson. What came out of that event was the discovery that many
philosophers are more or less out of touch with the changing landscape of computer-mediated living. This is not to diminish the excellent work of a handful of philosophers who cannot be so accused. One can think of the books and collections of Floridi, for instance, and of works by Charles Ess and his collaborators, too. There are others of course. This book derives in part from an attempt both to focus the attention of other philosophers who have not followed in the wake of these mentioned and to direct attention to how the world actually is as a lived phenomenon – that is, massively connected in and through the Internet and its supporting infrastructures, among other things. As it does this, so it also brings together others, from different disciplines – sociologists, designers, anthropologists, and others – to support and engage in this attempt at learning; to inform not just the all too often laggardly world of philosophy but to foster dialogues across disciplines and across other divides that don’t so easily scale onto academic divides. The resulting chapters display, I think, a remarkable diversity as well as a compendium of points of view on trust, computing, and society that cannot be found anywhere else.

On a more logistical level, I would like to thank the Cambridge University Press New York office for encouragement and tolerance in the preparation of the collection – particularly Ada Brunstein and Lauren Cowles and an anonymous but hugely supportive copy editor. Specific acknowledgments are in the footnotes for the chapters.