CHAPTER 2

Trust in the Moral Space

Piotr Sztompka

Philosophy and social theory have drawn many portraits of a human being: *homo politicus, homo economicus, homo faber, homo ludens*. Sociology has its own image: *homo sociologicus* (Ralf Dahrendorf 1968) based on four assumptions: relational existence, ascription of meaning, existential uncertainty, and normative regulation.

The fundamental truth about the people is that they always live in some relations to other people: with others, next to others, for others – but never alone. From birth to death we live in the inter-human space, surrounded by more or less “significant others” (George H. Mead 1964). The composition of our inter-human space changes, it is like a “social convoy” (Ray Pahl 2000) where with time some people drop out, some people appear and even after our death we are still for a moment accompanied by a funeral conduct of relatives, friends and acquaintances. For me this is the crucial trait of society. Society is not a holistic, supra-human entity, some presumed social organism or social system with *sui generis* properties and regularities. But it is neither a chaotic mass of separate, autonomous individuals living their life on their own. *Society for me is a network of relations among the people; what happens between and among individuals in the inter-human space.*

Human life is precarious, we are fragile animals, exposed to innumerable threats and finally destined to die. Large part of such precariousness is due to our social, relational existence, to the unavoidable and indispensable company of other people. We need others for a number of reasons. Without an intimate relation between our parents we would not have been born, and without maternal and parental care in our childhood we would not have survived. We need others as suppliers of goods and services that we cannot provide for ourselves. We need others as listeners and interlocutors in this most typical human action, talking. We need other as partners in cooperation, in order to reach goals which can be obtained only collectively, with our share directly dependent on the efforts of others. Finally, we need others as a social mirror (Charles H. Cooley 1983) in which we can estimate our worth and develop our self-concept.

We can never be entirely sure how others will behave toward ourselves, how they will respond to our actions. We encounter perennial uncertainty, relatively
small in the case of family or friends, much larger in the case of superficial and occasional acquaintances e.g., with the medical doctor, car dealer, the plumber, or sales person. But we have to act nevertheless, therefore we take risks, small and big.

To our relations with others we ascribe some meaning; personal meaning – our motivations, intentions, reasons, and cultural meaning shared and accepted by our group, community, society. In the areas which are most central for our life the social mechanism emerges which bridles and limits risks. Some relations are endowed with normative meaning, as good, right and proper, and therefore expected and sanctioned. The relations subjected to normative regulation I will call moral bonds, and the part of inter-human space where they appear – the moral space.

Before we turn to the detailed analysis of moral bonds, of which six I believe are crucial – trust, loyalty, reciprocity, solidarity, respect and justice – let me consider their common, general traits. First, how do we know that some relations are good, to be expected and exhorted. One may refer to philosophical considerations and the codes of ethics. One may apply functionalist reasoning that such relations are indispensable for the survival of society. One may refer to the theory of social evolution, claiming that in the struggle for existence societies which had not developed moral regulation were extinct. There is also a common sense view which perhaps is sufficient for our purposes and closest to sociological perspective, namely that most people on most occasions would consider some relations as welcome and others as wrong. Whether they are participants themselves or just observers, people react positively to the moral bonds and react negatively, with repulsion to their opposites: paranoid suspiciousness, disloyalty and cheating, egoism and exploitation, contempt and injustice. They simply feel happier to live in a society pervaded with good inter-human relations, and look with awe and envy at societies with a strong moral space. “Good”, like “beauty” is in the eye of the beholder, in this case the people participating in social life, or looking at social life of other groups from the outside.

Second, what is the ontological status of moral bonds? The relation may be represented by the interaction between concrete individuals A and B. Then it is just a personal occurrence at a given space and time. It just happens to a couple of people. But it may also be the case that the same type of relation is repeated numerous times by various individuals A and B, but also C and D, F and G etc. At some level of statistical frequency people would say: “They do, as it is done”, it is typical conduct in our group. But it may also occur that some type of relation is shared by a larger number of group members, as if objectified, external to each of them individually and most important – constraining,
obligatory. People would say “It should be done”. At this moment the moral bond becomes what Emile Durkheim has called social fact *par excellence* (Emile Durkheim 1968), and in more modern language we would say that relations become embedded in a culture.

How does this route leads from what happens, through what is done, to what should be done? I use the term “meaning industry” to refer to the mechanism of this complex process of crystallization: people talk, exchange opinions, debate about which relations are good and which are bad, the media enter, art joins by means of literature, poetry, dramas, films, philosophy and ethics articulate and systematize the debate. In the negotiations of meanings the consensus emerges and some bonds become embedded in the domain of culture. The relations extend now not only to concrete, named partners but to anonymous others, to strangers. Normative pressure is expressed in various positive inducements for those who abide, and various negative penalties for deviation. In this way the cultural moral bond exerts feed-back on every concrete individual interaction within the same group, community or society. The cultural quality of moral bonds provides one additional asset; their long duration. Culture obtains of inertia, it is resistant to change. Once the moral bonds reach a cultural quality they turn into a lasting tradition reproducing itself and passed from generation to generation. Needless to add, this is a moral space at its strongest.

Third, we may investigate the form that moral bonds take. To take the inspiration from Georg Simmel (Georg Simmel 1971 and 1991) and to use the metaphors from geometry, some relations are linear, they extend like a single line between A and B. Plurality of such interconnected, crossing or parallel lines makes a different pattern: a sort of grid or network. This results in a holistic picture of the whole group, community, or society which may be compared to social shape. Collectivities pervaded by moral bonds obtain a specific shape (“Gestalt”) which is grasped in the vernacular by such terms a “good social climate”, “good group atmosphere”, “team spirit”, “esprit de corps”, etc. It is only when moral space is deeply rooted in a whole group, that it obtains its strongest form.

Fourth, there is the question of the scope that the moral bonds embrace; is it particularistic or universalistic? Universalistic inclusion seems the imperative. As a matter of fact we would refuse the adjective good relations to those which Mark Granoveter and Robert Putnam call “binding”, (Mark Granoveter 1973, Robert Putnam 1993 and 1995) which are exclusive, limited only to a narrow group, the sect, political party, the mafia, and oriented toward the outside with suspiciousness, disloyalty, exploitation, contempt, hostility. There is no moral space in this case. Just the reverse, Edward Banfield calls it “amoral familism” (Edward Banfield 1958). It is only when the relations take the “bridging” quality,
to use Granoveter’s and Putnam’s term again (ibid.), that the developed moral space appears.

After these general considerations concerning the moral space, let me turn to my list of six most important moral bonds: trust, loyalty, reciprocity, solidarity, respect and justice. These constitute specific positive and negative vectors of moral space; they prescribe what should be done, and prohibit what should not be done. Within the syndrome of such bonds there is a hierarchy, some are more important than others. I consider trust as the core of the moral space, the moral relation which is a prerequisite for all other five relations. They cannot exist without some measure of underlying trust. In this sense, trust is a prior moral imperative.

The importance of trust in social life is due to the fundamental fact, noticed already by ancient philosophers, namely that a human being is essentially social. We cannot survive without others. The trouble is that we can almost never be sure how others will act toward us, or react to our actions. Part of the reasons for this uncertainty is epistemological: we simply lack necessary knowledge or information about our partners, about their intentions and motivations, as well as contexts or situations in which they act. But even more importantly, there are ontological limits to our predictions. First, human actions are always under-determined, or as philosophers put it, people are endowed with free will. Second, the determinants of action are extremely complex, some found in the present conditions of action, some deriving from past experiences, and some linked to future dreams, aspirations and plans. Their unique combination is impossible to detect. Third, there is the phenomenon of reflexivity: people act on beliefs, but not only adequate beliefs, often on gossips, rumors, prejudices, stereotypes, false information. Which hints and cues for action they will select from the sea of ideas and pieces of knowledge floating around is impossible to specify. And fourth, people are rule-directed creatures, they take into account values and norms of their community or wider society, but which rules they will accept and use among the multiple, often vague, mutually conflicting and even contradictory precepts indicating prescriptions, prohibitions, permissions and preferences (Merton 1982: 180) is a subjective choice and never easy to know.

Therefore in our actions we face pervasive uncertainty. And it is crucially important for us whether others will act in ways beneficial for us or harmful. But we have to act in spite of ignorance, in order to satisfy needs which cannot be met without others. Hence we resort to trust, a substitute for prediction and certainty. First, we formulate a belief about partners that they are trustworthy, i.e., that they will act in ways beneficial for us. But this is still purely contemplative and may be labeled as confidence. The second step is needed. Trust in a
full sense occurs only if we decide to act on such a belief, when we commit ourselves in action: marry a woman, lend money to a friend, sign a contract, make an investment, vote for a politician. Trust is the belief expressed in trustful action, that others are trustworthy, i.e., will meet our expectations and behave properly toward ourselves. Because we cannot be certain, the action in such conditions of uncertainty involves risk. Turning our confidence into action we take the risk, we gamble, we make ourselves vulnerable to possible abuse or breach of trust. Hence the simple definition I propose: Trust is a bet about the future, contingent actions of others (Sztompka 1999: 25; Sztompka 2014: 493).

The bond of trust means the expectation by A of the beneficial actions of B, and the trustworthiness of B means that it has a right to be trusted by A. Metaphorically speaking trust provides a bridge over the sea of uncertainty. When trust occurs in a single, concrete relationship the partners lower the risk by finding evidence as to their reputation, credentials, performance, appearance. On the other hand when trust becomes a normative, cultural precept, a relatively safe expectation may be that even anonymous strangers will be trustful and trustworthy. Trust, whether interactional or cultural, engenders existential security, predictability of the reactions of others, readiness to initiate interactions, to take risks and to embrace innovation and novelty in all transactions. Its opposite, distrust produces suspiciousness and anxiety which are paralyzing for actions and interactions. In that sense, trust makes the core of the moral space beneficial both for the individuals involved and for the whole groups where relations of trust dominate.

The second component of moral space is loyalty. Loyalty is the reverse side of trust, a duty to someone who trusts us. The bond of loyalty means the forfeiting of any harmful action by B toward A, when A trusts B. In this way loyalty is intimately linked to trust, in fact it presumes trust. Loyalty allows us to believe that someone whom we trust and whom we treat considerately will not take advantage of it against us, will not gossip about us behind our backs, keep silent about our secrets, will defend us against third parties, and will properly protect and return in due time whatever we have entrusted to him/her (a cash loan, a car, an apartment, a child for baby-sitting, etc.). We can also count on him/her to support our views and help us in what we do. The opposite of loyalty is opportunistic obedience imposed by force or threat of repression. The concept of loyalty does not apply to fawners. Obsequious yes-men obey their boss without reservations, because they do not wish to be thrown out of the party or sect, which gives them numerous benefits, and if one belongs to the mafia, one does not want to end up in a lake with bricks attached to legs. Such opportunism becomes uncomfortable, so yes-men quickly rationalise their conduct, begin to really believe in the infallibility and genius of their leader.
The American psychologist Irving Janis called this phenomenon “groupthink” (Janis 1972). It consists in people losing, or rather dissolving their personalities in a closed group, whose members mutually strengthen their beliefs and gradually move further and further away from reality.

The third moral value is reciprocity. Reciprocity in view of some authors is an innate, universal human impulse. Bronislaw Malinowski was discovering it among the primitive tribes of Trobriand islanders (Bronislaw Malinowski 1967 [1932]). Marcel Mauss considered it as a spontaneous reaction to any received gift (Marcel Mauss 1964, 1971). As he wrote, a “gift” initiates a network of relationships between the donors and the beneficiaries, and forms the basis of a community. The essence of a gift is spontaneity and selflessness. And in contemporary sociology Alvin Gouldner was arguing for the central role of reciprocity among other moral bonds (Alvin Gouldner 1960). Reciprocity requires us to repay for the goods we have received from others, And conversely, reciprocity allows us to expect that the person to whom we have given something will feel obliged to return the favour, even if postponed in time or of a different kind (metaphorically speaking, in a different currency).

The opposite of a gift is a bribe, a benefit conveyed with an instrumental intention to obtain something specific. It contributes to the emergence of a “corrupt community”, only outwardly based on mutual trust, but in fact united by a common fear of sanctions. Such a community is only apparently based on loyalty, but in reality on mutual blackmail, on the fact that both parties can blackmail each other.

The fourth moral value in our catalogue is solidarity. Solidarity means the readiness to sacrifice one’s own interests for a larger or smaller community (family, neighbours, professional, ethnic, religious, national, continental, all-human) in the hope that such a community will show concern for our problems and will reciprocate with compassion, help and care when we are in need. We show solidarity with those whom we refer to in our conversations and thoughts as “we” or “us”. The personal effect of solidarity is social identity linking our individual aspirations, goals, and hopes with the aspirations, goals, and hopes of a certain narrower or broader community. When authentic solidarity is lacking, a pathological, xenophobic and intolerant form of solidarity emerges, which was described by the British social anthropologist Edward Banfield as “amoral familism” (Banfield 1958). It denotes solidarity within a limited group – formerly a tribe, today a professional circle, trade union, political party, religious sect, or mafia organisation. The strength of such a solidarity relies on blind internal loyalty and absolute obedience to the leader, while being separated from society at large by a tight wall of reluctance and aggression. Such a solidarity does not unite, but divides, does not integrate, but excludes,
creating an insuperable dichotomy of “Us vs. Them”, reserving all the virtues to us, and attributing all the sins to strangers, or even denying them human dignity. This is not a solidarity of cooperation, but a solidarity of the besieged fortress. A common ethical space exists only inside a closed group, while outside, tolerance towards others is replaced by xenophobia, trust – by paranoid suspicion, kindness – by brutal hostility, debate – by insults, and the common good – by particularistic group interest.

The bond number five is respect. Respect regulates relations between people who are unequal – better or worse – in various ways. It copes with the fundamental fact that people have unequal talents, skills, knowledge, achievements, exceptional biographical record, consistent moral standards. We direct respect at elderly people emphasizing their experience and wisdom, we give extra measure of respect to women. There are also some occupations and professions endowed with particular respect, so-called “helping professions” (Merton et al. 1983): medical doctors, firemen, attorney, soldiers, policemen, priests. The value of respect allows us to believe that our services, achievements and successes will be noticed and appreciated in proportion to our efforts, talents, and contribution. If a bond of respect exists A can trust that B will gratify his/her achievements and B may trust in the same action by A. By the same token, we are compelled to treat the achievements of others in the same way.

The opposite of respect is, on the one hand, contempt and, on the other hand, flattery, false compliments, sham applause, the purpose of which is to make others dependent on flattery or to force the flattered person to give us something in return (e.g., to shortlist us on the election slate or give us a lucrative job in a state company). As all rules, respect may be abused or misdirected. The notorious case of misdirected respect or its highest form – fame, is the category of so-called celebrities. Their elevated status in popular awareness is usually the product of media marketing, rather than authentic achievements.

Finally, the sixth moral bond is justice. Justice is supposed to ensure a fair balance or proper proportion between what we give to others and what others owe us. It requires that such proportion be equally respected with reference to all people, whichever their social status, with the help of universalistic criteria. In the normative regime of justice the person A can trust that the rewards will be distributed proportionally to his/her effort, or achievement, by B who commands resources of material and immaterial sort (money, praise etc.) Depending on the kind of proportion that is at stake we may distinguish five forms of justice. First, distributive (or meritocratic) justice concerns the proportion of achievements (merits) and gratifications. Higher achievements should be more rewarded. E.g., the effort at work should be compensated by proper wage.
Second, communitarian justice concerns proportion between the contribution, service to a community, a group, society and what the community provides for its members. Beneficial membership should be matched by more contributions, and vice versa more contributions should be matched by more benefits from the group. E.g., the level of dues in the association should be proportional to benefits or services that association provides for its members. Third, retributive justice demands proportional repayment for the losses, harms or pains inflicted by other people. E.g., repair or replacement of the damaged property. Particularly important is proportional inflicting of penalties for the violation of laws and other social rules. This is the role of the courts of law, but also of parents vis-a-vis children, teachers vis-a-vis pupils, priests setting penance for the sins of the parishioners. Fourth, transactional justice has to do with the proportion of prices between goods, commodities or services exchanged between the people. E.g., sellers and buyers in the common trade, employers and employees in the labour agreement, suppliers and receivers in the industrial contract. Finally, fifth, attributive justice relates to the opinions, evaluations of other people. The rule demands proper proportion between achievements and the received amount of praise, respect, fame. It may be therefore considered as a particular variety of meritocratic justice. E.g., it is expected of professors giving grades to the students, reviewers of books or films, employers giving recommendations to employees.

The most important meta-rule referring to all forms of justice is that it should be applied without regards to any particularistic criteria, in equal, universalistic way to all, irrespective of their social status or role. As in fact in all cases the application of the procedures of justice eventually produces or enhances some inequality – e.g., of unequal wages, unequal rewards, unequal penalties, unequal measures of verbal or symbolic respect – the general definition may be formulated in a paradoxical way: *Justice is the equal application of the equal principles of inequality.* The opposites of justice include partiality, nepotism, undeserved privileges, unjustified pay gaps, undeserved penalties, excessive prices, and unfair opinions.

Moral bonds permit individuals to be open, innovative, creative thanks to the sense of existential security, to a strong social identity (strong and inclusive “We” or “Us”, who acknowledge our values), the predictability of others’ actions and the ability to plan one’s own actions. Without a place in the inter-human space and without recognized values, the fate of a person, as Thomas Hobbes wrote, is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”, entangled in “the war of all against all”. ([Hobbes 1946](Hobbes 1946 [1551])). The benefits for the community are vitality, efficiency and developmental dynamics (social order and social emergence). This is due to several circumstances. First, thanks to community integration.
Metaphorically speaking, moral bonds constitute “the cement of society”, or “the glue that keeps society together” (Elster 1989, p. 251). Second, moral values encourage cooperation with others. They mesh together “the gears of the social machine” (Sennett 1998, 2013). Third, they support coordination of various activities, enable harmonious relations. They serve as the “social lubricant” (Ossowska 1968).

The moral bonds are interrelated into a sort of syndrome, they mutually influence and enhance each other producing strong tendency for cooperation and vivid experience of a community. But in the syndrome trust plays a central role, it may be treated as a meta-bond, over and above others. Trust is the most valuable asset of the moral space. It is the mobilizing force of human agency, enabling it to overcome its own limitations, to transgress itself and push society forward. It is the foundation on which the edifice of good society stands.

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