

Can attempts to make schools more reliable render them less trustworthy?

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Abstract

This paper has two aims. One is to draw a distinction between two types of trust. The other is to argue for its applicability in academic discourse on educational policies. One of the two types of trust is *ethical trust* that rests on beliefs about others' ethical virtues. The other is *institutional trust* that typically depends on law enforcement and economic incentives. Ideas about a social order based primarily on institutional trust have haunted political thought since the time of Thomas Hobbes. Such ideas may seem realistic if we focus on business relations, where conformity to contractual terms suffices to meet the needs of all concerned. Intimate relationships rely more on ethical trust. In the first half of the paper the difference between these two types of trust is explained. In the final sections it is argued that successful schoolwork depends on ethical trust and that measures to make schools more reliable in the institutional sense, through supervision and accountability, need to be applied with caution. Such measures can undermine ethical trust because they, at least implicitly, question the moral integrity of teachers and school-heads.

Keywords: Trust, Ethical trust, Virtue Ethics, Education, Teachers' professionalism

When we trust people, we believe that they neither deceive us nor behave fraudulently. Our trust is warranted to the extent that such beliefs are justified. This applies not only to individuals, but also associations, corporations, governments, and schools. In the case of schools, trust is especially important because both successful education and the quality of children's lives depend on it.

In this paper I draw upon a monograph on trust by US security technologist Bruce Schneier (2012) to explain the difference between two different types of trust that I call *ethical* and *institutional*. The former has ties to virtue ethics and the latter is related to contractarian theories. The first two sections are about the distinction between

these two types of trust. In the two final sections I argue that the distinction is useful to describe recent trends in educational policies and school administration. It can be used to summarise research findings that have been couched in different terms. These findings indicate that focusing too much on institutional pressures can undermine ethical trust and make schools less trustworthy.

Schneier on societal pressures

In his monograph Schneier describes ethical trust as a general reliance that people will endeavour to do their duty, whatever the situation is and whatever loopholes exist in laws and regulations. He also says that when we do business with strangers, we need confidence that they will not cheat although we do not know enough about them to have any warranted beliefs to the effect that they are guided by good intentions. In such cases our confidence can rest on three different types of reasons: That those we trust have a reputation to uphold; that they are subject to sanctions or loss of financial gain if they fail to do their duty; that security systems make it difficult for them to treat us unjustly. On his account, trust can thus be warranted by reasons of four different types:

- a) Morality
- b) Honour and shame
- c) Rewards and sanctions
- d) Security systems

Schneier stresses, moreover, that morality is different from the next two categories because, unlike them, it works when no one is watching. The second and third both require consequences. The third one includes a legal order, police, and courts. Under the fourth fall burglar alarms, locks and fences, keywords, and cryptography.

Schneier's main argument is that "effective societal pressure usually involves all four categories, though not necessarily in equal measure" (Schneier, 2012, p. 240).

Every society needs to find a proper balance and avoid overemphasising the two latter categories at the cost of the former, both because the latter are costly and because "the very existence of rules and laws can counter moral and reputational pressure" (Schneier, 2012, p. 114).

Two paradigms

It has been recognized, since the time of Plato at least, that morality is different from other pressures because it works even when no one is watching. In the second book of the Republic, Plato (n.d.) tells a story about the magical Ring of Gyges that could make people invisible. Socrates' interlocutor, Glaucon, uses this story to argue that what keeps people from doing wrong is not virtue, but fear of punishment or bad reputation. On his account everyone who had such a ring would use it to commit crimes. In what follows, Plato's mouthpiece, Socrates, argues that Glaucon is wrong about this, and that injustice makes men wretched and miserable. If Glaucon were right, then we could never trust anyone's intentions. The best option for society would be to use reputation, institutional pressures, such as punishments, and security systems to make it in everyone's best interest to behave as if they were virtuous.

The tradition of virtue ethics, initiated by Plato and Aristotle, assumes that Glaucon was wrong. It does not follow that virtue ethicists think of societal pressures as superfluous. Neither does it follow that they believe that people would learn to be moral if they lived in a world full of contrivances, like the magic ring, that made it easy for them to get away with iniquities. But they thought that in the real world many people learn to be virtuous, at least to some extent. Furthermore, most of them think of honour, shame, rewards, and sanctions as serving at least two purposes: Making people who

lack moral virtues less likely to do bad things, and teaching people to become more virtuous. About the latter purpose Aristotle says, for instance, in the beginning of the second book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, that “legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them” (Aristotle, n.d., 1103b). On Aristotle’s account, seeking honour and avoiding shame plays a role in moral education because it accustoms people to do what is right, and is therefore, if everything goes well, conducive to moral virtue (Jimenez, 2011). In the seventeenth century, this Aristotelian view was revived by John Locke who argued that children should simultaneously be habituated to obey reasonable rules and taught to seek honour and avoid shame (Harðarson, 2019b). He does not say that love of praise suffices to make people moral. Neither does he think, as Glaucon seems to, that society functions without virtuous citizens. In his own words, love of praise is a “stock, whereon [...] to graft the true principles of morality” (Locke, 1989, §200). On Locke’s account, the crucial role of credit and shame is to accustom people to do what is right and thus to enable them to develop a moral disposition that goes beyond mere subservience to social norms. Like Aristotle he thought that honour and shame and habituation, partially reinforced through sanctions and rewards, have a positive role to play in moral education. In short, these two philosophers both argued that societal pressures can help people to develop moral virtues. Recently a similar view has been defended by Kristján Kristjánsson (2014; 2018).

As Schneier (2012) points out, Thomas Hobbes, another English philosopher from the seventeenth century, had a different view. He thought, as Glaucon did, that we could only trust other people to do what justice requires provided unjust acts had bad consequences for them. In chapter thirteen of the first part of his *Leviathan*, he argued that if men do not have “a common power to keep them all in awe” they cannot trust each other and therefore live in a condition of “such a war, as is of every man, against

every man [...] and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes, 1962, p. 143). On Hobbes’ account, warranted trust in society must be grounded on a legal order where it pays to do what is right because transgressors are punished. Hobbes argued in the first place that a group of rational egoists would agree on just rules of conduct and in the second place that society could make it profitable, for everyone, to obey the rules. Because of the former condition such views are labelled social contract theories or contractarianism.

On this contractarian view, institutions are the primary ground of trust in society. We count on others, not because we trust their intentions, but because we trust the police and the courts, economic incentives, and various social institutions to see to it that those we have dealings with are under sufficient pressure to do, most of the time, what justice requires. If we think along these lines, then we try to solve social problems by contriving to make it advantageous and profitable to be law-abiding and to act for the good of all.

If, on the other hand, we follow Plato, Aristotle, and Locke, then we think of morality as the primary foundation of trust and view the other three as auxiliary, although we acknowledge their role in character education. A logical continuation of this view is to search for ways to foster ethical virtues while trying to avoid using societal pressures that undermine morality.

Both these two opposed views have deep roots and wide ramifications. We do not have to think of one of them as right under all circumstances and the other as entirely wrong. The paradigm of the virtue ethicists may be better applicable to intimate relationships than to the larger stage of politics and big corporations. Hopefully, most of us trust our spouses and friends because we can rely on their goodness of heart, rather

than their fear or selfish interests. The Hobbesian paradigm may provide a more credible justification of our trust in some big systems. I do, for instance, keep my wages in a bank account without any knowledge about the dispositions of the bank managers. I simply assume that they do not steal my money because there are laws and law-enforcement. It does, however, not follow that all trust in big systems, like banks and political states, can rest exclusively on the foundations Hobbes and other contractarian theorists have described. Part of my reasons for trusting the bank is that I think the legislators did not contrive to make loopholes for the bankers to steal my money. I also assume that police officers and judges cannot be secretly bribed to help them get away with it. To some extent our trust in the system rests on assumptions to the effect that the top level is manned by virtuous characters. As Kevin Werbach (2018) argues, even the most sophisticated modern security systems, that rely on cryptography and blockchain data that cannot be tampered with, cannot be fully trusted unless those who design and maintain them act honestly. If this is right, then a vision of a well-functioning society without virtuous citizens is not entirely realistic.

This has been widely recognized by economists, social scientists, and political philosophers, at least since Hegel (1978) described abstract rights as embedded in an ethical order in his *Philosophy of Right*, originally published in 1820. Partially drawing upon Hegel's insights, Francis Fukuyama argues, for instance, that although democracy and market economy are often portrayed as resting on a legal order neither succeeds without widespread ethical and reputational trust, which he calls social capital. This is because "distrust in a society [...] imposes a kind of tax on all forms of economic activity, a tax that high-trust societies do not have to pay" (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 27). On Fukuyama's account, attempts to replace moral and reputational trust by centralized power have undermined abilities to build successful industries, enterprises, and

corporations – not only in Eastern European societies in the twentieth century under communist party rule, but also in other societies, such as Southern Italy and France, that were shaped by absolute monarchy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. “While governments can enact policies that have the effect of depleting social capital, they have great difficulties understanding how to build it up again” (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 11).

Since Fukuyama wrote this, scholars as different as the anarchist-cum-anthropologist James C. Scott (2012, 2017), the conservative political theorist and economist Patrick J. Deneen (2018), and the former governor of the Reserve Bank of India, Raghuram Rajan (2019) have argued to the effect that ethical trust thrives best in small social units and that it is undermined by centralization, whether it be through direct political control or through marketization in the spirit of neo-liberal capitalism. In their introduction to a collection of papers, entitled *The Philosophy of Trust*, Faulkner and Simpson (2017) say that in recent years several, both conservative and socialist, critics of modern capitalism have supported similar conclusions.

In what follows, I use the term *institutional trust* to denote trust that is primarily based on a warranted belief to the effect that people will obey rules either because it is in their own best interest to do so, or because it would be costly and difficult to break them. Trust of this type, that is, trust grounded on rewards, sanctions, and security systems, sometimes gives us adequate reasons to feel safe – but only while we avoid the shadows, sticking to areas covered by the rules and watched over by authorities or automated surveillance. But to designate trust based on warranted beliefs about someone’s moral goodness or ethical virtues, I use the term *ethical trust*.

The category of honour and shame extends into both the institutional and the ethical because concern with one’s reputation can range from the hypocritical to the honourable. On one end of the scale, we have those who only care about the economic

impact of public opinion. If Aristotle and Locke were right, there are also, at the other end of the scale, people who are partially virtuous, those who improve their moral character by seeking to improve their reputation. Well-founded confidence that such people cherish their honour is sometimes hard to distinguish from ethical trust. The same may also be true of some pressures created by rules and legislation. Some may avoid doing what the law forbids just to avoid punishment. Others may be law-abiding in ways that enhance their honesty and justice.

Ethical trust requires more than just the individual virtue of honesty. It is irreducibly social as it depends on interaction between those who trust and those who are trusted (Carter, 2022). To be trusted one must be expected to act honestly. For that one needs some forum where honesty can be shown. It has also been argued that how trustworthy people are depends on the social climate (McLeod, 2015).

I realise that in many philosophical writings about trust the term is reserved for ethical trust and some authors prefer the term *reliability* when they focus on institutional trust. This can be traced back to a paper by Annette Baier, published in 1986, that brought trust into the limelight for anglophone moral philosophers (McLeod, 2015; Faulkner and Simpson, 2017). There she defines trust as reliance on another's good will. Five years later, in her Tanner Lectures on Human Values, she restates this same distinction between trust and other types of reliance (Baier, 1991). She concedes, however, that trust is often "mixed with other species of reliance on persons" (Baier, 1986, p. 234), and that relying to some extent on the threat of sanctions does not mean that there is no room for ethical trust (Baier, 1991). In some of her examples it is far from clear to what extent trust is really trust in another's moral goodness. She says, for instance, that we "trust the mailman to deliver and not tamper with the mail" (Baier, 1986, p. 239), and also mentions "trusting police to play their role effectively, and

trusting one's fellow to refrain from open crime" (Baier, 1986, p. 256). She grants that in these cases trust does not rely on good will only, but also on some elements of fear. It seems to follow from this that what she calls different species of reliance, and I describe as different types of trust, are not entirely distinct. One fades into another, and sometimes – as in the case of the mailman – we may neither know nor care whether people are reliable because of their good will, or because they fear losing their jobs, or because of some mixture of moral goodness and less noble motives. Baier also emphasises that there are no rules about when to trust others' intentions and when to rely on their fear of punishment. Some of her warnings remind the reader of the grim reality that, in many cases of violence and sexual abuse, "the unsuspecting trust of the victim is part of the sorry story" (Baier, 1991, p. 129). Nevertheless, she is also very much aware of the forbidding cost of trying to create risk-free social environments through formal contracts, law enforcement, and checking everything out.

Notwithstanding these reservations, the distinction between ethical and institutional trust is, as I shall argue in what follows, helpful for understanding why some recent attempts to make schools and other public services more reliable are deeply problematic.

Trust and school education

Each school is a complex society that can fail in many different ways. It is therefore hard to count all the conditions that have to be met for a school to be trustworthy. I think these three are uncontroversial, but I leave it open what other items should be on the list.

- (1) When we send our children to school, we want to trust the teachers and the school-heads to be caring, considerate, and even-handed. We expect schools to

help each child to learn and flourish. A school betrays this trust if a student is treated unfairly.

- (2) As a society, we need to trust schools to provide good education. A school can fail to do that in many ways, for instance by wasting students' time without teaching them anything good or useful, or by propagating prejudices and nurturing vices and bad habits.
- (3) Those who fund schools need to trust them to use the money wisely and be truthful about expenses and whatever goods they provide. It is a breach of this trust if a school issues fake diplomas or tweaks data to amass more money than its due.

Conditions (1) and (3) have primarily to do with justice. Condition (2) has more to do with education, although justice is involved in so far as it requires schools to do their duty. In short, these three conditions mean that we need to trust schools to be just, and to serve their purpose by educating students rather than miseducating them.

If we focus on (1) and (2), we have ample reasons to think that we need ethical trust. A number of contemporary scholars have argued convincingly that teaching is a moral enterprise that cannot be adequately carried out without a teacher acting justly, fairly, and honestly and being, to some extent, a moral guide or role-model (Campbell, 2003, 2013; Carr, 2003, 2014; Cooke & Carr, 2014; Higgins, 2011, 2015; Sanger, Osguthorpe, & Fenstermacher, 2103; Sockett, 2019). It is very unlikely that teachers who are primarily driven by fear of sanctions will meet these expectations. Their relationship with their students is much more personal and caring than relationships within business, where heartless adherence to rules is sufficient to give customers their due. So, although there is nothing to criticise about a teacher's being law-abiding and concerned with his or her reputation in an honourable way, this does not suffice. We

cannot trust teachers to do their duty unless we think they are guided by relevant moral virtues. Nevertheless, changes in school administration and educational policies in recent decades has led to increased reliance on institutional pressures that foster selfish rather than moral incentives. It seems that political authorities in many lands assume that such pressures can be used to secure condition (3) without undermining (1) and (2). These assumptions are dubious.

About twenty years ago John Codd, a pioneer in modern educational policy studies, published his findings about attempts to use economic incentives and enforced codes to manage schools in New Zealand. According to him, this undermined ethical trust and eventually made schools and teachers less trustworthy (Codd, 1999, 2005; Snook, 2009). Quoting the New Zealand economist Timothy John Hazledine, Codd said that the irony was that “monitoring directly diverts resources from productive activities and, more insidiously, it fosters the sort of behaviour that it is supposed to prevent. People who are systematically not trusted will eventually become untrustworthy” (Codd, 1999, p. 49). A few years later he argued that institutionalised accountability has introduced into the school a set of managerial values, emphasising productivity, to the detriment of traditional democratic educational values that have to do with critical thinking, democratic citizenship, and social justice (Codd, 2005).

Since Codd wrote about institutionalised accountability as engendering a culture of distrust, other scholars have come to similar conclusions (Fitzgerald, 2009; Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti, & Sellar, 2016; Sidorkin, 2016; Byrd & Varga, 2018). If we need to appeal to somebody's better nature, we had better be wary of institutional pressures that implicitly question their moral integrity. Constant monitoring and minute control may undermine ethical trust whereas judicious legislation and law-enforcement can have opposite, and more desirable, consequences.

Ethical trust is to some extent a bootstrapping, or self-sustaining, attitude, as Faulkner and Simpson (2017) point out in the introduction mentioned above. In another paper published in this same book, Victoria McGeer and Philip Pettit (2017) argue that being trusted gives most people the incentive to meet others' expectations. If all goes well, trust can enable those whom I trust to live up to my expectations and enhance their reliability since manifest trust displays a favourable opinion about their reliability, giving them an "esteem-based motive for not letting me down" (McGeer & Pettit, 2017, p. 22).

Life would be easier if we had the sagacity to trust all trustworthy persons and no one else. But often we cannot tell the trustworthy and the untrustworthy apart. When dealing with people whom we do not know to be honest we need to be on our guard. Still, there are reasons to trust people until we have good evidence that they are persistently or incorrigibly untrustworthy.

Sometimes trust is not an option because the other person is known to be unreliable, while at other times, it is a matter of course, because she or he is evidently dependable. In between are all the cases where we either lack knowledge, or conflicting attitudes of trust and distrust have, simultaneously, some presumptions in their favour. As Richard Holton (1994) has argued, in these cases we often have some choice and can decide to trust. If trustworthiness requires both moral goodness and practical wisdom, and people are more likely to acquire these virtues if they are trusted, then it seems likely that trust can make those who are trusted more trustworthy. Giving trust a chance, when it is not outrightly stupid to do so, may therefore work for the good of all. This is borne out by a book on reform in twelve Chicago elementary schools by Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider (2002). The data they present indicate that ethical trust enables schools to improve and move forward and distrust has the opposite effect. In a recent

book about schools and teachers in Finland Pasi Sahlberg and Timothy D. Walker (2021) support this same conclusion and argue that schools in Finland are successful because teachers are trusted.

In a book about attempts to measure the efficiency of various social institutions US historian Jerry Z. Muller (2018) argues that attempts to make public services more reliable, by use of accountability based on measured performance and collections of standardised data, are generally counterproductive. His results indicate that what John Codd found out about schools in New Zealand applies to a broad range of public services, including the police, hospitals, and schools. In all these areas, he analyses examples that show the same vicious circle at work: A feedback loop where lack of ethical trust engenders disrespectful institutionalised accountability, which in turn undermines ethical trust.

The examples Muller describes fall under a rule that is sometimes called *Goodhart's law*, after the British economist Charles A. E. Goodhart. Sometimes it is named after the US social scientist Donald T. Campbell. Goodhart originally stated this “law”, at a Reserve Bank of Australia conference in Sydney in 1975, where he said that “any observed statistical regularity will tend to collapse once pressure is placed upon it for control purposes.” The main thought behind this was that “a change to the control mechanism will elicit a change in the behaviour of the controlled, as they will usually now have an incentive to adjust their behaviour so as to meet the target” (Goodhart, 2015, p. 227).

Campbell published his version of the “law” in 1976, in a paper about how to assess the impacts of planned social change, where he said: “The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social

processes it is intended to monitor” (Campbell, 1976, p. 49). The formulation of this lawlike regularity that is probably best known among education scholars is in a paper by Marilyn Strathern where she says: “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure” (Strathern, 1997, p. 308). This means that attempts to build institutional trust through data-driven administration tend to be self-defeating, not only because they undermine ethical and reputational trust, but also because the data become corrupt and the methods of administration, therefore, fail to measure up to their own standards. Already in his 1976 publication Campbell warned educational authorities against what is nowadays called standards-based accountability. When test scores, he said, “become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways” (Campbell, 1976, p. 52).

Since Campbell wrote this, attempts to use metrics and accountability to manage teachers and schools have spread and expanded. Muller says that they reached “a flood tide at the end of the twentieth century” (Muller, 2018, p. 31). Writing about this retrogression in English schools, Roy Lowe describes increased institutionalised pressures on teachers, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, as an epidemic of policymaking and concludes that, a few decades ago, society “was prepared to defer to the expertise of the teaching profession” but now “teachers are subject to constant public scrutiny” (Lowe, 2007, p. 161). According to Dana Goldstein (2014) the same is true of teachers in the US.

If we add to this what researchers at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues point out in a report on good teaching, namely that no “regulations and codes of conduct can prevent dishonourable professionals from acting dishonourably, nor ensure that people act with integrity and wisdom” (Arthur, Kristjánsson, Cooke, Brown, & Carr, 2015, p. 9), we have reason to fear that to whatever extent ethical trust is a

bootstrapping attitude, attempts to use institutional sanctions to eliminate risks and guarantee trustworthiness are self-defeating. They undermine the social goods they are meant to secure.

Concluding remarks on ethical trust and teachers' professionalism

When the term *professional* is applied to members of an occupation, it connotes that they are trusted to work autonomously. This autonomy typically entails that the group is, to some significant extent, independent of political control and that its members are, at least partially, self-governing and in charge of their everyday work. The trust in question is commonly justified on two grounds: Firstly, because the members of the group have expert knowledge and, secondly, because their conduct is guided by ethical standards (Carr, 2003, 2014; Dunne, 2011; Harðarson, 2019a; Hermansen, 2017; Hoyle, 1982; Sockett, 2019). There is, thus, a logical connection between professionalism and ethical trust.

Attempts to give institutional trust pride of place through standards-based accountability are closely tied to de-professionalization and a culture of distrust. I have cited what Codd (1999, 2005) said about increased use of economic incentives and enforced codes and Muller (2018), Low (2007) and Goldstein (2014) about constant public scrutiny of schools. These scholars use different terminologies and theoretical approaches to describe the same trend, where the work of teachers is more and more controlled by economic incentives and external regulations, and less and less guided by their own ethical standards and practical wisdom.

These attempts are not the only forces working against teacher professionalism in recent years. Along with lack of trust in their moral agency, there are misgivings about their expert knowledge and what Wendy Robinson has described as “the hard-won acceptance of ‘education’ as a respectable university discipline” (Robinson, 2017,

p. 57). In a wide-ranging review of these misgivings James McAllister says that in recent years teacher professionalism based on deep knowledge in fields such as philosophy, history, psychology, and sociology has been eroded “while there has been a related increase in more technical means-end thinking about education generally, and teaching and learning specifically” (McAllister, 2015, p. 45).

If it is true that distrusting people’s intentions is apt to make them less trustworthy, and if it is also true that most people are more likely to do their best if they are expected to be guided by their better nature – that is, that growth of ethical trustworthiness is to some extent generated by ethical trust and undermined by institutional pressures – then these changes must be reversed.

Teaching is a moral work, and schools cannot serve their purposes by just following rules of procedure and obeying the law. They need to be communities where those in charge care about students and about education. In so far as attempts to use institutional pressures to make schools trustworthy undermine the autonomy of teachers and school heads, they also undermine our grounds for trusting schools to do their duty.

Increased institutional trust and better security systems cannot make up for lack of ethical trust. If the latter is in short supply, we should seek ways to enhance it and, at the very least, take good care to preserve whatever little we have. Therefore, we need to think of schools in the spirit of virtue ethics. It is, as Schneier says in his monograph, “essential that we learn to think smartly about trust” (Schneier, 2012, p. 7).

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