

McCraw on the Nature of Epistemic Trust—Part II
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In my original response to “The Nature of Epistemic Trust,” by Benjamin McCraw (2015), I defended the view that epistemic trust reduces to one’s belief that another’s allegedly successful ability to track the truth in the past underwrites confidence in the latter’s present and future testimony (2015). On the basis of the introspective data, I deny that any irreducibly distinct, non-propositional attitude of epistemic trust supervenes on such a belief. Epistemic trust is not presented to consciousness as an episodic quale. There is nothing that it is like to trust someone other than being convinced that the trustee’s history validates the truster’s continued support in him or her as a beacon of knowledge.

Trust-In and Trust-That

Due to infelicitous wording on my part McCraw has misunderstood my position, and I apparently have misread his as well. As a reductionist regarding epistemic trust—that is, as one who maintains that epistemic trust-in is strictly identical with trust-that—I reject any supervenience thesis, contrary to McCraw’s interpretation of my account. I assumed however that McCraw himself was in fact committed to this thesis—a point he repudiates—since even he admits that on occasion (although not always) the basis of epistemic trust is a judgment about the prospective trustee (2016, 1) and that epistemic trust is *not* exhaustively propositional. The implication seemed to me to be that in these contexts some type of unspecified affective feeling inevitably arises from various beliefs regarding the one in whom the faith is held, just as for G. E. Moore the non-natural property of goodness necessarily emerges out of natural ones.

What exactly are “the objects of epistemic trust”? Ambiguity surrounds this expression. With ordinary usage as a guide, it certainly seems as if epistemic trust is placed in minded beings. Even so, I have argued that for one to trust S, one must be to some degree assured that S’s testimony is justified. Trust in people is epistemically parasitic on propositional beliefs. So are there only these two different kinds of objects of epistemic trust, trustees and propositions? Appealing to “...our commonsense practices and situations involved in reflection on trusting others” (2016, 1) McCraw introduces a third category, actions (or inactions), which, along with trusted individuals, are “non-propositional entrusted ‘things’” (2016, 1).

The proposal that an action (e.g., my wife picking up milk at the store) is an object of epistemic trust I find incoherent, both on logical and lexicographical grounds. While it makes sense to trust that p is the case given S’s seal of approval, and to have faith in S as a consequence of S’s prior winning testimony, trusting intentional behavior *per se* is a category mistake. I can assume various attitudes towards actions, but trusting them is not an option. Instead, what I may hope for is that a desired task be accomplished. It is because my wife has consistently picked up milk at the store when asked in the past that I trust that she will when asked in the present. And once this occurs, her picking up milk at the store today will be added to the storehouse of information licensing my trust that she

will pick up milk at the store when asked in the future. It is precisely such behavioral consistency in general, linguistic or non-linguistic in nature, that grounds one's commitment to trust another in the first place. The "things" here in question then serve as evidence confirming that epistemic trust in both beliefs and individuals is deserved but are not themselves the actual objects of epistemic trust.

According to McCraw, I am committed to holding that the belief in the trustee's reliability is not only necessary but sufficient for epistemic trust (2016, 2). Yet he claims that this stance is mistaken: one can believe that S is reliable without trusting S. On one interpretation McCraw is surely correct, but the biconditional analysis that I am prepared to defend is not the one attributed to me.

You and I both trust some third party, Oprah Winfrey let us suppose, while at the same time I don't necessarily trust you. You may be reliable insofar as you likewise accept her allegedly accurate testimony, and as her mouthpiece report this to the general public, but it is Winfrey I immediately trust, not you. It is her assertions that I believe to have been true in the past and will continue to be so in the future, not your's. Any declaration made by you is dependable only because its genesis is Winfrey. I can imagine though circumstances developing beyond my control in which access to Winfrey is cut off and as a result of such epistemic alienation I gradually begin to treat you as not her acolyte but a trusted source in your own right. Somehow you have, from my subjective perspective, inherited her precious mantle. Wisely or not, in this scenario my trust has been redirected to you. Your reliability is no longer derivative.

Varieties of Reliability

I wish to suggest, using McCraw's terminology, that there are both "thin" and "thick" varieties of reliability. S is nominally reliable to the extent that S's avowals are accepted as true for reasons other than S's own epistemic integrity. It is only when one has consciously tracked S's past history, judged that S enjoys some perhaps unique expertise, and therefore should depend on S's testimony in the future that epistemic trust surfaces. I employ this more robust sense of reliability, not the former thin one in my biconditional analysis of epistemic trust: one epistemically trusts S if and only if one has certain beliefs about S's thick reliability. Minimal or thin reliability is admittedly insufficient for epistemic trust.

McCraw charges that my reductionism is "... guilty of committing what I'll call the Descriptive/Normative Conflation (DNC). What I mean is that there seems to be a collapse between when trust is placed and when trust is placed *well*" (2016, 2). I did not draw this latter distinction as lucidly as I should have in my first rejoinder but it nevertheless remains true that trust is an inherently normative concept, even when it is *not* "placed *well*." Having trust in one presupposes a positive epistemic judgment about this individual as a source of insight, regardless of whether the conviction in question has merit. A *description* of epistemic trust requires mention of the truster's favorable attitude towards the trustee; an *evaluation* of epistemic trust on the other hand requires an additional dispassionate assessment of this positive posture.

McCraw himself can hardly dispute these points, given his characterization of trusters as vulnerable, “open to betrayal” due to their “cognitive lack” and who thus “risk a connection to the truth” (2015, 422). He and I agree then that the “epistemic dependence” essential to trust may or may not be justified. In either case, the truster *thinks*—correctly or otherwise—that he or she possesses some evidence underpinning the trustee’s purported authority.

One cannot take another to be authoritative and epistemically well-positioned in a vacuum, without reason. Given the phenomenological data, it is simply not possible to trust *ex nihilo*. Rather, epistemic trust in another is acquired because of that person’s perceived history of endorsing true beliefs. Granted, one may unwittingly place trust “... *poorly, without evidence, without justification, or undeservedly*” (2016, 3), but the truster minimally has to believe that it is being bestowed legitimately, *with evidence, with justification, and deservedly*. Epistemic trust is misplaced when this perception is not veridical and ideally withdrawn when whatever distortion there has been comes to light.

Who or What Can Trust?

In my first reply to McCraw, I wrote “... that if the supposed truster cannot upon being questioned ... acknowledge evidence, at least to oneself, that the trustee’s present or future testimony is credible in light of past achievement, the trust is only apparent and not real” (2015, 77). McCraw correctly interprets the aforementioned distinction as one I draw between mere trust-like behavior and authentic trust. I generated unnecessary confusion by not explicitly affirming that even on occasions of misdirected allegiance genuine trust exists. Such instances of trust are no less real than those in which trust is actually well-grounded. His appeal to commonsense intuitions notwithstanding, I question McCraw’s insistence however that animals and infants are clearly capable of true trust, an outlook based in part I suspect on both a sentimental attachment to these creatures and a tacit bias in favor of behaviorism in the philosophy of mind. It is not clear that the disagreement between McCraw and me centers on either the broadly psychological question of whether animals and infants are cognitively advanced sufficiently to entertain beliefs or on the epistemological issue of whether a healthy skepticism regarding attributions of mental states to others is called for.

McCraw maintains that a necessary condition for epistemic trust is that the truster have beliefs (419, 2015), yet he also affirms that “unreflective or precritical” trust exists in which the truster “... has no propositional beliefs about the person in whom s/he trusts” (419, 2015). While unsure of what McCraw’s considered position is, I readily agree (barring any skeptical challenges) that some animals and older toddlers do in fact become knowledgeable of their caregivers’ reliability in providing the comforts of life, and when such awareness is achieved, genuine trust supplants whatever merely mechanical, trust-like behavior may have manifested itself beforehand. Trusters must be able to form evidence-based beliefs; in their absence there is at best only apparent trust.

I wish to conclude with an observation regarding epistemic trust that should be of concern to psychologists and epistemologists alike (not to mention political scientists). It is a curious phenomenon that a significant number of trusters are by any objective measure totally unwarranted in putting their faith in others. That people may be artfully deceived into accepting certain self-serving testimony hook, line, and sinker at least has the salutary effect of drawing our attention to the human virtues of fidelity and fellow-feeling. What is less laudable however is the widespread tendency to place epistemic trust in individuals so uncritically, either by ignoring readily available counter-evidence or by projecting the trustee's undeniable skill in one area of expertise onto another, quite unrelated sphere. Although not his stated interest in the essay under review, dare I say I trust that McCraw will in the future make recommendations on how best to provide a proper evaluation of epistemic trust.

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References

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