The Educational Significance of Trust

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Annette Baier begins her widely discussed article, "Trust and Antitrust," with the observation that moral and political philosophers, from the ancients to our contemporaries, have said relatively little about trust.[1] As Baier notes, this is surprising given the centrality of trust to so many kinds of social interactions. Indeed, society itself, whether in the form of a small clan or a large state, is unimaginable in the total absence of trust. The impetus for this essay was the intuition that, among the social interactions in which trust (or its absence) is significant, are those occurring in educational relations. When I began looking for literature that might advance my understanding of the significance of trust in these relations, I found that philosophers of education, like the philosophers to whom Baier refers, have mostly been silent on the topic.

There are important exceptions. Paulo Freire believes that trust grows out of dialogic encounters founded on love, humility, and faith, and he regards trust as one of the virtues upon which emancipatory pedagogy depends.[2] Nicholas Burbules also addresses the role of trust in dialogue. Counting it among the six "emotional factors" in dialogue (which in addition to trust include concern, respect, appreciation, affection, and hope), Burbules postulates that trust develops out of mutual risk in disclosure. Once trust is established, Burbules argues, "[it] can become an unquestioned background condition, something that might need occasional reinforcement, but that most of the time literally goes without saying."[3] In a recent article about classroom relations, Miriam Raider-Roth explores some of the educational implications of students' trust — or lack of trust — in themselves and others. She concludes that a classroom atmosphere of trust bears significantly on students' ability to construct knowledge.[4] Deborah Meier makes a number of astute observations about trust in relation to contemporary schooling; most notably, that the current enthusiasm for standardized testing reflects a declining level of trust in teachers and schools.[5]

These authors all offer helpful insights into education, but none discuss trust theoretically — and no wonder since that is not their primary concern. Baier, on the other hand, has almost nothing to say about education, but does provide a theory of trust that, I believe, can inform a wide range of educational phenomena. I turn now to Baier's theory of trust.

BAIER'S THEORY OF TRUST

When moral philosophers have discussed trust at all, it has usually been of the explicit and formal sort (as in contracts). But as Baier observes, some varieties of trust are not captured very well in existing formulations: "Trusting is rarely begun by making up one's mind to trust, and often has no definite initiation of any sort but grows up slowly and imperceptibly….Trust can come with no beginnings, gradual as well as sudden beginnings, and with various degrees of self-consciousness,

voluntariness, and expressness" (*AT*, 240). Whereas the dominant, contractarian conceptualization of trust focuses on relations between individuals who are relatively equal — and these are certainly important — Baier also draws our attention to relations that are unequal in various dimensions; in particular, to relations between infants (and children) and their parents. Stated most directly, as conceptualized by Baier, to trust is to "let"[6] another care for (or attend to, guard, sustain, protect, or nurture, etc.) someone or something one values and involves giving another a certain degree of "discretionary responsibility" in deciding how to care for what has been entrusted. Trusting always involves vulnerability, since the person or entity being trusted is in a position to harm one or damage that which is given over to her care.

Baier discusses several ways in which trust can be abused. The most obvious sort of abuse occurs when a person explicitly agrees to care for someone or something and then fails to do so. Cases of this sort are common enough. But as Baier points out, trust is also abused when a person who is trusted "cares" for more than that which has been entrusted to her. She offers as an example the babysitter who not only feeds, entertains, and diaper-changes a child, but also paints her nursery, having decided that its original color was unattractive: "When we are trusted, we are relied upon to realize *what* it is for whose care we have some discretionary responsibility" (*AT*, 236). In the case at hand, the babysitter had discretionary responsibility in regard to child-care, not home decorating.

Most casual observers and a fair number of philosophers view trust as being an unalloyed moral good. But Baier reminds us that, while good and just relations thrive best in an atmosphere of trust, so too do all sorts of morally problematic relations. Social, political, and economic inequalities (among other factors) all bear on the moral status of trust relations. She notes,

> When the trust relationship itself is corrupt and perpetuates brutality, tyranny, or injustice, trusting may be silly self-exposure, and disappointing and betraying trust…may be not merely morally permissible but morally praiseworthy. Women, proletarians, and ex-slaves cannot ignore the virtues of watchful distrust, and of judicious untrustworthiness. (*AT*, 253)

Confidence schemes, by definition, require trusting victims; and the prevalence of these schemes illustrates how difficult it can be to discern when trust is warranted. To paraphrase Aristotle: Trusting and distrusting people is easy and anyone can do it; but trusting the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way is no longer easy, nor can everyone do it.[7] It is also not always easy to know how to appropriately meet the trust that has been given one. Baier reasons that, except in cases of accident, injury, or emergency, being trustworthy with total strangers usually entails little more than non-interference; one is trusted to leave the stranger and her belongings alone. But in close personal and professional relations, the requirements of trustworthiness are much greater and are complicated by the fact that more than basic trust is often at stake. As Plato would have us ask: Does trust require keeping a confidence when one knows a friend is bent on some disastrous course of action that can only be thwarted with the intervention of a third party?

Given the vulnerability entailed in trusting others, one may reasonably ask, "Why trust?" One answer Baier gives is that none of us alone is able to attend to all that we care about. For instance, most of us care about our health, but cannot do all that is necessary to stay healthy; with few exceptions, we cannot grow all the food we need, nor can we provide all our own medical care. We need others' help; but in placing ourselves in a position to receive that help, we also place ourselves in a position of potential danger. The grocer could sell us tainted food or the doctor could botch an operation, yet we have little choice but to trust them to a considerable extent with aspects of our health.

> The simple Socratic truth that no person is self-sufficient gets elaborated, once we add the equally Socratic truth that the human soul's activity is *caring* for things into the richer truth that no one is able by herself to look after everything she wants to have looked after, nor even alone to look after her own "private" goods such as health and bodily safety. (*AT*, 236)

What differentiates trust from mere reliance in Baier's conceptualization is that when we trust, we count on another's "good will." Trusting entails believing that, at the very least, the one trusted wishes us no harm, and in the case of some special relations, that they wish us all the best. Loving parent-child relations provide one of the clearest examples of the latter.

As noted earlier, Baier argues that trust is not always consciously given; sometimes it is automatic and unconscious. The second answer Baier gives to the "why trust" question reflects her beliefs about innate human characteristics; specifically, that infants are born with automatic and unconscious trust in their caregivers. Throughout a typical day, there are many, many occasions on which the infant or small child appears perfectly content despite the fact that they are profoundly vulnerable and utterly dependent on another's good will and care. Being tossed in the air by a creature five or more times one's own size would terrify most adults. But when healthy babies are made to "fly" in this manner, they almost always scream with delight, not horror. Such observations at least suggest the presence of trust or something closely akin, even though it seems highly unlikely that infants and the very young are aware that they trust.[8]

In her effort to distinguish the different forms trust might take, Baier considers various kinds of goods many people actually do value, but cannot care for or secure alone. Among these goods she counts "life, health, reputation…offspring and their well being, as well as intrinsically shared goods such as conversation, its written equivalent, theatre and other forms of play, chamber music, market exchange, [and] political life" (*AT*, 236). Education *per se* is not a focus of Baier's discussion; but I see education as being of the same sort of good that Baier enumerates. Education is widely embraced as a "good," but none of us alone is able to provide our own education in entirety. To become educated, we need the help of others; to receive that help, we must trust.

TRUST AND EDUCATION

A young child…is totally dependent on the good will of the parent, totally incapable of looking after anything he cares about without parental help or against parental will. Such total dependence does not, in itself, necessarily elicit trust…[b]ut surviving infants will

usually have shown some trust, enough to accept offered nourishment, enough not to attempt to prevent such close approach. (*AT*, 241)

It is relatively easy to identify the significance of trust in educational relations involving older children, teens, and adults; more difficult are relations involving the very young. However, it is at least suggestive to extrapolate from Baier's observation about infants' physical dependency and the likely role of trust in their survival. The newborn may not be a "blank slate" as Locke supposed, but she is not only physically incapable of self-preservation, as Baier notes, but also lacking the most basic knowledge, skills, and values needed for survival in any imaginable society. Developing these attributes depends on the acquisition of language (broadly conceived); and language can only be acquired in association with others. Typically, the first of these "others" include the infant's most immediate care-givers — parents, and often grandparents and siblings. It is doubtful that an infant trusts such caregivers in any explicit way; if Baier is correct, one might say she shows "natural trust" when she accepts their efforts at communicative interaction, when, for example, she gurgles, coos, and smiles in response to parents' faces, gestures, or voices.[9] (It is interesting to note that autism — a condition characterized, in part, by an inability to trust — is often first manifested by a child's withdrawal from communicative encounters.) Following Baier's account, then, one might speculate that among the earliest manifestations of trust, as trust relates to education, is the infant's initial engagements with language — the central medium *of* education.

As discussed in the first part of this essay, in addition to trust that is automatic and unconscious, occasions for trust arise when one needs the help of others to attend to something one values or cares about. Education — conceived in any way with which I am familiar — presents many such occasions. When a child begins to actively seek knowledge through such means as observation, exploration, and question asking, this implies a concern for her own education. While even relatively young children can advance some elements of their education independently, the bulk of their education requires the help of others. The acquisition of knowledge is not the whole of education, of course; but it is nevertheless a substantial aspect. Lacking basic trust in others' knowledge, it would be quite reasonable for a child to reject claims to the effect that the world is a sphere, that there are four oceans, and that oxygen is less concentrated at higher elevations. Since most of us cannot test such claims for ourselves, if we accept them as being true, we do so, at least initially, largely on trust. Considering the amount of knowledge one must receive in order to function in any society, a child who is unable to trust a primary conduit of that knowledge — other people — is at a great disadvantage.[10] (There is a rough parallel between trusting other people and trusting texts. To paraphrase Dewey, texts are repositories of people's knowledge.) Similar claims can be made in regard to values and skills, two of the other main kinds of goods imparted through education. If children do not trust the basic soundness of the values and skills (or techniques) that others seek to impart, surely they will be unlikely to adopt them as their own. Psychologically speaking, especially for children and younger adolescents, trusting others' knowledge, values, and skills may be indistinguishable from trusting others as individuals.

Learning is greatly facilitated by, and in some cases depends on, children's willingness to ask questions or to otherwise reveal areas of uncertainly or ignorance. A child who trusts that she will be treated with respect and kindness is far more likely to make these kinds of revelations than a child who anticipates ridicule. The need for trust may be especially great in cases where students are asked to consider and discuss topics or ideas that are bound to generate serious contention. Indeed, trust is one of the conditions that must be present for truly open and honest conversation.

Thus far I have focused mainly on the centrality of trust where the acquisition of knowledge and skill is concerned. Trust is equally if not more important in connection with the affective and emotional dimensions of education. Emotions are not merely "natural" or immune from instruction. The child who trusts others is far more likely to take her emotional cues from them — to see the world through their eyes — in unfamiliar emotional terrain. She is also more likely to reveal her feelings to trusted others and to take seriously whatever counsel they may have to offer. In short, it is in association with others that one learns which emotions are relatively more appropriate under which circumstances; one likewise learns the depth of feeling different occasions warrant. No doubt, different cultural groups will have different views about what constitutes appropriate emotional responses, but across cultures, part of becoming educated is learning what, for one's own culture, such responses entail.[11]

One usually thinks of trust as something involving at least two individuals, and this is certainly the dominant understanding in Baier's article. But, as Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski points out, the process of education entails learning to trust one's self; specifically, trust in one's senses as well as in one's memory and intellectual competence is necessary for the formation of belief.[12] It might be added that trust in these attributes is also needed for the construction of new knowledge. Raider-Roth found that when students trust their own knowledge they are able to use that knowledge to "build new understandings" and to "identify concepts" that were previously unclear to them.[13] In this study Raider-Roth also found that students' trust in themselves is linked with trust in others.

As mentioned, "discretion" figures prominently in Baier's account. At issue is how one should care for that which has been entrusted. Broadly conceived, education is a life-long process in which any one person will likely be educated in some sense by many, many others. However, those who have chosen to work in schools as teachers have special discretionary responsibilities. These responsibilities will differ somewhat according to school type — public or private, religious or secular, and elementary or secondary. Typically, at minimum, teachers are trusted to take reasonable precautions to keep students physically safe, to provide appropriate instruction in particular academic subjects, and to maintain a classroom environment that is conducive to learning and emotional security. If children in any given classroom were relatively homogeneous, perhaps trust would not pose too great a challenge. But, in most classrooms, there are important differences between students across a variety of characteristics — intellectual, emotional, and cultural. Because each student embodies a unique set of qualities, teachers face no small task

when it comes to figuring out how best to meet the trust placed in them. It is hard enough merely to provide every student "appropriate instruction," let alone the emotional and other non-academic support they may need.

The bulk of the discussion immediately above has focused mainly on students and teachers. I have tried to suggest that when students trust teachers with particular aspects of their education, this places students in a position of vulnerability and calls on teachers to exercise special care and discretion in their efforts to meet students' trust. But trust relations in schools are more complicated than portrayed thus far. Education is facilitated not only when students trust teachers, but also when teachers trust students (assuming in both cases that the trust is well founded). Most fundamentally, trust enables teachers to teach. If teachers did not trust students to exert the effort needed to learn, "teaching" would be a rather pointless endeavor. Trust in their own knowledge supports teachers' decision making about such things as pedagogy, curricula, discipline, and classroom organization. And, as noted earlier, trust is a condition for the open exchange of ideas, an exchange that, educationally speaking, is mutually beneficial for both teachers and students.

Ethically, and in some cases legally, teachers have discretionary responsibility in relation not only to students, but also to parents. First, parents have a significant interest in their children's education; indeed, compulsory attendance laws aside, the vast majority of parents send their children to school because they recognize that they (parents), alone, cannot provide an adequate education. Second, parents are generally seen as integral to the education of their children, and not just their informal education, but that occurring in schools as well. A common theme in the literature on parent-school relations is that the quality of these relations bears significantly on students' school experiences. Students who have at least one parent who communicates regularly with their teacher tend to succeed across a range of different academic and social measures at a higher rate than do students who lack this kind of parental support.[14] Clearly, relations between parents and teachers cannot get off the ground in the total absence of trust, and the more egalitarian of these relations are surely characterized by *mutual* trust where both parties share a degree of vulnerability.

If space allowed, the discussion about relations in which trust is educationally significant could be expanded to include school and district administrators, state, local, and national policy makers, and beyond that, to the individuals and institutions who participate in education informally.

LEARNING TO TRUST AND DISTRUST WELL AND FINELY

None of the foregoing is meant to imply that trust is always warranted. There are plenty of occasions n which *distrust* is the appropriate attitude. Students routinely encounter misleading information from advertisers, politicians, and mainstream "news" outlets; even textbooks have been known to contain half-truths and outright lies. And, sadly, we are all familiar with cases in which an adult has tried to win a child's trust with an eye toward causing her harm. All these kinds of cases (which certainly could be multiplied) suggest another way in which trust is educationally significant: part of becoming an educated person is learning to

identify the conditions under which one ought to trust — and to distrust. While an utter lack of trust may make a student resistant to genuinely helpful instruction, an overabundance of trust is at odds with such long-standing and well-defended educational aims as critical thinking. If the Aristotelians are correct, our goal educationally should be to help students to learn to trust and distrust well and finely.

Baier postulates that infants are born with the ability to trust their care-givers; surviving infancy would seem to require such an attribute. But with experience and education the character of trust appears susceptible to refinement over time. A young child may trust her parents in every regard, not only to meet her material and emotional needs, but also as a source of infallible knowledge about the world. Mature trust differs in several respects. First, judgments about the degree to which trust should be extended in different situations will typically become more astute with maturity. The child, who once trusted her parents in every respect, may grow to recognize that, while they are usually reliable, they are nevertheless fallible. Further, in maturity a person will typically differentiate between which persons (or institutions and objects) can be trusted for different purposes; for entertainment the *National Enquirer* is fine, for trustworthy news, the *New York Times* is a better bet.

If few of us are able to trust when told to "just trust," fewer still become trustworthy on command. Rather, it is likely that the process of becoming a trustworthy person begins early in life and is initiated though experiences with others who are worthy of trust. The fortunate child is one who is born into and raised in a community where trust is interwoven in the fabric of everyday interaction. Such a child will be surrounded with role models of trustworthiness; and more than that, trustworthiness will be, for her, *a way of life*. It takes time and practice to develop the perceptual acuity to reliably determine what constitutes a trustworthy response in complex situations. As Zagzebski observes, there is no algorithm for such a response. But a child who has numerous opportunities to see the different ways in which trustworthiness may be manifested is at an advantage when it comes to developing into a trustworthy person herself. In addition to the ability to decipher what is warranted by the particulars of the situation at hand, trustworthiness requires the *will to act* in ways that are trustworthy. Knowing what one should do is one thing, actually following through, another.

While there are plenty of circumstances in which distrust is warranted, clearly this does not mean that such circumstances are unproblematic. In fact, as Baier notes, it is often the absence of trust that attunes us to its significance; we feel ill at ease when we sense trust is lacking. Unfortunately, a survey of the contemporary scene indicates that distrust is fairly widespread. It is not uncommon for students to assert or demonstrate distrust of teachers and other adults, sometimes their own parents. Under trying circumstances, teachers lament a loss of trust in students' ability to learn and their own ability to teach. In recent years more and more parents have looked for alternatives to traditional public schools out of a lack of trust in some aspect of the public system. And students, teachers, and parents alike often seem to lack the trust needed to engage in the kinds of conversations where ideas, hopes, and worries are openly exchanged.

If it is the case that trust is educationally significant in the ways suggested here, then its absence from educational relations should be cause for concern. Needed, as Baier would suggest, is an assessment of the moral status of the relations where trust is at issue. Trust alone, if unwarranted, is no virtue at all and may serve to perpetuate inequality or oppression. The creation and maintenance of educational relations in which trust is warranted and morally good will, no doubt, require attention to an entire complex of conditions, not only personal or psychological, but also social, political, and economic.

1. Annette Baier, Trust and Antitrust," *Ethics* 96, no. 2 (1986): 231–260. This work will be cited as *TA* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 72.

3. Nicholas C. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 37.

4. Miriam Raider-Roth, "Trusting What You Know: Negotiating the Relational Context of Classroom Life," *Teachers College Record* 107, no. 4 (2005): 587–628.

5. Deborah Meyer, *In Schools We Trust* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Other major works on this topic include Megan Tschannen-Moran, *Trust Matters: Leadership for Successful Schools* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley/Jossey-Bass, 2004); and Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2002).

6. The word "let" is a little troubling here since there are cases in which there is no conscious giving of trust.

7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 51.

8. Recent scientific evidence supports Baier's view; the hormone oxytocin, which is secreted in the brains of mothers and their infants at birth, has been found to stimulate trust.

9. This analysis is roughly analogous to Nel Noddings's in *Caring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

10. Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 160.

11. There are many excellent publications on the education of emotions. Please see, for one example, Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

12. Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind,* 160.

13. Miriam Raider-Roth, "Trusting What You Know," 489.

14. See, for example, Joyce Epstein, *School and Family Partnerships: Surveys and Summaries* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993).