

The Theme of Trust Between Epistemology and Ethics

O Tema da Confiança
Entre Epistemologia e Ética

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Resumo

O artigo visa esclarecer a trajetória filosófica em torno do tema da confiança; a relevância dessa categoria filosófica está ligada às dimensões epistemológica e ética. O problema do risco da confiança é a filosofia ética do nosso tempo, sobretudo por causa do fenômeno da migração, da recente pandemia, da questão econômica e política. Voltando à obra de David Hume, procuramos explicar a análise empírica desse tema na perspectiva de uma nova era de confiança. O fundamento epistemológico da confiança esclarece a relação com a justiça e o pluralismo, fonte de recursos positivos, mas também de problemas importantes.

Palavras-chave: Justiça. Confiança. Ética. Epistemologia. Sujeito. Pluralismo.

Abstract

The article aims to clarify the philosophical path around the theme of trust; the relevance of this philosophical category is linked to both the epistemological and ethical dimensions. The problem of the risk of trust is the ethical philosophy of our time, above all because of the phenomenon of migration, the recent pandemic, the economic and political question. Returning to the work of David Hume we try to explain the empirical analysis of this theme in a perspective of a new era of trust. The epistemological foundation of trust clarifies the relationship with justice and pluralism, a source of positive resources but also of important problems.

Key words: Justice. Trust. Ethics. Epistemology. Subject. Pluralism.

1 Introduction

The philosophical meaning of the theme *trust* concerns a current ethical-political problem; trust invites us to think about the question of the basis of the relationship between subjectivities in order to analyze and propose new forms of coexistence in the globalized world.

In the contemporary world the value of trust represents a concrete philosophical problem this topic affects many sectors of philosophy as well as the human sciences because it involves the ethical dimension for their realization. How to build a subjectivity capable of entering into a relationship of trust under the political aspect and in the scientific methodology? It is necessary to understand that the development of trust is not a immediate fact but requires an *itinerarium*, a construction that deeply affects the totality of the self. Is it possible to build a subjectivity that activates trust from the empirical data of emotionality to rational processing?

2. The Dimension of Trust

The centrality of this dimension is what is defined in philosophy as "universal" since it enters the everyday as our common life. Onora O'Neill writes: "We may need trust often seems hard and risky. Every day we read of untrustworthy action by politicians and officials, by hospitals and exam boards, by companies and school"¹. No aspect of daily life escapes the need for relationships and therefore the ethical problem, the source of all possible common coexistence. Politics needs a pre-normative foundation in which trust is a fundamental pivot; in fact, the ethics of the community is not a simple belief but requires

¹ O'NEILL, 2002, p. 4.

a true epistemological methodology, a path of knowledge. Trust is not the purpose of a belief. Since trust affects the relationship between socially recognized individuals, it cannot be a blind faith, but requires construction. What we could define as David Hume's *oportunitivitateor* represents the first investigation into the modalities of constitution of a subjectivity starting from the empirical datum of experience about trust².

The Scottish philosopher focused on the interpersonal aspect and on self-confidence starting from the initial data of our knowledge: impression and perception. Just as the objects of sensitivity are perceived, the immediacy of trust is also perceived initially, but this is not enough to create sociality. As John Wright shows: "Hume thinks that the fundamental principle of modern philosophy is based on an argument from cause and effect"³. What is the cause of distrust and what causes it? An immediate causal datum is represented by the fact that people look for their own kind. Thick interpersonal trust is most likely to arise among people with the same or quite similar characteristics and backgrounds. Their shared attributes make the development of trust among such groups less risky for their members. However, this human inclination produces tight-knit networks that may exclude those who do not share the dominant/shared characteristics. In this view, thick interpersonal trust arises from familiarity and similarity with another individual. People who hail from common backgrounds, know each other well and share beliefs and principles are more likely to trust each other. This dynamic, as Hume already knew, is a great obstacle to the construction of a society and an

² Cf. HUME, 2000.

³ WRIGHT, 2009, p. 154.

interconnected subjectivity on the cultural, moral, political and social level. This is why there is a need to acquire a philosophical methodology that leads the instinctual attitude to be overcome, as far as possible, in a constructive constitution of the individual.

In analyzing the nature and origin of moral sentiments, Hume argued that individuals can better sympathize with others who share strong associative ties. Indeed, Hume described ideal agents in their theories, which in principle shared moral beliefs with others. In contemporary times John Rawls⁴ confronted himself on these subjects affirming that this trust towards the similar, if accompanied by a reasonableness, could be a path to build a shared morality. In the relativism of the globalized world the social composition based on trust represents a constructivist challenge. Starting from the empirical data of the search for common elements between similar men, it is necessary to interact with difference, with otherness. The institutional and social challenge of trust is in this openness to difference, to a plurality of views. Pluralism⁵ is the wealth on which to install trust as a collective ethical building force.

3. Justice and Pluralism

Dualism is something that generates mistrust, feeds a return to absolute identities that show a decidedly undemocratic path. Trust implies, of course, the rejection of an absolutist horizon whose patterns in Europe often re-emerge. The problem becomes institutional. Rawls writes: "Those who hold different conceptions of justice can, then, still agree that institutions are just when no arbitrary distinctions are made between persons in the assigning of

⁴ Cf. RAWLS, 1999.

⁵ Cf. BAGHRAMIAN, 2000.

basic rights and duties and when the rules determine a proper balance between competing claims to the advantages of social life. Men can agree to this description of just institutions since the notions of an arbitrary distinction and of a proper balance, which are included in the concept of justice, are left open for each to interpret according to the principles of justice that he accepts"⁶. However, before accepting this thesis, it is important to remember that Hume sees a difference between the institutional and the social (inter-human) realm. A subject that requires trust must be a subject that gives trust. The sphere of institutional government cannot fully model itself on this dimension because it is forced to the bond of domination and power. For David Hume: "Tho 'the object of our civil duties be the enforcing of our natural, yet the first motive of the invention, as well as performance of both, is nothing but self-interest: And since there is a separate interest in the obedience to government, from that in the performance of promises, we must also allow of a separate obligation. To obey the civil magistrate is requisite to preserve order and concord in society. To perform promises is requisite to beget mutual trust and confidence in the common offices of life. The ends, as well as the means, are perfectly distinct; nor is the one subordinate to the other"⁷.

The essential question is this: what must be done to create trust as a shared value? The path of dualism is negative for this purpose because it maintains a binary logic between the individual and the dominant group. With this trend there will never be clarity, precision, professionalism and correctness in trust negotiations. In O'Neil's view:

⁶ RAWLS, 1999, p. 5.

⁷ HUME, 2000, p. 238.

“Human rights requirements are imposed on the law, on institutions, on all of us. Contracts clarify and formalise agreements and undertakings with ever-greater precision. Professional codes define professional responsibilities with ever-greater precision”⁸. The balance of these various kinds of relationships needs an ethical openness based on pluralism. Building trust means building *traçaverça* *ubêtitiv* that is built starting from the direct experience of the community with others to reach a complex and differentiated society. According to Gilles Deleuze's point of view, there is always a relationship between instincts and institutions where Hume seems to define a relationship between empiricism and subjectivity with the aim of creating a new idea of sociality and politics no longer based on absolute values without an *epitemi barrou*. For this socio-political foundation, trust is the main axis because its activity must be constantly activated; this activity needs to be understood rationally in order to develop normativity. A normative characteristic that must not be imposed, but the result of an inter-relationship⁹. Deleuze shows that Hume implements a theory of productive connection in both the epistemic and moral spheres. The unity of these two phases as regards trust provides the possibility of building a subjectivity of trust. From the phenomenological horizon of the concrete relationship with others (descriptive phase) to the passage towards a shared plural normativity (constructive phase), Deleuze outlines the essentially practical implication of Hume's philosophy, which is why the French philosopher has opened up to this attempt (certainly still embryonic) to outline the plot for one new ontology of the politician.

⁸ O'NEILL, 2002, p. 7.

⁹ Cf. BAGHRAMIAN, 2019.

Hume explained, according to Deleuze, that the principles of association find their true meaning in a series of relationships that determine the details of the world of culture and law. Synthesis of Hume's philosophy: relationships as a means of an activity, of a legal, economic and political practice¹⁰.

4. Life, Subject and Trust

Man is immersed in the concreteness of reality in the face of plural circumstances, not mere events but cuts, fragments, partiality that we can rightly call "life". This notion of "life" needs trust. Onora O'Neill defines the practice of trust through the epistemological-moral clarification of three aspects: "aim, aim, ta"¹¹. The "aim" is that action that must be encouraged because today it has almost disappeared in the dynamics of real relationships. Subjectivities are wary because political sociality and the possibility of dialogue with government structures has increasingly distanced itself, leaving room for the centrality of purely financial processes. In such processes, trust is tied to profit, not ethics. The claim is a first basis for moral epistemology which arises as a relative foundation; there is certainly, as Hume points out¹², a first emotional approach, a question of trust towards the outside and others. Subsequently, the rational component must make trust a purpose by showing that it is a value in all respects. The emotional part, as Stephen Darwall¹³ shows, needs to be rediscovered without the technological mediation that makes relationships between people virtual: "trust involves

¹⁰ Cf. DELEUZE, 2003.

¹¹ Cf. O'NEILL, 2002, p. 4.

¹² Cf. HUME, 2000, p. 238.

¹³ Cf. DARWALL, 2009.

competence. The forms of criticism of the indifference of the administrators of the *republica* and their submission to the financial *dictat* is conceivable only if the emotional-rational nexus of the community is recomposed.

The concept of mind connected with morality in David Hume made us understand how the receptive experience and the *epist* rational construction can found a morality understood as trust sharing so as to be able to propose a different political purpose. The social sciences must dialogue with this category of Hume and make it contemporary to orient themselves towards a responsible, aware and capable living in relationship to initiate and request political action for the common interest. Can trust build justice? Or do we need justice first to create spaces of trust? The issue is mutual. If justice creates a political-judicial balance that allows all members of society to exercise their freedom, then it is necessary to establish trust relationships for which there is no trust without justice. However, the idea of justice has been thought out, structured and has changed over the centuries. The increased possibilities of today's individuals, the degree of knowledge and greater knowledge, the rich epistemological field developed, allow progress in fiduciary action to require radical changes in situations of injustice (the situation of minorities today is right here). Trust and justice are inextricably connected. The verticality of justice cannot be dominant, therefore the horizontality of justice required by individuals in society (citizens) is fundamental to guarantee a possible democracy. The same confidence, according to Lenard, is horizontal or vertical: "In the literature on trust in democracies, this kind of trust is sometimes dubbed "vertical trust," to signal the asymmetrical relation between truster (the voter) and trusted (the representative). So-

called “horizontal trust” is the term given to describe trust among citizens, whether engaging in shared political institutions specifically, or in “wider public”¹⁷.

Philosophical progress in the moral epistemology linked to trust has the task of combining the scientific methodology of research (rational function) with collective emotion and what for Hobbes and Descartes were the *passio* or *the* *passio* (emotionalist function). Trust is the bridge between these two approaches that David Hume anticipated in his writings. The aim, as Onora O’Neill argues, is to restore a horizon of transparency, competence and responsibility within the pluralism-relativism of social subjectivities, building this bridge between science and politics. Individual interest has a political impact on *omni* *one*¹⁸, no person is isolated. In a moment of crisis and risk of a return of fanaticism and racism of various kinds, trust represents that realistic-pluralistic attitude that has the aim of building subjectivity ethically open to the multiformity of values at stake. Trust seems to be *the* *value* *that* *move* *bet* *the* *value*. In her studies on Immanuel Kant’s practical philosophy, O’Neill identifies the two moments that structure the self at the epistemological level: “Much contemporary work in ethics and political philosophy, including “Kantian” writing, relies on a family of broadly empiricist theories of action in which reasons and desires, or preferences, are the key elements. Theories of action of this type are designed to meet two needs. On the one hand they are meant to explain acts as the product of certain desires and beliefs. On the other hand they are meant to provide models of rational choice that can *guide*

¹⁷ Cf. KOHN, 2008; GOVIER, 1997.

¹⁸ Cf. HARDIN, 2006.

action in the efficient pursuit of (intrinsically arbitrary) desires or preferences”¹⁹.

5. Conclusion

The invitation to reflect on the philosophical theme of trust has linked many aspects of reality: from the right to justice, from ethics to the human sciences. This theme has allowed us to return to problematizing the social experience of men under the emotional and rational aspect; the question of freedom in relation to responsibility, competence and transparency is the fulcrum of the philosophical discourse carried out here. Human emotions are a source of wealth but it is important to connect them to rationality as a model of research and complexity. Trust has the potential to link scientific and political worlds, emotional and social worlds, justice and freedom, ethics and law. The context, what the French call *mi lieu* (Hyppolite Taine) is characterized by plurality. The comparison between values is the value if conveyed through trust in considering the other a participant in the hermeneutic circle of discussion and reciprocity. O'Neill again: “Those who scoff often think that all that remains of reasons pretension to guide practice is a subordinate role, and that in Hume's words again Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions [...] Hume's arguments [...] invoke no general scepticism about reason. They leave room for an account of cognitive and so of instrumental rationality; they merely reject the claim that practical reason provides either knowledge of the ends of reasoned action or motives for acting reasonably”²⁰. The theme of trust should be at the basis of the construction of a new ethical subjectivity

¹⁹ O'NEILL, 1989, p. 66.

²⁰ O'NEILL, O. *Practical Reason and Preference*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 14.

capable of internalizing and externalizing the link between emotion and reason in a balanced sense; the epistemological approach on the pluralistic horizon could accomplish the task of harmonizing science and politics, law and freedom. The philosophical power of trust is not only in the present, in balancing relationships, contracts and relationships; this is also a strength of the future because a strength of construction of another possible policy, of a new process of collective emancipation where reason and passion are productively intertwined. The philosophy of trust builds the subject the *time of transformation of freedom*.

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