

Baier on trust

Trust as accepted vulnerability

Trusting others implies, not just relying on them, but in particular relying on their good will.

- Extends beyond intimates to strangers, or even enemies
- Amounts to accepted vulnerability to others' possible but not expected ill will, or lack of good will.

To pin down “good/ill will,” look at

1. varieties of vulnerability (things we value that that can be put within striking power of others) = risks
2. grounds for confidence that others won't take advantage of that power = reasons

We leave things we value vulnerable to others because we need their help in creating those things - and then in looking after them.

Trust and infant dependency

Trust involves letting others take care of something one cares about, where that implies some exercise of discretionary powers.

In some cases, e.g. between infant and parent, trust can't be verbally acknowledged.

Exclusive focus on the morality of contracts results from ignoring dependency relations between those unequal in power.

Some form of trust has to be innate for trust to get started at all (p. 242).

[Some questions

What about adult trust extended on a trial basis, i.e. to see whether someone is trustworthy?

- **Cf. initial “tat” in “tit for tat.” Is this just behavioral, without whatever mental state is involved in trust?**
- **Baier denies that trust can be extended at will (as in contracts) without a foundation of prior, less voluntary forms of trust.**

Also, if reliance on someone’s good will amounts to a mental state of positive expectation (not just the fact of dependency), can an infant really be said to exhibit it?

Can’t trust emerge gradually, on the basis of experience of reliability? Cf. earning a cat’s trust, etc.]

Noncontractual adult trust

Women in traditional roles also have no choice but to trust (or distrust), far from entering into a voluntary contract. And once women have equal legal rights, they still have responsibility for children without reference to an agreement.

Cf. Carol Giligan's research as alternative to “men's club” contractarian morality.

Modern moral philosophy concentrates on trust in governments, and in parties to voluntary agreements.

But even in adult life there are noncontractual cases of trust. Cf. trust in the plumber not to plant explosives.

Contracts serve to make things explicit and to minimize vulnerability.

An “expressibility” test

Baier tentatively proposes a test for the moral decency of a trust relationship: that its continuation need not rely on grounds either party would reject, e.g. successful threats held over the trusted party or the trusted party’s successful cover-up of breaches of trust.

“Where the truster relies on his threat advantage to keep the trust relation going, or where the trusted relies on concealment, something is morally rotten in the trust relationship.”

But Baier acknowledges that the test has limitations, e.g. it won’t handle brief encounters (cf. Baier’s earlier example of trusting a stranger in the library stacks).