

## **Book Reviews**

### ***Social Trust and Human Communities***

**by Trudy Govier**

McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997. Cloth: ISBN 0-7735-1622-X  
CDN\$55. Paper ISBN 0-7735-1690-8 CDN\$19.95.

#### **Reviewed by Celeste Friend**

Trust is, to both state the obvious and yet say the least, the bedrock of civil society. Without trust, human society certainly could not exist. Its importance, however, has not by itself caused it to be well attended to by philosophers, at least not historically. This is due, in part, I think, to the background nature of trust. Trust is extremely important, and at the same time, tends toward a certain kind of invisibility. As has been noted by many authors who discuss trust, it is perhaps most easily noticed when it disintegrates and becomes too thin to continue to support the social relations which rely on it. And, so, while trust is an omnipresent feature of any viable society and always has been, it has not attracted much theoretical or philosophical attention until relatively recently. But, in the past decade or so, it has become a hot topic of philosophical inquiry. This recent interest in trust can be found in many articles by Annette Baier on the subject, Laurence Thomas's exemplary work on moral psychology, and a number of other works by philosophers. The philosophical interest in trust is not, however, limited to ethical or political inquiries. The growing interest in testimony as an important area of epistemology has also given rise to an interest in trust, as is illustrated by *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* by C.A.J. Coody. And now we may add to the short but rapidly growing list of works on trust Trudy Govier's excellent book, *Social Trust and Human Communities*. This book advances the ongoing project of moving the subject of trust out of the shadows where it has been for so long, and into the forefront of moral and social theorizing, where it truly belongs.

This is an impressive book, one which encompasses a broad territory and discusses a wide range of issues as they relate to the role that trust plays in society. Just as trust is relevant to a wide and diverse range of social issues, the book is also wide ranging and diverse. A book about trust perhaps must deal with a wide variety of topics and problems. The very fact that trust is such an omnipresent feature of social life necessitates a detailed examination of it across a variety of contexts. And Govier has indeed taken on the task of describing the myriad circumstances and contexts in which trust matters.

The topics covered include the role that trust plays in testimony and therefore epistemology, the relation between trust and professions, the question of whether and how we can be said to trust strangers, how totalitarianism tears at the very fabric of trust and therefore of civil society, group trust, politics and trust, the different forms of cynicism, and trust in the realm of international life.

Especially compelling and convincing are Govier's discussions of how we can analyze specific societies from the perspective of whether they are trusting, whether they flourish because of high interpersonal trust, or suffer from the reverse. Govier analyzes the social behavior of an African tribe, the Ik, as described by Colin Turnbull in his book *The Mountain People*. The Ik are a people for whom trust is seemingly nonexistent. Govier considers the question of whether they might, as a social group, constitute a counterexample to her ongoing claim—which is the central thesis of her book—that society itself requires trust for its very possibility and existence. Govier concludes that they do not constitute such a counterexample. She argues that the Ik's lack of social trust does not show that society can exist without trust precisely because the Ik barely constitute a society, and certainly do not constitute a viable one. The Ik have come to be as untrusting as they are towards one another under extremely stressful circumstances in which their traditional ways have been lost, and they live on the brutal edge of survival, both individually, and as a group. And so, what initially seems to be a very problematic example of a society without trust, turns out to be a group of people (but hardly a society) with very little social trust who are therefore unable to form a stable and mutually beneficial cooperative society. Equally compelling is Govier's discussion of life in southern Italy. She discusses the endemic obstacles to social well-being and progress which pervade life in southern Italy, and the central role that distrust plays in those obstacles. These concrete examples of the connection between trust and the possibility of social cooperation go a long way towards making Govier's argument that society depends on at least a minimal amount of genuine trust between its members.

It is a virtue of the book that it discusses much of the contemporary literature on trust from a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology. An exception to this is that there is no reference to Virginia Held, in whose 1984 book, *Rights and Goods*, there is a chapter entitled "Social Trust." And, while Govier acknowledges the great debt that is owed to Annette Baier for making the subject of trust philosophically respectable, she nonetheless misinterprets an important claim that Baier makes and so argues against a claim which has not in fact been made.<sup>1</sup>

The book is not without other flaws as well. One of its flaws concerns a central metaphor. Govier uses the metaphor of "scatter trust" to describe a central form of trust which Govier introduces in Chapter 5, "Trusting Strangers?" "Scatter trust" is the term she uses to describe the phenomenon in

which we trust a wide range of persons and institutions with whom we are unlikely to ever come into personal contact. "One can call this attitude *scatter trust* because our trust is spread out, scattered" (112). For example, when we use money, we trust other people and institutions to continue to act in certain ways such that our use of money is reasonable. This is an instance of "scatter trust" because the people we trust in this kind of instance are by and large unknown to us and will remain so. Indeed, we cannot even specifically name or point to the people we are trusting when we trust people to use money in the same way we do. Govier is quite right to point out the ways in which trust, while socially omnipresent and indispensable, is nonetheless often impersonal, and does not necessarily rely on personal knowledge or contact. Much of the social trust which she describes is of this type, and the invisibility of and misunderstandings about trust may in part be due to the fact that trust, which we tend to think of in highly personal and intimate terms, is in fact often neither. But I find the metaphor of "scatter" misleading and inappropriate. To scatter implies that what is scattered is thrown loosely about, or dispersed at irregular intervals. Govier means to describe the phenomenon in which our trust is general and covers a wide area, but covers that area more or less evenly. "Scatter," however, would describe the phenomenon in which our trust is dispersed unevenly into different directions—covering some areas more and some less, or even not at all. In other words, the term "scatter" suggests a certain haphazardness and randomness to our trusting, which is not what Govier would seem to have in mind. So, while I agree that the phenomenon of generalized trust is real and important, the term she coins to describe it fails to describe it very well.

Another weakness of the book is that it is poorly edited. In several places it tends towards repetitiveness, and there are some glaring and distracting typos. The most prominent of these is a missing word in the very first sentence of the book! (It is, of course, difficult to determine where the fault lies on such an issue: with the author, or with the press.) Out of the blue, in Chapters 10 and 11, each chapter begins with an epigraph, where none had done so before. While an epigraph is virtually always a fine thing with which to begin a chapter, it is distracting to introduce the device so late in the book. And, on at least one occasion, Govier introduces and discusses an author only to later on introduce him all over again, as though the reader were being introduced to him for the first time. The overall effect is that the book sometimes comes across as a collection of separately written essays, rather than a single monograph.

There is a certain pitfall to writing so descriptively rich and deep a book as Govier has written. The pitfall is that in writing such a book so rich in detail, what may be lost is analytic rigor and precision. And so, in some places, Govier seems to conflate trust with prediction or reliance, while in others, she clearly recognizes that these are importantly different.

Despite these flaws that I have described, this remains a very important and good book, and well worth the read. There is too much that has not been said about trust for this not to be an important book. Its most important virtue is the implicit way in which it recognizes the complexity of trust and distrust, and the complex ways in which society itself requires trust. By taking on so many of the facets of social trust, *Social Trust and Human Communities* continually reminds us that wherever there is society, cooperation, and human flourishing, there is also trust.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>In her well-known article on trust, "Trust and Antitrust," Baier discusses a hypothetical scenario in which, trusting strangers in a library to simply leave her alone, she is instead saved from a falling brick by being pushed out of the way. In a case like this, Baier concludes that the heroic stranger, who did not simply leave her alone, would have done more than she was trusted to do, not less, and that Baier would, in such a scenario, have reason to be grateful to the stranger. Govier, however, misinterprets Baier as being "disturbed" rather than "pleased" by the stranger's actions. See page 115 of the book under discussion.

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## *Good Reasons for Better Arguments*

by **Jerome E. Bickenbach** and **Jacqueline M. Davies**

Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1997. ISBN 1-55111-059-8. Paper.

CDN\$26.95, US\$21.95

## Reviewed by Don S. Levi

This new textbook is intriguing because of its reliance on the ideas of Habermas. Although many of the lessons, including those on Venn diagrams and truth tables, Mill's Methods, fallacies, and how sampling or analogy can go wrong, are not new, there are several topics that are not usually found in other texts, including a section on game theory; whether fictional analogues are problematic; the *paradigm case/counter-example* technique for definition; and such fallacies as *appeal to vanity*, *two sided fairness* (where it is assumed that one must be either for or against), *just world hypothesis* (where we favor