Onora O'Neill On Trust.

I've written about ethics and political philosophy all my working life, but until the last two years I did not write on trust. If anyone had asked me why I didn't, I would probably have said that trust was important, but that it was a social attitude. My work was on basic philosophical and practical questions about justice. I wrote about reason and action, principles and practices, duties and rights, but not about social attitudes.

Trust, as I saw it, was mainly of interest to sociologists, journalists and pollsters: they ask regularly whom we trust. Some of our answers (look at the MORI website, http://www.mori.com/polls/) show that many of us now claim not to trust various professions. Yet I noticed that people often choose to rely on the very people whom they claimed not to trust. They said they didn't trust the food industry or the police, but they bought supermarket food and called the police when trouble threatened. I began to see that there is a big gulf between saying we don't trust others and refusing to place trust, between (claimed) attitudes and action. Bit by bit I concluded that the 'crisis of trust' that supposedly grips us is better described as an attitude, indeed a culture, of suspicion. I then began to question the common assumption that the crisis of trust arises because others untrustworthy. I began to notice that there were lots of news stories about breach of trust, especially about supposedly scandalous cases, but that there was surprisingly little systematic evidence of growing untrustworthiness.

Two years ago I was asked to give the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh for 2001. I chose trust in medicine, science and biotechnology as my topic. These lectures are about to appear under the title Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics (April 2002, Cambridge University |Press). When I finished writing I knew there was a lot more to be said about trust and mistrust. I had come to think that our new culture of accountability, which is promoted as the way to reduce untrustworthiness and to secure ever more perfect control of institutional and professional performance, was taking us in the wrong direction.

So when the BBC approached me to see what I could offer for the Reith Lectures, I suggested that I could look more broadly at trust and accountability, particularly in the professions and the public sector. In the lectures I argue that having misdiagnosed what ails British society we are now busy prescribing copious draughts of the wrong medicine. We are imposing ever more stringent forms of control. We are requiring those in the public sector and the professions to account in excessive and

sometimes irrelevant detail to regulators and inspectors, auditors and examiners. The very demands of accountability often make it harder for them to serve public.

Our revolution in accountability has not reduced attitudes of mistrust, but rather reinforced a culture of suspicion. Instead of working towards intelligent accountability based on good governance, independent inspection and careful reporting, we are galloping towards central planning by performance indicators, reinforced by obsessions with blame and compensation. This is pretty miserable both for those who feel suspicious and for those who are suspected of untrustworthy action - sometimes with little evidence.

In the Reith Lectures I outline a much more practical view of trust. The lectures are not about attitudes of trust, but about actively placing and refusing trust and the sorts of evidence we need if we are to place trust well. Far from suggesting that we should trust blindly, I argue that we should place trust with care and discrimination, and that this means that we need to pay more attention to the accuracy of information provided to the public. Placing trust well can never guarantee immunity from breaches of trust: life does not provide guarantees. There is no total answer to the old question ‘Who shall guard the guardians?’, and there is no way of eliminating all risk of disappointment. Nevertheless, many of us would agree with Samuel Johnson “it is better to be sometimes cheated than never to have trusted”.

If we are to reduce the culture of suspicion, many changes will be needed. We will need to give up childish fantasies that we can have total guarantees of others’ performance. We will need to free professionals and the public service to serve the public. We will need to work towards more intelligent forms of accountability. We will need to rethink a media culture in which spreading suspicion has become a routine activity, and to move towards a robust configuration of press freedom that is appropriate to twenty first century communications technology. This won’t be easy. We have placed formidable obstacles in our own path: it is time to start removing them.