Chapter 1
Trust in Government

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There are two senses in which trust has long been associated with government. One tradition is stated well in the ancient Greek "Anonymous Iamblichus": "The first result of lawfulness is trust, which greatly benefits all people and is among the greatest goods. The result of trust is that property has common benefits, so that even just a little property suffices, since it is circulated, whereas without this even a great amount does not suffice" (294). In essence, law enables people to trust and therefore to exchange, to their great benefit. The context of the remark is a list of the benefits of lawfulness. Clearly, the anonymous author shared the central vision of Thomas Hobbes.

The more common association in modern discussions is stated early by John Locke ([1690]1988), who held that society turns power over to its governors, "whom society hath set over it self, with this express or tacit Trust, That it shall be employed for their good, and the preservation of their Property" (§171:381). The political philosopher John Dunn (1988, 1984) has suggested that this is the core of Locke's political philosophy, that the relationship of citizens to government is one of trust, not one of contract. It is the possibility of this relationship and its working that are to be explained (see also Laslett 1988, 114–17). There are surely at least two elements at the core of governing a "working" society. One is some variant of Hobbes's concern with obedience motivated by compelling incentives of self-interest even when there is no trust. The other is Locke's trust, which itself is grounded in relevant judgments of government agents' incentives to serve the interests of citizens.

I wish to argue that the older Greek insight into the relationship
between trust and government is the better one. Trust in government is not a major consideration in the working of a modern society, but the trust among themselves that a good government enables its citizens to have is very important in their lives. I will not attempt to establish the latter claim here but will focus on the coherence of the claim that citizens can or should trust government. My conclusion will be that a claim that one trusts government is not closely analogous to a claim that one trusts another person. One might still wish to say that a citizen can trust government, but this “trust” is different from the trust that I might have in you. The seeming goodness and importance of ordinary interpersonal trust does not clearly transfer to any nonanalogous notion of trust in government.

The standard contemporary argument for the importance of trust in government is related to the commonplace view that without normative commitments by citizens, government cannot gain obedience from citizens. The English legal theorist H. L. A. Hart (1961, 196) argued that the Hobbesian vision of using coercion to motivate obedience depends on the fact that most people comply willingly, perhaps for normative reasons. It is their compliance that makes it possible for the state to focus its limited resources for coercion on the potentially disobedient.

But Hart’s conclusion can be true only in relatively benign contexts. In Nazi-ruled Czechoslovakia, obedience out of fear of severe reprisal seems likely to have been virtually the whole story for a very large segment of the population. Not many non-Fascist Slavs in Czechoslovakia can have been willingly obedient, in Hart’s sense, to their Nazi regime. The Czechoslovak case, while extreme, is not as rare as one might wish. Spanish rule of southern Italy, medieval rule of randomly conquered regions, and the rule of various Chinese empires and many colonial governments have had little more than the acquiescence of large parts of the relevant population. Similarly, for many partial rules, such as white rule over blacks in the United States, acquiescence of many was the most that could be claimed.

One might make an argument for trust in government that is analogous to Hart’s argument for obedience to government: Because enough people do trust, government can work well despite the lack of trust or even the active distrust of others. But, again, not many non-Fascist Slavs in Czechoslovakia can have trusted their Nazi regime. My concern here will be with benign cases in which trust is more nearly plausible than in Nazi Czechoslovakia and in which its plausibility is to be explained.

Any claim that government requires citizen trust is conspicuously false. A claim that is worthy of investigation is whether government that depends on extensive reciprocal participation by citizens requires trust in order to work well. Largely for empirical reasons, I will argue that even such a claim cannot be sustained. Or, rather, it cannot be sustained if what we mean by trust when we speak of trust in government is conceptually the same as what we mean when we speak of trust in another individual. Very often, all that is needed for government to work is for citizens not actively to distrust it. In general, it is important to note that contrary to the vernacular sense of not trusting, one may neither trust nor distrust another or a government with respect to some issue. If someone says, “I do not trust him,” she very likely means she actively distrusts him. But very often we are ignorant of another’s intentions or likely behavior and therefore we are in a state of neither trust nor distrust toward that other.

Trust is a fundamentally cognitive notion. To trust or to distrust others is to have some presumption of knowledge about them. For the vast majority of people in the world, including those whom we are likely to encounter, we know essentially nothing about their specific motivations toward us. The same is true of most of the people in our government: We do not know whether to trust them. If we are confident of their behavior in some context, that is because we generalize inductively from the behaviors of many of their peers or because we infer from the organizational incentives they face that they are more than likely to be trustworthy in that context.

A common claim about trust is that it is inherently normative. Unless it is merely an abstruse definitional move, this claim is not well grounded and even appears to be false (Hardin 1992, 1991). Although trust can well stand on the interest of the person trusted to live up to the trust placed in her, there may often be a tendency to associate the plausible normativity of trustworthiness with the notion of trust (Hardin 1996). In the encapsulated-interest account of trust summarized in the following section, my trust is grounded in my assessment of your interest in fulfilling my trust. I question any account of trust in government as similarly based on the trustee’s assessment of the trusted’s incentive to be trustworthy.

Advocates of moralized conceptions of trust at the individual level argue that trust is inherently a two-part relation, that it is not merely rational expectations about the behavior of others. Sociological accounts of trust, such as that of Bernard Barber (1983), however, seem to account for trust as simple expectation grounded in large-number regularities. Barber’s interest in trust grows in large part out of his more general concern with the role of professionalism in our lives. We cannot know enough to judge the competence of the professionals who serve us; therefore, we must essentially trust them to some extent.
To bring trust into political theory requires a micro-level account of how government works at the macro level. This will largely be an account of rational expectations of what government and its agents are likely to do. But the expectations will be rational not because they extrapolate from current and past actions, as might be adequate for a sociological account of credible, inductive expectations. Merely institutionalizing government and the implementation of policies should lead to greater stability of citizens' expectations and hence to greater trust in this limited sociological sense. To reach Dunn's concern of putting trust at the core of the relation between citizens and government, however, citizens' expectations must also be rational in the sense of depending on the rational commitments of officials. Rationally grounded trust in officials therefore requires that the officials be responsive to popular needs and desires. To have incentive to be responsive, they must be somehow accountable—most plausibly, perhaps, through competitive elections or some other form of public oversight.

To give an account of trust in government on analogy with trust in individuals requires two classes of argument. First, we must give an account of the trustworthiness of government agents. Second, we must account for the knowledge citizens are likely to have of such trustworthiness. In both accounts, the central problem is the translation from individual-to-individual relationships to individual-to-group or individual-to-institution relationships.

Trust as Encapsulated Interest

At the individual level, trust is a three-part relation: A trusts B to do x (or with respect to matters y). If, in the vernacular, I merely say that I trust you, it is commonly understood that there are limits to my trust of you. I might trust you to keep various promises or to act as an agent on my behalf on certain matters even though I might not trust you to repay a very large unsecured loan or to avoid romantic entanglements with my spouse. I wish further to stipulate that it is trust I have and not merely inductive expectations if I think you have a reason in some way grounded in me for fulfilling my trust. For example, I might well expect you to rise every morning at 7:00 because I know your habits very well, but I do not trust you to do so if I have no reason to suppose you do so somehow on my behalf. I can further say I trust you with respect to some action if your reason for doing it is to take me into account in some relevant way. Typically your reason will be that it is in your interest to maintain our relationship. Hence, my trust in you is typically encapsulated in your interest in fulfilling my trust.

Locke and others clearly were speaking of trust even in large contexts, such as political relationships. There is a substantial literature that supposes trust is out of place in the individual's relations to large groups and, therefore, to government. Against this view, it is clear that in principle—that is to say, conceptually—individuals can trust government, or at least parts of it or some of its agents, even under the relatively demanding notion of trust as encapsulated interest. Thus Locke's position is possible in principle. Unfortunately, in practice few people may genuinely be in a position to trust government in this sense. Trust is therefore largely irrelevant for the loyalties of most citizens. Hence, the metaphorical model of the social contract cannot be rescued by recourse to citizen trust.¹

Many recent treatments of trust suppose it to be inherently restricted to small-number, even dyadic, relationships. Some of these accounts are compelling, but, oddly, the generalization from them that trust is irrelevant to large-number interactions is misguided. Consider two classes of accounts—one based on arguments from the iterated prisoner's dilemma and one based on familiarity of the trusted to the trustee. These are both essentially grounded in a vision of trust as dependent on thick (or close, ongoing) relationships.

The sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1980) and the philosopher Bernard Williams (1988) have supposed that trust applies only to small-number contexts. Their view seems to rest on the model of cooperation in iterated prisoner’s dilemma: I have an interest in cooperating with you now because I want you to cooperate with me in future interactions. The interest one has in cooperating in a two-person iterated prisoner’s dilemma interaction does not generalize to large-number prisoner’s dilemma interactions (Hardin 1982, 145–50; 1991). Hence, Luhmann says, trust is vital in personal relations, but participation in functional systems such as the economy is not a matter of personal relations. It requires confidence, but not trust (Luhmann 1980, 102).²

Surely the central issue in the thick-relationships account of the trusted's interest in fulfilling a trust is not that it is grounded specifically in iterated prisoner’s dilemma incentives. Rather, the central issue is that the trusted have an interest in fulfilling a trust at all. Because iterated prisoner’s dilemma provides such an interest, it makes interpersonal trust work in many contexts of ongoing relationships— in essence, it makes for trustworthiness. If public officials and their institutions are to be trusted, they must have interests in fulfilling the trust placed in them just as I have an interest in fulfilling trusts placed in me by family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors with whom I expect to have long associations. Their interests need not—indeed cannot be—dependent on iterated prisoner's-dilemma interactions with
each particular individual who might trust them; there are other devices for giving them relevant incentives.

Locke was concerned with trust in those who govern. Some of his own discussion seems to mirror the Luhmann-Williams account. Arguably, the more complex and the more economically differentiated the society in question, the more likely trust is to be absent. (Certainly the less likely it is that trust grounded in the incentives of the iterated prisoner’s dilemma will fit all relationships.) Locke supposed that the best condition for humans is an environment in which they are fortunate enough to have well-founded confidence (Dunn 1988, 83–4). Much of Locke’s view seems to imply a need for something like face-to-face interactions, thus a small society.

In the second class of small-number accounts, those based on familiarity of the trusted to the trustor, consider two visions of trust at the small scale of a particular community, those of the Anti-Federalists and of the anthropologist F. G. Bailey. The central appeal of the Anti-Federalist vision during the constitutinal era of the United States was to representation by one's own kind. Why? They can be trusted to share one's interests on various legislative matters. In this respect, today's communitarians agree with the Anti-Federalists and with part of Locke's account.

Bailey (1988, 85) more generally argues that people are better inclined to like those whom they see as similar to themselves. This is evidently an armchair judgment rather than a hard empirical claim. Nevertheless, it might be a reasonable claim in many contexts. For example, one might generally expect to be better at predicting the behavior of those like oneself, and one might therefore find them more reliable. Still, the claim might be incoherent in many contexts. If I am to like others, must they be similar to me in intellect, sense of humor, ethnicity, religion, gender, interests, upbringing, or what?

The Anti-Federalists were not actually concerned with whether they liked one another. They were concerned with whether their local interests were to be the determinants of government policy. No doubt the typical small-town individual in upstate New York in 1788 was as likely to dislike a fellow local citizen as the typical Manhattan pluralist was to dislike a fellow city-dweller. But the small-town individual may have had interests that significantly differed from those of the urban pluralist. Anyone who greatly values life in a pluralist community with its interestingly different people has an interest in maintaining liberal pluralist institutions, just as actual (as opposed to academic) communitarians have an interest in maintaining their communities.

Bailey’s comment on liking those who are similar is made along the way in a discussion of trust in political leaders. In his context of small anthropological societies, he said such trust is achieved through devices of familial style plus unique capacities, such as intuition (1988, 85–6, 91). Oddly, however, he notes that to be leader of everybody requires marginality in the form of a lack of identification with any particular group (87).

Consider several examples of this observation in larger societies with great potential for divisive group conflict. Marshall Broz Tito was of mixed ethnic background and could not readily be seen as partial to Croats or Serbs. He was therefore an ideal leader of the multiethnic Yugoslav Republic. Similarly, Siad Barre was of mixed-clan background and was naturally nationalist in his leadership of Somalia. These men could be trusted by varied groups just because they could not be trusted by any one group to take its side. Alas, such leaders cannot easily be elected over locals if political careers are backed by group loyalties. For most of three decades Canadian prime ministers have been Québécois. A Québécois who is nationalist can be trusted by both anglophone and francophone citizens. In many mixed societies, such as Yugoslavia today and Rwanda and Burundi since their independence more than thirty years ago, political leaders whose careers have been grounded in ethnic loyalties have produced destructive government, because they cannot be trusted by those of other ethnic backgrounds (Hardin 1995, ch. 6).

In these contexts, political leaders can be widely trusted only if they are, as Bailey says, marginal and therefore different from others, not similar to them. One who is of mixed background is likely to have an interest in maintaining reasonable relations between the groups. Having that interest makes the marginal leader trustworthy to more than a single group. The small towns of upstate New York in 1788 could plausibly have been better served by one of their own than by representatives from across the land. Hence, because of the very different circumstances of Bailey’s society and the Anti-Federalists’ society, there were clearly different principles for securing interests. In both cases, however, it was not small scale in principle and therefore not thick relationships that defined interests.

The Problem of Institutional Trustworthiness

Many plausible psychological and normative accounts of individual behavior may be hard to generalize to apply to institutional behavior. If trust does not generalize to institutions, it is of limited interest in political theory and international relations. Observers of politics often speak in analogies that may be fallacies of composition. For example, one might try to explain peaceful Anglo-American relations by saying
that England and the United States trust each other, but this would, however, be a loose claim that one might be hard-pressed to articulate beyond its seeming metaphor.

In vernacular usage the term trust is readily applied to many institutions and institutional actors, such as banks, nations, and political leaders. As with individuals, the question of whether we can reasonably trust institutions reduces to the question of whether institutions can be trustworthy. As a matter of simple descriptive fact, it appears that many institutions can be reliably expected to fulfill their missions. It would be odd if this were merely a regularity or if it were a hard law of nature. Our task, therefore, is to unpack our sometimes reliable expectations to find out why they are reliable.

If our notion of trust comes from understandings of individual behavior and character, the term may be entirely out of place in application to a nation, group, or institution. There may be ways to interpret the notion to apply it to such actors, but it is not likely to be prima facie applicable without interpretation. It is now a commonplace understanding that interest does not readily generalize from individual to group or national levels. It should not surprise us to find that trust, which is commonly at issue just because interests are at stake, does not readily generalize either. Nevertheless, the encapsulated-interest conception of trust can be generalized to fit institutions.

Suppose one has no prior experience of institutions but only of individuals, and one now wonders whether a particular institution is trustworthy. This question is not strictly analogous to the problem of the infant and child who must learn from experience whether to trust, but it is somewhat similar. If I have a long history of relatively benign and even beneficial dealings with certain organizations, I can plausibly suppose they are trustworthy with respect to relevant matters. Alternatively, if my dealings have been bad, I can meaningfully say those organizations are not trustworthy. But when I have no experience and no reputational evidence from the experience of others in dealing with those organizations, I cannot say very confidently one way or the other whether they are trustworthy.

At first thought, this statement sounds like only part of an account of trust as encapsulated interest. I can predict from a lot of data, but I have no reason to think the organization especially takes my interests somehow into consideration. If we cannot add the latter, we can only say we have a regularity from which we infer a tendency, as we infer that the sun will rise tomorrow from the fact that it seemingly always has done so every day. This problem is often resolved by fiat. It is merely assumed that the officials in an organization act from the desire to accomplish some organizational goal of service.

Against this resolution by fiat, it would be odd if we found that individuals in organizational contexts had motivations for action that were significantly different from their usual motivations. They typically do have different incentives; that is how organizations work, by giving role holders incentives, negative and positive, for and against various actions, and by coordinating people acting from varied incentives. If individual trustworthiness correlates strongly with encapsulated interest in individual-to-individual relations, it seems likely that it must do so as well in intraorganizational relations that are, at times, individual-to-individual. If so, then the question whether role holders in an organization will be trustworthy will tend to correlate with whether it is in their interest to do what they are expected or trusted to do.

Endemic Distrust

When distrust in government is endemic, as in the East European and Soviet worlds at the end of the 1980s, there may be no better move than to weaken government substantially (Hardin forthcoming). Elimination of agencies and powerful bureaus and bureaucrats will eliminate the objects of distrust. "Strong" leadership is precisely what is not wanted when strong leaders have been the problem. Weak leaders unable to intervene capriciously are what is wanted to make the society develop successful trusting relationships. As it happens, the only economic system that works without leadership is the market, and even it requires stable law enforcement in certain realms if firms are to be trusted, either by workers, customers, or other firms.

Still, creating trustworthy institutional supports for legal and economic relations may be difficult even when the institutions are created de novo. The staff of any new organization or of any massively reformed organization is likely to come from the staff of prior organizations. If one created a new agency in New York City to handle some problem in a fresh and innovative way but hired staff from the extant pool of seemingly qualified people, one might discover that the new agency almost immediately fell into the usual New York malaise in which all supplicants are forced to invest in massive, wasteful haggling to get routine, reasonable things done. To create a genuinely new agency, it might be better to recruit staff from Texas, Wyoming, and scattered other places.

This potentially grievous problem stands in the way of simply changing policies in Russia and expecting to get the desired results. The distrust of Russian state agencies that oversaw the economy during its woeful years includes, rightly, distrust of many of the officers of those agencies. To give them proper incentives for behaving constructively might require massive organizational redesign. When New
York officials tell me something cannot be done or cannot be done in less than some large number of months, I openly disbelieve them. I am virtually sure that, if they were merely willing to do what they ostensibly are supposed to do (sometimes merely to sign a form lying before them), it could be done immediately, reasonably, correctly, and competently. As is often true, they seem to have come to view their interests as tied to the interests of their organization rather than to the interests of their clientele. This can happen simply because it is within the organization that they are rewarded, so that it is their organization and not their clientele who give them their incentives for action or inaction. They suffer something akin to the professional deforma-
tion that corrupted the French military establishment in defense of its honor even at the cost of punishing the innocent Dreyfus. Hence, they cannot be trusted in the compelling sense that their interests do not encapsulate mine.

At the most extreme change in government, such as after a major social revolution, the problem of establishing stable expectations may make trust nearly impossible for a while. Many people might have faith in the new regime because they think it represents their interests. And they might therefore say they trust the regime. They might continue to have such faith even after arduous years of failure, as in the Stalinist years in the Soviet Union, when the virtual deification of Stalin was evidently effective in many parts of the population. This trust would not be grounded, although it might be an unusual case of what some philosophers call trust as blind faith. It is hard to see how such trust can be good except by blind fortune.

It may be nearly impossible to avoid endemic distrust in much of politics without simultaneously avoiding clear positions on issues. Perhaps the most striking difference between leaders of many nongovernmental organizations, such as business firms, and elected officials is that the former typically must live up to relatively clear expectations, while the latter often can attempt to make expectations vague and the judgment of achievements therefore pliable. The difference is not stark. For example, in the so-called cola wars, Pepsi engaged not in defining its product but in identifying its potential consumers, the Pepsi generation. Much of the appeal to voters is similarly directed at their identifications, not at the programs they might like to see implemented. In politics, it is often a drastic mistake to be very specific, because most people must necessarily have preferences that fall some distance away from any proposed policy.

There are, of course, many issues for which this may not be true. For example, preferences on abortion policy in the contemporary United States are very nearly bimodal, with very sharply defined pro and con positions. The arguments of such writers as the lawyers Ronald Dworkin (1993) and Laurence Tribe (1990) that the two sides are not so far apart are prima facie unconvincing. Some candidates attempt to straddle this divide by being vague about how they would handle abortion policy or by passing the issue off to an alternative decision arena such as the courts or a possible constitutional amendment.

But for issues that have a more or less normal distribution of preferences, staking oneself to a precise position is tantamount to putting distance between oneself and most voters. The task of gaining the trust of constituents, then, is complicated by the virtual certainty that effectiveness in office will correlate strongly with disappointing or even offending large numbers of constituents on particular issues. Ronald Reagan, the best president the American Right has ever had, was reviled by much of that Right soon after he entered office. Dwight Eisenhower had the nearly unique advantage of being elected by a populace ignorant of any of his views, if he had any. And the first president, George Washington, was reviled at the end of his tenure by Thomas Paine for his compromises. From Washington's time forward, American presidents could be trusted—if that is not a distortion of the term—to change their stripes while in office. This might merely be an instance of Burkean representation that takes positions not according to constituents' positions but according to their supposed interests. Again, however, this stance is apt to require faith rather than trust.

The Possibility of Governmental Trustworthiness

In the encapsulated interest account, trust and cooperation are related problems, but they are not always the same problem. Cooperation may generally require conditions that make for trust, but not all trusting relationships are sensibly grounded in ongoing cooperation. Some trusting relationships depend on love or altruism from the trusted, and some involve only a loose concatenation of interests, nothing like direct exchange or pursuit of common goals. The latter may be especially typical of political life, where it may be vital to establish something analogous to trustworthiness for institutions, so that citizens may prosper and institutions and nations may cooperate. The trustworthiness of institutions need not, however, entail that they be trusted.

Some political philosophers, including the usually very sensible Hume ([1739 to 1740] 1978, 537), have supposed that government requires public-spirited people to make it work well. In practice most political institutions are staffed by people whose motives are heavily,
if not entirely, self-interested. To gain our trust, they have to work in our interest. Hence, the general problem is to make it the interest of various officials to work in our interest. We do this in part by making some officials directly answerable to citizens and in part by making other officials answerable to these. Both of these controls are likely to be very loose, but the latter seems especially weak. What is needed to complete the picture is a theory of how the general interest can be served by a government of millions of bureaucrats who are fundamentally self-interested, who are motivated not by unusual public spirit but primarily by income and career.

In crude outline, the most plausible theory is one that takes James Madison's analysis down to the level of individual officials. In defense of the U.S. Constitution, he wrote, "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself" (Federalist no. 51, 322). He recommended, "Ambition must be made to counter ambition. How? If I violate the norms determined by our bureaucratic mission, you and others are likely to find it in your interest to oppose me (Hardin 1988, 526–7). Sometimes the enticements to malfeasance are so great that they infect almost everyone in a relevant agency, as we often hear of whole governmental structures (as in Italy) or entire police units (as in the United States) that succumb to bribery or even to direct involvement in profitable relations with the Mafia or illegal drug traders. But commonly, even in such extreme cases, someone will have a strong career interest in bringing them to account. Strong moral commitment beyond interest may help and may be common, but it may also lead officials into taking the law into their own hands, and it cannot be reliable.

Often we expect institutions to be more stable than individuals. Many institutional promises and threats are more reliable than their individual equivalents. Consider some examples. The nuclear deterrent threat was credible because it did not depend on a particular individual's commitment to act in the relevant moment. The individual might choose, once deterrence had failed, to act as a humanitarian rather than as an avenger or as an automaton programmed to retaliate. The reliability of retaliation approaches near certainty if it is institutionalized in the form of many actors prepared to act in related but not entirely centrally controlled ways. (The success of a deterrent strategy may not require anything approaching near certainty of retaliation, because even a small risk is too much to invite.) Similarly, many of us might trust our fortunes to a bank more readily than to most individuals, perhaps even to close friends and relatives with whom we expect our relationships to last our lifetimes. Those rela-

tionships have a better chance of lifetime survival if they are not strained by excessive demands for trustworthiness.

Aristotle argued that the best of all governments would be a good monarchy and the worst would be a bad monarchy, or tyranny. The differences between a good and a bad democracy would be less great. To reduce variance, we might choose democracy as the preferred form of government in general. There may be little or no empirical study of Aristotle's factual claims, but they sound sensible. Government by the many may induce a kind of regression toward the mean and hence much greater predictability.

Seldom in history has anyone gone so far toward establishing institutional trust as did Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, head of a system that, throughout its seven decades, had exhibited extraordinary variance. He made some previously possible Soviet threats virtually impossible by putting institutional barriers in their way. For example, in inviting the reformation of the East European regimes and the dismantling of the iron curtain, he greatly reduced the possibility of a sudden Soviet conventional attack on West Europe. By withdrawing troops and certain materiel, he made it virtually impossible to launch a secret attack, without first visibly warning of attack during the necessary restoration of troops and equipment to the European theater. The obstacles he created consist of institutional structures that can impede individual audacity. Such institutional arrangements are appealing partly because they stabilize our expectations. Institutional behavior regresses toward the mean to average out the variance of individual behavior.

Our expectations may not be grounded in any theory or explanation of why they are justified, but simply in experience. For example, political trust of many kinds may be easier in the Soviet Union now than it was a generation ago, although many of the older generation may still be reticent in trusting others with their opinions. And such trust must be harder in China now than it was shortly before the June 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square.

One might suppose that trustworthy (that is, reliable) institutions are reliable because the right people are in the right places in them. But banks and many other institutions do not use great rigor in selecting people for their roles, and it seems unlikely that reliability emerges from simple goodwill on the part of individuals in those roles. Most of us are somewhat like bank tellers: We are secured in our normal honesty by institutional arrangements that make significant dishonesty risky, even difficult. Much of what looks like honesty is essentially self-interest at work.

Institutional arrangements may secure our expectations, and hence our trust, with the devices of self-interest, just as our own individual
arrangements do. I become trustworthy by establishing a reputation and by setting myself up for real losses if I betray a trust. If I betray your trust, I may lose the opportunity not only to have you depend on me again but also to have others depend on me. Those who fail to learn such lessons are seen as capricious and adolescent. Public officials and institutions are like individuals in that they must also often live by the reputations they establish. But, as is argued in the following section, they might well be trustworthy even though citizens do not generally trust them.

The Epistemology of Trusting Institutions

How can we make sense of trusting an institution if trust must be grounded in the interests of the institution and its agents? There are at least two ways we might unpack our trust of an institution. First, we could trust every individual in the organization, each in the relevant ways, to do what each must do if the organization is to fulfill our trust. Second, we could trust the design of the roles and their related incentives to get role holders to do what they must do if the organization is to fulfill our trust. In this case, the individual role holders might be broadly interchangeable, and we need to know few if any of them.

Neither of these visions is plausible for citizen trust of modern governmental institutions. Virtually no one can know enough of the large number of individual role holders to claim to trust them in the strong sense of seeing that they have interests in fulfilling trust placed in them. And few people can have an articulate understanding of the structures of various agencies and the roles within them or of the government overall to be confident of the incentives that role holders have to be trustworthy. As a matter of actual practice, it is utterly implausible that trust underlies most citizens' views and expectations of government.

In actual life we might not trust an organization but might merely depend on its apparent predictability by induction from its past behavior. Then we have merely an expectations account of the organization's behavior. Inductive knowledge in some contexts seems very compelling. Most of us expect the sun to rise tomorrow just because that is what has always happened so far as we know. For many people, that expectation is reinforced by the belief that there are physical laws to govern the sun's rising. Their expectations are Newtonian and not merely inductive.

Expectations of human behavior are much less reliable than the merely inductive expectations about the sun's behavior. Indeed, their unreliability is the central driving force of most great literature. In a cute moment, one might say that one of the strongest expectations we must have of people in the long run is that they will defy our expectations. (On a recent flight, a pilot told us, "We are now experiencing the unexpected turbulence I mentioned earlier.") While there is no analog of Newtonian physics to reinforce our expectations of human behavior, there is a consideration that is arguably far more widely understood than is Newtonian physics. We base many of our expectations of people's actions on beliefs about human psychology. Among the most compelling and generalizable of psychological traits is that people are motivated by their interests. Hence, trust—expectations grounded in encapsulated interest—may be more widely motivated than are beliefs about physical relationships that are grounded in nothing more than induction.

Of a large part of the population perhaps we can claim no more than that they have inductive expectations about government, not that they have grounds for trust as encapsulated interest. That an agency or its role holders are trustworthy might matter to some people, but to most there is nothing beyond expectations. Immanuel Kant's neighbors may have relied on his punctuality in his morning walk to set their own schedules. To trust requires more: that they rely on his having their interests at heart in deciding when to take his walk. If they could not think he did, they could not be said to trust him (Baier 1986, 234). Like Kant's neighbors, those people who merely have inductive expectations cannot be said to trust government. Inductive expectations that government will be capricious might be sufficient to ground distrust, but for most people there might be neither trust nor distrust of a reliable government or agency.

The trustworthiness of government might matter enormously to some citizens, but it might count only by default for many other citizens. Distrust comes easily; trust requires too rich an understanding of the other's incentives to come easily to many people. If Locke's understanding of government is that it must be grounded in trust to be legitimate, then no major government of modern times is likely to be legitimate for more than passing moments. For example, the government of the Czech Republic in its early days or the governments of England and the United States during the Second World War might have been legitimate in the eyes of most citizens, but the government of the United States since the Second World War cannot have counted as legitimate in Locke's demanding sense. Evidently, however, government need not be legitimate in Locke's sense to survive and even to manage a nation through major difficulties and into prosperity. It may suffice that government not be generally distrusted. If some core
of the populace genuinely does trust a government and not too many of the rest of the populace distrust it, then it has likely done well by historical standards for governments of large states.

In the end, trust may still be crucial to the success of government. Those most attentive to government will also be those most likely to know enough about governmental actions and structures to know whether at least parts of the government and some of its agents are trustworthy. If they are also the people most likely to oppose government effectively in response to its failings, then the possibility of trustworthiness and the epistemological possibility of trust could be fundamentally important to the stability of government. The significance of their role in support of government might be ramified by the implicit support of those who act from mere expectations without articulate knowledge of the trustworthiness of government. The expectations of the latter group might be based in large part on the expectations of others, just as most of us know many of the things we know only in the sense that we gather that others think those things are true. Our crippled epistemology is little more than mimicry.

Low voter turnouts in many nations, including, notoriously, the United States, are commonly taken as evidence that government has failed to elicit support. But, prima facie, an equally or even more plausible conclusion may be that such turnouts are evidence that government has not engendered grievous distrust and opposition. Silence cannot unambiguously prove the case for or against government. If mimicry very much underpins our expectations of government, then the limited commitment of most people to try to change or affect government makes epistemologically good sense.

Concluding Remarks

Some, perhaps most, of the contributions to this volume suppose that there is more at stake in relationships of trust than mere expectations grounded in the interests of the trusted to fulfill the trust. That is, they suppose that trust is not encapsulated in the interests of the trusted, as I assume for most trusting relations. For example, John Braithwaite, Simon Blackburn, and Martin Daunton argue in effect that trusting people can motivate them to be trustworthy. In Braithwaite’s account, this appears to be an inherently moral claim. But James Coleman (1988) argued that when someone asks a favor from another, “he does so because it brings him a needed benefit; he does not consider that it does the other a benefit as well by adding to a drawing fund of social capital available in a time of need” (P. S117, emphasis added). Coleman’s claim is, of course, often false, and his addendum is true only if there is reason to expect the relationship to be ongoing, so that there is an incentive to each party to repay the trustworthiness of the other. It follows naturally that this would also be true in the relations between public agents, such as welfare workers, and their clients, who will continue to depend on the agents well beyond their current interaction.

A reviewer of this volume asserted that “these are relationship-generated motivations that are outside the received tradition in rational choice.” This conclusion is simply false, nor need we “stretch rational choice theory to encompass [these motivations],” as the reviewer claims. Indeed, it can be argued that the largest body of contemporary rational choice work in sociology is work on ongoing relationships that involve iterated interactions, as in the vast literature on the iterated prisoner’s dilemma. That is to say, “relationship-generated motivations” are at the heart of rational-choice understanding of social and interpersonal interactions. Indeed, it is ongoing relationships that make it meaningful for us to speak of society rather than merely of an aggregation of individuals. If there is a lesson to be learned from the rich findings of Braithwaite and others on (supposedly) one side and rational-choice theorists on (supposedly) the other side, it is how much we have in common in our understanding, not how far apart we are. We would all benefit if the rhetoric of profound anti-rational-choice theory could be less heated and if our arguments could focus, rather, on the power of our particular explanations.

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, San Francisco, April 1 1995, and at the conference Trust in Government, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, February 2–3, 1996. The paper has benefited from commentary at these sessions and, especially, from extensive written commentary by Margaret Levi and two anonymous reviewers. I am grateful to these colleagues and others for their comments. These comments included occasional looks of disbelief from those who finally came to believe the argument was intended. The writing of the paper has been supported by New York University and by the Russell Sage Foundation.

Notes

1. More generally, it cannot be rescued at all. See Hardin 1990.
2. As his subtitle suggests, Luhmann focuses on our need to trust (that is, to have stable expectations about) large institutional aspects of life, such as the stability of our currency or the reliability of our political leaders during crises that could lead to foolish war.
3. This move began as early as the 1940s. By now, in a trick of marketing, virtually every living American is in 'the' Pepsi generation. See Schuessler 1997; Tedlow 1990.


5. Washington's character, Paine said, was a "non-describable, chameleon-colored thing called prudence," which was "in many cases a substitute for principle [and] so nearly allied to hypocrisy that it easily slides into it" (New York Times, 19 February 1995, 4:1). Paine was a master of invective, and he resented Washington's treatment of him during his presidency. But his remarks are well grounded in Washington's gift for opportunism, such as in his preferring English monarchy to French revolutionary democracy. From long before his presidency, Washington seemed to value successful personal achievement well above principle. See Ayer 1988 1990, 159, 164.

6. I am perhaps forced to be more alert to this possibility than are many scholars on these issues. I regularly participate in conferences dominated by anti-rational-choice theorists and also in conferences dominated by pro-rational-choice theorists. At both kinds of conference, I am regularly pilloried as the person most out of touch with social reality.

References


