

499. Where trust goes too far

There is a positive bias in trust, as if it is always a good thing. I have written much about trust, and my approach also was mostly positive. But trust can go too far, in several ways:

1. Trust in untrustworthy people is misplaced. If trust decreases because trustworthiness decreases, that is a good thing.
2. Blind trust. in disregarding the possibility or evidence of a lack of trustworthiness.
3. Trust out of desperation: there is no alternative. This connects to Albert Hirschman's recognition of 'loyalty' next to 'voice' and 'exit'. If there is no basis for deliberation, in voice, and no option of exit, in being pinned down or coerced, there is only one option of staying put and making the best of it. In Russia under Stalin, people talked lovingly of 'little father' Stalin, in spite of his blatant terror. Psychologically, it was unbearable to face reality.
4. Trust in higher powers can go too far and lead to excesses of 'Befehl ist Befehl', or Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil', in amorally following rules too far and rigidly, as found in the famous experiments of Stanley Milgram and the present crisis of the affair concerning public childcaring grants in the Netherlands.
5. Associated with that, when a system becomes very complex, with many people involved in a process, accountability may be lost, and the system may become untrustworthy.
6. The disadvantage of bonding in family or clan, as in Japan, for example, is that relationships are locked into such clans, excluding variety from outside, which can be bad for innovation.
7. One can have multiple, conflicting obligations, to job, family, personnel, customers, suppliers, environment, community or nation, that can necessitate disloyalty to at least one of them, in a crisis.
8. Due to harsh outside conditions that threaten survival, people who intend to be trustworthy can no longer afford it.
9. According to the philosopher Nietzsche, benevolence and pity are the result of the power play of the weak to protect them against the strong or exert vengeance on them. This can yield forced or hypocritical trust.
10. According to Bernard Mandeville, private vices are public virtues. I would say that the duty of benevolence can eliminate the virtuous power of 'Thymos', the urge to excel and perform of the entrepreneur, discoverer, sportsman, scientist etc.

The affair concerning grants for child care that is creating upheaval in the Netherlands was that the grants were given first, and had to be accounted for afterwards, and minor errors were immediately penalised by having to retribute the grants. This caused great distress, because the predominantly poor people involved had a hard time in conforming to the control, and were immediately branded as cheaters, and had to prove they were not. The procedure showed distrust of the citizens involved. The history behind this was that earlier there had indeed been blatant fraud in a different arrangement, with the same condition of giving the grant first and demanding accounts afterwards. This had been seen by parliament and the authorities as an excess of trust, and the distrust here was a rebound of that, demanding stringent control.

Nietzsche had said that benevolence, pity and trust were a result of a perverse exercise of the will to power of the weak, in protecting themselves against the powerful and taking vengeance

Bernard de Mandeville claimed that there is little evidence of virtue and that a society endowed with all the virtues would be a static, stagnant society. Virtues might suppress initiative and 'thymos', the drive and spirit of life, too much, which can harm both the individual, taking away the zest of life, and render society pallid and dull, in the absence of entrepreneurship in business, science, politics and discovery.

However, one can be open and honest in some of those conflicts between virtue and power, ask for sympathy, offer recompense, or accept retribution. One can be trustworthy in one's untrustworthiness.

In judging trustworthiness, one should be wary of impostors and con artists, and one should consider the conditions of survival and the multiple loyalties that people may have, in what Aristotle called 'phronesis'.

The principle remains that the default should be trust: trust someone until evidence or the perceived necessity of untrustworthiness arises. The other way around: distrusting people until trustworthiness is proven, is impossible, in the same way that a theory cannot be proven to be true. It is also counterproductive, in encouraging people to resort to make-believe and deception or lack of initiative for fear of that being taken as untrustworthiness.