

ON INTIMACY

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ABSTRACT

Pavel Ilkov Nitchovski: ON INTIMACY
(Under the direction of Luc Bovens)

I offer a general philosophical account of intimacy in four chapters. I argue that all intimacy is a matter of taking what I call ‘the intimate stance’ towards another person, object, or thing. To take the intimate stance is to treat the other (person, object, or thing) as though they are engaged in the cooperative activity of joint authorship over the narrative one uses to make sense of oneself. In other words, to take the intimate stance is to treat the other as co-author in answering the question ‘who am I?’ When one takes this stance towards another on a particular occasion that individual is engaged in an intimate interaction with the other, and when one takes this stance towards a particular relationship, then that individual is engaged in an intimate relationship. I also argue that if intimacy is a matter of taking the intimate stance then we have good reason to think that in certain circumstances it may be good to be intimate, in others it may be a very risky thing, and in others yet, something quite dangerous.

Dedicated to my sister, Bissy Nitchovska-McKenyon who taught me how to read and inadvertently set in motion whatever this is. And for paying my phone bill for the last twenty years. Some things can never be repaid!

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in intimacy as a topic of academic study began around the summer of 2017 after reading a paper on male friendship.¹ One of the central claims of that paper was that, in general, men have a problem with intimacy because they have a hard time talking about their feelings to one another. My initial reaction to this claim was that while it may have been correct at the time when the essay was written, and while it may be true in some stereotypical male environments, it couldn't possibly be true about men in general. In my experience, men were quite willing to talk to each other about how they felt and I had had many male friendships in which such conversations were standard fare. At worst, I thought, this was a problem for *other* men, but not for me and my friends—we knew how to be intimate.

But I just couldn't get over the nagging suspicion that I might be wrong about that and, indeed, that my confidence in my ability to be intimate was a sign that I didn't really know what intimacy was about at all. Sure, my friends and I *talked* about our feelings, and, on the whole, I have never had any problem telling anyone about what was on my mind, but perhaps intimacy involved *more* than doing *that*. But if so, what? And if intimacy *didn't* simply involve being open about one's feelings, then couldn't it be possible that I didn't really know how to be intimate? Could it even be possible that I might have a *problem* with intimacy?

I was troubled by this possibility, and, like any reasonable academic, I turned to the literature: if anyone could tell me what intimacy *really* was and whether I had a problem with it would

¹ Robert A. Strikwerda and Larry May, "Male Friendship and Intimacy," *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (1992): 110–25. This paper will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

be the philosophers.² When I turned to the stacks, however, I was surprised to find very little. Although topics like friendship and love have been a staple of philosophical inquiry since antiquity, and although I had always associated intimacy with those matters, the authors I found never seemed to address it directly. In most cases, when the term popped up in the literature, it was usually used as a synonym for “closeness” or as a euphemism for sex (i.e., “being intimate”), and the few explicit places in which it received more than a passing treatment just weren’t satisfying. At least in the analytic philosophical tradition—the tradition that I have been trained and educated in—there was simply no good answer to what intimacy was that could help me answer the questions I had.

So, with the confidence reserved for someone who knows nothing about a subject, I set out to try to provide some kind of preliminary account of the phenomenon that puzzled me so much. This project and the account that it develops is the result of that attempt.

In a nutshell, my claim is that intimacy is matter of taking a certain stance—the intimate stance—towards another person, object, or thing. This stance is characterized by seeing that person, object, or thing as implicated in how they (the person taking the stance) makes sense of who they are. In short, wherever we find people letting others shape the narratives through which they understand the world, we’ll also find intimacy. The details of this view and its justification are outlined in the chapters that follow. Below is a brief layout of the content of each of the chapters and their relation to one another.

Chapter 1 serves as the starting point of our journey and is explicitly focused on the phenomenon of intimate conversations between strangers. This phenomenon is especially interesting because it seems to undermine the standard association that many people tend to have between intimacy and certain kind of loving or established relationships. If intimacy can be present

² The joke here is intentional.

between two people who have never met, who don't know each other, and who do not have strong positive feelings towards one another before their interaction, then there's at least some reason to think that intimacy does not rest of any of those things (i.e., deep knowledge, positive affect, or a standing relationship). Rather, it must rest on something that happens during that specific conversation. But what is that?

In the first half of the chapter I consider whether the intimacy of the conversation could be a matter of *what* is said between the two people. After all, it seems reasonable to suppose that intimate conversations involve disclosing certain pieces of *private* information that isn't normally shared. Although there's some truth to this matter, I argue that this can't be the full story since we often share private information with others without seeing our conversation as intimate. I argue that the kind of information shared certainly matters, but what matters even more is how the person disclosing that information sees what they're disclosing in relation to themselves, and, crucially, what role they see the one with whom it is shared as playing. In other words, intimate conversations have a specific *aim*, and I argue that that aim is the collaborative engagement of another in the question of "who am I?", or, to put it in the terms I use in the chapter, of collaborative engagement in one's private narrative. Ultimately, I argue that to have an intimate conversation is to 1) disclose to another something reflective of the private self—of the narrative or features of the narrative that we tell ourselves in order to make sense of ourselves, our actions, and the world around us; 2) in doing so to (temporarily) share authority in the construction or evaluation of that narrative and to allow the other to have the same say in it that we take ourselves to have; 3) for the other to take up some of that authority and exercise it; and 4) in doing so to engage in the joint cooperative activity of constructing, maintaining, or evaluating that narrative.

Chapter 2 raises a challenge for the view advanced in Chapter 1. In short, it seems that even if the account presented in Chapter 1 is a good one for *conversational* intimacy, and even if it gives us some important insight into the nature of intimacy, it clearly cannot work as a general account of intimacy tout court. This is for two reasons: first, there appear to be clear examples of intimacy—sex being perhaps the clearest such example—that do not involve any kind of conversations whatsoever; whatever is that makes sex intimate (when it is), is usually not a function of what is being discussed during the act. Second, apart from these cases, there are other examples of intimacy that should be taken into account that quite clearly *never* involve any conversations between two people. Some people, for example, have intimate experiences in nature, at the grave of a departed beloved, or with animals and newborn infants. In all of those cases not only is it true that there is no back and forth verbal communication, but it is also true that any such communication is impossible. It appears, then, that an account of intimacy that focuses so narrowly on how intimacy is possible through conversation will be unable to handle any of these cases, and, consequently, will make for a poor *general* account of intimacy.

I think all this is correct. However, I argue that at the core of the conversational account of intimacy is something that allows us to handle all of these difficult cases while also letting us keep everything that is worth preserving in that account. More specifically, I argue that we can modify the conversational account slightly to bring our focus to what I call ‘taking the intimate stance.’ Briefly put, to take the intimate stance is to *treat* another person, object, or thing *as though* it were appropriately disposed to participate in the cooperative activity of engaging with one’s private narrative; i.e., as though they were engaged in the very same cooperative activity that marked the intimate conversation. Crucially, however, we can take this stance towards another regardless of whether they are *actually* disposed in this way, regardless of whether the other reciprocates in taking the stance back, and in non-verbal as well as verbal contexts. Thus, by shifting our focus to the

intimate stance as the core of intimacy, we can see that the way intimacy is achieved in conversations is just one instance of a much broader phenomenon. In turn, this allows us to keep the account developed in Chapter 1 and explain what a truly general account of intimate interactions looks like.

Chapter 3 raises a different challenge. Everything that has been discussed so far has been explicitly focused on intimate *interactions* between people who may or may not know each other. However, we tend to think of intimacy not only in terms of discreet moments between people, but also as something that ranges over *relationships*. In other words, we not only talk about having intimate conversations and intimate kisses, but also talk about having intimate *friendships*, about intimate romantic partnerships, and about the intimacy between parents and children. A good account of intimacy should be able to explain what it is that makes some such relationships intimate if it is to count as a general account of intimacy. Furthermore, it should say something about the relation between intimate interactions and intimate relationships. Even if one grants me that intimate interactions are a matter of taking the intimate stance and that taking the intimate stance doesn't require being involved in any previous relationship with the other, one might still think that there's *some* connection between the number of intimate interactions one has in a particular relationship and whether that relationship is intimate. Precisely what that connection is must also be specified if we are to have a full picture of intimacy.

I tackle both of these tasks in Chapter 3 by building on the insights gained in the previous two chapters. I argue that just as we've come to understand the intimacy of interactions by virtue of whether one person (or both parties) has taken the intimate stance towards the other in the course of an interaction, we can similarly understand the intimacy of relationships by virtue of whether one person (or both parties) has taken the intimate stance *towards the relationship itself*. In short, a relationship is intimate just in case at least one of the parties sees the relationship as impacting how

their private narrative, or how they answer the question “who am I?” This, in turn allows us to answer the question about the relation between intimate interactions and intimate relationships: namely, the intimacy of a relationship is a matter of how one sees that relationship, and not a matter of any number of intimate interactions therein. Some relationships can be very intimate even though they involve a minimal number of intimate interactions; other relationships may involve quite a high number of intimate interactions without therefore becoming intimate relationships. Nevertheless, it is not *unusual* for the intimate interactions that we have with others to influence the way in which we view our relationships, so, in general, we should expect to see intimate relationships develop in light of certain intimate interactions. I close out the chapter by taking a closer look at how seeing intimate relationships in this way can give us some insight into the supposed lack of intimacy in male friendships, and why I think the standard way of looking at those friendships is unsatisfying.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I address some questions about the value of intimacy. I focus specifically on the fact that although intimacy is generally regarded as something valuable and worth pursuing, it is also something that many people seem to struggle with and which appears to others as something frightening and dangerous. I argue that if intimacy is what I say it is, then we have very good reason to think that it *is* something potentially dangerous that should be handled carefully. In short, because intimacy necessarily involves sharing one’s prerogative in answering the question “who am I?” then it also necessarily involves making oneself vulnerable in certain ways: namely, one risks alienation and abuse at the hands of the other if one is not careful. Not only is this the case, but I argue that being intimate also makes one vulnerable to the possibility of becoming *self-alienated* insofar as one finds the narrative they use to make sense of themselves impossible to sustain. Crucially, this possibility is *always* on the table simply by virtue of what intimacy requires, and is not contingent on the good or ill will of anyone involved.

I then highlight one of the ways in which it may still be worthwhile to engage in intimacy despite the risks it poses. Specifically, I believe that at least sometimes intimacy can help us cope with and live through profound crises in which the narratives that we use to make sense of who we are have collapsed. I argue that the reason intimacy is able to do this for us is precisely for the same reason that it poses a risk. What makes intimacy dangerous is the possibility that it may profoundly change how we understand ourselves and our relation to the world, and it is precisely that very possibility that can act as a saving grace in those moments in which we've *lost* the means to understand ourselves. Finally, I finish the project by very briefly touching on some avenues of further research and some open questions that I hope to explore in future work.

At the end of the day, I can't say that I was able to answer the problem that bothered me initially—frankly, I still don't know if I have a problem with intimacy, and I certainly haven't been able to put to rest the worry that I might be wrong about what intimacy is. Furthermore, I think this project has raised more questions than it has provided answers, so, in a sense, I feel like I know less than I did before. However, I do believe that there are at least some things in here that aren't entirely wrong (or that are at least headed in the right direction) and if this piece can one day serve as a useful starting point for someone who can give a much better account of intimacy, then I would be happy. Short of that, if you, the reader find something interesting here and there, then it would have been worth writing it.

Chapter One: The Intimate Conversation

Introduction: The Party

Imagine that you find yourself at a party where you don't know anyone but the host. Social convention prevents you from leaving immediately, so you decide to kill some time by meeting a few people. You line up at the snack table and introduce yourself to the person behind you. The two of you talk about the weather, your jobs, and what brings you to the party, but the conversation doesn't seem to go much further than that. You sense a kind of reservation to get engaged in anything more serious from the other—when you bring up a political topic, they quickly change the subject, and any time you try to ask more personal questions you receive only monosyllabic responses that signal to you that you're close to crossing some social boundary.

After a few minutes of pleasantries, you can tell that something just isn't clicking and excuse yourself to get another drink from the kitchen. On your way there, you spy a casual acquaintance who says hello and find yourself in another conversation. Unlike the previous person, this conversational partner is eager to get very serious immediately. They tell you about how they've been struggling with their latest project, how poor their health has been, and about the creeping doubts they're having about the stability of their romantic relationship. The topic of conversation is intense, but interesting, and it's got you hooked—you want to talk to this person and understand more about them. However, as time passes you find yourself with the distinct feeling that nothing you say really has an impact on the course of the conversation. You're having a conversation with this person, but it's clear that more than anything, they're talking *at you*—nothing *you* contribute seems to affect what

they want to say. You nod along for a while before finding a way to sneak away noting that only seconds later your acquaintance has already moved on to their next victim.

Disheartened by your first few attempts to connect with the guests, you find a spot to charge your phone when someone approaches you to ask if there's a spare charging cable. As the two of you sit by the outlet, you begin causally talking, exchanging the usual pleasantries. You discover that they're only in town for the night and that in the morning they'll return to Australia to join their long-term partner and their young family in a new town. Still, something is different about this conversation—unlike your first failed attempt at a conversation this person seems willing to move past the surface topics and doesn't resist more probing questions. They talk about the anxieties they feel about the move, the worries they have about being a good parent, and the love they have for their partner. Unlike your second attempt, they also seem interested and responsive to what you're contributing, reflecting on your words and taking them seriously. The conversation flows freely and before you know it, you find yourselves talking about your childhoods, the meaningful people in your lives, the hopes you have for the future, and the regrets you have about the past. Hours pass without either of you noticing and you only break off your conversation when you realize that you're the only two people left at the party and that the host is politely signaling that it's time to call it a night. You wish your conversational partner good luck in their future journeys and you both head home never to see or speak to each other again.

Despite the fact that nothing more came out of this conversation, something special has happened to you at this party: although you didn't necessarily plan to, you've had an *intimate conversation* with a stranger. While not terribly common, intimate conversations with strangers are not exceedingly rare—most people will probably have at least one such conversation in their lifetime or can easily imagine having one. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is a puzzling one: what is it precisely

about a conversation that makes it *intimate*? And how was it possible for intimacy to occur between two *strangers*? Most of the time when we think about intimacy, we think about it in the context of specific standing relationships. We talk about intimate friendships, the intimacy between two lovers, or the intimate bond between parents and children. Yet, as we've seen, it is clearly possible for two people who don't know each other, who do not have an existing relationship, and who do not form one after this one night at the party to be intimate with one another. How is this possible?

In this chapter, I present a solution to this puzzle and an account of what makes conversations intimate without assuming that the intimacy found therein is a function of an existing relationship between the two people in question. This account will then serve as the launching point from which we can explore intimacy in greater details in the chapters to follow.

In a nutshell, I will argue that conversations are intimate when they have a certain structure: namely, 1) one party discloses some information that is reflective of some central aspect or aspects of how they understand themselves; 2) in doing so they share their authority in constructing the narrative that they use to make sense of themselves and invite the other to weigh in on what has been disclosed; and, because 3) the receiving party is willing to participate, the result is that 4) the two engage in a cooperative evaluation and/or construction of the disclosing party's self (i.e. an evaluation of how the disclosing party understands themselves).

To get there, however, I want to begin by looking at an initial possible explanation of what makes conversations intimate. This will be done in Section I. Although the view discussed there is wrong, it is not implausible—in fact, it contains some insights into intimacy that shouldn't be thrown out entirely. In sections II and III I take these plausible elements to develop my own account. It is here that I explain what the private self is, what it means for another to engage in its

construction, and what it means to share one's authority in that construction with another. Finally, in Section IV I address some of the virtues of the account.

I. The Private Disclosure View

To make matters simpler, let's put the party scenario described above in a format that will make it easier to refer to later on and drop the second person description. Consider the following.

PARTY: Remy and Julia are two strangers who meet at a party where they don't know anyone. In an effort to relieve their boredom, they strike up a conversation. The two initially talk about superficial subjects, but as the hours pass, they gradually get into more personal subjects until they find themselves discussing their childhood, their families, and innermost hopes and fears. At the end of the party Remy and Julia part ways never to see or talk to each other again.

Before we discuss PARTY in greater detail, it's worth pausing for a second to make a distinction that will be important for the rest of the project: namely, the distinction between intimate *interactions* and intimate *relationships*. This distinction is rather intuitive, but it can be specified more directly by noting that interactions are, generally speaking, bounded by a particular activity and take place over a relatively defined period of time. This is not the case for relationships. Friendships, for example, can stretch across years and decades and their status is not necessarily dependent on the two friends doing anything in particular—in fact, people can remain friends despite the fact that they haven't seen each other for many months or years. By contrast, a particular conversation (a dinner, a walk on the beach, etc.) between two people is bounded by when they start *talking* and when they end.¹ Our analysis of PARTY, then, is an analysis of a particular kind of intimate *interaction*. And because it is an interaction between two strangers, it is an interaction that is not set within the context of a

¹ These boundaries may not always be clear, of course—did our conversation start when we greeted each other at the restaurant or after we settled on a specific topic? Did it end when we stopped to eat or when we said goodbye at our cars?

specific *relationship*. For the remainder of this chapter and the next, our focus will be entirely on intimate *interactions*, with the question of intimate *relationships* addressed in Chapter 3.

What is it about the conversation in PARTY that makes it intimate? The first and perhaps most obvious thing to consider is the conversation involves the disclosure of *private* information that is not shared with just anyone. Thus, as a first pass, we might suspect that it is precisely the act of disclosing such private information that makes intimate conversations different from other conversations. Call this the Private Disclosure View (PDV).²

To endorse the PDV is to make a distinction between the intimate conversation and what we might call ‘intimate information’, and to hold that what constitutes the former is the presence of the latter. In other words, it’s to hold that conversations *become* intimate when intimate *information* is disclosed, and that what makes information intimate is that it’s rarely (or ever) divulged to or shared with other people.

This simple version of the PDV is wrong but not implausible—it really does seem to matter that what Remy and Julia are talking about is something that they don’t normally share with other people. After all, in the absence of some further explanation for why it should be the case, it would be quite puzzling to call their conversation intimate if it never ventured beyond discussing the weather or the sharing of common interests. However, if the PDV is correct, then it would follow that any conversation in which private information is shared is an intimate one.

It’s easy to see why this is not the case. Consider, for example, the fact that information about one’s bathroom habits is also (usually) private and rarely shared with other people.

² Versions of the PDV appear in the models of intimacy used by psychologists. See, for example Reis & Shaver’s Interpersonal Disclosure model of intimacy in Jean-Philippe Laurenceau et al., “Intimacy as an Interpersonal Process: Current Status and Future Directions,” in *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 61–81.

Nevertheless, we rarely consider conversations with one's doctor in which such information is disclosed to be intimate ones. In divulging our bathroom habits to a gastroenterologist, for example, we have no problem acknowledging that we have disclosed something private that few other people have access to, while at the same time recognizing that the conversation itself is not an intimate one. In short, we can easily make the distinction between a conversation *in which private information is disclosed* from an *intimate* conversation.

The same point can be made if we consider cases from the other side in which someone is telling *us* some private information that has not been solicited. Consider, for example, the drunk at the end of the bar who spills his guts to anyone willing to listen. Such a figure might very well disclose information that might not otherwise be available to you—he might tell you about his failed marriage and faltering business, for example—but this hardly makes for an intimate conversation. Indeed, far from being a bridge to intimacy, the divulgence of such information under such conditions may be a source of irritation or an intrusion, and the mere fact that it has been shared and that it's *private* doesn't make much of a difference.³

Still, the defender of the PDV might point out a disanalogy between these two cases and PARTY since the conversations with the doctor and the drunk are decidedly one-sided—*you tell* your doctor about your bathroom habits, but they don't *tell you* about theirs; the drunk *tells you* about his woes, but you don't return the favor. By contrast, the conversation in PARTY is markedly different since Remy and Julia *tell each other* about their respective childhoods, families, hopes and fears and so on. There's an element of *reciprocity* and *mutual* disclosure of private information in the intimate case

³ This is not to say that it is impossible for such a conversation to *be* intimate. Indeed, the conversation between Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov and the drunk Marmeladov in the second chapter of *Crime and Punishment* is as good a candidate for an unsolicited intimate conversation with a drunk as there can be. The point is not that one cannot have an intimate conversation with drunks, but rather that the mere disclosure of personal information won't cut it. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Vintage, 1993)

that is absent in the non-intimate one that seems to make a big difference. In light of this, the defender of the PDV can slightly alter their view and insist that it's not the *mere* disclosure of private information, but that a mutual and reciprocal disclosure from both parties is needed for intimacy.

Putting aside the question of whether the conversation with your doctor would become *more* intimate if they told you about *their* bathroom habits, the point is well taken when we consider PARTY. Suppose, for example, that we modify the example in such a way that although Remy discloses his hopes and fears, Julia refuses to reciprocate in disclosing hers, but instead only nods politely and steers the conversation to a new topic. It seems correct to say that by doing so Julia snuffs out any potential intimacy that could have developed between the two.

This much seems to be true, but we must be careful here since we might be able to explain the difference in other ways. Consider the following case:

GRIEF: Steven and James are close childhood friends who live on opposite sides of the country. Steven's father has just passed away and James has flown in to attend the funeral and support his friend. After the wake, the two go to a bar where Steven tells James all about his relationship with his father and how much he regrets not spending enough time with him before he passed. James listens and comforts Steven before the two part for the evening.

GRIEF strikes me as another paradigm example of an intimate conversation, yet in this example it is very easy to imagine that there's a similar asymmetry in the conversation in the sense that James does not necessarily reciprocate everything that Steven says. For example, James' father may very well be alive or he may not have any regrets about spending time with him. Given the seriousness of the situation, we might even think that it would be wholly inappropriate for James to talk about *his* feelings about the death of someone in *his* family rather than focusing on those of his friend. This is not to say that reciprocating in this way would necessarily prohibit the conversation from being

intimate, but only to point out that the intuitions we have about the intimacy of the conversation do not hang on whether *both* parties share private information of the same kind.

It's important to note that this example is slightly different from PARTY since it involves two people who are lifelong friends rather than two strangers. Thus, one might think that the fact that we still think the conversation is intimate despite the lack of reciprocal exchange of information is due to the fact that we implicitly smuggle considerations about their relationship in the back door. Perhaps close friends don't need to necessarily engage in explicit reciprocation to have an intimate conversation, but strangers do.

There's something to this claim, but we can construct a slightly modified version of PARTY to show why it doesn't explain everything. Specifically, we can imagine that instead of both Remy and Julia sharing their deepest hopes and fears, only Julia does so while Remy listens patiently and attentively to her, chiming in with comments and reflections as needed, without necessarily talking about *his* hopes and fears. It seems to me that such a conversation could still very well be considered as intimate despite the fact that there's no strict reciprocity between the two parties and despite the fact that the two people don't have a shared history of being friends.

Still, there's something that seems to be quite important about the element of reciprocity that can't simply be thrown out on the basis of GRIEF or our modified version of PARTY. As we mentioned earlier, it does seem right to say that if Julia simply refuses to reciprocate Remy's disclosures, then there won't be any intimacy either. The way forward, then, seems to hang precisely on how we think of reciprocity. There's one sense—the sense that we've been working with so far—in which to reciprocate to another is to mirror their behavior. In this sense, Julia reciprocates Remy's disclosure about his hopes and fears by disclosing *her* hopes and fears. However, there is a different, thinner sense of reciprocity that doesn't entail this kind of strict mirroring, but which does require a

certain kind of equal engagement in the interaction—an uptake to what’s been presented. This is the sense in which we can say that we make reciprocal moves to each other while playing chess—the moves we make are not identical, but they are responses to the moves that the other person has made. We reciprocate in this way in conversation when we respond appropriately and with relevant information to what the other person has said.

Putting all this together, then, the defender of PDV can once again alter their view slightly and insist that it’s this latter, thinner version of reciprocity, coupled with the disclosure of private information, that makes conversations intimate. Thus, they could agree that GRIEF remains an example of an intimate conversation because Steven discloses some private information and because James responds appropriately to what has been shared, and not because both talk about their fathers. Likewise, in PARTY both parties not only share private information, but they *also* reciprocate in the thinner sense just described. Furthermore, they can note that the intimacy disappears when Julia nods her head and changes the subject not because she has refused to disclose, but precisely because she has refused to reciprocate in the exchange.

This more sophisticated version of the PDV seems to do better than either of its predecessors, but it’s important to note how little it adds to its predecessors. At its thinnest, the requirement for reciprocity that we’re discussing now amount to meeting a minimum norm *for having a conversation at all*. In other words, in refusing to reciprocate in this way one simply refuses to participate in the conversation! And it’s very hard to have an intimate conversation with someone who refuses to have a conversation in the first place.

If this is correct, then the core of the view remains the same. It simply holds that what matters for an intimate conversation is that, in the first place and at a bare minimum, it remains a conversation, and in the second place, that it is a conversation in which personal information is

disclosed. And once again, we can bring up the fact that we do have conversations with medical professionals (and others) that meet these criteria but which do not amount to intimate conversations. Furthermore, what keeps them from being such is not a refusal to cooperate in the conversation—after all, the gastroenterologist doesn’t just nod and change the subject when you tell him about your bathroom habits, but presumably offers relevant input based on what you’ve disclosed in light of the reason you’ve come to see them.

It seems, then, that we’re back to square one with the PDV, but the dialectic has been advanced in a notable way. Specifically, our discussion of the kind of reciprocity needed in an intimate conversation has pointed us to the fact that intimate conversations are a kind of joint, cooperative interaction—we’re *doing* something together that goes beyond having a conversation. Rather, the suggestion is that intimate conversations have some *further* aim, the pursuit of which makes them intimate. The next step is to specify what that aim is.

II. The Aim of the Intimate Conversation

One feature of PARTY that dovetails nicely with our discussion of reciprocity is that Remy and Julia are not merely divulging private information to one another, but that they are actively involved in the conversation. The two aren’t just patiently waiting for the other to stop talking so that they can have their turn—such a conversation does not seem to be intimate at all—but are *engaged* in what the other is saying. We imagine that Remy doesn’t just tell Julia about his deepest fears, letting the information simply be acknowledged, but expects her to respond to what he has to say and to weigh in on it—to bring *her* understanding of what has been said to the conversation. The same is true for James and Steven—we imagine that Steven isn’t just using James’s presence as an excuse to talk, but presumably wants James to respond to the expression of his feelings even if it is just to signal that he empathizes for his friend’s loss. In both cases it’s reasonable to assume that

neither party wants what's been shared simply *to have been expressed*, but desires that it be considered by the other and, as it were, be given its full weight in their eyes.⁴ There's a kind of expectation that one is taking what's being disclosed—and the person behind it—*seriously* and to engage with it.

At the same time, however, it's true that we also expect the gastroenterologist to take seriously what we say when we tell them about our bathroom habits and, likewise, to engage with what has been said. So, the expectation to actively participate isn't sufficient for an intimate conversation.

However, consider the reason we want to be taken seriously by the gastroenterologist. Presumably, we want that to be the case because we want them to use that information to solve whatever problem it is that has brought us to their office. The seriousness here is in service of resolving an issue with the persistent cramping in our stomach (or whatever). Thus, we divulge the relevant private information to them for the sake of achieving *that* goal, and we want what has been shared to be given its full weight in their eyes as it relates to bringing us the relief we seek.

Crucially, we don't intend for the doctor to take that information *as an expression of who we are*. As we stated earlier, it seems to matter that what is being shared is in some sense private—intimate conversations seem to be concerned with things that aren't common knowledge to everyone. But it's more than a mere lack of publicity that does the work. There are lots of things that are never shared with others that pertain to one's person, such as the number of haircuts one gets in a year, one's hat size, or the name of one's high school teacher. Yet, despite the exclusive nature of such information, these matters just don't seem to have the same weight; they're pieces of information *about* us, but

⁴ It's true that, occasionally, we do say that we "Just want to get something off our chest." This suggests that, at least sometimes, we really do want what has been shared simply to be have been expressed. But it's worth pointing out that even in those cases our desire is to express it to *somebody* and not just to have *said* it out loud. Readers who have lingering worries about cases like this should stay tuned for the discussion of one-sided intimacy in Chapter 2.

they are generally not ones that we care much about. This is because the private nature of such information is not reflective of how we think of ourselves or how we make sense of who we are. The information we disclose to the doctor about our bathroom habits is, in general, this kind of information—it is information *about* us that isn't normally shared with others, but it is information that is, as it were, only *incidentally* about us and which doesn't speak to anything substantial. To put the matter another way, most of us don't tend to *identify* with our bathroom habits (and many of us would be quite displeased if others took us to). By contrast, information about our hopes and fears and our relationships with our parents tends to be information that is not incidentally about us, but the very way through which we understand ourselves, our actions, and our place in the world.

In light of all this, the suggestion at hand is that intimate conversations are ones in which one discloses information *reflective of this personal self*—the self that one identifies with and make sense of the world through—for the goal directed activity of inviting the perspective of the other to bear on it. In other words, the intimate conversation involves an invitation for a joint and cooperative evaluation or construction of that self.

Before we explore this suggestion in greater detail, we can present the matter more formally by saying that an intimate conversation has the following features: 1) one party discloses some information that is reflective of some central aspect or aspects of how they understand themselves; 2) in doing so they invite the other to weigh in on how *they* understand them; and, 3) the receiving party is willing to participate, the result is that 4) the two participate in a cooperative engagement and/or construction of the disclosing party's self (i.e. of how the disclosing party understands who they are).⁵

⁵ This view is heavily influenced by Daniela Dover's "The Conversational Self" to which I owe a huge inspirational debt. Daniela Dover, "The Conversational Self," *Mind*, (forthcoming).

These are the broad outlines of the view, but more details need to be fleshed out before it can become plausible. More particularly, it's imperative that we specify what the 'self' referenced in 4) is and what it means to engage in a cooperative evaluation or construction of it. Part of this has already been mentioned in the preceding remarks but I aim to make these claims explicit here.

III. The Private Self

When talking about 'the self' in this context, I am explicitly referring to it as that which provides (for oneself) the answer to the question "who am I?" As such, it corresponds to one's *conception of oneself* rather than, for example, the conditions necessary to establish or preserve identity across time. Although questions about how personal identity is established or preserved across time are interesting and important, the answers to them are generally not ones that *we* use to make sense of ourselves. I may very well know that I am psychologically continuous with the person I was yesterday, but still struggle to understand who I am in a thicker, richer sense.

Marya Schechtman makes a nice distinction between two ways in which the question "who am I?" can be asked that is useful here. When asked by the confused adolescent it is a question about what she calls "characterization— the question of which actions, experiences, and traits are rightly attributable to a person;" when asked by the amnesia patient, it is a question about reidentification.⁶ The answer to the former tracks what can be called the 'moral self' and the answer to the latter what can be called the 'metaphysical self.' My use is explicitly concerned with the

⁶ Marya Schechtman, *Staying Alive: Personal Identity, Practical Concerns, and the Unity of a Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 100 and Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 75-77.

former and not the latter though I will simply refer to it as ‘the self’ or ‘the private self’ rather than the ‘moral self’.

To have a ‘self’ in the sense that I’m using it, then, is to be able to provide at least an implicit answer to the characterization question. Following Schechtman, I believe we do so “by developing and operating with a (mostly implicit) autobiographical narrative which acts as the lens through which we experience the world.”⁷ This narrative is constructed by making reference to facts about us (or at least what *we take* to be facts about us) which are woven together and put in relation to one another—it is done by providing a cohesive *structure* to the things that one knows about oneself that render those facts, as it were, one’s own. To have a self in the sense that I’m using, then, is to have a narrative through which one makes sense of oneself, one’s actions, and one’s place in the world. In turn, to have an intimate conversation with another is to invite them to participate in the construction of that narrative by way of talking.

Some further clarifications are in order: by talking about the self in these terms, I don’t mean to imply that its necessary that every person have one explicit, complete, and coherent narrative through which they view the world and which makes sense of their actions. I imagine few people, if any, can construct such a narrative. Rather, it seems more likely that we operate through a patchwork of different, largely implicit, and sometimes conflicting narratives that can vary across time and context. The narratives that I used to make sense of myself as a teenager, for example, are not the same narratives that I use to make sense of myself in my thirties, and I imagine that these won’t be the same narratives I use in my old age; this is fine since no narrative need be set in stone.

⁷ Schechtman (2014), 100. Besides Schechtman, adherents to the narrative self view are Daniel Dennett, Alisdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor.

I also don't mean to imply that *every* person must employ a narrative at all times. Galen Strawson, for example, insists that there are some people who never think of themselves in terms of any narrative whatsoever and who have no particular interest in either their past or their future. He says such people live Episodic lives (as opposed to Narrative or Diachronic lives), and he considers himself one of them.⁸ I don't doubt that there are such people and I won't argue that they are necessarily pathological or deficient in some way. What matters for our purposes is that the way of structuring and making sense one's life through (partial, overlapping, incomplete, contradictory, etc.) narratives is not uncommon and that many people do, as a matter of fact, engage in such a practice.

The fact that we construct our narratives should also not be taken to mean that we do so out of whole cloth. Far from it, in most cases we enter into the enterprise *in media res*, already finding ourselves working with existing narratives or bits of narratives. Part of this is due to the fact that, as a matter of development, each of us is subject to the narratives of other before we have the opportunity or ability to even think about who we are.⁹ By the time we do come to raise the question "who am I?" we have already been provided with some of the means to answer it. Thus, we tend to think of ourselves as boys or girls, as Americans or immigrants, as Christians or Muslims, and so on because *others* have already been treating us as such. In essence, nobody comes to answer the characterization question with a truly blank slate, and the initial ways in which we attempt to answer it is often a matter of figuring out how we answer that question *given* that others have already attempted to answer it for us.

Still, there is a big difference between how *others* have tried to answer the question for us—what narratives make us and our actions sensible to others—and how *we use* that material to answer

⁸ Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio*, no. XVII (2004): 428–52.

⁹ See Schechtman (2014) pg. 104 as well as Tamar Schapiro, "What Is a Child?," *Ethics* 109, no. 4 (1999): 715–38 on this topic.

the question for ourselves. When it comes to doing that, each one of us has the final word in endorsing or identifying with certain narratives and in rejecting others. We see this once again when we consider the moment in adolescence in which we first ask the question of who we are and begin to challenge or assert certain parts of the narratives that we have thus far been provided with. We can, for example, reject the narrative of being a boy or a girl provided to us by others, and refuse to employ a narrative that makes sense of ourselves through the lens of gender. Likewise, we can choose to affirm the narrative of the immigrant or of the racial or religious minority and make sense of ourselves with reference to those facts. In doing so, we exercise a unique authority that comes with the freedom to choose *what* facts about us are central to our understanding of ourselves—which ones constitute the lens through which we make sense of our world and our actions—which ones are peripheral, and which ones are irrelevant.¹⁰

The scope of this authority and under what conditions it is used should not be overstated. In the first place, although this authority is ultimately a matter of will, it does not always appear as though it can always be done *at will*. Some facts seem to impinge themselves on the individual so that, as it were, they demand to be included in that person's narrative. Trauma, in particular, seems to have this effect. Despite the fact that many trauma victims very much wish to get to a point in which their experience does not factor in how they understand themselves, they find it very difficult to do so by restructuring their psyche so that their trauma only plays a peripheral role in how they make sense in the world.

Relatedly, there seem to be other cases in which certain narratives or parts of narratives are hard to dislodge at will because they've been beneficial at one time and we've simply developed the habit of understanding ourselves through them. This can be true even if such narratives have

¹⁰ According to some existentialists (Sartre in particular) we have this authority by virtue of the fact that we are always ultimately free with respect to how we interpret our relation to any situation that we find ourselves.

become untenable or even if making sense of ourselves through them causes us quite a lot of distress. Consider, for example, the person who has spent the last twenty years trying to “make it” in Hollywood, going from failed audition to failed audition, unable to think of themselves in any other terms but those of an aspiring actor. Such a person may very well realize that the narrative they’re using isn’t doing them any favors, but nevertheless find themselves unable to abandon it, not because they lack *the authority* to do so, but rather because it still serves to organize and structure their life, and because in the absence of that structure there may very well be nothing that can be as effective in putting together the leftover scraps.

Separately, the authority that comes with being able to choose how to make sense of yourself does not entail having authority that *others* make sense of *you* in the same way. It’s a well-known tragic fact that the other might primarily (or exclusively) understand you in reference to those very things that you have deemed to be peripheral or irrelevant to how you understand yourself.¹¹ Inversely, although we have the authority to how we make sense of ourselves, we generally do not have the authority to determine how *others* make sense of themselves. We can cajole, entice, bribe, suggest, threaten, or propose that adopting such-and-such a narrative would work just as well in making sense of what they’re doing, but at the end of the day whether there’s any uptake from the other such that they do, in fact, end up making sense of themselves in a particular way is beyond any one individual’s power.

Nevertheless, the fact that each of us always holds on to the authority to make sense of ourselves does not mean that we cannot *share* that authority with others. We do so when we *treat* the

¹¹ Fanon’s narration of his experience in Paris in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2008)) comes to mind. There, Fanon describes how he was made to confront the fact that the Parisians can see him in no other light than that which brings into focus his status as a black man in a white city. The disconnect between how he has come to understand himself and how others understand him—and the fact that this disconnect appears ineliminable as long as the relation between colonizer and colonized remains—is in great part of the conflict in the work.

other as having the same kind of say that we do in the project in which we're engaged; i.e., the project of how we understand ourselves. To treat someone in this way does not mean completely submitting ourselves to the will of the other such that we alter our private narrative in whatever way they suggest—this is the path to abuse, alienation, and bad faith. Rather, it is to treat the other as a co-author in a shared project whose participation in it has the same weight as our own.

Consider, for example, the collaborative project of writing together. To write with someone else does not mean that one simply accepts what one's writing partner suggests uncritically. Nor is it to challenge everything that they contribute to the project because it doesn't fit perfectly with one's preestablished vision. Rather, to write collaboratively is to let the interplay between what each author brings to the project shape the final product, with each person being allowed to participate as equals in their work. Neither author is subordinated to the other, and both see each other as providing something to their shared goal.

Something similar occurs when we share authority over engaging with our private narrative with another. The analogy with collaborative writing falls apart when we consider that each one of us forever retains the final editorial word in our shared project, which, of course, does not happen in actual writing. As such, we can always erase and undo the work of the other once our conversation has ended and revert back to the way we made sense of ourselves prior to it. In light of this it is perhaps better to say that we share our authority with the other in an intimate conversation insofar as we temporarily suspend the standing prerogative we have to be the sole author of our narrative during the interaction. We recover that prerogative once the conversation is over, but nevertheless, it's its temporary suspension that serves as one of the structural features of the intimate conversation.

To sum up: the ‘private’, narrative self that is relevant to our discussion of the intimate conversation refers to the self that is constituted by the narratives we construct in response to the question “who am I?” in its characterization form. The narrative or set of narratives that is provided in answer to that question serves to make sense of ourselves, our actions, and the world around us, and to make us intelligible to ourselves and to others. Some of the narratives we construct in response to this question are constrained by what others will accept, but each one of us has final authority and say over which narratives we accept and endorse and which ones we reject.

In light of all this, to say that the intimate conversation is one in which two people are engaged in a cooperative evaluation or construction of the private self is just to say that these people are engaged in the cooperative evaluation or construction of that person’s narrative (or part of a narrative). Crucially, we do this with another when we share that final authority we have over who we ‘really’ are and treat the other as having an equal say in answering the question of “who am I?” In even simpler terms, it is to treat the other as capable of and authorized in determining who one is. In doing so, we need not *fully* cede the authority we have over determining the answer for ourselves, or treat the other as though they have *complete* authority over how we should understand ourselves. Rather, it is only to say, on the one hand, that the other’s input is taken as seriously as one’s own, and on the other hand, that the constraints that are normally put in place to prevent this from happening have been removed (if only temporarily and conditionally).

We can now restate the four features of an intimate conversation more clearly. To have an intimate conversation is to 1) disclose to another something reflective of the private self—of the narrative or features of the narrative that we tell ourselves in order to make sense of ourselves, our actions, and the world around us; 2) in doing so to (temporarily) share authority in the construction or evaluation of that narrative and to allow them to have the same say in it that we take ourselves to

have; 3) for the other to take up some of that authority and exercise it; and 4) in doing so to engage in the joint cooperative activity of constructing, maintaining, or evaluating that narrative.

IV. Some Virtues of the Account

The view presented here helps us understand what makes PARTY and GRIEF instances of intimate conversation and to clear up some misconceptions. Depending on how we fill in the details, GRIEF presents us with a case in which James has disclosed something private that is reflective of the narrative that he uses to make sense of himself (i.e., something reflective of his private self): perhaps something about his relationship with his father, or about his *pain* over the loss, and so on. In sharing this information with his friend, he also invites Steven to weigh in on this part of his narrative and to bring his understanding to bear on how James should understand the narrative (e.g., was he a good son? Could he have been a better one?). Finally, Steven takes up this invitation to share James' authority in engaging with the narrative, and gives his input, joining James in a cooperative activity. He can do this in different ways: he can challenge James on the narrative that's presented ("of course you were a good son, everyone feels like they didn't spend enough time with a loved one who's passed and such feelings aren't indicative of somehow being negligent."), or by affirming the narrative and showing that he, too, views things as James does.

A similar story can be told about PARTY. There, we have a situation in which one person shares something reflective of their private self—namely, their deepest hopes and fears—and invites the other to weigh in on those. The other party takes up that offer and in return signals that they, too, are willing to share in exchange, sending out a similar invitation to the first party. Both offers are accepted and the two engage in mutual construction of each other's narratives by reflecting on what each person has shared and showing how they understand what has been disclosed.

The view also allows us to explain why the conversation in which we disclose private information with the doctor are not intimate conversations. The first reason is that, as we noted earlier, we are much less likely to consider disclosures about our bathroom habits to be reflective of our private narrative since few people (if any) think of their bathroom habits as essential to how they make sense of themselves and the world around them. More generally, we tend to think of the matters we discuss with doctors as peripheral facts about us that are relevant to a problem that needs to be resolved with the help of a professional, and not as central elements of who they are. Thus, we can say that such conversations are not intimate because they lack feature 1 described above.

The second reason we don't view them as intimate is because although we expect the doctor to respond and comment on the private information that has been shared, the boundaries of how they're allowed to respond are very circumscribed. They are invited to bring in their perspective on the matter as a means of addressing the malady or affliction that bothers us, and not as a matter of engaging with our narrative. Indeed, any attempt by the doctor to suggest that your bathroom habits are reflective of who you are is likely to be immediately rebuffed and to bring the conversation to a screeching halt. In other words, our conversation is not intimate because it also lacks feature 2. Not only is what is shared not reflective of the private self, but in disclosing that information we do not share any *authority* with the doctor to engage with the narrative(s) that constitute that self.

Notice how different the situation is when we consider conversations with a therapist or psychoanalyst. The latter two are still medical professionals, yet intimate conversations with them are much more common than with one's gastroenterologist. We can see why by noting that one of the very purposes of having conversations in therapy is precisely to uncover, discuss, and evaluate aspect of oneself or how one thinks of oneself in order to overcome some difficulty. In other words,

it is built in to the patient/therapist dynamic that what will be discussed will be reflective of the private self and how the patient makes sense of themselves and the world around them.

Furthermore, the expectation that the therapist is invited to participate in the conversation and to use their expertise to provide feedback precisely about these matters is also built into that dynamic.

All this is fertile ground for intimacy.¹² Of course, even on such fertile ground intimate conversations are not guaranteed. If either the patient refuses to divulge any relevant information or if they refuse to share any authority with the therapist about how they understand themselves, then the conversation is unlikely to be intimate (and, non-incidentally, the session is unlikely to be very productive).

These observations also allow us to draw some practical conclusions about having intimate conversations. First, regardless of whether we want to have more or fewer intimate conversations, we can make an effort to be aware of the implicit narratives that we use to make sense of ourselves and which elements thereof are central to that task. In other words, we can make an effort to better understand our private self. In doing so we will be more cognizant of whether what we share with others is reflective of our private self or not. If we want to have more intimate conversations, we can purposefully disclose information that is reflective of the private self; and if we want to have fewer intimate conversations, we can try to avoid discussing such matters.¹³ We can also become more cognizant of whether or not we want to invite the other to share in the authority in engaging with our private narrative. If we want to keep intimacy at a minimum, for example, we can send clear

¹² Indeed, because of this, therapists need to be properly trained to resist some of the intimacy that can be generated lest the relationships between patient and therapist become *too* intimate and frustrate the therapeutic goals.

¹³ This does not mean that we will always be successful and we may find ourselves having an intimate conversation despite our intentions not to. For more of this see my discussion of *The Silence of the Lambs* in Pavel Nitchovski, “‘Hello, Clarice.’ (A Step) Towards a Philosophical Account of Intimacy” (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2018)

signals to the other that although we are sharing something private, their input in the conversation is not going to be taken seriously. This may very well bring the conversation to a halt, but it will also help with keeping the conversation from being intimate. If, however, we want to facilitate intimacy in the conversation, we can send signals that show that the input of the other will be taken quite seriously and will be instrumental in shaping how we understand ourselves in light of what's been shared.¹⁴

From the other side, we can also try to be more aware of whether the person with whom we're conversing is indeed inviting us to participate in an intimate conversation or whether, as in the case of the drunk at the bar mentioned in Section I, we are merely serving as a sounding board. If we're interested in increasing the intimacy in conversation, we can demonstrate our willingness to pick up the authority that has been shared with us, or send signals that we would be willing to do so if authority were to be shared. Alternatively, if we want to keep the conversation from becoming intimate, we can make it clear that we're not interested in cooperating in the engagement of the other's private narrative. We can, for example, signal that we are distracted, disinterested, or indifferent to the conversation, or simply steer the conversation away from topics that appear to be reflective of the other's private self.

One worry that might arise at this point is that the view I've presented makes the intimate conversation too conscious and purposeful of an activity. In other words, it appears that a person has to go into a conversation *intending* to share something private, then *intentionally* share authority with the other person, who must *consciously* accept that invitation and *consciously* engage in cooperative

¹⁴ I haven't specified what those signals are. One suggestion that seems plausible is that we look at the cues that psychologists use in measuring intimacy in the lab—e.g., maintaining eye contact, engaging in small physical contact, turning one's body towards the other, etc. These cues seem to be fairly good at tracking intimacy and the view I've presented here could explain why that's the case. They are cues that signal that we are being invited to engage in a more substantial interpersonal interaction and that the other is willing to take us seriously.

self-construction. This might seem too demanding, especially in light of PARTY in which we specify that the two parties enter the conversation aiming to relieve boredom.

I believe this worry can be assuaged by considering the fact that two people can be engaged in a goal directed activity (in this case, cooperative engagement with the private self) without being motivated to do so under that label or without intending to do so. What's required on this view is not that people enter into the conversation with the intention of structuring it in the way described, but that the conversation simply *have* that structure. At a minimum I believe this does require that one agrees to make certain moves—for example, the disclosing party does have to temporarily suspend one's prerogative to have the final interpretive word on one's private self, and the receiving party does have to actually accept the authority shared with them. But the two don't have to think that what they're doing is precisely *that*. One can, of course, temporarily suspend one's prerogative to self-construction by explicitly declaring they will do so, but they can do the same thing without realizing *that* they're doing it (perhaps because they're curious about what the other person says, because they trust them, etc.)

Likewise, one can take up the authority given to them by recognizing that they've been given that authority, or by acting as though they have that authority once certain cues have been given.¹⁵ In most intimate conversations this happens naturally and without any conscious intention to do so—one can even find oneself, as it were, swept along in a conversation only to realize in retrospect that they had an intimate conversation and that they did, in fact, allow for the perspective of the other to bear on how they understand themselves (one can also find oneself having had an intimate conversation without understanding at all why it was intimate!). As all this relates to PARTY, then,

¹⁵ This is always a tricky thing to do since it's possible to misread the relevant cues and the consequences of doing so often involve swiftly being put in one's proper place.

we can say that the conversation is intimate because it had the appropriate structure regardless of what the initial motivation for having it was.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter we've taken the first steps towards providing a full account of intimacy by providing an account of what makes conversations intimate. This has been a useful place to start because, in the first place, intimate conversations are common enough to be familiar to most people, and, in the second place, because such conversations can occur between strangers, thus, challenging the standard way we think about intimacy as built upon a pre-existing foundation. The view proposed holds that intimate conversations are such just in case they have a certain structure: something has been disclosed that is reflective of the private self of the disclosing party, this disclosure serves as both an invitation for the other to bring their understanding to bear on what has been disclosed and as a means of sharing authority in engaging with that private self, and the invitation and corresponding authority to do so has been taken up by the receiving party. When people engage in such a conversation they are also engaged in a cooperative construction of the private self of the disclosing party and this cooperative activity is what makes it intimate.

As it stands, this account is explicitly an account of *conversational* intimacy only and not a general account of intimacy as it appears in all of its guises. The latter is a broader phenomenon since, quite clearly, not every intimate interaction involves talking. Nevertheless, I believe this account gives us some insight into the nature of intimacy that we can use to provide a general account of intimacy. I turn to this task in the next two chapters, starting first with a general account of intimate interactions, and following it up with a general account of intimate relationships.

Chapter Two: The General View of Intimacy (Part I) – Intimate Interactions

Introduction

In the previous chapter we outlined an account of what makes certain conversations intimate, focusing specifically on the question of what makes it possible for two strangers to engage in a such an interaction. This account provided a key insight into one of the forms that intimacy can take, but it is not obvious that it can address all of them.

For example, many people report to have had intimate experiences with animals, newborn babies, while reading a book, or while being alone in nature. If we take such reports of intimacy to be accurate—as I think we ought to—then it’s clear that whatever it is that makes those interactions intimate is not due to the *conversations* that occur therein. In some such cases, no conversations occur; in others, such as ones with nature and animals, no conversations are even *possible*—no matter how much I talk to my dog Ted or the Grand Canyon, they never talk back (echoes and barks notwithstanding). Even where conversation is technically possible, other problems arise. Most notably, sex between two consenting adults can be intimate (as can embraces, kisses, and certain ‘meaningful’ looks), but when it is, it is *usually* not because of what is *said* during the act. Consequently, as long as our account of intimacy is narrowly limited to conversational contexts, it will fail to be a good *general* account of intimate interactions.

Quite separately, there is also the matter of intimate *relationships*. In the previous chapter we purposefully set aside any discussion of relationships aside by noting that intimate conversations do not necessarily have to take place within the context of an existing relationship; two people can meet, have an intimate conversation, then part ways forever. Although this is true for intimate

conversations, and, as I will argue, it is true for intimate interactions in general, it does not mean that there are no such things as intimate relationships. There are, of course, such relationships and we might want to say something about what makes *them* intimate, regardless of whether or not they are necessary to understand how intimacy in a conversation with stranger is possible. Likewise, we may also want to know what relation—if any—there is between intimate interactions and intimate relationships. We may wonder, for example, whether intimate relationships are such by virtue of the intimate interactions that occur therein, or whether these two domains of intimacy are autonomous.

We are thus faced with three major tasks: first, we want to provide a general account of intimate interactions that can accommodate non-conversational intimate interactions like the ones described above; second, we want to provide a similarly general account of intimate relationships that can explain what makes for intimate friendships, intimate love affairs, and so on; and third, we want to explain the relationship between intimate interactions and intimate relationships.

This is a tall order, but one that we can deal with handily. This is because although on the face of it the conversational model of intimacy appears incapable of accommodating the problems outlined here, it rests on a core idea that can be carried over beyond the conversational context. In what follows, I will argue that the very same dynamic of sharing authority with the other to engage with one's personal narrative that is used to explain intimate conversations can be used to explain non-conversational cases of intimacy as well. I call this dynamic 'taking the intimate stance.' Roughly speaking, to take the intimate stance towards another is to *treat* them as sharing authority with respect to one's private narrative, or, to put it in terms of the last chapter, to treat them as cooperatively engaging in answering the question "who am I?" With the idea of the intimate stance in hand we will be able to handle these difficult cases and provide a general account of intimate

interactions. This will be the task of this chapter. We will then turn to a separate discussion of intimate relationships in Chapter 3.

I'll begin by taking a closer look at why a strict application of the conversational model won't work for non-verbal cases of intimacy as it stands. In light of the arguments presented there, I will make some necessary modifications to the conversational model in Section II. This will allow us to preserve the valuable insights found in Chapter 1 while also giving us path towards the more general account of intimate interactions that we're seeking. In essence, I will argue that what's shared in both intimate conversations and non-verbal cases of intimacy is that one or both people have taken the intimate stance towards the other in their interaction. Section III explains what it means to take the intimate stance towards another, and Section IV will return to the problems raised in Section I to show how the new modified account can handle them. In particular, I will argue that by focusing on when the intimate stance is and isn't taken, we will be able to account for cases of one-sided intimacy, cases of non-verbal intimacy, and when and why sex is intimate. Before we get to any of that, however, let's take a closer look the limitations of the conversational model.

I. Parent and Child: Problems with a Straightforward Application

Consider the following case:

BABY: Mary has just given birth to her first-born daughter, Hannah. After swaddling her, the nurse brings Hannah back into Mary's room where she's able to hold her daughter for the first time. She takes the baby and places her on her chest, feeling her little heartbeat against her skin.

I take it that BABY is a paradigmatic example of an intimate interaction between mother and child.

It also has two important features that make it worth considering: in the first place, it is a clear example of an intimate interaction that does not involve a conversation—as such, it is an example of what I might call 'non-verbal' intimacy which we have already acknowledged pose a *prima facie*

problem for a strictly conversational model of intimacy. In the second place, I argue, it is also an example of what we might call ‘one-sided’ intimacy, and thus fits into the category of intimate interactions that occur with animals, books, and in nature. This one example, then, lets us get a grasp on both of the problems that confront the conversational model discussed so far. The hope is that if we can explain what makes *this* interaction intimate, we will be able to say something about both of the categories to which it belongs, and hence, to make some progress.

As mentioned, a straightforward application of the conversational model will not work here for several reasons. First, and quite obviously, there is no conversation between Mary and Hannah, and thus, no clear way to see how the model could be applied directly. Nevertheless, one could reasonably argue that even if there’s no conversation, something is *communicated* by at least one of the parties involved, and, thus, the possibility remains that something is also *disclosed* by them. And if we can get to the point where disclosure is in the mix, then the conversational model may still have some legs.

However, for this proposal to work, we would have to be able to specify two things: *who* is doing the disclosing, and *what* is being disclosed. Here we run into some problems. Regarding the question of *who* is disclosing, it strikes me as implausible to say that Hannah (the baby) could be disclosing much of anything given her current psychological condition. Of course, we can say that by crying, for example, Hannah discloses her distress, or her desire to be swaddled to those around her. However, this kind of “disclosure” strikes me as a minor abuse of the term. Used in this way we can also say that my air-conditioner “discloses” that the temperature has risen above a certain point by kicking in, or that the dark clouds on the horizon “disclose” the possibility of rain in the

afternoon.¹ This sense of disclosure seems radically different from the sense of disclosure considered in the intimate conversation. The latter, relevant sense wasn't a matter of mere signaling to internal or external conditions (i.e., what we might say Hannah's crying amounts to), but rather contained an element of intentionality that had its source in the disclosing party. In other words, it seemed to refer to an activity that was, at the very least under the control of the agent performing it.² Given her status as a newborn, it seems unlikely that *anything* Hannah does is under her control at all, and hence, that Hannah is not 'disclosing' in the relevant sense.

Even if we set this concern aside and grant that Hannah discloses *something* to her mother by resting on her chest, we face the problem of specifying *what* is being disclosed. Recall that on the conversational model it isn't enough just to disclose *anything* in conversation. Rather, for the conversation to be intimate, what is disclosed must be reflective of the private narrative through which the disclosing party makes sense of themselves and their place in the world. Once again, given Hannah's limited capacities, it strikes me as highly implausible to suppose that she has anything like a private narrative at all. Hannah is simply not in a position to make sense of anything—including herself—through narrative or any other means. Given proper development, she will eventually be

¹ The allusion to Grice's two senses of "meaning" here is not incidental. Although to disclose something by doing x is to do something different than to *mean* something by doing x (and hence, why I take it that treating disclosure something as *meaning* something constitutes a minor abuse of the term), the overlap is substantial. H. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Arts*, 1975, 41–58

² This is not to imply that even in conversations *everything* that is disclosed *must* be intentionally done so. After all, we frequently say *more* than we mean to. But in those cases, we can at least say that I disclose something unintentionally (say, how depressed the harsh winter has made me) by disclosing something *intentionally* (e.g., constantly talking about how little sunlight there has been in the last couple of weeks). This is more than we can say of Hannah. This is also a separate matter from the question of whether *intimacy* is always something done intentionally. The point here is simply that there's no *disclosure* from Hannah that can be mapped onto on the previous model.

capable of doing this, but it seems like a stretch to attribute such cognitively complex behaviors to her directly out of the womb.³

Because of these problems, the conversational model seems like a non-starter when it comes to Hannah. That being said, the same problems do not arise for Mary (Hannah's mother). We can reasonably suppose that she *can* and *does* make sense of herself through at least some kind of private narrative or set of narratives, and, given what we said earlier, it seems possible that Mary could disclose something intentionally by embracing her child for the first time. Likewise, we can suppose that in doing so Mary also invites Hannah to share in constructing how Mary makes sense of her life (knowing full well, of course, that Hannah is unlikely to do much to take up that offer). Thus, Mary, at least, seems to meet many of the conditions specified in the conversational model.

The fact that the problems that arise for Hannah do not arise for Mary is important. At the very least, it suggests that whatever it is that makes the interaction between mother and daughter intimate at this point, it is something that has to do with what *Mary* does and how she relates to Hannah, and not something that, as it were, has its origins in Hannah, or in something that the two do *together*. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that the straightforward application of the conversational model offered in the previous chapter goes through. This is because even if we grant that it's Mary who discloses something reflective of her private narrative to Hannah, and that in doing this she invites Hannah to share authority over that narrative, the conversational model specifies that this authority must be taken up by the receiving party and result in engagement with the narrative. And,

³ Developmental psychologists place the ability to employ narratives in self-construction at around 2 years of age. See William Damon, Richard M. Lerner, and Nancy Eisenberg, eds., *Handbook of Child Psychology: Social, Emotional, and Personality Development*, 6th ed. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2006) and especially Ch. 9: The Self.

once again, it seems unreasonable to suppose that Hannah is in any position to take up any authority given to her or to engage in any cooperative activity whatsoever.⁴

A straightforward and strict application of the conversational model in this context, then, appears to give us the wrong results. Taken as a general explanatory model of intimate interactions, it forces us to say that BABY is not an intimate interaction because the authority shared with Hannah is not picked up. And, because of BABY shares features with many other cases, it also concludes that there are no intimate interactions with nature, animals, books, and so on. It is slightly better disposed to handle cases of non-verbal cases of intimacy such as those involving sex between two consenting adults since we can reasonably say that such acts can involve the relevant kind of disclosure involving the relevant kind of sharing of authority. However, even in those cases the model seems rather ill-fitting: is it really the non-verbal *disclosure* during sex that makes it intimate? And is sex only intimate when the other takes up an authority given to them through that disclosure? The answer to both of these questions is, at best, unclear, and at worst plainly false. Generally speaking, we seem to lose sight of the phenomenology of the intimacy that is actually experienced in those moments by trying to make them conform to the phenomenology of the intimacy that we experience in conversation.

At this point we have four options: first, we can reject our intuitions about the intimacy of cases like BABY and the intimacy of sex and retain the conversational account. Alternatively, we can retain our intuitions about those cases and instead reject the conversational account of intimacy. Third, we can adopt a disjunctive account or take something like a Wittgensteinian family

⁴ Mary, of course, more than likely knows this which might make her disclosure and the offer to share authority here puzzling. At best, it seems that she's simply pretending to engage in certain kinds of behaviors as she would with other people who could reciprocate. I think that's right and will expand on this point shortly, but for the moment I just want to point out that regardless of this particular puzzle about her motivation, the model still doesn't work.

resemblance approach to intimacy that rejects the assumption that there's anything in that unites our varying intuitions. Or, finally, we can try to refine the conversational model in light of what has been pointed out, preserving the core insights it provides while abstracting from the particular form for which it was designed. What is the appropriate step to take?

The first option strikes me as a non-starter. Even if we think that the conversational model is a good one for handling intimacy in conversations (as I obviously think it is), our account should respect the strong intuitions about these other cases. The second option seems less implausible than the first, but it seems premature at this point to give up on what has been gained from the conversational model and start from scratch—at the very least, it doesn't seem obvious that we ought to give up on those insights before we can be sure that nothing can be salvaged from them. Indeed, in light of these observations, it seems reasonable to take the third, Wittgensteinian approach, but, again, as a response to our failure to find something like a unifying account. What I propose at this point, therefore, is that we take the fourth approach and see if we can give a modified version of the conversational model that attempts to account for the diversity of our intuitions. And if it should turn out that *that* account is an implausible one, then we can turn to the other two options.

II. Modifying the Conversational Model

Recall that the move that allowed us to make headway in the question of what it takes for a conversation to be intimate was to note that the intimate conversation appeared to aim at a certain goal. I argued that it is not the mere disclosure of (private) information that made certain conversations intimate, but rather, what is *done through* the disclosure of that information that makes the difference. Conversations become intimate when information is disclosed such that it a) serves

to invite the other to participate in a cooperative engagement with the narrative they use to make sense of themselves, and b) that kind of invitation is taken up.

We can note at this point, however, that this model presents a kind of idealized situation in which everything has, as it were, gone right. In reality, things are always much messier, and it is by looking at some of the messier cases that we can get a better sense of how we might modify the conversational model to respond to the challenge that interactions like BABY pose for it.

i. Breakdowns and Mismatches

There are a couple of ways in which the conversational model can break down in its current form. In the first place, something could be disclosed by one party that *might* very well be reflective of that party's private narrative, but in such a way that it is unclear to the receiving party (the one to whom it is being disclosed) whether this is in fact the case.

Take, for example, how various people deal with traumatic experiences. On the whole, people tend to be reluctant to speak to their trauma to just anyone, and when they do, they often treat those traumatic experiences as ones that have had a profound impact on them. Unsurprisingly, traumatic experiences also have an effect on how people understand *themselves* in relation to that trauma. Thus, when people speak about their trauma it is not unusual for *others* to treat them as engaging in precisely the kind of disclosure that is necessary for an intimate conversation to take place.

However, this is not always true. Consider, for example, the fact that when I was a child I fell on a radiator and burning my hands and face. For some people, such an experience can be very traumatizing, and, in fact, I have also been told that it was traumatic for me at the time as well. By this point, however, this event plays absolutely no role in how I understand myself and I speak freely

about it as just something that may as well have happened to someone else.⁵ Someone who hears me talk about being burned, then, may very well think that I'm disclosing something reflective of my private narrative in doing so, but they would be making an innocent mistake. My disclosure here just isn't playing the same role as it is for someone who is still traumatized by the experience or for whom the trauma made a huge impact (e.g., someone whose face was seriously and irreparably scarred). Most attempts to treat my disclosure as an overture in which I invite the other to engage with my private narrative, then, will also be a mistake.

Nevertheless, we might think that someone who makes such a mistake and attempts to engage in the construction of the narrative that they assume this experience factors in, is still doing *something* that's relevant to intimacy and that leaves a kind of remainder for our judgments thereof. I'll return to this point shortly.

A second, related way in which the ideal conversational model can break down are cases in which something that is in fact reflective of an individual's private narrative is disclosed, but in which that disclosure does not constitute an invitation to share in the collaborative project of engaging with the person's narrative. A crystal-clear example of this is the recent testimony in front of the Senate by Dr. Christine Blasey-Ford against (then) Supreme Court Justice Nominee Brett Kavanaugh regarding the alleged sexual abuse she suffered at his hands. By her own lights, the events of that night have been both traumatic and have had a profound effect on at least parts of the narrative through which she understands herself. Thus, Dr. Blasey-Ford's disclosure fits the

⁵ It may be argued that I'm severely underestimating the trauma of this event. Perhaps with enough psychoanalysis it may turn out that it really *did* shape me in a profound way, but that I've been exceptionally good at repressing it. This might be so, but it's important to note that I really *don't* see myself as shaped by this event *as of now*, and the narratives that are relevant for our discussion are precisely those that we use to make sense of ourselves *to ourselves*. I could perhaps be *convinced* to make sense of myself through this traumatic event (this would be the role of the psychoanalysis) in the same way that I could be convinced to make sense of myself through any number of other narratives (e.g., being a sinner, an idiot, etc.). But it does matter that I don't understand myself that way now.

parameters needed for the conversational model. Nevertheless, it is apparent to anyone who watched the proceedings that in doing so she was *not* thereby inviting the members of the committee to engage in that private narrative. Anyone thinking otherwise would be making a serious mistake.

In Dr. Blasey-Ford's case the refusal to extend an invitation to others through one's testimony is obvious. Other times, however, these signals can be subtle, tentative, and ambiguous. In some such cases, the party to whom the information is disclosed may find themselves in a similar situation to the first kind of breakdown discussed above. In other cases, whether the invitation has been made is ambiguous *to the person doing the disclosing*.

This may sound odd at first glance, but I think it happens quite frequently. We can see this when we consider cases in which we are still “testing the waters” with the other, and checking to see if the person we're talking to is up to the task of engaging with our narrative. In those cases, we might tentatively share a tiny bit about matters that are reflective of our private narrative in order to see how the other responds. Often, this is matter of checking to see if the other is to be *trusted* in the activity—intimacy is a *risky* activity, and by verifying that the other is trustworthy we attempt to shield ourselves from the dangers that it involves.⁶

That being said, not all cases in which we test the waters are ones in which we're checking to see that the other is trustworthy. We may, for example, generally trust the other, but nevertheless test to see if they are up to the task. We might not be worried that the other will abuse us or take advantage of the vulnerability that intimacy involves, but rather be concerned that the other lacks the emotional maturity to get be intimate. Although this is related to trust insofar as trusting another with a task seems to entail a belief that they are, at the very least, capable of performing the task, it is a separate matter. Similarly, we might worry that although the other may be trustworthy insofar as

⁶ I discuss the dangers of intimacy in detail in Chapter 4.

they wouldn't abuse their position as collaborator, our very disclosure may be harmful to *them* or to the relationship between the two of us.

Both of these types of cases can be illustrated if we imagine a son who idolizes his father and thinks of him as the model of a loving husband, but who, unbeknownst to the son, has been having an affair with another woman. The father may be reluctant to talk about his affair with his son, not because he thinks that his son isn't *trustworthy* but for the two reasons specified above: in the first place, he may worry that his son is not up to the task of receiving the authority that comes with engaging with his father's narrative; and in the second place, he may worry that to be made aware of this part of his father's life would destroy *the son's* understanding of who he is and the nature of their relationship—indeed, he may feel that this is just too great of a burden to place on him. Nevertheless, depending on their relationship (and the maturity of the son), we can still imagine the father *wanting* to disclose information about his affair to his son by making small overtures, tentative passes, and so on, simply to test whether his worries are warranted. He might, for example, say something like “being married is not exactly what I thought it would be,” disclosing in that statement something that is reflective of how he's come to think of himself in relation to his marriage and the affair, without it being clear to either himself or the son whether he has therefore invited him to explore the matter.

A third category of cases involve those in which one person discloses something reflective of their private narrative that also constitutes the relevant kind of invitation to the other, but which fails to receive any uptake from them. As with other kinds of breakdowns, sometimes such failure is unambiguous and the other person explicitly says or shows that they're not interested in participating. In other cases, however, the failure of uptake from the other party may be unclear. In a parallel to the father/son case, we can imagine someone who recognizes that an invitation has been

made, but who isn't quite sure whether *they're* up to the task. The son in the previous example may be sharp enough to suspect that something is going on with his father—indeed, he may even have an inkling about what his father wants to say—and feel drawn to helping his father while still being unsure of whether it's a good idea to do so. He may worry that he won't be capable of handling the responsibility that such an activity involves, he may worry about how the relationship with his father may change if what he suspects is true is confirmed, how the relationship with his *mother* may change as a result, and so on. In the moment such worries may fail to be decisive to the question of whether he will *eventually* take up the invitation extended to him, so he may respond only tentatively, engaging just enough to keep the conversation going while still keeping the door cracked to the possibility of doing so later.

Finally, there are also cases in which the initiating party pulls back—they extend the invitation to the other to engage with their narrative, the other responds appropriately, but the initiating party realizes that they don't want to continue. This can occur even if the one to whom the disclosure is made is both trustworthy and capable of the task at hand.⁷

To sum up, we have four general (though not exhaustive) ways in which the intimacy of conversations can diverge from the ideal conversational model: i) something may be disclosed that *looks* like it is reflective of an individual's narrative but is not; ii) something may be disclosed that *is* reflective of an individual's narrative but which doesn't constitute an invitation to the other to engage with the narrative; iii) something may be disclosed to another that is reflective of an individual's narrative but it may be unclear to *either* party whether an invitation has been made (or

⁷ These kinds of dynamics seem to be characteristic of invitations in general. For a related discussion, see Quill Kukla, "That's What She Said: The Language of Sexual Negotiation," *Ethics* 129, no. 1 (2018): 70–97 and specifically section IV.a where they discuss the pragmatics of invitation.

such invitation has been made or taken up only tentatively); and iv) an invitation may be made that is the retracted.

Despite the fact that examples in each of these categories do not strictly fit the ideal model, there seems to be something important about the very *attempt* of one (or both) persons to engage in the narrative of the other that is important. There appears to be a kind of remainder that has to be accounted for and that is relevant to the understanding the intimacy (or lack thereof) in the interaction.

I believe that this remainder is best explained by the fact that in these kinds of cases the ideal structure that I've argued constitutes the ideal intimate conversation is particularly in place, but hasn't quite come together. We can recognize the *attempt* to achieve the aim to the intimate conversation by one of the parties as pulling us to judge that *something* at least resembling intimacy has occurred that warrants recognition. In this respect, the phenomenon in question looks a bit like that of unrequited love. Ideally, we might say, love is reciprocated; however, there's something important about understanding love that we shouldn't lose track of even in those cases in which there is no reciprocity. To simply say that unrequited love is *not* love is to miss out on a significant dimension of how love appears between real people in non-ideal situations. Likewise, even when we talk about reciprocated love, it is rarely the case that the two people who love each other do so to the same extent, in the same way, and to the same degree. Those who fail to acknowledge these facts would be making some egregious mistakes and, ultimately, failing to get a good understanding of love. The same, I believe, can be said about intimacy.

ii. The Conversations Model Modified: A Spectrum of Intimacy

In light of the messy reality of cases like the ones discussed, I propose that look at the intimacy of conversations as positioned along a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum are those

cases of intimate conversations that we've come to treat as ideal cases and which were covered in the previous chapter. We can call these conversations involving "full" or "reciprocal" intimacy. At the other end of the spectrum are those conversations in which none of the elements of the ideal account are present and which make up the vast majority of conversations we have with others. In between these two extremes are those conversations involving "partial," "one-sided," "unrequited," or "ambiguous" cases of intimacy which have been highlighted by the examples we've looked at so far.⁸

Crucially, what gives the one-sided cases of intimate conversations their place in the spectrum is the fact that either, on the one hand, an invitation *has been made* by one party but has not been picked up by the other party, or, on the other hand, the receiving party has *attempted* to engage with the narrative of the other.⁹ In either of these cases the parties take on the cooperative attitude that constitutes half of the full picture of intimacy and *treats them as though* they were engaging in the cooperative activity that marks the (full) intimate conversation.

To put the matter in a different way, we can say that each "takes a step" towards the other and opens up to the possibility that the two will engage in the narrative that constitutes the private

⁸ Of course, not all interactions that fall between these two extremes of the spectrum are equal in terms of intimacy. Different cases may fall closer to one side than to another. For example, a case in which one person has disclosed something reflective of their narrative to another and granted them authority, but in which the authority is not picked up because of a benign misunderstanding on the receiver's part is closer to the ideal end of the spectrum than the end in which there is no intimacy. By contrast, a case in which one person acts as though they have been granted authority despite clear evidence that the disclosing party has done no such thing is much closer to the non-intimate end of the spectrum than to the other end. Similarly, cases involving minimal attempts at intimacy would be found near the non-intimate end rather than near the fully intimate one.

⁹ This is not to imply that one can engage in one-sided intimacy simply by being extremely domineering or ignoring the obvious rebuffs from the other side. There is a difference between harassing someone and engaging one-sided intimacy, though I believe the line between the two is less clear-cut than we might believe. Indeed, what can begin as an intimate conversation can very quickly begin to feel like harassment when we realize that the other has overstepped a boundary that we may not have realized we had.

self.¹⁰ Importantly, whether the two parties “meet” in the middle is never guaranteed—one may take the step towards the other only to find them turning their back. In this respect, we can once again see why so much of intimacy seems to be fraught with risk and vulnerability. Indeed, there is always a risk in taking a step towards the other and one can never be absolutely certain that things will go as planned.

I believe that when we become aware that such a step has been taken—whether by ourselves or through the other—we also become aware of being engaged in one-sided intimacy. In turn, we can also say that what pulls us in many cases to have the judgment that there is something intimate in, for example, the *attempt* to disclose something reflective of the private self is precisely our sensitivity to the fact that such a step has been taken.

Let’s take stock. If all that has been said is correct, we now have a subtler and more complicated model of the intimate conversation. This model preserves the insight we gained from our analysis in chapter one insofar as the conversations that were deemed intimate there still count as intimate and for the same reason that specified there. However, we are also now aware of the many ways in which the intimate conversation can fail to meet the ideal described, but for which it still seems appropriate to say that *some* dimension of intimacy is still present. What pulls us toward the judgment that something intimate has happened is the fact that one party has taken the step towards the other (or that both parties have, but things have gone awry); what pulls us away from that judgment is the fact that the two haven’t met in the middle.

¹⁰ Here I’m very much influenced by some of Martin Buber’s remarks in the first part of *I and Thou* (Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Touchstone, 1971)). Indeed, it’s not unfair to say that I see quite a lot of overlap between my discussion of intimacy and Buber’s “speaking the Thou.”

If this is correct, then we can say that what makes a difference is precisely whether such steps are taken or not—when they are, we feel that there is some intimacy, and when they’re not (or when it’s unclear whether they have been taken), we feel that the intimacy is somehow diminished. In turn, this allows us to see the very same phenomenon from a different perspective and to claim that at the *core* of the intimate conversation is precisely the dynamic of taking those steps. With this insight in place, we can give the general account of intimate interactions that account for cases like BABY, intimate sex, and so general, non-verbal cases of intimacy.

III. The Intimate Stance: Taking a Step Towards the Other

The modified version we’ve just considered looks at intimacy as a matter of taking a certain attitude towards the other in conversation. I call adopting this attitude “taking the intimate stance” towards the other.¹¹ To take the intimate stance is just *to treat the other* as if they were appropriately disposed to engage in the cooperative activity of engaging with one’s private narrative. In conversation, one can take this stance through their relevant disclosure to the other, or, alternatively, one can also take the stance in their role as hearer by treating the disclosing party as though they (the hearer) had been invited to participate in that activity (i.e., as though the discloser had taken the intimate stance towards them). In either case, the stance can be taken even if the other does not *actually* engage in the cooperative activity. In those cases, the intimacy of the conversation falls somewhere on the spectrum between the non-intimate and the fully intimate, sometimes deserving the name of ‘one-sided’ intimacy, and other times coming closer to one of the two extremes of the spectrum.

¹¹ The term “stance” here is intended to conjure up the image of taking something like a karate stance. In the same sense that taking a karate stance involves adjusting one’s body in such-and-such a way, so taking the intimate stance involves changing one’s perception of the other in such-and-such a way.

The suggestion I want to make is that this focus on the intimate stance is not only enough to help us understand conversational intimacy in greater detail, but is also enough to get us to account for the difficult one-sided and non-verbal intimate interactions. If we can see how all intimate interactions are a matter of one or both parties taking the intimate stance towards the other, and if we can see verbal discourse as just one *particular* way in which this is done through conversation—i.e., as just one of the means by which one can take the intimate stance in that specific context—then we’re in good shape. To do this, however, we have to say a bit more about the intimate stance and what it means to treat someone or something in the way specified by that stance.

i. Treating as Perceiving

Generally speaking, it is fair to say that for X to treat Y as Z is simply for X to direct certain behaviors towards Y that would be appropriate or fitting if Y were Z (regardless of whether Y actually is Z). For the *maître d’* to treat me like someone who doesn’t belong in the restaurant is for them to look down their nose at me, to refuse to seat me, to ask me to leave, to call security, and so on. The *maître d’* may be right to treat me this way—I may have shown up to the restaurant shirtless or drunk, for example—or they may simply be exhibiting a bit of classism. But in either case, as long as they display these behaviors, we have grounds to say that I’ve been treated as though I don’t belong.

This much seems true. However, what’s of interest to us is the specific question of what it means for X to treat Y *as though they were engaging with their private narrative*. The brief foregoing analysis suggests that to do so is for X to behave towards Y as would be appropriate if they were engaging with their narrative. But this isn’t exactly informative unless we know what behavior is *fitting* given this kind of activity.

To put it bluntly, although I think there are a number of overt behaviors that we can point to as signaling that this is happening in a particular context and interaction, the answer to our question is not going to be found in cataloguing them. Rather, I propose that the behavior that is fitting here is an internal one that precedes the externally observable ones. In particular, the behavior in question is that of *seeing* the other in a certain kind of light.

In saying that seeing someone as such-and-such is an internal behavior I have something very much in mind like what Iris Murdoch describes in “The Idea of Perfection.”¹² There, she presents us with the following example which I quote at length:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D’s accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him...However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: ‘I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.’ Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. If we take D to be now absent or dead this can make it clear that the change is not in D’s behavior but in M’s mind. D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. And as I say, *ex hypothesi*, M’s outward behavior, beautiful from the start, in no way alters.¹³

What we see here is a clear example of a mental act that in no way cashes out in any outwardly observable behavior and which does not depend on there being such behaviors (hypothetical or otherwise).

¹² Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2001).

¹³ Ibid. pg. 16-17

Now, Murdoch's use of the example has a different aim than the one that interests us here. In particular, it matters greatly to Murdoch that the attention that M pays to D is a careful and *just* attention and that it's an *honest* and *moral* attempt to see D in a *good* light. This matters because on Murdoch's view it is precisely moral concepts that escape the restraints of what she calls the behaviorist-existential framework that has dominated philosophy since Wittgenstein. Whether Murdoch is right about this claim is not directly relevant. The only thing that matters for our purposes is simply the claim that one can bring about changes in how one relates to another without engaging in any specific outwardly observable behavior, but simply by looking at them in a certain light.¹⁴

This is the sense in which I say that the behavior that is appropriate to the intimate stance is a matter of seeing the other in a certain way. In saying this, of course, I don't mean to imply that other observable behaviors don't follow this internal one—after all, an intimate conversation requires *conversing* and in the absence of *that* behavior, it can hardly be considered as such. However, I want to say that the outward behavior is what makes an intimate conversation a *conversation*, but what makes it *intimate* is the taking of the intimate stance. That latter activity isn't readily observable, but it is nevertheless something that is done by an individual and that is of paramount importance to any intimate activity.

ii. Authority and Equality

Still, the question remains about precisely the way in which the other must be seen in this light. Perhaps unsurprisingly given what has been said so far, I propose that the light in which the

¹⁴ I treat Murdoch's use of visual language here as metaphorical and as intending to capture the notion of choosing to relate to another person in a different way simply by how one thinks of the other. I recognize that the use of such metaphors often has ableist connotations, but I hope it's clear that this is not my intention here and that my use of it is also metaphorical and only kept so as to read easier in connection to Murdoch's own phrasing.

other should be seen when taking the intimate stance towards them is the light of someone with whom a certain kind of authority has been shared over the question “who am I?”

The notion that intimacy requires the sharing of authority may rub people the wrong way for two reasons. In the first place, some people might think that the very idea of authority is anathema to anything like intimacy. For someone to have authority over another seems to imply that the former has certain prerogatives over the latter that force the latter to submit to their will. This is the sense in which, for example, someone might say that a police officer has authority over a motorist—the former has the authority by virtue of the fact that they have been granted the prerogative to pull people over, request documentation, and use lethal force should they feel threatened. By contrast, the motorist lacks that same authority both with respect to the officer and other fellow motorists because he does not enjoy the same prerogatives. From this point of view, authority is something one has it at the *expense* of the another who lacks it and who must submit to it.

This, of course, is only one way of looking at the notion of authority, and I hope it’s clear that this is not the sense in which I’m using the term in talking about intimacy. There’s another sense in which one can grant authority to another not by *submitting* to the other, but by *extending* certain privileges to that person. It is in this different sense that I speak of treating the other as having authority in the context of intimacy.

This point can be made clearer with an example. I take it as a given that each of us has certain authority over what goes on with our bodies and specifically who is allowed to touch them, do things to them, for how long, and in what way. In most everyday situations, this authority is absolute for each of us—you can’t touch my thigh, stroke my hair, or even *look* at me naked. In other, specific contexts, however, this is allowed: if you and I are lovers, for example, each of those things is something that you can do (in certain contexts, of course) precisely because I have shared

the prerogative I have to be the sole person who manipulates my body with you. In those cases, it's obvious that your being granted this authority is not a matter of my *submission* to your will and your permission to do such-and-such to me is not a matter gaining something at my *expense*. If anything, you are granted something like a privileged status with respect to others who are not afforded it. Likewise, it is obvious that in granting you this authority, I do not therefore lose my own—quite clearly, I still retain the authority to do the things that *you* have been allowed to do and which others are not (and a whole lot of other things besides). Crucially, I also retain the authority to revoke *your* privileges should I choose.

It is this latter sense of granting another authority that I suggest is relevant in the intimate stance, specifically as it relates to engaging with one's private narrative. There are, of course, many instances in which we might grant another the prerogative to have the same kind of authority that we have with respect to our bodies which do not therefore make for an intimate interaction. To return to different example from Chapter 1, when I go to the doctor's office I grant the nurse practitioner the prerogative to prod me with all sorts of tools. Nobody else who doesn't occupy a similar role is allowed to do the same. Nevertheless, those interactions are not intimate ones so long as the authority over *who I am* is not shared in that process. As long as I keep a strict division between *who I am* and what one is doing to me, I can allow all sorts of things to be done without any of them being intimate. If, on the other hand, I share the authority to define who I am with another, then even the most trivial interactions can become intimate.

The second reason this notion of sharing authority tends to rub people the wrong way is because the notion of sharing *equal* authority with another strikes some as being too strong. People who have this worry might find nothing problematic with intimacy involving the granting of certain prerogatives to the other, but might bristle at the notion that that the prerogatives have to be

anything like an *equal* authority as the one that one has over oneself. What intimacy requires, they might insist, is something like taking the other seriously in the cooperative venture, and *that* falls much shorter of *equality*.

One reason for raising this objection might rests on a conception of equality that is related to the previous worry about authority. In other words, one might reason as follows: if one were to treat the other as having the *same* kind of authority as oneself, and if one *always* has authority over oneself, then to grant someone *that* authority is to permanently subjugate oneself to the will of the other. In light of this, it seems much more reasonable to suggest that something short of equality is required here since intimacy doesn't require something quite that dramatic. Hence, the talk of taking the other *seriously*.

The first thing to point out here is that the problem rests on the assumption that the extension of equal authority is somehow temporally unbounded, such that granting it once in a particular context allows it to cascade for perpetuity. But it's not clear why this should follow. Consider, again, the prerogative that is extended to the other in the medical context. There, I grant the other the prerogative to do things to me that normally only I'm allowed to do to myself. However, in doing so I neither lose the authority I have over my own body (it's not as though in granting the nurse the authority to stick me with a needle, I lose the authority to stick myself with a needle), nor is it true that the authority extended to the nurse to administer medication goes beyond the particular hospital visit. The nurse's prerogative to treat me in such-and-such a way ends at a certain point—usually, when I'm discharged from the hospital—and does not extend beyond that. One way of putting the matter, then, is to say that the authority shared with the nurse is withdrawn at the conclusion of the particular task which brings the two of us together and for the sake of which it is shared. In the nurse case the exit conditions are clear and formal, but the same dynamic

can be observed in cases where they're less so. Lovers and friends, for example, grant each other certain prerogatives that are revoked once their relationships end even if it's not always exactly clear when that end has been reached.¹⁵

The simple point here is that the granting of equal authority here for the sake of engaging in one's private narrative does not entail anything like a permanent equality with respect to this task. At least in theory, one can always exit from such arrangements even in media res (much in the same way that one can always withdraw consent even during sex).

Our skeptic may agree with all this, but still fail to be convinced. Their problem isn't that granting the other equal status leads us down a slippery slope, they might say, but, quite literally, that intimacy just requires something less than equal authority. To use an analogy, it's certainly true that if one is thirsty, one can relieve that thirst by drinking the purest imported mineral water from the most pristine mountain springs—but it's also true that one can do the same thing by drinking straight from the tap. If someone were to insist that the former is required to do the job, they wouldn't be strictly mistaken (after all, it is sufficient!), but they would be wrong in thinking it's necessary given the alternatives available. Likewise, it might be true that sharing equal authority over one's narrative is sufficient for intimacy, but it would be wrong to think that it's necessary—taking the other “seriously” is enough.

I'm not unsympathetic to this objection, but it appears to hang on just how we cash out what taking the other seriously involves. What we know at this moment is only that, by stipulation, to take the other seriously is supposedly to treat them as having less-than equal authority during some interaction. However, I'm not sure that this is correct and, indeed, I'm not sure that the

¹⁵ Two people may, for example, continue to occasionally sleep together, live together, and have the same kind of conversations with each other even after they break up.

disagreement here isn't merely a verbal one. I suspect that what other people might want to call "taking someone seriously with respect to x" just is what I call "giving the other equal authority as oneself with respect to x."¹⁶

What would be helpful at this point is a positive account of what it means to take the other seriously that serves as an alternative to my proposal that what's required is the sharing of equal authority. The only account I've encountered that does this is Daniela Dover's description of taking someone seriously in conversation. However, given that my account of intimacy is so heavily influenced by her own, it strikes me as less than helpful in moving the dialectic forward. For example, one of the attitudes required for taking the other seriously in conversation is that of abdication:

The second condition for taking you seriously is that I treat your understanding of me as relevant to my understanding of myself. Just as I do not suppose that I can figure you out from the outside, I also do not suppose that I can figure myself out from the inside. Instead, I regard your perspective on me as one that I have to take into account in my own thinking about myself. This means that when your interpretation of me conflicts with my antecedent self-understanding, I will not pull rank by claiming privileged authority for the deliverances of introspection. I will not simply ask you to defer to my expertise as an interpreter of myself. In other words, I will not demand that you grant me what Rahel Jaeggi (2014, 71ff) has called 'interpretive sovereignty': the privilege of having the last word when it comes to the subject of oneself. I abdicate that privilege, giving up my interpretive sovereignty in conversation with you.¹⁷

Although she doesn't mention anything about shared authority, it seems to me that Dover and I are talking about the same process. In other words, I take it that in "regard[ing] your perspective on me

¹⁶ In fact, I suspect that in some cases, to take someone seriously involves giving them *greater* authority than one takes oneself to have such that the charge raised here can be reversed. To take the climate scientist seriously is not to think that they understand the environment as well as I do, but that they understand it *better* than I do. In those cases, I grant them more authority over matters concerning the climate than I do myself.

¹⁷ Dover (forthcoming), 9.

as one that I have to take into account in my own thinking about myself” I place you on *equal* footing with me with respect to the matter of who I am. I claim that this, in turn, is to see you as having the kind of authority that *I have* on that matter. Your input regarding who I am is not less authoritative than my own (nor is it *more* authoritative!) but is rather treated as being *like my own in this respect*. In turn, whether we call this process “taking the other seriously” or “sharing equal authority” or “having co-authorship over (part) of one’s narrative” is irrelevant to me and the disagreement becomes a verbal one.

In fact, I want to claim that the disagreement remains a verbal one as long as the notion of taking the other seriously involves something like what Dover describes. It becomes a substantial disagreement when taking the other seriously is taken to be something less than that. There is room for such a view. One might, for example, think that taking another seriously just involves that one simply takes them (or their interests, or their input) into consideration as one of any number of things to consider. To take the other seriously on such a view is compatible with merely thinking that they’ve made a good point or given some good advice with respect to some matter. This certainly doesn’t appear to have anything to do with sharing authority or seeing oneself as being on equal footing with the other (not even with respect to the particular matter at hand—after all, a broken clock is still right twice a day). However, it also seems to me that the giving of advice or the making of a good point doesn’t have anything to do with intimacy either. This is so even when the advice or the good point has to do with the question of “who I am?” To put the matter bluntly, good advice simply doesn’t amount to intimacy as long as I see that advice as contingent on whether I accept it or not. If, on the other hand, that advice is presented as something that has the same kind of authority that I give to myself, then we have reasons to think that something intimate has happened.

iii. Summary and the View Stated

Our journey into what the intimate stance involves has taken us quite far from the question of how to account of cases like BABY. Before returning to that question, however, it's worth taking stock.

At the start of this section, we considered intimacy as involving a spectrum, and the location of any given interaction on that spectrum as being determined by whether one, both, or neither of the parties involved take the intimate stance. We called those interactions that involve both parties taking that stance cases of “full” or “reciprocal” intimacy; those that involved neither party, we called “non-intimate” interactions; and those that involved only one person taking that stance we called “one-sided,” “partial,” or “unrequited” cases of intimacy.

We then considered what it means to take the intimate stance. I proposed that it fundamentally involves *treating* the other as though as if they were appropriately disposed to cooperatively engage with one's private narrative. In turn, I suggested that this involves seeing the other as having co-authorship over how the question of “who am I?” is to be answered. More specifically, to take the intimate step towards the other is to treat them as having the same prerogatives that one takes oneself to have with respect to oneself when it comes to answering how one makes sense of oneself.

This is the general view of intimate interactions that has been developed here. The question now remains how this view can be used to explain BABY and cases like it. I turn to this next.

IV. The Difficult Cases

i. One-Sided Intimacy

To begin, we can place BABY in the category of one-sided non-verbal intimate interactions and treat it accordingly. Since it's one-sided, we know that the source of intimacy will be a matter of only one of the parties taking the intimate stance towards the other, and given what we've already said about Hannah's (the baby's) mental capacities, we can say that Mary (the mother) is that source. Furthermore, we can specify that what makes the interaction between the two intimate is not something that is disclosed by Mary in placing her daughter on her chest, but precisely in the fact that Mary has taken the intimate stance towards Hannah. She does this by *treating* Hannah as someone who is implicated in how Mary understands herself; i.e., as having authority in shaping Mary's narrative. Mary does this not by virtue of her disposition to *say* certain things to her daughter (though not to their necessary exclusion either), but by virtue of coming to see her in that light. More colloquially, we might say that at that moment and in that first hug, Mary no longer sees who she is as exhausted by how *she* understands herself—rather, in that moment and by her own lights, *who Mary is* evades her sole grasp and becomes an interpersonal matter.

The same move allows us to handle other one-sided cases as well. Thus, to have an intimate interaction with an animal is to take the intimate stance towards it in the same way that Mary takes it towards Hannah. Likewise, to have an intimate interaction while reading a book is to take that stance towards the book itself (or towards the author or one of its characters), and to have an intimate interaction in nature is to take that stance towards one's surroundings.¹⁸

¹⁸ Here again, Buber comes to mind: "I contemplate a tree. I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of light or splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of the blue silver ground...I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, and eternalize it. Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition. But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me." And again: "When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. He is no longer He or She limited by other Hes and Shes, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in *his* light." Buber (1971), 58-59.

This might seem like a strange thing to do, especially if one is explicitly aware of the fact that the dog, the canyon, and the book will never take the intimate stance back to us. As such, we might wonder whether all such cases involve a significant amount of pretense or delusion. I think to look at it in this way is a mistake, although I grant that the more one is explicitly aware that the other will never reciprocate, the harder it will be to take the relevant stance—if one *only* thinks of one's dog as an animal, of books as dead letters, and of nature as only so much dirt and water, then it will be very hard for one to see any interactions involving these things as intimate.

That being said, I think two comments are in order. First, it seems to me that in many cases of taking the intimate stance there is no reason to assume that anything like pretending is happening at all. I take it that to pretend to do something is to engage in behaviors that are fitting for that activity while believing that the actual activity is not happening. For example, what makes moving my body in such-and-such a way an act of pretending to ride a horse is in part due to the fact that I do so while also believing that I'm not *really* riding a horse. To pretend to share authority over one's narrative with another would, then, involve acting as though one were seeing them in the relevant light discussed above, while also believing that one is not *really* doing this. If that latter belief is not present, then it seems to me unclear that any pretense is going on. Am I *pretending* that my wife is the most beautiful woman in the world if I do not at the same time believe that there are more beautiful women out there? Perhaps so, but perhaps the question has simply never arisen for me.

Furthermore, if one *does* see the other as sharing authority over their narrative, then one simply *has done* what is required of taking the intimate stance—no further belief that, for example, one *really is doing this* is necessary (any more than my driving a car involves the further belief that I *really am* driving the car along with the actual driving of it; as with the smitten husband, *that* question simply never crosses my mind). Thus, to take the intimate stance towards an object, animal, or thing does not necessarily entail pretending.

There are, however, other cases in which we're very clearly believe that the other is not in the position to reciprocate or that it's impossible for them to do so. A widower might visit the grave of his departed partner and speak as though she were alive, even saying things like "I know you can't hear me, but I wish you were still here." In doing this he might very well take the intimate stance towards his departed lover and treat her as though she still had authority over who he is while at the same time being fully aware that this is impossible. Hence, there may be some level of pretension here, but such cases do not strike me as objectionable in the sense that they involve some kind of substantial delusion or an attempt to escape from reality. Instead, such cases strike me as involving the same kind of pretense that's involved in, for example, treating one's young child as though they were a talented artist. Sometimes we engage in these kinds of pretenses not as a way of escaping from the truth, but as a way of placing value on particular persons or objects in our lives. So, to take the intimate stance towards one's deceased spouse, or one's dog could be a way of affirming that one values them and sees them as something bound with how they understand themselves. I see nothing objectionable in doing this.

Furthermore, at least one reason to take the stance towards something that cannot reciprocate seems to be the fact that it cannot do many other things either. On the one hand, the dog, book, or canyon cannot *object* to being treated as having authority—there is no boundary that one can cross with *The Little Prince*, no one to make uncomfortable, or to burden with a responsibility they might find onerous or stifling. On the other hand, taking the stance with respect to such things also comes with no risk of rejection, offense, or abuse. The Blue Ridge Mountains might never define themselves in relation to me, but they will never object to my opening up myself

to be defined by them, and they will never use the authority I treat them as having in order to take advantage of me.¹⁹

ii. Sex and Physical Intimacy

Finally, there's the question of the intimacy involving certain sexual activities, physical touch, meaningful looks, and the like, which requires closer attention. Sex is both a particularly important topic in discussing intimacy, and one that poses certain challenges for the view advanced here.

The primary challenge for the view advanced so far is a phenomenological one. While it may be more readily accepted that the intimacy of conversations (or reading a book, or spending time with one's dog, etc.) can be captured by the notion of sharing authority over one's narrative, the *experience* of intimate sex seems to evade this description. The view considered so far focuses on how one treats the other with an eye towards oneself—to take the intimate stance is to see the other as related in such-and-such way to how one makes sense of oneself. As such, it makes intimacy appear to be a *cognitive* matter that stands at a certain distance from what is being done physically. By contrast, the intimacy of sex and other physical activities seem to be primarily a *bodily* matter. Intimacy in that context appears to be something that is *felt* in the body—in the gentleness of the lover's caress—and not in the *head* of the person being caressed. Consequently, it appears as though either the intimacy of sex has nothing to do with this notion of sharing authority, self-definition, or making sense of oneself, or, if it has something to do with those matters, it amounts to an obscure relation that must be made explicit. Furthermore, given the fact that the link between sex and intimacy is taken to be especially strong insofar as people tend to consider sex to be one of the

¹⁹ The same is motivation is probably not what drives the widower, of course. The question of keeping himself safe from the influence of his deceased wife is probably the furthest thing from his mind.

paradigmatic means of expressing and engaging in intimacy, the fact that the account provided so far seems to fit in badly poses a serious problem for the view as a *general* view of intimacy.

A second reason one might be skeptical of the current view is due to the seemingly close connection between intimate sex and relationships. In the popular imagination, intimate sex usually occurs in the context of an existing relationship between two lovers who employ their deep knowledge of or care for one another to produce mutual pleasure for each other on a morally equitable ground. Intimate sex is considered not only good sex because it *feels* good, but also because the production of the pleasure that makes it feel good is done with an eye towards fairness (intimate sex isn't selfish sex), and is the result of a sensitivity and concern for the other. Usually, such sensitivity and concern arises from knowledge, love, or understanding of the other that comes from being in a relationship. Furthermore, good sex is most likely to be seen as *intimate* when it is taken to be a reflection and expression of that same knowledge, understanding, and love for the other.²⁰ As such, intimate sex is often taken to be a mark of the quality of the relationship: people who have strong relationships have intimate sex, and people who don't have intimate sex have comparably poorer relationship.

The fact that in the popular imagination the intimacy of sex is so entrenched in the context of relationships—and, then, usually in the context of *loving* relationships—suggests that sex is not intimate (or is hardly ever intimate) in the absence of such a relationship. On a strong view, if intimacy in sex is the expression and success of a loving relationship, then it simply follows that if there is no such relationship, then there is no intimacy in sex that can *express it*. Consequently, two people may have good and mutually pleasurable sex—that is something afforded to libertines and radicals—but intimate sex is beyond their reach. On a weaker view, one might grant that intimate

²⁰ See "Sex and Intimacy" in Lynn Jamieson, *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

sex just is a matter of having good and mutually pleasurable sex, but hold that having such sex requires a substantial knowledge and understanding of the many subtle particularities of the other that simply isn't available to people who may not know each other. In turn, such a person may claim that the reason intimate sex and (loving, understanding, etc.) relationships are so closely related is primarily a pragmatic matter. The reason relative strangers are unlikely to experience intimate sex is not because it necessarily only occurs in the context of the relationship, but because it requires certain epistemic and emotional resources that are hard to find outside of those contexts.

If the popular conception of sex is correct, then it poses two further problems for my view that is separate from the phenomenological worry: first, intimate sex appears to require some element of *goodwill* or some kind of deep positive affect for the other that is expressed in the act. However, taking the intimate stance does *not* involve any such element—as described, one only needs to treat the other as having a certain kind of authority in order to take the intimate stance, and that certainly does not entail that one has *any* positive feelings towards them. Indeed, one could take the intimate stance towards one's enemy, toward someone they despise, or simply towards someone to whom they're completely indifferent.²¹ If the intimacy in sex really is so closely connected to an expression of love or some other positive feelings for one's partner, then it seems as though my view is in bad shape.

The second related problem is that taking the intimate stance does not require having any specific deep knowledge of the other, what they like, or what they find pleasurable. Yet, if the intimacy of sex requires such knowledge—if only for the production of pleasure—then even if the intimacy of sex does not require anything like an expression of love for one's partner, and, hence, if

²¹ See my "Hello, Clarise." for an example of such an intimate encounter in an early version of the theory of intimacy developed in this dissertation.

the first problem could be avoided, taking the intimate stance would still be unable to do the work required.

Thus, the intimacy of sex appears to pose three total problems: 1) the phenomenology of intimate sex seems ill-captured by talk of taking the intimate stance; 2) intimate sex seems to involve the expression of some positive feeling or attitude towards the other (which is not required in taking the intimate stance); and 3) intimate sex seems to involve some deep level of knowledge or understanding of the other (which is not required in taking the intimate stance).

A. Desire, Pleasure, and the Self in Sex Work

I want to address all three of the problems outlined above by looking at a rather surprising place: the presence and absence of intimacy in sex work. This focus on sex work is of particular interest to the present discussion for two reasons. First, the sex in question is, generally speaking, not readily considered to be paradigmatic of *intimate sex*.²² Understanding how and why this is the case can give us some insight into what factors make it non-intimate, and, conversely, what factors might make a difference when it is intimate. Second, despite the fact that such sex is generally not considered intimate, there are exceptions to this claim—some sex workers (and some johns) *do* find their sexual encounters to be intimate despite the conditions under which they take place. Understanding how *that's* possible will help us along as well.

²² Indeed, it is often enough to point to the very phenomenon of sex work to convince someone that sex by itself doesn't not amount to intimacy.

Let's begin with the first point. In a recent paper, Elizabeth Megan Smith points out that, often, because of the stigma associated with their line of work, sex workers will tend to put a certain kind of distance between themselves and their clients.²³ Quoting Jacqueline Comte, she notes that:

Many female sex workers will tend to maintain a clinical performance and avoid all sexual desire and pleasure during work in order, on the one hand, to not perceive themselves and be perceived as 'real whores', but also, on the other hand, to maintain the feeling that they remain faithful to their lover or husband.²⁴

This is a kind of compartmentalization that allows the women to separate the sexual activities they engage in with their clients from the sexual activities (perhaps the very same type of activities) they engage in with their chosen partners. Note, however, that the compartmentalization is a very interesting one: namely, it is done by maintaining "a clinical performance and avoid[ing] all sexual *desire and pleasure* during work" so as "not to *perceive themselves and be perceived as 'real whores'*". If Comte and Smith are right, and this is how and why many sex workers tend to separate their work life from their private life, then it suggests two important things: first, that the primary means by which the compartmentalization is done is through control of *desire and pleasure*, and second, that at least one of the purposes for which these matters are controlled is as a means of *maintaining a perception of oneself*.

One plausible way of understanding the relation between these two elements is as follows: 'real whores' engage in sex with strangers for money *because they like it*, because they *desire* it, or because they find *pleasure* in the act. That's how *they* make sense of what they do because that is *who they are*. In turn, by rejecting, denying, or simply setting aside any questions of pleasure and desire, the sex workers in question can maintain an identity and perception of themselves that does not

²³ Elizabeth Megan Smith, "'It Gets Very Intimate for Me': Discursive Boundaries of Pleasure and Performance in Sex Work," *Sexualities* 20, no. 3 (2017): 344–63

²⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 337.

require adopting the identity of the ‘real whore’. In other words, it is by severing the link between desire, pleasure, and its relation to a particular identity that they do not endorse that the women are able to separate the non-intimate sex they have with their clients from the sex they have with their partners. In contrast, it is by allowing this link to be formed in the context of sex with their partners that they also allow *those* acts to be intimate.

This move is a familiar one in the philosophical literature. Most notably perhaps, it can be found in Frankfurt’s discussion of freedom and personal identity in “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person.”²⁵ Briefly put, Frankfurt makes the plausible claim that what distinguishes persons from non-persons is the ability of the former to structure their will in ways that non-persons cannot. In particular, persons are not only subject to certain desires and inclinations that Frankfurt identifies with the will, but they are also capable of reflecting on those desires and endorsing some while rejecting others. It is by virtue of these second-order desires about which of the first-order desires that constitute their will that an individual is considered a person. Furthermore, it is when these endorsed first-order desires are effective in bringing an individual to action that a person can be said to have a free will.

What’s important to note is the strong connection between the presence of a desire and its relation to having a particular identity. In other words, to have an identity—indeed, to be a person at all—is to stand in a certain relation to one’s desires and to be able to say “this is the one that matters.” Although Frankfurt puts the matter in terms of competing desires, each of which pull the individual in different directions, I believe the same process that he describes can be put in terms of the things that we *don’t* desire, and even in terms of what things are *open* for us to desire. As Frankfurt presents things, our desires seem to *afflict* us—we first become subject to them (for

²⁵ Harry G. Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (1971): 5–20.

whatever reason), and only then do we have the further ability of reflecting on those desires and endorsing or rejecting some of them. However, I think that this process of endorsement or rejection can also occur for desires that we do not currently have or for desires that we do not even want to be open to. In other words, who I am is not just a matter of which desires that I *actually* have are endorsed, but is also a matter of the stance that I take to desires that I do *not* currently have. I am not, for example, *indifferent* to the possibility of coming to desire to hurt children. At this moment not only do I lack the desire to do that, but I also strongly do not *want* to desire it. In essence, in considering who I am in the present, I foreclose the possibility of that desire, and would feel that something had gone wrong if I were to find myself having been pulled in that direction. This is not solely because I don't want to be weak willed, nor is it because I'm worried that I *might* succumb to a desire I don't want to endorse. Rather, it is because how I think of myself requires that I don't see myself as vulnerable to such desire in the first place.

I believe it is precisely this fact that the women in Smith and Comte's study are sensitive to in their compartmentalization efforts. In other words, it's not that they feel torn between the desire for payment on the one hand, and the desire for sex with the John on the other, only to endorse the former over the latter. Rather, it's the very distinction between someone for whom pleasure and desire with such-and-such a person under such-and-such circumstances is a possibility and someone for whom such a notion is foreclosed and for whom those attitudes are set aside for another. The suggestion here is that the women in question preserve their identity as lovers to their partners by not only letting their second order desires dictate which first order desires are effective, but also which first order desires are even possibilities. In saying this I don't mean to imply anything as absurd as the notion that *if* they didn't have certain second order desires not to experience pleasure

in such contexts that *they would*—rather, it’s that the very option of that happening isn’t on the table.²⁶

It’s also not uncommon to think of desire and pleasure as indicating one’s “true self” or the self that comes “naturally.” There’s often something telling about someone who experiences pleasure in certain contexts (say, when engaging in violence), or who finds themselves strongly pulled towards something they don’t want to do. In the best cases, we might say that such a person is weak willed or incontinent; in the worst, such desires and pleasures are a sign of a certain kind of character.²⁷ Here, too, we can see the compartmentalization efforts of the female sex workers as an attempt to sever the link between what may be experienced in sex (or, more likely in their cases, what experiences are generally associated with sex) and *their* identity.

If this is correct, then the link between desire and pleasure on the one hand, and intimacy as has been defined in the view I’ve been advocating for becomes clear. Specifically, my claim is that the in imposing restrictions on the potential or actual sources of what pleasure they experience and what desires they endorse, the women in question are also managing the question of who they are, who’s allowed to enter into that negotiation, and under what conditions. Put another way, in allowing for actual or potential desire and pleasure to take place *only* with their chosen lovers, they are also taking the intimate stance towards their lovers *through* their sex. They are granting authority to their lover to *produce* a pleasure that speaks to who they are. By contrast, this prerogative is not given to their clients—they are not given access to shaping their identity or to having a say in who

²⁶ This is like the person who responds to the question “suppose you hated your child: how much would you sell them for?” with the answer “I would never hate my child.” In this case, it’s not a failure of imagination, but a refusal to engage.

²⁷ One way to show the cruelty of the villain by demonstrating that he not only does horrible things, but that he takes *pleasure* in doing them.

they are even if they are engaged in the very same physical activity in both contexts. Simply put, the sex workers tend not to take the intimate stance towards their clients, and as a result, the sex between them is not intimate.

This is not to say that it would be impossible for there to be intimate sex even in sex work. Interestingly enough, Smith points that for at least one of the sex workers in her study—Kitty—sex work is *often* an intimate affair. Her explanation for what makes this possible is illuminating: “Because of my sexuality and the way I am, in what I’m looking for, [sex work] take[s] a place for me...in-between work and pleasure and personal life, so it gets very, very intimate for me.”²⁸ As Smith describes her, what allows Kitty to do this is the fact that she “approached her work as an extension of her own sexuality; seeing each engagement as a jointly intimate experience.”²⁹ This fits in well with what we’ve said so far and is precisely what we should expect to see: namely, the ability to take a stance towards the other and the act in which one is involved, and which constitutes a way of understanding oneself (an “extension” of oneself in Smith’s terms) makes the difference in whether the act takes on an intimate dimension or remains non-intimate.

It’s not clear how common Kitty’s experience is among sex workers because, as Smith points out, very little sociological work has been done to address the question of pleasure and desire from their perspective. Still, if taken at face value, Kitty’s remarks are interesting because they make room for the possibility of intimate sex between relative strangers that is not the result of an expression of love or deep knowledge for the other. Rather, what makes such acts intimate is Kitty’s ability to see her actions with the other through precisely the angle that we’ve been looking at intimacy in general.

²⁸ Smith (2017), 356.

²⁹ Ibid.

B. Sex Outside of Work

Of course, there is a significant difference between the sex had by sex workers and the sex had by others. Aside from the fact that the former is primarily a financial transaction, there's also something to be said about the fact sex workers tend to *explicitly* compartmentalize their relations to their clients in ways that many people do not. This explicit compartmentalization may be in part due to the fact that many sex workers don't necessarily get to pick the people with whom they sleep, which, in turn may encourage drawing sharp distinctions in the attitudes one takes towards one's sexual partner. And it seems that these lines are not as sharply defined in non-transactional sexual encounters.

Because of this, people don't tend to think of the intimacy of sex as related to their identity, but rather as something that just happens as a result of *being* with the other. Not incidentally, the people with whom we tend to experience intimate sex are also frequently ones that we *do* love, or whom we are in a loving relationship. This makes it seem that the source of the intimacy *must* be *in* the expression of that loving relationship.

This is not implausible, and it really does seem to be true that intimate sex *can* involve an expression of love or some positive affect towards the other—indeed, the vast majority of sex that we have may involve such expressions. In turn, this seems to present an important question: is the intimacy of non-sex work sex a result of the same kind of general story we gave in our discussion of sex work, or is it the result of the expression of the love and positive affect that it seems so closely connected with?

In short, I think we can answer this question by noting that to see sex as an expression of one's love for the other or as a mark of the (good) quality of the relationship in which it occurs is just another way to take the intimate stance toward one's chosen partner. This is perhaps most easily

seen when we consider intimate sex as an expression of love. Notably, some views on the philosophy of (romantic) love see it as the formation of a union. Robert Nozick's view, for example, holds that love is matter of having a desire to form a "we" with another person and the desire for that person to reciprocate that desire.³⁰ Crucially, this desire involves the desire to construct of a *new* joint identity that defines how the two parties understand themselves, how they make decisions, and how they are perceived by others. Likewise, Robert Solomon's union theory of love holds that "love is the concentration and intensive focus of mutual definition on a single individual, subjecting virtually every personal aspect of one's self to this process."³¹

Nozick and Solomon's views are, of course, not the final word on love, but they are plausible ones that align very closely with what has been said about intimacy. Indeed, the account of intimacy we're advocating here serves to *explain* why intimacy is so closely connected to love: namely, *both* phenomena involve at the very least, the willingness to be defined and to understand oneself through the other, with love being a *particular* way of mutual definition.³²

The point here is that it seems quite reasonable to say that *when* sex is intimate *because* it is an expression of the love that two people feel towards each other, is not in conflict with the claim that, at bottom, the explanation of the noted intimacy is still a matter of taking the intimate stance. In other words, to say that sex is intimate for that reason, is just to sneak in the intimate stance along for free without drawing explicit attention to it. Indeed, it appears quite hard to make sense of the

³⁰ Robert Nozick, "Love's Bond," in *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 417–32

³¹ Robert C. Solomon, *About Love: Reinventing Romance for Our Times* (Hackett Publishing, 2006), 197.

³² Perhaps the most notable difference between the two is that romantic love at the very least seems to require some kind of positive affect towards the other, whereas this doesn't seem to be the case with intimacy. Much more work needs to be done to separate the two phenomena, although I suspect that any attempts at a clean division between the two will be less than enlightening.

notion that, on the one hand, a particular sex act can be intimate qua an expression of the love between two people, and on the other hand, deny that the intimate stance has been taken. At least on the union views on love, this would be tantamount to saying that the sex in question is both an expression of that union and a willingness to make sense of who one is interpersonally, and a refusal to make sense of oneself with the other.

It doesn't follow from this, however, that intimate sex *must* be an expression of love or a willingness to fall in love or anything like that. To take the intimate stance is not the same thing as *loving* another person—the latter is a much more specific relation which may or may not require something like the general positive affect for the other, deep knowledge of them, an appreciation of their particularity, etc. Rather, my suggestion is that love entails the intimate stance, and as such, the *expression* of one's love (at least in sex) requires taking the intimate stance first. This, in turn, allows us to say that we're neither wrong in our judgment that there's something intimate in expressing one's love during sex *nor* wrong in thinking that intimacy is still ultimately a matter of taking the intimate stance.

iii. The Objections Addressed

How do these considerations help us make sense of the objections raised at the beginning of this section? Recall, the intimacy of sex raised three problems: 1) the phenomenology of intimate sex seems ill-captured by talk of taking the intimate stance; 2) intimate sex seems to involve the expression of some positive feeling or attitude towards the other (which is not required in taking the intimate stance); and 3) intimate sex seems to involve some deep level of knowledge or understanding of the other (which is not required in taking the intimate stance).

We are now in a position to address all three. My response to 1) is to push back on the claim that the phenomenology of intimate sex is incompatible with talk of the intimate stance. It's true,

intimate sex is not necessarily experienced as something cognitive, and certainly not one that seems to involve explicit reference to things like private narratives and shared authority. Rather, it tends to be experienced in terms of the pleasures and desires that it involves and the way those are negotiated, explored, and satisfied by the people involved. What I've tried to suggest, however, is that the question of who desires what, what pleasures are felt, who is allowed to produce those pleasures, in what way, and under what circumstances, is very closely tied together with the question of *who one is*. I've tried to show that this is the case by looking at how sex workers generally envision the connection between desire, pleasure, and the self. We can see that they create space for the intimacy in their private lives by extending the prerogative to be shaped by the other via pleasure and desire only to their chosen lovers, and by refusing that prerogative to their clients. When this prerogative is not extended, the sex is not intimate, and this appears to be the case with the majority of sex done for money. However, as we see the case with Kitty, when this is extended, then sex can be something very intimate *even* if it is done for work.

If this is correct, then we can also see how to address objections 2) and 3) at the same time. On the one hand, if we take the explanation given for why sex workers like Kitty can engage in intimate sex as a good one, then it serves as a counter example to the worries that underly those objections. Presumably, people like Kitty don't *love* their clients and they doesn't know them for long enough to get the kind of deep epistemic resources that seems to be operating in this objection.³³ On the other hand, this is perhaps too much to ask of Kitty and our collective experience still suggests that even if she's speaking truthfully and accurately, she represents a minority population. Here, again, my suggestion is that the tension between our general judgments about the intimacy of sex are not at odds with the view being advanced. It makes sense to say that intimate sex is an

³³ This may be different if someone has a client that they've been seeing for many years. There, we might say that there's a kind of intimate relationship that has formed. For what those are, read on to the next chapter.

expression of love (or some positive affect for the other) and that it involves knowledge of the other gained within the context of a relationship. But this doesn't mean that these elements are operative instead of the taking of the intimate stance. Far from it, they explain the intimacy precisely *because* they already assume the intimate stance—take *it* from the picture and it becomes unclear how or why they're supposed to account for the intimacy.

Finally, I believe that a version of what has been said about the intimacy of sex can be said about the intimacy of a single (intimate) touch and other non-verbal interactions.

V. Conclusion

Let's wrap up. We began by looking at some of the limitations of the conversational model of intimacy developed in Chapter 1 and why a straightforward application of it would be unlikely to serve as a general account of intimate interactions. In particular, it became apparent that even though the conversational model of intimacy might do well as a model of intimate *conversations*, intimacy appears in many more contexts than conversations. There are not only cases of non-verbal intimacy, but also ones in which the intimacy seems to be entirely one-sided. We addressed these issues by returning to the conversational model and noting that even in the context of conversation, there are certain complications that still pull us towards the judgment that something intimate has happened even if it didn't quite fit the model outlined in Chapter 1. As a result, this allowed us to see the model developed there as a kind of *idealized* scenario of an intimate conversation that rested on a core phenomenon: that of taking the intimate stance. We then defined taking the intimate stance towards another person, object, or thing in the course of an interaction as the matter of *treating* the other person, object, or thing *as though* it were capable of engaging with one's private narrative (i.e., the question of "who am I?") through the shared authority extended to them. We then

showed how focusing on the intimate stance allowed us to handle both one-sided cases and non-verbal cases, paying especially close attention to the phenomenon of the intimacy of sex.

Still, our work is only half complete since apart from intimate interactions, we also tend to think that intimacy also appears in certain relationships. This, in turn brings its own set of challenges similar to the ones addressed here. I turn to these and to how the current account can be made to handle intimate relationships in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: The General View of Intimacy (Part II) – Intimate Relationships

With the general view of intimate interactions under our belt, we are finally in a position to turn to the rest of the questions raised in the introduction to Chapter 2 and address the topic of intimate relationships. As previously mentioned, the common view about intimacy seems to be that the proper domain of intimacy is precisely within the context of certain relationships—friendships, love affairs, the relationships between parents and children, and so on. One of the implicit tasks so far has been to get us to stop thinking of such relationships as preceding and required for any particular intimate interaction. However, in pointing out that intimate interactions do not require intimate relationships and that the former can come free from the latter, I am neither suggesting that there are no such things as intimate relationships, nor that there is no connection between the two. The task before us now is to use the intimate stance to explain what intimate relationships are, and what the connection between intimate interactions and intimate relationships might be. If that can be done, then we can be more confident that we have given a plausible *general* account of intimacy.

I. Starting Points and Assumptions

I want to begin with the hopefully uncontroversial assumption that even in the absence of a clear prior notion of what an intimate relationship involves, not all relationships are intimate simply by virtue of being relationships. I have a certain relationship to my students, to my barber, and to my parents' co-workers, but these are not necessarily *intimate* relationships. To call a relationship intimate is to qualify it in a certain way and to set it apart from other non-intimate relationships—if *every* relationship were intimate, then none of them would be.

Of course, there *are* certain relationships that we already set aside as special ones. In particular, we tend to think that the relationships with our friends, romantic partners, and family members are different from the relationships we have with other people. To be in one of these relationships is, among other things, to have special duties to the other by virtue of being in the relationship that we normally don't have with others, and they usually not only involve people whom we value highly, but the relationships themselves seem to be things that we place high value on. That is, we not only value our friends themselves, but also the *friendship*; we value not only our parents, but our relationship *to them*; we value not only our beloved, but the fact that we love them and are loved in return.

Along with the first uncontroversial assumption, I want to make a second, equally uncontroversial assumption that at least *some* instances of friendship, love, and kinship count as instances of intimate relationships. The two questions that we should address at this point, then, is which instances count as such and why.

The answers to these questions are complicated by the fact that literature on each of these topics has a very long and detailed philosophical tradition that we could not hope to reproduce in sufficiently great detail in the space provided here. If figuring out what constitutes an intimate relationship required a complete catalogue of all the various plausible views on friendship, love, and kinship, then our project would come to a halt. I would like to avoid this.

A more plausible suggestion would be to offer something like a single “best” view on what these kinds of relationships amount to, and then try to figure out whether all relationships that count as, say, friendships on that view are also intimate relationships or whether only some are. That being said, this suggestion runs into a different problem that I would also like to avoid: namely, even if we could say that such-and-such a view is the best view of friendship, we are in no better of a position

to figure out whether only *some* friendships are intimate while others are not, since we lack an account of what it means to have an intimate relationship.

Let me illustrate this point. Suppose, for example, that we took Aristotle's account of friendship as the correct one. On that view, there are three kinds of friendships distinguished by the grounds that sustain the particular relationship: utility, pleasure, or virtue.¹ Friendships of utility are grounded on the fact that each party find the other to be useful in some dimension; friendships of pleasure are grounded on the fact that each finds the other to be pleasant to be around; and friendships of virtue are grounded on the fact that both parties are virtuous. Only the last of the three is meant to be the "true" and complete kind of friendship, with the former two only deserving the label because of their similarity to it. How would we then determine whether each of these kinds of friendships or only one (or none of them) count as intimate friendships? The only way forward seems to be to appeal to some existing notion of the intimacy within those friendships that lets us set some aside. Thus, we might be tempted to reason as follows: friendships of pleasure and utility are fickle things, dissolving when the pleasure or utility that sustains them disappears; intimate friendships, however, seem to be more substantial and weightier and to persist in the face of contingency. Consequently, given that there are only three kinds of friendships, it appears that intimate friendships *must* be the friendships of virtue, and this is further supported by the fact that friendships of virtue are also supposed to be less susceptible to change.

Now, maybe this is plausible, but is it correct? There are some reasons to think that it is not if we take a closer look at Aristotle's account. On his account, friendships of virtue are based on the fact that both parties care for each other insofar and *because* each party is virtuous. This is important for two reasons. First, it is well known that being virtuous is a very, very difficult status to achieve

¹ Books VIII and IX of Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 2014).

(even more so if we also accept the doctrine of the unity of the virtues), so that the number of true friendships would be exceptionally rare. Now, I certainly don't count as a virtuous person on Aristotle's account, nor does anyone that I know. Unsurprisingly, then, I do not have any friendships of virtue, and on the suggestion we're considering now, I also wouldn't have any intimate friendships either. I do, however, think that I have a few intimate friendships, that I've had others in the past, and that I'm not mistaken in that judgment. Second, even if we grant that I'm more virtuous than I've given myself credit for, it's not at all obvious that my intimate friendships have anything to do with virtues of the other. From my perspective at least, those considerations hardly ever enter into consideration.

It seems that we're in a difficult situation in which it's either the case that a) both I and virtually everyone else is mistaken in thinking that we have any intimate friendships; that b) the Aristotelian account of friendship must be swapped for a different account; or that c) true friendships and intimate friendships come apart. And the problem is that none of these options actually help us answer the question of what makes a particular friendship intimate. Option a) seems not only implausible and inaccurate, but also an example in which the particular account of *friendship* is determining and constraining our account of intimacy and it's not clear that going in *that* direction will give us insight into intimacy at all. Option b) is a little better, but it seems entirely plausible that Aristotle's account of friendship could be a perfectly good account of friendship while being a poor account of *intimacy*. Indeed, there's a real question here about whether Aristotle or any of the Ancients even *had* the concept of intimacy, or whether, like the concept of courtly love, intimacy is a fairly recent phenomenon arising under particular circumstances at a particular time. And just as say, Plato's account of love in the *Symposium* might be correct even if it has nothing to say about *courtly* love, so Aristotle's account of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* may be correct even if it has

nothing to say about *intimate* friendship.² Option c) may also be correct and it could turn out that, for example, intimate friendships are friendships of pleasure or utility, falling short of the *true* friendship that Aristotle describes. But I do not see a way to verify whether *this* claim is correct or incorrect without bringing in more considerations about what intimacy involves.

Now, the discussion of Aristotle was only meant to illustrate a general problem that faces us in explaining intimate relationships. That problem, I propose, is not one that derives from the particulars of any account of friendship, love, or kinship, but from a general “relationship-first” approach that begins with a particular view of one of these relationships and then attempts to find what makes some instances of those relationships intimate and other not (or, of course, what makes *all* instances of a particular kind of relationship intimate).

The worry here is that in doing this we are not getting at the features of intimacy, but taking the features of *the relationship* and using our intuitions about which of *those* features make some instances an instance of an intimate relationship. And it seems entirely possible that there is no feature to be found *in friendship*, for example, that can explain what makes some friendships intimate and others not, that can also explain why some kin relationships are intimate but others are not, and still explain why some romantic relationships are intimate and others not.³ At the same time, it’s precisely our intuitions about what is and what isn’t intimate that are doing the hard work here. If that is so, then it seems that we should start with *those* intuitions—the intuitions about what intimacy

² Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Gilbert P. Rose, Bryn Mawr Commentaries (Bryn Mawr, PA: Bryn Mawr College, Department of Greek, 1981);

³ For what it’s worth, this is the mistake that I think the few people who have written in philosophy about intimacy make. Both Julie C. Inness and Diane Jeske’s conceptions of intimacy start from the assumptions that intimacy is to be first found in these relationships, resulting in views on which intimacy is necessarily a *positive* and valuable thing in all of its guises. See Julie C. Inness, *Privacy, Intimacy, and Isolation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Diane Jeske, *Rationality and Moral Theory: How Intimacy Generates Reasons* (New York: Routledge, 2008)

looks like and then see where we find it in friendship, love, and kinship, rather than the other way around.

That being said, we are no longer in a position in which we have to rely solely on our intuitions. In fact, the work of the previous chapters was precisely to get us to a somewhat systematic view of what intimacy looks like in general in one area (that of intimate interactions). We can now use what we've learned there in order to specify which friendships, loves, and kinships are intimate and which ones are not. This has the added advantage that we don't have to commit to any particular view of what constitutes any of those relationships. Rather, we could say something like the following: given what the account of intimacy is when looking at interactions, it makes sense to think of intimate relationships as involving such-and-such elements—this means that *these* friendships would be intimate but *those* would not, that *these* love affairs would be but others would not, and so on. We could then check whether what our theory posits accords with what we generally hold regardless of what theory of friendship (or love, or kinship) we subscribe to.

II. Intimate Relationships and the Intimate Stance

According to the general account of intimate interactions, intimacy with another on any given occasion is a matter of one or both parties taking the intimate stance to each other through a given interaction. This, in turn, means that one or both parties has come to treat the other in their interaction as having the same kind of authority that they take themselves to have with respect to their private narrative. How can we use this same idea to explain intimate relationships?

i. The Aggregate View

One tempting but ultimately mistaken route to take is the one that starts with the seemingly plausible claim that the quality or character of any given relationship is to be understood in terms of the quality or character of the individual interactions that constitute it. Call this the “aggregate view”

of relationships. On this view, to have a friendly (or hostile, or adversarial, or troubled) relationship with another is just for some sufficiently high number of the interactions that take place between the people in question to be friendly (or hostile, or...). As it relates to intimacy, this view holds that it is the intimacy of the individual interactions that, taken as a whole, colors the relationship itself and makes it intimate. And given that we already have a notion of what it is to have an intimate interaction between two people, the aggregate view just states that intimate relationships are those relationships in which a sufficient number of intimate interactions take place.

This view is not entirely implausible on its face. If every time you and I met, we fought, then it would make sense to say that we have a combative relationship. Furthermore, if our interactions *weren't* combative in any respect, then it would be hard to see on what grounds we could say that *the relationship* is combative. The view also has the further advantage of answering one of the questions that we set out at the beginning of this chapter regarding the connection between intimate interactions and intimate relationships. The aggregate view gives us a direct answer: intimate relationships are constituted and characterized by the intimate interactions that they range over. Finally, this view also let us explain why we are able to put our relationships on a kind of intimate gradient and specify that, for example, this friendship is *more* intimate than that one. If the intimacy of a relationship is a function of the number of intimate interactions that it involves, then it's reasonable to say that a friendship involving a higher number of intimate interactions would be more intimate than one that had fewer.

Despite these apparent advantages, I'm not convinced that the aggregate view is correct. In the first place, although it's true that this kind of aggregate story works well with respect to *certain* relationships, I don't think it's generally correct. It may be true, for example, that we're justified in classifying certain relationships as hostile on the fact that the majority of interactions between the

parties in the relationship are themselves hostile, and it may also be true that in the absence of such hostility in the interactions, we wouldn't have any reason to think the relationship itself was hostile. However, this doesn't mean that this applies across the board for all relationships. Quite clearly, for example, the relationship between a parent and a child is not a familial relationship by virtue of the fact that each one of the interactions between the parties is a familial interaction (whatever *that* might mean). Of course, in this particular case, it will be true in a trivial sense that every interaction between the parent and child *would* be a familial interaction, but it's rather obvious that we've gotten things backwards here: the relationship doesn't *become* familial because a certain number of familial interactions have been had, but rather each *interaction* is such because they're already in a particular kind of relationship.

In the second place, it seems to handle actual cases quite badly. On the one hand, there seem to be many relationships that strike us as intimate, but in which both the number of interactions and the frequency of those interactions are not intimate. For example, I have a group of close friends from college whom I consider to be intimate friends, but the majority of our interactions are non-intimate. We talk frequently, but we are not constantly having intimate conversations. Rather, we mostly make jokes, catch up on what we've been up to, and talk about current events. In that respect, our interactions don't differ much from the interactions I have with other (non-intimate) friends.

The relationships with my parents and sister are similar. Most of the interactions I have with them are not ones that involve the kind of sharing of authority that I've claimed constitutes intimacy, but are rather the kind of everyday ordinary interactions between adults. The same goes for my romantic partner. Although our intimate interactions are not rare, the vast majority of them are not about figuring out who we are together, but about what to eat for dinner, who needs to walk the

dog, what movie we're going to watch, and so on. Indeed, I suspect that I'm not unique in this respect and that if we were to take stock, we would discover that the majority of the interactions we have in those relationships that we consider to be intimate are not replete with the kind of stuff that's found in film and literature, but are comprised of the kind of ordinary day-to-day stuff of all other relationships.

On the other hand, it also seems true that there are other relationships that involve quite a significant number of intimate interactions, but which do not as a result make the relationship an intimate one. Consider, for example, the relationship between a patient and their psychotherapist. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the conversations one has with one's therapist are different from the conversations one has with one's gastroenterologist, in no small part because at least part of the goal of having conversations with the former (but not the latter) is for them to help answer the question "who am I?" As such, the norms of talk therapy makes it fertile ground for, at the very least, what we've called "one-sided" intimacy. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the high number of intimate interactions one has with one's therapist does not automatically make the relationship one has with them intimate. Nor does it mean that *that* relationship is somehow *more* intimate than a different one which involves fewer such interactions.

Of course, this is not to say that such relationships cannot be intimate, or that people are wrong to think that *their* relationship with their therapist is an intimate one. Rather, it is simply to point out that there is nothing absurd in claiming that one has had a high number of intimate interactions with a person and that their relationship is not an intimate one. We are not faced with the absurdity of claiming that one has twelve donuts in hand, but does not have a dozen donuts. If that's so, then the relationship between intimate interactions and intimate relationships is not a straightforward one of quantity, but something different.

ii. The Dispositional View

I take these reasons to be good enough to set the aggregate view aside. Still, the view touches on something reasonable that we shouldn't discard completely. In particular, it doesn't follow from the fact that the number of intimate interactions doesn't entirely account for the intimacy of the relationship that there is no relation between the kinds of interactions within a relationship and how we view that relationship. Although the vast majority of the interactions between my college friends and I are not intimate ones, we *have had* such interactions in the past. The same, of course, applies for my family members, and with my partner.

Perhaps more important than the fact that such interactions have occurred in the past, however, is the fact that in the context of these relationships intimacy is *expected*, or, if not quite expected, welcomed. Among my friends, it is something of an unstated assumption that although we mostly make jokes when we talk to one another, *if* one of us were to, for example, try to have an intimate conversation with the others, such overtures wouldn't be rebuffed, shut down, or dismissed. In other words, there's a kind of disposition or openness to engaging in intimacy even if such engagements are only taken up sparingly in the actual course of events. In turn, this disposition appears to be related to previous intimate interactions had with the particular person or persons—i.e., it makes sense to say that *because* we've had previous intimate interactions, I am willing to have more in the future, and because I am so disposed, our relationship is intimate. The same can also be said for my relationships with my parents and my partner.

Notice that this suggestion is very different from the quantitative picture advanced on the aggregate view. Intimate relationships are now not a function of the number of intimate interactions had in the past, but they're also not entirely divorced from such interactions either. Rather, those (actual) interactions serve as the grounds that leave us open to further (potential) intimacy, and that

openness itself makes our relationship intimate. Furthermore, if one of us were to stop being open in such a way—perhaps because the other had abused their position during the course of an intimate interaction—then we could reasonably say that the relationship is no longer intimate, although it had been before. By contrast, no such move would be available if the intimacy of a relationship were strictly a factor of sheer quantity of previous intimate interactions.

So far so good. However, if the dispositional picture were the full story, then it wouldn't make sense that, for example, I don't have an intimate relationship with my therapist. Not only have I had many intimate conversations with her in the past, but I am also disposed to have further ones with her, and I know that if I were to attempt to have such conversations with her, she would be open to having them (as long as they were in the appropriate setting, of course).⁴ This is how she gets paid, after all. So, something more needs to be said to explain how this can be possible.

iii. Taking the Intimate Stance Towards the Relationship Itself

I believe what's missing in the case of my therapist and what's present in the other relationships mentioned is the fact that I see my relation *to those relationships* in a different light than I see the one with my therapist. I don't merely see the relationships with my close friends as the context or setting in which I'm disposed to have intimate interactions. Rather, the relationships themselves serve as one of the things *through which* I make sense of myself. It is with reference to the relationships with my parents, these particular friends, and this particular romantic partner that I construct the narrative that serves to make sense of who I am and what I'm doing.

⁴ The fact that my therapist is only open to having such conversations in a particular setting doesn't make a difference here. After all, my friends, parents, and partner are also not open to having intimate conversations *just anywhere*—sometimes the timing is inconvenient (they're in the middle of running an errand); sometimes the context is inappropriate (we're in a movie theater). Being disposed to engage in intimacy does not entail being disposed to engage in intimacy immediately or at every turn.

In light of this, my suggestion is that what makes a relationship intimate is the fact that I take the intimate stance towards the relationship itself, and allow myself to be molded by *it* in general. Let's unpack this suggestion before highlighting some of its virtues.

Recall, to take the intimate stance towards anything on a given occasion—whether it be a person, object or a thing—is to treat it (i.e., the other) as though it were appropriately disposed to cooperatively engage with one's private narrative. This, in turn, is cashed out in terms of seeing the other as having equal authority as oneself with regards to answering the question “who am I?” The suggestion before us, then, is essentially that intimate relationships are those relationships that we see as sharing authority with respect to that same question.

In that sense, to take the intimate stance towards my relationship with my partner is to be open to the dynamics of that relationship to have an impact on how I make sense of who I am. More concretely, it is to consider that who I am is a matter of both the status of that relationship—I am at least in part defined *by* being in this relationship—and a matter of what *we*, the unit that comprises that relationship, decide or do *together*.⁵ The crucial element here is, of course, the fact that in taking this stance towards the relationship I give up the prerogative I normally take myself to have to be the sole determiner of who I am. I now see the answer to that question as closely bound with something that is not entirely up to me.

Another way of putting the matter is to say that I consider *changes* in the relationship with my partner to have an effect in how I understand myself. It is to grant that, for example, if the relationship were to fall apart, then *who I am* and *how I understand myself* would also change in response. What I mean is not simply that things around me would change, such that, for example, I

⁵ Once again, union views on love are especially amenable with my view of intimacy since, at least on some of them, to be in love is to quite literally be co-defined with another in a new entity.

would need to find a new place to live, that I would be deeply upset, or that I would have to navigate some tricky social situations with mutual friends. Rather, I mean the much stronger claim that I would quite literally understand who I am and what I'm doing in a different way by virtue of the fact that I am no longer in that relationship.

The same happens when *good* things happen in the relationship as well. The first time a romantically involved couple says "I love you" to one another, for example, constitutes a significant development and change *in the relationship* itself. Doing so, of course, suggests that the relationship is more serious than it was before, and that the people involved are (or are willing to be) more committed to one another. Indeed, the very act of saying this can itself be an intimate *interaction* (but we shouldn't confuse the two). Nevertheless, the relationship doesn't become intimate solely by virtue of the intimacy of that interaction, but only becomes such when the individuals involved see their own understanding of who they are as affected by that change in the relationship. A person can, after all, say the words 'I love you' to another, recognize that this means the relationship is more serious as a result, and that they now have certain obligations that they didn't have before, but still see *that* as having no impact on how they make sense of themselves. To put it another way, the changes in the relationship lead to no corresponding changes in how they understand themselves and they treat the question of "who am I?" as one that remains entirely separate from what happens in the relationship. When that is the case, I claim the relationship is not an intimate one (or at least not yet).

I think this phenomenon is readily observed in other cases as well. Having a child, I have been told, can be a profound experience that not only alters the parents' relationship (regardless of whether they're together or not), but is also one that introduces a new relationship in the mix (viz., that between the parent and the child). How one sees *that* relationship with respect to how one

understands oneself is, however, an open question. For many people, the introduction of this relationship makes a profound difference to their private narrative, and hence, the relationship between parent and child becomes an intimate relationship. For others, however, its introduction does little to change how they understand themselves—they hold on to their prerogative to be the sole authors of their narrative, and the relationship with the newborn just becomes one more element of it. Indeed, some parents maintain this stance towards the relationship with their children for their entire lives.⁶ When that happens, the relationship is not intimate, though it may be perfectly caring and adequate otherwise.

The same can also be observed from the other direction. Although everyone technically has parents, not everyone has an intimate relationship with them. Unsurprisingly, the reason why many of us tend to view our relationships with our parents, siblings, and close kin is because those are the very first relationships we have with other people and are precisely the relationships through which we first come to construct our private narrative. Well before one even begins to answer the question of “who am I?” individually, one is already provided with answers from the relationships with those people.⁷ In other words, by the time one comes to pick up this question, one already finds oneself implicated in a relationship with another—one has taken the intimate stance to the other before one even knows that one is capable of doing so. However, from this it clearly doesn’t follow that one

⁶ I don’t necessarily mean to imply any negative judgement here or that the people who do not have intimate relationships with their children are somehow worse parents than others. This may be true, but I think, on the whole, one can be a perfectly decent parent without such a relationship. I often think of my grandparents and their relationship to my own parents in this respect. From what I can tell, there was nothing intimate between my grandparents and their children and they exhibited a kind of benign indifference to them—kids were just things that happened when you got married in a Bulgarian village in the 50’s and not something that radically changes your understanding of who you are. I do, however, suspect that as a result of this, my *grandparents’* lives were more impoverished than they could have been and that my parents could have had something of value that they were deprived of. But I take it that depriving one’s child of something valuable they could have had is not necessarily the mark of bad parenting.

⁷ We touched on this in part in chapter 1

must have taken that intimate stance with one's biological parents rather than with one's older sibling, one's grandmother, one's adopted parents, and so on.⁸

Despite this fact, there is a time in most people's developmental trajectory in which they are able to evaluate those initial intimate relationships and *decide* whether they want to continue taking the intimate stance towards them. In some cases, the intimate stance is maintained even through adulthood, and children continue to understand themselves through their relationship with their parents; in other cases, the prerogative to define oneself is asserted by the child and they stop taking the intimate stance towards that relationship; other times still, the stance is initially taken, then withdrawn during adolescence and early adulthood, and then taken once more later in life.⁹ This, of course, is familiar to anyone who has been or has had to raise teenagers.

Finally, the same dynamic can be seen with friends as well. Not all friendships are ones towards which we take the intimate stance, and not all friendships are ones such that changes in the nature of those friendships involves a change in how we understand ourselves. Some friendships, for example, end frictionlessly with little else changing—we come together for a while, spend some months or years without investing much of ourselves into the relationship, and then drift apart slowly not having been fundamentally changed by our camaraderie. The friendships we have at work are often like this, kept together only by our shared tasks, but dissolving once one of us leaves. Other friendships, however, seem to make a significant impact on us, leading to significant alterations in how we understand ourselves even if they only last a relatively short time.

⁸ Attachment theory tells us that the object of our attachment is a function of proximity rather than biological affinity. John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 2nd ed., vol. Volume I: Attachment (Basic Books, 1982)

⁹ c.f. The developmental trajectories as described in Lynn Jamieson's *Intimacy*

Here, again, developmental trajectories are worth mentioning. In contemporary western societies, the importance of intimate friendships seems to wax and wane as one matures or transitions through various stages. Young people, in particular, seem to place much more importance on intimate friendships than adults do.¹⁰ Of course, one may still have intimate friendships when one is older, but those appear to become fewer in number as one matures and as intimate romantic partnerships become dominant.¹¹ All this makes quite a lot of sense if intimacy and intimate relationships are what I claim they are. If intimate relationships are those through which one makes sense of oneself, then we should expect more intimate relationships and the willingness to take the intimate stance towards such relationships at precisely those moments in which one's self-understanding is in jeopardy and as one is actively trying to establish or recover one's private narrative, and fewer at those moments in which it is relatively secure. Thus, we should expect few intimate relationships in childhood and adulthood since those are periods during which our narrative is not yet fully within our hands or in which it is more or less fixed by virtue of the stability of the relationships we've established. And we should expect more intimate relationships, or at the very least, the search for such relationships during the times in which we are establishing who we are—namely, adolescence, or during so-called “mid-life crises.” And this is, indeed, what we tend to observe.

¹⁰ C.f. Talcott Parsons, “Youth in the Context of American Society,” *Daedalus* 91 (n.d.) in *Intimacy* pg. 76

¹¹ According to William Rawlins, friendships are especially important in adults before a partner has been found and after a partner has been lost. See William K. Rawlins, *Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics, and the Life Course* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1992).

III. Virtues of the Account and the Relation between Interactions and Relationships

We've seen what it means to take the intimate stance towards a relationship and how accepting this view allows us to get a grip on what it means to have intimate friendships, romantic relationships, and kinships. Furthermore, we've done this without committing to any given view of what any of those relationships are, giving us a general account of intimate relationships. In this section I want to highlight some of the virtues of the view that have not been mentioned already.

The first thing to note is that the view allows us to make sense of why it's possible to have an intimate relationship with a person even though the vast majority of our interactions are not themselves intimate. As already discussed, the vast majority of the interactions I have with my romantic partner, my friends from college, and my parents and sister, are non-intimate and constitute the stuff of everyday life. On something like the aggregate view discussed in section II, it wouldn't make sense to consider these intimate relationships. On the intimate stance view, however, we can say that they're intimate regardless of the number of such interactions because *I* treat those relationships as vital to answering the question of who I am. It's, of course, true that I might be motivated to do so *because* I have had previous intimate interactions in each of those relationships, but it is not the sum of those intimate interactions that make a difference here.

Second, we can also make sense of how it's possible for me to have lots of intimate interactions with my therapist without at the same time having an intimate relationship with her. On the aggregate view, this wouldn't make sense since the sheer number of intimate interactions that we've had would automatically make the relationship an intimate one. And on the dispositional view, the claim that the relationship isn't intimate also wouldn't make sense since I readily admit that I am disposed to have further intimate interactions with my therapist. Yet, on the intimate stance view, we can see that neither the number of interactions nor the dispositions I have to engage in such

interactions are decisive. On this view, the relationship is not intimate because while I might take the intimate stance towards my therapist on any given occasion in her office, I do not take the intimate stance towards our relationship itself. Simply put, in answering the question “who am I?” I never make any reference to that relationship.¹² Indeed, if I were to stop seeing that therapist, not much would change with how I understand myself as a result. I may, of course, regret the inconvenience of having to find a new therapist and be annoyed at the fact that I will have lost the others’ years of implicit knowledge of me, but that’s about it. For others, the dissolving of the patient/therapist relationship may very well be a very serious matter and they may indeed come to change how they understand themselves as a result. However, this is perfectly compatible with the intimate stance account since this account does not preclude that one *can’t* take that stance towards one’s therapist—I just don’t.

Third, the intimate stance account lets us understand how it’s possible for only *some* relationships of the same kind to be intimate and for others not to be. This is not because, as the aggregate view suggests, we have had more intimate interactions with some friends but not with others, or, as the dispositional view suggests, we are more disposed to have such interactions with them. This may, of course, be true, but it’s not what makes a difference. Rather, it’s possible that only some relationships of the same kind are intimate while others are not because we only take the intimate stance towards some token relationships but not others. This is easiest to see with friendships since it’s possible for me to take the intimate stance towards some of my friends but not others since I may understand myself through some but not all of my friendships.

¹² This is compatible with the fact that I might take into consideration particular things that we’ve talked about on some given occasion. In other words, I may use the skills the therapist has provided me with to make sense of myself, without using the relationship itself in that way.

This provides us with a fourth advantage that is a bit trickier to see, but which I believe is one of the most important ones provided by the intimate stance view. To see it, we have to return briefly to some of the methodological discussions in Section I. As discussed, usually, the kinds of relationships that we deem as intimate are also ones that we value highly. Indeed, sometimes when we say that a particular relationship is intimate, we mean to indicate just that. In turn, this tends to suggest that intimacy *must* have something to do with that value. As a result of this, people tend to approach intimacy through the relationship-first approach discussed earlier, in which they seek the various ways in which the *value* of the relationship is expressed in a particular interaction or in the relationship itself.

As stated, this approach isn't absurd, but it leads a potential problem that is side-stepped by the intimate stance view I endorse. In particular, the focus on intimacy as something inherently valuable tends to give the impression that if a relationship or an interaction is *not* valuable, then, it must not be intimate. After all, if intimate relationships are characterized by something like the expression of one's love or like for the other, then there can be no intimacy between people who do not express such affinity.¹³ Or, alternatively, if there is notable intimacy between people that can't be denied, then it appears that they must *really* like, or love, or care for one in some way.

I believe both of these claims are false. That this is so is perhaps most clearly seen when we consider abusive romantic relationships. On my view, we can say that such relationships can sometimes be intimate by virtue of the fact that the abused has taken the intimate stance towards that relationship and has come to understand themselves at least partially in virtue of it.¹⁴ In turn, what makes that relationship *abusive* is something separate from that which has to do with the

¹³ See Julie C. Inness' account of intimacy.

¹⁴ It is also possible that the *abuser* has taken that intimate stance towards their victim. As far as I can see, there's nothing in theory that prevents this from happening, though, I assume it is a relatively rare phenomenon.

actions of the abuser. It's true, in some cases, the reason for why the stance was taken *initially* may very well be because one likes or loves the other one, but there are cases in which one finds oneself implicated with the other long after those feelings have passed and the abuse has started. Indeed, one can find oneself incapable of thinking of oneself *but through* the relationship precisely *because* of the abuse they have suffered at the hands of the other. In such cases it's simply not true that the abused actually values the relationship with their abuser in some form or fashion—they really don't, but they are simply not in a position to make sense of themselves in other ways.¹⁵

Of course, the person who advocates for intimacy as necessarily connected to value for the other could accept that the abused does not *value* the abusive relationship (or the interactions therein, or their abuser), but instead insist that the obvious lack of value indicates that there is no intimacy in the relationship. This suggestion doesn't imply that the victim in the situation is anything like a willing participant or someone who values what's happening to them. However, the denial of the intimacy here seems to me to mask one of the reasons why some abusive relationships are so morally objectionable. In particular, it seems to me that at least part of the wrongness of such abusive relationships is to be found in the very fact that how one understands oneself is bound up in the relationship itself. It's one thing for you to tell me that I'm worthless if we've just started dating—you've done something wrong in hurting my feelings and disrespecting me; it's an entirely different thing for you to tell me that I'm worthless if we're in an intimate relationship—there, the wrong is partially to be found in the fact that I have taken the intimate stance towards our relationship and as a result understand myself through it. Consequently, your claim that I'm worthless has significantly more weight since, in a very real sense, you *make me see myself* as worthless. In fact, you may say this to hurt me precisely because you know that in saying it you have this effect

¹⁵ It is one of the marks of abusive relationships that they give the impression to the abused that they are *nothing* without their abuser.

on me! By denying that there is intimacy in the relationship because there is no value in it, we obscure this dimension of the wrong committed by the abuser. On my account there is no need to do this because to be intimate with someone does not entail having any positive affect toward them.

At the same time, my view doesn't preclude there being positive affects towards the other either. Far from it, it makes it easy to understand *why* intimacy is so closely related to love, friendship, and kinship: namely, it finds its place in those relationships because it is with respect to those relationships that we tend to make sense of ourselves and our place in the world. It is also precisely in these relationships that we find talk of selves combining or blending or extending: to be a friend is to have another self; to be in love is to create a shared entity; to have a child is to quite literally create something that is one's flesh and blood. This is all plausible and it comes directly out of the account in question that we should expect this. In doing this, however, my account doesn't assume that everywhere we find intimacy we find love, friendship, or kinship.

i. Grounds for Intimate Relationships

It still remains for us to specify what the connection between intimate interactions and intimate relationships might be. I have argued that an individual can take the intimate stance towards another person, object, or thing, in any number of discreet interactions without taking the intimate stance towards the relationship with them (as I do with my therapist). This tells us that intimate relationships are not necessary for intimate interactions. But is the opposite true? Can someone take the intimate stance towards a particular relationship without also taking (or having taken) the intimate stance towards the other on some previous occasion? In other words, does the existence of an intimate relationship entail the existence of intimate interactions?

Strictly speaking, the answer is no. Since taking the intimate stance towards a relationship simply requires that an individual see that relationship in a certain light—namely, as something that

shares authority with that individual in answering the question of who they are—and since doing *that* doesn't require having taken the intimate stance towards the person object or thing previously, interaction and relationship can come apart.

Still, this suggestion might strike the reader as odd if only because so many of the relationships that we hold to be intimate involve at least *some* number of intimate interactions. One might grant the point made earlier in criticizing the aggregate view that intimate relationships are not *replete* with intimate interactions, but still insist that such interactions are not incidental to the question of whether one takes the intimate stance towards that relationship. Such a person need not assume that the presence of such interactions *makes* the relationship intimate, but only claim that such intimate interactions serve as the grounds on which the intimate stance is taken. And in very many cases, this seems to be true. After all, it's not unreasonable to think that, for example, our relationship has become intimate *after* and as a result of the intimate conversation we had together. Likewise, if someone were to ask me why I have taken the intimate stance towards this friendship in particular, there is nothing odd in saying that I did so *because* we had that conversation. This seems to suggest that at least in *practice* the connection between intimate interactions and intimate relationships is much tighter than I claim it is.

Furthermore, to deny that connection completely seems to leave the door open for some very strange scenarios. For example, it means that it's possible for someone to take a rather superficial relationship—say, the acquaintanceship they have with their mail carrier—and take the intimate stance towards *that* relationship without having any previous intimate interactions with that person. The fact that it is *technically* possible to do given how we've set things up changes nothing about the fact that *actually* doing so would be *very strange*. In fact, not only would it be strange, but it would seem almost psychologically inscrutable since taking the intimate stance towards one's mail

carrier under these conditions seems absolutely groundless. And this seems like something our account should be able to address.

I believe the first thing to say in response is that, on the whole, this analysis is correct. It seems reasonable to say that both the vast majority of the intimate relationships we have do have *some* basis in some previous intimate interaction, and also that for someone to take the intimate stance to just *any* relationship would be a very strange thing to do. Nevertheless, I don't think that this shows that there must be a strong connection between the two—at least not one so strong as the one that might be suggested by these previous remarks.

The second thing to note is that the problem seems to be that of providing something like a *reason* to take the intimate stance towards a particular relationship. But in requesting such a reason one could be requesting one of two things: in the first place, one could be asking for something like an *explanation* of why a certain thing was done or how it was possible for something to happen; in the second place, one could be asking for why taking the intimate stance *should* be done, regardless of what explanation we might offer for *why* it was done. In other words, one could be asking for either an explanatory reason, or a normative reason. Given that I have said nothing yet about when it would be a good or reasonable or useful thing for someone to engage in intimacy of any kind, I'm not in a position to give a normative reason for why someone might want to take the intimate stance towards a relationship without any intimate interaction. However, this isn't necessary. All that's needed to show is how it's *possible* for this to happen in a way that doesn't appeal to people having inscrutable and mysterious motivations (as it appears to be the case with taking the intimate stance towards one's mail carrier). If, at the same time, we can grant that this possibility is compatible with the fact that the vast majority of intimate interactions *are* grounded in intimate interactions—something I've granted already—then we're in good shape.

I think there are at least two reasons why might someone as a matter of fact end up taking the intimate stance towards a relationship without having any previous intimate interactions. Consider, first, a relationship in which two people come to understand themselves through their relationships with another, not by virtue of the fact that there are *any* intimate interactions between them, but simply by virtue of the fact that the two have spent so much time together and become so accustomed to one another that they simply cannot live otherwise.¹⁶ Some such cases are ones in which people also *learn* to love one another as their lives become more intertwined over the years. In those cases, there may be moments of intimacy here and there around which a loving intimate relationship crystalizes. However, not all are necessarily happy affairs—some, it seems, begin as and remain a matter of circumstance or survival.

This can sometimes be seen with old married couples who have long stopped loving each other (or who never loved each other in the first place), but who, for financial, cultural, or practical reasons never divorce. Some such couples may have simply paired together out of necessity or convenience, ultimately becoming “stuck” with one another for better or worse. I believe my grandparents’ marriages on both sides involved something like this. Both marriages involved a pair of people who most likely did not initially care much for each other, but who nevertheless developed

¹⁶ Fans of musicals might be reminded of “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face” from *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, *My Fair Lady*, Musical, 1964.) Notice how the singer laments the fact that he’s no longer independent, and the recognition that, in theory, he could be again (and yet...):

I've grown accustomed to her face
She almost makes the day begin
I've grown accustomed to the tune that
She whistles night and noon
Her smiles, her frowns
Her ups, her downs
Are second nature to me now
Like breathing out and breathing in
I was serenely independent and content before we met
Surely I could always be that way again
And yet...

a certain kind of psychological co-dependency on one another that made it virtually impossible for them to think of each other as separate from the life and relationship they've *had* to build together. They may very well have had *some* intimate interactions in the course of their marriages, but it seems to me that the intimacy of their relationship was not due to any of *those*, but rather from the brute necessity of having to make a life together whether they liked each other or not.

A second reason for why someone might take the intimate stance towards a relationship with another is not because they've become accustomed to the other, but because both have shared a significant or traumatic experience, or because one has been traumatized at the hands of the other. Consider, for example, the experience of two survivors of a terrorist attack. These people may come to know each other through their shared misfortune and, as it were, automatically come to see the relationship they stand in as paramount to how they understand themselves and their place in the world. What binds such people together is not the intimacy of the attack as interaction between the two (after all, *they* may very well not have interacted at all during the event). Rather, it is the very fact that their status as survivors—and, hence, the very thing that puts them in a certain kind of relationship to one another—has become an ineliminable part of the private narrative they use to make sense of themselves.¹⁷ Something similar, I believe, binds military veterans who have been in combat or who have been witness to certain horrors together.

As grim and depressing as all of these cases may be, I believe they all point to a (explanatory) reason for why someone might take the intimate stance towards a particular relationship with another person without there being any particular intimate interaction. To put the point in a

¹⁷ Something similar sometimes happens with emigres who find each other abroad—there's a strong initial urge to view the ex-pat as implicated in the same immigrant narrative that one has for oneself. Such 'bonds' aren't necessarily kept up for long. In fact, sometimes a simple conversation is enough to convince one (or both) of the parties that there is no relationship to take seriously there at all. But there's something about that initial moment of shared camaraderie that is very suggestive. The effect is less pronounced for people like myself who see little connection to their country of origin in terms of how they understand themselves, but some elements still remain.

different way, what sometimes makes the relationship intimate is not a *decision* that an individual makes on some particular occasion *to see* the relationship in this way. Rather, there are some cases in which one simply finds that one's view of the relationship *has changed* because of the circumstances in which one finds oneself. My grandparents' growing accustomed to one another was a matter of the specific circumstances of Bulgarian village life (and its oppressive gender roles); likewise, the survivors of the terror attack coming to see their shared status *as survivors* was a matter of the impact of the tragedy had on them. The grounds for both of these changes are in the particular surrounding circumstances and not in the particular interactions. What matters here is, remember, that in the first place, one or both parties have come to see the relationship in a different light, and that, in the second place, there's a reasonable explanation for how that could happen that doesn't render the people involved as psychologically bizarre. We've done this now while also allowing that in some circumstances one *can* take that stance towards another person intentionally. Whether there are any further normative reasons to, say, become accustomed to one's patriarchal village husband, or whether there such a reason to see oneself as bound with other survivors is a separate matter.

Finally, this lets us know what's so odd about the person who takes the intimate stance towards their mail carrier without having any intimate interactions with them previously. What strikes us as so odd about this person is that, on the one hand, there is no seemingly plausible story in the background that would explain why they would have *come* to see their relation to their mail carrier in a different light. Things might look different if we can provide one of the two stories discussed above (i.e., becoming accustomed and/or sharing trauma). In the absence of such a story, we're only left with the possibility that they must have *intentionally* come to see the relationship in a different light, and if that's the case, then their motivation once again appears mysterious and inscrutable.

IV. Male Friendships: A Concrete Example

The previous discussion of how relationships may come to be intimate without being grounded in any particular intimate interactions is helpful in understanding a different phenomenon: male friendships. The notion that men have a problem with intimacy and that this is obvious when we look at how they interact with one another is almost treated as a bit of common sense. Thus, I want to spend just a bit of time engaging with this particular phenomenon in light of what has been said.

I want to suggest that at least some male friendships can be considered intimate despite the fact that many men may never actually have had any intimate interactions with one another. Furthermore, given the standard patriarchal stories that many of us operate with, male friendships can serve as an example of the two ways of coming to take the intimate stance described above.

To better situate our discussion, consider how Robert Strikwerda and Larry May describe a typical male friendship:

Two men sit in a bar, each sipping his third beer. Every few minutes one speaks, more by way of a speech (about last night's baseball game or the new beer on tap); the other nods in agreement but waits a while before speaking himself, and then often on a different topic altogether. The men are not concerned by the lack of conversation; indeed, they might tell you that they know each other so well that they don't need to have lengthy conversations, adding that it is the peace and quiet of one another's company that they each prize most highly. When they depart for home, they clasp hands or perhaps merely salute one another.

Such companionship is enjoyable; at least, we have enjoyed it. Our point is not to criticize such relationships. Not every friendship needs to be intimate. However, it seems to us that if *all* of one's friendships display such a lack of intimacy, then one's life will be impoverished and unsatisfying. Such friendships are not in themselves impoverished, but a steady diet of them may lead one either to nutritional deficiency or to hunger for something more. Similarly, if men are open to intimacy only with female friends or partners, they cut themselves off from deeply rewarding

relationships with other men, as well as help perpetuate a debilitating gender pattern in which women do the emotional work for men.¹⁸

The first thing to ask is on what grounds Strikwerda and May take the friendship between these two men to lack intimacy. The obvious answer seems to be that this is the case because there is nothing intimate about the *interaction* described and that such interactions constitute the vast majority of all interactions in such a friendship. This suggests that Strikwerda and May would most likely endorse the aggregate view of intimate relationships. In doing so, however, they conflate intimate interactions and intimate relationships and conclude from the fact that most male friendships do not involve many (if any) intimate *interactions* that the *friendships* themselves are not intimate. Now, I am willing to grant that the example they discuss certainly doesn't constitute an intimate interaction, but I am not convinced that the relationship between these two men is not an intimate relationship *on that basis*. After all, recall that most of the interactions we have in the course of most of our intimate relationships are also non-intimate.

Once we make the distinction between an intimate interaction and an intimate relationship, we can note that any given interaction between the two men may very well be non-intimate while the relationship itself remains an intimate one. This may be because, in some cases, the grounds on which each has taken the intimate stance towards their relationship is to be found in some previous intimate interaction that is not (and need not) be repeated in every further interaction. Or, it may be because the two men in question have simply become accustomed to each other and see their

¹⁸ Strikwerda and May (1992), 112. Strikwerda and May are some of the few philosophers who have explicitly written on intimacy, and it should be noted that it was this paper in particular that sparked my interest in the topic. As such, I respect them greatly for their work, even though I believe that, ultimately, they are wrong about the nature of intimacy. It's worth noting that as both Strikwerda and May and I talk about male friendships, we're explicitly and exclusively talking about male friendships between straight, cis men. Things may look very different in other communities.

relationship as something without which they can't make sense of themselves.¹⁹ Alternatively, there may never have been any intimate interaction between the two, but they may have both been subject to some even that has bonded them in the way alluded to above—for example, they may both be war veterans, or they may both have been involved in a near-death experience, etc.²⁰

It is, of course, hard to tell if this is the case in this particular example without knowing more about each man's life, but it is not hard to imagine how such a thing could be possible. One can, for example, imagine that these two men have met every other day in the same bar for the last twenty years, and, as the authors themselves acknowledge, they may know each other very well, enjoy each other's company, value the peace and quiet they have together, and find that the lack of conversation doesn't bother them in the least bit. On my view, none of this suggests that their relationship is not an intimate one. What *would* suggest this conclusion, however, is any suggestion that the relationship is irrelevant to how they understand themselves. If, for example, one of the men in the example were to show indifference at the prospect of the friendship ending, if it didn't matter to him whether they talked about sports with their friend or just any other barfly, and so on, then we would have grounds to think that not only their interactions, but also their friendship is not intimate.

Now, in fairness to Strikwerda and May, they acknowledge that there are male friendships that look different from the “typical” male friendship described above—they call these “comradeships.”²¹

¹⁹ A nice example of these kinds of intimate relationships can be found in the very underrated cartoon *King of the Hill* (Mike Judge, “King of the Hill” (Fox, n.d.)

²⁰ Less grimly, they may have both seen a fantastic Bruce Springsteen concert or taken mushrooms together.

²¹ For a great view of what comradeship involves that is significantly different from Strikwerda and May's view, I recommend Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (New York: Verso, 2019).

The sharing of certain kinds of experience—such as those of teenage boys in a summer resort community, of soldiers in trenches, or of sailors on long sea voyages—provides the occasion for mutual self-disclosure among males. In these situations, one is in a period of some stress, whether puberty or physical danger, with plenty of time and not enough activity to fill it. In war, men are forced to be with one another, and they report that in this situation they often reflect on aspects of their lives they normally would block. Soldiers not only fight shoulder to shoulder, but they sit for long hours in cramped quarters wondering if their lives will end in the next barrage of gunfire. Such occasions can bring men to talk about deeply personal matters in their lives and hence to form bonds with one another that may last long after the common experiences have ended.²²

It's clear that the scenarios that Strikwerda and May describe are precisely the scenarios that I want to say constitute coming to take the intimate stance towards the relationship. In fact, they even run through the three kinds of possible explanations we've discussed: namely, they could have done this because they have grown accustomed to being together, or because they've been subject to the same kind of stress, or because they've had intimate interactions with one another (viz., intimate conversations in the trenches). On my view, this just means that the men in question have come to have an intimate relationship. However, according to Strikwerda and May, this is merely comradeship and doesn't amount to intimacy at all. Why?

Comrades are not necessarily intimate friends, for they are often bound to one another as generalized others, not in terms of how each one is as a unique member of the human race. Somewhat paradoxically, comrades are loyal to each other not out of concern for the particularity of the individual other, but out of an almost impartial respect for people of a certain type or in a certain situation: fellow soldiers, compatriots, coworkers, etc. ...Comradeship is a deontological regard for a generalized other and, in this sense, is quite different from intimate friendships, which are based on regard for a particularized other and where consequences and contexts matter quite a bit.²³

²² Strikwerda and May (1992), 112-113.

²³ Ibid. 113-114.

What makes comradeships non-intimate on Strikwerda and May's view seems to be the ways in which they differ from *friendships*. It is friendships that are supposed to be particularistic and involve a special concern for the other, so the fact that comradeships do not seem to involve such a specific concern for the other *because of their particular characteristics*, rules out comradeship as being friendship, and hence, as being an *intimate* friendship.

It should be obvious from what has been said so far why I disagree with this view. I don't think that intimacy has to do with the particularity of the other, but in the stance that one takes towards them or the relationship in question. As such, what makes a friendship intimate is not the fact that it's *a modified* friendship, but simply that it's a friendship in which the particular stance has been taken. As long as the stance has been taken towards the relationship and as long as that relationship counts as a friendship (even if it's not the purest and highest form of friendship), then it is an intimate one.

Somewhat ironically, their view on intimate friendship is perfectly compatible with my own description of intimacy.

In intimate friendship, the psychic boundary that normally encloses the male self, allowing the characteristically self-confident, competent, single-minded pursuit of one's public roles, is temporarily opened to allow a new focus to develop, one that includes the man and another person. It is not the formation of a new boundary as typical in comradeship, but an expansion of one's concentration of attention from self to include the other.²⁴

This definition of an intimate friendship has *many* common features with the general view of intimacy I've defended in this chapter and the last. In fact, it describes a dynamic in which an individual stops seeing oneself as a self-determined and autonomous agent—as an encapsulated self—and starts seeing oneself as bound and involved with another. This is very similar to the view

²⁴ Ibid. 114.

that I've advocated for. Note, further, that *nothing* about this description has anything to do with the particularities of the other person or the fact that intimate friendship is non-deontic. It does, however, stress on the particular way in which one is able to view the other and the individual's relation to that other.

In a sense, then, Strikwerda and May are fellow travelers on the road to intimacy. However, they've become too focused in two places: first, their analysis of intimacy begins with and takes its cues from their conception of intimate *friendships* rather than focusing on intimacy itself. And second, their analysis is much too focused on the importance of intimate *interactions* (and in particular, on intimate *conversations* and self-disclosure) as the grounds for having an intimate relationship. Indeed, they constantly speak about men's problems with intimacy as rooted in their inability to *self-disclose* to other men.²⁵ As such, their view is very narrowly concerned with intimacy as achieved in conversation. As we've seen, however, even if this is a very common form of intimacy, it is only *one* such form. And just as we shouldn't conclude that someone (or some group of people) is incapable of intimacy *tout court* from the fact that they struggle with intimacy in one domain, so we shouldn't conclude that men struggle with intimacy simply because they may struggle with intimate conversations.

Finally, there are advantages to looking at intimate male friendships from my perspective than from Strikwerda and May's. Let's grant two assumptions for the moment: first, that regardless of what has been said regarding male friendships, it's true that men struggle more with intimacy than women do (both in terms of intimate interactions and in terms of intimate relationships); and

²⁵ Consider, for example: "As we have noted, many male friendships lack the dimension of mutual self-disclosure. The women we know report forming friendships through self-revealing discussion, whereas the men we know report that they typically form friendships based on common activities...if one cannot accompany another person in the various aspects of the other's life, full disclosure through action is virtually impossible, and thus disclosure via speech becomes a practical necessity" pg. 116 Notice how strong that is! Intimate conversations become a *practical necessity for intimacy*!

second, that it would be *better* if men engaged in intimacy more often.²⁶ On Strikwerda and May's view, our attention is drawn to the barriers and obstacles that are in place that keep men from *talking* to each other. This, in turn, leads to a focus on the ways in which men are encouraged or discouraged from sharing their feelings with one another. Now, this strikes me as a perfectly fine thing to do, and, on the whole, I don't see any problem with men learning how to speak to each other, but it's also a very limited proposal and not necessarily one in which more *intimacy* is produced.

What matters on my view is not that there are *more men* who talk to each other about their feelings, but that there are more men who see their place in the world as bound with the lives of other men *and women*. As I see it, the sharing of one's feelings doesn't by itself make for intimacy at all. Indeed, one could imagine a world in which every man has learned to talk about their feelings at great length, but in which they more fully see themselves in "the characteristically self-confident, competent, single-minded pursuit of one's public roles" than they did before. As a consequence, we might find ourselves in a world in which there's a lot more male self-indulgence, but much less male intimacy.

By contrast, my theory can accept the need for better emotional literacy as a means of increasing intimacy (after all, intimate conversations *are* important and they *can* serve as the grounds for intimate relationships too), without remaining so narrowly focused on self-disclosure. Furthermore, because my view accepts that at least some male relationships are intimate despite the fact that they exhibit very little intimacy in their interactions, my view also suggests that we can learn from such relationships. Strikwerda and May seem to find little value in comradeship—I find *a lot*. Indeed, I think focusing our attention on how men have been able to form intimate relationships

²⁶ We can grant this for the reasons that Strikwerda and May state—that an increase in men's intimacy would result in a more equitable and less sexist society (this is certainly something that I want).

with one another despite the strong pressures *not* to be intimate with one another can provide us with valuable insight into how men have *resisted* the patriarchy's imperative to think of themselves in certain ways. The specific details of precisely how men have been able to do this or how they might be able to do this in the future is beyond the scope of this project, but is yet another avenue for further research.

V. Conclusion

With the conclusion of this chapter, we have given the full *general* account of intimacy since we have explained what makes both intimate interactions and intimate relationships possible. I have claimed that at the core of both phenomena is the intimate stance: to have an intimate interaction is to take the intimate stance towards some particular person, object, or thing in the course of a particular interaction, and to be in an intimate relationship with another person, object, or thing, is to take the intimate stance with respect to that relationship. In both cases, what matters is that the person who takes the stance treats the other person, object, or thing *as though* they shared equal authority with respect to answering the question “who am I?” together. This view has had some nice advantages, the biggest of which, I believe, has been to unite what may have appeared to be a desperately disparate phenomenon like intimacy through one core feature: the intimate stance.

Now that we have this general account, it's worth saying something about the value of intimacy itself and why we may want to engage in something like it. I turn to this next.

Chapter Four: The Value of Intimacy

I take it as an uncontroversial assumption that, at the very least, intimacy *appears* to be valuable. This, undoubtedly, is due to the fact that, as we've seen already, intimacy is very closely associated with other things such as love, friendship, and kinship, all of which are taken to be valuable in their own right. Of course, that *there is* a connection between such valuable relationships and intimacy has already been granted. But even if we acknowledge such a connection, it does not tell us whether intimacy *itself* is something valuable, or whether it is only valuable in relation to these further things. Thus, we can ask whether intimacy is valuable *if, when, and because friendship* is valuable (and because, for example, intimacy is a certain reliable way of securing the value of friendship), or whether intimacy is valuable independent of any further consideration.

I want to begin our exploration of the value of intimacy by taking a look at why intimacy may actually be something to avoid rather than embrace. If, in going this approach, we discover that there is, in fact, no good reason to fear intimacy or to see it as something potentially dangerous—if it turns out that all worries are essentially ungrounded—then we'll be in a better position to understand its value if only by separating what appears to be bad about it from what's good about it. If, however, we discover that there are good reasons to think that intimacy really *is* potentially dangerous, then we'll also have a good reason to think that its value is more complicated than we may have thought.

I will argue that we *do* have some very good reasons to think that intimacy is potentially dangerous, and that this simply follows from what intimacy requires of us. In particular, I think that given the view of intimacy I've argued for, it necessarily leaves one open to the possibility of abuse,

exploitation, and alienation. Furthermore, the risk that this poses is an ineliminable one that does not depend on the good will or character of the one with whom one is intimate, but is a risk that arises from the very dynamic of intimacy itself.

Nevertheless, I will argue that at least sometimes it's worth engaging in intimacy because doing so allows us to attain other valuable things. I consider one such example as a case study in Section II and argue that intimacy can help us cope in the face of serious crises. Undoubtedly, there are other valuable things that intimacy can help bring us apart from the ability to cope, but my focus will be on just this example.

I. What's so Scary about Being Intimate?

i. Groundless and Reasonable Difficulties

For many people, achieving intimacy can pose a substantial challenge. This is true in respect to both intimate interaction and intimate relationships. Why is this so? And is it correct to think of intimacy in this way?

In some cases, the difficulty in question can be explained by reference to how people are socialized. If we're brought up in an environment in which intimacy is entirely lacking (or close to entirely lacking), in which being intimate with others is discouraged, or in which intimacy is strictly regimented and policed, then we might find many people who struggle with intimacy for no other reason than that they lack the skills and know-how to do so. If we find a community in which swimming is never taught, then we should also expect to find a community in which people will have considerable difficulty swimming.

Such an explanation is not without its merits and probably goes a long way in explaining some of the gender differences we find with respect to intimacy. If boys in general are never taught

how to be intimate with others, if they never see intimacy modeled by other men in their lives, or if they're strongly discouraged from following the lead of the few role models they do have around them, then it's no surprise that they would grow up to become *men* who struggle with intimacy too. This is all the more true if, at the same time, they are also encouraged to think of themselves as entirely independent, self-reliant, and autonomous agents who don't need others (or who, ideally *shouldn't* need others) in order to figure out who they are. If intimacy requires giving up the prerogative to be the sole author of one's private narrative, and if young men are encouraged to always retain that prerogative at the risk of being seen as weak or incapable, then they might find themselves struggling to be intimate for lack of pure know-how.

Nevertheless, it seems wrong to say that the difficulty with achieving intimacy is *always* or necessarily a matter of lacking certain practical skills. Very often, people seem to struggle with intimacy because it simply *appears* to them as something frightening and dangerous, or, at the very least, as something involving a non-trivial amount of risk. Consequently, many people are reluctant to engage in it due to the perceived dangers that intimacy involves. Such a reluctance can remain in place even if we know how to be intimate, and even if, on the whole, we very much want to engage in it. To extend our metaphor, there's a difference between struggling to swim in the river because one doesn't know *how* to swim, and in being reluctant to swim in the river because it is infested with piranhas.

Of course, this isn't unique to intimacy. A person with an intense phobia of needles, for example, may very well know that it's good for them to get a flu shot, know how to do so, *want* to get the vaccine, and still struggle with going through the procedure. However, in this case and others like it, we can reasonably say that the difficulty here is not due to anything about *the shot*, but rather something to do with the individual person and their particular psychology. Indeed, if we weren't

trying to be particularly conscientious of this person's feelings, we might say that although the shot is a real source of anxiety for them, the perceived danger they see in the procedure is groundless—they're simply mistaken to see it as something dangerous. By contrast, this is not the case with the person who experiences anxiety at the prospect of undergoing an untested experimental surgical procedure. To struggle and experience anxiety in this case is not to be pathologically fearful, but to be appropriately sensitive to the dangers and risks of the untested procedure.

The question before us, then, is whether the difficulty that people experience in intimacy is more like the difficulty of the phobic person—an unfortunate, but ultimately groundless reaction to something that's actually good—or more like the reasonable difficulty faced by the surgery patient. This question is complicated further by the fact that socialization and upbringing is important here as well. In some cases, at least, what one finds to be frightening or painful is a function of how one is brought up, of the kind of social pressures that one is subject to, and of the kinds of habits one develops.¹ Thus, it is possible that, on the whole, if young boys and men struggle with intimacy it is not *only* because they lack the necessary skills to engage in it, but *also* because they have been socialized to find intimacy frightening. This may very well be the case regardless of whether there *is* anything actually frightening about intimacy itself.² So, in order to answer whether there really *is* something worrying about intimacy, we have to be able to make sure that the reasons we give are neither ones that amount to being improperly brought up in the sense that one has been taught to fear something one has no reason to fear, nor a foible of an individual's psychology (as is the case with the phobic person).

¹ C.f. Aristotle's discussion of pleasures and pains in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

² Many people are afraid of foreigners, for example, but that's (usually) not because there is something dangerous about foreigners *as such*. In fact, data suggests that immigrants in the US, at least, are actually *more* law-abiding than their native-born compatriots. The fear of the immigrant here is one is very much real, but is not a pathological one (in the phobic sense) but usually due to how one was socialized.

This leaves us with at least one reasonable option on how to make progress: namely, we should first examine what intimacy itself requires in its general form, and see if we have any good reason to be reluctant to engage in it. If there are no good reasons to be reluctant, then we can reasonably conclude that the difficulties involved in being intimate are due to upbringing or individual idiosyncrasy. However, if there are at least some good reasons not to engage in intimacy in general, then we can better understand why so many people seem to experience so much anxiety around intimacy.

ii. Autonomy, Alienation, and Abuse

In the most general terms, my view holds that intimacy as it appears in the context of interactions and in the context of relationships is a matter of taking the intimate stance. Recall, an interaction is intimate if one person (or both persons) takes the intimate stance towards the other in the course of that interaction. And a relationship is intimate if one person (or both persons) takes the intimate stance towards the relationship in question. Recall, also, that to take the intimate stance is to *treat* the object to which one has taken the stance as though it were appropriately disposed to share in engaging with one's private narrative. This treatment, in turn, was cashed out as a matter of seeing the other (person, object, or thing) as sharing authority with the person taking the intimate stance with respect to the question "Who am I?" Finally, to see someone (or something) in this way involved giving up one's prerogative over being the final authority (or sole author) over how that question is answered.

On this picture, it very much looks like intimacy comes with a non-trivial loss of autonomy over one's private narrative. And given the importance of one's private narrative as the very thing that structures one's place in the world and makes sense of their actions, this loss of autonomy seems like a very significant thing! After all, we are not talking about sharing authority with another

over what movie we should go see, or what we should eat for dinner, but of sharing authority over *who I am*.

This, in turn, makes it easy to see how intimacy can be a very *risky* thing. In the first place, if intimacy requires sharing authority over who I am with you, then there's the clear risk that you could take the authority given to you and use it to abuse or exploit me. In making you a co-author in my private narrative I run the risk of *losing* control of that narrative and of being made into someone who is primarily there for *your* benefit. This kind of exploitation was touched upon briefly in the last chapter. The risk here is not necessarily that of being made to do certain things against one's will, but rather the risk of being made *into* a certain kind of person. To be seen as a coward in the eyes of one's intimate is a very different matter than to be seen as such in the eyes of a stranger. The stranger has little say in who you are and how you think of yourself, but the intimate has been given much greater authority in determining this by your own lights, and thus, their seeing you this way *makes* you a coward.³ Of course, this same dynamic could be a source of abuse as well as exploitation. The other may not want to turn you into someone who manipulates you for their benefit, but may simply take pleasure from causing you to suffer.

All this suggests that, at the very least, one should be very *careful* in matters of intimacy and that one should learn to be a good judge of character before allowing one's narrative to be altered by just anyone. Thus, it seems that if one makes sure that one only takes the intimate stance with trustworthy people who won't be abusive, then the problem diminishes. I'm partially sympathetic to this claim since the mere presence of a risk (even a significant risk) does not by itself mean that something isn't worth doing. However, I think there's another kind of risk that one is exposed to

³ Sartre was right that hell is other people. He was just wrong to imply that it's *all* other people. Really, hell is just one's intimates. Of course, it is also one's intimates who make one a good person as well—the sword cuts both ways. So, if hell is one's intimates, then maybe so is heaven.

when being intimate with another that is perfectly compatible with the other being perfectly trustworthy, well-meaning, and friendly. This is the risk of becoming alienated from oneself. Simply put, you and I may have an intimate interaction in which I grant you shared authority over who I am, and as a result of what *you* do with that authority, I may become someone other than who I would have wanted to become.

More generally speaking, this alienation occurs when our interaction leaves me in any situation in which I am unable to recognize or understand myself in the terms that I have so far been able to so. To use a familiar example, I may have gone into our interaction with the narrative of the aspiring Hollywood actor, struggling to remain in the business, but ultimately making sense of what I do and how I do it on the basis of the project that I have dedicated my life to. You may take the intimate stance to me in our interaction with the perfectly good intention to explore how I understand myself and how I make sense of my narrative in light of this project. Yet, through the course of our conversation, and through no ill will on your own part, it may become apparent to both of us that *that narrative* simply cannot be sustained.⁴ Such a realization can be highly distressing. And not because it was done purposefully and maliciously by an abuser or exploiter, but simply because it remains true that in sharing authority over my narrative with you, I still run the risk of being made into someone *different* from who I was before.⁵

Crucially, I believe this risk is present even in those one-sided cases of intimacy discussed in Chapter 2. This may sound odd since one might reason that the widower who takes the intimate

⁴ A similar kind of horrifying moment occurs when one realizes that one's cherished philosophical idea has encountered a fatal objection.

⁵ A rather humorous example of this kind of worry can be found in the BBC show "An Idiot Abroad" in which the titular idiot Karl Pilkington worries that if he goes abroad to China he might adopt new culinary tastes that we won't be able to satisfy at home. The worry is a silly one, but it points to Karl's awareness that his life in England has a certain kind of stability rooted in who he takes himself to be, and that changes brought about by new experiences put that stability at risk. Krishnendu Majumdar, "China," *An Idiot Abroad*, September 23, 2010.

stance towards his departed lover at her grave, the mother who takes the intimate stance towards her newborn, or the person on the hike who takes the intimate stance towards the majesty of the Grand Canyon is relatively safe since there is no agent out there who can take advantage of their vulnerability. Indeed, this was one of the reasons we sited for why someone might take that stance towards such things. After all, it's not as though the departed lover, the baby, or the landmark will *do anything* at all to induce a change in the other that would result in the kind of alienation we are discussing now. In those cases, recall, the other object, person, or thing is simply *treated as though* they could engage in one's private narrative, regardless of whether they're actually able to do so. As such, it's fair to say that if alienation is possible, it would be so only because the person taking the intimate stance has *self-alienated* in the sense that they have made *themselves* into someone else through taking the intimate stance towards another. But I think this is precisely what can happen. Simply put, what allows for alienation of either variety (i.e., alienation at the hands of the other or self-alienation) to occur is the very opening up to the possibility that the narrative through which one makes sense of oneself is not something that one determines alone. When taking the intimate stance towards another one essentially *grants* that this is the case, and in that moment in which one treats the baby, the gravestone, or the canyon as a potential co-author in that narrative, one also implicitly grants the possibility that the narrative might change. In such moments one might imagine what the other would say or how one might appear to the other from their perspective. This very process (what we may call self-objectification) in which one thinks of how the other might engage with their narrative can be enough to set things in motion.⁶

⁶ Poetry is likely to slip in here. I sometimes think of the line from the 1988 film *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, *Die Hard*, Action, 1988) (a great piece of poetry indeed!) in which Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) says: "'When Alexander saw the breadth of his domain, he wept for there were no more worlds to conquer.' Benefits of a classical education." This quote is sometimes attributed to Plutarch, but it is, unfortunately, apocryphal. Still, one could imagine this moment as precisely one of self-alienation in which Alexander the Great poses the question of who he is in light of his domain, only to discover that the narrative of conqueror can no longer be sustained.

The prospect of alienation, exploitation, and abuse strike me as serious reasons to think of intimacy as something potentially dangerous and harmful. Crucially, this simply falls out from a closer look at the general account of intimacy provided. The potential risks that have been brought up here are not ones that arise only if one lacks certain social skills, nor are they ones that arise only if one has been socialized a certain way. Rather, they are risks that arise from the very intimate dynamic. As such, those risks appear to be inherent to intimacy wherever it appears and not a contingent feature of the way we relate to one another. In turn, this allows us to return to the question with which we began this section and to say that, at least in some cases, people struggle with intimacy precisely because intimacy involves taking big risks to which we're sensitive even if not explicitly aware. In other words, there seems to be such a thing as a healthy fear of intimacy that isn't like the phobia of being given a shot, but is more like the fear of an untested medical procedure. And, indeed, this is what many of us may have already suspected.

This is an interesting result for two reasons. First, it gives us some evidence that we might have the right account of intimacy in hand since it is able to produce plausible verdicts that accord with our intuitions on intimacy without explicitly building in those intuitions into the account itself. In other words, we didn't get the result that intimacy is potentially dangerous by first building in considerations about how intimacy seems to require vulnerability. If we had done that, then there would be nothing surprising about the conclusion that intimacy is potentially dangerous since vulnerability necessarily implies potential danger. This certainly is one way to begin the project, and, indeed, one question that I often get asked when I present my work on intimate conversations is why I don't primarily focus on the vulnerability of intimacy as a starting point. The simple answer is that I think to do so is to confuse the fact that intimacy involves a certain *kind* of vulnerability—namely, the vulnerability involved in sharing authority over one's narrative—with the notion that vulnerability is a *core component* of intimacy. The latter suggests that intimacy is *about* being vulnerable,

and I think, if anything, vulnerability is an ineliminable biproduct of intimacy, but not what it's about. In any case, the fact that our account is able to loop around and not only account for the apparent vulnerability involved in intimacy, but to also explain why we should expect it to be there is, I think, a good sign.⁷

The second reason this result is interesting is because it seems to tell us something about the value of intimacy. If what has been said so far is correct, then it's reasonable to think of intimacy *itself* as something potentially dangerous or harmful. However, if this is the case, then intimacy appears to be radically different from other kinds of goods. For example, it is not reasonable to say that *health* or *happiness* are potentially dangerous or that they require that we be careful in how we engage with them. Of course, one may be significantly harmed if, for example, one *pursues* happiness through the consumption of drugs and alcohol, or if one *pursues* health through fasting. But those are very different claims from the wildly implausible one that *being* healthy or happy is dangerous or harmful. By contrast, it is not just the case that certain pursuits of intimacy make it dangerous (and undoubtedly, there are such pursuits), but rather that the very dynamic of intimacy makes it such.

II. Why Pursue Intimacy?

It's important to note that in raising the inherently risky nature of intimacy, I do not mean to imply anything about how likely these risks are to happen. Indeed, we should be careful not to *overstate* the danger of intimacy simply because there is an ineliminable risk in the mix. One could very easily insist that virtually every activity involves *some* risk, but that this doesn't mean that the risk is never worth taking or that it can't be outweighed by the potential benefits that the particular

⁷ I have yet to see any other approach to intimacy that *explains* why vulnerability is related to intimacy that doesn't simply assume that it's one of its facets. I, of course, agree that it's a facet, but claim that I can explain its presence on the surface, too. Namely, one must be vulnerable because co-authorship over one's narrative necessarily requires vulnerability.

activity can bring about. Not only is this the case, but there are also certain things that we can do that limit our exposure to risk even when it is an inherent one. Driving to the store poses some inherent risk of catastrophic car failure or an accident caused by the carelessness of other drivers, but we think that very often this risk is worth taking for the benefit of getting to other places quickly. Furthermore, we mitigate the risk involved by doing things like being attentive to the road and putting on our seatbelts.

I think both of these remarks apply to intimacy as well. In particular, given the risks involved with intimacy, it makes sense to be careful and selective with the people with whom we are intimate. This is not always possible since, as I have suggested, there are times in which we find that we have already taken the intimate stance towards another or towards a relationship without realizing it. The relationships that many of us have with our parents, for example, are frequently ones to which we find we have taken the intimate stance to without choosing to do so. Likewise, we can sometimes fall in love with someone we shouldn't have fallen in love with despite our best efforts, and we may find ourselves also having taken the intimate stance towards a toxic relationship that harms us significantly.

However, the fact that this sometimes happens with particular people and particular relationships does not mean that intimacy always or even usually catches us unawares. Nor does it mean that we cannot become more aware of when certain attempts are being made by others to engage us in intimacy. Furthermore, just because taking the intimate stance may always involve some risk of say, alienation or abuse does not mean that the risk is equal across the board on all occasions and with all persons. The possibility of abuse may never be fully eliminated is real, but that doesn't mean that it's always on the horizon, or that every single person is equally likely to abuse us as any other person. Here, once again, restraint, caution, and care seem to be the proper advice.

Still, it seems that something should be said about why one should ever take the risk of being intimate even if we grant that it can be minimized; even if we grant that putting on the seatbelt reduces our risk of dying in an accident, there's got to be something that gets us to take that risk on in the first place. Indeed, even with taking all of these things into consideration, many of us may still think that it has been worth it to be intimate in the past and that it would be worth it to be intimate again. Why is that? What do we stand to gain by doing so?

In what follows I want to focus on just one way in which intimacy can be of value: that of coping with a collapsed narrative. Undoubtedly, there are likely to be many such valuable things related to intimacy. Trust, for example, seems to be very closely related to intimacy for obvious reasons: if building trust necessarily requires being vulnerable with another and if taking the intimate stance necessarily involves being vulnerable in the ways specified above, then it's clear how intimacy can be an avenue (though, of course, not the *only* avenue) through which two people can come to trust each other. Likewise, social recognition by the other seems to be something very important to people, and it, too has a clear connection to intimacy in the terms described. It seems reasonable, for example, to claim that one way of getting recognition from the other involves their acknowledgement that one's narrative is one that *they* can make sense of. Nevertheless, a full list of all the valuable things that intimacy may be able to help us gain, and the details of how it might do so would take us many more chapters to develop. In lieu of that, I only want to illustrate what I have in mind with a single one.

i. Collapsed Narratives

A. Herakles and Ajax

I want to begin the discussion by looking at two somewhat surprising sources: Sophocles' *Ajax* and Euripides' *Herakles*. Bernard Williams briefly discusses both plays in *Shame and Necessity* and

his comments on them there are especially useful for our purposes. Before we get to that discussion, however, a brief synopsis of both plays is in order.

In the *Ajax*, we join the Greek heroes of the Trojan war following the death of Achilles in a dispute about what to do with the fallen hero's armor. As the second-best warrior in the Greek army, Ajax believes he should be given the honor, but, contrary to his wishes, Agamemnon and Menelaus decide to award it to Odysseus. The decision infuriates Ajax who vows to kill all three for slighting him. Before he can act on his decision, however, Athena intervenes and tricks him into slaughtering the camp's sheep and their herdsman in the night while making him think that he has killed his enemies. By morning, Ajax has recovered his sanity, but the consequences of his actions have become apparent to the whole camp. Ajax is overwhelmed by the shame of what he has done and decides to commit suicide. Despite the attempts of his concubine Tecmessa to talk him out of it, he sneaks away from the camp under the pretense of purifying himself and impales himself on his sword.

We see a similar story in the *Herakles*. There, we find Megar, Herakles' wife, and her three children, taking refuge in the altar of Zeus from Lycus, the ruler of Thebes. They are hiding from him because he intends to kill them in order to secure his right to the throne. Herakles is missing from the scene because he is still in Hades, finishing the last of his labors and it only appears to be a matter of time before Lycus will be able to complete his plan. After he orders that wood be stacked around the altar so that he can burn his victims alive, Megar submits to him and asks for permission to dress herself and her children in their ceremonial death robes so that they can face their execution with dignity. Lycus agrees and decamps to give them time to prepare. In the meantime, however, Herakles returns with Theseus, and having learned about Lycus' plan, vows revenge. He ushers his family back into his palace and when Lycus returns to murder them, he is instead killed by Herakles.

At this point the story takes a dark turn as Hera, jealous of the fact that Herakles is Zeus' son, has sent Iris to drive Herakles mad in order to humble him. And indeed, we learn through a messenger sent to Theseus that in his madness Herakles has killed his wife and children. When he arrives, Theseus finds his friend tied to a pillar, surrounded by the bodies of his beloved. Much like Ajax, Herakles is overcome with shame at what he's done and intends to kill himself. Unlike Ajax, however, Theseus is able to convince Herakles not to go through with the act, offering his friendship, support, and the possibility of a new life in Athens.

The parallels between the plays are apparent: two great heroes are tricked by the gods, driven mad, made to do things that are so shameful that suicide becomes a viable option, and both are given reasons by those around them for why they shouldn't take that path. The crucial difference between the two is, of course, the fact that one goes through with the act while the other does not. The central question that faces us when these two stories are brought into conversation with one another is how to explain the difference in outcome between the two.

As Bernard Williams sees it, Ajax's suicide is a direct result of his realization that given his character, he cannot continue to live in light of the actions that he's committed.

[Ajax] knows that he cannot change his ethos, his character, and he knows that after what he has done, this grotesque humiliation, he cannot live the only kind of life his ethos demands...Being what he is, he cannot live as the man who had done these things; it would be merely impossible in virtue of the relations between what he expects of the world and what the world expects of a man who expects that of it.⁸

⁸ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 72.

Simply put, Ajax's character, the essence of who he is, makes it impossible for him to live the kind of life that he can recognize as his own. In Williams' terms, "he has made himself, apart from everything else, utterly absurd."⁹

We might think that very much the same thing can be said about Herakles—yet he does not kill himself. It's worth pausing for a moment to look at how Williams explains this difference. He appeals to two factors that keep Herakles going—Theseus' friendship and Herakles' own aversion to cowardice. These, he claims, were not available to Ajax. The former seems true since Ajax's murderous actions were directly spurned by the betrayal of his comrades—where they should have honored him for his warrior's prowess, they instead dispossess him of what should be rightly his. Furthermore, the very fact that Ajax slaughters the sheep while under the impression that he's killing Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Menelaus leaves the possibility of the restoration of those relationships out of the question.

Nevertheless, given Ajax's character, we should expect him to be just as averse to cowardice as Herakles. Williams acknowledges as much. However, if this is correct, then it seems as though the only thing that made the difference between Ajax and Herakles' case is the presence of friendship. But the claim that friendship should prove to be Herakles' saving grace might strike us as quaint and implausible (One only needs a friend in order to live with the murder of one's family? *Really?*). Indeed, although friendship plays an important part in the explanation of how the fates of the two heroes diverge, I believe the mere fact of Theseus' friendship *can't* by itself explain why he lives while Ajax dies. This is where I think Williams is slightly off the mark. It is not simply friendship that helps Herakles, but rather a very particular thing that occurs within the friendship dynamic between the two. In particular, what does the work here is the fact that the extension of friendship

⁹ Ibid. The use of the term 'absurd' is not incidental here. I'll return to this point later.

here also serves as a signal to Herakles that his actions do not mean that his life is incompatible with the kind of character he has. Or, to put it in other words, Herakles survives because he is able to *recover* the narrative that served to make sense of his life, his actions, and his relation to the world so that he can see a path towards a future life.

We can easily put this in the narrative terms of intimacy: Both Ajax and Herakles have lived up to a certain point with a certain kind of personal narrative that serves to answer the question ‘who am I?’ and which orders the world around them and gives meaning to their actions; viz. they are *heroes*. Nevertheless, the actions that each takes in their respective madness makes it impossible for them to maintain that narrative—a hero neither slaughters non-threatening sheep in his rage, nor kills his family. As a result, both of their lives are rendered absurd and meaningless, and, consequently, suicide becomes an option for each. Yet, with the help of Theseus, Herakles is able to maintain some semblance of his narrative through the assurances that the latter provides in insisting that his narrative still makes sense and that he still has an answer to who he is.

But why is this path not available to Ajax? After all, Ajax’s concubine Tecmessa also attempts to sway him from suicide and pleads with him to stay alive for the sake of her and their son. As such, there is *technically* an available narrative for Ajax to subscribe to which will provide him with an answer to who he is: namely, he could continue to make sense of the world as a *father* and *partner* to Tecmessa and their son. Yet, Ajax does not accept this narrative. This tells us also that the mere presence of an alternative narrative is not enough, and that something else is missing from the relationship between Ajax and Tecmessa. That, I believe, is the fact that Ajax simply never treats Tecmessa as having the kind of authority to help him (re)construct the narrative that can make the world make sense again. He is unable to take the intimate stance both towards his lover and towards their relationship. As a result, her words have no weight in rendering the world sensible again. By

contrast, Herakles *is* able to take that stance towards Theseus and treats his friend as having authority in helping him provide an answer to the question of who he is.

Why is this possible for one and not the other? At least part of the answer has to do with the status that Tecmessa and Theseus occupy in Greek society: Theseus is a hero like Herakles while Tecmessa is Ajax's concubine. We can imagine that Ajax may have been persuaded to continue living if, counterfactually, it was Odysseus who tried to convince him that life can make sense as a devoted father much in the same way that Theseus is able to convince Herakles. Yet, it's important to note that this doesn't happen and that the only person who tries to save Herakles is someone to whom Ajax, for perhaps entirely social reasons, would not take as authoritative in providing an alternative narrative. In that respect, we can explain why Tecmessa's pleas would have fallen on deaf ears given the kind of society that Ajax inhabited. Nevertheless, even with this social explanation in the background, it remains true that Ajax couldn't take the intimate stance towards Tecmessa and that it's *this* inability that dooms him regardless of what the external conditions that made exercising it in this particular case impossible or highly unlikely.

In the same vein, it is also worth noting that friendship doesn't completely fall out of the picture here. In other words, Williams isn't entirely *wrong* in finding Herakles' salvation in friendship. It seems reasonable to say that aside from the fact that Theseus is a hero like Herakles, he is also his *friend*, and that occupying that role has a lot to do with why Herakles is able to treat Theseus as someone who is capable of helping him reconstruct his narrative. These two things are not separate. Indeed, we might even say that Herakles was already involved in an *intimate* relationship with Theseus insofar as he saw *his* status as a hero—the answer to the question 'who am I?'—as bound up with the relationships one has with *other* heroes. In other words, to be a hero is to be recognized and see as such by other heroes and part of what Theseus does in reaching out to Herakles is show

him that there has been no fundamental change in that relationship. By contrast, again, Ajax does not have an intimate relationship with Tecmessa since a hero's status is not bound with what relationships one has with one's concubines. Nor does he have friends who might step in at that moment to rescue him. He is, in a very real sense, alone, and that loneliness, coupled with his inability to overcome the social constraints that prevent him from taking the intimate stance towards Tecmessa, spell his doom.

B. Lessons from Tragedy

But what does this have to do with *us* today? The first thing to point out is that although the world of Homeric heroes is quite different from the one that we inhabit today, the challenge that Herakles and Ajax face is one that pertains as much to us as it does to them. That challenge is precisely that of being unable to answer the question that serves to give meaning to the world and our actions in it.

One way of putting the matter is as saying that both Herakles and Ajax have become alienated from their respective narratives. That this can happen to us, too, has already been discussed as one of the risks inherent in the very dynamic of intimacy. More specifically, I argued earlier that the very possibility of taking the intimate stance towards another leaves the door open to the possibility of becoming someone else. I also argued that this can happen in a number of different ways, including the so-called one-sided cases of intimacy in which one self-objectifies and self-alienates. In both of these forms, the alienation in question is a potential result of taking the intimate stance, but the broader phenomenon is simply that of finding oneself in the absurd situation of not being able to rely on the narrative that one has used previously in order to structure the world. Crucially, this can happen even without taking the intimate stance.

Consider, for example, a man who makes sense of his life through the narrative of being a loving parent. When he thinks about who he is, he invariably makes reference to his daughter, to her wellbeing, and to her future prospects and happiness. And when he thinks about why he gets up in the morning, why he goes to work, why he pays his bills on time, and so on, he ultimately bottoms out with some reference to his daughter (e.g., “I do these things because I am Rachel’s father, and because I care for her and want to provide a safe and stable environment for her to be happy and successful.”). Such a man quite literally lives for his child.

We can also imagine what would happen to such a person if, by some horrible turn of events, Rachel dies before her father does. He would clearly be devastated, but apart from that, he would also lose the narrative which united his life and gave meaning to it. It’s not hard to imagine that he wouldn’t see any purpose in doing any of the things that he did before, and that everything that was tolerable *because* it was done for his daughter should now seem meaningless and absurd. Under these conditions, as anyone who has experienced them or had someone close to them experience them knows, suicide becomes a viable option. In other words, such a man would be facing the same crisis that Ajax and Herakles face, but not because he shares in their honor culture, but because like them, his personal narrative has collapsed. He has become alienated from the thing that made sense of his life—what used to be a live narrative has now become something artificial and disconnected from the reality in which the man finds himself.

Note also that there’s nothing in the content of the narrative of being a parent that suggests that suicide is required if one’s child dies in the same way that someone might argue that it is required in the honor case. It is not the specific norms of parenthood that make suicide an option, but the fact that if one’s life makes sense of one’s life *through* being a parent and one can no longer do so, then one’s life no longer makes sense.

The dynamic in question can play out in countless ways with countless different narratives. We can just as well imagine someone who makes sense of their life through their work and whose life is made meaningless by the closing of the factory; we can imagine someone who makes sense of their life through service to the Communist party and whose narrative collapses after the fall of the Berlin Wall; we can imagine someone who makes sense of their life through the pursuit of becoming an artist, and who becomes absurd by having his hands crushed by a crate on the way to Tahiti; and so on.¹⁰ For every narrative that can be thought of, we can always imagine some way in which that alienation can occur, and in which the narrative can collapse and render life meaningless.¹¹

It should be noted, of course, that in most of these cases suicide is not strictly *required*—the danger that is presented in becoming alienated is not the danger that one will find oneself in a situation in which one *must* kill themselves. Rather, it's the danger of that becoming a real option.¹² Even in those cases, however, one can continue to live even in the presence of the profoundly absurd. Indeed, if Camus is right, then even in the most extreme cases it's possible for one to live with it indefinitely, and it suffices to say that most ordinary cases are not like that of Sisyphus. In such ordinary cases, survival might just be a matter of holding out—of coping—until one can find a different narrative to shift to that does the necessary work. The unemployed factory worker may find (quite literally) new meaning in his life by picking up gardening; the party-less communist may be able to restructure his life around music; the unlucky painter may find order in returning to his

¹⁰ A similar problem, I've heard, is experienced by veteran soldiers who leave the military for one reason or another, and can no longer make sense of their life as civilians.

¹¹ The point I'm making here is not very far at all from the one made by Williams regarding moral luck. See Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)

¹² Technically, suicide is always an option, but not all technically available options have the same weight. It is equally an option for each and every one of us right now to drive to Mexico, to rob a bank, to kill our neighbor, or to burn all of our possessions. Yet, in the total realm of possibilities, those options aren't taken seriously (nor should they be).

family; and so on. This quite clearly seems to be possible since people are often able to recover from even the most devastating tragedies. But that is also not strictly necessary and the possibility that one can find oneself with no alternative source of meaning (no “ground project” in Williams’ terms) waiting in the wings is always a live one.

Importantly, this is a risk that *each of us is open to if we are to make sense of our lives at all*. This claim may seem too strong for some—indeed, it may be thought that there are clear ways out of this predicament. We might, on the one hand, think that we can come up with different narratives that are constructed in such a way that they cannot fail. On the other hand, we might try to ‘futureproof’ our selves and adopt as many possible narratives as we can, so that, as it were, we always have a ‘backup’ available should some misfortune befall us. I think neither of these two options is actually plausible.

Let’s take the first suggestion. Returning to our discussion of honor for a moment, we might reason that the problem with Ajax and Herakles is that the narratives through which they make sense of their lives involve too many ways to fail. We might think that the narrative of the Homeric hero is simply too fragile insofar as it involves too many substantial norms, the failure of any of which results in its collapse.¹³ Thus, we might suspect that we can do better by ‘thinning’ out the narratives that we subscribe to, choosing only those that are impossible to collapse, or, in any case, those that are much more stable.

¹³ In this respect, we might think that the narrative of a Homeric hero is a lot like that of masculinity (indeed, the overlap between the two is hardly incidental). As Miqqi Gilbert tells us one of the tyrannies of gender is that so few of us can meet its many, overwhelming standards. If all this is correct, then I would predict that people whose narratives are deeply leveraged in gender are especially at risk of narrative collapse. In turn, it is especially these people who would have the most need for intimacy. Miqqi Alicia Gilbert, “Defeating Bigenderism: Changing Gender Assumptions in the Twenty-First Century,” *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 93–112.

Consider, for example, the narrative of being a ‘citizen of the world.’ The conditions under which such a narrative might collapse are unclear (does one fail this if they develop a particularly strong attachment to a particular place? Or if one becomes a nationalist? Or is everyone by definition a citizen of the world by virtue of being *of* the world?) And since it’s hard to see how this narrative can collapse, it’s reasonable to think that such a narrative will be more stable and that one could continue to make sense of the world through it under most conceivable circumstances.

The initial problem with this suggestion, I believe, is that the ‘thinner’ the narrative employed to make sense of the world, the less capable that narrative is of doing its job. One wants to ask *how exactly* being a citizen of the world can serve as a satisfying answer to the question ‘who am I?’ If it is to be able to do the relevant job, then the answer must be able to structure one’s relation to the world and to other people, and to make sense of what one does. But in order to be able to do all this, it must involve the introduction of some substantial norms that can be met or violated in some respect. Consider the thinnest version of the ‘citizen of the world’ narrative (along with the assumption that it is, in fact, one that is less likely to collapse). If doing literally everything is compatible with being a citizen of the world, then being a citizen of the world does nothing to structure one’s life, or to give grounds for why a certain action is taken rather than another. In short, the answer that adopting this narrative provides is not an answer at all—one buys stability for one’s narrative by undermining the reason one needed a narrative in the first place!

The second, and perhaps more direct problem with this suggestion is that as a matter of fact, people simply *don’t* make sense of their lives using such thin or abstract narratives. It is exponentially more common to meet people who do so through more ordinary but (not incidentally) thicker narratives involving specific and concrete social roles and the norms that surround them. One meets philosophers and janitors, liberals and conservatives, and mothers and fathers, and not citizens of

the world, impartial observers, or purely thinking things. In short, there's something to be said about the seemingly natural reluctance people have to adopt thin, abstract narratives in making sense of the world.

The second suggestion that we can futureproof our selves by adopting many different 'backup' narratives is slightly more plausible but still falls short. It's plausible insofar as it is true that we do, in fact, often live our lives by adopting many different overlapping narratives. For example, the narrative that I use to make sense of why I'm writing this dissertation is different from the narrative I use to make sense of my relation to my parents and so on. Ideally, however, there is a unity and compatibility between the various narratives that we adopt from time to time and in different situations.¹⁴ The life that makes sense under the narrative of an aspiring philosopher is not so completely divorced from that of a son such that the two cannot be brought together in some form or fashion; i.e., my whole life is not fundamentally fractured.

That being said, it is not necessarily the case that should one narrative collapse—should I, for example, fail at becoming a professional philosopher—the alternative narrative of being a good son (or something like that) would immediately be able to fill the vacuum that that failure creates. With enough luck, it may, of course, but despite their ideal commensurability, alternative narratives are not so fungible as to be substituted at will. This is due to the fact that the narratives we use to answer the question of 'who am I?' also serve to structure our lives to differing degrees. Although I might use different narratives to make sense of different parts of my life at different times, it remains true that I *primarily* structure my life through one (or maybe a few) narratives. If that one should

¹⁴ See Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 14 (1976): 453–66

collapse, then we might say that my *entire* life has not become absurd, but that a very large portion of it has. And in some cases, that can be enough.

So, although I think it may be wise not to leverage oneself too heavily into one narrative and, as it were, to embrace our multi-faceted nature through which we can make sense of the world in many different ways and with many different narratives, practically speaking, it's just not that simple. Just as we can't eliminate the need to make sense of the world in the first place, we simply can't eliminate the fundamental risk of having our narratives collapse.

If all this is correct, then one of the lessons we learn from the two tragedies we've considered is that we're not *that* different from the heroes they describe, even if we are separated from them through time, space, and cultural context. What we and they face equally is the need to make sense of the world by being able to answer the question 'who am I?' and the very real possibility that despite our best plans, hopes, and intentions, the world (or the vast majority of it) can be rendered quite literally incomprehensible to us. This is not something that only certain people faced at a certain time in history, but one that each of us has always faced and which we will always continue to face.

C. Intimacy and Coping

In what way, then, can intimacy help us here? Well, quite simply, it can help for the same reason that it poses a threat: namely, in our intimacy with others we face the potential of being something other than what we are. If we are content with what we are, that possibility manifests itself as a risk. If, however, we find ourselves alienated and our narratives collapsed, then the possibility that we could be something else (something other than the nothing that we are currently) can also be a saving grace.

We saw how this worked with Ajax and Herakles. The narratives of both heroes had collapsed, leaving both of them in a precarious situation that made their lives absurd and which made suicide a real option. In this moment of crisis, Ajax was unable to take the intimate stance towards anyone else, and as a result, remained locked in his collapsed narrative, and ultimately killed himself. By contrast, Herakles was able to take the intimate stance towards Theseus, and as a result was able to recover his narrative (or to pivot to one close to it, depending on how one understands the story) and live another day. The same can be said as a potential avenue for Rachel's bereaved father, the party-less Communist, the unlucky painter, and for any one of us should we be so unlucky as to find ourselves in a similar situation. In those dark nights of the soul, intimacy can be of value because it reminds us that just as what we were before is contingent, so, too, is what we are *not*—just as we were something before, so we can be something again.

None of this, of course, does anything to show that this value of intimacy is anything other than an instrumental value. Apart from the fact that it may not always be a good thing for everyone to cope, the simple fact of the matter remains that we don't always need to cope. In that respect, the value of intimacy is like that of medication—something that can be very helpful for people with a certain condition, but something that can be potentially very harmful for people who do not have that condition.

One final illustration comes to mind. About a decade ago I was talking to an ex-girlfriend's mother whom I knew to be a born-again Evangelical Christian. She was a very nice woman who knew that I am an atheist and never held it against me—in fact, we often had long conversations about her relationship to her faith and what it meant to her. On one occasion, she told me that when she was young, she, too, was an atheist, but that she had converted later in life. I was curious as to why she had made the change, and she told me that this happened during a time in her life in which

she and her husband were living in Saudi Arabia (Texas oil stuff) and she found herself completely miserable. She felt completely isolated, in a foreign country, in which she didn't speak the language, and had no friends. It was during that time, however, that she found a group of American women who were in the same predicament and who got together to read and discuss the Bible. It was as a result of those Bible study sessions that she came around to God and what convinced her to convert to Evangelical Christianity.

I think stories like these are fairly common. Growing up in conservative Texas, I heard many others like them, all of which had a similar structure. In essence, each person had come to Evangelicalism precisely at the point at which they were most miserable and in which nothing about what they were doing or why they were doing it made much sense. Now, if we are to temporarily put aside the claim that the faithful themselves use to explain their conversion (i.e., that God comes to those that are in most need of His help), then we can explain the situation in the following terms: they are situations in which the world has become absurd for the individual in question and in which the narratives they use to make sense of themselves can no longer do the work that they once did. They are profound moments of alienation, either because of circumstance (as was my ex's mother who found herself isolated in a foreign country because of her husband's work), of bad fortune (as was my mother's friend who converted after the death of her son), or of their own doing (as the boy I knew in high school who converted after overdosing on heroin). At those moments, it is not the mere possibility of friendship and camaraderie that pulls folks out of their absurdity, but also the fact that the narrative of being *born again* can serve to put back everything that was lost.¹⁵ In that respect, the difference between Ajax and Herakles and our own predicaments looks even smaller than before.

¹⁵ In fact, it is often part of that narrative that one has lost one's previous narrative! The potential convert can see their very absurdity as *making sense* within the new narrative.

Crucially, the stories such people tell are often stories that are replete with intimacy in the terms that have been developed through the course of this project. In other words, in describing their relationship to the church, to their community, or to the people who helped convert them, they speak of them as those relationships that they (now) use to make sense of their lives. Likewise, when they talk about the period of their initial conversion, it is not unusual to hear similar descriptions of coming together, of understanding the value of community, or of seeing oneself as part of something bigger. This is not a coincidence; in fact, I believe this is exactly what we should expect if intimacy is what I say it is.

Finally, I hope it's clear that in classifying experiences of religious conversion in terms of intimacy, I am not suggesting that there is anything inauthentic or bad about them. I've known some rather militant atheists who might take this route and who might argue that such conversions take advantage of people when they're at their lowest. It's possible that this might occasionally be the case, and depending on how we fill out the details, we may be able to find cases of predatory conversion that we might want to oppose. On the whole, however, I think for the vast majority of cases, the fact that one is able to recover the ability to survive to the next day is a good thing, even if I don't believe in the metaphysical explanations that religion offers.¹⁶

Indeed, I see what happens in religious conversions of this type as just one of the things that we do in order to make sense of what we're doing for the short amount of time we're here. Some of us do this with the narratives of religion, some of us with the narratives of the political activist, some with the narratives of the academic, and so on and so on.

¹⁶ That being said, I don't think that it's always good (either for the person or for others) that one finds a way to continue. Arguably, the world would be a much better place if Hitler, for example, had not been able to find a new narrative around which to structure his life following the collapse of his painting ambitions. Likewise, I suspect that in some cases it might be better to choose to die in an attempt to retain maintain one's narrative than to survive by finding another one. But both of these kinds of cases are probably exceptions to the rule.

III. Conclusion

Is there more to the value of intimacy apart from the instrumental role it plays? Perhaps. I leave the question as an open one here, but will return to some potential ways in which its non-instrumental value can be pursued in the conclusion to this project. For the present, however, I remain skeptical of such pursuits if only because it seems to me that nothing that is inherently and fundamentally *risky* can have non-instrumental value, and, as I have shown, intimacy has this characteristic.

Even if we grant that intimacy is only instrumentally valuable at the end of the day, there still remains much work to be done when it comes to specifying precisely when someone should and should not be intimate with another, and, more generally, when it's best to retain the prerogative to be the sole author of one's narrative. Regardless, I take myself to have done two things in this chapter: first, to have shown that if intimacy is what I say it is, it is something that we have good reason to be worried about; and second, that regardless of the fact that this is the case, we have at least some reason some of the time to engage in it anyway—in fact, in some cases, intimacy may indeed be the thing that saves us from absurdity.

In the remaining few pages I want to close off by taking a very short tour of where we've been and to merely motion towards future areas of exploration.

Concluding Thoughts and Future Research

Let's take a quick recap of the journey we've taken over the last four chapters. We started our exploration of intimacy by taking a close look at how intimacy could be possible in *conversation* between two complete strangers. This was a useful place to start since such conversations are not only fairly common, but because they also throw a wrench in the conventional way that many of us tend to think about intimacy. Usually, we tend to think of it as something that occurs within the context of specific relationships and on the basis of extensive knowledge and/or positive affect for the other. However, if intimacy could occur between two strangers who knew nothing about each other and who didn't stand in some previous relationship to one another, then what makes their conversation intimate could not be explained through an appeal to *those* things, but rather must be explained by something that occurs within the parameters of the conversation itself.

Following this line, we considered whether the conversation becomes intimate by virtue of the kind of information that's being disclosed, and concluded that this couldn't possibly give us the full answer. After all, the stuff of intimate conversations could be disclosed under all sorts of different scenarios without the conversations becoming intimate (e.g., conversations with a doctor or a psychiatrist). We noticed, however, that the content wasn't entirely irrelevant, and that very often, intimate conversations revolved around information that was somehow reflective of what I have called the 'private self', or, the narrative or set of narratives that we employ in order to make sense of ourselves, our actions, and our place in the world.

After giving a more detailed explanation of how we should think of the private self, I offered a full account of conversational intimacy arguing that to have an intimate conversation is to 1)

disclose to another something reflective of the private self—of the narrative or features of the narrative that we tell ourselves in order to make sense of ourselves, our actions, and the world around us; 2) in doing so to (temporarily) share authority in the construction or evaluation of that narrative and to allow the other to have the same say in it that we take ourselves to have; 3) for the other to take up some of that authority and exercise it; and 4) in doing so to engage in the joint cooperative activity of constructing, maintaining, or evaluating that narrative. We closed off the chapter by looking at some of the virtues of this model.

Although the conversational model of intimacy did well in explaining what makes a particular conversation intimate, it was obvious that it couldn't possibly serve as a *general* model of intimacy for two reasons: first, the scope of intimate interactions goes far beyond having intimate conversations and includes both one-sided and non-verbal intimacy, and second, the conversational model said nothing about what it means to have an intimate *relationship* with another person.

Nevertheless, in Chapter 2, I argued that both of these problems can be addressed by noting that the model advanced in Chapter 1 is a kind of idealized version of an intimate conversation and that actual conversations allow for deviations from the idealized version that remain intimate. This allowed us to shift our focus from the specific conditions of the conversational model to what I've called 'the intimate stance.' Briefly put, to take the intimate stance was to *treat* another person, object, or thing as though it were capable of participating in what we established was the aim of the intimate conversation: namely, of sharing authority with oneself over the authorship of one's private narrative. As long as the intimate stance was taken by at least one party towards another person, object, or thing, we could say that an intimate interaction had taken place. We then considered how this appeal to the intimate stance allowed us to not only preserve the conversational model of

intimacy but also account for one-sided and non-verbal intimacy, solving the original problems that we established at the beginning of the chapter.

In Chapter 3 we applied a similar treatment to explain what intimate relationships are and what the relation between intimate interactions and relationships might be. Briefly put, I argued that just as intimate interactions are simply interactions in which one party (or both parties) have taken the intimate stance towards the other, so an intimate relationship is one in which one party (or both parties) has taken the intimate stance *towards that relationship*. To do this, in turn, was to share authority over the authorship of one's private narrative with the relationship and to see *it* as (at least partially) determining how one answers the question 'who am I?' Or, to put it another way, to see who one is as a matter of what happens in that relationship.

This also allowed us to answer what the relation between intimate interactions and relationships is. In short, there is no strict relation between the two: one could take the intimate stance towards another in a particular interaction without being in an intimate relationship with them, and one could also take the intimate stance towards a relationship without having had any intimate interactions with the other party in that relationship. That being said, we noted that doing the latter would be quite strange in most cases and that, usually, some grounds for taking the intimate stance towards a relationship would be in place. Finally, we closed out our discussion of intimate relationships by taking a closer look at intimacy in male friendships and how the account we've advanced so far can be used to give us some insight into that phenomenon.

Finally, we picked up the question of the value of intimacy. We began by considering why so many people have trouble with intimacy and seem to be reluctant to engage in it: could this simply be the result of on the one hand, improper socialization, or, on the other hand, idiosyncratic psychologies? I argued that this is not the case and that, actually, if the account of intimacy we've

been considering is correct, then we have very good reason to think that intimacy is something that is *necessarily* risky. It can not only lead to abuse at the hands of a malicious other if one isn't careful, but it can also lead to profound self-alienation even if no ill will is involved. Crucially, this was established solely by looking at what is required by taking the intimate stance and noting why *that* is necessarily a risky thing.

Nevertheless, even if intimacy is a necessarily risky thing, it doesn't mean that the risk it involves is never worth taking. In particular, I focused on one potential scenario in which intimacy can help us: the scenario of facing one's 'collapsed narrative.' We explored what it means for one's narrative to collapse and how intimacy can help one recover/construct a new narrative by looking at the stories of Ajax and Herakles. Working from comments made by Bernard Williams, I argued that we could understand both heroes' plights as ones in which the narratives used to make sense of their actions and the world around them become untenable by their own doing. In turn, we could understand why only one of them was able to cope and escape absurdity through the fact that only one of them was able to take the intimate stance towards another person. By taking the intimate stance towards Theseus and towards his relationship with Theseus, Herakles was able to recover his narrative as a hero; Ajax, however, could do no such thing and was doomed.

Finally, I argued that the very same predicament that afflicted these Homeric heroes can strike any of *us* as well, and that for the same reason that intimacy could help *them*, it may also be able to help us should the need arise.

This is where we ended the project, but there are many more questions that are left to be addressed. I'd like to discuss just two of them in the last few pages. The first has to do with some unfinished business when it comes to the value of intimacy. As I've presented the matter, I've implied that the primary value of intimacy is a contingent one—*if* we happen to find ourselves in

such-and-such a situation, then intimacy is good. But is this all there is to it? What should we say, for example, to the person who's quite comfortable and confident in his narrative? Do *they* have any reason to pursue intimacy? Or, to put the question another way, is there something else that a person who rejects intimacy is missing in refusing it?

This is a difficult question to answer and one that seems to me to be an open one at this moment, but I want to say only a few suggestive things on the matter. None of this is meant to be decisive, and all of it is contingent on further empirical and historical research.

Frankly, I'm skeptical that at the end of the day intimacy is more than a kind of technology for living—something that we've developed as a result of the kind of world that we find ourselves in for the purpose of getting by. More specifically, my suspicion is that the need for intimacy arises in proportion with the need to provide an answer to that central question “who am I?” and I suspect that *that* question hasn't always been a pressing one. This is not to say that the question hasn't always been an *important* one. Indeed, if answering it serves the function that I claim it does, then it's hard to imagine how people could have ever gotten along without needing *some* kind of answer to it. Nevertheless, I suspect that at certain times, for certain people, under certain political systems, that answer has simply been foreclosed and, as it were, provided for them—one simply *was* whatever the social position they occupied stated they were (e.g., a noble, a merchant, a serf, a Christian, etc.) with little room for maneuver. Under such conditions the risks of narrative collapse that faced Ajax and Herakles (and us) would have still been serious ones—after all, one could still be excommunicated from the church! — but there simply would have been little recourse in the event of failure. At the same time, however, the need to *find* an answer to the question of who one is would have been much less pressing.

By contrast, in a social environment in which one is primarily considered to be an individual, untethered from tradition, and defined by their ability to satisfy their desires through consumption (i.e., under a liberal, capitalist political economy) the need to answer the question becomes much more urgent if only because there is no fixed answer waiting in the wings. Or rather, because there are *too many* answers! In a world where the primary imperative is to “be oneself” as a free, rational consumer, the very matter of figuring out *who* that is precisely becomes an ever-present concern.

I don’t necessarily think that this shift (if indeed it occurred in the terms that I present here at all) is a bad thing. I harbor no yearning for a time before intimacy in which the problems of today didn’t require its invention as a technology of living. And whatever bad things may be said about modernity, its destruction of the *ancient régimes* whose hierarchies would have made the need for intimacy minimal is not one of them—better that there be intimacy and no kings than the other way around. At the same time, given my reluctance to attribute any non-instrumental value to it, I’m also not convinced that the need for intimacy is necessarily a good thing either. To appropriate Nietzsche’s remarks in a different context, I think the most we can say is the shift that has made intimacy a pressing matter today is something that has made us more *interesting* and less *shallow* as a species. Whether this new depth is itself a good thing is a separate question.

But what does all this have to do with the matter of the value of intimacy? What does it tell us about whether intimacy has any purpose for the person who is perfectly secure and confident in who they are, or who, for whatever reason simply feels no need to answer the question of “who am I?”¹

¹ Recall, in discussing the narrative self in Chapter 1 I mentioned that Galen Strawson says he feels no need to think of himself through any kind of narrative whatsoever. What would we tell Strawson about the value of intimacy?

In the first place, we can remind such persons that even if they're perfectly confident in who they are this moment, that doesn't mean that this will always be the case and we can advise them to remain open to the possibility of intimacy should the need arise. To do this, however, is to offer merely prudential advice. Apart from this, however, we can also insist that in refusing intimacy one misses out a deep and fundamental truth about what they are as a being: namely, that perhaps simply by virtue of the time and place in history that they find themselves, they are a deeper creature than they may have taken themselves to be. When one engages in intimacy, regardless of whether everything goes right or wrong, one directly or indirectly acknowledges that they are fundamentally something-that-can-be-other-than-what-they-currently-are. And crucially, that this is the case because we are the kinds of beings whose self is interpersonally defined. If this is indeed a fundamental truth about us, and if such truths have value beyond their instrumentality, then we may be getting closer to finding a source of a non-instrumental value for intimacy.

The second and final thing that I think can be explored further is the concept of group intimacy.² Throughout the project I've primarily discussed intimacy as something that happens between two individuals. However, strictly speaking, there's nothing in what we've said about what is required in taking the intimate stance that speaks against taking it with respect to a *group*. To do this would just be to see *the group* as having shared authority over one's personal narrative and this seems possible. Indeed, I think this is precisely what one sees when considering the nationalist—in other words, a nationalist is just someone who has taken the intimate stance towards the group comprised of his compatriots and who sees how he understands *who he is* as bound with what *the group*. In essence, I think it's possible to understand nationalism as just intimacy writ very, very large.

² This phenomenon was addressed in a recent paper by C. Thi Nguyen and Matthew Strohl as a means of explaining the particular moral wrong of cultural appropriation.

If this general line of thought is on the right track, we could consider some very interesting questions. We could, for example, begin to trace the connection between the rise of nation-states and the rise of the importance of intimacy as a technology of living: could one be driving the other or did both arise as a product of something else? Likewise, we could consider whether our knowledge of how we might interfere in matters of intimacy between individuals could be carried over on a macro scale. Suppose, for example, that we know that harmful but intimate relationships between individuals can be more easily broken by intervening at the level of intimacy and helping one of the individuals find an alternative narrative through which to make sense of themselves. Could the same kind of intervention be used to separate people who are in a similarly harmful intimate relationship with a *group* (e.g., a cult, an ethno-nationalist organization, etc.)?

It's not clear at this point, and as with my previous speculations, this is to a great extent an empirical matter. However, I hope it's clear how many different avenues of research this project naturally flows into. So, although this part of it is coming to a close, a lot of work remains to be done on the subject in the future.

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