From Where does Trust come and Why is "From Where" Significant?

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Abstract

Starting with a decisive scene in Victor Hugo's novel *Les Miserables,* the paper searches for a place for trust to reside. We find such a place between the situations where it appears in our relations and generously attaches us to each other.

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Victor Hugo, with his legendary protagonist, Jean Valjean of the post-revolutionary novel *Les Miserables* (1987), paves the way for the French phenomenologists Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as for the more academically oriented Maurice Merleau-Ponty, each of them being a passageway to the understanding of profound human phenomena. In the extract below, we meet the ex-convict Jean Valjean on a stormy October evening in 1814, when he knocks at the richly decorated door of the man of God, Bishop Myriel of Digne, his sister and their maid, asking for a place to stay the night. The bishop kindly greets him, offers him a meal, and gives him a bed. Later that night, Jean Valjean, unable to sleep in a comfortable bed after years of sleeping on boards in the notorious prison of Toulon, sneaks away, taking most of the bishop's silver with him. This is how we are introduced to the first encounter between the convict and the bishop:

> The door opened. It opened quickly, quite wide, as if someone were pushing it boldly and energetically. A man entered. We already know him. It was the traveller we saw wandering in search of food and shelter. He came in, took a step, and paused, leaving the door open behind him. He had his knapsack on his back, his stick in his hand, and a rough, hard, tired, and fierce look in his eyes. Seen by firelight, he seemed a hideous, sinister apparition. Madame Magloire had not even the strength to scream. She stood trembling, her mouth agape. Mademoiselle Baptistine turned, saw the man enter, and started up half alarmed; then, slowly turning back again to the fire, she looked at her brother, and her face resumed its usual profound serenity. The bishop gazed tranquilly at the man. As he was opening his mouth to speak, undoubtedly to ask the stranger

what he wanted, the man, leaning with both hands on his club, glanced from one to another in turn, and without waiting for the bishop to speak, said loudly: "Listen here! My name is Jean Valjean. I was a convict. I have spent nineteen years in prison." (Hugo, 1987, p. 73)

The encounter between four persons, we learn the meaning of the moment only for one of them, is decisive for Jean Valjean's experience of human dignity, and has a ripple effect on his life. When he pleads for understanding in front of the bishop, the head of the church, he does not yet know that the man in front of him is, in fact, the bishop. As the representative of the institution that is the front provider of mercy, though at the same time also is the most authoritarian judge to mankind's fall and sinful disposition, the outcome of the situation for Jean Valjean might well be dismissive as charitable. By letting the man of the church know who he is, his yellow passport verifying his confession; he is a recently released prisoner, to whom no one will give food or water, in any case not open the door and let in. Jean Valjean's very presence puts moral to test. Realizing that he is standing face to face with the representative of the institution that knows good from evil, seems to intensify his plea. It is obvious to all that he needs help to keep up his physical life, but the bishop also sees his tacit plea for compassion and for someone who is willing to witness his misery with empathy.

"Madame Magloire," said the bishop "another place, please." The man took three steps toward the lamp on the table. "Look," he exclaimed, as if he had not understood, "did you understand? I'm a convict – I'm just out of prison." […] The bishop turned to the man: "Monsieur, sit down and warm yourself. We are going to have supper in a moment, and your bed will be made while you eat." At last the man did understand; his expression, which up till then had been gloomy and hard, now showed stupefaction, doubt, and joy – an extraordinary transformation. He began to stammer like a madman. "What! You'll let me stay? You won't send me away? A convict! You call me Monsieur and don't say "Get out, dog!" like everybody else. I thought you'd send me away, too, so I told you who I am right away." (Hugo, 1987, pp. 73-74)

Jean Valjean enters the home and the life of the bishop, his sister and their maid, unexpectedly, and is met as a welcomed guest. The bishop looks at him as he stands there in the doorway, listens respectfully and invites him for supper. The encounter between the convict and the bishop is an exception from the general norm of the time, perhaps from the norm of all times, but this is how Hugo lets it happen. The encounter echoes with what Lingis notes as "the noise of another person's life disturbing the tranquillity of mine" (1994, p. 28). The noise of the other into the little household's sphere of attention addresses them and influences their plans. Jean Valjean compels from them a choice of action. The bishop might, like Lingis, experience that "with the least glimpse of the other [...] I can feel arrested in my own intentions, contested" (p. 28). My awareness of a person in need creates a certain uneasiness and indecisiveness in me. My own plans for the moment fade, and I am left exposed to the other person's situation.

Being addressed by another is "to subject oneself to another," Lingis remarks (1994, p. 87). To subject oneself to someone is an action, or a way of being that opens up possibilities. By listening to the soundless "command" of the other's mere presence in my life, and by attentively being directed to him or her, the moment all of a sudden

carries a possibility of something new. Lögstrup addresses the possibility of the moment, when saying that "trust is a possibility of possibility maintenance. Distrust is a possibility of possibility suspension," (1996, p. 24).The bishop subjects himself to Jean Valjean, and by this act he sustains the possibility of trust. Had he met Jean Valjean's appeal with rejection or even with hesitation, the encounter would have been brought to an abrupt end and the possibilities of trust closed, or at best delayed.

Lingis (2004) adds yet another dimension to trust by linking it to courage. Trust and courage have in common that they are immediate and context qualified expressions that "arise and hold steadfast as one's projections, expectations and hopes dissipate," he says (2004, p. x). Trust and courage build on themselves, elevate and increase, in spite of their uncertain prospect in the real world context. If Jean Valjean had not had the courage to trust, no possibility would have opened up. If the bishop had not had the courage to let trust and himself trust, no relationship between them would have become. As a relational phenomenon trust can open up possibilities, and if responded to trustfully, trust sustains the keeping open of new possibilities. Uncertainty, risk, dependency and mercy are required for trust to be experienced as trust. Trust withstands life but withholds from becoming rationalized knowledge, with which we might organize, plan and control life and relationships (Lögstrup 2008). Trust is not conductive to an end, nor manageable, revisable or refinable. Jean Valjean simply stood there in the bishop family's doorway unexpectedly, inconveniently, interrupting an evening meal, disturbing a tranquil and advantageous life, a stranger to a world that was unaware of and unprepared for his presence. The spontaneous weight of the moment is just what moral is about, as mere givenness (Bauman, 1993). The moment itself is moral because this is the instant when a decision to trust or not, is made. Trust arises before ontology; one is being *for* someone before one is being *with* someone (Levinas, 1985). Yet, from *where* does trust arise, and how does *where it arises from* make a difference?

Sources of Trust

We question the shortage of trust in today's societies, and tend to think of trust in terms of lack of or demand for trust. Trust is likely to go unrecognized when present, but while lacking we become acutely aware of its absence and make it a topic. But can trust be influenced or possessed to build personal or professional relationships? Can trust be created, preserved, rebuilt or extended when necessary, or when relationships become problematic? Can trust be recreated conveniently and effectively when lacking or eroding? Although we know that at the core of trust there lingers uncertainty and ambiguity, and that these qualities belong to the powerfulness of trust, we still consider these frail and risky qualities a defect or weakness of trust. We consider trust's weak and risky qualities the "trick of trust," as Möllering puts it (2006, p. 7), the qualities that might trap us and delimit our influence, or reduce our control of a desired outcome. These are the elements of trust that we would like to reduce or eliminate. We constantly attempt to moderate the fragility of trust by acting as if trust were manageable, rational and predictable. We establish routines and reflexively organized procedures in public schools, health services as well as in areas like the prison service. Student-teacher agreements on homework, behaviour and learning contracts to increase students' grades, safety offered to elderly through automatic

warning aid, and surveillance of prisoners by advanced technology and microchips fixed to their ankles, or inserted in their bodies, are but some examples.

Even an etymological reading of trust could sustain interpretations of trust as related to agreement and alliance, or associated with authority, reliability and strength.[1] The seamy side and the weaknesses of trust go unmentioned. Trust seems to be interpreted from its desired outcome, rather than from the ambiguous meaning embedded in the trusting act itself. Trust as a noun and trust as a verb, however, seem to reveal a certain small, but significant difference. While trust as a noun connotes terms of power and assertiveness, trust as a verb seems indirectly to emerge from ambiguity, and is harder to get a grip on. Verbs are by definition words that convey action or a state of being. However, *to trust* does not convey action, like for instance to run or to smile. Neither does *to trust* describe a state of being, like to understand or to exist. To trust seems to be different. In Norwegian the term *to trust* requires a temporal auxiliary verb, *å ha* tillit (to *have* trust), and does not make sense as a verb without this necessary support. This prods us to wonder what we actually do when we trust. What does *to trust* look like as a relational action? Or what would *to trust* refer to as a state of being? Could it be that to trust in fact is something that we cannot easily classify, neither grammatically, nor as a relational experience? Could it be that rather than filling trust with a specific meaning, like we so unaffectedly do in our day to day encounters with each other, we should be responsive to experiences where trust fills our world with meaning (Saevi & Eikeland in review, p. 13)?

Jean Valjean as well as Bishop Myriel of Digne in the moment of being exposed to each other, is faced by the challenge to see the person beyond the role. Their encounter could have been blurred by the other's condition, position, class, or in this instance the sheer appearance of the other, and to the representative language related to these qualities. Lingis (2004) notes that we tend to feel that to know someone is to relate to their representative features, like gender, culture, education, class and so on. Encounters often are "detoured into efforts, even more evidently fragmentary and superficial, to know all these layers" (2004, p. viii). Bishop Myriel however, cuts straight through conventions and superficialities of social class and inappropriate condition, and sees Jean Valjean as a person speaking straight to him personally. Before the bishop is physically and mentally *with* the man in the doorway, he is existentially *for* him. Trust as a possibility arises from that situation. But where was trust concealed until the moment they met? Was trust potentially hidden in Jean Valjean or in the bishop, or was it residing unseen and unspoken of, somewhere else?

Life's "Small Goodness"

Lögstrup (2008) makes a distinction between the experiential characteristics that belong to the phenomenon itself, and the phenomenon as a subject of our examination or evaluation. Trust as well as distrust are modes, in which we understand our own life, ourselves and our relation to others. One of the essential qualities of trust as an interdependent self-understanding of the human being, is its affirmative or positive character. This trait is embedded in the meaning of trust itself, and cannot be removed without changing trust into distrust. We simply are not capable of understanding trust neutrally or objectively as positive or negative, but we can chose purposefully to evaluate trust negatively, in contrast with its self-understanding. The point here is that

our self-understanding somehow is in possession of us before we are in possession of it. We understand ourselves before we know that we do it. Lögstrup says,

Whether something is positive or negative, good or evil, is not decided at the moment when we evaluate it; it is not originally decided at the moment we make it our own. My life made me its own before I made it mine. My life has given me to understand what is good and evil before I take a position on the issue and evaluate it. (p. 6)

Trust belongs to the very basics of life. Trust is relationally lived, felt, and experienced as positively given, when spontaneously it appears. Trust as a "sovereign expression of life" Løgstrup (1997, p. 113), can transform a situation and free the persons involved from being bounded by their own matters. Instead, we are invited by trust to go beyond what we know, and hold on to someone else, as he or she appears to us. In fact, as Lingis claims, "We attach to someone whose words or whose movements we do not understand, whose reasons or motives we do not see" (2004, p. ix). We spontaneously trust another person exactly because trust belongs to life and cannot be reflected before it is lived. "The expression of life cannot be applied, but can only be realized, as I realize myself in it," Lögstrup says (2008, p. 53). The possibility of transformation lies in my total involvement with the other. The encounter between Jean Valjean and Bishop Myriel of Digne is a situation where the "situation is a function of the agent" (p. 53), and not as in a self-enclosed situation where the person simply is mastered by the situation. The life of the convict, as well as of the bishop, was turned upside down and transformed in the spontaneous expression of trust. To trust is not subject to a certain purpose, or a meaningless act, until it has been reciprocated (Saevi & Eikeland in review). Trust cannot be rationally justified, but is something related to what is right and good, rather than to reasonability and social correctness. Trust is no more or no less, than my spontaneous response to the other's trust in me. No precaution or reflective self-preservation is needed. The immediate attentive response is what is asked for in the other person's trusting appeal.

Van den Berg (1972) argues that the connection between persons, the basis for their relation, is not residing in their relation as such. Rather, he says, we share some thing outside the two of us, *out there*, like plans, interests, responsibilities, or situations (p. 67). We are in original contact with the objects of the world, and the world is in direct contact with us. Murdoch, while dealing with the sovereignty of good, suggests that the good should not be understood as part of the world, "but as a movable label affixed to the world; for only so can the agent be pictured as responsible and free" (2003, pp. 3-4). What if trust resides somewhere *out there*, outside our control, even outside persons and relations? Jean Valjean and Bishop Myriel of Digne did not trust each other as a means to an end or in order to "make sense" of an otherwise meaningless situation. Trust to them was its own end, and was not futile, until it had been reciprocated or repaid. They were free to trust, and to cling to the possibility of the possible, with no particular reason or justification. Perhaps trust could be seen as one of life's "small goodnesses" (Levinas, 1981), that like the good is visible and evident in action, or as lived relationality, but at the same time is of a quality that eludes rational reason and argument? Trust somehow as an "object" is invisible or indiscernible to us. Like the good, trust is something that we know when we experience it, and yet, "we know it and we know it not. We recognize it experientially but cannot pin it down, predetermine or control it" (Saevi & Eilifsen,

2008, p. 11). Trust arises, opens up possibilities and then if we try to hold on to it, trust slips between our fingers and evaporates. Trust is given to us only in how it appears, and we are simply "passageway[s]" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 39) to its transformative potential. Trust appears spontaneously and sovereignly when the mere appearing of what appears is possible, and when life opens up a situation for it to reside.

Endnotes

[1] www.etymonline.com

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