

Training in Trust

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A NUMBER of years ago the German theologian and philosopher, Karl Heim, a man who also knew a good deal about the natural sciences, wrote a book on the question of certitude, which he called "the life-and-death question for religion."¹ He soon makes it clear that the question of certitude — how we can be certain of anything — is vitally important not only for religion but for the whole of human life and society.

He begins by making a distinction between two kinds of certitude: one is based on calculation

¹ Karl Heim (1874-1958), *Glaubensgewissheit. Eine Untersuchung über die Lebensfrage der Religion*, 3rd edition (Leipzig: J. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1923).

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(*Berechnung*), the other on trust (*Vertrauen*).

It is not only in mathematics, engineering, and the sciences that we seek to arrive at certitude by means of calculation. When a businessman, for example, considers introducing a new product, he wants to have some certitude or assurance that it will move well. Therefore, he makes a calculation of the soundness of this project, taking into consideration what he knows about his customers, their tastes and requirements, the market situation, the quality of the new product, and as many other relevant factors as he can identify and evaluate. The degree of certitude which he can obtain in this manner concerning the success of his venture is less than that obtained by an engineer calculating the weight of a bridge section, but

the kind is the same: it is based on calculation, but the calculation of less tangible and certain factors.

When it is a question not of investing in a product but a person, in other words, of taking on a partner and giving him a share of responsibility and authority, a businessman will also make calculations. He will attempt to evaluate his prospective partner's know-how, experience, initiative, ability to get along with people, several other factors — and his financial and personal integrity.

However, when one is dealing with human beings as opposed to merchandise, there is always needed something more than mere calculation, no matter how complex and careful. A partnership can be an unhappy proposition — and many are — if one partner's confidence in the other is based on nothing more than the *calculation* that the other is unlikely to try to cheat him. For a better relationship, in business as in marriage, something deeper is necessary. Mere calculation on the basis of past performance does not give a man much real confidence in his business partner or in his wife: he has to know something about his or her character. Character cannot be computed.

It is at this point that Karl Heim points to our need for the

second kind of certitude, for the kind that is based not on calculation but on trust. If we cannot trust at least some of our fellow human beings, our life becomes a savage jungle. Much of Heim's book is an attempt to prove that there can be a sound basis for personal trust — that trust need not be just wishful thinking. Rather than follow him in this detailed argument, let us consider some of the implications of his basic conviction that trust is essential to truly human life.

Trust Implies Mutuality

The certitude which is based on calculation depends only on the data which can be ascertained and on the accuracy of one's calculations. If I want to be certain how much a man owes me, I have only to add the amounts of the notes he has signed plus any unpaid interest. The certainty of this knowledge depends on me only to the extent that I can locate all the necessary figures and add them up correctly.

But when it comes to the question, "Will he pay me back?" the situation is different. To make the case clear, let us suppose that the loans are unsecured. In giving a man an unsecured loan, I have expressed confidence in him as a man of a certain integrity. My certainty that he will repay me

depends on his character, or rather on my evaluation of it; that is to say, it depends on my ability and inclination to trust him, and that involves something more within me than merely my ability to add.

As Heim observes, trust is a *mutual* thing. My ability to trust you depends not only on my knowledge of you, but on my knowledge of myself. He writes: "Thus I can only trust another human being if I myself deserve to be trusted. If I, in my own life, always go after the strongest attraction, then I will be unable to believe that any other man is different. Only if I myself am determined not to be diverted from my course by enticements or by threats will I be able to think that another man can possess the same determination. Thus, when I come to trust another man, to do so makes me feel obligated to a very definite attitude of the will myself. From this perspective we understand the influence which every relationship of trust has on the people involved. We understand why many people only become able to believe in goodness again when they find a man whom they can trust. Nothing has a more ennobling effect on us than to find another human being in whose love we can believe. . . . Thus the trust which another person confides in us produces a power which lifts

us up and carries us beyond our own limits. As often as a relationship of trust arises between two human beings, it is like closing an electrical contact. A current of living forces begins to flow."²

Professor Heim does not add, as well he might, how much a breach of trust can hurt the individuals involved — not only may my whole world collapse if a trusted friend betrays me, the same or even worse can happen if I betray my friend. How difficult it is for us to believe in the forgiveness of a friend whom we have betrayed, or to trust him once again! He may remain perfectly trustworthy, but our betrayal of him has destroyed our own ability to trust!

The Centrality of Trust for the Individual

Does Professor Heim correctly evaluate the fundamental importance of being able to give and receive trust? Even without examining his evidence, most of us will sense that he is right. Each of us has had the experience of which he speaks. Even the trust of a dog or a horse has an effect upon us, making it harder to betray the animal by neglect or ill-treatment. How many of us have gone ahead and fulfilled an unpleasant obligation without compulsion or the

² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

threat of untoward consequences, simply because we knew that someone we respected was trusting us to do it?

As long as a certain fundamental minimum of integrity is present in the person being trusted, our trust influences him and strengthens him in his resolution to be trustworthy. The father who trusts his son not to lie to him does more to help him grow into an honest man than the father who always checks up on his son's veracity.

On the other hand, if a trustworthy individual is put into a position where all those around him constantly betray him and each other, it is all but impossible for him to preserve his integrity. (This problem is faced often enough and in a very tangible way by an honest businessman forced to do business in a country in which the tax authorities take it for granted that all tax returns are fraudulent. How can you remain honest when the authorities assume, as a matter of course, that you will lie about your income, and therefore tax you on twice what you declare? In some cases, the only alternatives are to go out of business or to give up one's integrity.)

The ability to trust and to merit trust depends on the habit of trust, and trust is something that can be

trained and developed. Just as no good coach will break an athlete's self-confidence by trying to force him to do something he simply cannot do, but will gradually build him up by pushing him each day to a slightly higher performance, so no good teacher will entice a pupil to dishonesty by trusting him at once with something which is beyond his capacity. On the other hand, just as no athlete ever becomes good unless he takes the risk of pushing himself harder than he thinks he can go, so no pupil becomes trustworthy unless he is trusted in some situations in which he could get away with cheating.

Over the years, and varying with the location, the kind of school, and other factors, our educational systems have built up ways of trusting their pupils and of exercising them in trustworthiness — the teacher may let the pupils grade their own tests; he may go out of the room during a written quiz, and so on. One of the great things about certain sports is that they force the teammates to trust each other, and teach them to trust themselves as well.

There is, however, one limiting factor. We mentioned it a few paragraphs earlier: there must be a certain fundamental minimum of integrity in the person to be trusted. Without this minimum,

all trust is misplaced, and it results only in deceitful dealing and disillusionment. It is precisely this minimum which is increasingly at stake today.

The Centrality of Trust for Society

An individual who cannot be trusted will eventually and inevitably make moral and spiritual shipwreck of his life. Even if he should succeed in amassing wealth and power, he could have no true friend, no one who truly loved him. But the same is true of society as a whole. Many people are blissfully unaware of the degree to which the very functioning of industry and commerce as we know them today depends on a certain fundamental minimum of integrity in most of the individuals who make up a society.

Even the commonplace example of cashing a check at a bank, such as happens countless times a minute throughout the United States, immediately confronts us with the implications of a substantial minimum of personal trustworthiness for the conduct of any kind of business. What if I gave the teller a check for one hundred dollars and he counted out to me nine ten-dollar bills in such a way that they looked like ten? It is easy enough to do, and many of us do not count the money ourselves if the teller has counted it out in front of us.

But even if I recounted it at the window and discovered the shortage, who is to prove that I did not palm the ten-dollar bill myself in order to get one hundred and ten dollars for a one-hundred-dollar check? Imagine a situation in which every such transaction had to be performed before witnesses, with prompt and immediate sanctions for subterfuge. Such situations have existed, and they can exist again. There is no substitute for trust other than compulsion.

What happens when a lender cannot trust a borrower? He demands that the security be brought physically into his house and left there. The borrower, in turn, certainly will not accept a check, much less a credit in his bank account. He will demand that the loan be counted out to him in solid, metal money. In the extreme case he will even bring his own balance and weigh it before accepting it.

Our Western civilization, based on several thousand years of Jewish and Christian religion, has given its citizens a long training in honesty and trustworthiness. All too often they have not learned their lesson well, but more often they have. Otherwise, the present system of commercial relations would never have arisen. The God of Israel demanded truth even "in the inward parts" (Psalm 51:6),

and praised the man who kept his word even when it cost him something to do so (Psalm 15:4). Jesus told His followers that their speech must be such as to render oath-taking superfluous: their simple "Yes" or "No" should be its own guarantee of truthfulness (Matthew 5:37). We all know plenty of examples of Christian and Jewish failure to live by these principles; in fact, we doubtless do not need to look beyond our own record for examples. But we have all profited by the fact that these principles do exist, and have been so clearly set forth by our religious tradition, and have, even though imperfectly, been honored by generations.

The Paralysis of Untrustworthiness

That these principles, and the value-system built up around them, are breaking down, is hardly open to question. What the long-range effect of such a decline in personal trustworthiness will be on our society is easy enough for the reader to project. As long as there is a certain widely-accepted and honored minimum of personal integrity, individual responsibility will bear many of the burdens for the functioning of society. The alternatives are chaos or compulsion. Leaving aside what will happen within society as individual relationships of trust become unre-

liable and disappear, let us look at the kind of major policy decisions which will be made by leaders of a society in which personal integrity is being replaced by personal gratification.

Karl Heim pointed out that people who do not have firm ideals from which neither enticements nor threats can move them simply cannot believe that anyone else could have firm ideals. This might explain why leaders of the United States, over a prolonged period, have seemed unable to believe that communists in general or Russians in particular will pursue their long-range goals despite their short-range convenience. How better explain the persistent conviction, or delusion, held in spite of all the evidence, that "the Russians are mellowing"? If we have lost the habit, individually and nationally, of following our ideals despite our immediate self-interest, how can we believe that anyone else will do so? And what terrible mistakes we will make through our inability to believe!

The Power of Faith

A number of economic papers and books have been published recently showing that if certain trends continue and certain policies are pursued, the dollar will collapse. This is not a moral judgment, but a simple fact which will

inevitably follow if certain factors continue to work. In the same way, despite the evident moral and religious implications of what has been said here, the conclusion that Western free-enterprise society *must collapse* — or turn into something unrecognizable and horrible — is not a moral judgment. It is a simple conclusion drawn from the evidence.

Fortunately, there is a variable factor. That factor is man himself. Man cannot turn himself from a sinner into a saint by an act of the will, any more than he can make himself run a four-minute-mile by willing to do so. Apart from a genuine and spectacular conversion, no scoundrel can turn himself into an honest man, worthy of trust, by simply willing to be trusted. But fortunately, no one starts off in life as a perfect scoundrel.

Without wishing to deny the *divine* factor, or to fail to say that at a crucial point it becomes essential — for that would be irresponsible and dishonest for a Christian and a theologian — it is

possible, and fully consistent with our biblical heritage and with the experience of Judaeo-Christian civilization, to say that there is a *human* factor, and that it is substantial. We have had the experiences of which Karl Heim speaks, all of us, unless our human lives have been impoverished beyond all reckoning. We know the ennobling power in our own life of a friend's trust, even if imperfect and incompletely merited by us. We have all seen the power of our trust to make another fulfill an unpleasant obligation, not because he must, but because we trust him.

These are realities of human life and experience. They can be built upon, just as a coach can build upon the present strength and endurance of an athlete to make of him a champion in the future. We can build them in our own lives, and in the lives of those around us. The man who trains himself and others in trust and trustworthiness can have a certitude, an assurance which the mere calculator can never know. ♦

THOSE who are demanding freedom from responsibility have yet to discover there is only freedom for the responsible.

Distinguished Everybodies

ARCHIE PEACE

“WHAT’S it all about, my life, my world?” I assume the question is as perplexing and inescapable to others as to me. And for what they are worth, here are two premises I find helpful in examining the questions of life.

1. For all practical purposes, we are living in an unfinished world, a world in process of being completed and understood by man.
2. Each person is uniquely equipped to participate in this ongoing process of completion and understanding.

That each of us lives out his years in an incompletely understood world is all too obvious. We are still seeking answers to fill in the gaps in all areas of our knowledge of the world and of ourselves, and each answer we find poses new questions.

But the incompleteness of our knowledge appears, to our limited understanding, to be compounded by the added element that we are actually living in a world which is incomplete — one that is still being “worked out.”

To speak of an unfinished world may shock some. The fact of the matter is not subject to scientific proof or disproof, for it is of the nature of an expectant extension of the mind in an attempt to adequately comprehend the involvements of our life in this world. But, fact or faith, we humans are scarcely in a position to set limiting boundaries when accounting for the energies operating in this world.

Use any term you wish to denote the basic energies operating in this world, the gradual expansion of our knowledge only makes plain that each advance produces more unknowns and unexplainables to be pursued. Principles which seemed to be unshakeable

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