

AQUINAS ON TRUST AND OUR SOCIAL NATURE

Marie I. George

One evening, two friends of mine were discussing whether one could really trust one's spouse. It seemed to me unduly cynical to conclude that one could not, and so I decided to see whether Aquinas could shed some light on the matter. In researching the matter, I was struck by how Aquinas both affirms a moral obligation on our part to trust others and ties it to our social nature.

First, a brief account of what Aquinas takes trust to be is in order. It is hard to define trust because it seems to be something we directly experience--there does not seem to be something better known than it. Moreover, Aquinas never offers a definition of trust. He does, however, often speak about it when discussing the supernatural virtues of faith and hope. He sees our belief in certain truths about God, and our hope to get to heaven, to be founded upon our trust in God. Aquinas thus characterizes trust as an assured reliance on someone for either knowledge or for help.

The obvious reason why someone would think one can not trust anyone is the simple fact that all human beings are fallible and are thus liable to let one down, friends included. As Aquinas points out: "An infallible opinion of the goodness of any mere man could not be sustained, however, for even the most holy men are found to fail as to certain things."¹

If even the mostly holy men fail, the average person is even more likely to do so. Whence, as Aquinas notes, while the one who relies on God is never disappointed, for God's goodness is unchanging, the one who hopes in man is sometimes disappointed, for human goodness is subject to failure.²

¹ SCG, IV 55.

² See *In Ps.* 30, p. 250b: "Secondly he posits the stability [of hope in God]--'Let me never be put to shame,'--because this hope relies on God who is unchanging; but the one who hopes in man who fails is sometimes confounded."

A second reason not to trust others can be seen by considering the fact that we cannot even entirely trust ourselves. We have an inside view on our intentions, values, and virtues, but not on those of others. Despite this, we cannot be entirely sure of our intentions, nor that we would resist sin under trying circumstances. As Aquinas observes: "Peter was saying this [i.e., that he would lay down his life for Christ] to the extent it seemed so to him, and not with a lying heart (*animo*). But nevertheless man does not know the strength of his heart (*affectus*), and above all not when danger is at hand."³

Our ignorance about ourselves is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that we cannot be sure that we are in the state of grace⁴--which we could be, if we had certitude about our intentions, and especially about our repentance of serious sins. Thus, Job says: "Though I think myself right, his mouth may condemn me; though I count myself innocent, it may declare me a hypocrite. But am I innocent after all? Not even I know that...." (Jb. 9:20, 21)

In addition, Aquinas in his commentary on Job affirms more generally that no one by himself can know the state of his soul with certitude.⁵

Aquinas also speaks about self-doubt when commenting on the Apostles' reaction to Christ's words that one of them would betray him by each asking "is it I?" As Aquinas notes, they are sure that Christ is speaking the truth, and this causes each of them to doubt himself.⁶ The betrayal of Christ was plainly an exceedingly grave offense, and yet the Apostles, who were not wicked men, realized that they were capable of it.

If we then sometimes have reason to doubt ourselves, despite a privileged vantage point when it comes to knowledge of our morals and motives, how can we be expected to trust others whose morals and

³ *In Io*, edited by P. Raphaelis Cai, O.P. (Rome: Marietti, 1952), #1843.

⁴ See *ST I-II* 112.5: "Another manner in which a human being could know something is on his own with certitude. And in this manner no one can know that he possesses grace."

⁵ *In Iob*, p. 64a "[H]omo se ipsum non cognoscit statum suum..."

⁶ See *In Io* #1801.

motives are not apparent to us? Even if others were more reliable than ourselves in the past, it is apparent that we cannot be entirely sure of how reliable they are. As Aquinas observes: "For a human being, even if he knows others, nevertheless is not able to have certain knowledge about them, because he only sees those things which are apparent; and therefore for him work[s] provide the means of proof in regard to others."⁷

A third reason for not trusting any human being is that Scripture admonishes us not to do so.⁸ However, I do not intend to take up this theological objection here.⁹

Given that Aquinas notes that all human beings are fallible, even the good, and that he observes that we do not entirely know how reliable we are, and we know others less well, one might gather that he would advocate a mistrustful attitude towards our fellow man. However, this proves far from being the case. And this is where man's social nature enters in. As Aquinas notes:

because in the life we share in common it is necessary for one man to make use of another as if this other were himself as to those things where he himself does not suffice, therefore it is necessary that he rely on those things which another knows and are unknown to himself as on those things which he himself knows: and thence it is that in human affairs (*hominum conversatione*) faith is necessary, by which one man believes the things said by another; and this is the foundation of justice... and thence it is that no lie is without sin, since this faith is detracted from by every lie as from something which is necessary.¹⁰

⁷ *In Io* #422.

⁸ "A curse on the man who put his trust in man, who relies on things of flesh, whose heart turns from Yahweh. ... A blessing on the man who puts his trust in Yahweh, with Yahweh for his hope" (Jr. 17:5).

⁹ Aquinas, in a number of places, explicitly addresses the scripture passages that state that we should trust no one but God. See, *inter alia*, *CT*, q. 253, *ST II-II* 17.4, and *ST II-II* 25.1 ad 3.

¹⁰ *In Boeth. De Trin.* 3, art. 1. See *ST II-II* 129.6 ad 1: "[I]t belong to the magnanimous person 'to be in need of nothing,' because being so belongs to

We all need others. People need to rely on us, and we need to rely on them. The former is the basis for the moral responsibility to act in a trustworthy manner. However, the presence of trustworthy individuals does not by itself suffice for collaboration; they have in fact to be trusted. From this fact arises a corresponding moral obligation to trust others: "Nevertheless people do not owe their parents every honor.... A person, however, owes to his friends and brothers trust (*fiduciam*) and the sharing of things, and similarly to blood relatives and to those who belong to one tribe, and to fellow citizens, and so forth."¹¹

Aquinas is fully aware that (as Scripture says): "Even a man at peace with me, in whom I hoped, and who ate bread at my table, exalts at my fall." But, he does not take this line, which he understands as a prophecy concerning Christ, to undermine the notion that there is a moral obligation to trust others:

Judas was counted as one of the friends [of Christ]. This prophecy came about in fact because he betrayed Christ with a kiss which is a sign of friendship and peace. Whence the Lord said (Lk., c. 22): "Judas, do you betray the son of man with a kiss?" ... Further he [Judas] was one of his intimates; whence "someone in whom I hoped." But was Christ then deceived in his hope? No. And therefore he says "in whom I hoped," i.e., in whom I seemed to hope, i.e., to trust (*confidere*), because he entrusted to him the administration of his goods. Alternately, "in whom I hoped," i.e., on account of his condition: I so stood to him as I *ought* to hope in him. But sometimes a person hopes in someone whom he believes to be a friend, and whom he *ought* to trust, and nevertheless he is disappointed: "Do not trust any of

one who is deficient; this nevertheless ought to be understood according to the human condition; whence he [Aristotle] adds 'or almost nothing'. For it is above man to be in need of absolutely nothing. [E]very human being...needs human assistance, because man is naturally a social animal so that he is not sufficient unto himself as to his life. Therefore, insofar as the magnanimous person is in need of others, thus it belongs to him that he have trust in others...."

¹¹ *In Eth.* #1783.

your brothers" (Jr., c. 9); "Do not trust your friend, and have no confidence in your leader" (Mi., c. 7).¹²

We see that Aquinas does not understand the Old Testament passages here to contradict the notion that we owe people trust despite the fact they may let us down--"I so stood to him as I ought to hope in him." This is consistent with his position on caution, which will be discussed further on. He is insistent that we should give people in general the benefit of the doubt--mistrust should not be our default attitude: "a man ought to presume of any person what is good being ignorant [of the contrary]."¹³ Aquinas praises those who are trusting: "But this certainly was commendable in Peter, namely, his trust because he was suspecting no evil of his comrades [for he affirmed without exception that all of the Apostles believed in Christ]; but to be admired in the Lord is his wisdom, which perceived hidden things."¹⁴

For Aquinas, a person's lack of suspicion often bespeaks of his own moral goodness: "[I]t is the wont of a good and innocent soul that he believes others as well to be far from any evil-doing which he knows himself to be free of. And therefore because John was the most innocent disciple, and the evil-doing of betrayal was far from his mind, he never suspected that a disciple could go ahead with such an evil act."¹⁵

Aquinas's praise here of John's innocence should not, however, be taken as an endorsement of naiveté. Innocence and naiveté are similar in meaning, as both involve a lack of knowledge and dispose one to credulity.¹⁶ The innocent person, however, is one who is unfamiliar with evil, as is the case of a young person lacking experience of life who is himself good. The naive person, on the other hand, has sufficient

¹² In Ps. 40, p. 307a, b; emphasis added.

¹³ In Io #421.

¹⁴ In Io #1006.

¹⁵ In Io #1818.

¹⁶ See *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1980): "Naive: deficient in worldly wisdom or informed judgment; esp. credulous. Innocent: free from guilt or sin esp. through lack of knowledge of evil: blameless."

experience of fallen human nature to know better than to trust people indiscriminately—the question: “How could you be so naive?” expresses blame. Naiveté is a form of imprudence opposed to caution.¹⁷ Thus, the trust Aquinas advises is not without restrictions: “One is to presume what is good about any and every person unless the contrary is apparent, so long as this does not tend towards the endangerment of another. For then caution is to be exhibited, such that one does not believe just anybody...”¹⁸

Aquinas adds here two qualifications to the trust we in general owe people. First, one need not give the benefit of the doubt to someone who is manifestly bad. Secondly, one is obligated to exercise caution in those cases where being taking in can result in harm to someone, instead of proceeding on the assumption that the person is trustworthy until proven otherwise. Aquinas applies both of these criteria in the specific case of whether one can legitimately reject someone's testimony:

[T]estimony... does not have infallible certitude, but probable certitude. And therefore anything which carries probability with it in the opposite direction renders testimony ineffectual. Sometimes that someone lacks solidity in testifying to the truth is rendered probable due to some fault of the person (such as infidelity and ill-repute; further those who are guilty of public crimes and who cannot accuse) and sometimes in the absence of fault. And the latter is either due to a defect of reason, as it plain in the case of children, the insane and women [sic]; or due to emotion, as is plain in the case of enemies, relatives, and household members; or even from some external condition, as is the case of paupers, servants and those who can be commanded, concerning whom it is probable that they can be easily induced

¹⁷ See *ST II-II* 49.8 (“Whether caution is part of prudence”): “The things that prudence is concerned with are contingent things that can be done, in which just as truth is able to be mixed with falsehood, so too evil with good on account of the multi-form character of things to be done where it is common for the good to be impeded by the bad, and for the bad to have the appearance of goodness. And therefore caution is necessary for prudence, as it is taken to be a good thing that a bad thing is avoided.”

¹⁸ *ST II-II* 70.3 ad 2.

to bearing witness contrary to the truth. And thus it is manifest that the testimony of someone can be rejected, both with and without fault on his part.¹⁹

Obviously, if a judge or jury believes a false witness, this can result in great harm, namely, the condemnation of an innocent person. Thus, caution and mistrust have a rightful place in trials, and sometimes even distrust (understanding here mistrust as doubting someone's reliability and distrust as taking the person to be unreliable—the two are sometimes taken as synonyms²⁰). In addition to setting aside the testimony of those whose untrustworthiness is apparent, such as that given by convicted criminals, one can also set aside the testimony of those who can be easily coerced or persuaded to give false testimony. One need not give the benefit of the doubt to a witness who was an enemy or a relative of the accused.

Aquinas also finds mistrust and suspicion warranted when one discovers that one's fiancé has been unfaithful: "Although those who have become engaged have not given each other power over their respective bodies, nevertheless if either (or both) engage in fornication, it then becomes suspect whether he or she will be faithful in the future. And therefore one can protect oneself from the other by breaking off the engagement."²¹ The unfaithful party is of proven unreliability, and lack of trust in him or her is thus warranted.²²

Aquinas's explanation of why the formation of a true friendship takes time and much mutual frequentation suggests another point about trust, namely, that there are different degrees of trust or caution

¹⁹ ST II-II 70.3.

²⁰ It is one thing to have no reason either way to trust a person or not; it is another to have reason not to trust a person. For this reason "mistrust" in these two cases does not mean the same thing.

²¹ ST Suppl. 43.3 ad 6 ("Whether an engagement can be broken off...on account of fornication by the other party").

²² Aquinas never directly addresses the difficult question of whether one should ever go back to trusting a spouse who was guilty of marital infidelity.

one should display towards others.²³ Trust is not all or nothing, but develops over time, during which we can observe the other person's reliability. Plainly, one need not have spent extensive time with someone in order to trust him to water one's plants, whereas one does if one is to trust him with intimate details of one's life. Prudence dictates that one display greater caution when the potential for harm is greater.

Thus far we have seen that Aquinas does not tell us that we should give others the benefit of the doubt without qualification. If he is not against keeping one's eyes open, and indeed blames those who believe others too readily,²⁴ why does he counsel trust rather than mistrust as the normative attitude? Again, it is because he regards the continued existence of society as dependent upon its members trusting one another and not offending each other.²⁵ Mistrust imperils the survival of society by its negative impact both on group efforts and on the dissemination of knowledge crucial for survival; in similar ways, mistrust affects society's well-being as well. In addition, mistrust often constitutes an insult, which also contributes to the breakdown of society. And on top of this, mistrust engenders more mistrust, thus

²³ See *In Eth.* #1582: "[A second reason why true friendship is rare is] because friendship of this sort requires a long period of time and getting used to each other in order that they know each other to be virtuous and friends; for as the proverb goes, it does not happen that people know each other until they have eaten together a measure of salt. For it is not appropriate that one accept another person as one's friend before one appears to the other [as someone] to be loved, and is trusted to be such...."

²⁴ In the gospel account of the woman at the well, the townspeople told the woman: "Now we no longer believe because of what you told us; we have heard him ourselves and we know that he really is the savior of the world" (Jn. 4:42). Aquinas, commenting on this passage, says: "granted that to believe men quickly pertains to superficiality (*levitas*)..., nevertheless, to believe God quickly is, to the contrary, praiseworthy" (*In Io* #662).

²⁵ *ST I-II* 94.2: "In a third manner there is an inclination in man to the good according to the nature of reason...as man has a natural inclination... to live in society. And according to this, those things which regard an inclination of this sort pertain to natural law, such as that... he not offend others whom he must frequent."

multiplying both of its ill effects. Let us see how Aquinas develops these points.

The central role Aquinas attributes to trust for the well-being of society comes out in numerous places, including his discussions of lying,²⁶ keeping secrets,²⁷ oath-taking,²⁸ as well as in his treatment of the virtue "*veritas*" or genuineness (the opposite of which is phoniness or fakeness). Perhaps one of the clearest passages expressing Aquinas's view on trust in society is his response to an objection that claims that genuineness is not part of justice:

Since man is a social animal, one man naturally owes another that without which human society cannot be preserved. Men would not be able to live with one another unless they were able to trust one another (*nisi sibi invicem crederent*), as when manifesting the truth to one another. And therefore the virtue of genuineness (*veritas*) in some manner answers to the notion of debt.²⁹

Here, Aquinas speaks explicitly of the obligation to show oneself to be a trustworthy person. Trust, however, is a two-way street—the other person then has a corresponding obligation to trust people who appear to be sincere.³⁰ The failure to do so would imperil human society:

²⁶ See *In Boeth. De Trin.*, q. 3, art. 1 quoted earlier in the main text: "no lie is without sin."

²⁷ *ST II-II 70.1 ad 2*: "There are sometimes things of the sort that one is not held to denounce. Whence one can be bound [not to reveal them] by the fact they are confided to one as a secret. And then one cannot in any manner be held to make them known, not even on the command of a superior, for to preserve trust (*servare fidem*) belongs to the natural law; the command of a man has no power against what belongs to natural law."

²⁸ See *In Duo praecepta caritatis in Opuscula Theologica*, vol. 2, edited by Raymundi M. Spiazzi, O.P. (Turin: Marietti, 1954), #1206: "Further [false oaths made in God's name] injure other men. For no society can endure among people unless they trust (*credant*) one another. However, things that are doubtful are confirmed by oaths."

²⁹ *ST II-II 109.3 ad 1*.

³⁰ Aquinas maintains that the failure to rely on the human assistance that is available is sinful: "And therefore if people rely on God alone, they do not on

That without which human society cannot be preserved is above all necessary for man, and to humanity as a whole (*toti generi humano*), since man is a political animal (as is said in 8 *Ethic.*). But without trust (*fide*) human society cannot be preserved, because it is necessary that one man believe another as to promises and testimony and other things of this sort which are necessary for men to remain together. Therefore, trust (*fides*) is in the highest degree necessary to humankind.³¹

If people dismissed the testimony of every witness, it would be impossible to maintain justice in society, justice, of course, being essential for a genuine political community. And if people set no store on the promises of others, it would be difficult for any cooperative enterprise to get off the ground. As Aquinas notes, human society is useful for survival,³² for survival generally requires the coordinated efforts of many individuals, as is the case of hunting large animals, constructing sizeable shelters, and defending one's property against attackers. Where distrust is present, people often attempt to compensate for those whom they perceive to be likely slackers ("I cannot count on him to do his job"), and in doing so often jeopardize the project at hand, as they are liable to interfere with each other and not do their own job as well as they might.³³ There are also many truths useful for survival that need to be passed on from one individual to another, e.g., that such-and-such a plant is poisonous or safe to eat. Here, too, when distrust is present, people tend to refrain from acting ("I do not believe him when he says this is safe to eat"), and thus miss out on things that would help them stay alive.

account of this tempt God. But if without any utility or necessity they would abandon human aid, they would be tempting God" (*ST II-II 97.1 ad 3*).

³¹ *In Boeth. De Trin.*, q. 3, a.1, 3rd sed contra.

³² See *In Pol.* #387: "life in common is also useful for the sake of staying alive, as long as each of those present in a community ordered to life helps the other to sustain life and to ward off the dangers of death."

³³ I used to clean houses when I was in college. I remember one client who on my first visit followed me around the house as I vacuumed, dusted, etc. For all practical purposes she might as well have done the work herself.

Aquinas also appears to agree with Aristotle's view that a society held together only by bonds of justice and not also by bonds of friendship is at risk for disintegrating.³⁴ Trust is essential for friendly relationships.³⁵ Even though trust is needed simply for society to survive, it is also plainly needed for society to thrive: to have a system of education, to offer care for those in need, to foster cultural activities such as concerts, etc., all require the joint efforts of many individuals.

In addition to seriously hampering cooperation, mistrust is also harmful to social life insofar as a person who is mistrusted is liable to perceive this as an insult or injustice to the extent it entails an erroneous and temerarious judgment of his character. Aquinas says as much in his discussion of whether one ought to interpret questionable behavior, appearance, etc. in a more rather than a less favorable manner:

When someone has a bad opinion about another without sufficient cause, he injures the other and treats him with contempt. No one ought to condemn another or harm him in any way in the absence of a compelling reason. And therefore where there do not appear any manifest indications of a person's badness, we ought to hold him to be good, and anything doubtful ought to be given the more positive interpretation.³⁶

Plainly, harming others in this manner is destructive of harmonious social relationships.

Aquinas does not deny that those who put a positive spin on a person's doubtful behavior, demeanor, etc. may be mistaken more often than not. However, he maintains that: "It is better that someone frequently err in having a good opinion of some bad man, than that he more infrequently err in having a bad opinion about someone good, for

³⁴ See *In Eth.* #1542: "And he [Aristotle] says that states seem to be conserved through friendship. Whence legislators are more eager to preserve friendship among citizens than even justice, for they sometimes set justice aside, e.g., in cases where punishment is to be inflicted, lest dissent arise."

³⁵ See *In Eth.* #1592-93.

³⁶ *ST II-II* 60.4. The question is entitled: "Utrum dubia sint in meliorem partem interpretanda."

the reason that the latter causes injury to someone, whereas the former does not."³⁷ In addition to being insulting, misjudgment of a good person is further injurious because it is liable to affect his reputation: "a person is held as honorable by the fact he is judged good, and contemptible by the fact that he is judged bad."³⁸

Aquinas does not deny that in some cases holding a good opinion about someone bad may have harmful consequences; for this could plainly happen if one went on to rely on such a person because of one's mistaken opinion. Aquinas is simply saying that as a *general rule* one should shy away from thinking ill of anyone. Accordingly, one should be disposed to display trust as a general rule. Again, this does not mean that one's trust should be blind. Where the possibility of trusting someone who is not trustworthy carries the risk of harm, one has an obligation to display caution rather than trust.

To prevent serious harm to its citizens, society puts in place various institutions and agencies in order to ascertain the reliability of individuals exercising various tasks. Some of them ascertain reliability from the point of view of competence, e.g., the Department of Motor Vehicles grants licenses for driving big trucks to those who pass tests. Some of them ascertain reliability from the point of view of whether the professional did the work for which he was contracted, e.g., the Better Business Bureau. Background checks are run for those who work with children, and so forth. Arguably, making use of these resources to determine whether one will rely on a given person is not to mistrust that person in the first place, but is rather simply to assess whether it is apparent that the person is unreliable (e.g., the chimney man who advertises having a permit, but in fact no longer holds a current one). In such cases, one's assessment is not apt to be taken as an insult, as it is impersonal, being based on the prior assessment of a societal agency or group (which one trusts rightly or wrongly to have made a suitable evaluation).³⁹ In any case, the possibility of serious harm would legitimate a certain mistrust.

³⁷ ST II-II 60.4 ad 1.

³⁸ ST II-II 60.4 ad 2.

³⁹ Aquinas never makes this distinction, but I think there is reason to distinguish "impersonal mistrust" from "personal mistrust." Doing a

One might object that Aquinas does not think that trust should be our default attitude on the grounds that he apparently regarded oaths to be legitimate due to many different causes.⁴⁰ One requests an oath from someone whom one does not entirely trust.⁴¹ However, Aquinas maintains that the situations in which one can legitimately require another to take an oath are limited to "*causa necessaria*," such as in judicial proceedings.⁴² There are times we really need to know that what the person is saying is true in order to avoid serious harm. As Aquinas puts it in the *Summa Theologiae*, oaths are like medicines, to be used only when really needed.⁴³ And while, according to the *reportatio* of Petrus de Scala, Aquinas held that "it is licit to swear for many reasons," when one looks at the nine reasons that are given, all of them involve serious matters such as "restoring peace" and "putting

background check on a person applying for a job working with children would be an example of the former, whereas not trusting a fiancé that has never cheated on one would be an example of the latter. Impersonal mistrust is not of the sort that is damaging to society, as people ordinarily understand that it is necessary; those who take it as a personal insult are at fault for doing so.

⁴⁰ According to the *reportatio* of Petrus de Scala in *Super Evangelium S. Matthaei*, edited by P. Raphaelis Cai, O.P. (Rome: Marietti, 1951), ch. 5, lec. 8.

⁴¹ ST II-II 89.5: "An oath is sought to alleviate some defect, namely, that by which one man mistrusts another." *Per accidens*, it might happen that the person in court who swears in witnesses is a close friend of a person sworn in. See also ST II-II 98.4 ad 1: "[the private individual] does not always know [whether] the person swears truly or falsely, but he sometimes may be in doubt about what actually happened and believe that the other person will swear truly, and then he demands an oath in order to have greater certitude."

⁴² See III *Sent.* d. 39, art. 5, q'la 2, solutio 2 and ad 2.

⁴³ See ST II-II 89.5c and ad 3. ST II-II 89.5: "It ought to be said that that which is not sought except in order to remedy some defect is not numbered among those things which are to be desired per se, but among things which are necessary, as is manifest in the case of medicine, which is sought to remedy infirmity. An oath, however, is sought to remedy some defect, namely that by which one man instructs another."

calumny to rest in legal proceedings."⁴⁴ This, of course, fits with what was said above about the need to show caution, and thus some degree of mistrust towards people when there is a risk of serious harm. It does not support the notion that our initial attitude towards others should generally be that of mistrust.

There are many situations in life where one risks little by trusting others without doing a background check or having extensive familiarity with them.⁴⁵ Maybe one's coworkers will eat the lunch one puts in the common fridge; maybe one's neighbors will fail to return tools one lent them; maybe the person one carools with will not show up on time. But these are small prices to pay considering the reaction one's coworkers and neighbors would have if one treated them as if

⁴⁴ See the *reportatio* of Petrus de Scala in *Super Evangelium S. Matthaei*, ch. 5, lec. 8, #536: "Whence, note that it is licit to swear for many causes. First, for confirming the truth to the incredulous; II Cor. 1, 18: 'By the faithful God, I swear that there was not in what we said to you yes and no' [context: people may have had doubts whether Paul had acted in their best interest]; secondly for restoring peace, as Jacob swore to Laban (Gen. 31:53); thirdly, for contracting friendly ties (Gen. 26:28: 'The men of Gerar said to Isaac: "Let there be an oath between us"' [context: Isaac thinks that they hate him]); fourthly, for manifesting the truth: 'Testimony in the mouths of two or three witnesses sustains any charge' (Deut. 19:15); fifthly, for the preservation of fidelity: 'The elders of Israel came to the king, and he struck a treaty with them' (II Reg. 5:3); sixthly, for the recognition of obedience and subjection, as the men of Galaad to Jephtha [Judges 11:10]; seventhly, to respect the custom of the Church, as canons do [e.g., the sons of Israel swore to serve the Lord]. And these seven reasons are put forth for the sake of some good. There are two other reasons for the sake of removing evil, namely, for putting calumny to rest in legal proceedings: 'The end of all controversy is an oath for confirmation' (Heb. 6:16). The other reason is to purge infamy: 'When the cadaver of a killed man was found, and it was unknown who was guilty, the elders and the judges went out...and said: "Our hands did not shed the blood here, nor did our eyes see it. Be favorable, Lord, to your people Israel whom you have redeemed" (Dt. 21:1).'"

⁴⁵ It is plain that the degree of trust we owe people varies with the situation. Some situations call for more caution than others. It is one thing to hire a gardener and another to hire a kindergarten teacher; one need not, and indeed ought not, trust a butcher like one trusts a bosom friend.

they were unworthy of trust. They would be insulted and consequently would be liable to mistrust one in return.

We have seen that mistrust is detrimental to society, hampering collaboration and generating indignation on the part of those unfairly mistrusted. As just mentioned, to make matters worse, mistrust breeds mistrust. This is a further reason to be reticent to mistrust others. Aquinas speaks about how mistrust engenders mistrust when commenting on an incident recounted in John's gospel: "[S]ince he [Christ] knew that they trusted him imperfectly, he himself did not trust them."⁴⁶ Aquinas does not elaborate on exactly why the mistrust of the people in question engendered mistrust on the part of Christ. However, Aquinas notes elsewhere that we often judge others according as we are ourselves.⁴⁷ A person who is mistrusted for no reason is led to wonder whether the other's mistrust is not due to the other's lack of trustworthiness.⁴⁸ Also, we generally do not trust those who harm us, and so others' unjustified mistrust of us leads us not to trust them.

In conclusion, Aquinas does not think that most people are virtuous, and he is fully aware that everyone is fallible, even the virtuous, and

⁴⁶ *In Io* #421.

⁴⁷ See *In Io* #1818. See also *In Io* #2399: "[I]t often happens that people think the same things [to be true] about others which they themselves suffer from."

⁴⁸ Although I could not find any place where Aquinas affirms it, I think that it is evident that trust breeds trust. We perceive people who trust us to be trustworthy themselves, and we also perceive them as paying us the compliment of regarding us as trustworthy. Lack of trust, on the other hand, tends to incline the mistrusted party toward becoming untrustworthy. It is a commonplace that people live up to the expectation one has of them. A child or young person who is mistrusted to do the right thing, despite possessing sufficient judgment and character to do so, is tempted to adopt the attitude, "my parents already think badly of me, so I might as well do the bad things they think I'm liable to do if it were not for their watchful eye." This fits with Aquinas's observation that "a person will abstain from sins many times for the sake of preserving his reputation. And therefore when someone sees that he has already lost his reputation he gravitates towards sinning for no good reason..." (*De Correctione Fraternali*, in *Quaestiones Disputatae*, vol. 2, edited by P. Bazzi [Turin: Marietti, 1965], q. unicus, a. 2).

that our judgments of others' intentions and character are not infallible either (people can be fake and deceive us). For this reason, he does not advocate an attitude of blind trust. Indeed, in the fickle realm of human action, where the bad often has the appearance of good, Aquinas holds that a person would be lacking in the virtue of prudence not to be cautious and mistrustful when harm to others may ensue. Nonetheless, he holds that trust rather than mistrust should be the normal attitude we adopt towards others due to the essential role it plays in society. Lack of trust seriously compromises the collaboration necessary for life and for living well. We cannot profit from the knowledge and help other members of society have to offer us, if we mistrust them. In addition, if we presume that people are likely to fail us at any moment, they are rightly insulted, and our mistrust thus weakens the harmony within a society. Moreover, mistrust generally engenders more mistrust, which is another reason that it should not be our default attitude, but one we adopt only when there is reasonable evidence of the other's untrustworthiness or when serious harm can ensue. For all these reasons, it is of the utmost importance to trust people, giving them the benefit of the doubt, while exercising caution as the circumstances demand.