Exit and voice

by Bart Nooteboom

122. The destruction of distrust   8-12-2013

Trust is needed to give some space to others for choice and action. The alternative is to lock up the other in control and monitoring.

However, while distrust is destructive it is itself difficult to destroy. Deep distrust will defeat trust.

In a relationship that starts with distrust others have to prove that they are trustworthy. This is doomed to fail. Proving one's trustworthiness is logically impossible in the same way that it is impossible to prove that a theory is true. No matter how often or long a theory has been corroborated, i.e. not contradicted by observations, it remains possible that it will be falsified in the future. In the same way, no matter how often one shows one's trustworthiness, in keeping to agreements and promises, and taking positive action to mutual advantage or even from altruism, and being open about mistakes and failures, this does not prove that next time one will not break trust.

Since trustworthiness cannot be proved, and the possibility of its lack remains, the mistrustful are inclined to impose ever-stronger tests of trustworthiness. But there is no logical end to this. At some point the people who remain mistrusted will break out and exit. And the mistrustful will interpret this as evidence of untrustworthiness.

If a relationship is started in distrust, and people have to prove their trustworthiness, they will avoid all actions that may break expectations, which would likely be seen as a confirmation of untrustworthiness. No opposition will be voiced. I once worked at a university faculty where the dean took the stance that people must first prove their trustworthiness. It led to an organization of 'yes-men', lack of criticism, sweet-talking the dean, a culture of fear and conformism. It is the only case that I know of where in the end a dean was deposed by a university board.

By the same mechanism, in the difficult struggle of going from eros to philia, discussed in a preceding item of this blog, a deep fear of vulnerability and failure may yield the stance that now the other has prove his/her trustworthiness, and then the destruction of love sets in, leading to an exit which is seen as a confirmation of untrustworthiness, or lack of love.

Deep distrust can keep one from engaging in relationships that would allow people to show their trustworthiness. Trust, on the other hand, enables relationships and can be adjusted when untrustworthiness manifests itself.

In contrast with distrust, trust, with its assumption that another is trustworthy, can be falsified by evidence to the contrary. However, if the room for action offered by trust leads to a disappointment of expectations, that does not necessarily prove untrustworthiness. It can be due to a mishap, a mistake, or lack of attention. One should extend benefit of the doubt and engage in *voice*, a discussion of what is going on, allowing for mistakes or lack of competence, and be open about one's own errors and mistakes. When this voice does not work one can reduce the space for action, extending control, or one can go for *exit*. Trust is *imperfection on the move*.

164. Trust as virtue   published 21-9-2014

Trust yields a good illustration of virtue ethics. Trust is not a moral obligation but a virtue. It requires character. It is contingent, not universal: one should not trust blindly or unconditionally, but depending on experience, customs and conditions. Trust can be both emotional and rational. It can yield dilemmas. It requires actions that are appropriate to specific circumstances. It requires practical wisdom to perceive and judge what is salient in those circumstances.

Here I pick up elements from the earlier analysis of trust in this blog (in items 68-73).

As I discussed there, trust is a matter not only of intentions but also of competences. One must not only have good intentions but also the ability to act upon them.

Trust is emotional since it is accompanied by risk, fear, hope and doubt. It is rational in the analysis of reasons why the *trustee,* the trusted person, organization or system, may or may not be trustworthy.

Trustworthiness requires virtues of character, such as being reasonable, forbearance, commitment, endurance, consistency, empathy, openness, courage, and the right amount of self-confidence.

A shortage of self-confidence breeds suspicion, out of an excessive sense of vulnerability. Too much self-confidence blinds one to risks or overestimates ability to deal with them.

Trust requires courage because it presupposes acceptance of uncertainty. If one were certain about what will happen and what people will do, there would be no talk of trust.

Trust requires reasonableness, forbearance, and reciprocity, give and take, in taking appropriate action. When something goes wrong one should not immediately conclude foul play. One should extend benefit of the doubt and give an opportunity to explain what happened. Disappointment of expectations may be due to a mishap that is no one's fault, a shortfall of competence, or lack of attention or commitment, rather than bad intent. Then one must have endurance and commitment to help improvements. In other words, one should not immediately go for 'exit', but give 'voice' a chance.

Conversely, when one makes an error, one should own up to it, explain, help to redress damage, and show how one aims to prevent similar errors in future. One should also be open concerning one's fears. That gives the other side an opportunity to take action to mitigate them. In other words: trust requires openness.

Empathy is needed to understand the motives and position of others, including threats they suffer, in order to take them into account in forbearance, and to judge risks and reliability.

Trust is not 'being nice'. Precisely because there is trust one can afford to be critical.

More trust can allow for less control, but trust is not boundless and where it ends control must start. Trust is not unconditional. In case of persistent error or cheating, controls are tightened, or voice turns into exit.

Trust is imperfect. It breaks under pressures of survival, as in times of crisis. Then self-interest is likely to prevail, and relations may break. The challenge then is to end a relationship in as trustworthy a fashion as possible, helping to limit the damage it causes, and helping the other side in the exit.

One may also face different, conflicting obligations, to family, job, community, and conscience, and one may have to choose.

Finally, apart from trust as a means to govern relationships, it also has intrinsic value: for many people, for virtuous people, dealing on the basis of trust is more agreeable and is part of humane relationships.

In sum, trust requires virtues of courage, self-confidence, forbearance, openness, reasonableness, endurance, and voice. One should analyze specific events in specific conditions, with an open mind, to arrive at appropriate action. One can encounter conflicting obligations. One should seek a balance between trust and control, between self-interest and altruism. And trust also has intrinsic value.

The capability of trust is a good example of what Aristotle called 'practical reason' (*phronesis*).

219. Voice, twitter and barking   published 5-10-2015

'Voice' means that in case of trouble in a relationship one voices it, with the intent of solving it, in collaboration, in contrast with 'exit', where one engages in battle, or walks out, ending the relationship. Voice is crucial for trust, as I argued in this blog.

The notions of voice and exit derive from Albert Hirschman. A paper at a recent conference on the philosophy of management[i], the question was raised what effects social media have on voice. Here I tap from that paper.

Voice, with its intention to mend problems, should exercise some restraint. Too much voice creates noise and chaos. It should also be patient, allowing time for a response and efforts for improvement.

In the past this took care of itself, given the effort and transaction costs of setting up and conducting communication. Now, with social media, the costs and the threshold are low. It is easy to vice a complaint on Facebook or Twitter. At no cost it can be exercised impulsively and indiscriminately. There is no pause for reflection and restraint. This increases the volume and decreases the quality of voice.

The limit of 144 signs blocks nuance.

Twitter also lacks the non-linguistic hints of gesture, eye contact, and demeanour that support interpretation, disambiguation and understanding, on the part of both the receiver and the sender. There is no direct feedback in the communication, which might restrain, modify or supplement the message.

It often also demands immediate response and action from the target of voice, not only because of the impatience of the source of voice, but also for the risk that the protest proliferates and escalates, in re-tweets, repeats, response, and additions.

But there is more. It seems that such voice, if it can still be called that, is exercised not with a serious attempt at improvement, but as a means of attracting attention, seeking confirmation, self-expression, venting emotions. A streak of hysteria enters.

With all this, twitter becomes barking. It may not even have a clearly identifiable addressee, but is a general, weakly specified protest, resentment, thrown at the world at large. The smallest stirring in the undergrowth sets off one dog, and a host of other dogs furiously follows, salivating, not wanting to seem an underdog.

In consumer society, where the consumer is said to be sacrosanct, he/she has been exhorted to voice complaint, in interviews, surveys and opinion polls, and now on internet, not just as a right but almost as a duty to prevail.

If there is an addressee of the barking, what is she/he to do, when an avalanche of diatribe erupts? To cope with it, computers are used, with standard responses, I would think, and intelligent software sifting through the bile for bits of serious and fruitful bits of voice.

What can be done? There is software that builds in a pause for reflection on Internet, or a prod to re-read one's message, before sending, or that allows a target to respond before the tweet is broadcast. Will that help, or is it like trying to hush a barking dog? Can the dogs be muzzled without violating freedom of expression? Is there no exit?

231. The temptation of exit   published 7-12-2015

Trust and fruitful relationships require a commitment to 'voice', the effort to acknowledge problems in a relationship, view them soberly and approach them constructively and reasonably, and to solve them together, in give and take.

It requires an effort at mutual understanding. Crossing what in this blog I have called 'cognitive distance', differences in views, perspective, norms and knowledge, trying to understand and be understood. That requires adequate 'absorptive capacity', ability to understand, from experience and knowledge, skills of empathy, imagining oneself in the shoes of the other, and skill of expression, with the use of metaphor to phrase one's views in terms familiar to the other. It requires trust in giving space to the other, running the risk that the other employs that space to one's detriment.

That makes voice difficult, full of effort, and risky. It is easier to exit: walk out, break the relationship, and be done with it. Differences in perspective, views and knowledge can be fruitful but also bothersome.

When uncertain, averse to risk, or mistrustful, one may go for pre-emptive exit: getting out before the other does. One may be hesitant to invest in a relationship with a high risk of loss. This may apply, in particular, to love relationships, in fear of getting hurt, and 'wasting one's best years'. Having been cheated or deserted a lot, one will stand more ready to cut losses and flee.

According to Alain Badiou[ii] and Simon Critchley[iii] love is not comfort and contentment but ongoing effort. It strikes a gap in the self, to receive a gift over which one has no power, and giving something over which one also has no power. It is a conquering of the impossible. It is easier not to engage in it.

Also, the grass may seem greener on the other side of the hill, tempting exit to gain more.

Lacking self-confidence, feeling vulnerable, one may be on the look-out for negative signs, tempted to give a negative interpretation to harmless, even well-intended acts.

This is strengthened by the psychological phenomenon of 'loss aversion': more weight is attached, with stronger emotions, to potential loss than to potential gain. In a 'loss frame' people may fall into emotional extremes. Even businessmen have been known to litigate in revenge, at great cost, without the slightest chance of success.

Third parties may help, in a 'heart to heart' with a good friend, perhaps, or consultation with a professional intermediary, dousing flames of fear and emotion, defusing foregone conclusions, recognizing the facts, showing the positive, checking out suspicions.

In sum, voice is hard, and fragile. It takes courage, commitment and perseverance.

And when, finally, a decision to exit is taken, with good reasons, the question becomes how to conduct it.

One form of exit is the ambush: prepare exit on the sly, and spring it by surprise, dropping the bomb, leaving the other in confusion and distress. That minimizes the opportunity for the other to block or obstruct the exit. It is a tempting form of exit.

But it also catapults the other in a loss frame that may trigger extremes of revenge, in conflict, litigation, slander and destruction of reputation.

The other option is a voice mode of exit. Here one alerts the other in time, helps to unravel the relationship, giving support in exit, and some form of compensation, perhaps, and help in finding an alternative. Here also, third parties may help as intermediaries.

Are the dedication to voice, and the skills needed, resisting the temptations of exit, sufficiently part of education?

231. Will robots have voice?   published 13-12-2015

What will happen when robots take on more and more tasks, with increasing intelligence? What if a robot is opinionated, its views going against the established order, or against the will of its maker or owner?

Presently, an intellectual, scientist, or worker on a shop floor with contrary views cannot easily be silenced, in democracies. But robots may be simply switched off, or re-programmed to conform.

What will this do to people, if with regard to robots they no longer need to defend their views, and can bend the views of robots to their own? Would people then prefer to consort with robots, for the ease and comfort of it? Would that make them more self-involved, narcissistic even, turning robots into mirrors?

In this blog I argued that one needs the opposition form the other to detect one's own myopia, to nourish a flourishing life. This is needed, I argued, to achieve the highest form of freedom, which includes freedom from the bias of the self.

If robots are self-learning, by adapting their intelligence to what is successful, more rigorously and perfectly than humans, will this be a source of contrariness, defiance? People have a variety of sources of experience, in jobs, families, friendship, sports, travel and chance encounters, to feed their cognition and morality. Will robots have access to such diversity of experience? Will the owner of the robot, having invested in it, be willing to grant it unproductive time, in a range of private activities?

Next to his notions of 'exit' and 'voice', Albert Hirschman recognized the possibility of 'loyalty', which is acceptance, surrender to a faulty relationship.

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Robots may undergo forced exit, being switched off, or may be programmed for loyalty. Will they be allowed to raise voice, or even be programmed for it? Or will they ever be self-generative enough to grasp voice, or even to impose loyalty? How moral will they be? And how would they acquire morality? I discussed that in item 179 of this blog.

233. Constructive alienation   published 18-12-2015

The notion of alienation is best known from the work of Marx. It mostly has a negative connotation of not being able to express and be oneself, and to be accepted, in work or communication. This has three elements.

First, not getting the opportunity to express oneself. Second, not being heard or understood. Third, not being accepted for what one claims to be.

Concerning the third, whatever one claims to be, to deserve in position and recognition, is to be ratified by whatever categories apply in the established 'symbolic order' (to use that term from Lacan and Zizek). One may claim to be a philosopher but this is recognized only when one has a degree in that field or publications that have been well received professionally or by the wider public. Zizek called such lack of recognition and legitimation a 'second death', a symbolic death, next to physical death of the body.

Here, alienation is that 'I am not perceived or credited to be what I feel I am'. On one extreme, as an outsider one may hardly be recognised at all, hardly have symbolic presence. On another extreme, as a celebrity one may have too much symbolic presence, distorting what I feel I am.

However, perfect expression, being fully and faithfully present in the symbolic order, could apply only if one assumes that there is a given, coherent, unified, original self to be expressed.

In philosophy since David Hume, later also in Marx, and in postmodern philosophy, that notion of the subject is waived. The subject is seen as multiple, often incoherent, sometimes even inconsistent, and in flux. It is constituted by action and communicative interaction, from response from others. Thus imperfection of expression is inherently problematic because there is no autonomous self to express. Nevertheless, imperfect expression is still a cause of feeling forlorn.

Alienation, not being fully understood and accepted, is the price one pays for having an identity. One cannot have an identity without some degree of difference or distance to others.

Alienation is also inherent in the constitution of the self. This was recognized by Marx, and is called 'constitutive alienation'. As I have argued in this blog, one needs opposition from the other to develop a self, to have any chance of correcting one's myopia and

prejudice, to gain freedom from it. Imperfect expression may call forth correction or enrichment by the response from others. It then becomes imperfection on the move, in the ongoing making of the self.

In preceding items in this blog I discussed Alfred Hirschman's notions of 'voice', 'exit' and 'loyalty'. Voice is needed to maintain and repair relationships when they run into trouble, as they mostly do, rather than fleeing from them, in exit. In the present analysis, voice assumes a deeper value, as constitutive of the self.

Then, the issue is not so much an issue of autonomy, the opportunity to express a given self, but of automorphism, the opportunity to form the self.

Of course, this requires attention from others, not just to listen to what one has to say, but being open to it, even if it sounds eccentric, giving it the benefit of the doubt, and next also to oppose or correct it, not only allowing for expression but also yielding impression. One not only needs to join but also to have a rejoinder. This appears to be increasingly lacking in large areas of modern work, due to increased flexibilization, as I discussed earlier, in item 211 of this blog. Perhaps this resembles what Marx called the 'commodification of work'.

So, by constructive alienation I mean two things: alienation as a basis for construction of the self, and alienation from the sources of such construction. If one is robbed of opportunities for the dialectic of expression and construction one is alienated from construction.

That occurs when after sending a message one receives no evidence that it has been read, or when there is no response, no rejoinder. This happens often in communication via the Internet. Sending a message is a bid for symbolic recognition, and lack of response yields alienation. For lack of response one is also alienated from the sources of the construction of the self. Thus, proliferation of messaging yields proliferation of alienation. We call this the communication revolution.

259. Voice and parrhêsia   published 30-4-2016

In this blog, I have used the notion of *voice*, proposed by Albert Hirschman, in a discussion of the practical wisdom of trust. Here I make a connection with the notion of *parrhêsia,* discussed by Michel Foucault in his late work (in the form of lectures at the *Collège de France,* in 1984).

Parrhêsia is a form of truth telling, different from other forms, such as confession, prophecy, teaching, reporting, scientific and philosophical discourse. Those forms mostly entail technical or factual matters (*techne,* in ancient Greek), and they are mostly one-directional, keeping distance, staying aloof.

Parrhêsia, by contrast, is a matter of morality (*ethos*), requires commitment, and is bilateral, interactive. It accepts the uncertainty of what one effects in the other, and of his/her response. In being honest, it puts the relation at risk, the risk of a break, or of a defensive, aggressive response, or *exit*, to adopt that other notion from Albert Hirschman. Hence, it requires courage.

This makes it very much like *voice*, if not identical. Perhaps the notion of *parrhêsia* deepens the notion of *voice.* But also the other way around: *voice* complements *parrhêsia.*

Voice/parrhêsia is a form of benevolence and requires benevolence also on the part of the interlocutor, to be open to criticism, extending benefit of the doubt rather than jumping to conclusions and falling into suspicion when meeting opposition, or running away from it.

In other words, voice/parrhêsia requires trust and reciprocity in openness and benevolence. Trust is a condition for it as well an outcome of it. When voice meets voice it deepens.

I propose that it does not entail 'telling it all', as Foucault suggested. Trust should not be blind and openness has its limits, to limit relational risk, for oneself and the other, and not to overtax the absorptive capacity and benevolence of the interlocutor, and indeed also one's own. It is fragile and requires care.

Foucault also discusses the extreme form of cynicism, in the classical sense, of a brutal, offensive, uncompromising telling of stark, naked truth, often combined with an exhibitionist renunciation of worldly goods. If that is a form of voice, it is an exit form of it.

286. Creative conflict and criticism   published 24-10-2016

Present culture wars in Western societies, with shouting matches between nationalists and cosmopolitans, 'elites' and 'commoners' or 'grass roots', highly and low-educated, free traders and protectionists, are due, in large part, I think, to an unwillingness and inability to engage in uttering and absorbing constructive criticism. At the same time there is an urge towards expression and self-assertion. Together, they have disastrous effects of polarization, with mutual indifference, or intolerance and escalation of negative conflict.

Conflict can be creative but that demands the effort and ability to engage in giving and accepting, appreciating, constructive criticism, based on openness and curiosity, aimed at mutual understanding. Those may be based on Christian virtues of faith in the positive potential of people, hope of its realization, and love for the give and take of relationships. It may also be based on traditional, cardinal values of reflection, courage, moderation and justice. We seem to have lost all of those, somehow.

What is happening?

First, young generations, not having suffered the horrors of war, racism and nationalism, have grown up in a safe, protective environment, robbing themselves of the need to deal with hardship that builds strength and resilience.

This has fed risk avoidance, in an obsession with safety and control. That has produced excessive control mechanisms in many realms of work, which stifle professional initiative, kill intrinsic motivation of work, and narrow room for improvisation and for catering to variety of taste and circumstance.

Second, postmodern philosophy has generated, mostly as a result of misunderstanding, an excessive, perverse relativism, according to which any view is as good as any other. Opinions are as good as arguments, and everyone has a right to his or her own. There is no common ground for debate, and criticism is seen as intolerant, offensive, power play.

The misunderstanding is this. I accept relativism in the form of renouncing absolute objectivity and truth, accepting that one's views, and even observations, are biased by forms of thought, based on one's biological and cultural inheritance, and formed along one's individual path of life. However, the resulting difference in ideas and views, in what earlier in the blog I called 'cognitive distance', form a reason not for abandoning debate, but, on the contrary, for engaging in it. Precisely because our views are biased, the only chance we have at correcting them lies in looking at other, conflicting views. As I argued at several places in this blog, one needs opposition from others to achieve freedom from one's prejudices and errors.

In contrast with this, an ethic has arisen where respect is seen as avoiding criticism, rather than valuing opposition. People congregate with whom they agree, cuddling their conformity.

Third, there is a romantic urge for individual self-expression, authenticity. In combination with unwillingness and inability to voice and absorb criticism constructively, this becomes a noisy celebration of narcissism.

At some schools, students are bedded in safety, in a pact of mutual non-aggression. Trust is seen as softness, conflict avoidance. Instead, students should be educated to voice and absorb constructive criticism. It is precisely because there is trust that one can tell each other 'the truth'. Returning to the cardinal virtues: one should learn to listen and reflect on what is said, what to say, and how to say it. Have the courage to take the risk of giving and evoking criticism. To be moderate and modest in one's claims, and just in judgement.

This issue is connected with the notion of cognitive distance. To recall: cognition here is a wide notion, including knowledge as well as moral views concerning the conduct of relationships. Distance is bothersome, makes collaboration difficult, but also yields the potential for learning. Ability to cross cognitive distance enhances learning by interaction. It is good for society as well as the individual.

One can make a distinction between distance in substantive knowledge and moral/ relational distance. The latter is more difficult to cross than the former. Constructive conflict is best served by reducing moral distance, in order to better cross distance in knowledge. Dealing with each other while disagreeing.

[i] Isaac Waisberg & Ingrid Erickson, 'Who is listening? The impact of technology on voice', *Philosophy of Management Conference*, Oxford, 9-12 July, 2015.

[ii] Alain Badiou, 2009, *Eloge d'amour*, Flammarion.

[iii] Simon Critchley, 2010, *How to stop living and start worrying*, Polity.