

TRUST AND TERROR

by Onora O'Neill

Daily Trust

It's a pleasure to be back in Belfast, and to speak about trust here. We all of us first learn to trust and what it takes to be trustworthy as small children, from family, friends and neighbours. I first learned about trust in the Braid Valley, where I was born and spent large parts of my childhood in my grandparents' home. Despite the political tensions that all families in the North know, trust was strong: doors were not locked and questions were answered honestly.

For all of us, after all, trust is the most everyday thing. Every day and in hundreds of ways we trust others to do what they say, to play by the rules and to behave reasonably. We trust other drivers to steer well; we trust postal staff to deliver letters efficiently — well, more or less; we trust teachers to prepare our children for exams; we trust colleagues to do what they say; we even trust strangers to tell us the way.

And when we place trust we don't simply assume that others are reliable and predictable, as we assume that the sun rises reliably, and the milk goes off predictably. When we trust we know — at least when we are no longer small children — that we could be disappointed. Sometimes we place trust in spite of past disappointment, or without much evidence of reliability. To withdraw trust after a single lapse, as if we were rejecting a scientific theory in the face of decisive evidence, would often seem suspicious, even paranoid. All trust risks disappointment. The risk of disappointment, even of betrayal cannot be written out of our lives. Samuel Johnson put it this way: 'It is happier to be sometimes cheated than not to trust'¹ Trust is needed not because everything is wholly predictable, or wholly guaranteed, but on the contrary because life has to be led without guarantees.

Trust and Fear

Trust often invites reciprocal trust: and when it does, we have virtuous spirals. Equally trust can open the door to betrayal, and betrayal to mistrust: there are

vicious spirals. Today I want to say a little bit about the most extreme situations when trust starts spiralling downwards, and we might lose it all together.

In dangerous times, as we know, placing trust can be risky. Holding fire might allow an enemy to fire first and fatally; refusing to denounce someone might allow that other person to get a denunciation in first. Prisoners' dilemmas are not just abstract theory — they really happen. And recently terrorism has been more than ever in our minds. Terrorism undermines the conditions of trust less because it inflicts violence — though it does, and the violence may be frequent or sporadic — than because it spreads fear. As the etymology of the word tells us, terrorists aim at terror, at fear, at intimidation. Fear and intimidation corrode and undermine our ability to place trust, and declining trust in turn fuels pre-emptive action and hostilities, and makes it harder to trust.

Events in New York, we all know, illustrate this. The US lives with an awful lot of sporadic violence: crime and the gun culture flourish in ways that we can hardly imagine. This violence creates lots of fear, — mainly private fear, allayed (partly) by ingenious private security; and it does not wholly undermine the possibility of trusting others and trusting institutions. But the collapse of those gleaming towers led to far wider fears that no private security arrangements could reduce. It made the daily placing of trust in others and in the normal functioning of public institutions very much harder. Fear intruded into those seemingly well-protected spaces of the office and the airport, the Pentagon and the Stock Exchange. The spread of fear caused by the atrocities, and by the anthrax mailings, was the more palpable because nobody spelt out how further terror could be averted.

This was not coercive terror, of the sort practised by the Mafia and reasonably well known here in Belfast where we are tonight; it was not 'an offer you cannot refuse'; it was abrupt and unpredictable rather than sticking to a sickeningly familiar pattern. There was no statement of terms to be met; nobody claimed co-called 'credit'.

There was only the obscurity and silence of pure terror. Subsequent events have made the identities and aims of the perpetrators of September 11th a little less obscure; those behind the anthrax mailings remain wholly obscure — at least so far.

Trust, Rights and Democracy

Where danger and terror undermine trust, nothing is more urgent than restoring conditions for trust. But how to do it? One standard contemporary answer is that the political conditions for placing trust must be achieved, and that these include human rights and democracy. Human rights and democracy have after all been central to efforts to construct a ‘peace process’ in Northern Ireland and other parts of the world. I believe that human rights and democracy are not the basis of trust: on the contrary, trust is the basis for human rights and democracy.

Human rights, which we venerate today, are more often gestured at than they are seriously argued for. The list of rights proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of 1948 is often seen as canonical. The list is untidy and unargued. It includes some rights of high importance that perhaps are universal rights. It also includes culturally narrow rights, such as the ‘right to holidays with pay’, but this supposed right was an aspiration of the labour movement in the developed world in the middle of the twentieth century; and it has little relevance for the billions of human beings who are not even employees.

The Declaration defines rights poorly, and it says almost nothing about the corresponding duties. No inspection of the Universal Declaration, or of later UN or European Documents, will show us who is required to do what for whom, or why they are required to do it. The underlying difficulty of any Declaration of Rights is that it assumes a passive view of human life and citizenship. Rights answer the questions ‘What are my entitlements?’ or ‘What should I get?’ They don’t answer the active citizen’s question ‘What should I do?’

Yet no claim to rights has the faintest chance of making a real difference without clear answers to the question ‘what should I do?’ A supposed right to free speech is mere rhetoric unless others — all competent others — have duties to respect free speech. A supposed right to a fair trial is mere rhetoric unless others — all relevant others — have duties to ensure such trials, unless judges have duties to give fair decisions, unless police and witnesses have duties to testify, and to testify honestly, and so on for all involved in a legal process. Duties are the business end of justice: they formulate the requirements to which Declarations of Rights merely gesture; they speak to all of us whose action is vital for real, respected rights.

If duties are the business end of ethical and political requirements, why don't we notice that? Why do we lavish so much more attention on rights? And why are we so often silent or slipshod in talking and thinking about duties? Perhaps it is partly because it is so much more fun to think about all the things that other people should do for us, and not about what we should do for them.

But there may be deeper and political reasons. Declarations of Rights ostensibly offer something to everybody, but they do it without coming clean about the costs and demands of respecting the rights they proclaim. Governments have generally been willing to sign up to Declarations of Rights, indeed to ratify them, but a lot less keen on the counterpart duties. Individuals have often been willing, even eager, to claim their rights, but much less willing to meet their duties to respect others' rights. In thinking about rights, we readily see ourselves on the receiving end: and it is always someone else's round.

The Universal Declaration takes a simple and unsatisfactory view of the duties needed to secure rights: it just assigns them to states. It conveniently ignores the reality that some states are not committed to rights and that others are too weak to secure them.

Where states or parts of states are weak or failing, it is idle to object when they do not secure full rights for everybody: they can't do it. Rights are not taken seriously unless the duties that underpin them are taken seriously; those duties are not taken seriously unless there are effective, committed people and institutions to carry them. How can there be rights to fair trials when terrorists cannot be prosecuted for their crimes because witnesses know that it is beyond the power of the police to protect them if they testify? How can rights to freedom of assembly be secure in the face of intimidation? How can basic civic rights be secured in a country of well-armed clans like Afghanistan? How can fair trials proceed where judges are bribed or menaced, or even assassinated?

Without competent and committed persons and institutions, duties simply won't be met; and if they are not met, rights won't be respected; and if rights are not respected democracy won't be achievable. Democracy can show us what is politically legitimate; but it can't show us what is ethically justified. On the contrary democracy presupposes rights, and rights presuppose duties. So there can be no full democracy where rights and duties are violated, where voters are intimidated, where ballot boxes are stuffed, where political parties working within the constitution are banned.

Which Duties?

If duties (or obligations) are prior to rights, if duties are what we should really be looking at, we need to reorient our political thinking. The thought is quite different from the familiar platitude of the 1990's that we all have responsibilities as well as rights. The platitude happens to be false. Babies and the severely retarded, for example, have rights but no responsibilities. But if any of us is to have any rights, others have got to have counterpart duties. The thought that nobody has rights unless others have duties is a precise logical claim. So in thinking about ethics and politics, we would I believe do better to begin by thinking about what ought to be done and who ought to do it, rather than about what we ought to get. Passive citizens, who wait for others to accord and respect their rights and mistakenly suppose that states alone can do so, are, I think, doomed to disappointment. Active citizens who meet their duties thereby secure one another's rights.

Active citizens take a serious view of their duties. But they can't do this by looking up some Declaration of Human Duties — this is an unfashionable literary genre, although it at least addresses the proper question. How then can we know which duties, and in particular which political duties are fundamental? One way of thinking about this, which I find more convincing than any of the alternatives, derives from the work of Immanuel Kant, the great eighteenth century philosopher who lived at the other end of Europe, in remote East Prussia on the boundaries of Russia. He sees duty as the basis of rights and of justice and his famous arguments for cosmopolitan justice have made him one of the most significant political thinkers in our globalising age — in spite of his demanding thought and, let's admit it, sometimes tortured prose.

So let me begin with the classic Kantian thought: we are all moral equals. Nowadays this thought is usually followed up quickly with the claim that we therefore all have equal rights. But for Kant the deeper implication is that we all have equal duties. No competent person, and none of the institutions that human beings construct, is exempt from fundamental duties. The basic principle of justice — of all duties — is that they have to be based on principles for all. We should not act on principles unfit to be principles for all.

That is a tough requirement. It is always easy to think that one's own case or cause is exceptional. Violence and terror, coercion and murder,

intimidation and mutilation have victims: perpetrators know and intend to ensure that those victims are unable to do what they do. They know from the start that their ways of acting won't be open to their victims, hence not open to all others. Equally, deception and fraud, extortion and manipulation, have victims: perpetrators know and intend to ensure that those victims are unable to do what they do. They know from the start that their ways of acting are not open to their victims, hence not open to all others. Anybody who aims to act only on principles that others too can adopt must reject these and all other ways of victimising.

These are robust and demanding conclusions. They identify basic duties that must be met if we are to live in a world in which trust can be placed, in which institutions that secure human rights can be built, and in which democracy may be possible. Where violence and coercion, deception and intimidation are common, it is because some people act on principles that cannot be principles for all: they breach and neglect fundamental duties, violate others' rights, and undermine both the possibility of democracy and of placing trust.

Trust during Dark Times

I believe that these arguments establish duties that provide a basis for rights and a basis for democracy. But they don't show what we should do when others flout their duties. Why should anyone place trust, fulfil fundamental duties or respect others' rights if they face intimidation and violence, extortion, deception, and at the limit terror? Won't those who place trust or meet duties in these conditions face danger and become victims?

Well, I think that if we believe that rights are the precondition of social and political trust, there is nothing we can do until other people start respecting our rights — and nothing they can do until we start respecting their rights. If we persist in taking a passive view of human beings, seeing them primarily as holders of rights, and forgetting that rights are the flip side of others' duties, restoring trust will seem a hopeless task. But if we remember that human beings must act before anyone can have rights there is a different way of looking at matters. Some duties that support trust can be met even in the darkest times.

When we read the inspiring literatures on confronting terror and oppression in many parts of the world in recent decades, we can see how small moves sometimes begin large changes, like the pebble that falls and causes an

avalanche. Let me give you an example. It's not from South Africa, or Chile or Northern Ireland, but from former Czechoslovakia. In his wonderful essay 'Power of the Powerless' President Vaclav Havel describes a way in which it was possible to refuse complicity with injustice in the dark days before the Velvet Revolution. The Communist party of the People's Republic of Czechoslovakia used to send out bulletins with Party slogans and messages to be displayed in every shop. These mind-numbingly boring slogans were so familiar that they became invisible: and yet displaying them represented a small form of support for the regime and its oppressions, a small connivance, a small lie. Refusal to display those messages, to endorse that view of the world, was a small act of truth and courage, and ultimately of power, that was open to the powerless. From those small refusals, bolder action followed.

Lying, complicity and refusal to testify honestly are very common in the face of fear and terror: but they can be built down rather than reinforced. This can be done by rejecting the politically correct vocabularies in which crimes are renamed, and perpetrators accorded respectability, by refusing to lie and by telling more of the truth, by refusing to endorse slogans and half-truths. Trust is destroyed by deception: and destroying deception builds trust — and thereby the basis for rights and democracy.

Of course, one has to admit that there are conditions so dire that even minor defiance is risky: in Stalin's Soviet Union and in Taliban Afghanistan trivial non-conformity could have fatal costs; only underground resistance was possible. But beyond the extremes there are possibilities. Speaking truthfully does not damage trust; it creates a climate for trust. We can stop using euphemisms to placate those who threaten or do injustice; we can refuse to dignify community intimidators by speaking of them as community leaders; we can accord genuine community leaders the honour they deserve. We can stop using vocabularies of community protection and freedom fighting to dignify crimes. We can stop calling for reduced police powers while simultaneously demanding stronger police protection. We can set aside the passive outlook, which fantasises that blaming and accusing others contributes to justice.

In offering these examples I do not mean to suggest that we need heroes rather than reform. On the contrary, active citizens improve institutions as they improve the conditions for trusting. Increasing performance of duties

builds a foundation for human rights and democracy and may start a virtuous spiral of trust. In the past fifty years, I believe we have too often modelled justice in terms of human rights, thoughtlessly assumed that states can shoulder the entire task of securing them, and then blamed them when they failed. We have closed our eyes to the inadequacy of state power in many parts of the world and to its limits where people take a merely passive view of citizenship.

Terror is indeed the ultimate denial and destroyer of trust. Terrorists violate the spectrum of fundamental duties and thereby the spectrum of human rights. Typically they do violence and coerce, they deceive, they intimidate. In the wake of terror, trust spirals downwards. Its restoration is the hardest of political and civic tasks: but not a task that states can handle alone. The passive culture of human rights suggests that we can sit back and wait for others to deliver our entitlements I suggest that if we really want human rights we have to act and to meet our duties to one another.

Footnotes:

- 1 Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, 79

Dr Onora O'Neill is the Principal of Newnham College Cambridge. She personally agreed to the reproduction of this Reith Lecture 2002 in this publication. Her permission was endorsed by Cambridge University Press, which holds the copyright.

The Reith Lectures are an annual lecture series, which began in 1948 with the philosopher Bertrand Russell. Leading thinkers are invited to consider significant contemporary issues. In this series in 2002 Dr. Onora O'Neill examined the apparent decline in trust placed in government, business, the press and other institutions. She investigated the source of deception in society, questioned established approaches to professional accountability, re-examined issues of press freedom, and searched for means to establish trust amid violence and terrorism. More information is available on www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/