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1
The paradox of trust

John Locke declared trust to be 'the bond of society', the *vinculum societatis*, and we need not doubt him.[1] Everyday life is a catalogue of success in the exercise of trust. Our dealings with friends and enemies, neighbours and strangers depend on it, whether in homes, streets, markets, seats of government or other arenas of civil society. Would you ask a stranger the time unless you could normally count on a true answer? Could you use the highway without trusting other drivers? Could an economy progress beyond barter, or a society beyond mud huts, unless people relied on one another to keep their promises? Without trust, social life would be impossible and there would be no philosophers to try casting the light of reason upon it.

But, although trust is an obvious fact of life, it is an exasperating one. Like the flight of the bumblebee or a cure for hiccoughs, it works in practice but not in theory. When we think about it, the obvious fact that, on the whole, we manage to live together in mutual confidence

1. *Essays on the Laws of Nature* (1663), ed. W. von Leyden, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954, p. 213. Locke argues that self-interest cannot be the basis of 'the law of nature' and I warmly applaud. I would like to thank John Dunn for the reference.

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turns mysterious. In *Essays on the Law of Nature*, Locke accounted for trust by invoking a divinely ordained 'rule of morals or law of nature', which makes us trustworthy when we are acting in conformity with it. This ordinance, discernible through sense experience by the light of nature and binding on us, lets us see what does and does not accord with our rational nature. In the more famous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* he made it a matter of appeal to nature without recourse to God's will.[2] But, either way, reference to an external moral fabric for our lives no longer satisfies philosophers outside the natural law tradition. Modern philosophy of a kind which counts Locke among its founders largely subscribes to an Enlightenment view of reason and nature, of knowledge and reality, requiring a more profane account of trust. Even so, the light of reason should have no trouble in illuminating the bond of society. But it does.

The trouble may be with the light, especially if we construe practical reason as instrumental or 'economic' rationality. It may be that it is not instrumentally rational to trust instrumentally rational people. If so, we need a better account of reason, as I shall urge presently, and one which does not spread distrust as more people come to accept it. On the other hand, it may be because the bond of society defies reason in any version. This thought is especially disturbing, given current fears that the bonds of liberal society are growing more fragile. I do not just mean fears that crimes of violence are on the increase and neighbourhoods becoming less safe after dark. I mean also more abstract fears that social changes are eroding people's sense of trust and of belonging, thus making them blind to the needs of others and less willing to contribute to the common weal.

If such anxieties are well grounded, there are two diagnoses. One is that trust grows fragile when people become too rational; the other that trust grows fragile when people are not rational enough. Both are plausible and the difference between them cuts very deep. They imply different accounts of practical reason, together with different ideas of

2. 1690, or the Oxford: Clarendon Press edition, ed. P. H. Nidditch, 1975.

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law, politics, social science and the conduct of personal life. One bids us be more rational, the other less.

For a view that reason undermines trust, here is Francis Fukuyama, author of *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*.[3] This popular book contrasts societies where there is a 'cultural community' with those which lack 'cultural capital'. The former secure trust through a solidarity which depends not on explicit rules and regulations but on 'a set of ethical habits and reciprocal moral obligations internalised by each of the community's members'. The latter are typically those where economic rationality has made such inroads into social cohesion that, perversely, they cannot exploit the economic opportunities created by their rationality. Hence there is a political message too:

> if the institutions of democracy and capitalism are to work, they must coexist with certain pre-modern cultural habits that ensure their proper functioning. Law, contract and economic rationality provide a necessary but not a sufficient basis for the prosperity of post-industrial societies; they must be leavened with reciprocity, moral obligation, duty toward community and trust, which are based in habit rather than rational calculation.

Fukuyama thus contrasts reason and modern legalism with habit and pre-modern social virtues. Whereas efficiency depends on the former, trust depends on the latter. We need both, he says, and prosperity depends on striking a balance.

His way of construing the bond of society bodes ill, however. If reason is modern and if trust depends on a habit of practising some pre-modern social virtues, then it is no surprise to find trust becoming fragile. Rationality thus conceived can hardly fail to subvert ancient trust – pre-modern reciprocity, moral obligation, duty to community – which is based in habit. If reason is the voice of progress, it threatens to ruin us all.

This is no way to keep our philosophical spirits up at the end of a

3. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, New York: The Free Press, 1995. Quotations below are from chapter 2.

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troubled century. But, before stating the contrary view, I shall mark out the scope and strategy of *Trust Within Reason*. Trust is a huge topic, ramifying throughout the social sciences and humanities. The core problem is how it can and should be achieved, given what Kant termed 'man's asocial sociality', and I shall address it. But, since a philosopher would be rash to claim expertise across the board, my title signals a particular slant. *Trust Within Reason* asks what reason can tell us about the basis of trust. By 'reason', I mean both a broad Enlightenment idea that we have powers of theoretical and practical reasoning which can guide us in what we believe and do, and a precise current version of it, whose better name is perhaps 'rationality'. This is the instrumental notion at the heart of rational choice theory, game theory and an 'economic' approach to human behaviour. Connecting the general to the particular is a persistent question of whether the spread of reason (or rationality) enlightens the modern world or undermines the trust between people which makes it possible.

Here is my theme, stated broadly. We cannot flourish without trust. This should be as plain to reason as it is to common sense. So reason should be able to show us what makes for a reliable social order, where people find it rational to trust one another. Yet, at least in some current versions, it apparently bids us play the games of social life in ways which make losers of us all. This applies especially to the suggestion that trust is a matter of mutual self-interest. However plausible it sounds, it subverts the bond of society by challenging the utility of social virtues like public spirit, neighbourliness, honour, common decency and, in a word, reciprocity. Is that because these are moral notions, potent only when protected by custom and habits and thus shielded from the light of reason? There are those who say so. But they are not straightforwardly moral notions in a sense approved by most moral philosophers. They are neither abstract enough to be clearly universal nor uncontentious enough in their claim to be virtues. Honour, for instance, is a powerful but local social adhesive which often licenses morally questionable conduct. Yet trust can seem to depend on local ties which it is neither instrumentally rational nor morally commendable to respect. In that case, there cannot be trust

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within reason. But, given a different idea of practical reason, deeper than prudence and morally charged, we shall find that the light of reason illuminates the bond of society after all.

The slant is thus that reason, when wrongly defined, can distort what it is meant to illuminate. A theory of practical reason tells us how we do and should reach conclusions about what to do. An instrumental theory makes prudence the guide and tells us when it is rational to trust people guided by prudence. That means, roughly, that we can trust people to do what best furthers their aims and to avoid what does not. There is a sting in the tail, since this makes it rational to act in a trustworthy way less often than it takes to sustain a general trust. So the more people adopt the theory, the more fragile the bond of society becomes. Hence, as a descriptive theory, its truth depends on how widely it is believed; and, since believing it has implications for what it is rational to do, it is, so to speak, a player in the game which it analyses. That makes it also a normative theory but not yet a true one. When we ask what would be true, part of the answer comes with seeing how people act in the light of different theories. So can we find a theory of practical reason which leads us to trust one another when we know that we share it? If so, that will be a happy ending.

By keeping trust within reason, a philosopher may, I hope, venture within range of prowling social theorists far more expert in understanding human relationships. But I do not thereby endorse a division of labour between philosophers and others, which assigns an exclusive expertise to each. A sub-theme will be that boundaries between philosophy, social theory and social science are inherently fluid, perhaps merely artificial, because we are part of our own subject matter and belong to a world which changes as intellectual boundaries become known to change. In asking what a world would be like where there is trust within reason, we help or hinder its construction.

TRUTH, VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS

With this preamble, I turn to the other side of the question about the roots of trust, the view that trust is fragile because we are not rational enough. When the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century were

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assembling what has come to be called the Enlightenment project, they were sure that there is truth to discern about the nature of our social ties, bonds and, to add a key term, obligations. It was, they presumed, a scientific truth, even if the social sciences were too young to discern it in full. Where trust flourishes, people must have reasons to trust one another and one task for the young moral sciences was to identify the character and workings of such reasons. Where trust is fragile and the bond of society weak, a rational understanding of the bond can tell us how to strengthen it. As the moral sciences progressed, it would become clear how social obligations function, thus explaining how societies work and revealing how they can work better. Whereas today's readers may jib at this joining of 'is' and 'ought', the Enlightenment project for human progress took a future moral science to be seamless. A science of morals which studied the essential character of human nature and the forms which morality takes in practice would identify the true virtues whose cultivation increases human wellbeing. The presumption was, in short, that 'truth, virtue and happiness are bound together by an unbreakable chain'.

Enlightenment scholars will recognise this note of vaulting optimism about reason and progress. The proposition that 'truth, virtue and happiness are bound together by an unbreakable chain' comes from a remarkable book, the *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*.[4] The *Sketch* is often acclaimed as the purest, boldest and noblest statement of the Enlightenment project. Its author, the Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94), was a philosopher, mathematician, social scientist and supporter of the French Revolution of 1789. Although belonging to an aristocracy unenthused by a revolution which guillotined aristocrats, Condorcet saw in it the dawning of an enlightened age. Proscribed under the Terror in 1793, he went into hiding, where he wrote the *Sketch* in great haste as an outline for what would have been a massive work. In 1794 he was discovered and

4. Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind* (1795), ed. Stuart Hampshire, trans. June Barraclough, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1955.

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arrested by the *gendarmes* of the revolution he proclaimed, and he died in prison two days later. The book was published in 1795 by his Jacobin friends as an enduring testament to his and their faith in reason and a better world.

The *Sketch* divides human history into ten stages, of which the ninth runs from Descartes to the French Revolution and the tenth is described in the future tense. Condorcet links truth, virtue and happiness from the start. 'Man is born with the ability to receive sensations', he begins, promptly adding that from this capacity and an ability to form and combine ideas 'there arise between him and his fellow creatures ties of interest and of duty, to which nature herself has wished to attach the most precious portion of our happiness and the most painful of our ills'. This is the cue for new moral and political sciences, which will have direct implications for morals and politics, and he undertakes to demonstrate 'how nature has joined together indissolubly the progress of knowledge and that of liberty, virtue and respect for the natural rights of man' (p. 10).

The theme is resumed at the start of the ninth stage, where he assures us that 'publicists have at last discovered the true rights of man and how they can all be deduced from the single truth that *man is a sentient being, capable of reasoning and of acquiring moral ideas*' (p. 128). The true rights are those needed to secure the interests of each and all. Our interests are simple: happiness in the first instance and, to achieve it, prosperity, liberty and greater equality of wealth, education and opportunity. There is no reason in nature or human nature why they should conflict. Where they seem to, it is a sign that our feelings are misdirected and our institutions imperfect. The new sciences will teach us to school the former and improve the latter. Taking stock of human progress, as he reaches his own century, he assures us that 'All errors in politics and morals are based on philosophical errors and these in turn are connected with scientific errors' (p. 163). Then, looking ahead to a sunlit, if distant, future, the final chapter promises that 'The time will therefore come when the sun will shine only on free men who know no other master than their reason' (p. 179).

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The method proposed is thus to assume that all human beings have the same universal human nature and capacities, to understand how we form ideas and then to guide us to progressive ones. This is one prong of a scientific campaign to improve our perfectible nature, as indicated by this rhetorical question:

> Just as the mathematical and physical sciences tend to improve the arts that we use to satisfy our simplest needs, is it not also part of the necessary order of nature that the moral and political sciences should exercise a similar influence upon the motives that direct our feelings and our actions? (p. 192)

The other is to shape public institutions and laws to create a public realm which works for human benefit, portended by further rhetorical questions:

> What are we to expect from the perfection of laws and public institutions consequent upon the progress of those sciences but the reconciliation, the identification of the interests of each with the interests of all? Has the social art any other aim save that of destroying their apparent opposition? Will not a country's constitution and laws accord best with the rights of reason and nature when the path of virtue is no longer arduous and when the temptations which lead men from it are few and feeble? (p. 192)

With this triumph of reason in prospect, the book ends with a moving peroration:

> How consoling for the philosopher who laments the errors, the crimes and the injustices which still pollute the earth and of which he is often the victim is this view of the human race, emancipated from its shackles, released from the empire of fate and from that of enemies of its progress, advancing with a firm and sure step along the path of truth, virtue and happiness. (p. 201)

Two centuries later, injustices still pollute the earth and we have yet to acknowledge enlightened reason as our only master. We may wonder why the path is proving so hard. Condorcet would no doubt diagnose 'enemies of progress' on the one hand and scientific ignorance or error on the other. But there are other answers, far less consoling for the philosopher. One is that errors in morals and politics do not all rest on philosophical errors and so on scientific errors in the way envisaged by Condorcet, and this thought will engage us later.

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Meanwhile, here is a more frightening answer. It is that the Enlightenment project, so blithely sketched in the Age of Reason, rests on a catastrophic mistake. For, far from being the friend of virtue and happiness, reason is their enemy. If the French Revolution is hailed as a new dawn of reason applied to human nature and society, then notice that the dawn began with a bloodbath, dictatorships and wars throughout Europe, before achieving a far from perpetual peace. Since then, the new social sciences have certainly increased the power and scope of reason; but notice how they have somehow conferred it on tyrants like Hitler and Stalin, whose state machinery has used truth to destroy virtue and happiness. It is not the sleep of reason which begets monsters, as in Goya's famous painting, but reason itself.

This chilling retort is too stark for the theme which I wish to explore but I include it as a backdrop to the ambivalence about reason which so many thinkers have felt. Enlightenment banishes whatever it regards as superstition, prejudice, corruption and the misuse of power and it promises a rationally ordered society of rational individuals. But, in giving its disciples the power to bring rational order about, it takes a great risk. The risk is partly that, by conceding nothing to a human nature which is stubbornly imperfect, it dismantles old defences against original sin, and so lets the devils expelled from the front door take control when they return by the back. The grimmer risk is that reason is itself the enemy of human qualities and relations which a just, free and good society must cherish, the enemy of trust.

In that case – and this is my theme – we should be wary of a society where free individuals know no other master than their reason, if 'reason' is construed in some typically modern ways. We should also be wary of social sciences, built on a particular model of the natural sciences, which are then licensed to shape our motives and institutions in the hope of identifying the interests of each with the interests of all. Hence we may wonder whether we have been misled in philosophy too, and thus come to embrace post-modern doubts about the universal and objective character of reason, especially in its pretensions to moral progress. Yet such doubts are not conclusive. Even if

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some ways of construing the notion of rationality in Enlightenment spirit make it irrational to trust people who are rational, there may be other notions on offer. Truth, virtue and happiness may still be ours to connect in some manner. Let us see.

THE PROBLEM OF TRUST

With these large thoughts in the background, I shall next focus on what the title of the chapter terms 'the paradox of trust'. To locate it, let us resume the more ordinary thought that trust is essential for everyday life and pervades our dealings with friends and enemies, neighbours and strangers. Whenever we eat, drink or close our eyes, we trust others not to harm us. Every day is an adventure in trusting thousands of others, seen and unseen, to act reliably. Would you exchange your old car for my pile of bank notes if you thought I might have printed the notes in my cellar? Well, you might risk it if you knew your old car was all rust under the new paint. Fraud is a fact of life too. But fraud depends upon honesty in general and, taking our bearings from what constitutes the bond of society, we readily grant the overall need for bank notes to be genuine and second-hand cars what they seem.

We can provisionally distinguish two varieties of trust. (Whether they are finally distinct will be discussed later.) Firstly, we trust one another to behave predictably in a sense which applies equally to the natural world at large. I trust my apple tree to bear apples, not oranges. I trust its boughs to bear my weight, if they look strong and healthy. I trust my reliable old alarm clock to wake me tomorrow, as it did yesterday. I trust you to wear a blue shirt again today, never having seen you in anything else. These are inductive inferences, reliable but, as every philosopher knows, not guaranteed, and trust is a simple matter of warranted prediction. Some of the warrants involve the attribution of purpose to human agents. But that is not untoward – I attribute purpose to my dog when I trust it to bark at intruders. There is nothing peculiar about trusting human beings, while trust is simply a matter of predictability.

Secondly, we trust one another to do what is right. This is more slip-

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