Comment on Tony Steinbock's Paper, Spep 2005

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Introduction

First of all, I'd like to express my admiration for the work in phenomenology that Tony has done over the last decade, which is joined by my admiration for his new project, within which he attempts to elucidate selected moral and emotional phenomena, such as the phenomena of hope, despair, and, as we have just heard, trust. I find Tony's attempt to offer a phenomenology of emotional and moral existence to be a superb realization of how phenomenology was understood – when it entered the philosophical stage at the beginning of the last century – in Goettingen and in Munich. As many of us acknowledge, the Munich and Goettingen schools' phenomenological attempt to understand and make sense of the goal of a philosophy that returns to the "Sachen selbst" without relying upon Husserlian technicality and superfluous methodological questions was a remarkable contribution to phenomenological philosophy. It seems to me that Tony's way of addressing phenomenological issues is of that quality; for insofar as he addresses the issue at hand in his paper, namely, trust, directly and without formalities, his investigation permits us to see the structure of our own experience mirrored in his interpretations of the phenomenon of trust. For these (and other) reasons, I very much enjoyed reading his paper.

Instead of summarizing what we have just heard, and instead of dealing with every aspect of what Tony has laid out for us, I will proceed in the following way: I shall restrict my comments to two aspects of Tony's analysis, which, I believe, deserve critical

attention. [1] First, I shall critically examine Tony's analysis of the inter-personal dimension of trust. For although I agree with Tony's overall analysis, especially its Kantian undertone (trust versus instrumentality, trust versus self-interest, trust and freedom), I do not agree with his thesis that trust does not depend on the past. Rather, I think that *since* trust is not exclusively connected to "single" acts, choices, or decisions, in its personal dimension trust must necessarily include a reference to the past. As such, I do not think, as Tony seems to suggest, that trusting is an "event." In this connection, a fine attempt to recover this past dimension as a personality trait can be found within the history of psychology, especially in Freud's and Erikson's theories of personal identity as well as their ideas about interpersonal relations to the other. It seems to me that an integration of the psychological aspects emphasized in their theories not only re-integrates the dimension of the past, but is also helpful in our attempt to understand the relation between *trusting as an act* and a *trusting person*. [2] The second, related, aspect of Tony's analysis that I shall critically examine involves Tony's claim that we give ourselves over to the other when we trust the other, and that we lay open our own vulnerability in doing this. Though I agree with Tony that we need a notion of "weak subjectivity" in order to understand trust, I also believe that there is reason for conceiving trust in an opposite way, namely, as a form of autonomy.

Critique of selected points

Though I agree with Steinbock's claim that trusting is an "inter-Personal relation" (6), I am unsure whether the reconstruction of trusting can be successfully carried out when we fail to differentiate between two levels of trusting, namely (a) the concrete level of trusting a specific person in specific circumstances, and (b) the presupposed *mode* of

existence and personality, which we might call the "trusting person." To put this differently, I think that we should make a distinction between *trusting a person* and *a trusting person*. Though Tony deals with both, I am somewhat confused about how the "event" of trusting and the "personal aspect" of trusting are related.

[a] It seems that Tony wants to understand trust as a concrete activity or as an attitude towards another person that reveals itself in certain circumstances, such as (to use his example), when one chooses a babysitter for one's children. This seems to point to the act of *trusting a person*. Trusting in this sense is conceived as an act or as an activity, as a mental attitude, as an "event," or as a form of behavior, the notions of which are associated with Tony's analysis, as is evidenced when he claims that trusting should be understood as a "giving oneself over to the other" (7), as a "moral act" (10), as an "insighting" (8), as a "reexecution" (8), or as "freely given" (7).

[b] On the other hand, as Tony in my view correctly points out, trust should be confused neither with a "decision" nor with a "belief attitude" (10); rather, trust in a second sense functions as a *presupposition* for concrete interpersonal relations that involve trusting. For example, as Tony claims, "trust is revelatory of intersubjectivity and the moral sphere, opening up a social space" (11). If this claim is convincing, then we must conclude that trusting is also a relation between persons that is *already* in play when we enter *concrete* relationships. This is to say that trust is an a priori being-towards-the-other that becomes re-actualized in concrete situations. For example, the condition for the possibility that I am able to trust Tony to be a fair grader (say, if I were to be his graduate student) is not only dependent on the concrete circumstance(s) within which I begin to trust him, but also depends on my being-a-trusting-person, that is, on my being *able* to

trust. Accordingly, we might say "I *can* trust!" is the presupposition for "I trust you." Only in this case are we able to speak, as Tony does, of an "opening up of the social sphere."

Trust, then, is not only the specific act, decision, or event of giving oneself over to the other, but rather, at a more fundamental level, it is the presupposed "relation" and general attitude towards the other, which is already in play when, for example, I decide to trust my babysitter. In this way, trusting is itself – before we conceive it as a particular act or as a concrete relation towards another person – a *form of personality*, a mode of *being someone*. Consequently, trust in this personal sense refers to a *presupposed mode of being* that opens up the concrete sphere between me and the other, by pointing to me as *who* I am and to the other as *who* she is. Being a trusting person and being trustworthy are two possibilities to be, and probably, as Tony points out, two aspects that make a non-instrumental form of being with others possible.

If this simple consideration makes sense, then we must reconsider whether Tony's claim that trusting does not depend on the past is fruitful for the overall analysis of trust and trusting. In regard to the first sense of trusting that I introduced above, namely, *trusting a person*, I find Tony's claim that trust does not require a dependency on or a reference to the past convincing, given that an inclusion of the past in my "giving myself over to the other" would transform this "giving" into a *result* of instrumental consideration. As Tony, in my view persuasively argued, trusting is different from taking someone to be reliable.

However, in regard to being *a trusting person*, I do not think that we can argue for a position that rules out any reference to the past, since a trusting person must generate

herself on the basis of some relation to her own past experience. In what follows I shall further elaborate on this aspect.

Freud and Erikson on Trust

According to Freud, the first decisive experience that the newborn child has is characterized by a pre-figuration of death, which is initiated by the child's loss of its main object, namely the presence of the mother. In fact, the stability and liability of consciousness are constituted by a permanent process of dealing with this original experience of fundamental absence, and because the child experiences absence as a fundamental instability of its identity and self, the process can be characterized – as one commentator puts it - as „learning to survive" [*Überlebenlernen*] (Liebsch 1996a, 306). Or, to put it in the words of the famous psychologist Erikson, the development of our self can only become a successful story if a basic „feeling of original trust" [*Gefühl von Urvertrauen*] in life (Erikson 2000, 59, 62, 69f.) can be established. This basic trust must be developed despite the fundamental negation that occurs by way of the inevitable confrontation with the absence of the primary loved object, and it can only arise if the child learns that not every experience of absence is permanent, and that things and persons can reappear after having been being absent. If this establishment of identity and the establishment of reality becomes shaken or distorted, however, absence will be symbolically connected to *permanent* absence, loneliness, separation, and the destruction of identity. Consequently, later on in its life the self that did not become a "trusting person" will react in the face of possible betrayal with anxiety. In this way, trusting is a form of *self-identity*. Someone who trusts is someone whose self has been established as both self-autonomous and as *different* from the other.

Within this process the self-formation and identity development of the self is absolutely dependent on *the other*, insofar as *the other* – initially the mother (at least usually) - must support the trust in life. For example, a borderline trauma might be exemplified by a loss of the basic trust that occurs in the phase during which the child develops her first tendencies to leave her mother, even if only by a few footsteps. At this moment, the child must learn to mediate between her fear of losing her mother by going away from her, and the fear of being identified with her and thus swallowed up again [*Wiederverschlungenwerden*] (Rohde-Dachser 1989, 161).[1] We can see that, viewed from a psychological point of view, the problem of absence is deeply rooted in the problematic of the other, as well as in the problematic of alterity in general.[2]

Conclusions

What can we philosophically learn from these briefly outlined psychological analyses? I believe that we can learn three things: [1] First, we should acknowledge that trust has essentially to do with the interplay of the presence and the absence of the other. [2] Second, a trusting person is someone who has established herself in early childhood as someone who does not take the absence of other persons, i.e., the possible loss of love and trust, as a threat to her identity and life. In other words, a trusting person is one who has established herself *in difference* from the other, as someone who does *not* merge with the other but has established herself as an *autonomous* person who can live *without* the other. [3] Finally, trusting on the personal level has to do with a reference to the past and with a reference to the relationship between self and caregiver, as the primary giver of love and "holding."

Given these points, I think that we should be skeptical about two of Tony's claims: First, I do not believe that trusting should be conceived as a form of "giving oneself over to the other," since it seems to be a form of interpersonal relation within which both selves, the trusting and the trusted person, are bound by a relation of recognition, which is only possible if *both* sides are autonomous beings. In trusting, then, I do not give myself over to the other; rather, I do exactly the opposite, namely, I take myself and the other to be *independent, autonomous* beings. If Tony leaves his child with the babysitter because he trusts him, he does *not* show vulnerability, he shows that he takes the other as the same as himself, that is, as independent and autonomous, as, in fact, trustworthy. In this way, it is not the trusting person who is vulnerable, it is the person who is *unable to trust who is vulnerable,* since such a person makes herself *dependent on* the other. Indeed, a non-trusting person will probably try to control her environment and is therefore likely to end up with anxieties when she leaves her child alone with the babysitter. Ironically, by doing this she enslaves herself to the other and to what she tries to control. In this sense, the controlling and not-trusting person is extremely vulnerable, while the person who trusts shows her *non-vulnerability*, which means in this context, her autonomy.

Literature

Tony, I apologize for quoting the German titles, but I didn't have enough time to go to the library

Freud, Sigmund 1997: Studienausgabe. Hrsg. von Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards und James Strachey. 13.Auflage. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer.

Erikson, Erik H. 2000: Identität und Lebenszyklus. 18.Auflg. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.

Liebsch, Burkhard 1996a: Geschichte im Zeichen des Abschieds. München: Fink.

Rhode- Rohde-Dachser, Christa: Das Borderline-Syndrom. 4.Auflg. Bern: Huber 1989.

1   Borderline patients have never learned the basic problematic of the absence and presence of the mother. In most cases, the mother was unable to handle the situation properly so that the patients are, to put it in the words of Rohde-Dachser, "condemned to longing" [*Sehnsucht verurteilt*] (163). The mother also encounters problems with this situation, because the child wants to be *dependent* and *autonomous* at once, a situation that reappears again, later on, when the child „leaves the home" after puberty. The child develops, in the first phase of learning, a concept of being disconnected from the mother through basic forms of aggression. This is because it cannot accept that the mother is an independent person, who can in general exist *without* the child. However, in its imagination and its egocentricity, the child believes that the mother is there *only* for him or herself.

2   Freud illustrates the problematic of presence and absence within the context of the away/here [*Fort/Da*] game, which every child loves to play, whether with things or with the appearance and disappearance of bodies and faces. His description leads us to an original longing for something that is lost. According to Freud, the game of absence and presence is constituted by a simple symbolic process that points to the origin of signs and language itself. By encountering the absence of a toy or of the mother's face, the child says something like „ooo" and by encountering the reappearing it says something like „aaa." Because of the vowels, the game is called the *Fort/Da* game (Freud III, 225).[2] In this game the symbolization of presence and absence is an exchange between the ontological level and the level of language. According to this theory, language itself is based on longing. Within the first phases of the child's development, the Fort/Da game is primarily not played with "neutral" objects but with the absence of the mother's face. The child experiences the absence of the mother as a negative feeling and it has to learn to give up its instinctive satisfaction (Freud III, 225). According to Freud, the game with the absence and presence of things and bodies is actually the *original* place to handle the absence of the mother. This means that the game renders it possible to go through the fundamental lack that everyone comes across in the first phase of his or her life. The Fort/Da game serves to "train" one to trust life, as well as to learn to become the "master of the situation" [*Herren der Situation*] (Freud III, 226), in this way stabilizing the ego.

Accordingly, a trusting personality is related to a possible *loss of the mother* who usually functions as the first libidinous object. The process is thoroughly paradoxical since only *because* the mother is experienced from time to time as being away, the symbolic meaning of what we call "mother" is constituted at all. In Freud's theory the symbolization is deeply connected to ontological considerations. In short, according to Freud every form of longing is rooted in the longing for the original situation of satisfaction and its loss, which is symbolized by the "mother" (Freud VI, 307). The origin of longing is located within "the traumatic situation of missing the mother" [*traumatischen Situation des Vermissens der Mutter*] (CW20, 170; Freud VI, 307). To put it in more philosophical terms: the origin of longing has to be understood as a split between intention, in this case desiring, and fulfillment, in this case the presence of the mother.