Trust, Reliance and the Internet

Abstract: Trusting someone in an intuitive, rich sense of the term involves not just relying on that person, but manifesting reliance on them in the expectation that the manifestation of reliance will increase their reason and motive to prove reliable. Can trust between people be formed on the basis of Internet contact alone? Forming the required expectation in regard to another person, and so trusting them on some matter, may be due to believing that they are trustworthy; to believing that they seek esteem and will be rationally responsive to the good opinion communicated or promised by an act of trust, or to both factors at once. Neither mechanism can rationally command confidence, however, in the case where people are routed only via the Internet. On the Internet everyone wears the ring of Diogenes; everyone is invisible, in their personal identity, to others.

1. Introduction

Words like “trust” and “reliance” are used as context requires, now in this way, now in that, and they serve to cover loose, withheling clusters of attitudes and actions. Here I invoke some theoretical issue, however, and use the terms to tag distinct phenomena: “reliance” a generic phenomenon, “trust” a species of that genus. I want to argue that while the Internet may offer novel, rational opportunities for other forms of reliance, it does not generally create such openings for what is here called trust.

The paper is in three sections. In the first, I set up the distinction between trust and reliance. In the second, I outline some different forms that trust may take. And then in the final section I present some reasons for thinking that trust as distinct from other forms of reliance is not well served by interactions on the Internet, at least not if the interactions are otherwise unknown to one another. (The paper is a follow-up to Pettit 1995, and steals freely on some arguments in that piece.)

The Internet is exciting in part because of the way it equips each of us to assume different personas, unburdened by pre-given marks of identity like gender, age, profession, class, and so on. A very good question, then, is whether people can develop trust in one another’s personas under the shared assumption that persona may not correspond to person in such marks of identity. Suppose that you and I oppose on the Internet under a number of different names, developing a style that does with each. I am both Betsy and Bob, for example, you are both Jane and Jim. The question is whether you as Jane can trust me as Bob, I as Betsy can trust you as Jim, and so on. But good though it is, I should stress

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that this is not the question that I try to deal with here (Brennan, Pettit 2004a; McGee 2004a). My focus is rather on how real-world, identity-laden persons may achieve trust in one another on the basis of pure Internet contact, not just how the Internet persons they contact can achieve trust in one another on that basis.1

2. Trust and Reliance

Trust and reliance may be taken as attitudes or as actions but it will be useful here to take the words as primarily designating actions: the actions whereby I invest trust in others or place my reliance in them. So what then distinguishes relying on others in this sense from trusting in them?

To rely on others is just to set in a way that is promised on their being of a certain character or on their being likely to act under various circumstances in a certain way. It won’t do, of course, if the guiding belief about others is just that they have a low probability if displaying the required character or disposition. The belief that others will prove amenable to one’s own plans must be held with a degree of confidence that clearly exceeds 0.5. To rely on others, as we say, is to manifest confidence in dealing with them that they are of the relevant type of disposed to behave in the relevant way.

I may rely on others in this sense in a variety of contexts. I rely on automobile drivers to respect the rules of the road when I step out on to a pedestrian crossing. I rely on my doctor’s being a competent diagnostician when I present myself for a medical examination. I rely on the police to do their duty when I report a crime I have just witnessed. In all these cases, reliance is a routine and presuppositional rational activity. If we are Bayesians about rationality, then we will say that such acts of reliance serve to promote my ends according to my beliefs and, in particular, that they serve to maximize my expected utility.

Relying on others in the sense exemplified here is not sharply distinguishable from relying on impressional things: relying on the strength of the bridge, relying on the accuracy of the clock, and so on. True, the reliance is something I may expect those on whom I rely to notice but this does not appear to be essential. The important point in the cases surveyed is that relying on someone to display a trait or behaviour is just acting in a way that is shaped by the more or less confident belief that they will display it. And relying on a person in that sense is not markedly different from relying on a non-personal entity like a bridge or a clock or perhaps just the weather.

Acts of rational reliance on other people, such as our examples illustrate, do not count intuitively as acts of trust; certainly, they do not answer to the use of the worst “trust” that I treat here as canonical. Trusting someone in the sense

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1 While this question is more mundane than that which I ignore, it is in one respect of greater importance. A form of trust is intuitively more significant, the greater the potential action red lens with which it is associated. And by this criterion person-to-person trust is likely to be of more significance than trust between personas. It may put one’s overall fortune at stake, whereas persona-to-person trust will tend to involve only stakes of a psychological kind.
I have in mind—and it is a sense of trust that comes quite naturally to
me—treating him or her as trustworthy. And treating someone as trustworthy
involves assuming a relationship with the person of a kind that need not be
involved in just treating someone as reliable. To treat someone as reliable—say,
as a careful driver, a competent doctor, a helpful police officer—means acting on
the confident belief that they will display a certain trait or behaviour. It would
be quite out of place to say that whenever I treat a person as reliable in this way,
I treat them as trustworthy. Thus I might be rightly described as presumptions
if I described my attitude towards the driver or doctor or police officer as
of treating the person as trustworthy. The watchmen of Kautzberg might
as well have claimed that they treated Kant as trustworthy when they relied on
him for taking his afternoon walk at the same time each day.

The cases of reliance given, which clearly do not amount to treating someone
as trustworthy, are all instances of rational reliance, as we noticed. Does this
mean that when I go beyond mere reliance and actually trust a person—put my
trust in the person—I cannot no longer be operating in the manner of a rational
agent? Does it mean, as some have suggested, that trust essentially involves a
leap beyond rationality, a hopeful but rationally unmotivated sort of reliance; if
you like, a Hail-Mary version of the practice? This suggestion would leave us
with a paradox that we might phrase as follows. If trust is rational then it is
not deserving of the name of 'trust'—not at least in my regimented sense—and
if it deserves the name of 'trust' then it cannot be rational.

Happily, however, there is an alternative to this suggestion, and a way beyond
this paradox. The assumption behind the suggestion is that the only factor
available to mark off ordinary reliance from trust is just the rationality of the
reliance. But this is mistaken. The acts of reliance considered are distinguished,
not just by being rational, but also by being, as I shall put it, interactively
static. And what distinguishes trust from reliance is the interactively dynamic
character of the reliance displayed, and not any necessary failure of rationality.
So at any rate I argue.2

My relying on others will count as interactively dynamic when two special
conditions are fulfilled; otherwise it will be static in character. The first condition
required is that the people on whom I rely must be aware of that fact that I am
relying on them to display a certain trait or behaviour; that awareness must
not be left to chance—in the paradigm case, indeed, I will have ensured its
appearance by use of the quasi-performative utterance “I'm trusting you to...”
And the second condition required is that in revealing my reliance in this manner
I must be expecting that it will engage the dispositions of the trustor, giving
them an extra motive or reason for being or acting so as I am relying on them to
be or act.3

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2 In putting this argument, I am not wanting to justify for the use of the word "trust". I am
perfectly happy to acknowledge that the characterization I provide of interactively dynamic
trust does not catch every variation in usage, even in the usage of the word beyond the kind
where it clearly makes little more than "only". My premise
3 Interest is in demanding a phenomenon that is useful of particular interest in human life.
4 Providing an extra motive or reason, as discussed in Pettit 1990, need not mean making it
more likely that the person will behave in the manner required, be or she may already have

What of the connection to rationality? I argue that both reliance in general,
and trust in particular, may be rational or irrational. While we illustrated
reliance on other people by instances that were intuitively rational in character,
the reasons motivating the class of people that would behave in that way. I can raise the utility
that a certain choice has for you, even when it already has much greater utility than any
alternative.
3. Two Forms of Trust

There are basically two kinds of kinds of trust which might be involved in this situation. The first I will refer to as trust in the information. This means that people will feel entitled to rely on the information provided by the products or services of the other party. The second kind of trust I will refer to as trust in the performance. This means that people will feel entitled to rely on the performance of the products or services provided by the other party.

In order to use the term "trust" in its full sense, it is necessary to consider the nature of the relationship between the parties. If the relationship is based on a formal contract or agreement, then trust may be considered as a term of the contract. If the relationship is more informal, then trust may be considered as a moral or ethical principle.

There is a third kind of trust which is not directly related to the information or performance of the other party. This is trust in the character or reputation of the other party. People may trust someone because they have a good reputation for honesty or integrity, or because they have a good track record of performance. This kind of trust is often based on personal experience or prior knowledge of the other party.

In conclusion, trust in the information and performance of the other party is essential to the functioning of a market economy. Trust in the character or reputation of the other party is also important, but it is not as critical as trust in the information and performance.
The desire for esteem can serve in the role of the meta-disposition of which we spoke earlier. Let people want the esteem of others and they will desire to become disposed to prove reliable in response to the trusting manifestation of reliability. Or at least that will be the case in the event that the trusting manifestations of reliance normally serves to communicate a good opinion of the trustee. And all the evidence suggests that it does serve this purpose, constituting a token of the trustee's esteem.

The act of relying on others in a suitable context is a way of displaying a belief that they are not the sort to let you down: they are trustworthy, in the modality of loyalty or virtue or prudence/perception. The trustee does not typically utter words to the effect that the trustees are people who will not let the needy down, that the trustees, as we say, are indeed trustworthy individuals. But what the trustee does in manifesting reliance is tantamount to saying something of that sort. Let the context be one where, by common assumption, the trustee will expect the trustees to prove reliable in a certain way only if they have a medium of trustworthiness: only if the trustees are indeed loyal or virtuous or prudent/perceptive or whatever. Under such a routine assumption—more below on why it is routine—the act of trust will be a way of saying that the trustees are indeed of the trustworthy sort.

Indeed, since words are cheap and actions dear, the act of trust will be something of even greater communicative significance. It will communicate in the most credible currency available to human beings—in the gold standard represented by action—that the trustee believes the trustees to be truly trustworthy: to be truly the sorts of people who will not take advantage of someone who puts himself or herself in their hands. It does not just record the reality of that belief, it shows that the belief exists. Thus Hobbes (1991, 64) can write: "To believe, to trust, to rely on another, is to Honour him: sign of opinion of his virtue and power. To distrust, or not believe, is to dishonour." When it connects in this way with the desire of a good opinion, the act of trust has an important motivating aspect for the trustees. It makes clear to them that they enjoy the good opinion of the trustee: the belief that they are trustworthy—but that they will lose that good opinion if they let the trustee down. This means that the trustee has a reason to expect the manifestation of reliance to be persuasive with the trustees, independently of any belief in their pre-existing loyalty or virtue or prudence. If the trustees value the good opinion of the trustee, which the manifestation of reliance reveals, then that is likely to give them pause about letting the trustee down, even if they are actually not particularly loyal or virtuous or prudent/perceptive in character. Let the trustee down and they may gain some immediate advantage or save themselves some immediate cost. But the trustee down and they will forfeit another immediate advantage: the salient benefit of being well regarded by the trustee, as well as the other benefits associated with enjoying such a status.

But there is also more to it: to certain others, I often demonstrate to third parties that I trust these people. Other things being equal, then, such a demonstration will serve to win a good opinion for the trustees among those witnesses; the demonstration will amount to testimony that the trustees are trustworthy. Indeed if the fact of such universal testimony is salient to all, the demonstration may not just cause everyone to think well of the trustees; it may cause this to become a matter of common belief, with everyone believing it, everyone believing that everyone believes it, and so on. Assuming that such facts are going to be useful to any perceptive trustees, then, the existence of independent witnesses to the act of trust will provide further esteem-centred motives for them to perform as expected. Let the trustee down and not only will trustees lose the good opinion that the trustee has displayed; they will also lose the good opinion and the high status that the trustee may have won for them among third parties.

The belief that someone is loyal or virtuous or prudent/perceptive may explain why the risk-taking that trust involves may actually be quite sensible or rational. Certainly there is a risk involved in this or that act of trust but the risk is not substantial—it is, at least, a rational gamble—given that the trustee has those qualities.5 What we now see is that the belief that certain parties desire esteem, and that responding appropriately to an overture of trust will secure esteem for them, may equally explain why it is rational to trust those people. It does not direct us to any independent reason why the trustees may be taken to be sufficiently reliable—any reason of objective trustworthiness—but it reveals how the act of trust can transform the trustees into reliable parties, eliciting the disposition to perform appropriately. To manifest trusting reliance is to provide normal, esteem-sensitive trustees with an incentive to do the very thing which the trustee is relying on them to do. It is a sort of bootstraps operation, wherein the trustee takes a risk and, by the very fact of taking that risk, shifts the odds in his or her own favour.

Believing that certain individuals are loyal or virtuous or prudent/perceptive is quite consistent, we should notice, with believing that still in some measure they desire the esteem of others. This is important because it means that people may have double reason for trusting others. They may trust them both because they think that they are trustworthy and—a back-up consideration, as it were—because they think that they willavour the esteem that goes with proving reliable and being thought to be trustworthy. I said earlier that to trust certain others is to treat them as trustworthy. When one trusts them in the standard way, one treats them as trustworthy in the sense of acting out of a belief that they are trustworthy. When one trusts them on the esteem-related basis, one

5 For the record, I think that the risk involved in a test of trust need not be a risk of the ordinary, predictable kind (Petit 1995). Take the case where I am dealing with others whom I believe to be more or less certain of responding appropriately to an act of manifest reliance on my part; let me degree of confidence that they are reliable in this way be as near as you like to 1. I can still be said to trust such people, so far as I put my face in their hands when I rely on them. I do expose myself to a significant probability that they will betray me — that probability may approach 0 — but I do expose myself to the accessibility of betrayal to them. I expose myself to their having the freedom to betray me. Here I break with Ronald Hauden 1992, 507, and with Richard Holton 1994.

6 I have come to realise, from discussions with Virginia McGee, that the role of belief here may be played by the attitude of hope, as I have characterized it elsewhere (Petit 2004). For an exploration of this line see McGee 2002.
treats them as if they were trustworthy, whether as a matter of fact they are trustworthy or not.

One final issue. The esteem-related way in which trust may materialize de-

deps on its going without saying—its being a matter of routine assumption

shared among people—that when a trustee invests trust in a trustee, that is

because of taking the trustee to be trustworthy. But isn’t it likely that people

will recognize that in many cases the trustee invests trust because of taking

the trustee to want him or her esteem, or the esteem of witnesses, not because of

taking the person to be actually trustworthy? And in that case won’t the

mechanism we have been describing be undermined? People are not going to

expect to attract esteem for proving reliable, if they expect that their proving

reliable will be explained by the trustee, and by witnesses, as an effect of their

wanting to win that esteem. They will expect to attract esteem only if they

think that their proving reliable will be generally explained by the assumption

that they are trustworthy types: by the attribution of stable dispositions like

loyalty or virtue or prudence or perception.

Is there any special reason to think that the system won’t unravel in this way,

and that it will continue to go without saying—it will continue to be a matter

of common assumption—that people who prove reliable under conditions of trust

will enjoy the attribution of estimable, trustworthy dispositions? I believe there is.

The assumption is going to remain in place as long as people are subject to

the fundamental attribution error or bias, as psychologists call it, and so are

likely to expect everyone to conform to that pattern of attribution. And

a firm tradition of psychological thought suggests that the bias is deeply and

undoubtedly ingrained in our nature.

E. E. Jones (1990, 188) gives forceful expression to the view that the bias has

this sort of hold upon us: “I have a candidate for the most robust and repeatable

finding in social psychology: the tendency to see behavior as caused by a stable

personal disposition of the actor when it can be just as easily explained as a

natural response to more adequate situational pressure.” This finding

that people are deeply prone to the fundamental attribution bias—supports the

idea that, even if they are conscious of their own sensitivity to a force like the

desire for esteem (Miller/Prentice 1996, 804), people will be liable to trace the

behaviour of others to such a situational pressure. They are much more likely to

explain the behaviour by ascribing a corresponding disposition to them.

And that being so, they are likely to expect each to do the same, to expect that

each will expect each to do the same, and so on in the usual hierarchy. Thus they

are likely to expect that trustees will invest trust in certain others only so far as

they take those others to have the stable personal dispositions associated with

trustworthiness.

And so, finally, to the connection between trust and the Internet. The question

that I want to raise is whether the Internet offers a milieu within which relations

of trust—trust as distinct from reliance—can rationally develop. There is every

reason, of course, why people who already enjoy such relations with one another

should be able to express and circulate trust in one another over the Internet.

But the question is whether the Internet offers the sort of ecology within which trust

can rationally form and strengthen in the absence of face-to-face or other contact.

Is it a space in which I might rationally make myself reliant on others by sharing
difficult secrets, asking their advice about personal problems, exposing myself

financially in some proposal, and so on?

We distinguished in the last section between two sorts of bases on which trust

may emerge in general. The primary basis for trust is the belief that certain

people are trustworthy: that is, have stable dispositions like loyalty and

virtue and prudence or perception. Primary trust will be rational just in case

that belief is rational and serves rationally to control what the trustee does.

The secondary basis for trust is the belief that even if the people in question are

not trustworthy—even if they do not have stable dispositions of the kind

mentioned—they are meta-disposed to display the trust or behaviour that the

trustee relies on them, now in this instance, in that, to display. More con-

cretely, they desire esteem and they can be moved by the esteem communicated

by an act of trust—and perhaps broadcast to others—into becoming disposed to

be or act as the trustee wants them to be or act. The secondary form of trust

that is prompted in this manner will be rational just in case the belief in the

esteeem-seeking meta-disposition is rational and serves rationally to shape the

trustee’s overt act.

Does the Internet offer a framework for the rational formation of primary

trust? In particular, does it provide an environment where I may rationally come

to think that someone I encounter only in that milieu is a likely to respond as a

local or virtuous or even prudent/perceptive person? Or does it offer a framework

for the rational formation of secondary trust? Does it enable me to recognize and

actuate another’s desire for esteem, creating a ground for expecting that he or

she will respond favourably to my trusting displays of esteem?

There is no problem with the possibility of the Internet facilitating rational

reliance, as distinct from trust. Suppose I become aware of someone over email

or in a chat room or via the web. And imagine that an opportunity arises where I

will find it rational to do something—say, go to a proposed meeting place—only if

there is reason to believe that the other person will act in a certain way: in this

case, be at the proposed place to meet me. I may not have very much solid

evidence available about that person over the Internet—deception is not easily
detectable—but there is nothing to block the possibility that what evidence I

have makes it rational for me to rely on their doing this or that; what evidence I

have makes that a rational gamble.

A related problem arises with the trustee as distinct from the trustee. Why should the

trustor expect that the trustee and other witnesses will take them to be disposed not by a

wish to signal esteem and thereby motivate the trustee, but rather by the attribution of a

trustworthiness disposition to the trustee? The answer, I think, is that to the extent that people

tend to explain the esteem-seeking behaviour of others by attributing stable dispositions they

will also tend to explain the relevant sort of esteem-signalling behaviour as stemming from the

attribution of such dispositions. They will display, or not as attribution bias, but a meta-

characteristic bias: a tendency to take people to employ an attributional heuristic in interpreting

and dealing with others.
But reliance is one thing, trust another. Take the question of primary trust first of all. Is it ever legitimate to base one’s reliance on the Internet, and on the Internet only, that I can come to think of them as local or virtual or even prudent/perceptive: that is, capable of recognizing and responding to a sense of the long-term interests that they and I may have in cooperating with one another? And is it ever likely to be possible for me to invest trust rationally in such contexts?

I think not. Consider the ways in which I come to form beliefs about loyalty and virtue and prudence; I may rely in every way on what people tell me about such beliefs to at least three distinct sources of evidence. First, the evidence available to me as I see and get used—no doubt at subpersonal as well as personal levels of awareness—to the expressions, the gestures, the sounds, the looks of people: in a phrase, their bodily presence. Call this the evidence of face. Second, the evidence available to me as I see the person in interaction with others, enjoying the testimony of their association and support: in particular, see them connecting in this way with others whom I already know and trust. Call this the evidence of frame. And third, the evidence that accumulates in the record that I will normally maintain, however unconsciously, about their behaviour towards me and towards others over time. Call this the evidence registered in a personal file on the people involved.

The striking thing about Internet contact is that it does not allow me to avail myself of such bodies of evidence, whether of face, frame or file. The contact whose address and words reach my screen is only a virtual presence, albeit a presence I may dress up in the images that fantasy supplies. I cannot read the face of such a contact; the person is a spectral, not a bodily presence in my life. Nor can I see evidence of his or her character—and I won’t be able to establish independently whether his or her is appropriate—in the interactions the person enjoys with other persons familiar to me, assuming that such witnesses will be themselves only spectral presences in my experience. And not, finally, will I be able to keep a file on the performance of the person over time, whether with me or with others. There won’t be any way of tracking that person for sure, since a given person may assume many addresses and the address of one person can be unmasked by others.

Not only do these problems stand in the way of my being able to judge that a pure Internet contact is loyal or virtuous or prudent/perceptive. They are compounded by the fact that such problems, as I am in a position to see, will also stand in the way of me being able to read and relate to me. For them will be just a spectral presence, as they are spectral presences for me. Our voices may call out over the Internet, but it won’t ever be clear where they come from or to whom they belong. They will be like a chorus of lost cries, seeking in vain to pin one another down. Or at least that is what they will be like, about the illusions that fantasy may weave as it claims to find structure and stability in the shifts of the kaleidoscope.

On the Internet, to put these problems in summary form, we all wear the ring of Gyges. Plato took up an old myth in asking whether we would be likely to remain virtuous, did we have access to a ring that would give us power, on wearing it, to become invisible and undetectable to others. That myth becomes relevant on the Internet for, with a little ingenuity, any one of us may make contact with another under one address and then, slipping that name, present ourselves under a second or third address and try to manipulate the other’s responses to the first. That we exist under the second or third address may not be undetectable to the other in such a case but that it is we who do so—that we have the same identity—certainly will be undetectable.

In view of these difficulties, I think that the possibility of rational, primary trust in the virtual space of the Internet is only of vanishing significance. It is a space in which voices sound out of the dark, echoing to us in a void where it is never clear who is who and what is what. Or at least that is so when we enter the Internet without connection to existing, real-world networks of association and friendship.

But what of secondary trust? Are the prospects any better here that we will be able to reach out to one another in the environment of the Internet and forge relationships of trust? I think not. I may be able to assume, as a general evidence of frame. And third, the evidence that accumulates in the record that I will normally maintain, however unconsciously, about their behaviour towards me and towards others over time. Call this the evidence registered in a personal file on the people involved.

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real individuals construct on Internet forums. If I construct an agony aunt persona on an Internet forum, then in that persona I may succeed over time in earning—earning, not just winning—the trust of those who, in the guise of other Internet identities, seek my guidance. This form of trust is of great interest and opens up possibilities of productive human relationships but it is not the phenomenon that I have been discussing here. My concern has been with how far real people can manage, on the basis of pure Internet contact, to establish trust in one another. And the answer to which I am driven is that they cannot effectively do so. The message of the paper, in a word used by Habermas (2001), is that ‘telepresence’ is not enough on its own to mediate the appearance of rational trust between real people.

One concluding word of caution, however, I have argued for this claim on the assumption that telepresence will remain as Gyanas as it currently this: that it will continue to lack the facial salience, the framed support, and the flexible identities available in regular encounters with other people. I am no futurist, however, and I cannot say that telepresence will always remain constrained in these ways. Perhaps lurking out there in the future of our species is an arrangement under which telepresence can assume firmer, more assured forms and can serve to mediate rational trust. I do not say that such a brave new world is logically impossible. I only say that it has not yet arrived.8

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