

The well-springs of trust

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Abstract:

Trust is essential to the development of a person (a subject) and the establishment of a bond. At the outset, we are talking about fundamental trust, inherent in the total dependency of every human being, unlike other animals. The relation with the parent who nurtures the child also affects the quality and stability of trust. It contributes to the child's self-confidence, which is correlated with trust in others. Inevitably, disappointments occur. The individual copes with them through social conventions, such as promises, and through expectations about intersubjective relations (based on shared interests and values). Another ground for building trust is reputation, which is ultimately a demand for love.

Eating, caring, learning, bonding or working, whatever the walk of life, whether to satisfy needs or indulge desires, to accomplish actions, sometimes even very common ones... for all this, the idea of confidence or trust compels recognition. In deeds and, too, in words, between friends, within a couple and even on the sofa in a psychoanalyst's office, confidence is a key to the formation of bonds with others. What would happen if doubt were to have such strong roots that any sort of knowledge or even the most ordinary interactions were liable to be put in question?¹

According to *Le Trésor de la langue française* (TLFI), confidence is a “*spontaneous or acquired belief in the moral, affective, professional value... of somebody else such that one is incapable of imagining deceit, betrayal or incompetence from that person*”. What characterizes confidence is “*faith in something, in someone*” (TLFI).² Confidence is an act of faith grounded on values. But is it a deliberate action, in other words, a choice? Some authors have concentrated on trust as a fundamental or basic confidence present at the very start of a child's development. Others have asserted that confidence comes from the person's environment — a sort of state of nature in contrast with the idea that, depending on the context or environment, confidence will be, erratically or stably, established.

If trust is fundamental to a person, what happens when disappointments, inevitable and sometimes cruel, upend the person's beliefs? Is society not the guardian overseeing an equilibrium of beliefs that, were it missing, would keep social bonds from forming, the very bonds indispensable to each and everyone and to life together in society?

Spontaneous or acquired, grounded on values, confidence thus takes its origins in a belief that it would be wrong for us to deny. Intersubjective, collective resources exist for preserving confidence.

¹ This article, including quotations from French sources, has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation has, with the editor's approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites were consulted in June 2021.

² <http://atilf.atilf.fr/tlf.htm>

At the start, dependency

A state of nature or a fact of history

According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1775, pp. 44-45), a human being has the *“faculty of self-improvement, which, by the help of circumstances, gradually develops all the rest of our faculties, and is inherent in the species as in the individual: whereas a brute is, at the end of a few months, all he will ever be during his whole life, and his species, at the end of a thousand years, exactly what it was the first year of that thousand.”* Moreover, human beings are so perfectible and unprogrammed that they can kill themselves. This is the flip side of freedom, as individuals, “extracted” from their origins in a state of nature, pass toward historicity.

Whereas an animal can satisfy primary needs very early in its development, a human being depends on its milieu for years. Freud talked about children’s *“biological immaturity”*, their inability to satisfy primary needs. The infant who does not yet talk has no other possibility than to totally rely on its parents for food. Its vulnerability is so great that it has to trust those who take care of it.

The child’s trust in its parents is, at the start, unconditional. An infant is completely credulous, out of necessity and, too, by nature. According to Thomas Reid (quoted by ORIGGI 2008), human beings have a *“natural, psychological tendency to believe”*.

Confidence, vulnerability and learning

The child’s vulnerability resonates with what adults undergo in certain circumstances (even ordinary ones). For instance, trusting a doctor means that the person is “yielding” to a learned authority. Unlike for adults however, the *“child’s affective confidence does not suppose that it has previously weighed the pros and cons; it is in a situation of maximal vulnerability from the very start”* (ORIGGI 2008).

This state of trust, present from the start, is the child’s response to its extreme vulnerability, but it also provides the grounds for a learning process. A child is immersed in language from its birth. In and with the words spoken by others, it constructs its mental and symbolic spheres. *“The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes after belief”* (WITTGENSTEIN 1969, §160).

This learning process requires letting go, giving up, yielding — what some psychoanalysts have described as a “feminine” position. It is often hard for adults to learn, since this receptive position entails letting one’s guard down. For young men, in particular those struggling with their sense of masculinity, it connotes being or becoming feminine; and this scares them. Rebellion is then the reaction to this threat arising out of this mental construction process.

So, for feeding and learning at the start of life, we talk about “trust”, a basic or fundamental confidence. It is the outcome of a state of nature, of an original credulity. However confidence is also the outcome of successful interactions with the nurturing parent.

The child's first interactions

Nurturance

An infant is subject to *"unthinkable anxiety [...] : going to pieces, falling forever, having no relation to the body, having no orientation"* (WINNICOTT 1962 p. 56). One parental function is to adjust to a baby's chaotic experience and bolster the process of symbolization or, we could also say, interpretation: to have the role of reflecting what the child feels and expresses, for want of words, with its cries, gestures or mimics. This reflecting of the child's experience leads the infant to build its own language and gradually emerge from the chaos.

Donald Winnicott wrote about the *"good enough mother"*, who *"identifies with the child's needs [and] forms the educational grounds for work on the ego"* (TYAR 1998). Such a mother has a way of holding and handling the child, containing its anxiety and feeding it. These processes must not be too satisfactory however. In this sense, what is good enough is neither too good nor not good enough. The "bad" mother is *"the one who satisfies her child's desires too much [... or] who does not deprive the child of deprivation"* (TYAR 1998).

Frustration stimulates the child's development by challenging its aptitude to imagine a separation between itself and the world. It opens onto creation, since what one has lost or will be unable to get will be recreated through the symbol that replaces this lack with a story, a narrative. Freud (1920) called *"fort-da"* the back-and-forth movement as his grandson was throwing small objects with a string attached and then drawing them back with the string. When the child threw the object under the bed, he exclaimed "Fort" [Away], and when the object reappeared, "Da" [There]. Through this movement, the child was *"metaphorizing"* the absence/presence of its mother. It was no longer in the grips of the anxiety caused by this absence. Instead, it became a director who staged this disappearance. Confidence arises out of this capacity for independence through the creation of one's own world of cognitive representations.

Confidence in one's self, in others

Self-confidence thus arises out of the weaving of a narrative about what is missing. Once symbolized, the disappearance of the loved one becomes a story that the child recreates and appropriates. The child thus builds up confidence in its potential for independence and its ability to create, to build. Confidence in others and in one's self arises out of a single process. Once internalized, the parent and his/her absence are no longer threatening. Furthermore, parents *"contribute"* owing to their shortcomings (the inability to respond to all needs, the obligations that force them to be absent, etc.) to the making of the child's inner world. Distrust yields to confidence in others (who might have to be absent — without this absence causing anxiety) and in one's self (since the child comes to realize that it can survive during the absence).

Disappointment, the loss of illusions

According to Ferenczi (1913), a child's disappointment has two fundamental origins: the one *"having to do with the capacity of the persons authorized to explain things and processes, and disappointment with their inclination to tell the truth"* and *"disappointment in the confidence [...] placed in the persons who hold authority or more precisely disappointment in the reality of their love"*. The parents' omnipotence is demystified. The child realizes, not without difficulty, that its parents cannot satisfy all its desires. In addition, the childish omnipotence expressed in the feeling that any need should be satisfied is dissipated in the encounter with *"requirements that the child can no longer meet through the force of its desire alone but only by modifying the outer world"* (FERENCZI 1913). But the outside world always puts up resistance.

Likewise, the illusion of a pure, unconditional love wanes, yielding before the perception of ambivalence. Lacan (1975) has called this “*hainamoration*” [“lovehatation”]: love is tainted with hate, and *vice-versa*. In a situation where a dog licks or bites, a human being will experience a confusion of feelings. Some people choose relations with animals in order to no longer have to cope with uncertainty of this sort. Some even prefer hating the other person whose authenticity, realness, is less a matter of doubt than the greatest love.

Given that the child is disillusioned with the omnipotence of its parents and of itself but wiser owing to its observation of the ambivalence of feelings, it learns to seek commitments, pledges, as safeguards. The rules of interrelations, the social game or institutions relentlessly strive against doubt, or even distrust, which each and everyone might have. They establish forms of confidence so that commitments and, therefore, life in society remain possible.

The social mechanisms of confidence

Dependency upon others ensues from one of the “*fundamental needs of humanity, the need to cooperate*” (ORIGGI 2008). It is crucial for those who are the most vulnerable, but is also present “*in any state of humanity, whether the primordial state of nature or the state of society*” (ORIGGI 2008). Given this affective, economic and social dependency, humanity is forced to build confidence despite its loss of illusions. Certain “mechanisms” help to do this.

Promises

Keeping promises is the consequence of a contract (covenant) for warding off widespread distrust (HOBBS 1977). Since ties of blood, origin or kinship are, by their very nature, expected to be a safeguard for confidence, making a promise is mainly a substitute for these natural bonds. A promise is conducive to establishing relations between people who do not know each other or between persons with diverging interests.

Keeping a promise is a matter not of feelings but of conventions; and conventions are consolidated by proving their mettle. Recognized as beneficial from generation to generation, their position has been reinforced; and they have become the body of law for transactions and exchanges.

Shared interests and common values

Even though conventions formally regulate commitments without the intervention of feelings, confidence is also grounded on intersubjective criteria involving interests and shared values. “*I have confidence in someone if I have reasons to believe that it will be in his/her interest to take account of my interests*” (ORIGGI 2008). Altruism is a source of doubt in social relations. Knowing the other person’s interests is, in one sense, reassuring. A commitment often emerges from the reciprocal revelation of the benefits to be expected from a relationship. As long as the other person does not display his expectations, doubts will exist about his trustworthiness.

We must also reckon with the values at stake. The “*wager [is made...] that the other person will comply with the same values as oneself [...] I have confidence in someone if I perceive in him qualities that I highly value*” (ORIGGI 2008). This moral code, even though it might run counter to public ethics (e.g., the honor code among crooks), is indispensable. The last thing people give up is their personal values.

Reputation

Reputation is another factor underlying confidence. According to Lacan (1986), behind any demand is an infinity of demands and, ultimately, the demand for love, which is different from a biological need (hunger) that is satisfied with an object (food). Conversely, no object can satisfy a demand: whatever is provided will never be right, will never be satisfying. Behind a demand is another demand and, ultimately, a demand for love. The quest for a reputation is nothing else.

According to Origgi (2008), Adam Smith “*placed reputation at the center of life in society*”: “*Nature, when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please and an original aversion to offend his brethren*” (SMITH 1759). According to Pettit (cited in ORIGGI 2008), “*I have reasons for having confidence when I can wager on a psychological quality among fellow men for honoring this confidence in order to keep or earn a good reputation.*”

There is, it goes without saying, a frantic quest for reputation on the Internet. This quest is now visible to anyone on the social media. This phenomenon is similar to what has been observed on a small scale in cliques. Reputation lends credibility and increases the chances for networking in the future. Earning a good reputation brings economic advantages. What is more: “likes” are, in fact, words of love.

Conclusion

Confidence, partly necessary and formative, is inherent in the individual’s development. It safeguards the social equilibrium. Given the disappointments inevitable in any walk of life, it survives thanks to conventions, shared values and interests. It is the outcome, we might say, of a relentless struggle between the wounds incurred by the individual and the necessity of setting up a means of conciliation.

What about distrust? Have we not observed, during the current pandemic, a spreading of suspicion? Has it not been customary, since Julius Cesar, to point a finger at the quarrelsomeness of the inhabitants of our national territory and their distrust of anyone who governs them, as soon as the person takes office? Suspicion welds some couples. Threats might become a source of vitality, since they place a value on what might be lost. In the case of the nation, as Jacques Julliard has pointed out, “*distrust of central authorities is, for many of the French, what democracy is about. When everyone is in agreement, everyone starts worrying*” and, recalling the words of Marat, “*Anyone in whom authority is invested is a potential enemy.*”³

What if discord, in our personal lives and in society, were a sign of vitality? What if it were essential for the fervency of social bonds?

³ Interview on France Culture (2020), “Penser ce qui nous arrive avec Jacques Julliard” in the program *Répliques*, 30 May, 52 min.

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