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## Frontiers of Philosophy in Practice

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## Book Reviews

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*Edited Trevor Curnow*

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**Onora O'Neill**

*A Question of Trust*

**Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. viii + 100**

**ISBN: 0521529964 (pb) £9.95, 0521823048 (hb) £25**

This book contains the text of Onora O'Neill's 2002 BBC Reith Lectures. She observes that while trust is always a risky business (and so one we would rather avoid if we could), reports of its demise are somewhat exaggerated. Many who claim to distrust the medical profession, the police and the media nevertheless continue to visit their doctors, dial 999, and buy newspapers. On the other hand, few people working in the public sector can fail to be aware of a spreading culture of distrust, often dressed up in such terms as 'public accountability' and 'quality assurance'. (Curiously, the politicians who have imposed this culture are barely mentioned, although one might have thought that falling turnouts at elections were an indicator of *something?*) However, because the decline of trust has been overestimated, responses to it have often been disproportionate, if not counter-productive (as in the case of schools, where more tests tend to equate to less learning).

She reserves some of her harshest comments for the media (pp. 94-5): 'We cannot support freedom for media conglomerates to orchestrate 'public discussion' in which some or many voices are unrepresented or caricatured, in which misinformation may be peddled uncorrected and in which reputations may be selectively shredded or magnified.' This is part of a broader argument for rights to be re-attached to duties, rather than asserted in isolation.

The real sin, the real enemy of trust, is deception, which is itself parasitic upon trust. We cannot avoid trust, since life can never provide us with enough guarantees to render it redundant. Trust is part of what helps to make the world go round. That is why it is important, and that is why betrayals of it are such a serious matter.

This is a stimulating and lively read that has the capacity to depress and reassure at the same time!

**Trevor Curnow**