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Dialogue, Trust, and Acknowledgement

Some degree of trust is presupposed in any back-and-forth communication and is thus needed for dialogue. In turn, trust presupposes acknowledgement of the other participants. Hence the present theme: dialogue, trust, and acknowledgement. Implied in the notion of dialogue is mutuality. Assuming, for the purposes of simplification, that there are two parties in the dialogue, then each of these must listen to the other, respond to the other, hear the other's reasons and arguments, be sensitive to the other's feelings, hear the other's stories, and be sensitive to the other's values.

These features, often alluded to in such expressions as "genuine dialogue," are essential to a dialogue. The frequent use of the expression "genuine dialogue" suggests a recognition of the fact that there are many non-genuine dialogues – many contexts in which dialogue is supposed to occur, but does not. We often want to talk but not listen, and even when we seem to be listening, are waiting with suppressed impatience for our own chance to speak. Even when we do listen, we too often simply disagree or agree, failing to respond actively to the reasons and sentiments of the other person. We may just record his or her ideas as some kind of given without responding intellectually or emotionally. Another type of failure of response occurs if we attempt to control the discourse by manipulating the other person.

Dialogue is important for many reasons. One key aspect is that of criticism: dialogue helps us to weed out error. We gain an opportunity to correct our own mistakes when we attend and respond to objections offered by another person with a perspective different from our own. In this way, dialogue can contribute to accuracy. We also improve our creativity through dialogue. The synthesis of one perspective with another may provide new possibilities; a new idea may stimulate a novel thought which in turn provokes another. In such cases, the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. Participation in a dialogue also provides the basis for an equitable and ethically sound relationship involving mutuality, reciprocity, and respect. Such a relationship in turn offers a model and foundation for democratic participation in decision-making and problem-solving.

So far as trust is concerned, the need for trust in communication is apparent with regard to all of these features of genuine dialogue: criticism, accuracy, creativity, ethical relationships, and democratic participation.¹

To be genuinely involved in a dialogue, people must not just be playing a part, or just pretending to engage. This point is often made concerning negotiations, where parties may be accused of “not negotiating in good faith.” What is meant is that such parties come to the process, ostensibly involved and committed to it, but that they are pretending and only appear to be interacting sincerely with the other party. One might negotiate in bad faith because one wished to seem to negotiate – perhaps in order to comply with a legal requirement, or for reasons of public relations. For dialogue to occur, the appearance of attending to, and responding to, the other party must be a reality and not a sham; there must be no rupture between appearance and reality.² And that is a matter of trust; to engage in a dialogue with another we have to be engaged in good faith and believe that the other is similarly involved.

Trust is a matter of confident expectations that others will do as required and expected. To trust another person is to be confident that he or she is motivated and competent so as to be disposed to act in ways that are not immoral or injurious. The expectations constitutive of trust are founded on our beliefs about other people; these in turn are typically based on experience. So far as particular people are concerned, it is experience of these people. So far as people in general are concerned – including strangers – it is our broader social experience, yielding general conceptions of human nature. A fundamental aspect of trust is its involvement of interpretive dispositions. When one person trusts another, that trust affects his interpretation of the actions and statements of that other – a slightly off-colour joke, a moment of awkwardness, or even some matter like an unreturned telephone message will be explained away and not taken seriously. By contrast, if he distrusts the other, such things are likely to be interpreted as evidence of disregard or animosity. When distrust is deeply entrenched, it is hard even to emerge from it. There are many illustrations of this type of situation. During Cold War days, one analyst of arms control accords claimed that under circumstances of entrenched distrust of the Soviet Union by the United States, “no amount of evidence of compliance . . . with a treaty banning possession of chemical weapons, would prove the absence of non-compliance.”³ In other words, suspicion of non-compliance was so entrenched that it affected the interpretation of the evidence that, *prima facie*, could have supported claims to compliance. What might, straightforwardly interpreted, counted as evidence of compliance with the treaties was regarded instead as evidence of skillful cheating.

Distrust has a powerful tendency to grow, for reasons social psychologists have documented. Social psychology confirms the power of self-fulfilling spirals, where a ‘hermeneutic of distrust’ functions to supply more and more evidence of suspicious behavior. Another documented factor is that of the confirmation fallacy: we seek evidence to support what we already believe and tend to ignore evidence that disconfirms our favoured hypotheses. The attribution fallacy also contributes to the entrenchment of distrust. In this faulty line of reasoning, the actions and statements of a person are taken as evidence of his or her character, rather than as by-products of role and circumstance. Parties who sense that they are distrusted tend to be discouraged and demoralized, and respond accordingly.⁴ Established results about the social psychology of reasoning help

to explain how and why distrust feeds on itself, making established distrust very difficult to overcome.

One way to appreciate the significance of trust in dialogue is to consider what it means to try to conduct a dialogue in circumstances characterized by distrust. If we do not trust our dialogue partner as far as motivation is concerned, we are rather unlikely to believe what he or she says; we will suspect the person of deception, even outright lying, in an attempt to manipulate us or exploit our willingness to listen and communicate. If we do not trust the dialogue partner so far as competence is concerned, we will have little confidence in the claims made and the observations reported. Trust is needed for confident belief in the communications of another person and for a sense that that other is positively disposed to us. It is thus an essential prerequisite of genuine dialogue. If we distrust someone, we feel uneasy in his presence; we feel vulnerable in some respect, and we are likely to try to protect ourselves by holding back and guarding against various eventualities. We may feel that this person would reveal confidences or distort or misuse what you say. We will not want to acknowledge to him any flaws in ourselves or our view of things. We are likely not to be very open. Thus, it can be seen that so as far as *expressing ourselves* in an attempted dialogue is concerned, distrust will hold us back.

Distrust will also affect how we *interpret and understand* what the other party says. If we distrust a person, that attitude is likely to affect how we interpret what she says and does, and how we respond to her – which, in turn, will affect how she responds to us. We will suspect that person of biasing her information, omitting relevant points, failing to acknowledge obvious objections to her own position, and trying in other ways to manipulate us. We may be so sensitive to potential affronts or threats that we allege them on the basis of very slight evidence. With enough distrust, even accurate and well-intentioned messages are likely to be misinterpreted.

Clearly, then, distrust is inimical to dialogue. Distrust works against openness, expression, sharing, collaboration, and progress. Seeing this, it can be appreciated that some degree of trust is presupposed by dialogue.⁵ For a dialogue to occur, each party must, minimally, trust that the other party is not trying to exploit, manipulate, or harm him or her, and is honest and reliable with regard to the ideas put forward.

To strike a more positive note, as well as *presupposing* trust, dialogue can also help to *develop* it. Suppose that parties sincerely express themselves, make claims that are reliable, interpret each other's claims carefully, and take seriously the claims, reasoning, feelings and values of the others when responding. In such a case, the very fact that a dialogue has occurred provides a basis for increased trust between the parties. Dialogue is, then, a context in which trust can be built.

Acknowledgement bears a crucial, and interesting, relationship to trust. Lack of acknowledgement is often a barrier to trust and a cause for distrust. The connection between acknowledgement and trust can be readily appreciated in a context where reconciliation is being attempted after one party has wronged another. If – as is all too often the case -- a wrongdoer is unwilling to acknowledge that he has done wrong --

victimized persons have no basis for assurance that such things will not be done again. A person who does not admit that certain acts were wrong has provided no assurance that he would not act in such ways again, and the wrongs themselves gave a basis for distrust. There is no reason to overcome that distrust; the needed assurance cannot be provided when there is no acknowledgement. Depending on the nature of the wrongs, that distrust could be profound.

Despite the clear importance of acknowledgement, it is rare to find this topic discussed in its own right.⁶ Rhetoric about the importance of acknowledgement abounds in discussions of political and personal reconciliation and in some discussions about therapy and personal growth. There are many appeals to acknowledgement in reflections on mediation and conflict resolution. For example, the familiar ‘Getting to Yes’ model of Roger Fisher and William Ury incorporates a number of features providing for acknowledgement. Active listening and indicating that one ‘hears’ the other part are central to the process. Forms of non-acknowledgement such as interrupting and name-calling are banned.

So far as detail is concerned, we hear more about non-acknowledgement than acknowledgement itself. There are different kinds of non-acknowledgement. These include lack of attention, ignoring, self-deception, denial, disrespect, denigration and – in extreme cases – humiliation. In the context of a dialogue, we may to acknowledge a person by ignoring his or her contributions, by asking questions and failing to wait for the answer, by interrupting, by stereotyping, discounting or denigrating the person, or – still worse—by insulting or seeking to humiliate him or her. Non-acknowledgement need not be conveyed in words: it can be expressed in gestures or actions.

Acknowledgement is a public expression – often through articulation in words -- of an attitude or belief. In many contexts, acknowledgement is related to knowledge; in fact, it presupposes knowledge. To *acknowledge* that x, you must *know* that x, and for you to *know* that x, x must be *true* and you must have compelling evidence for it. For example, a man can acknowledge that he is an alcoholic only if he knows that he is an alcoholic; he can know that he’s an alcoholic only if it’s true that he is an alcoholic and he has enough evidence to show him it’s true.⁷ Although acknowledgement is related to knowledge, it is not the same thing as knowledge. Unlike knowledge, acknowledgement is always acknowledgement *to someone* -- even if that person is only yourself.⁸ Furthermore, we can know things without acknowledging them. For instance, a man might know that his grandfather was a convicted murderer but never acknowledge this to others. In fact, it is even possible for him to know it without ever acknowledging it to himself.

Acknowledgement is crucial for dialogue. Both attitudes and beliefs are involved -- and these will be indicated through gestures, actions, and words. We acknowledge the other when we communicate attitudes of valuing and respect – whether we do this in words, in gesture, or simply by paying attention to the other party. These expressions of acknowledgement indicate a recognition of the other as a person and (in some contexts) the representative of a cultural group. Acknowledgement of the other person as an *other*

and as the one with whom we are having this dialogue is absolutely fundamental. To engage in a dialogue with another person, we must indicate our *respect* for him or her as an equal party in the conversation. We must acknowledge that the other *is* a person, a possessor of dignity and human rights and, as such, the moral equal of other persons, including ourselves. The other is a person with feelings, values, a point of view, and a cultural background -- none of which are to be denigrated or insulted. As an *other* person, the dialogue partner is potentially different from us in perceptions, beliefs, and values. Differences that emerge in a dialogue are real and significant; they should be respected and regarded as a basis for exploration, negotiation, and creativity. They are not to be looked at solely as mistakes or evidence of wrong-headedness or immorality; they are to be respected. It is crucial to understand here that respect means respecting the other as a person with a point of view and position in the world. Respect does not require agreeing with the other person or refraining from criticizing the claims that person puts forward. In a dialogue, the otherness of the other is taken seriously and regarded as an opportunity, not an obstacle.

To acknowledge the other is, by implication, to acknowledge some restrictions and limitations on ourselves. It is to admit, and indicate in gestures and words, that our own perspectives are not the only ones relevant to the discussion. We are engaged with another party with another perspective and potential to contribute. To see this as worth doing is to acknowledge that our powers are limited and our own perspective is likely to be incomplete in some ways. This sense that the other is as important a person as we are ourselves and has, potentially, every bit as much to offer, is presupposed in a genuine dialogue. Because of this relationship between acknowledgement of the other and limitations of the self, competitiveness and egoism are often barriers to acknowledgement.⁹ We may not wish to recognize our own limitations and fallibility: an acceptance of these features of ourselves may seem to threaten our very identity. In some contexts, it may be difficult even to recognize that we are vulnerable to the actions and decisions of others and need to negotiate with another party, who has power and legitimacy that we cannot overcome. Ethically, we have an obligation to acknowledge the other, stemming from the ethics of respect for persons and human rights. Epistemologically, we have good reason to acknowledge, in the sense of taking seriously, the contributions of the other person. We are fallible and could be wrong; we can benefit by attending to the other; and we have no entitlement to the last word.

To acknowledge the rights and perspectives of other people is to put restraints on our own potentially egoistic interpretations and inclinations. We need to acknowledge, and communicate to the other, that we are ready to participate with him or her so as to supplement and improve our own limited perspective on the matter. In acknowledging the other and the potential value of his or her perspective, we are at the same time allowing that there may be limitations in our own beliefs and values. Clearly, these attitudes are prerequisites of dialogue, clearly needed for the critical and creative potential of dialogue to be realized. They should contribute to a sense of trust from the other party; acknowledgement of his personhood and potential provides evidence that we

are engaging in genuine dialogue and not seeking to exploit or manipulate him in a situation of pseudo-exchange.

The great significance of acknowledgement can be explained in terms of our interdependence so far as interpretation and understanding are concerned. The roles we assume, the positions we occupy in this world, the things we are capable of doing -- ultimately even the thoughts and feelings we have within and about our most private selves -- are fundamentally tied to our interactions and exchanges with other people. With only a few Stoic exceptions, we human beings are social beings and dependent on each other for our understanding and valuing, even for our understanding and valuing of our own selves.¹⁰ For example, it is very difficult to be a mother and live out one's life as a mother if no one else allows that one has this role. If there is a gulf between the way we see ourselves and the way others see us, there is a problem, one which in extreme cases can contribute to psychosis or suicide.¹¹

Between parties in a dialogue, attitudes of acknowledgement are essential in expressing and furthering mutual respect. The importance of acknowledging people in this sense of respecting them and attending to their perspective is beautifully captured in the African notion of *ubuntu*, which expresses a notion of persons as essentially relational and existing through their connections with other people. Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained the notion of *ubuntu* as follows:

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, "Yu, u nobuntu;" "Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*." Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours." We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "A person is a person through other persons." It is not, "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong. I participate, I share."¹²

¹ See, for example, Dale E. Zand, "Trust and Managerial Problem Solving," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17 (1972), 229 – 239.

² I argued these points in Trudy Govier, *Social Trust and Human Communities* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1997) and Trudy Govier, *Dilemmas of Trust* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1998). Short versions, applied to particular issues, may be found in Trudy Govier "Judicial Independence in the Context of Interdependence," Law Commission of Canada, *Setting Judicial Compensation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Ottawa 1999), pp. 95 – 104 and Trudy Govier, "Trust, Acknowledgement, and the Ethics of Negotiation," in *Speaking Truth to Power: A Treaty Forum*,

³ Allan Krass, "Focus on: Verification and Trust in Arms Control," *Journal of Peace Research* 21 (1985), 285 – 288. The comment predates by nearly twenty years the scandal about the failure to find WMD in Iraq, but eerily anticipates that situation. Extreme distrust of Saddam Hussein and of the arms inspection process led intelligence interpreters in the United States and many western countries to think that absence of evidence of these weapons did not show that no weapons were there but showed only that the Saddam Hussein regime had been pretty clever about hiding them.

⁴ R. Nisbett and L. Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall 1980).

⁵ This should not be understood to imply that trust is an all-or-nothing thing. There are degrees of trust and degrees of distrust. For dialogue to occur, it is not necessary to have the deepest and most complete degree of trust (one say that would be needed in an intimate relationship), but it is necessary to have enough trust to express oneself freely and accept as generally honest and competent the communication of the other party.

⁶ Dr. Karl Tomm, head of the Family Therapy Unit at the University of Calgary, regards acknowledgement as profoundly important in therapeutic contexts, and asserts that the absence of acknowledgement can result in psychosis or suicide. Conversation, January, 2004.

⁷ My views of acknowledgement have been stated in Trudy Govier, "What is Acknowledgement and Why is It Important?", in Carol A.L. Prager and Trudy Govier, (eds.), *Dilemmas of Reconciliation* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 2003), pp. 65 – 90, and Trudy Govier, "Acknowledgement and Forced Confession," *The Acorn* XI no. 1 (Fall-Winter 2000-2001), pp. 5 – 20. (References to relevant philosophical treatments of self-deception appear in the first essay.) Further reflections will appear in *The Humanist in Canada*, March 2004 issue.

⁸ I owe this point to Risa Kawchuk.

⁹ I owe this point to Karl Tomm.

¹⁰ How far these exceptions go is a matter for philosophical debate. I have in mind such examples as that of Nelson Mandela who, when a prisoner for some twenty-seven years, apparently always showed leadership and other moral qualities and never doubted that he was 'the captain of his fate.'

¹¹ I have this on the authority of family therapist Karl Tomm.

¹² Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday 1999), p. 31.