

Handout for “Watsuji’s Account Of Trust: A Critical And Comparative Analysis”

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A synopsis of Anthony Steinbock’s account of trust in *Moral Emotions* (Northwestern University Press, 2014).

1) Trust is an inherently social, interpersonal act that “finds its fulfillment only in a possible other...in a person or community.” Trust is a sign that “strictly speaking...the individual cannot be conceived as separate or isolated.” (201) “Trust is a freely given and giving act” The freedom it depends on is—paradoxically I would add—my freedom realized as being bound to another,” and the other’s freedom to respond. “In trust, I am already given over to another... I am ‘decentered’ and ‘dis-positioned’,” that is, in the process of trusting “the position of the otherwise self-centered ‘I’ is decentered.” (202) In a fundamental way trust helps constitute “interpersonal relations, social relations, and intercultural communication.”

2) The act of trusting has a unique temporal structure in which I orient myself to the future in giving myself over to another *ahead of time*. Trust differs from other modes of future-orientation such as expectation and anticipation, and even hope. Trust also differs fundamentally from reliance in that trust does not depend upon the past, does not need to be secured in past experiences as does reliance, even if past experiences of trusting can create a predisposition to trust others in a present situation. Reliance on the other hand unfolds over time and is necessarily extended temporally. Other features distinguish trust from reliance (Steinbock speaks rather of the experience of reliability), including the practical function of reliability as opposed to the interpersonal exposure of oneself in trust. “Trust is interpersonally temporalizing and one of the foundational elements in social existence.” (204)

3) When I trust another, I “invest myself ‘personally’ in the other person,” give myself over to the other and am bound to the other directly, without mediation and without epistemic judgment or skeptical disposition. The binding character of trust indicates its normative sense. I am bound to another not because I first bind my self to her by an act of the will, but because trusting intrinsically and passively entails being bound. [In trusting I let the other act for my behalf, if not necessarily on my behalf.] I expose and dis-pose myself to another as she will be and will act, and so I remain vulnerable in a manner that is not a moral weakness. “Vulnerability is essential to the trust experience.” (207) We become vulnerable not to the possibility of being mistaken about a judgment, but to betrayal, the violation of a personal bond.

4) Trust is a primary, active mode in itself and is not the same as a lack of distrust or mistrust. Trust does not depend upon other dispositions or acts such as overcoming suspicion or distrust. Distrust directed to persons as individuals or as a collective, and mistrust directed to a type of person or thing, are derivative modifications of trust. Trust is interpersonally formative and essential to social life; sociality depends upon trust. In being bound to others we not only reveal our vulnerability, but also “open up a sphere of deeper interpersonal possibilities.” We “prepare the field of social existence,” “open up a social space” and “moral sphere.” (212, 210) The normative dimension opened by trust does not arise by first making a decision about whom to trust, or by deciding whether to trust is what I should do. Trust reveals the moral social sphere in the first place.

5) As an intrinsically interpersonal moral emotion, trust can be immediately directed to another person or it can be mediated by the trust of others. For example, I may trust a surgeon new to me because she is trusted by my regular doctor, whom I trust. My doctor’s trust in the surgeon generates my trust in the surgeon. Trust, then, is generative of trust and can also be generative of trustworthiness. A person’s being trusted can elicit a sense of that person’s trustworthiness. [Of course, trusting another does not necessarily make that person trustworthy, and I do not trust because the other has proven herself to be trustworthy.] Trust may also elicit a sense of being imposed upon, as when I entrust my belongings to a stranger. Steinbock takes (the possibility of) imposition as an essential feature of trust.

6) Trust, which can be betrayed only by another, is not a form of commitment, which can be broken only by oneself.