
The Sense and Sensibility of Betrayal: Discovering the Meaning of Treachery through Jane Austen

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Introduction

In the past few years the charge of “betrayal” has become all too common. Yet, with all the fanfare and publicity attached to these charges, there has been surprisingly little written about what we even *mean* by the term. It clearly matters a great deal to us. An act of betrayal makes us appreciate Dante’s reserving the innermost ring of the Inferno for the betrayers. We can even say there is a characteristic “feel” to betrayal. The betrayed experience powerful sensations of violation; they feel used and damaged. Betrayal, however, elicits more than strong feelings. Psychologists offer clinical evidence attesting to the devastating effects of betrayal.¹ Betrayal acts as an assault on the integrity of individuals, affecting the capacity to trust, undermining confidence in judgment, and contracting the possibilities of the world by increasing distrust and scepticism.² Betrayal changes not only our sense of the world, but our sensibility toward the world.

A charge of betrayal, then, must be taken seriously. While it

¹ See for example: William Haley and Bonnie R. Strickland, “Interpersonal Betrayal and Cooperation: Effects on Self-Evaluation in Depression,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50, no. 2 (1986): 386-91.

² See for example: Tina Rosenberg, *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe’s Ghosts After Communism* (New York: Random House, 1995).

may be that a particular case of betrayal is justified, the burden of offering that justification clearly belongs to the betrayer, *not* to the betrayed. Many, however, have been accused of betraying someone and felt wronged.

They respond with outrage, defensiveness, or merely confusion. Sincerely believing their actions do not constitute betrayal, they do not feel obliged to offer justification. Instead they may demand explanations and apologies from the accuser, who *already* feels injured. Such conflicts raise the important question: how do we separate genuine instances of betrayal from merely “felt” instances? Psychological studies do little to illuminate this question, since such studies typically concern the effects of betrayal on an individual, and for this purpose it matters little whether the betrayal is genuine or not.

Distinguishing genuine instances of betrayal from those that are merely “felt.”

For the purposes of moral assessment, however, it surely matters a great deal whether an actual betrayal occurred. Further, because even a merely perceived betrayal ruptures trust and contaminates relationships for both parties, negative consequences may be mitigated if a legitimate interpretation of the incident can be offered. Refining and clarifying exactly what betrayal is, the context within which it occurs, and how it differs from other trust violations, may allow a more reasonable assessment of betrayal. Therefore, we must turn away from psychology and look to moral philosophy for enlightenment.

Unhappily, the philosophical literature does not offer as much help as one would like to sort through this issue. Two in-depth discussions of betrayal, however, are found in Judith Shklar’s “The Ambiguities of Betrayal”³ and Peter Johnson’s *Frames of Deceit*.⁴ Although Shklar deftly uncovers the many ambiguities surrounding betrayal and Johnson provides an excellent study of forgiveness, neither furnishes a detailed discussion of what the term ‘betrayal’ means. But only a clear sense of betrayal will allow the reasonable assessment that puts betrayal in its proper place.

For example, Shklar does at one point characterize betrayal as an act in which “one person should have both intentionally convinced another person of his future loyalty and then deliberately

³ Judith Shklar, “The Ambiguities of Betrayal” in *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁴ Peter Johnson, *Frames of Deceit: A Study of the Loss and Recovery of Public and Private Trust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

rejected him.”⁵ Yet she lists as “betrayals” such examples as experiencing the social mores and traditions one grew up with becoming outdated and being in a marriage where one partner outgrows the other. Shklar is interested in exploring our mixed feelings about such familiar experiences. To categorize these sorts of situations with Von Stauffenberg’s betrayal of Hitler or Madame Bovary’s infidelity, however, makes it very difficult to sort out the salient features of actual betrayals, assess them morally, or determine appropriate responses to them.

Both Shklar and Johnson argue, however, that trust and betrayal are best understood through a careful reading of literature. To some extent it is unsurprising that they look to literature rather than to philosophy for insight into betrayal. In literature, an event such as betrayal usually takes place in “full view” and accompanied by significant details about the characters, including their histories and environments. Further, in literature unlike philosophy, trust and betrayal are common themes. Shklar and Johnson each provides an assortment of alleged betrayals to consider, highlighting the character of individuals, their circumstances, and their motivations as important elements in assessing betrayal. Yet neither writer has a systematic way of differentiating between a genuine betrayal and a merely perceived betrayal. Such distinctions, however, are critical for moral assessment and for a reasonable interpretation of the event.

*Theoretical
and practical
needs.*

Betrayal is both a “people” problem and a philosopher’s problem. Philosophers should be able to clarify the concept of betrayal, compare and contrast it with other moral concepts, and critically assess betrayal situations. At the practical level people should be able to make honest sense of betrayal and also to temper its consequences: to handle it, not be assaulted by it. What we need is a conceptually clear account of betrayal that differentiates between genuine and merely perceived betrayal, and which also provides systematic guidance for the assessment of alleged betrayal in real life.

In what follows I offer an account of betrayal that attempts to meet the two requirements of conceptual clarity and contextual adequacy. There is a great temptation to use the events in Washington of the past few years as the case study for such an analysis,

⁵ Shklar (1984), 141.

but I believe that, for a variety of reasons, including the difficulty of viewing events from “within,” this would only complicate matters rather than clarify them. Rather, like the authors cited, I too believe that betrayal in literature is fruitful ground for analysis. I have chosen Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* for examples of trust and betrayal, because Austen displays the needed complexity and subtlety of human relationships and because she recognizes that violations of trust come in a variety of shades and colors. This particular novel, moreover, not only supplies multiple instances of trusting relationships gone awry, but also a common, detailed, and intelligible landscape within which these relationships exist.

Again, however, in order to illuminate betrayal and appropriately assess a purported betrayal, rich examples are not enough. We need a clear concept of betrayal. I will develop this concept by beginning with the related concept of trust. By starting with an explicit definition of trust and using this definition to analyze the various examples Austen provides, betrayal will emerge as but one of two types of violation of trust. This in turn will allow us to distinguish actual from merely “felt” betrayals. I will finally argue that understanding and being sensitive to the other form of violation of trust, which I call abandonment, may be even more significant to our moral life.

For the sake of brevity, I offer the following definition of trust, but will not argue for it here:⁶ Trust is a disposition on the part of

⁶ While the literature on trust is not as extensive as the topic warrants, several writers have attempted to define it. I believe the most successful attempts to define trust can be found in the following works: Laurence Thomas, *Living Morally: A Psychology of Moral Character* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Bernard Barber, *The Logic and Limits of Trust* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983); Annette Baier, *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), especially chapters 6-9; Virginia Held, *Rights and Goods* (New York: Free Press, 1984), especially chapter 5; Trudy Govier, *Social Trust and Human Communities* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997); Olli Lagerspetz “Legitimacy and Trust,” *Philosophical Investigations* 15 (January 1992): 1-21; and the following two collections of essays: *Ethics, Trust and the Professions: Philosophical and Cultural Aspects*, eds. Edmund Pellegrino, Robert Veatch and John P. Langan (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991); and *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, ed. Diego Gambetta (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

The definition employed in this article is my own, although it has been influenced by these authors. Any flaws or problems with it cannot be attributed to them but only to myself.

one person (the trusting party) to extend to another (the trusted party) discretionary power over something the truster values (the “object of trust”) with the confident expectation that the trusted party will have the good will and competence to successfully care for it.⁷

Conditions for Violations of Trust

To trust is to risk disappointment.

In Austen’s novel, we find many instances in which trust is disappointed. The definition of trust implies that the truster becomes vulnerable to the trusted party. Therefore, anytime we trust we risk disappointment in a number of ways. For example, the trusted could neglect or even intentionally harm the trust object. Yet how we assess moral culpability and how we should feel about the disappointment varies with the circumstances. It is important to note, both for the philosopher and the person who feels disappointed or betrayed, that there are at least two persons involved in a trust relationship. We can begin by assessing the truster’s role in disappointment.

Warranted vs. Justified Trust

We must first distinguish between warranted trust and justified trust. Warranted trust means that, as a matter of fact, the trusted party does indeed possess the requisite competence and good will to successfully care for the object of trust. Comparing three examples of trusting in *Sense and Sensibility* helps make these distinctions clearer:

(1) Mrs. Dashwood trusts Mr. Dashwood to provide for her and their daughters.

(2) Elinor trusts Colonel Brandon with Marianne’s happiness in marriage.

⁷ Although for reasons of space I cannot provide a thorough treatment of this definition, some initial clarifications are in order. First, while I am aware that people use ‘trust’ to refer to inanimate objects (e.g., “She trusted the bridge to hold them”) and collectives (e.g., “She trusted the courts to do their job.”), I restrict the term in this article to interpersonal trust. Second, objects of trust are often deeply intertwined with the truster and hence I do not mean to imply they are always separate and distinct. Thus, to say that I trust my spouse with my happiness in our marriage is not to say that “my happiness in our marriage” is something detached or separate from me. However, by speaking of an “object of trust” in general, we cover the spectrum of both the tangibles and intangibles with which people are trusted.

(3) Marianne trusts Willoughby with her future happiness in marriage.

To say that Elinor's trust in Colonel Brandon is warranted is to make the factual claim that Colonel Brandon has both good will toward Marianne and the competence to make her happy. Trusting may also be *unwarranted*. In such cases the trusted party does not, in fact, possess either the good will or the competency to care successfully for the object of trust. In the first part of the novel Marianne trusts Willoughby with her future happiness, but this is unwarranted. He is, as a matter of fact, incapable of making her happy.

That her trust was unwarranted, however, does not imply that Marianne was foolish to trust Willoughby. We must recognize that saying trust is warranted differs from saying trust is justified. Warrantedness, to employ a clumsy term, is concerned with the actual state of affairs. Justification is concerned with the epistemological status of trusting, with what constitutes adequate grounds for trusting. To claim trust is justified means there are plausible grounds for believing that, in this particular circumstance, trusting will be successful. But how do we determine what constitutes plausible grounds?

One option is to say that trust is justified if and only if it is not disappointed. In our first example Mrs. Dashwood trusts Mr. Dashwood to provide for her and their daughters. Unfortunately, when he dies the women are turned out of Norland Park and obliged to accept the charity of a relative of Mrs. Dashwood. Clearly, Mrs. Dashwood's trust was disappointed, but was it unjustified? Examining the perspectives of Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood, as truster and trusted, allows us to answer this question.

We want those trusting us to remember that, as finite beings with limited knowledge, we can neither anticipate nor surmount every contingency. Therefore, a truster may be disappointed even though we have done all we could to care for the object of trust. For instance, no one was more surprised than Mr. Dashwood when his uncle willed the family fortune so that it was impossible for Mr. Dashwood to leave either the estate or any significant funds to the women.

Mr. Dashwood's disappointment was, at first, severe; but his temper was cheerful and sanguine, and he might reasonably hope to live many years, and by living economically, lay by a consider-

able sum from the produce of an estate already large, and capable of almost immediate improvement. But the fortune, which had been so tardy in coming, was his only one twelvemonth. He survived his uncle no longer; and ten thousand pounds . . . was all that remained for his widow and daughters.

His son was sent for, as soon as his danger was known, and to him Mr. Dashwood recommended, with all the strength and urgency which illness could command, the interest of his mother in law and sisters.⁸

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At each step Mr. Dashwood tried his best to follow through on his trust. Once he receives the bad news about the will, he sets about trying to improve their inheritance, but then becomes ill. Yet he still tries to fulfill the trust: he summons his son and extracts a deathbed promise to help his stepmother and half-sisters. However, it is also true that Mr. Dashwood fails to anticipate his greedy daughter-in-law, who dissuades the son from giving anything to the women. This lack of foresight results in his wife's and daughters' severe disappointment. Yet, it seems excessive to say trusting him was unjustified simply because he could not anticipate every contingency.

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There are similar issues to consider if we take the perspective of the trusting person. Mrs. Dashwood had known her husband for years; he always demonstrated good sense about financial matters, and he was devoted to his family. In light of all this it would seem unduly severe to say her trust was unjustified. When we trust people, we can never be absolutely certain of their motivations or competence. No matter how much we know about them and their circumstances, our information will fall short of perfect knowledge. Yet if we are foolish to trust without such knowledge, then *any* case of trusting is unwise and none can be justified.

I doubt there exists any single objective standard of justification by which to measure all cases of trust. Still, there is a spectrum of reasons and motivations for belief, and we can distinguish good from bad reasons. In regard to trust, there are at least two relevant considerations. First, what skills should the trusted possess to care successfully for the object of trust? Second, what methodologies should be used to determine whether the trusted party has those skills and the good will for warranted trusting? Notice that the answers to these questions may differ from what the truster

⁸ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811; reprint, with an introduction by Paul Montazzoli, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996), 2-3.

believes to be the necessary skills and the correct methodology.

The answer to the first question depends on the nature of the object of trust itself. Successfully caring for horses and hounds requires a different set of skills than that required for the successful care of a marriage. Colonel Brandon, in the second example, has the resources and the capabilities to sustain a deep and lasting relationship. As Mrs. Dashwood tells Elinor,

His age is only so much beyond her's, as to be an advantage, as to make his character and principles fixed;—and his disposition, I am well convinced, is exactly the very one to make your sister happy. And his person, his manners too, are all in his favor. . . . Their gentleness, their genuine attention to other people, and their manly unstudied simplicity is much more accordant with her real disposition⁹

It is critical that a potential husband for Marianne have such qualities (or a similar set) if he is to make her happy. Believing that a man possesses these qualities constitutes reasonable grounds for believing he could help create a successful marriage.

Conversely, where there is a discrepancy between the *reality* of the set of necessary skills and what the truster *believes* to be the requisite set, the trust is unjustified. Presumably, there is little correlation between regularly feeding and grooming one's horses and being a good spouse. If Marianne had based her judgment of Willoughby's potential as a good husband solely on the grounds that he was diligent in grooming and feeding his horses, we could say she was unjustified. But this is not the case. Marianne believes that Willoughby possesses all the traits of Colonel Brandon. In addition, she believes they share a love of music and the arts, a commitment to passionate living, a disdain for some of the more conservative aspects of their society, and a strong mutual physical attraction.

The second set of questions turns on what methodologies are employed to determine whether someone possesses the requisite skill or good will to care for the object of trust. Marianne talks at length with Willoughby about their mutual interests and common philosophy of life, they examine the house he expects to inherit, and so on. Such discussions and activities are a sensible means of discovering a person's character, prospects, and goals. However, if she had made her assessment purely on the basis of his fancy

⁹ *Ibid.*, 315-16.

clothes and handsome face, she would have been unjustified in her trust. Thus, we can be completely correct about the requirements for a successful marriage and be completely foolish in the way we determine who meets those requirements. Again, for any given situation, there are better and worse ways of determining if someone possesses the skills and good will for warranted trusting.

Acknowledgment

Suppose that, in addition to all the conversations that are mentioned or alluded to in the book between Willoughby and Marianne, he is also candid about other areas of his life. Imagine that in their time together he frequently talked about his scandalous past and confessed his determination to marry into money, no matter the cost. He and Marianne might still have had the same discussions about art and life, displayed their mutual affection, visited his future estate, and so on. However, it would be harder to say Marianne's trust had been violated when he became engaged to a wealthy woman. Even though we may trust people, that does not necessarily oblige them to honor that disposition. The fact that some object of trust is valued by us does not mean that another must accept discretionary responsibility for it. There must be an acknowledgment or acceptance of the trust. Without such acknowledgment, there may be disappointed trust, but no trust violation.

Acceptance of trust can be explicit or implicit.

Such acknowledgments may be highly explicit, as when we make a promise to another. Promises often function as a way of explicitly saying to people, "You can trust me about such and such." However, not all acknowledgments need be so explicit. There can be subtler, yet equally binding, cases of accepting trust. For example, the acceptance can be assumed in virtue of a particular role the trusted party has adopted. Physicians, lawyers, and priests, by becoming representatives of their particular collectives, announce that they can be trusted about a specific range of things. There are also personal relationships where, in virtue of the nature of the relationship itself, we acknowledge that we can be trusted, as in the case of friendship or love. To accept friendship, for example, is to acknowledge that we can be trusted to respect one another, safeguard confidences, or lend a helping hand.

Such tacit acknowledgments are often properly assumed for two reasons. First, there is culture or social background. Thus,

both parties are guided in their actions by a set of mutually understood norms and mores. Second, we assume the other party has learned from experience, just as we have, that certain actions and attitudes are necessary or else relationships will wither and die. We tend to assume that this is not the first friendship the other person has had, so we also assume that they have learned something about what friendships typically entail. These two assumptions allow us to understand and interpret each other's actions and words. We cannot always stipulate ahead of time what shall matter, since, as in the case of justification, the exact extent and scope of the trust can only be completely understood within the context of the specific relationship.

Willoughby daily seeks out Marianne's company, encourages her public displays of affection, returns it as much as he can, allows her to believe he is free to marry, and never discloses any information about his past that would modify her opinion of their future together.

Nothing could be more expressive of attachment to them all, than Willoughby's behaviour. To Marianne it had all the distinguishing tenderness which a lover's heart could give, and to the rest of the family it was the affectionate attention of a son and a brother. The cottage seemed to be considered and loved by him as his home; many more of his hours were spent there than at Allenhurst; . . . the exercise which called him out in the morning was almost certain of ending there, where the rest of the day was spent by himself at the side of Marianne. . . .¹⁰

We might argue, along with Elinor, that this behavior is not enough to constitute an acknowledgment by Willoughby that he can be trusted to marry Marianne.¹¹ It is surely, however, an acknowledgment that he can be trusted to be honest with her about matters directly related to her welfare and to correct misconceptions she has about their relationship. Moreover, it is legitimate to assume he would endeavor to do this so as to cause her as little suffering as possible.

Some might argue that unless trust is acknowledged it should not even be thought of as justified. On such a view, acknowledgment is not a separate consideration from justification. However, I believe it is worthwhile to preserve the distinction so that we may better delineate when and how trusting has gone awry. As the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

imaginary case in which Willoughby was straightforward about his intentions and his past shows us, unless the trusted party acknowledges the trust there can be no violation. Likewise, we may have a situation in which someone accepts our trust, yet because it was not justified any resulting disappointment should not properly be called a violation. For example, Mrs. Dashwood's young daughter Margaret might believe she can be trusted to handle the family finances and sincerely accept this responsibility. If, however, through unwise choices she loses all their money, it would not constitute a violation of trust. Trusting a thirteen-year-old "without . . . much sense" in these circumstances would be an instance of acknowledged, but unjustified, trust.¹²

As we saw from our definition of trust, trust involves two parties. A truster may be disposed, for any number of reasons, to extend discretionary power over an object of trust to another. This, we could say, is a case of *simple* trusting; this trust may be successful or it may be disappointed. In analyzing situations of disappointed trust, however, we found that in order for the disappointment to count as a violation, the truster must have both plausible justification for trusting and reasonable grounds for believing the trusted party has acknowledged the trust. It is these two elements, justification and acknowledgment, that distinguish simple trusting from trust *relationships*. It is only within a relationship of trust that a case of disappointed trust may (potentially) be a genuine violation of trust. It is the violation of the relationship of trust that has moral significance, not the disappointment of trust per se. To assess a violation of trust adequately, however, and to distinguish betrayals from other violations of trust, we must also examine the role of the trusted party in administering the acknowledged trust.

Causal Links

Culpability on the part of the trusted must be present for a violation of trust to occur.

The last necessary condition for a genuine trust violation is that the cause of the disappointment must be linked to some neglect or indifference, or to an intentional decision on the part of the trusted party to disappoint the trusting party. As we saw in the case of Mr. Dashwood and the inheritance, we may have a situation where trust is both justified and acknowledged, and yet the

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

ensuing disappointment cannot properly be characterized as a violation. The series of sad events that followed Mr. Dashwood's death happened despite his sincere and conscientious efforts to secure his family's fortune. Clearly, trust relationships always exist within a context—an "outside world" we cannot always control.

Contrast Mr. Dashwood's efforts with Willoughby's behavior. Willoughby, without any warning, suddenly leaves Devonshire for London, and does so without informing Marianne or her family of his intent to secure himself a wealthy wife. When Marianne later visits London he ignores all her messages, causes her public humiliation, and finally sends her a letter that virtually calls her demented for assuming there was ever anything between them but a pleasant friendship. We learn later that Willoughby had loved Marianne and had intended to marry her, but the unexpected pregnancy of a young woman he had recently seduced had caused his disinheritance. He therefore chose to abandon Marianne and marry a wealthy woman for whom he did not care.

Like Mr. Dashwood, Willoughby had to contend with a world outside his relationship with Marianne—and a very full world it was. Unlike Mr. Dashwood, however, he had options available to him that were consistent with the established relationship of trust; he chose to ignore them. Other people and events *influenced* Willoughby's choice, but they did not force it. When Willoughby later attempts to justify his actions to Elinor, she gives him her judgment, "You are very wrong, Mr. Willoughby, very blameable. . . . You have made your choice. It was not forced on you."¹³

Two Kinds of Violations of Trust: Abandonment and Betrayal

Willoughby's actions are a genuine violation of acknowledged and justified trust, and they have near-fatal consequences. Yet Austen, while not excusing Willoughby's behavior, does not judge him as "so *very* wicked."¹⁴

The world had made him extravagant and vain—Extravagance and vanity had made him cold-hearted and selfish. Vanity, while seeking its own guilty triumph at the expense of another, had involved him in a real attachment, which extravagance, or at least its offspring, necessity, had required to be sacrificed.¹⁵

Willoughby violated Marianne's trust, but did not betray her.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 307.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 309.

Rather than casting this violation as the deliberate act of a despicable character, Austen instead presents it as the understandable result of a complex dynamic between the world and the emerging character of a young man of “open, affectionate, and lively manner.”¹⁶

While we may think Austen (and the Dashwoods) too generous in their assessment of Willoughby, her portrayal of events nevertheless allows us to distinguish fundamental characteristics of betrayal. First, betrayal is an intelligible purposive event. Second, betrayal is a specific kind of manipulation of the relationship of trust. Third, genuine betrayal requires a more deliberate character and a more cultivated understanding than Willoughby possesses.

It is clear that, before and immediately after hearing Willoughby’s explanation, both Elinor and Marianne showed less inclination than Austen to excuse his behavior, though the two sisters subsequently softened their view. Willoughby begins his account:

. . . I had no other intention, no other view in the acquaintance than to pass my time pleasantly. . . . Careless of her happiness, thinking only of my own amusement, . . . I endeavoured, by every means in my power, to make myself pleasing to her, without any design of returning her affection.¹⁷

But Elinor cuts him off. She is outraged at this portrait of a man who understands the quality of her sister, and her affection, and deliberately develops the relationship of trust in order to manipulate it for his own ends.

Marianne’s response is not outrage, but horror. She is devastated, not just because she has lost her love, but because of what the violation seems to prove about Willoughby, and about herself.

At present, if I could be satisfied on one point, if I could be allowed to think that he was not *always* acting a part, not *always* deceiving me;—but above all, if I could be assured that he never was so *very* wicked as my fears have sometimes fancied him . . . My peace of mind is doubly involved in it;—for not only is it horrible to suspect a person, who has been what *he* has been to *me*, of such designs,—but what must it make me appear to myself?¹⁸

Once the initial shock has worn off, Marianne believes she could be resigned to what has happened, if she had reason to think him something besides a calculated seducer. That knowledge would do

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 311.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 298.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 321.

something to clear him, and acquit her of complicity with a heartless and accomplished villain.

The calculated and deliberate campaign that Elinor and Marianne *thought* Willoughby was engaged in has the intentional quality we associate with betrayal. Betrayal does not just happen accidentally. It is not the mere intention to violate trust, however, that separates genuine betrayals from other violations of trust: Willoughby's actions were intentional in so far as he knew they constituted a violation of the trust relationship. Nor do the consequences of betrayal necessarily distinguish it from other violations. As Elinor points out to Willoughby, ". . . The misery that you have inflicted—I hardly know what could have made it worse."¹⁹ What distinguishes betrayal from other violations of trust is the perspective of the betrayer toward the relationship of trust and the distorted quality of that relationship itself.

The betrayer sees the relationship of trust in fundamentally instrumental terms. The relationship is the medium through which a betrayer creates an effect or obtains a prize. The betrayer is engaged in the relationship; its healthy existence is vital to the successful completion of the intended effect. A betrayer cannot stand aloof; like a craftsman, he must know and manipulate his medium. Further, in order to achieve the goal, betrayers must lie or mislead the truster about their intentions at critical moments in the relationship. This is so because their objective is not the care of the object of trust, whatever it is, but the use of the relationship to achieve a goal extrinsic to it.

Betrayal entails cultivating relationship of trust for an ulterior purpose.

The spirit of instrumentality and deception imbues the entire relationship; it colors all the betrayer's actions and words. Whatever compliments or tenderness the violator extends to the truster is suspect: it is impossible to distinguish which actions or words are sincere and which ones are merely efficacious, because he *does* have an interest in the relationship as well as in an object beyond it. Further, because of the engagement of betrayers, they operate with an awareness, a foreknowledge of what the inevitable violation will do to the truster. The more that a violation is marked by these features the more we see it as betrayal.

Although Willoughby initially entered into the relationship with this attitude, it quickly vanished as he fell in love with

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 307.

Marianne. Willoughby does not see his trust relationship with Marianne in instrumental terms; his actions are not the calculated maneuvering of a traitor setting up his victim. What Willoughby does instead is to unilaterally withdraw from the relationship, indifferent to (or at least insufficiently concerned with) the effect on Marianne. He *abandons* his care of the relationship of trust. While this is clearly a violation of her trust, it is not betrayal. He is not engaged in the relationship to manipulate it; rather, he disengages from it entirely.

Recognizing this second kind of violation of trust may allow us to discern some of the more subtle moral dimensions of trust, and of its violation. Such distinctions will matter when we are evaluating the character of a violator, since most of us believe individuals' motivations should be weighed when assessing the ethical status of their actions. Those who engage in relationships of trust in order to violate them must be judged differently from those who engage in them with good intentions, and then abandon them as Willoughby does. Austen recognizes this and seems to make the point that those who betray are, for this reason, worse than those who abandon our trust. When Elinor tells her sister that Willoughby really did love her and so his treatment of her was not by design, Marianne is grateful and relieved. With the knowledge that Willoughby had loved her, she is able to sort through his actions and words and determine that at least some of them were genuine. Moreover, it relieves her of her fear that she could love a traitor—an idea devastating to Marianne's sense of self

Austen's conclusion that betrayal is more devastating to the truster than abandonment is open to question. Yet, even if Austen is correct in this judgment, this does not mean that betrayal is always the more evil of the two kinds of violations of trust. In some cases, with regard both to the actual method of violation and the resulting consequences, there is no significant difference between the two. Note that Willoughby's actions would likely have been the same in either case: the courtship, the sudden departure, the public humiliation, the cruel letter, and their effect on Marianne could hardly have been more devastating if they had been part of a carefully orchestrated campaign. Even if Marianne did not suffer the added damage to her conception of self, this would have made little difference if she had died from the influenza instead of recovering.

Furthermore, betrayal unlike abandonment can be a highly moral act or at least done for moral reasons. However, whether we agree with Marianne's forgiveness of Willoughby's actions or think her too kind, what is without question is that Willoughby has done nothing meritorious. Indeed, it is hard to envision a situation in which someone who abandons a relationship of trust through laziness, cowardice, or indifference would ever merit our approval.

Yet, this is not the case with betrayal. If we consider the situation of spies in World War II who cultivated the trust of Nazis purely with the intent of harming them and their cause, we can hardly imagine a more clear-cut case of betrayal. Similarly, law enforcement agents sometimes must go undercover to capture murderers and drug dealers. Again, they deliberately cultivate the trust of those they have every intention of harming. However, spies and undercover agents are not evil because they are betraying; sometimes the only way to eliminate evil is through betrayal. It may be the case that it is impossible to engage in betrayal without becoming morally tainted at some level, but this only constitutes an argument for why it should be done judiciously and infrequently. Individuals who engage in such actions knowing the dangers to their souls deserve some praise for what they have risked.

Betrayal of a relationship of trust can be moral, abandonment never so.

On the other hand it is hard to think of any comparable situations in which abandonment would merit such praise. As Elinor says of Willoughby,

The whole of his behaviour . . . has been grounded on selfishness. It was selfishness which first made him sport with your affection; which afterwards, when his own were engaged, made him delay the confession of it, and which finally carried him from Barton. His own enjoyment, or his own ease, was in every particular, his ruling principle.²⁰

Whereas a betrayal can be done for moral reasons, violations of trust through abandonment are most commonly the result of narrow self-interest.

Abandonment and Denial

There is yet another significance to the distinction between betrayal and abandonment. Most of us do not see ourselves as be-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 327.

*Those who
abandon,
rather than
betray,
relationships
of trust are
more prone to
self-deception.*

trayers, and in this assessment we are probably correct. For good or bad, it is not everyone who can cultivate the trust of another while plotting to break that trust, or to recognize that someone has our justified, acknowledged trust and then turn that relationship into an instrument. Willoughby certainly did not have this type of deliberate, calculating character.

But notice that this allows him to indulge in a familiar form of denial. He casts himself more as the victim of unfortunate circumstances than as someone who has committed a great wrong: he sees the way he treats Marianne as necessary, unavoidable. If Marianne had not written him after coming to London, he might very well have rationalized away his actions entirely,

I had been growing a fine hardened villain, fancying myself indifferent to her, and chusing to fancy that she too must have become indifferent to me . . . and silencing every reproach, overcoming every scruple, by secretly saying now and then, 'I shall be heartily glad to hear she is well married.' But this note made me know myself better.²¹

Had he been allowed to continue in this vein, he may even have ended by convincing himself that his actions were for *her* good, and were, therefore, praiseworthy in some way.

His moment of honesty is again replaced by denial as he blames his wife for the cruel note he sends to Marianne, "I had only the credit of servilely copying such sentences as I was ashamed to put my name to But what could I do?"²² Had Marianne not come close to death, he probably would have reverted to his original opinion and embraced the lies he had been "forced" by his wife to write.

What Austen does so well with Willoughby and Marianne is to present a frighteningly common situation wherein an individual voluntarily enters a relationship of trust and then abandons that relationship, not from some carefully constructed plot to harm the truster, but from a neglect born of self-interest, disinterest, or carelessness. Willoughby illustrates that with abandonment we may find innumerable ways of passing off responsibility for our actions; with betrayal we are at least deliberate and self-aware. But Marianne must remind us that the results of abandonment can be as cruel as the most meticulously plotted act of betrayal.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 304.

²² *Ibid.*, 306.

Conclusion

Without trust life would be impoverished and frightening. We are limited creatures, and our dispositions to extend discretionary power to others serves us well. Trusting allows the formation of bonds of utility, community, and intimacy. Yet the very limitations that ground trust also entail risk and vulnerability. We must be aware that any simple trusting risks disappointment; forming any relationship of trust risks abandonment or betrayal.

Violations of trust can shatter our sense of the world and our place in it. However, in order to move beyond this subjective sensation and rebuild, we must integrate the experience within the larger context of the world in which we live. Betrayal and abandonment do not just happen *to* people: they are intelligible events involving participants who engage in relationships subject to the contingencies of the world. Understanding that betrayal and abandonment result from a dynamic encompassing at least a truster, a trusted, and the world, may, with reflection, allow us properly to judge responsibility, guilt, and contingency.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, understanding and reflecting on trust and violations of trust makes us cognizant of the relationships of trust we have helped create and the obligations they impose upon us. Without such understanding and reflection we may drift along in a comfortable haze of denial. The dramatic nature of betrayal may distract us from the more mundane abandonments of trust, short term or long term, that can damage those whose justified trust we accept. The truth of the matter in our own lives can be settled only by honest, rigorous self-reflection on our relationships of trust with lovers, friends, clients, students, colleagues, and children.