

A Different Way of Thinking about Trust with C. Thi Nguyen

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, The Big Ten]

Christiane: Many of us rely heavily on our smartphones and computers. But does it make sense to say we "trust" them? On today's episode of Examining Ethics, the philosopher C. Thi Nguyen explores the relationship of trust we form with the things we use.

C. Thi Nguyen: I trust Google Search like I trust my memory and my own internal attentional systems. Trust is a way of welding open pipelines from the outside world, into your own brain and thinking and action. It's a way to try to integrate things into yourself. When something is part of yourself, you don't carefully question each of its deliverances, you just trust your memory. You just trust your eyes. If we're too gullible about this kind of trust. What it is to trust in this case, it's to too-eagerly weld things into your brain and self without thinking about it and without worrying about what that means.

Christiane: Stay tuned for our discussion on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: Many philosophers write about trust as something that we consciously direct only toward other people. So I can carefully think about and choose to trust or not trust a new friend or a colleague.

My guest today, the philosopher C. Thi Nguyen, explains that there's another way we trust. We not only can *trust* non-human objects like smartphones, we tend to trust those objects in an unquestioning way; we're not thinking about it all that much. That makes sense, because if I had to think through whether or not I trusted Google docs every time I used, I'd never get any work done. (And you wouldn't be listening to this show!)

The problem, though, is that while this unquestioning trust makes our everyday lives easier, we don't recognize just how vulnerable we're making ourselves. We're putting ourselves at the mercy of large and increasingly powerful corporations.

[interview begins]

Christiane: Most people understand trust to be a conscious attitude that we have toward people, toward other people. So how is your account of trust different from this common understanding?

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C. Thi Nguyen: In general, the history of philosophy about trust, which is surprisingly thin. I mean, people have been talking about it since the '80s and '90s, but there's been surprisingly little conversation about trust. The conversation about trust has started talking about moral relationships, and it always wants to talk about how we relate to other people in society and a lot of the conversation says something like, what you trust is you trust that something has goodwill or cares for you.

I got really interested in the fact that we trust other stuff too. I feel like I deeply trust the calendar on my computer, and I deeply trust the Google Docs that I use to share information with my collaborators. I trust them in such a profound way that I don't even realize it. So I wanted to talk about what it was to trust in such a way, what that special relationship was. My theory in general is that when you trust something, you take on a specific attitude towards it, an unquestioning attitude. You stop thinking about it. You can walk on the ground with suspicion, or you can walk on the ground in a mode of trust. When you're trusting it, you're not really thinking about it. That's the thing I'm most interested in, our dependence relationships in the world in which we just use it, depend on it, put our lives in the hands of something without even thinking about it.

I remember I was teaching this stuff in class, and one of my students, he was like big dude, very bro. He was like, "Look, man, I never trust anything. I'm my own man. I've never trusted anybody else." And then I just paused. I was like, "Okay, I want you to think of yourself. Did you drive to school?" And he was like, "Yeah." I said, "Okay, you came here on the highway." He's like, "Yeah." I was like, "How many people did you trust with your life in your 30 minute commute to school? I just want to think not just drivers, but also mechanics for brake lines." I just watched him melt down in the class. This is the thing that I'm really interested in. This kind of trust is often so subconscious, so we don't realize how many objects, people, artifacts, bits of the world we're putting profound trust in, including in our lives without even thinking about it. It just recedes to the background.

Christiane: In your account of trust, the fact that you don't have to think about it too much is a key part of it. We're not talking about the kind of trust where we sit and think about it for a long time, and we revisit it every once in a while, and we think about it most of the time. The unquestioning part is important, right?

C. Thi Nguyen: Well, it's a little bit subtle because there are two things you could talk about. There's the question of whether or not you ever decided to trust something, and then the second question of what it is to trust something, to be in throes of it. I want to separate those. So I think it's really important to acknowledge two things. One is a lot of the trust we've come to, we've never thought about it. It's automatic. It's background. We've never even realized we trust. I think a lot of people are like this with cars, actually. The other thing to think about is there are some things that we decided to trust, but once we decided, what happens is that our trust recedes to the background.

So a lot of my thinking about trust comes from this amazing paper from Annette Baier who starts the conversation about trust and philosophy. The paper's called "Trust and Antitrust." If anyone

is interested in this space at all, that's the paper you should read. She stages it as a criticism of social contract theory, because she says, "Look, Rousseau and all this political theory that's based on the idea of the government is a social contract where free beings voluntarily decide to cooperate with each other." She says, she actually says in the paper, "That's something that only rich gentlemen sitting in a gentlemen's club could ever imagine was the foundation for morality."

She says, "Morality starts in vulnerability. It starts in children being taken care of parents. It starts in powerlessness, in relationships." The background theory for her is that what it is to trust is to make yourself vulnerable to somebody, to put some part of yourself into their safe keeping. For her, we trust without realizing that we've trusted. One of the primal forms of trust that she wants to talk about is a child taking food from its parent. Now my kid is five. He doesn't quite trust me perfectly, but for a long time, I give him something in his spoon and he just puts it in his mouth, right? That's not philosophical. That's not articulated. The essential relationship we start in this world often is trusting certain other people.

I mean, it's kind of funny, because a lot of philosophy wants to stage it as the basic primal attitude is distrust, and then you have to decide to trust people, but actually the way she spins it and the way some other philosophers like Tyler Burge spin it, is no. The only way you can start life is by trusting other people, by trusting the objects around you, by trusting what people tell you, and then you need a reason to distrust. So the first background thought is that for Annette Baier, we often start with such profound trust that we haven't articulated it to ourselves. That's one thing, how trust is undecided. Another thing, and this is what I'm focused on, is actually the fact that trust is an attitude of unquestioningness, and you might have decided that in the background.

Let me give you an example. I'm a climber, and I got to a lot of this thinking about learning to climb, because there's a really complicated thing you do as a climber of learning to trust your rope. What the training procedure is is you go to some safe place, you climb right to where you're clipped, and you jump and the rope catches you immediately. And then you climb two feet above your last clip and you jump, which is a five foot fall. You take longer and longer jumps, and you're supposed to keep doing it until you're bored of it. I mean, you take hundreds or thousands of falls, and then at some point you're like, "Yeah." You've trained yourself to trust your rope. Does that make sense? You can decide to do it, you can think about it, but once you've decided to do it, what you get to is a state where you don't question the rope at all. You don't think about it. It's just in the background. You can just concentrate on the climb. It's not even part of your mind.

So there are two separate questions. One is, did you ever decide or articulate to yourself or reason to whether you should trust? I think sometimes yes and sometimes no. Sometimes you trust without realizing. Sometimes you make a conscious decision to trust. There's the other question of what it is to be in the trusting state, whether or not you came to it through consciously or just as how you were brought up, and that's what I'm focused on. My theory is

that that, whether you decided to or not, that is pushing something into the background. Putting so much trust into it that it just recedes from your consciousness, that you enter a state of unquestioningness. I think for a lot of us, our relationship, I mean, at least for people my age, a lot of the technologies I use, I did not trust at first, and then I came to use them so much. I used to not trust Google Docs, and now I literally trust it more than I trust my own biological memory.

Christiane: So in your piece, you write that there's a difference between relying on something and trusting on it, and that's betrayal, and we'll get to that. But why couldn't we just say we rely on objects, Rather than that we trust objects? The more you think about it, the weirder that seems right. Do I trust my smartphone as much as I trust my partner?

C. Thi Nguyen: [laughing] I actually think a lot of us trust our smartphone more than our partners, because if you read something on your smartphone or see an image on your smartphone and your partner says the opposite, the smartphone we treat as the more reliable witness. [laughter ends] Okay. It's so natural in our language, to speak of and invest this kind of fuller-blooded trust in objects. People that have been involved in moral philosophy I think have been trained to not think about trust in objects, but it's so natural in speech.

So one of the things I did was I just wandered through books looking for people talking about trust, and trusting in objects, they talk about it all the time. So I found things about saying things, like running manuals, it said things like, "Don't trust muddy ground. Be careful." I found accounts of veterans at war saying the emotional experience of being at war was that you can't trust the air or the ground anymore.

I think it is useful here to talk about this difference between trust and reliance. So this comes from Annette Baier again, from this paper "Trust and Antitrust," which is an incredibly useful analysis where she says, "Look, there are these two different notions, and we colloquially use the term trust for both of them, but we need to separate them." So the terms that she gives us are mere reliance and full trust. So she says, "Sometimes we have an attitude of mere reliance on people." Mere reliance is just depending on something. One of the things about reliance is it's not really morally loaded. If you're crossing a creek carefully on a log, and it creaks and breaks on you, you don't get mad at it. You don't think it failed you. It's just a piece of nature. You are relying on it, you're depending on it, but nothing else.

But sometimes we have this other attitude, this more morally loaded attitude of trust, this fuller thing. She says, "You can tell the difference between mere reliance and trust, because when reliance is broken, you're just disappointed. But when trust is broken, you feel betrayed." She gives a great example of the different relationships you can have with people. So Christiane, imagine if you and I had offices next to each other, and every day you left your office at noon and every time I saw you leave, I would be like, "Okay, it's time for me to go to class." So I would use your passage.

If that was all there was, all that was happening was that I was relying on you. One way we can tell this is if one day you didn't do that, if you didn't cross in front of me, my life might get screwed up, but I couldn't blame you. I couldn't feel betrayed by you. I would just be like, "Ah, that's not a reliable indicator." But if we had a conversation and you told me, you'd be like, "Thi, I will knock on your door at noon, I swear to you," and you didn't do it one day, I could feel betrayed. I could feel some kind of complex moral response. One of the interesting things for me is that if you look at the way people talk about not all objects, but some relationships to objects, when they fail you, the response seems to be this complex, loaded feeling of betrayal.

So think about the desktop on my laptop, which is supposed to be really stable, suddenly rearranges itself. Or something happened the other day where something else took over my mouse on my computer and it just started moving around, not at my behest. I was freaked out and angry. It feels intrusive. That's the thing that I was really, really interested in, some types of response, it's not quite exactly like moral betrayal, but it's something close to it. The most important thing for me, it was obviously more than reliance.

So here's a standard philosophy argument for it being more than reliance. You'll hear, from all these bits of text I found, the runner that says, "Don't trust the ground." What they're saying is, well, you still have to step on it. You still have to rely on it. You still have to depend on it, but you should do so with a state of questioning suspicion. The soldier that no longer trusts the air, what's going on with them? Well, they still have to rely on the air. They still depend on the air, but they're now unsettled about it. It's now not an easy, unthinking relationship. So the big suggestion I have is that there are two things that you can add onto mere reliance. One thing is this moral thing we do with other agents, of promising and committing and all that stuff. The other thing is something we can do towards other agents, but also objects. We can put them beyond suspicion. We can stop questioning them. When that's breached, we get a different experience of betrayal. It's intrusive and alienating to have your laptop suddenly start moving around outside your will.

One of our paradigmatic concepts of trust and betrayal comes not towards other people, but sub-parts of ourselves. We talk about being betrayed by our hands, or being betrayed by our memory. When this thing that we thought was part of us goes wrong. This is the big suggestion I want to make. The reason I can be betrayed by a smartphone is I tried to make it a part of me. I invested it with a part of myself, and then it lets me down. When the calendar on my phone starts misbehaving, that to me is an experience like your hand suddenly not doing what you tell it to do. It's a breach of some internal agency.

Christiane: I think a lot of times, if somebody were to tell me, "I'm late because my Google calendar messed up," I think I might still blame that person. So I, as another person, attach the object to that person and hold it responsible too.

C. Thi Nguyen: That's interesting. That's weird. I mean...I don't think, it depends. My intuitions here are mixed up. This is just me thinking aloud. I think part of what's going on is that this thing

we're doing where we're integrating technology into a part of ourselves, where someone else made that technology, this is a new relationship. This is not something we have settled moral intuitions about. It's a kind of new way of being a person in the world, and I think we haven't figured out how to blame people accurately.

Something I think about a lot is, when you trust things, you're kind of bringing them inside you. I think when you trust Google's search, you're letting Google Search be part of your attention control mechanism. You're letting it direct where your attention goes. So it turns out that the more people use the same portals, the lower the diversity of objects that the world looks at. There've been some interesting studies about how in the social media era, the whole world is looking at, collectively, a smaller number of articles per week. Everyone looks at the same few articles, because there's the ones that pop up that get fueled by the feed. People will think I'm nuts, but I'm really worried that the number of recipes we're using is—we're losing radically a richness of recipes. There used to be, I think, hundreds of thousands of ways to make cassoulet. But if right now, the majority of people, the way they make something like cassoulet, they Google it and what comes up first is either the New York Times recipe or the Serious Eats recipe.

So suddenly, we're getting this massive, I think our cultural memory is actually just shedding this huge diversity of culinary richness, and the reason is because we're all using Google Search. Now, here's my question. Who's responsible for this? We've all welded Google Search into our...we trust it. We let it set our attention and our reading order, and now this minor cultural catastrophe is happening. Who's responsible? I mean, is it Google? Is it each of us? I don't know what the answer is, and it's because there's this new situation where all of us are welding, into our agency and our rationality, a single unified external source. This is just a new situation. This is just weird.

Christiane: And I feel like what makes it newly weird is that, like you were saying, we're digital natives enough to want to trust something. But we also remember when it really didn't work that well, or that reliably, that we did have to kind of learn about it. So the reliability and the smartness of all this is very new to us as a culture as well.

C. Thi Nguyen: Exactly. Let me give the full statement of the theory for a second, and then we can talk about all the weird implications. So here's the full statement, what it is to trust. So I'm not saying this is the only way to trust. There are at least two different ways to trust. One is this moral way, where you commit or you think someone else has goodwill, that you can only do towards other people or corporations or things like that, and the other is this unquestioning attitude. What it is to take an unquestioning attitude towards something is to suspend deliberation and just accept its actions or deliverances as, just to accept it. Here's what that looks like.

Notice that this is the relationship we have with our memory. If I remember that I was supposed to go somewhere at 5:00, in most circumstances, I just go. I don't think about it. I don't question myself. I'm just like, "Oh yeah, I'm supposed to pick up the kids at 5:00. Okay, I'm going." So I

trust my memory unless there's some really good reason not to. Notice that most of us now have the same relationship with an external object, our calendars. Our calendars are literally, if my calendar says, it's 5:00, you're supposed to be in a meeting, I don't pause. I don't question it. I just go. In fact, I trust my smartphone's calendar more than my memory. Because I don't remember something, and it says, "Well, you're supposed to be on this Zoom call at 9:00." I'm like, "I mean, I guess I'm supposed to be on the Zoom call at 9:00."

The big background thought is that we have to trust in this way, because if we constantly question everything, we would never get anything done. We are limited human agents. We have to trust things. By the way, I just want to notice that this relationship of trust is not new. Part of the idea is that when you walk on the ground, most of the time you trust the ground. You can't question every step. You don't have the mental effort for that. Similarly, for a lot of us, through time, a lot of us trust certain newspapers. In the sense of the *New York Times* for most of us, not all these days obviously, for most of us, if the *New York Times* says there's an earthquake in London, you just believe that.

What's new is, how complicated a lot of the systems we are coming to trust are. When you trust Google Search, part of what makes it so appealing to trust it is such a powerful mechanism. I think you and I probably remember what it was like before Google Search, when you had to use, I don't know, AltaVista search and it was just garbage, 99% garbage and 70% porn. It was just basically trying to figure out what was useful that wasn't porn. Google Search just does all this for you, and so you trust it. You trust it to start things, which means that you are bringing it into the same relationship with you as your other internal cognitive parts. I trust Google Search like I trust my memory and my own internal attentional systems.

So the thought is something like trust is a way of welding open pipelines from the outside world, into your own brain and thinking and action. It's a way to try to integrate things into yourself. When something is part of yourself, you don't carefully question each of its deliverances, you just trust your memory. You just trust your eyes. This leads to, and I think this is what you're talking about, the big worry for me, which is if we're too gullible about this kind of trust. So I call this agential gullibility, this a super gross philosophy term, but what it is to trust in this case, it's to too-eagerly weld things into your brain and self without thinking about it and without worrying about what that means.

Christiane: I follow the idea that it's important to think about trust when it comes to objects, because a lot of them we've integrated into our very selves, or we trust them more than we trust our own brain at times. But the thing that I struggle with is how morality fits into all that. My smartphone, if it betrays me by failing to give me a notification when I need it, it's not doing that to hurt me. You wouldn't even call it an accident, because it has no intention. So how does morality fit into this with objects and trust?

C. Thi Nguyen: I mean, in a funny way, what I'm saying is it's not exactly moral. What I'm saying is there are two ways to be betrayed, one of which is conventionally moral, being betrayed by other people, and the other of which is this weird thing that we haven't thought

about enough. What I want to say is it's not just mere reliance. It's not just mere disappointment. It's more, but it's also not quite moral. It's this other thing.

The best way I can put it is that it's alienation. It's like finding out that something that you thought was part of you, and just a coherent part of your will and reasoning, is screwing up or obeying some other interest or acting against you in some way. You're right that it's not moral. So I think the thing that we've learned is that sometimes betrayal is moral, and sometimes betrayal is something else, it's tracking something else. What betrayal is about in general is about failures to integrate. What trust is about in general, across all these forms, is the attempt to integrate. There are two very different ways we integrate. One is with other people. We make promises, we make commitments. We think about each other's goodness, and that's a very moral relationship. When that fails, we get a kind of betrayal, a very moral betrayal. But in these other space, we also attempt to integrate with things like our biological memory, our biological hands, and our smartphones and the ground.

When that gets [inaudible], that's another failure of integration that leads to a feeling of a betrayal, but it's not moral. It's like a failure of your own self. I mean, mean here's one way to put it. Moral relationships are relationships between one agent and a different agent. These relationships are like one agent trying to spread its agency out into the world. So it's almost like this is a self-directed betrayal. I mean, and I think when my memory screws up, I feel betrayed by my memory, but that's betrayal by a sub-part of myself. I think the difference between me here and a lot of other people is that other people think betrayal is exclusively moral, and sometimes I don't care what the word here is exactly, but we reach for the word betrayal. You're betrayed by your memory. Why?

I think it's because you're finding out like something that you thought was a smooth functioning part of yourself, that all the gates were open to, is not quite trustworthy, is screwing up or acting in some weird, different interest, or just not responding to your commands smoothly. That happens with your hands, and that happens with my folders on my laptop. That's another thing where it's supposed to just obey your command, and then once in a while it doesn't, and it does something funky in front of you. You're like "GAH!!" Right? So the thing that I'm really interested in is that there's this relationship we take up towards the world that is more than reliance that we get really invested in, we have this really powerful affective response to, but it's not quite moral. It's next door.

Christiane: Well, for anyone who's listening who's like, "Hey! This is an ethics podcast." There is an ethics to, or there is a morality to your argument a little bit, right? Maybe I'm wrong, but why is it? Why should we be thinking about the relationship between ourselves, trust, and objects?

C. Thi Nguyen: If you want a quick why are we talking about this in an ethics podcast, it might be that the relationship between you and your phone might not be moral, but because of the sensitivity and delicacy and vulnerability of that relationship, it creates all kinds of moral

responsibilities outside. One is what you decide to trust has moral implications for the rest of the world, and the other is there are massive moral implications for the technologists that design these things, and for the regulators that regulate how we use them. If we understand how deeply we're changing ourselves with these trusting relationships, I mean, how about this?

Imagine I get excited about a new calendar app and I don't investigate it all, and I just trust it, and it's bad. I don't pick up my kids on time. I don't show up to my meetings on time, and I'm like, "Man, but it's so easy to use." I think I am morally letting down the rest of the world by integrating into myself something crappy. I think what makes us realize is if we think that Google Search is an attention direction mechanism, that two thirds of the world is integrated tightly into their consciousness, then we should think that every single decision that Google makes has vast moral and ethical consequences for the rest of the world.

Because now, we're outsourcing. A lot of us are outsourcing parts of our consciousness, parts of our mind, parts of our agency. Here are these situations where huge parts of the world, an enormous number, of people are all outsourcing to the very same technology, which again, this is just weird. This is a thing that I don't think we've had so far. We haven't had one particular, extremely active, complicated processing thing that is now a shared part, that through this unquestioning attitude has become a shared resource for so many people simultaneously. I mean, lots of people trust the ground, but it's not like they're trusting the very same piece of ground, and it's not like the ground is doing an enormous amount of information processing.

Christiane: Or collection.

C. Thi Nguyen: Yeah, collection.

Christiane: So what brought you to this idea? Why do you care about this?

C. Thi Nguyen: I mean, I care about this for a lot of reasons. A lot of the other stuff I've been working on over in the philosophy of art has been on the nature of games. The book that was eight years of my life has this basic thesis that games are the art form of agency. That what a game is is an artist will manipulate a form of agency that you step into, so that it tells you not only what you can do, but what you care about. I got really interested in the point that the basic part of the medium of the game designer was manipulating your motivation through points. So I got started thinking about points, and then I started thinking about gamification, because most people in the world think, "Games are good, so gamification is awesome." I ended up thinking, "No. Games are good because they're secluded from everyday life." When you gamify Twitter, you're offering a new motivational system. You're offering a motivational system that's directing people's motivations for communication about everything.

One of the things I started thinking, one of the places I got into this was I was like, what happens? I wanted to say something like, people are really trusting their Fitbit to tell them to set their values. People are trusting Twitter to set their values. None of the language that was around for me accurately captured how profoundly intimate this relationship was, how

vulnerable this relationship was, how intrusive this relationship was, how much people are opening themselves up to. I mean, I really think that a lot of us are letting Mark Zuckerberg set what we care about. We are outsourcing our values to Facebook and Twitter and Apple.

I've been thinking about trust between humans for a really long time. When I started looking at this, I was like, look. Obviously we trust, in some intimate, intense, and profound way, bits of technology. And most people, in philosophy at least, are like, "We can't talk about that. You can trust the designers, but you can't trust the objects themselves." I was like, "No. no. Sometimes I trust the object itself or not." When I trust my climbing rope or not, it's just not the manufacturer. It's *this rope* that's been around for three years, and now I have to decide, do I trust *this* rope? So I just started thinking about what it was to have this incredibly intense relationship with certain technological objects, and I got here to this theory.

[Interview ends]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Lemon and Melon]

Christiane: If you want to know more about C. Thi Nguyen's work, including a link to another episode he recently appeared on, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org.

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