

**Better to Receive Than to Give?**  
**The Meaning of Trust in Religious and Catholic Thought**  
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Quaestiones Disputatae Panel

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**Preambles**

First, I want to expand the subtitle of my remarks this afternoon. I add the phrase “human living,” and a “therefore”, so that the subtitle reads “The meaning of trust in human living, and therefore in religious and Catholic thought.” How trusting is understood in human living connects with the meaning of trust in religious and Catholic thought. Our title this afternoon, “Better to Receive Than to Give?” is derived from a saying attributed to Jesus in the New Testament’s “Acts of the Apostles”: It is more blessed to give than to receive” (NAB Acts 20:35). Furthermore, Aristotle says something rather similar, as we will see. My title therefore engages Jesus and Aristotle, and it proposes tilting the comparative “better” the other way, thus suggesting it is better to receive than to give.

My remarks this afternoon, derived from a book I’m doing on trust, are a bridge, connecting trusting in human living with trusting in a religious and Catholic context.

In particular, I want to address five components of this bridge:

- \*the difference between having an opinion and trusting;
- \*the difference between vulnerability and dependence;
- \*the challenge that lies in defining trusting;
- \*the way in which it is better to receive;
- \*how one receives in religious and Catholic thought—and living.

### **I. Opinion and Trusting**

Consider Consumer Confidence surveys. Each month some people get a phone call, and they are asked: Is this a good time or a bad time to make a major purchase? The interviewees give their opinions. From their opinions are derived reports on consumer confidence—consumer trust, if you will. They are not asked whether they do take risks, just about whether they believe that it is a good time to take a major risk. What's their opinion?

Or consider confidence in government. Some years ago a newspaper had the headline "In Government We Trust (As Far as We Can Throw It)." The story had the observation that in some cases there is greater trust of one's government representative than of one's government; in other cases there is greater trust in the system of government and less in specific government officials. The people gave their opinions. Their opinions about the trustworthiness of the government were reported as trust in government.<sup>1</sup>

And social scientists generally distinguish between trusting and acting on trust. To a social scientist, to trust a person is to believe certain things about a person. A typical social science definition of trust is this: to trust is to believe that someone else has interests which extend to include my own interests; thus to trust is to believe that someone is trustworthy.<sup>2</sup> To trust is to have an opinion about someone's interests in relation to mine.

Even the demons believe, as the New Testament's Letter of James (2:19) has it—believe that God exists. But their opinion about God is not a matter of their trusting God, even if these demons believe that God is trustworthy.

I propose that trusting be defined in terms not of what I believe about other people, but in terms of how I interact with other people, how I deal with others. There is a difference between thinking and doing, between thinking someone is trustworthy and doing some actual trusting. We recognize the difference between believing my parachute will work and actually using the parachute. I can believe someone is trustworthy and yet, for various reasons, not actually trust that person; sometimes, for example, I just decide to take care of the matter myself.

My approach, however, focuses on more than opinion about someone. To trust is not merely to believe something. In actual trusting, there is commitment and engagement.

More needs to be said about how trusting is a way of acting, of course, but before we turn to definition, let us examine my second point, about vulnerability and dependence.

## **II. Vulnerability and Dependence**

Vulnerability is a popular word. Some even define trust as accepted vulnerability.<sup>3</sup> We know that vulnerability means subject to being harmed, and if trusting involves possible harm, trusting involves vulnerability. It is odd that our language does not have a matching word for, not harm, but benefit or help. Perhaps we should invent one: benefit-ability or help-ability.

Furthermore, we can think of situations where vulnerability is more imagined than actual. The builders of roller-coasters aim for reducing actual vulnerability, while increasing imagined vulnerability.

But we should recognize a difference between vulnerability and dependence. When I am dependent on someone else, I need something from that person. If it is need for something that continues as essential for life, I have significant continuing dependence. But I may have varying vulnerability—more with an increase in the likelihood of undergoing harm, or less with a decrease in such likelihood. My point: dependence can continue, while vulnerability may vary. We can even imagine a situation where actual vulnerability approaches zero while dependence continues. The air we breathe may shift from less to more healthy, while our dependence on air remains the same. A child continues to be dependent on her parents, but responsible parents reduce possible harm.

So, how does this contrast between vulnerability and dependence play out in understanding trusting? Before we consider that, we need to take our look at Aristotle.

Aristotle offers a sketch of an ideal human being, which he calls the great-souled or large-hearted person; we have his concept in our term “magnanimous.” As Aristotle put it, the great-souled person “is ashamed to receive benefits, because it is a mark of a superior to confer benefits, of an inferior to receive them” (*NE* 1124b 9-10). So if we are to live up to being a person of great soul, we should be ready to benefit others, and reluctant to receive benefits. The big-hearted person lives with largess; she or he gives, but is embarrassed to receive. She is self-sufficient; he is independent.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has taken issue with Aristotle about giving as preferable to receiving.<sup>4</sup> He has done so in the context of reflecting on vulnerability and disability. He invites us to consider how we are all, each and every one of us, lacking in abilities. We are all therefore disabled in some ways. If we are to do some things, therefore, we need others to help us do them. If we are to have, we must receive. If we are to receive from others, we need to trust them.

But if Aristotle is right, our dependence is regrettable. Those who are self-sufficient don't need to trust. The rich have the option of buying help. The poor depend on the good will of others. Trusting is a coping mechanism, second best; trusting is a crutch.

We could reduce our need for a crutch. Stoic philosophy points out that we can get hurt because we have our happiness in the hands of others. The sensible response to this danger is to reduce our exposure to harm from others. While we cannot control what happens to us, we can control our *responses* to what happens to us. How we feel about the world or about ourselves should not depend on what others think and do. What is external to me can wound me only if I enable it to do so. So I should keep my real goods internal.<sup>5</sup>

On the stoic approach, it seems better to reduce our trust, for in reducing our trust we reduce our vulnerability and increase the likelihood that our desires will be satisfied. If we trim our desires to extend not farther than our range of control, we can make our happiness happen.

Since we cannot control what others think of us, we give up caring what others think of us. We reduce the extent to which our welfare depends on the good will and competence of others. The stoic program says: Avoid near occasions of trust. Don't look for help and you won't get hurt.

So if we buy this Aristotle, we don't buy trusting. More about this when we return to vulnerability and dependence and God.

### III. The Challenge of Defining Trusting

Defining trusting is like the process of defining colors. The standard way of defining a color is to situate it on a three-dimensional figure, with the three dimensions labeled hue, lightness, and saturation. Similarly, I as it were chart trust, but according to four dimensions, with a core meaning in all four.

In the first dimension, which I term reliance trusting, there are several ingredients. One is that I have something within the reach of someone else, some good within the causal range of another, actually subject to being affected by another. And, I consent to having something within some other's causal reach. There is, of course, desire—desire that someone take care of what is valuable to me. So, trusting also includes letting someone take care. And there is an at least twofold belief or judgment about who or what I trust, that this someone does have the ability to take care—the competence—and does have good will towards me—the willingness to take care. So reliance-trusting has the ingredients of causal range, consent, desire to be positively affected, and dual belief that the other can and will be of help.

When I engage in reliance-trusting, what I have in the care of another is some *thing*, which, however important to me, is quite distinct from my very self. I let someone take care of my furnace, for example. I trust you with this matter, because of your skill and good will.

But—and this is our second dimension—sometimes what I have in the care of another is my very self: *I*, and not just some thing I have, am in another's hands. And sometimes when I am myself in another's hands, I am content to be so because of that other. I trust you with me

because of you. This form of personal trust seems to be in a dimension different from my letting someone take care of some thing. There may be change in the second dimension but not in the first: my closer friend or intimate is not ipso facto a more reliable gofer.

The third dimension: Sometimes I am trusting not so much for some definite outcome, but for basic support. I have a basic trust or confidence in what I need to uphold me. This is the trust identified as basic by psychologist Erik Erikson, and is the opposite of the anxiety, *Angst*, recognized by philosopher by Martin Heidegger. I look to be safe, secure.

The fourth dimension is related to knowing. I trust as I seek to learn. I am open: I, as it were, trust my abilities to come to know, as I count on some realities to get through to me if I am open to what they can reveal about themselves.

We can label these four dimensions as follows: first, reliance trust; second, intimate or I-thou trust, third, security trust, and fourth, openness trust.

These four dimensions, however, have a common core: to trust is to be receptive to enhancement. Receptivity to enhancement is the positive element contrasting with vulnerability to diminishment. Receptivity to enhancement is broad enough to fit all four: receiving a helping hand, welcoming a personal presence, finding a sustaining ground, obtaining a cognitive insight. I use “enhancement” for whatever may be beneficial, be it instrumental help or personal presence or undergirding security or open illumination. Notice that vulnerability is not included in the definition, but dependence is: enhancement comes from other.

#### **IV. The Way in Which It is Better to Receive Than to Give**

With apologies to Aristotle, trust need not be a second-best option. We can see how trust is of prime importance for human flourishing through a remark by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, linking trusting with loving and expecting: “To love anybody is to expect something from him, something which can neither be defined nor foreseen; it is at the same time in some way to make it possible for him to fulfill this expectation. Yes, paradoxical as it may seem, to expect is in

some way to give: but the opposite is none the less true; no longer to expect is to strike with sterility the being from whom no more is expected, it is then in some way to deprive or take from him in advance what is surely a certain possibility of inventing or creating.”<sup>6</sup> Putting Marcel’s remark in other words, we can say: When we trust someone, when we are thus receptive, we enable that person to invent and create. When we trust, we let another create. Letting someone create is better than giving something to someone.

### V. How One Receives in Religious and Catholic Thought—and Living

Because Catholicism and most religions are in major ways theistic, I can reword our fifth point as: How better to trust God by receiving. We need to be cautious, not only because I am a philosopher making suggestions in an area where moral and ascetical and mystical theologians earn their living, not to mention where the saints do their living. We should especially be cautious because, while as Thomas Aquinas observed there should be no limit to trust in God, yet it is a more serious sin to trust God badly than to trust ourselves badly.<sup>7</sup>

#### The Difficulty of Trusting God

But it is not easy to trust God. Sometimes it is easier to quote someone else than to speak in one’s own voice about trusting God; and so I quote. In his *Addiction and Grace*, psychiatrist Gerald May observes: “Little in our normal life . . . supports really trusting God. . . . Few if any of us are able to follow Jesus’ call for trust completely. . . . Instead, we assume that trust in God should be only a spiritual ideal, wistfully and distantly respected, but impossible to apply in the down-to-earth conduct of our daily lives. True spiritual freedom, we maintain, is something that we can consider *after* we have established our physical and relational security in the world. In our culture, the three gods we do trust for security are possessions, power, and human relationships. To a greater or lesser extent, all of us worship this false Trinity.”<sup>8</sup> There is a trust equivalent to idolatry, and that is trusting what is other than God. Yet despite being thus cautioned about such

fiducial idolatry, and paraphrasing Saint Augustine, we back off and trim our prayer down to: Give me trust in you, Lord, but not yet.

And—here we encounter heady theological waters: we can think that letting God take care *enables* God to exercise care. And, conversely, following Marcel, God does well to trust people, because reserving caring to Himself would leave people uncreated and uncreative. We may be encouraged regarding God by what Jean Vanier wrote regarding people who are mentally handicapped: “To love someone is to reveal to them their capacities for life, the light that is shining in them.”<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, God’s aim is: by loving us to reveal to us our capacities for life, the light that is shining in us.

#### Vulnerability and Dependence in Relation to God

As we have seen, at the core of trust is dependence, but not automatically vulnerability. To trust is to accept dependence. Just as we do in human trusting, we afford someone access to our goods and our lives. We, as it were, push some aspect of our good out there to get it within reach of someone who can help. We ask someone to take care. We choose to depend.

Yet some of this depending is not a matter of choice. Ambulanced to an emergency room, I am suddenly, willy-nilly, within the causal range of others. Children, also, find themselves within the causal range of others. Children are dependent from the outset, depending on others for help, for love, for support, for learning, whether they are glad or cranky about being helped.

Awkward as it may be at times, we are presented with the role of being children of God. Not of being teenagers of God; not of being brothers and sisters of God, but children of God. While you may find the idea of being a child of God irritating or consoling, it does have this insightful implication: we simply find ourselves within the range of God. We do not choose and then put ourselves within God’s causal reach. We are dependent from the outset, whether we take such dependence hopefully, fearfully, grudgingly, naïvely.

There are differences between trusting directed towards people and trusting directed towards God, differences are significant, and scary, and salutary. With people, we trust well when we tune our trust wisely. With God, the desire to be affected may be maximum, the permission we give may be maximum, God's discretion is maximum. In relation to God, dependence is maximum—but actual vulnerability is zero. How, in relation to God, do we tune our trust wisely?

### Trust and Catholic Realities

But what about the Church, the Catholic church? And scripture, tradition, revelation, for that matter. Trust in God sometimes tangles with or claims to require trust in religious community or church or text or tradition. In a Christian context, for example, the so-called Protestant principle of final allegiance to nothing short of God dialogues with the so-called Catholic principle that what is of God is available to us through human channels. I need not stress that trust in church is a very large topic. Equally large is suspicion. Trusting *and* suspecting, judging trustworthy *and* judging suspect, are part of the life and thought of religious communities. But suffice it here to say this much: that any good suspicion must take its stand on a platform of trust. Any large police department has a department of Internal Affairs whose job is to be suspicious; similarly, the Church needs a department of Internal Affairs whose job it is to be suspicious. We need suspects we can trust. Political scientists and political leaders work out rules and roles for trusting and suspecting in civil society; it is important also to have rules and roles for trusting *and* suspecting in religious society.

To sum up: trusting means more than having an opinion. Trusting means depending—but, in relation to God, without actual vulnerability. Trusting is better understood as being receptive to enhancement, in instrumental, personal, security, and cognitive dimensions. Trusting opens up receiving beyond believing, and it is better to be ready to receive than to be self-sufficiently generous. I would hope Aristotle would adjust and Jesus would agree.

(This understanding of trusting may shed light on, by similarity or contrast, what faith is about, and what Church thought and Church life are about.)

1. Sam Roberts, "In Government We Trust (As Far as We Can Throw It)," *The New York Times*, 4 January 2004, Week in Review, 4.
2. See, for example, Russell Hardin, *Trust and Trustworthiness*, Russell Sage Foundation Series on Trust, IV (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002), and the review included in J. Keith Murnighan, Deepak Malhotra, and J. Mark Weber, "Paradoxes of Trust: Empirical and Theoretical Departures from a Traditional Model," in *Trust and Distrust in Organizations: Dilemmas and Approaches*, ed. Roderick Moreland Kramer and Karen S. Cook, The Russell Sage Foundation Series on Trust, Vol. 7 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 293–326, at 297.
3. See Annette C. Baier, "Trust and Anti-Trust," in *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1994), 95–129, and responses to this essay, originally published in *Ethics* in 1986.
4. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, The Paul Carus Lectures 1997 (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999).
5. For recent proposals in the Stoic tradition, see Thomas V. Morris, *The Stoic Art of Living: Inner Resilience and Outer Results* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), and Steven Luper, *Invulnerability: On Securing Happiness* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996).
6. Gabriel Marcel, "Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope," in *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, 1944, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 49–50.
7. *Summa theologiae* II-II 21,1, Reply 1.
8. Gerald G. May, M.D., *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 32.
9. Jean Vanier, "Love and Revelation," *Magnificat* 6, no. 3 (May 2004): 137.