

Trust and Trustworthiness: Extending Rice's Analysis

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Suzanne Rice has provided a provocative analysis of a central concept in educational relations — trust. Her analysis serves us well for several reasons: (1) it reminds us of the central importance of trust in parent-child, teacher-student, and teacher-parent relationships; (2) it clarifies how a trust relationship involves the one trusting, the one trusted, and the object of the trust; (3) it identifies fruitful areas for philosophers of education to explore as they develop a more adequate understanding of trust and its corollary, trustworthiness; and (4) it reminds us of the fundamental neglect that most philosophers of education have shown recently towards this critical concept. In light of my deep interest in the topic, it is a special pleasure for me to respond to her essay.¹

SOME CRITICAL INSIGHTS FROM RICE'S ESSAY

Drawing on Annette Baier's seminal analysis of trust, Rice reminds us that trusting relations are ones of "vulnerability" since the one trusting entrusts something she cares for to the one trusted. Since those trusting can be harmed, disappointed, or betrayed by those they trust, Rice invites us to consider whom we should trust, under what conditions should we trust, to what extent should we trust, and when it is appropriate not to trust. She reminds us, as did Baier, that the one trusted often has broad discretionary responsibility in how to deal with what she has been entrusted with. This discretionary responsibility can be abused if the one trusted takes on responsibility for more than that with which she has been entrusted. She uses Baier's example of a babysitter who not only feeds, entertains, and diaper-changes a child, but also paints her nursery having decided its original color was unattractive. Nice example. I also like how Baier puts the problem: "For example, if I confide my troubles to a friend, I trust her to listen, more or less sympathetically, and to preserve confidentiality, but usually not, or nor without consulting me, to take steps to remove the source of my worry."²

Citing Baier, Rice points out, quite usefully, that in some relationships watchful distrust and judicious untrustworthiness are called for.³ Another useful point is that, if students are to be encouraged to discuss contentious subjects, teachers must be entrusted with providing them emotionally safe environments. Rice thus calls attention to the challenge teachers face of being appropriately responsive to students whose intellectual, emotional, and cultural characteristics differ from theirs — suggesting that teachers must provide not only "appropriate instruction" but also emotional and other forms of non-academic support to meet students' needs.

EXTENDING RICE'S ANALYSIS

Rice acknowledges the enormous complexity an analysis of trust would entail; thus, here I want to suggest where a fuller analysis of this topic might lead. The first area for us to consider in more depth is what might be at stake for a teacher to be viewed as "trustworthy" — a person who warrants being trusted. I view this problem

as central to what is involved for teachers to become moral role models for students. In this regard, Rice draws usefully upon one of Baier's categories of "trustworthiness" — namely, that of "good will" — but neglects Baier's other two categories — negligence and competence.⁴ Notice that we not only use the term "trust" in the global sense of "You can trust Bob" or "Beware of trusting this principal" but also often use "trust" to refer to the way a person does or does not fulfill specific responsibilities — duties with which they are entrusted in their specific roles. "You can trust Susan to get her students' papers back on time with thoughtful comments," or "You can seldom trust Fred to come to class fully prepared." The issues of "negligence" and "competence" lie at the heart of whether one can be entrusted with the educational welfare of children, but these topics are complex. Suzanne Rice talks about "providing appropriate instruction" but what areas of competence would this involve? Should we expect beginning teachers, for example, to know how to diagnose their students' prior knowledge adequately when preparing lessons? Should we expect them to know how to differentiate their instruction sufficiently to help students who read far below grade level? In special education, we expect that children will be provided with an individualized educational plan that meets their particular learning needs as professionally diagnosed, but can we assume that regular teachers will be sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of children who have special kinds of cognitive and emotional needs? How should we think of competence and negligence in a teacher's role as a person entrusted with the educational welfare of students? What do we have a legitimate right to expect?

If we consider how broad and nebulous a teacher's "in loco parentis" role might be to ensure that a child's educational welfare is enhanced not diminished, we might consider the present accountability movement and whether it provides a background context where teacher "distrust" might be warranted — distrust directed towards educational policy makers and district officials carrying out these policies.⁵ Does an overemphasis on high stakes test scores as the fundamental measure of a child's growth and of a school's educational progress warrant an educator's distrust? If one believes that developing curiosity, the love of reading, a sensitivity to others, especially those who are different from us, reasonableness, open-mindedness, and modest skepticism are critical to developing educated persons, how might one expect educators distrustful of contemporary educational policy to act? What would appropriate expressions of distrust look like? Would Rice's analysis take us towards understanding the background climate of distrust that exists in many educational contexts?

Another area that Rice's analysis might be extended to include is the area of distrust that underlies students' prior experiences with oppression, racism, sexual harassment, and abuse. Her point that "social, political, and economic inequalities all bear on the moral status of trust relations," raises many questions worthy of further analysis. How might teachers teach students in ways that acknowledge their own positions of power and privilege and the background contexts which institutionalize racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression? How might teachers find ways to give voice to students who experience traditional school classrooms as

places that silence and marginalize them? Nancy Nyquist Potter in her chapter, “The Trustworthy Teacher” suggests that significant percentages of female students are “survivors of incest” and that trustworthy college teachers “can be counted on to resist the notion that student survivors [of incest] are somehow marginal, that the incidence of incest is low, or the child sexual abuse isn’t really a part of oppressive structures of our society.” “One of the central pedagogical responsibilities of trustworthy educators,” Potter argues, “. . . requires that we teach materials in ways that allow students to make those significant connections with their own lives.”⁶

Trustworthiness as a morally central concept of teacher student relationships acknowledges several important features of a teacher’s role: (a) that teachers are responsible not only for appropriate instruction but for the quality of their interpersonal relationships with students; (b) that teachers are also responsible, to a significant degree, for the normative culture they create in their classrooms; (c) that teachers can betray trust by not being fair-minded, by exercising bad judgment, by not taking their students’ concerns, complaints, perspectives, and feelings seriously; (d) that insecure teachers can inappropriately try to meet their own psychological needs through caring for their students in unhealthy ways; (e) that teachers not only have responsibilities to their students, but to their departments, schools, school districts, and their professions since they function as citizens of these larger communities. In their role as citizens, we might ask, what do we have a right to expect of teachers as the guardians of our children’s well being? What kind of educational citizens would we view as deserving our trust? Since what we might expect of teachers as citizens might differ considerably from person to person, what entitles teachers to be justifiably trusted remains a topic much too rich to continue to be neglected?⁷ It deserves our deepest concern; through her provocative and comprehensive analysis, Rice has invited all of us to take the topic of trust and trustworthiness seriously. For that, we are all indebted to her.

1. Michael S. Katz, “Trust and Trustworthiness: Examining a Neglected Topic in the Ethics of Teacher-Student Relationships” (paper presented at the annual conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, Oxford, March, 2004), and “Trust, Trustworthiness, Narcissism, and Moral Blindness: An Examination of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*” (paper presented at the annual conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, Oxford, March 2006).

2. Annette C. Baier, *Moral Prejudice: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 103.

3. *Ibid.*, 253.

4. *Ibid.*, 103.

5. See Onora O’Neill, *A Question of Trust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 43–59 for a thoughtful discussion of the ways in which the “accountability” movement in England has harmed, rather than promoted, a climate of trust.

6. Nancy Nyquist Potter, *How Can I Be Trusted: A Virtue Theory of Trustworthiness* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 106.

7. For another stimulating book on the ethics of personal relationships and the centrality of trust, see Trudy Govier, *Dilemmas of Trust* (McGill, Canada: McGill-Queens University Press, 1998).