

Relationships: Their Vulnerability and Resilience

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The person is gone. Perhaps she is a friend who has moved away and fell out of touch. Or he is a lover who no longer responds to your messages. Perhaps a colleague with whom you collaborated and who left academia. In any case, there is nothing more you can do. It *seems* the relationship is over. And yet you are holding out hope that the person will return. You hope that you and your friend will reconnect, that the lover will long for you again, that the colleague will suggest another collaboration. By hoping, we might say, you are “holding on to the relationship”. But what does this mean? Does it mean that you are failing to acknowledge the relationship is over, or that you are keeping it alive? I will here defend the thesis that by holding out hope for a relationship one neither fails to acknowledge the relationship is over (though it might be) nor does one keep the relationship alive exactly; rather, one does one’s *part* to keep the relationship alive. One hopes for the future—that the relationship *will* survive—but also for the present—that the relationship still exists.

Although I start and end on the subject of hope, the bulk of the talk will be spent discussing a puzzle about the vulnerability and resilience of relationships. The solution to the puzzle will bring us back to hope. So here’s the plan. In section 1, I ask what it means for relationships to end and suggest that in *a certain sense* relationships never end. Then, in section 2, I raise the main puzzle: how can the existence of a relationship both require adherence to its constitutive norms and withstand violation of these norms? I consider various answers and eventually, in section 3, propose that whether a relationship exists at a time depends on adherence to its constitutive norms at other times, in accordance with a relationship-trajectory. This view, I claim in section 4, makes clear why hope is significant in relationships: by hoping we commit to the norms of the relationship and to the relationship-trajectory while acknowledging that whether the relationship exists *now* is not yet determined nor is it entirely within our control.

## **Section 1. Do relationships end?**

Do relationships end? Of course they do—the question does not seem worth asking. But on second thought the answer is not so clear. When philosophers speak of relationships they normally refer to the kind of relationships that explain why we have reason to give certain people so-called “special treatment”: friendships, romantic relationships, familial relationships, etc. Special treatment includes not only things we do for or with regard to participants in such relationships, but also reasons we have to feel certain emotions for or about them. We don’t have the same reasons and obligations with regard to strangers. Another common thought, of course, is that such relationships can end—or at least we think this of friendships and romantic relationships; family relationships are a different story, and I’ll say more about them shortly.

Now, it would seem to follow from these assumptions—i.e., that relationships explain reasons for special treatment and that they end—that when a relationship is over one no longer has reason to give special treatment to the person who used to be the participant in the relationship. So I have no reason to respond to my ex-friends and ex-lovers any differently than I respond to strangers. But this is false. Although I do not have reasons to respond to my ex-friends and ex-lovers as I once did, I still have reason to regard them as special in some ways and those reasons are (at least partly) explained by the relationships we shared. Because of the relationships we shared, they will never be strangers to me.

Indeed, even when a person with whom I shared a relationship dies, I still have reason to regard her as special: I have reason to grieve her death, and even after grief, I continue to have reason to respond to the person’s life, to my memory of it, and to the activities, projects, and places associated with the person’s life in a special way. Thus, there seems to be a sense in which our relationships never end, they only *change*, because they continue to give us reasons for special treatment of some sort. And yet our talk of the ending of relationships seems to mark something significant and real, something more than a *mere* change.

Consider the changes in a parent-child relationship as the child grows from infancy to adulthood. The parent-child relationship changes drastically over the years, and each change might come with a certain warranted sense of loss, but it is implausible to describe the process by which one

stage ends and another takes its place as ‘an ending of a relationship’. Or, to take another example, a relationship between two friends who see each other almost every day can change when one of them moves to another country and from then on they meet once every year or two. They are still friends, but the friendship has changed significantly. Again there is a warranted sense of loss, but no ending of a relationship. By contrast, when a friendship or a romantic relationship *ends*, the change in the relationship is such that it is no longer a friendship or a romantic relationship. This does not mean that the relationship is no longer special—that one no longer has reason to treat the other person in a special way—just that the relationship no longer gives reasons of friendship or romantic partnership. So the ending of a relationship is, strictly speaking, the ending of a relationship *as the kind of relationship it is*.

To be sure, there is still a question about why, for example, the change of one *kind* of friendship to another *kind* of friendship doesn’t strike us as an ‘end of a relationship’ whereas the change of friendship into a relationship that isn’t friendship does. In other words, which kinds of relationships are continuous with other kinds and which kinds are discrete, and why? I think this is an important question, and toward the end of the paper I will suggest a preliminary answer to it. But in what follows I will not assume an answer. I will take for granted that changes in certain kinds of relationships strike us as endings and focus on those changes. So when I speak of the ending of a relationship I mean the ending of a relationship as the kind of relationship it is, usually, as a friendship or romantic relationship.

## **Section 2. A puzzle about adherence to relationship-norms**

As I said, the kinds of relationships we’re interested in are relationships that play an important role in our lives by explaining some of our most important reasons and obligations. As such, these relationships have norms that give them their distinctive shape. There are norms of friendship, norms of romantic relationships, norms of family relationships, etc. Specific relationships have specific norms, but the kind of relationship they fall under indicates the general structure their norms must take. For example, there is a great variety of friendships, each with its particular set of norms, but we recognize these different relationships as instances of friendship thanks to the

general form of their norms. Relationships are therefore partly *constituted* by norms; I'll call these constitutive norms *relationship-norms*.<sup>1</sup>

In many (though perhaps not all) cases, the participants' adherence to the relationship-norms seems necessary for the existence of the relationship as the kind of relationship it is. If I am not interested in your company, I am not your friend; if I refuse your intimacy, I am not your romantic partner. Family relationships do not seem to depend on adherence to norms in the way that friendships and romantic relationships do. My sister and my father remain my sister and father no matter what attitudes I take and how I treat them or they me. Still, a full-fledged relationship between siblings or between a parent and a child does seem to require adherence to certain norms. By treating my family members as strangers I would not only violate the norms of my relationship with them, I would be doing something *destructive* to the relationship. At the limit, when distrust and animosity run very high indeed, or when despair of the relationship leads to indifference, it might no longer be possible to treat each other as siblings, or as parent and child. In such conditions, it is arguable that relationship-norms lose both their psychological *and* normative grip. So even family relationships can be destroyed by the violation of their constitutive norms, though perhaps they can never be completely or thoroughly destroyed.

Looking beyond friendship, romantic relationships, and family relationships, there might be a kind of relationship that does not depend on adherence to norms: the moral relationship. Insofar as there is a moral-relationship that holds between persons as such, it seems to survive even the most egregious violations of its norms. Morally mistreating a person—even severely degrading a person—does not obliterate one's moral relationship to that person. This is one way of getting at the common idea that moral norms are especially binding or unconditional: their force cannot be undone or opted out of through changes in our conduct and behavior. We can treat people *as*

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<sup>1</sup> Note that not all norms associated with a relationship must be constitutive and therefore not all of norms associated with a relationship must be 'relationship-norms', in my sense of the term. My friend and I are both committed to meeting every Wednesday night for drinks. This norm can change—we might choose a different night to meet—but this change wouldn't constitute a change in the relationship nor a change in one of its constitutive norms. By contrast, if I stop coming on Wednesdays without offering an explanation, this might be a violation of a constitutive friendship-norm that requires a degree of mutual accountability. There's room here for comparison with other rule-governed practices, such as games or legal systems.

mere objects, but we can never actually relate to people as we relate to objects. Strictly speaking, objectification of persons is bound to fail.

In any case, it is true of many relationships that adherence to relationship-norms is crucial for their existence as the kind of relationships they are (I'll drop this qualification henceforth). This idea finds different expressions in recent writing on relationships. Agnes Callard, for example, claims:

When you and I are in a relationship, we coordinate our shared valuing by way of explicit or (more usually) implicit rules—norms—that constitute our relationship as the particular form of co-valuation it is. We each manifest our co-valuation of that relationship in the adherence to the relevant set of norms. These norms are the backbone of our relationship; by following them, we value it. (2017, 130)

Niko Kolodny says that “a friendship or romantic relationship just is an ongoing pattern of concern” (Kolodny 2003, 149); and Samuel Scheffler writes that being in a special relationship involves valuing the relationship non-instrumentally, which means viewing the other person as a source of special claims (Scheffler 2001, 100).

Though initially plausible, the idea that adherence to relationship-norms is necessary for the existence of the relationship can seem, on reflection, too strong. Any healthy relationship includes at least some instances of norm-violation. We sometimes mistreat our friends, romantic partners, or family members. We say and do hurtful things, we act selfishly at the expense of others, we break promises. We also have feelings we shouldn't have and fail to feel as we should: instead of feeling pride in a friend's success I feel envy, and instead of feeling empathy toward a friend's anguish I remain indifferent. Such violations of relationship-norms do not immediately undo the relationship. Indeed, they can help us to negotiate and clarify the norms, to form and express our mutual commitment to them, and they are often crucial for the eventual flourishing of relationships.

Therefore, two apparently incompatible theses nevertheless seem plausible:

1. Adherence to relationship-norms is necessary for the existence of a relationship.  
(Adherence Condition)

2. Violation of relationship-norms is often part of an ongoing relationship. (Benign Norm-Violation)

Are (1) and (2) really incompatible?

Notice, first, that violation of some relationship-norms is compatible with adherence to others. So if (1) requires only adherence to *some* relationship-norms, and (2) allows only the violation of *some* (and not all) relationship-norms, then (1) and (2) are compatible.

However, given that all relationship-norms are, by definition, constitutive of a given relationship as the kind of relationship it is, adherence only to some of them would seem to fall short of a full-blown realization of the relationship. So it is plausible that (1) requires adherence to all relationship-norms and therefore is incompatible with the violation of some relationship-norms, which (2) allows.

Second, it may be suggested that the incompatibility of (1) and (2) shouldn't disturb us since all it implies is that violation of relationship-norms *damages* or *diminishes* the relationship. Instead of thinking of the existence of a relationship as an all-or-nothing matter, the proposal goes, we should think of it as a matter of degree. Even if a full-blown relationship requires adherence to all relationship-norms, violation of relationship-norms is compatible with the existence of the relationship *to a lesser degree*.

This second proposal should also be rejected because even when relationship-norms are violated, the relationship is in crisis, and both participants mistreat each other, the relationship need not be diminished. Indeed, during such crises, the significance and presence of the relationship in the life of the participants might be all the more palpable. Moreover, minor norm-violations can be conducive to its flourishing and occur as participants explore the relationship's nature and their commitment to it. So we are still left asking how can norm-adherence be necessary for the existence of a relationship (1) if norm-violation can be benign (2)?

Let's look more closely at (1) and (2). (1) would not conflict with (2) if interpreted as the claim (1\*) that the existence of the relationship at  $t_n$  requires adherence to all relationship norms *at some t*. According to (1\*), my friendship with Micha can exist even when I violate its norms as long as Micha and I adhere to its norms at some point in time. (1\*) and (2) are compatible.

However, (1\*) seems too weak. It implies that my friendship with Micha can persist even if I adhered to the relationship-norms only once and long ago, and that as long as we adhere to the norms once the adherence condition is satisfied forever, even if we will never adhere to the relationship-norms again. These results are implausible, so we should reject (1\*).

Still, there might be other interpretations of (1) that are compatible with (2). In fact, (1) is incompatible with (2) only if interpreted as the claim (1\*\*) that adherence to all relationship-norms at  $t_n$  is necessary for the existence of the relationship at  $t_n$ . (1\*\*) is very strong: it implies that the moment we violate a relationship norm the relationship disappears. The incompatibility of (1\*\*) with (2)—in other words, the fact that we can violate relationship-norms without obliterating the relationship—suggests that (1\*\*) is *too* strong. It is not the case that the existence of a relationship at  $t_n$  depends on adherence to all relationship-norms at  $t_n$ . What we seek, then, is an interpretation of (1)—of the adherence condition—that is compatible with (2) and therefore not as strong as (1\*\*) and yet plausible and therefore not as weak as (1\*).

### **Section 3. Relationship-trajectories**

Niko Kolodny makes a suggestion about the nature of relationships that can be useful for our purposes. Kolodny says that relationships are *historical*, that is, the existence of a relationship at a given time depends on facts that obtain at previous times. Whether Micha is my friend at  $t$  depends not only on our actions or mental states at  $t$ , but on “a historical pattern of attitudes and actions between us” (Kolodny 2003, 147). So perhaps our friendship at  $t$  can survive my violation of our relationship-norms at  $t$  because we have a history of persistent adherence to our relationship-norms. Put simply, one screw-up does not undo a history of good friendship.

This proposal, which interprets the adherence condition historically, seems promising. It is more demanding than the idea that relationships require only one instance of adherence at some time (this is I\*) but it allows that a relationship can exist at a time when its norms are violated (it denies I\*\*).

Nevertheless, the historical interpretation of the adherence condition yields some implausible results. First, in some cases a history of adherence is not required for the satisfaction of the adherence condition. When Micha and I first meet and begin to follow friendship-norms we don't have a history of adherence to such norms but we might nevertheless be experiencing the beginning of friendship. The historical interpretation of the adherence condition implausibly rules this out: it says a friendship can only exist given a history of adherence to friendship-norms. Second, in some cases a history of adherence to relationship-norms is not enough to satisfy the adherence condition. Suppose Micha and I have a long history of adherence to the relationship-norms of friendship and then, suddenly, I violate friendship-norms by cutting all my ties to him and declining to meet or talk to him. This moment might be the end of our friendship due to norm-violation and despite the fact that we have a history of adherence to friendship-norms.

I believe a more plausible interpretation of the adherence condition captures the fact that our relationships depend not only on the present and the past, but also on the future. Whether a first meeting is a beginning of friendship depends, in part, on future adherence to friendship-norms and whether an act of betrayal is an ending of a romantic-relationship depends, in part, on whether the relationship will be repaired and its norms adhered to once again.

To make this idea more precise, I will draw on the work of Karen Jones. Jones argues that there are *trajectory-dependent properties*. Here's a quick unpacking of this claim. First, Jones says that a trajectory is "an ordered, temporally extended sequence of states or events, where the kind of ordering required as well as the typical temporal length of the sequence depend on the kind of trajectory in question" (Jones 2008, 271). Second, trajectory-dependent properties are properties that apply in virtue of something's being a trajectory, which unfolds over time. Third, when a trajectory-dependent property applies to states or events it does so in virtue of the location of those states or events within the broader, structured, temporally extended whole. So whether a

trajectory-dependent property obtains at  $t$  is vulnerable to future contingency. More generally—and this is the fourth point—“ascriptions of trajectory-dependent properties have temporally extended truthmakers such that whether it is correct to ascribe a trajectory-dependent property to  $A$  at  $t$  depends on what happens *elsewhen*, whether at  $t+n$  or at  $t-n$ ” (272).

For example, whether a hammering of a nail is also a building of a table depends not only on facts that obtain when the nail is being hammered but on facts that obtain before and after the hammering of the nail, on whether the hammering of the nail fits in the trajectory of building a table. Similarly, Jones argues that whether a person is in love and whether a feeling or thought is a feeling or thought *of* love depends on what happens, or has happened, *elsewhen*. As Jones puts it: “To find out whether  $A$  is in love with  $B$  at  $t$ ,” she writes, “we must look beyond states of  $A$  that obtain wholly at  $t$  and look instead at the unfolding sequence of states and events of which  $A$ ’s state at  $t$  is part and ask, does it have the right form to count as a love-trajectory?” (275).<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, I propose that to find out whether  $A$  is in a relationship of a certain kind with  $B$  at  $t$ , we must look beyond states of  $A$  and  $B$  that obtain wholly at  $t$  and look instead at the unfolding sequence of states and events of which  $A$ ’s and  $B$ ’s states at  $t$  are part and ask, does it have the right form to count as a relationship-trajectory of the relevant kind? Micha and I each have a conception of friendship that guides our interactions over time and can make it the case that our first meeting was a beginning of friendship and that our falling out is a crisis rather than the ending of our friendship. Since norm-violations of certain kinds and degrees are part of plausible relationship-trajectories, a norm-violation need not imply the end of a relationship. However, at the moment the norm is violated, the relevant relationship-trajectory is yet to unfold and therefore it is not yet determined whether the relationship has survived the norm-violation. What happens next will determine what just happened.

Using the idea of trajectory-dependent properties, we can formulate a more plausible interpretation of *Adherence Condition*:

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<sup>2</sup> What is a proper love-trajectory is a substantive normative issue, partly determined by social and cultural scripts. When a certain love-trajectory is socially recognized, it can make a form of love available to people who would otherwise not interpreted their experiences as elements of such love-trajectories and therefore not pursue such trajectories and not make it the case that their experiences *are* experiences of love.

The existence of a relationship at  $t$  requires adherence to relationship-norms *elsewhen*, whether at  $t+n$  or at  $t-n$ , in accordance with a relationship-trajectory.

Therefore, whether a norm-violation at  $t$  is benign or destructive depends on whether adherence to relationship-norms occurs *elsewhen* in accordance with the relevant kind of relationship-trajectory.

Finally, the notion of relationship-trajectories might help us explain why some changes in kinds of relationship strike us as *an ending of a relationship* and others do not. Here's a very rough proposal (but I think a promising one). Some relationship-trajectories are such that they have their *end in sight*; they are *completable*. For instance, the relationship parents have with their infants is not meant to persist in the same way indefinitely; it is part of the trajectory of this relationship that it evolves as the child grows older. The *completion* of a relationship-trajectory leads to change in the relationship without *ending it*. Similarly, a teacher-student relationship-trajectory can be completed as the student becomes the teacher's colleague, for example, and yet the new stage in the relationship is not the end of a relationship because it evolves from the trajectory of the previous stage. By contrast, trajectories of romantic relationships as such are often essentially *open-ended* or *incompletable*: it is essential to the kind of relationships they are that they aspire to persist indefinitely as romantic-relationships. If a romantic-relationship changes into a non-romantic relationship then the relationship had failed to live up to its aspirations as the kind of relationship it is. What the relationship then becomes cannot be viewed as an evolution that is compatible with its previous trajectory. In short, I propose that changes in relationships are *endings* of relationships when they are *failures of relationships*.

#### **Section 4. Hope**

With this account on the table, we can finally turn to hope. Suppose a friend has betrayed your trust, thereby violating a friendship-norm. Now consider two reactions you might have. The first is anger. You want to hold your friend accountable, you want the friend to acknowledge what he or she did, apologize, etc. Responding in this way, you adhere to friendship-norms and you do your share in sustaining the relationship. As Agnes Callard puts it: "Anger is the form that your co-valuation of our relationship takes in response to the action by which I (seem to you to)

withdraw from co-valuing with you. Because you cannot care (value) together with me, you care about (are angered by) it” (Callard 2017, 130). Moreover, in being angry you are also *hoping* that the other person will recommit to the relationship-norms; you are hoping that he or she will recognize the violation, regret it, make amends, etc. Your hope becomes less sustainable, and less justified, the longer the other person disregards the relationship-norms.

You might, however, have a very different response to your friend’s betrayal: one of indifference and withdrawal. “From now on,” you might say upon learning of your friend’s actions, “this person is a like stranger to me; our mutual commitment to the relationship has been revoked.” Your response to your friend’s violation of your friendship-norms is not anger, but complete disengagement. You do not hope or expect that your friend will adhere to the norms and you cease to adhere to the norms yourself. In some cases, when the friend’s norm-violation is sufficiently severe, disengagement such as this might be justified. But responding to norm-violation with disengagement makes it very likely that the relationship has ended and a friendship-trajectory would not unfold. To be sure, it is still possible that, despite your disengagement, the friend will repent and apologize, and that, consequently, you will change your mind and recommit to the relationship yourself, in which case the relationship will resume and the whole episode will have turned out to be a major crisis rather than an ending. However, when both participants in a relationship lose hope that relationship-norms will be adhered to in accordance with a possible relationship-trajectory, the relationship is all but guaranteed to be over.

Hope is crucial because it combines a commitment to upholding the relationship-norms according to a possible relationship-trajectory and an acknowledgment that whether the relationship-trajectory will actually unfold as one hopes partly depends on facts that are beyond one’s control. When we hold out hope for a relationship we do our part for its sake while at the same time acknowledging that, depending on what happens next, the relationship might already be over. It is not merely that we might later *find out* that the violation of the norm ended the relationship—this is an epistemic vulnerability that we surely have, too. But here the issue is not epistemic but metaphysical: whether this moment is the end of the relationship will be *determined* by later events. This metaphysical indeterminacy is a great source of anxiety but it is also an

ineliminable part of having relationships and an important way in which we are vulnerable to others. Holding out hope for a relationship is a bit like holding out hope for an ongoing Zoom call when the internet connection is suddenly unstable: we mean to be speaking to another person but it might turn out that, alone in a room, we are speaking to no one at all.