

TWOFOLD TRUST

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Abstract At the heart of trust is the concept of *relationship*. The author, considering the complexity of this category, adopts a symbolic, and therefore synthetic, representation of trust by analyzing, in that “great code” of Western civilization that is the Bible, a passage placed in *bereshit*, or “in the beginning”, in the first Jewish sacred book, *Genesis*. In it a threefold relationship is drawn: vertical between man and God, horizontal between man and woman, and between man and all living beings. This trusting architecture can be destroyed by human freedom and sin, but it can also be nurtured and enriched through the love received and given, which contains all the human forms of tenderness, trusting abandonment and recognition in communion.

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“It is more shameful to distrust one’s friends than to be deceived by them”. This maxim of the seventeenth-century French moralist François La Rochefoucauld proclaims, albeit in a negative way, the primacy of trust in human relationships. In the Romance languages and their Latin etymology, the word corresponding to the English “trust” belongs to the lexical constellation of faith, with other cognate words (*fede, fidarsi, affidamento, confidare, confidenza, confidente, fiduciario, fiducioso*) and the negative correlates (*sfiducia, sfiduciato, diffidenza, diffidente*). The basis is an Indo-European root (*bhid-*) that alludes to a conviction, a certainty, an unshakable persuasion, while in the Anglo-Saxon horizon another root (*treowe*) means “worthy of belief” and generates the English *trust* and the German *Vertrauen* and *Treue*, which evoke fidelity.

The threefold human relationship

Around the word “trust” a vast field of derived phrases has been created that express the feeling of security, of hope, of serenity placed in other people, but also in divine transcendence and even in cherished objects. In the latter case it configures the theological concept of idolatry, fiercely opposed in the Bible and in the sacred texts of other religions. “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths and cannot speak, they have eyes and cannot see, they have ears and they cannot hear, they have nostrils and they cannot smell. Their hands cannot feel,

their feet cannot walk. No sound comes out of their throats! Let him who makes them and everyone who trusts in them become like them!" (*Psalms* 115, 4-8).

If idolatry generates a deformation of the person, making him resemble the dead object worshipped (one thinks in this respect of the capital vice of avarice), genuine trust, on the other hand, has as its soul the interpersonal relationship between living human beings, both on the individual level and in the social sphere. It is, therefore, necessary to make the concept of trust the basis of *relationship*. Considering the complexity of this category, I will opt for a symbolic, and therefore synthetic, representation, appealing to that "great code" of Western civilization that is the Bible, through a passage placed in *bereshit*, i.e. "in the beginning", in the first Jewish holy book, *Genesis*.

Chapter 2, which I have chosen, is defined as a sapiential metahistorical etiology. It is, therefore, a tracing back to the origins (etiology) of being and existing and, therefore, not a reference to a single historical event. It is an approach to metahistory, namely to the permanent quality of human history according to a "sapiential", philosophical-theological and not technical-scientific interpretation. Now, on that page there is a threefold human relationship. There is a vertical relationship towards transcendence: "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (2,7). In the believer's view, therefore, it is the bond of the creature with his Creator.

Then comes the horizontal link with one's partner, the woman, "a help *kenegdô*", as the Hebrew puts it, literally "as in front of him", seeing eye to eye in an equal and reciprocal way. The "rib" in Hebrew is in itself "the side, the flank" and, therefore, presupposes equality, so much so that the two bear practically the same identity name: *ish*, man in the masculine gender, *ishshah*, woman in the feminine gender, who is "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh" (2,21-23). Finally, there is the relationship with the animals that are other living beings, to whom the man assigns a name, that is, an identity (2,19-20), and with the land that must be "tilled and cared for" (2,15), without forgetting that in Hebrew *ha-'adam*, Man, has a bond with the *'Adamah*, soil, matter.

Trust is expressed precisely in this threefold harmonious relationship, which can, however, be devastated by human freedom, as the following chapter 3 of *Genesis* teaches, in the account of "original sin" or radical sin, which embodies all acts of rebellion and distrust of God, of neighbor and of the world. Fundamental to our discourse on trust is, of course, the second relationship, the interpersonal one. It is the substance of the very anthropology of Western culture in its moral, existential and religious soul made up of love and solidarity, combined in a delicate balance with the demand for justice.

Responsible trust in others

It is in this light that the concept of human nature is represented. The person is not monadic but dialogical, not cellular but organic, not solipsistic but communal, as recent personalistic philosophy has repeated (Mounier, Buber, Lévinas, Ricoeur). Trust puts down its roots at this intersection between the self and the other. The reflection of the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, mentioned above, is evocative when he places the source of ethics in responsibility towards the other in his interpellation of me: “responsibility” derives precisely from *respondere*, giving an effective answer to the question of the interlocutor who is “before you”. His face challenges you, showing you his poverty, just as you are poor without him. It is here that the interpersonal and intercultural dialogue arises, which is possible only with mutual “trust”, avoiding on the one hand a fundamentalistic-nationalistic identitarian rejection and, on the other, the homologating syncretism that erases personal and community identities.

In an era of globalization and in the current infosphere of virtual communication, the I-Thou dialogue, as suggested by the other French thinker Paul Ricoeur, must also introduce the “third”, namely the humanity with whom one does not have a direct contact. Yet it has a face and an identity, and it can only be reached through “the migration of the memories of others”, a commitment to knowledge and care urged in our day by the migratory flows and the planetary presence of different cultures and the polytheism of values. We must exercise our trust in this figure of a different “third party” by promoting their rights and political structures marked by justice and solidarity.

In this enlargement of relationships, which leads us from our direct and close neighbors to trust the different and remote other, the diachronic dimension also deserves attention, as suggested by the German philosopher Hans Jonas in his essay *The Imperative of Responsibility*, which takes into account the current technological civilization and ecological sensibility. “Others” are now also the future generations to whom we have to pass on a habitable world and vital resources. It is within this multifaceted horizon of relationship that the exercise of active but not naive trust is placed, aware of the creaturely limit to which Chapter 3 of Genesis, quoted above, referred with its warning about wounded human freedom.

In this sense, trust does not ignore the risk and even the temptation of distrust. It can have two faces, the negative one of suspicion and systematic doubt, capable of extinguishing the warmth of trust and freezing relationships, but also the justifiable one of the critical spirit, of intelligent scrutiny, of judging wisdom. Another French moralist, who lived in the eighteenth-century, Nicolas de Chamfort in his *Maxims and Thoughts*, did not hesitate to affirm, reforming the biblical text of the Book of Proverbs (1,7): “There is no wisdom without distrust. Scripture says that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. I, on the other hand, believe it is the fear of men.” The aberration

that might stem from such a critical, albeit legitimate, sense is evident. And it is precisely the biblical book of Proverbs itself that restores the focus on the theme: “In fear of the Lord lies the trust of the strong... The fear of the Lord is the source of life” (14,26-27).

However, even in sacred wisdom there remains a reservation about entrusting oneself to others, as one of Job’s friends suggests: “Man’s trust is like a thread, and his security is like a spider’s web” (8,14). The Apostle Paul himself invited the Christians of the Greek city of Philippi “not to put their trust in the flesh”, meaning in sinful human frailty (3,3). This echoes the reservation advanced by prophets, such as Jeremiah: “Cursed be the man who puts his trust in man and finds his support in the flesh” (17,5). It is certainly a precaution of a religious nature, which has an alternative in the trust in God, as can be seen from many biblical passages intended to demystify the choice to trust in power and strength. “A king is not saved by a great army, nor does a mighty man escape by his great vigor. An illusion is the horse for victory, and not even a great army can bring salvation.” *Psalms* 33,16-17; cf. also *Isaiah* 30,15-16; 36,6).

Religious trust

In this way we have gained an outline of the fundamental structure of the concept and practice of trust. At this point we can explore, albeit in an essential and “impressionistic” way, the two strictly interpersonal relationships, that with God (and therefore faith, religiosity, spirituality) and that with human beings. Of course, it would also be significant to mark the third relationship with matter, the earth, the world, which emerged in chapter 2 of Genesis presented above. But such a treatment would require a broad discourse to which we can only allude, evoking the trust and the relative ethical surveillance that must be exercised with regard to science (genetics, neuroscience, artificial intelligence), or referring to the complex ecological issue, as it was formalized in Pope Francis’s *Laudato si’*.

For now we can proceed only along the two paths indicated, and first of all we can introduce *religious trust*, which is a constant of all faiths. Remaining in the Christian area, let us clarify the theme by adopting traditional theological language: we can speak of *fides quae* (“faith which” has in itself a content of truth) and *fides qua* (“faith by which” we adhere to the person of God who reveals himself to us and enters into communion with us). There is, then, first of all the knowledge of the divine message, of its revelation, its contents.

The heart of this communication is, of course, the Bible, but it is also the cosmic revelation for all peoples, “the seeds of the divine Word” poured out into the whole being, as the Fathers of the Church used to say. There is, therefore, an “object” of belief, a datum to be penetrated, explored and understood: it is the divine *Lógos*, the “discourse”, the “Word” that God communicates to us and which has its apex in a person, Jesus Christ, who enters history uniting in himself the divine

and the human, *Lógos* and *sarx*, as St. John says, namely the eternal “Word” and historical “flesh”. And the goal of this encounter is in Christ’s Passover, where death, the emblem of our creatureliness, and the Resurrection, the sign of perennial and glorious divine life, intersect inextricably for our redemption and transfiguration.

That is why the first Christian Creed, quoted by St. Paul, reads as follows: “Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures, he was buried and he was raised to life on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures....” (*1 Corinthians* 15,3-5). But faith, precisely because of this vital content, postulates a “subjective” reaction, *fides qua*, namely acceptance. In addition to being a “discourse”, it is a “journey” of life: it is trust, it is abandonment to the Revealer and Redeemer, it is entrusting oneself to him and to his paternal arms. Faith, therefore, also has an aspect of risk, of self-giving, in the awareness that God’s mysterious horizon is far higher than ours, as the Lord already suggested through the mouth of Isaiah: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, your ways are not mine. As heaven is above the earth, so are my ways above your ways, and my thoughts are above your thoughts” (55,8-9).

The attitude of Abraham, “our father in faith”, is typical, not only when he climbs the steep slope of Mount Moriah, holding Isaac by the hand, but also when he received, years before, that vocation that had made an upheaval in his life: “Leave your country, your people, and the house of your father, and go to the land to which I will lead you.... Abraham departed, as the Lord had commanded him... By faith Abraham, called by God, obeyed and departed, not knowing where he was going” (*Genesis* 12,1, 4; *Hebrews* 11,8).

There is, therefore, in fiduciary faith a dimension of risk (as Job teaches) that can generate doubt. It is, however, tempered by the certainty of God’s fatherhood, that he will not give a stone to the child who asks him for bread, and if he asks for a fish, he will not offer him a serpent (*Matthew* 7,9-10; see also *Matthew* 6,25-34). For this reason, divine symbolism is entrusted to images of trusting certainty, such as the rock, the cliff, the fortress, the defense, the refuge: “The Lord is my strength and my shield, and in him my heart trusts” (*Psalms* 28,7). It is in this light that we understand the existence of the prayerful literary genre of the “psalms of trust”, not exclusive to the Bible, but particularly exalted in it within the Book of Psalms.

In fact, we must not forget that the word *amen*, which still closes our prayers today, repeats the Hebrew verb of faith (*mn*), which literally designates being founded on solid ground or support, as Isaiah suggests in 7,9 with a play on words in the original Hebrew: “If you do not believe (*ta’aminu*), you will not be firm (*te’amenu*)”. Christ will also insist: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You place your trust in God. Trust also in me” (*John* 14,1). The symbol of the shepherd is the emblem

of this trust that sustains faith and prayer, as we find in the celebrated opening of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing” (v. 1).

In other religious traditions, too, trust is the fundamental category of faith. Thus, the very term “Islam/Muslim” semantically refers in Arabic to a trustful reliance on God, so that the *Qur’an* declares: “Who can choose a better religion than that of relying oneself completely on God?” (4, 125). And in the Jewish tradition of the *Talmud* this prayer of trust is proposed: “Lord, you are my rock and my refuge. If fate is adverse, you are my shelter. To you I entrust my spirit in sleep and awakening. Spirit and body I entrust to your hands so that you may protect me, and I am not afraid.”

This transcendent trust – which is nevertheless constantly tested by the trials of life, as taught by the prevalence in prayer of supplications that flourish even amid the crisis of faith – has its sweetest and most tender icon in a line of the very brief Psalm 131: “I feel calm and serene, a child in his mother’s arms, a weaned child is my soul” (v. 2). It is a song of spontaneous and absolute, almost instinctive trust, very like the affectionate and serene clinging of the child to the person who ensures his security and peace, his mother. It is not, however, the suckled child but the “weaned” baby that in the Near East is carried by his mother on her back. There is, therefore, a more conscious intimacy, a theme that already surfaced in ancient Egyptian epigraphy itself: “Twice happy is he who rests blissfully on the arm of the god Amun, who cares for the little and the poor.”

Trust in others

The maternal-filial image leads us spontaneously to the second profile of trust, that of our fellow, of the other person, of the being who shares our same humanity, quite apart from all culture, ethnicity, geography and temporality. Psychology has tried to trace the matrix of this trusting attitude and has identified it precisely in the archetype of the child at the primordial stage, when he perceives that he is welcomed and loved by people and the surrounding environment. As the psychologist Erik H. Erikson explained in his essay *Childhood and Society* (1950), the child thus acquires a security that allows him not only to recognize what is reliable but also to perceive the opposite of negativity, of evil and of hatred.

Trust is thus nourished by love received and given, as taught by the famous biblical precept dear to Jesus of “loving one’s neighbor as oneself” (*Leviticus* 19,18; *Matthew* 22, 39). It combines in itself the necessary love for oneself, which is trust in one’s own abilities, with solidarity and self-giving towards the other, through the complexity of the relationship with those who are analogous to yet different from oneself. This delicate balance between the self and the other is stressed, for example, by Thomas Aquinas, who curiously links trust – in the wake of Cicero (*Rhetorica* II, 54) – to the

virtue of fortitude (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 128). Trust entails the strength to break the closed circle of proud selfishness and a readiness to take risks in entrusting oneself to the other. But it is also the magnanimity of engaging in arduous undertakings with one's own talents and energies, courageously coping with adverse situations.

The highest representation of loving trust in the other has its apex – in keeping with the passage quoted from Genesis on the relationship between man and woman – in the *Song of Solomon*, an extraordinary love poem of only 1250 Hebrew words, which has its ideal theme song in the declaration of the female protagonist: “My beloved is mine and I am his... I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine” (2,16; 6,3). The duplicity of personal identities is almost dissolved, giving rise through mutual trusting abandonment to a single identity, precisely to “one flesh”, that is, to a single existence, as suggested by *Genesis* (2,24). In this light, we can also understand Christ's paradoxical assertion: “There is no greater love than he who lays down his life for the one he loves” (*John* 15, 13).

Of course, within social structures, especially modern ones, the relationship of trust is divided into multiple types and regulated by norms, including legal ones. This is the case, for example, of some cases such as “fiduciary property”, characterized by the right to enjoy and manage an asset not to satisfy one's own interest but that of others. Or like the “fiduciary contract”, by which the ownership of an asset is transferred from one person to another, with the agreement that the latter uses it for a defined purpose, after which the asset is returned to the original owner. In this vein, there is also the “fiduciary will” and other legal modalities, in keeping with a variegated legal system typical of each State or society. (Think of the practice, already in force in the fourteenth century, of the *trust* according to English common law.)

We have evoked this juridical dimension, without going into it in any depth, only to recall how trust penetrates into the concreteness of civil and even political life (for example, the Parliamentary “vote of confidence” in a government), embodied in multiple forms. In conclusion, however, it is necessary to mention – as has already been alluded to above – the crises that can affect interpersonal and social trust and that are the subject of constant sociological and political, as well as pastoral, analysis. It will suffice to list a few features of these breakdowns in trust within the human community.

Let us think of the insecurity generated by the interweaving of customs and experiences created by multiculturalism, an uncertainty capable of producing rejection of others and even hatred towards them. Emblematic, then, in today's domestic architecture, are the armored doors of apartments that exclude any contact with the neighbors. The Covid pandemic itself, with the lockdown, heightened the isolation already inherent in urban systems, especially in megalopolises,

inhabited by a crowd of personal and familial solitudes. Moreover, the infosphere in which our globe is enveloped, instead of accentuating communication, often favors aggression, suspicion, deception, fake news, the illusions by which virtual relationships are established with falsified figures, to the point where it creates dramatic disappointments and dangerous deceptions. To all this must be added the nightmares of war, terrorism, fear of the future, mistrust of and in the new generations.

The task not only of religions but of culture and politics should be to exorcise and anesthetize – albeit realistically – these fears with actions that rebuild the social fabric of proximity and produce a capacity for resilience. It is curious to note that statistically in the whole Bible this divine appeal resounds 365 times – albeit with a varied vocabulary – “Do not be afraid!”, as if it were the “good morning” that God repeats to humanity at every dawn, to dispel any fear of what lurks in everyday existence.

As the seal and synthesis of this discourse, however, I will present a parable from another civilization, very different from ours, the Tibetan.

In it, a person is imagined who, walking in the desert, sees something confused in the distance. This frightens him, since in the absolute solitude of the steppe anything dark and mysterious – perhaps an animal, a dangerous creature – cannot help but be disquieting. As he advances, however, the wayfarer discovers that it is not an animal, but a man. But he is still afraid; in fact his fear grows with the thought that that person may be a robber. However, he is compelled to proceed as long as he is in the presence of the other. Then the wayfarer looks up and, to his surprise, exclaims: “It is my brother, whom I haven’t seen for so many years!”

Distance breeds mistrust, fears and nightmares. Men must draw close to others to overcome that fear, however understandable it may be. To refuse to know the other and to meet him is tantamount to renouncing that love of solidarity that dispels terror and generates true society.

Rererences

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