

# Philosophical Explorations

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# Developing Trust

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## Abstract

This paper examines developing trust in two related senses: (1) rationally overcoming distrust, and (2) developing a mature capacity for trusting/distrusting. In focussing exclusively on the first problem, traditional philosophical discussions fail to address how an evidence-based paradigm of rationality is easily co-opted by (immature) agents in support of *irrational* distrust (or trust) – a manifestation of the second problem. Well-regulated trust requires developing a capacity to tolerate the uncertainties that characterize relationships among fully autonomous self-directed agents. Early relationships lack this uncertainty since care-givers take primary responsibility for determining a child's interests, reducing the scope (if not the intensity) of potential conflict between self and other. Once agents recognize that adulthood demands foregoing the security embedded in such relationships of dependency they are free to embrace a more appropriate paradigm of rationality for guiding their thought and action in interactions with others.

the reflective trust of adulthood; (2) developing trust as a movement from a condition (either dispositional or circumstantial) of distrust and suspicion to one of trust and confidence; and, finally, therefore (3) *developing trust* as a process that is transformative in nature, both of a person's psychic world and the world of potential action and interaction he or she consequently inhabits. As Trudy Govier remarks:

Those who trust more often than not will see people and situations differently from those whose tendency is to be suspicious of others. They will structure their social world differently, and will for these reasons encounter different opportunities and relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Her view is supported by the psychoanalysts Isaacs, Alexander, and Haggard:

1 Govier (1991). This paper contains an excellent discussion of the difficulties of overcoming standing distrust. My focus in this paper is different than Govier's, but I owe much to her insightful reflections, including those contained in Govier (1993)

By the world,  
I think my wife be honest and  
think she is not;  
I think that thou art just and think  
that thou art not.  
I'll have some proof.  
– Shakespeare *Othello* III. iii.  
399-402

People see only what they are pre-  
pared to see.  
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

## I

This paper is about developing trust, a phrase that is multiply ambiguous. I mean to talk about developing trust in a number of different senses: (1) *developing* trust as a movement from the unconscious, unchosen, innocent trust of infancy to

The fact of trusting or not trusting determines by itself large aspects of the subjective world of the individual. Expectancies, anticipations and hopes are influenced by it. Perceptions and conceptions of self and others, and the interpersonal possibilities are vastly different for the trusting and the non-trusting. Thus the trusting and the non-trusting live in different worlds.<sup>2</sup>

While the trusting and non-trusting may live in different worlds – significantly incommensurable worlds, as I'll discuss below – these are not worlds it is impossible to move between. On the contrary: most people inhabit both of these worlds with different people, at different times, and with respect to different situations. As we mature, our attitudes of trust and distrust become more differentiated, more selective, more directed at particular others as a consequence of our experiences, both in the general run of our lives and in specific encounters with those particular others. For instance, my trust or distrust of a particular car mechanic will likely depend on what I know in general about the culture of car mechanics – as gleaned from my own and others' experiences with various mechanics, reports on shows like *Car Talk*, and so forth – as well as my specific experiences with, and judgements of, this particular car mechanic.

Developing a selective capacity for trust and distrust is thus an important part of a maturational process by which we become what philosophers like to call “rational agents” – adults whose general capacities for theoretical and practical reasoning are standardly regarded as falling within the purview of philosophical evaluation. Indeed, it is common practice to treat questions about the developmental conditions of agency as irrelevant to the philosophical analysis of conditions for rational trust. In this paper, I want to question this methodological practice, arguing that it is naive in a way that leads philosophers to advocate an inappropriate paradigm for rational thought and action in interpersonal relations. This paradigm is not only theoretically inadequate, it is practically dangerous in so far as it inhibits anyone who embraces it from developing the kind of agency that is genuinely characterized by well-regulated attitudes of trust and distrust. Thus, I will be claiming that philosophers who persist for methodological reasons in a principled form of psychological naivete run the risk, not just of irrelevancy, but of doing real damage in what they recommend as rational, morally defensible behaviour.

This principled form of naivete begins, as I have said, with taking fully developed, independently functioning rational agents as the proper site of theoretical inquiry – inquiry which is, therefore, held to be normative (and “philosophical”) rather than descriptive (and “psychological”). The point of it, we are told, is to gain a better understanding of the nature and scope of our epistemic and moral responsibilities – as rational creatures, of course, confronting a world ‘out there’ populated by other such creatures. To pursue this inquiry, we ask a form of hypothetical question: ‘How could a rational agent form, and understand herself to form, justified true beliefs?’; or ‘how could such an agent come to participate in civilized society, making herself vulnerable to others?’ In fact, these questions are

doubly hypothetical: First and most obviously, they are hypothetical in their idealizing assumption of rational agency. But secondly and, for my argument more importantly, they are hypothetical in so far as the challenge they present for the agent is one of using reason to overcome a peculiar form of solipsistic isolation, whether it be epistemological or moral. While this is not a challenge we ordinarily face (i.e., outside of philosophical contexts), it seems pressing *within* this framework of analysis because it is a problem that would confront individuals who begin their epistemological and moral lives, so to speak, as fully developed agents. Thus, such a form of inquiry is not simply normative; it goes further in abstraction by articulating norms for rational behaviour that are geared to conditions of disengaged neutrality that do not, and could not, arise.<sup>3</sup> How fatal is this to the project of improving our philosophical understanding of the topics in question?

Consider the problem of trust. On this traditional approach, it is usual to understand trust as an attitude it is rational to adopt towards others only under conditions of contract. That is, it is rational for autonomous agents to agree to engage with one another trustingly only on condition that any resulting vulnerability constitutes an acceptable risk given anticipated benefits and the existence of mechanisms to punish those who act against them. However, adapting this paradigm to real-world conditions faces an obvious difficulty that has now been noted by a number of critics, following principally on the work of Annette Baier. In her landmark paper, “Trust and Anti-Trust,” Baier argues that many of the relationships we take to be paradigm cases of trusting relationships involve dependencies that are not, and could not be, freely chosen.<sup>4</sup> Hence, they are not contractual. Yet it seems wrong, if not morally reprehensible, to consider many of these relationships *irrational*: for instance, relationships with children, animals, the ill, and the dying. More to the point, given the prevalence of such trusting relationships in our everyday lives, no moral theory will be worth its salt if it has nothing to say about how we ought to conduct ourselves within them. The solution, however, is not to abandon discussions of the rationality of various forms of trustful interaction; rather, it is to recognise that questions of rationality, like questions of moral acceptability, must be raised within a far richer framework of analysis than has been traditionally assumed. In other words, Baier concludes, if we are to do an adequate job of theorising about real world moral relationships “in all their sad and splendid variety”, contractarianism must move from the centre to the periphery of our discussions.<sup>5</sup>

3 As a genuine aside, it's worth noting that a significant minority now questions the idealising norm of rationality at work in these rational reconstructions. Such philosophers favour instead a more naturalistic approach in which human thought and action are analysed, not in terms of their unconditional rational appeal, but more modestly in terms of their contribution to the species' success in its environment. There is something attractive about this suggestion, and I do not want to dismiss it entirely. Nevertheless, what the new naturalism shares with reconstructionism is the tendency to analyze our capacities solely in terms of how they would serve the hypothetical interests of relatively independent, adult individuals. In this paper, I will suggest that we can learn more if we take a different ‘naturalistic’ tack, i.e. one that explicitly focuses on the developmental trajectory of our various capacities.

4 Baier (1986), p. 249.

5 Baier (1986), p. 247.

2 Isaacs, Alexander and Haggard (1963)

A more fundamental problem with the contractarian approach to trust is that it puts the cart before the horse in attempting to explain the generally trusting, cooperative conditions of everyday life. Suppose we were to ask in a transcendental vein, 'what are the conditions for the very possibility of contract?' Baier and others argue not just that the contracting parties need to be relatively equal in power and authority; more importantly, there must already exist a general "climate" of trust. For the conditions under which individual contracts work best are the very conditions *generally* required for them to work at all – viz., where the contracting parties each assume that the other will uphold his or her end of the bargain, not because of mechanisms of enforcement, but rather because of mutual goodwill. Anyone who has tried to reach negotiated agreement under conditions of extreme suspicion will recognise the validity of this point. As background trust diminishes, costs of enforcement simply become too high for contracts to be effective. At the extreme, they are no longer possible at all. Hence, it mistakes the logic of what makes contracts work to imagine they can generate this background climate of trust in the first place.<sup>6</sup> The moral is: we need to expand our theoretical understanding of the human condition if we are to deal adequately with the phenomenon of trust, of which the capacity to engage in contractual agreements is merely a proper part.

Considerations like these have led a number of philosophers to adopt a developmental perspective.<sup>7</sup> In order to account for the kind of trust on which contracts ultimately depend, they argue that trust must be viewed as something we begin with, not something that has to be achieved by rationally driven negotiation if it to be experienced at all. As Lars Hertzberg claims, "trust ... is implicit in many of the primary reactions of one human being to another. It is the loss of this way of reacting that has to be made intelligible, by invoking, say, the effects of experience or instruction."<sup>8</sup> Baier concurs: "Infant trust that normally does not need to be won but is there unless and until it is destroyed is important for the understanding of the possibility of trust. ... Unless some form of it were innate, and unless some form of it could pave the way for new forms, it would appear a miracle that trust ever occurs."<sup>9</sup>

On this new approach, it may seem as though the contractarian problematic has simply been turned on its head: Now what we really need to explain is how rational agents come sensibly to distrust others, not how they come to trust them. For as Baier, Govier, Sissela Bok and others make clear, though some may be tempted to romanticise trust, to think it a good come what may, there are clearly occasions of trust and trusting relationships that are morally objectionable. And since trusting others seems to be in some sense a natural (though corruptible) disposition, moral psychologists should aim to clarify the conditions that call for the proper regulation and even withdrawal of trust. For if we trust too readily or too far – trust, that is, without question – we can leave ourselves open to exploitation, manipulation, tyranny, brutality and the pain of betrayal if it turns out that

our trust is misplaced.

Of course, over-ready – or what I shall call, 'incontinent' – trust is no worse a problem than over-ready – incontinent – distrust: If we are too ready to withdraw our trust, too prone to question or doubt, we not only lose the benefits, current and prospective, of a trusting relationship, we lay ourselves open to acting immorally towards others whom we have, through distrusting, misjudged. Shakespeare was no stranger to these unhappy themes. Othello is a prime example of one who could trust neither wisely or well. Duped by Iago, he doubted Desdemona and ended by doing her in. The tragedy of Othello lies not so much in what was done to him, but in what he did to others as a consequence of his unruly attitudes.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, then, even if we take a developmental perspective, the sensible, well-motivated regulation of our attitudes of trust and distrust remains an important topic for moral theorising. However, there are deeper methodological implications to philosophers' taking a developmental perspective than have yet been emphasised. For despite what some of its proponents may think, its importance lies not in viewing trust as our natural starting state (a problematic idea that I will return to below); rather, it lies in making clear why we need to think more attentively about (dis)trusting agents themselves if we are to understand the conditions for rational trust. For once adults are viewed as dynamic beings that develop out of an infant state – hence, in an interpersonal world that is continuously structured and restructured by their changing affective attitudes – it is no longer possible to ignore how their own developing psychological condition affects their relationships with others. In other words, development should not be viewed as a process that ends in some completed state known as 'adulthood' from which we can then ask specifically philosophical questions about, say, the rationality of judgement or behaviour. Rather, it is an *on-going* process with cognitive effects stemming from and affecting our engagements with others that must always be factored into our philosophical reflections.

To clarify the importance of this methodological shift in perspective, consider by way of example an agent such as Othello who is honestly determined to judge others fairly but nevertheless seems incapable of confidently trusting them. Though he may conscientiously search for "objective proof" of their goodwill, thereby living up to certain epistemic ideals for rational judgement, no amount of evidence seems completely to allay his suspicions. In such a case, it seems clear that the difficulties lie structurally within the agent's own psyche. However, if we are blind to this possibility in our personal relationships, we risk the pain and frustration of trying to satisfy unsatisfiable demands (or to have them *satisfied* if we are such distrusters ourselves). Worse, if we are blind to this possibility in our philosophical theories, we risk distorting the intellectual landscape by elaborating normative conceptions of social interaction in which unsatisfiable demands

10 Naomi Scheman makes the interesting observation in Scheman (1987) that Iago does not so much victimise Othello as answer a need in him. Consequently, she remarks, "if Iago hadn't been there, Othello would have had to invent him." (p. 120) Since I argue that Othello has an immature understanding of trusting relationships, I agree with Scheman that doubt would have come eventually to Othello and with the same corrosive effects – Iago or no Iago. The focus of Scheman's article is more gender-oriented than mine, but I owe much to its inspiration.

6 My thanks to Elijah Millgram for helping me to formulate this point so succinctly. See also Baier (1986), pp. 245–246.

7 Baier (1986), Hertzberg (1989), Govier (1992), Horsburgh (1960)

8 Hertzberg (1989), p. 317.

9 Baier (1986), p. 242.

for 'safe trust' are *per impossibile* normally satisfied. This is reminiscent of the Sisyphus task epistemologists take on when they try to give a "straight" answer to certain forms of scepticism – i.e., an answer that would satisfy the sceptic on his own terms. Often, there is no such answer to give. Instead of bowing to the sceptic's (methodological) paranoia, the correct response is, first, to diagnose what drives him to search for a kind of certainty that is structurally unattainable and then to propose a new way of responding to him, both personally and philosophically.<sup>11</sup> Analogously, in responding to the unruly distrust, we need to diagnose what drives him to seek structurally unattainable reassurance about a persistently doubted other. Taking a developmental perspective helps by subverting our persistent pre-Kantian urge to view external conditions as objectively determinable by the agent in question and so wholly responsible for his attitude of distrust. In a moral-psychological version of Kant's Copernican revolution, it forces us to consider how the agent's attitudes towards others are always the result of a complex interplay of inner and outer conditions.

Thus, as a first step, I will be arguing that the unruly distrust, like the sceptic, must be urged to turn his critical gaze inwards in a new way even as he turns his gaze outwards to the external world. For while it is comforting to suppose that a person need only be encouraged to adopt the disinterested stance of an ideally rational agent in order to overcome persistent suspicions, it is far from clear that such a strategy could ever be successful. There are familiar reasons for this, which I will canvass below, having to do with the ready assimilation of evidence to cognitively pre-activated schema. But the objection I want to press cuts even deeper, since it questions the psychological use such agents can make of principles of conduct that are purportedly purely epistemic. My claim will be that if the psychological cause of an agent's distrust has to do with immature and, therefore, unrealistic expectations about what an adult relationship of trust could involve, no amount of 'proof' of the other's trustworthiness will lay his fears to rest. He will always be disappointed by (and disappointing to) the (never quite) trusted other. He is seeking something that cannot be found in adulthood – a situation in which the trusted other takes on all the responsibility for maintaining the relationship between them. In this kind of person, the quest for proof becomes disingenuous, a strategy for avoiding the burdens of adult agency. Instead of facing the challenges of adult trust, the persistent distrust uses the epistemic ideal of rational neutrality to block his understanding of what building and maintaining such relationships require of him, and so shirks the responsibilities that go along with adult trust. From his putatively disinterested position, he searches for evidence to let himself off the hook – evidence that unsurprisingly he soon discovers of the other's often 'wilful' inadequacies. Thus, the traditional ideal of rational agency is co-opted into a psychological structure that supports a particularly noxious form of self-deception. The agent who sits in 'disinterested judgement' of the other sees himself acting rationally and responsibly according to well-grounded and widely endorsed principles of inquiry and proof; yet, in fact, he does not reflect at all on what genuinely rational activity in the context of

11 On this theme, see Cavell (1979).

these relationships demands. Further, he believes his relationships falter for reasons wholly external to himself when in fact his own misplaced expectations prevent him from acting in good faith towards the other.

The deeper lesson I want to draw from this pertains more directly to the tradition of sceptical inquiry such an agent appropriates. If I am right, it is useless simply to admonish him for irrational and even immoral behaviour since, in his case, he precisely uses this well-received paradigm of rationality to block the kind of reflection that could lead him to revise the tenor of his conduct towards others. This suggests that, as philosophers, we need to rethink what we mean by rational behaviour and judgement. For what this agent needs is something like a paradigm shift – a shift that philosophers can only begin to understand through a deeper exploration of the psychological mechanisms that drive such an agent to search outside his relationship with another for independent proof of the other's trustworthiness. We could call this exploration 'philosophical therapy', since it attends to how psychological and philosophical dimensions of a problem necessarily intertwine in the sphere of interpersonal behaviour. Its aim is to deepen both the theoretical and practical understanding of our epistemological and moral capacities by calling attention to the kinds of psychological barriers that stand in the way of our continuing cognitive and affective development through mature interactions with others. In what follows, I will attempt to identify these barriers arguing, in agreement with Baier, that our philosophical tradition itself reflects and reinforces a conception of interpersonal behaviour that is developmentally retarded. But while Baier describes this conception as attractive to those who share a 'healthy and understandable', albeit adolescent drive towards autonomous self-assertion, I will claim the reverse. An agent's quest for objectivity in dealing with others by means of affective disengagement may well be adolescent, as is the philosophical tradition that supports it. However, so far from serving a maturing desire for autonomy in any straightforward sense, it demonstrates at least as much *resistance* to such autonomy. For autonomy in the context of mature relationships requires that an agent engage with trusted others, no longer as a child, but as a self-standing adult whose expectations are shaped by recognising that others within these relationships are autonomous agents as well. In particular, this means coping with the kinds of differences that inevitably arise among adults and which need to be continuously negotiated if trust is to grow and endure. A capacity for persistent dynamic involvement with others demands from the agent a quality of reflective responsiveness that is unique to adult interpersonal relationships. It thus requires him to fashion himself on a different model of what it is to be rational in *responding well* to others, a model that can only make sense for him once his psychological need to hold onto the less demanding and more secure dependencies of childhood begins to disappear.

## 2

Let me begin my argument for the need to become more psychologically sophisticated in our theoretical attempts to understand the rationality of trust by returning to more familiar philosophical territory. If we acknowledge, as I claim we must, that we do not begin our epistemological and moral lives as fully devel-

oped, independent, and affectively neutral agents, it is crucial to ask what are the kinds of epistemological difficulties we face in dealing with others given our history of affective engagement and dependency? Earlier I said that the trusting and distrusting inhabit incommensurable worlds. Though many philosophers regard the notion of incommensurability with suspicion, I use it here to emphasise how our attitudes of trust and distrust shape our understanding of various events, leading us to experience the world in ways that tend to reinforce the attitudes we already hold.<sup>12</sup> This phenomenon has already been interestingly discussed.

Judith Baker, for instance, in her article entitled "Rationality and Trust" describes an important kind of trust, "friendship trust", which is "robustly resistant" to evidence that speaks against a friend's presumed character and/or potential deeds. Suppose, Baker suggests, we have a friend, trusted as such, who is accused of some crime on substantial evidence. Do we credit the evidence? Do we cease to trust our friend on that basis? Baker writes:

... what others regard as evidence against ... [my friend] isn't considered by me as evidence at all. It is not that I close my ears to what people say, or refuse to look at, or repress, the facts. I believe that there is an explanation for the alleged evidence for the accusation which will clear it all up.

In advance of hearing the case, I am prepared to believe that there is such an explanation. I am biased in favour of my friend ... I am committed to her being innocent. Moreover, as the case grows, as evidence mounts, I do not have corresponding mounting doubts. Although there may be a time when I cease to believe in my friend, there are no limits which can be set in advance, on epistemic grounds, which would determine the point at which it is irrational to continue to trust her.<sup>14</sup>

What goes for trust seems to go for distrust. As a chillingly unhappy counterpoint to Baker's description of friendship trust, Trudy Govier notes:

12 Perhaps I should reemphasise that I do not mean to suggest that our attitudes towards others *must* be either one of trust or distrust. Certainly, when we encounter strangers a kind of neutrality is possible. Of course, if one's encounters with others are repeated and multifarious, such neutrality will not long endure. In addition, it must be acknowledged that, while our attitudes of trust and distrust become more differentiated, more selective, more directed at particular others as we mature, we *may be* (often are) predisposed to quick and evidentially selective judgements based on past experiences, pre-existing social structures, dependency relationships and a host of other factors that affect our judgements both consciously and unconsciously. Thus, the 'neutrality' we feel towards strangers must not be equated with the abstract and (to my mind) mythical neutrality presupposed in much philosophical work.

13 Not discussed in my text is the suggestive work of Karen Jones. In Jones (1996) she writes: "While affective attitudes can't be willfully adopted in the teeth of evidence, once adopted they serve as a filter for how future evidence will be interpreted." (p. 16). Further, trust and distrust can be "cultivated", in her view, by "controlling our patterns of attention, our lines of inquiry, and our interpretations" (p. 22). Given these reflections, she raises two questions that are germane to my work in this paper: (i) what are the constraints on cultivating attitudes of trust and distrust given the kinds of psychological mechanisms that control our affective patterns of attention, and so forth? (ii) how are agents to evaluate their own capacity for reasonably cultivating trust or distrust given the "self-confirming" nature of these attitudes? (p. 17).

14 Baker (1987), p. 3.

...distrust has a strong tendency to be self-perpetuating: when we distrust someone, we regard even those acts and gestures which should be benign as sinister underneath. We systematically interpret what the other says and does so as to confirm our distrust, and suspiciousness builds on itself. Distrust impedes the communication which could overcome it: what is said is not taken 'straight' because we assume that the other is trying to deceive, mislead, or manipulate us. Even apparently constructive and useful actions, gestures of good will, will be ill received, taken as tokens of something other than what they appear to be. We see, describe, understand, explain, and predict the distrusted other in ways which confirm our distrust, so that suspiciousness builds on itself and our negative beliefs about the other tend in the worst cases toward immunity to refutation by evidence. If the other responds in kind to our attitudes and distrustful behaviour, our distrust will evoke the very negative actions it anticipates and amount, in the end, to a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>15</sup>

Since our attitudes of trust and distrust govern how we experience the world, how we interpret the actions of others and the beliefs we thereby form, it is irresponsible to regard these attitudes as purely responsive to evidence even if we think them so. It is irresponsible and occasionally even tragic, as Shakespeare has movingly instructed us:

Once the seed of doubt was sown in Othello's mind, he was able to assemble "solid proofs" of Desdemona's imagined infidelity out of the most tenuously ambiguous occurrences. We watch in despair as he is led from professing his unshakeable belief in Desdemona ("My life upon her faith!") to his utter conviction of her betrayal with the ever-loyal Cassio ("She's like a liar gone to burning hell!") (*Othello* I.iii. 297; V.ii. 132). And by what evidence? Desdemona's gentle plea on Cassio's behalf, a partially overheard (and, hence, misinterpreted) conversation, a hurried leave-taking between the putative 'lovers', and, of course, a stolen handkerchief – the only evidence the villainous Iago finds necessary to fabricate. Iago's brilliance thus lies not in any meticulously devised and executed plot, but in his recognition of the psychological power of the naively distrusting mind to weave a coherent fantasy around a few mainly chance events, here made salient to Othello in large part by Othello's own conviction of his capacity for objective interpretation. (What he perceives thus becomes "proof" of Desdemona's infidelity.) Othello is duped, then, not so much by Iago, as by the workings of his own mind and by his inability to understand how his attitudes of trust and distrust structure his world.

It's important for philosophers not to make the same mistake. As Baier rightly cautions, it's criminals, not moral theorists, who by and large have been adept at understanding our cognitive vulnerability to interpreting the character and deeds of those to whom we relate through shifting planes of trust and distrust. But now, if our attitudes of trust and distrust do not arise straightforwardly from the evidence, how can they be rationally determined and/or assessed? For I concur with Judith Baker that the trust she characterises as going beyond, or even against, the evidence – friendship trust – can be rational. And I take it we would like to say in consequence, and a propos this exemplary case, that Othello's shift

15 Govier (1991), p. 56.

in attitude towards Desdemona from trust to distrust was tragically irrational, as indeed was his continuing trust (against Desdemona) in his so-called “honest Iago”. What can be the basis for these assessments?

If we focus on Othello, it is natural and in a sense reasonable to conclude that there was something wrong with him, with the way he was determined to put together the elements that fuelled his unhappy fantasy: if only he had been genuinely responsible about exercising his rational faculties, this would never have happened. But how precisely do we understand Othello to have failed in this responsibility? Our philosophical training makes it tempting to suppose he simply let his emotions get in the way. If only he had striven more *self-consciously* for the disinterested objectivity beloved of traditional epistemological and moral theory, everything would have been all right. He would have recognised that Iago was just as open to question and doubt as Desdemona herself and consequently done a better job of assessing the evidence against her in an unbiased way. Admittedly, this would have produced less exciting theatre, but at least Othello’s behaviour would have been morally and epistemically irreproachable.

Or would it have been? From a moral point of view, even this ‘ideal’ scenario falls short in its description of the kind of behaviour we expect from others with whom we have a particular kind of trusting relationship. As Baker has noted of ‘friendship trust’, the kind of trust that exists paradigmatically between committed lovers, we rely on trusted others to believe in us despite what a so-called ‘neutral examination of the evidence’ might show. We expect them to react to events in a way that demonstrates (in a sense to be explored) their *bias* towards us. This is what it means to be a friend. Othello thus betrays Desdemona in the first instance by not understanding and respecting the quality of their relationship. As Baker argues, “... to think of someone as a friend is to expect her to have one’s interests at heart, to act on one’s behalf, to take one’s part, and to take one at one’s word. To be a friend is, reciprocally, to be trustworthy oneself.”<sup>16</sup> And what does such trustworthiness involve? The capacity to understand and follow through with the kind of commitment one has made to the other in putting oneself forward (explicitly, in marriage vows) as his or her friend – i.e. as a person who stands by and believes in the trusted other despite challenges that might cause more ‘neutral’ individuals (see note 13) to be wary.

But does this mean that, from an epistemic point of view, individuals within various trusting relationships are morally committed to thinking and acting irrationally – for instance, by ignoring or reconstructing evidence that points to the other’s bad character or behaviour? Is it not right to think that there comes a point where continuing trust in others, even intimate others, shades into culpable gullibility? Some might resist this characterisation, arguing that it begs an important question about who really is at fault when someone has been gulled in such a relationship. Lars Hertzberg, for instance, would like to shift the onus of blame entirely onto the guller:

When someone’s trust has been misplaced, ... it is always, I want to say, a misunderstanding to regard that as a shortcoming on his part. The responsibility rests with the

person who failed the trust. The reason for this is that, unlike reliance, the grammar of trust involves a perspective of justice: trust can only concern that which one person can rightfully demand of another.<sup>17</sup>

There is something attractive about this idea. Certainly someone who betrays a friend’s trust has a lot to answer for. Yet, it seems overly-romantic to presume the truster is without any responsibility for taking care of himself within a trusting relationship and, hence, for taking care of the relationship itself. After all, the truster we have in mind here is an adult with capacities for observation and judgement, not to mention interpersonal communication. And we expect him to go on using these throughout his relationship with another. Thus, if the gullible adult is not morally at fault (and I am not directly suggesting that he is), then at least he may be faulted on cognitive grounds. By putting (or continuing) his trust in another *uncritically*, he becomes something like an infant who cannot do otherwise. Of course, since the gullible adult can do otherwise, he fails to live up to his cognitive responsibilities as a mature person. Consequently, we are right to say he trusts *irrationally*.

This, of course, was not Othello’s problem, at least with respect to Desdemona. Indeed, one might argue that he was doing his best to avoid such gullibility by facing the possibility of her infidelity and seeking evidence that would establish it. However, before we congratulate Othello for trying to heed the voice of reason at least in this regard, we must not forget that his over-ready distrust of Desdemona – his apparent unwillingness to being gulled – was matched by a radically uncritical trust in Iago. This accounts for the sobering realism of Othello’s character: Incontinent trust is often accompanied by incontinent distrust, whether these attitudes are directed towards different people at the same time or towards the same person at different times (recall Othello’s earlier passionate professions of trust in Desdemona). This points to a relationship between such attitudes. In fact, I suggest, they spring from a common source – namely, an immature psyche that persists in many adults and which is manifested in part by their embracing an unhappy myth about the kind of disengaged neutrality that mature thought and action towards others involves.

Let me now look at this myth more closely. Like many myths, it has some elements of truth which may partly explain its intellectual and emotional appeal: for instance, that as adults we have – and ought to exercise – both affective control and the capacity for evidence-based reflective judgement in difficult circum-

17 Hertzberg (1989), p. 319. The difference between trust and reliance, according to Hertzberg, is that reliance is an attitude we adopt towards others because we have judged them to be trustworthy in some respect. Trust, on the other hand, is an all-out attitude we take towards others whom we are not usually in a position to judge: We trust what they do or say *because* we trust in them. Once again, I agree with Hertzberg’s idea that full-blown trust goes beyond (sometimes against) the evidence (see my comments on Baker above), but I disagree that adult trust has built into it the putative asymmetry Hertzberg describes: “In relying on someone I as it were look down at him from above. I exercise my command of the world. I remain the judge of his actions. In trusting someone I look up from below. I learn from the other what the world is about. I let him be the judge of my actions” (p. 315). On my account, adult trust is neither Hertzberg’s reliance nor his trust. To extend his metaphor, I neither look down on the other nor up at her; ideally, I try to look her in the face.

16 Baker (1987), p. 10.

stances. Yet living up to our cognitive and affective responsibilities cannot entail becoming a rational agent in the traditional sense. For, as we have seen, such rationality presupposes a kind of abstract neutrality with respect to others that is simply not possible for beings that develop as we do. Like it or not, we are in one way or another dependent on others from the day we are born and develop our cognitive and moral capacities precisely through our affective engagements with them. Of course, the dependencies which shape us change over time in keeping with our maturing needs and interests. But they do not go away. They continue to condition our affective lives and, so, modulate how we experience the world. This is not to say we do not also mature in our cognitive capacities for observation, planning, judgement, self-direction, and so forth. But it is to say that such capacities mature, and can *only* mature, in large part through a maturing capacity to understand and handle the way our affective engagements contribute to our lives. Thus, we need not completely repudiate that aspect of our intellectual tradition which insists that we need to be independent and self-reliant if we are to realise our potential as rational creatures. But once we acknowledge our human situation to be one that is unavoidably enmeshed with others throughout the various stages of our lives, we need to revise our understanding of what such qualities amount to and how they are best developed. Coming into our own as “independent” or “autonomous” agents requires that we learn to handle our dependencies maturely; it does not require us – *per impossibile* — to ignore or do without them. Moreover, the philosophical importance of understanding “independence” or “autonomy” in this way cannot be underestimated; for only then can we begin to see how narrower questions, like how we ought to judge others on the basis of evidence, are properly subsumed under the much more important and general question of how we ought to use reason-situated-affectively in *responding well* to them.

What, then, does it mean to become a maturely dependent creature, and how did Othello fail in this regard? More precisely, how can his failure of rationality within his trusting relationships be understood more completely as a failure of maturity? To answer these questions, it will help to examine the nature of the dependencies that exist within the two kinds of trusting relationships, infant and adult.

Infant trust is often characterised in terms of utter dependency. The relationship between infant and adult is dramatically asymmetrical. As Hertzberg says, “the human infant is not... an independently intelligible living unit, and not simply because of the physical cares which he must receive from others, but because the sense of his activity depends on the way in which it is interwoven with the activity of others.”<sup>18</sup> The developmental psychologist, Jerome Bruner, has called this sense-making structuring of activity ‘parental scaffolding’. The idea behind it is that the child comes into the world without much capacity for self-maintenance, still less with the capacity for self-directed thought and action and, hence, for self-determination. Nevertheless, he has impressive capacities for imitation and, in particular, selective imitation, first, of the facial movements of his caretakers, then of their body movements, and finally of their actions with objects in

18 Hertzberg (1989), p. 316.

their environment. These mutual imitation games, delighted in by child and parent alike, are the primary means by which the child identifies himself as like another and so, eventually, as a person whose thoughts and actions belong to the kind that persons produce. They are also the primary means by which the parent moulds the child to react, think, and feel about things as persons do. As the psychologists Meltzoff and Gopnik remark:

...mutual imitation games are a unique and important constituent of early interpersonal growth. Adults are both selective and interpretive in the behaviour they reflect back to the child. They provide interpretive imitations to their infants, reflections that capture aspects of the infants’ activity, but then go beyond it to read in intentions and goals to that behaviour. ... This, in turn, leads the infant beyond his or her initial starting point. Likewise, selected actions, especially those that are potentially meaningful in the culture, will be reflected back [to the infant] more often than others...<sup>19</sup>

The dependency the child experiences in the hands of the adult is thus the dependency of “self” constitution. The parent literally makes it possible for the child to define and understand itself in social space, which is a space at the same time created by the parent. The child’s capacity for self-determination is thus, at this stage, taken on by the parent – eventually, of course, in order that the child can develop an independent capacity for self-determination. Paradoxically, then, self-determination must begin with other determination: the child becomes an agent by having its agency enacted by another. Now, is the bond in this relationship a bond of trust?

There are good reasons to call it trust, but reasons not to as well. Trust is not mere reliance, but reliance that is marked essentially by a recognition of the other’s personhood. As Richard Holton claims, “Trusting someone does not involve relying on them and having some belief about them: a belief, perhaps that they are trustworthy. What it involves is relying on them... and investing that reliance with a certain attitude... we normally take only towards people ... When the car breaks down we might be angry, but when a friend lets us down we feel betrayed.”<sup>20</sup> Holton never really clarifies why we adopt such different attitudes towards the things we rely on as opposed to the people we trust; but it seems clear that it must have to do with our expectations that others’ behaviour towards us will be governed by their acknowledgement of our personhood. Objects don’t do that. Trust, thus, involves recognising the other’s acknowledgement of oneself as a source of self-determined action, hence as a reflectively self-conscious person with reactive attitudes towards other people and the world. Without these attitudes, and their mutual recognition and acknowledgement, we would be incapable of moral interactions.<sup>21</sup>

Now, in the case of the relationship between parent and infant, it is clear that the infant’s development as an independent agent depends on the parent’s

19 Meltzoff and Gopnik (1993), p. 349.

20 Holton (1994), p. 67.

21 In the same way that H.P. Grice has said we would be incapable of genuinely linguistic interactions. On reactive attitudes, see Strawson (1982).



acknowledgement of his personhood. But the infant is not yet a person, in the sense that he is likewise capable of recognising either the parent or himself as a person each in his or her own right. At best, the infant is capable of what Melzoff and Gopnik describe as a kind of functional recognition: here is something 'like me', i.e., something that can be imitated and imitates me in return.<sup>22</sup> So the infant is not yet in a position to trust the parent. But it is trust-in-the-making, and made only because the parent behaves as if the child trusts the parent – i.e. the parent acknowledges and acts towards the child as a person whose attitudes and actions towards the parent are not only self-determined, but also conditioned by the child's recognition of the parent's own personhood. In this way, the child comes to be the kind of being that could trust the parent, i.e. a being that is capable of full-blown adult trust.<sup>23</sup>

Adult trust involves a dependency that is different in kind from 'infant trust'. Since the trusting adult relies upon the other, he is vulnerable, like the infant, to actions and attitudes outside of his control. Nevertheless, the adult relationship between truster and trusted is importantly symmetrical. The truster does not depend on the other either for self-determination or for maintaining the relationship between them as a relationship between persons. He is a person in his own right. The trust he gives is, therefore, 'chosen' in the sense that it issues from his own capacity for recognising the relationship between him and the one he trusts as a relationship conditioned by mutual acknowledgement. And since such acknowledgement does not depend in the adult case on the other's pretence that he is a person with fully self-directed thoughts and intentions, the thoughts and intentions he actually has require acknowledgement by the trusted other if the other is to treat him as a person.

The adult thus requires from the trusted other something much more than the infant requires and also something much less: He requires that his vulnerability to the trusted other be recognised as the vulnerability of one self-determined person to another. It is thus a vulnerability based on interests, needs, and desires which are importantly the truster's own and to which he trusts the other can and will be sensitive, guiding her actions accordingly. But, of course, since he requires this kind of full acknowledgement from the other (rather than parental self-enactment), he must be prepared for disappointment. The trusted other is a person in her own right as well – with needs, desires, interests that are importantly her own. So, even with all the good will in the world the trusted other may not be able to live up to the truster's hopes and expectations, either because she has misunderstood the truster's needs and desires or because her own needs and desires cannot be easily reconciled with the truster's own and cannot be given up without serious compromise. Since the trusted other does not take on the role of determining the truster's needs and desires herself, the trusted other can betray the trusting adult in a way that she cannot betray the so-called trusting child. This is not to minimise what can happen to the child. On the contrary. The child can certainly be profoundly and invasively damaged by the parent on whom he

22. Holton (1994), p. 337.

23. This position is developed more fully in McGeer and Pettit (forthcoming). For a similar point, see Hentzberg (1989), p. 316.

must rely. But because the parent takes on the role of determining the child's understanding of his own needs and desires, the child cannot experience, at least initially, the gap between self and other as a gap of potentially conflicting interests.

So what happened to Othello? Why do I claim he was immature in his understanding of trust and trusting relationships? Othello was caught somewhere between infancy and adulthood, wanting the security of infancy within an adult relationship. He aimed for this security by making his trust in others contingent upon their needs and desires being undifferentiable from his own. Iago, in his project of manipulation and aided by his (kneeling) position of servitude, pandered to this need by seeming to subordinate his own agency to Othello's:

*Witness, you ever-burning lights above,  
You elements that clip us round about,*

*Witness that here Iago doth give up*

*The execution of his wit, hands, heart*

*To wronged Othello's service! (III, iv, 460–464)*

Desdemona, in the context of her real adult love, made no such pretence. She continued to enact her own agency by articulating desires and goals of her own. In the face of their potentially diverging interests, Othello's trust in her depended on his acknowledging this feature of their relationship, including all the trials and tribulations that portends – always working to understand and be understood by the other, and with no guarantee for continuing success. He took refuge instead in a "nostalgic fantasy-memory" (Baier's term) of the parent-child relationship in which the ground of its security and stability, self-determination by the other, had been completely effaced.<sup>24</sup> By imagining such relationships to be possible in adulthood, Othello transformed his own need for such security into the oppressive and ultimately destructive ideal of trust beyond doubt. Thus, he demanded absolute proof of Desdemona's fidelity, proof that (by nature of the psychological roots of this demand) could not be forthcoming. By failing to recognize his own contribution to this dynamic, Othello broke faith with Desdemona and with himself. With Desdemona, by failing to acknowledge her as a self-determining person in her own right (finally to the point of killing her), and with himself, by abrogating responsibility for directing his own life, not to Desdemona, of course, whose distance (by distinction) *ipso facto* made her unreliable, but to another parental surrogate, the 'evi-

24. Baier (1986) uses this expression to explain "... the persistent human adult tendency to profess trust in a creator-God" (p. 242). As noted before, Baier argues that it is rejection of this kind of faith in an all-powerful being (hence, a rejection of infant trust) that may partly explain why discussions of trust are so limited in modern moral philosophy: "If trust is seen as a variant of the suspect virtue of faith in the competence of the powers that be, then readiness to trust will be seen not just as a virtue of the weak but itself as a moral weakness, better replaced by vigilance and self-assertion, by self-reliance or by cautious, minimal, and carefully monitored trust. The psychology of adolescents, not infants, then gets glorified as the moral ideal." (Ibid.) Baier and I agree in calling this psychology 'adolescent'. But, as I have argued, I believe it persists in many adults (even philosophers) because of a continued longing for, rather than rejection of, a state of infant trust. Hence, religious faith of the sort Baier describes and her "cautious, minimal, and carefully monitored trust" are really variant manifestations of the same underlying psychological condition.

dence', which Othello insisted would tell him authoritatively whether to trust her or not. But the answer was foreordained. To turn away from Desdemona, to seek elsewhere for the security she could not give him, was already to interpret her otherness as a form of betrayal. The 'evidence' thus became for Othello, not only a reassuring source of certainty, but also a certain (i.e., inevitable) source of reassurance: *ex post facto* confirmation that he was right to withdraw from her as he did.

## 3

Finally, a word about paradigms of rationality. The foregoing reading of *Othello* has been a philosopher's reading, aimed at revealing certain features of the complicated epistemology of trust that I claim have escaped more traditional analyses. As with any reading, it could be enhanced in a number of ways: I do not mention the social and political aspects of the play; I do not focus (directly) on issues of gender. And these are far from irrelevant to the philosophical examination of questions of trust and distrust. Indeed, I hope this paper makes obvious why such issues cannot be irrelevant and invites more work along these lines. Still, my explicit purpose has been more modest. It has been to insist that, even if we begin with narrower epistemological concerns, philosophers cannot go far without taking into account what it means for us to be in the world as developed and developing beings. In particular, I have tried to explain why the project of searching for objective proof for or against another's goodwill, though standardly encouraged, will not inevitably lead to rational attitudes of trust and distrust. On the contrary. *One sees what one is prepared to see*. This motto can be taken as a banal reminder to the agent to be scrupulous in his search for and assessment of evidence; or it can be taken in a psychologically and philosophically more suggestive way, as an observation that the agent cannot be expected to break out of the circle of self-confirming trust or distrust without letting go of a certain model of what it is to be rational in his relationships with others. It is not just that this model advocates affective neutrality in situations of interpersonal dependency where such neutrality is neither desirable nor possible; this model operates psychologically to relieve the agent of the need to act as a genuinely responsible agent in the emotionally and cognitively challenging conditions of adult trust. To accept such a role may well be one of the hardest developmental tasks human beings can be motivated to accomplish – which may explain why we are also sometimes driven to avoid it. It means accepting, among other things, that relationships among consenting adults will always be conditioned by the kind of differences that self-directed, yet affectively engaged individuals bring to one another – a source of structural uncertainty in the interpersonal dynamics of any given adult relationship. In the face of this uncertainty, we can either run from it, using an inappropriate paradigm of rationality to justify narrowly self-protective but, ultimately, self-infantilising and often harmful behaviour; or we can risk making ourselves vulnerable to others, actively acknowledging the fact that we might fail in our relationships with them or be betrayed by them, but recognising that such moments of trust are necessary to move forward in life, to create things we cannot yet imagine and to transform ourselves (and others) in ways we cannot yet anticipate.

This requires accepting a different paradigm of rationality – an alternative vision of how reason can serve the self-confident adult who is willing to stake his own capacities for survival under duress against the potential rewards of building successful relationships with others. In this context, it is not that questions of warranted trust disappear; but they do not have the same *a priori* urgency that drives the immature agent to seek guarantees against disappointment and pain. The mature agent understands that such guarantees cannot be had: he uses reason to *respond well* to particular others, conducting himself towards them in ways that invite them into a trusting relationship. He shows his awareness that their responsiveness is partly, thought not entirely, contingent upon his ability to understand and respect their interests and desires as features of their agency, rather than merely as potential blocks to his own. And he looks for signs in *their* responses that they are willing to do the same towards him. Only in such concrete exchanges can an agent determine how far his trust is warranted, for these will show him to what extent he can use reason constructively, not just to negotiate the difficulties that inevitably arise within mature relationships, but also to expand his self-understanding as he strives to understand and move forward with particular others. Reason, on this model, is not used to dominate the other or to protect the self; it is used to continuously discover the other *and* the self, as each party evolves through the dynamics of interaction. This means trusting in reason itself, not to offer guarantees against disappointment, but to provide the means for working through and moving beyond disappointment when such moments arise. For just as reason cannot deliver the sceptic from his self-imposed doubt, it cannot protect the agent from the difficulties attendant on adult trust. But this is hardly cause for despair – or, rather, with such 'despair' comes the chance to develop a new understanding of what it means to be an agent reasoning with others in the world. For the moment he abandons the project of using reason 'objectively' from the perspective of an ideal (disengaged) observer is the moment he can begin to embrace a new project of exploring the unlimited potential of concrete, work-a-day reason used continuously and constructively to respond well to others in the context of his evolving relationships with them.<sup>25</sup>



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