Attachment, Security, and Relational Networks

Introduction

There is now extensive discussion in normative philosophy about personal relationships—from older debates about their nature and value, to more recent discussions of their implications for institutional design and freedom of association. The literature is primarily focused on *dyads*: close relationships between two people, such as romantic partnerships, two-person friendships, or parent-child relationships, and their perhaps distinctive contributions to our lives.[1]

But close dyads are not all there is to our relational lives. Most people have many relationships, of many different types. In the broadest sense, our relational network includes the totality of all relationships in our life, but it can also be divided into more discrete groups, as distinct from dyads, such as friendship groups, colleague groups, or families. What is omitted from a dyadic analysis of personal relationships, and accordingly contemporary philosophical discussion, is an understanding of the distinctive contributions of the wider network to our lives, over and above the more attention-grabbing dyadic relationships.

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[1] Regarding love, the literature focuses on intense relationships between two people (see, e.g., Frankfurt 1988; Scheffler 1997; Velleman 1999; Kolodny 2003). Regarding friendship, as Simon Keller recently put it: "If you want to feel bad about yourself, read the philosophical literature on friendship. It is full of descriptions of deep, profound, intense friendships, presented as illustrations of *real* friendship, *true* friendship, *good* friendship, *deep* friendship, or friendship at its *best*." (2023, 1) Such friendships are conceptualised as holding between two people; Keller provides numerous historical and contemporary examples. Yet Keller himself also goes on to theorise less-than-perfect friendships between *two people*. For parent-child relationships, see Brighouse and Swift (2014); Ferracioli (2023); Gheaus (2016), (2021a), (2021b); Hannan and Leland (2020); Macleod (2002); and Weinstock (2020).

Attending to the network raises several important questions. How might we conceptualise the complex network of relational threads that make up the fabric of our social lives? Does that fabric ever have a moral value that is 'over and above' the value of the individual relationships that constitute it? What draws the various relational threads together, into a tapestry that enriches a person's life overall? In this paper we address these questions with reference to one important good that relationships can provide: *felt security*.[2]

Roughly speaking, a person enjoys felt security when they receive *security-inducing care* as a response to *security-based attachment*. We use 'attachment-care relationships' to refer to relationships that embed this good. We believe that, although such care is synonymous with dyads (such as romantic partnerships or close friendships), the good of felt security can be provided by networks, and indeed that networks are structured to provide felt security in ways that are distinctive.

The concept of 'felt security' derives from the enormous psychology literature on attachment theory. Within that literature, by far the most-theorised relationships are parent-child and romantic relationships. Just like philosophers, psychologists usually conceptualise these relationships dyadically: the received wisdom is that each person to whom we have a security-based attachment can provide us with security-inducing care *entirely on their own*. As one group of psychologists put it: "attachment theory presumes that healthy, satisfying relationships are, by definition, dyadic."[3]

We aim to disrupt this presumption. There are many people in our lives who cannot provide us with felt security on their own. But these people can *contribute* to our felt security,

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[2] There is also recent work in psychology suggesting people are simply *happier* if they have a varied relational diet (Collins et al 2022). This has implications for the overall value of networks, but is distinct from our focus on the specific good of felt security.

[3] Moors, Conley, Edelstein and Chopik 2014: 225. See also fn. 5.

by being part of a network. It is the network overall, but no one individual within the network, that provides felt security, and this is what we mean by networks providing value 'over and above' the one-to-one relationships they are made up of.

Of course, relationships (whether conceived as dyads or networks) provide participants with many goods other than felt security. And the value of such relationships might not be reducible to the 'goods' they give participants, whether felt security or otherwise. Their value might be, in part, more intrinsic than that. But as we aim to show, the good of felt security illuminates certain overlooked virtues of relational networks, as compared with relational dyads—particularly in the realm of liberal political philosophy.

We argue that there are three crucial differences between dyads and networks with respect to the good of felt security. First, networks are more consistent with liberal freedom than dyads; second, networks (unlike dyads) give us the opportunity to repair, replace, and remove relationships while retaining our felt security, as well as the opportunity to develop that capacity; and third, networks generate felt security more robustly than dyads, providing the good of 'robust felt security'. These three virtues illustrate some of the benefits of centring networks in the moral-political philosophy of personal relationships.

Our claim is not that networks are overall 'better' than dyads—nor even that networks are overall 'better' vis-à-vis the good of felt security—but rather that networks can provide us with *bona fide* felt security and do so in a different *way* than dyads do. It is this different way of realizing felt security that imbues networks with sources of value that are *different* from those contained within relational dyads. A single life can contain, and be enriched by, both dyad-based and network-based felt security[4]—so philosophers should attend to both. As we will discuss, the value of networks has important practical implications for the provision of

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[4] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this way of putting it.

felt security through political institutions. Attending to networks in addition to dyads reveals new depths in the philosophy of personal relationships. Our discussion of felt security merely begins to plumb those depths. Thus, the paper is partly a provocation for others to explore how networks fare with regard to various sources of relational value (sources, that is, other than felt security).

We begin in Section 1 by characterizing attachment-care relationships and theorizing the felt security found within dyads. We highlight the ambivalent nature of dyadic relationships as a source of felt security. In Section 2, we theorise relational networks, explaining how, like dyads, they can provide felt security. In Section 3, we explain the three virtues of security-inducing networks. We close in Section 4 by considering the implications of our network approach, explaining how it can help guide and assess individual actions and institutional design.

1. The Ambivalence of Dyadic Attachment-Care Relationships

In this section, our aim is to explain dyadic attachment-care relationships and highlight some difficulties that arise from them. Personal relationships have received extensive attention from moral philosophers, from Aristotle and Confucius to Bernard Williams and Harry Frankfurt.[5] One important good obtained from close personal relationships is *felt security*. To explain the idea, it is best to begin with a discussion of how important this good is for

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[5] See Aristotle on friendship (2014: book 8), Confucius on filial piety (1998), Williams on partiality (1981), and Frankfurt on caring and love (1998: ch. 14).

children, building on research in developmental psychology, and then explain how security-based attachment can also be vitally important for many (we do not claim all) adults. [6]

Children need carers who are present, consistent, and loving, to meet developmental milestones. Healthy relationships with carers provide a child with a secure base, which they can be confident will protect them and meet their needs. This frees them up to take risks, explore new things, and engage in novel activities with confidence, eventually in the absence of their carer. In such relationships, the child is 'attached' to the adult. This attachment—and, more crucially, the adult's caring response to the attachment—makes possible the child's growth and development. After all, almost all growth and development require engaging in new experiences that can, almost by definition, be scary and uncomfortable. When the adult serves as a trustworthy attachment object, this enables the development of children's core agential capacities, including their emotional, relational, and decision-making capacities. Furthermore, their experience of security-based attachment gives them a model for trusting and being trustworthy, which enables them to trust others—and be trusted by others—later in life. For this, the child requires a security-based attachment with a non-substitutable other.

Adults often develop attachments of a similar kind, for similar reasons. Adults can develop attachments to one another in familial and romantic love, and in friendship.[7] They can also become attached to children, such as their own children or grandchildren, just as children can be attached to them. Security-based attachment in adults has recently been

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[6] The following explanation primarily draws upon Bowlby 1969; Bowlby 1973; Bowlby 1980; Ainsworth 1969; Ainsworth 1991. These seminal texts have spawned a huge subdiscipline in developmental and social psychology. See, for example, Simpson 1990; Zeifman and Hazan 2008; Hepper and Carnelley 2012; Mikulincer and Shaver 2016.

[7] Simpson 1990; Hepper and Carnelley 2012; Mikulincer and Shaver 2016; Zeifman and Hazan 2008.

theorised by Monique Wonderly, who argues that it is characterized by (1) the *felt need*[8] for (2) *engagement* with (3) a *non-substitutable* other, where (4) the desire's unfulfillment undermines the person's *felt security*.[9] If the desire is frustrated, the attached person comes to feel "'out of sorts,' 'off-kilter,' 'no longer all of a piece,'" "'unsafe,' anxious or like a less competent agent."[10] Of course, adults tend not to rely on their attachment figures to the extent children do. But even in adults, one's sense of self, one's energy and motivation, and one's feeling that the world is a navigable place can be rocked if one lacks engagement with particular non-substitutable others. Consider the fall-out of relationship breakdowns or bereavements: these kinds of loss deeply affect our sense of security and belonging.

Security-based attachment produces the distinctive good of felt security only when the attachment is responded to with a specific kind of care: security-inducing care. Security-inducing care is distinctive in being an intersubjective process in which one person responds to another (1) in an *ongoing and open-ended way* (2) in response to their *particularity* with (3) the goal of *fulfilling their need for felt security*, which need arises from their security-based attachment. These three aspects of care mirror aspects (2), (3), and (4) of Wonderly's characterisation of attachment, on which attachment involves (1) the *felt need* for (2) *engagement* with (3) a *non-substitutable* other, where (4) the desire's unfulfillment undermines a person's *felt security*. In general, care is an ongoing and open-ended response ('engagement') to a particular (non-substitutable) other's need. Security-based attachments engender a specific type of need (the need for felt security), which paves the way for a

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[8] 'Felt needs' are analysed in-depth by Wonderly 2021. One might wonder: can something really be a 'need' if it is merely 'felt'? Do we really value *felt security*, rather than *security*? In our view, Wonderly (2021) convincingly argues for the importance of fulfilling felt needs.

[9] Wonderly 2016: 232.

[10] Ibid.: 231; 239.

distinctive type of valuable care: security-inducing care. When our need for felt security is fulfilled by security-inducing care, the relationship embeds the value of felt security.[11]

However, in its dyadic form, felt security and security-inducing care are problematic in two ways. The first concerns the way in which the need for felt security makes us vulnerable. The second concerns the pressure that security-inducing care appears to exert on others to provide it.

To explain the first concern, when we are attached to another, our felt security is vulnerable to engagement, or lack of engagement, with that person. Our confidence, our self-esteem, and our agency can be deeply affected by what the person we are attached to does or fails to do, or even what happens to them. The idea of attachment is in stark opposition to the liberal individualism that permeates much of normative philosophy and our broader culture, emphasizing, as it does, ideals of autonomy and independence. Viewed in this light, attachment is a rather pitiable state. Of course, many people are attached to more than one attachment object. As an adult, one might be attached to one's spouse, one's best friend, one's parents, *and* one's children. Having a multiplicity of attachment objects blunts the sting somewhat: for example, if the spousal relationship breaks down, one might find solace in spending time with one's parents.[12] But even if one has numerous dyadic attachments, the point remains that one's felt security is rocked by the disruption of *any one* of these attachment relationships. While our remaining attachments might be a comfort, the very fact that we *need* such comfort demonstrates our deep vulnerability towards *each one* of our attachment objects—a vulnerability that is only multiplied when we are attached to multiple people. To give a starker example: if one's child dies, one's other children may be a comfort. But this does not remove the death's effect on one's felt security.

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[11] We theorise security-inducing care in Collins and Shields, unpublished.

[12] We thank an anonymous referee for this point and example.

Moreover, in attachment-care relationships, *commitment* often plays a distinctive role. This raises a particular set of difficulties for attachment-care relationships among adults. To be a true secure base for someone, one must be committed to stand ready to receive them across a fairly wide variety of possible circumstances. As the saying goes, the 'fair-weather friend' is no friend at all. This is all the more so when the fair-weather friend is someone on whom one depends for felt security. The distinctiveness of felt security lies in the fact that we envision our secure base to be present and waiting even when the going gets tough. Our secure base therefore must be committed to being there for us—not necessarily 'come what may,' but at least across a fairly wide variety of ways things might go. Indeed, committing to someone partly *constitutes* the activity of caring for someone in a way that produces felt security. When our attachment objects have low levels of commitment to being present for us in times of emotional need, security-inducing care is rendered impossible.

To explain the second concern, when commitment holds from the attachment object to the attached person, it occasions costs for the attachment object. By committing to provide another with security-inducing care across a range of possible ways things might go, we thereby block ourselves off from a potentially valuable way of life in which we are open with regard to future plans, relationships, and projects. As Cheshire Calhoun says, "commitments are intentions to follow through on X despite or in the face of developments that would, in the absence of commitment, make it rational to reconsider one's mere intentions or provisional plans."[13] Because commitment plays this delimiting role in the life of the committer, some philosophers have argued that commitment lacks any intrinsic value in the context of personal relationships.[14] While commitment might lack *intrinsic* value, it at least has *strong*

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[13] Calhoun 2009: 620.

[14] Calhoun 2009; Gheaus 2015. For dissent, see van Hooft 1996. On the importance of commitment for care from within a care ethical perspective, see Walsh 2017.

instrumental value in the service of felt security. Felt security is impossible without commitment. In the context of attachment-care relationships, then, commitment plays a double role: on the one hand, it part-constitutes security-inducing care; on the other hand, it holds the committer hostage.

Because commitment is necessary for security-inducing care, when another person is attached to us and we are enmeshed in an attachment-care relationship with them, we have strong instrumental reasons to make commitments and stick to them. To unilaterally extract oneself from such a relationship is to risk leaving our relationship partner without felt security, which is a deep loss to them. The concept of security-based attachment, then, can explain the *pro tanto* wrong involved in unilaterally extracting oneself from attachment-care relationships. This explains and justifies the guilt that is often experienced by those who unilaterally sever attachment-care relationships. Such guilt responds to the deep instrumental value of commitment (and of the felt security that commitment makes possible). At the same time, though, the costs of commitment for the committer explain why we cannot be required to stay in attachment-care relationships against our will.

In summary, dyads are a source of great value, but they are also a source of immense pressure: the need for felt security and security-inducing care appears to be in opposition to liberal freedoms. In dyadic attachment-care relationships, the attached person's felt security depends on the attachment object in a way that leaves them somewhat wretched and dependent. Meanwhile, the attachment object faces some normative pressure to maintain a level of presence and commitment that forecloses some potential future goods for them. Although dyads are the paradigm cases of valuable intimate personal relationships, the value of dyadic attachment-care relationships is ambivalent: such relationships occasion the particular good of felt security, whose role in underpinning our agency is not to be underestimated, while also locking us in to vulnerabilities (for the attached person) and

commitments (for the attachment object) that might be difficult to sustain. Furthermore, there is something troubling about the inherent risk of having a single source of felt security that could be snatched away in death or at the other person's will.[15]

As mentioned above, most people don't rely on a single dyad for all their felt security. Rather, they have many dyads. But even then, the breakdown of any one dyad can be devastating. What's more, for many people, there is one dyad on which they are more invested than any other.[16] When most, if not all, of your felt security is bound up in one dyad, this is a significant risk. Our vulnerability in dyadic attachment is the point we wish to highlight; this point remains even when multiple dyads are on the scene.

As we argue below, the value of security-based attachment—and the importance of commitment—looks very different in networks than in dyads, even in lives with multiple dyads. By shifting our perspective from the dyad to the network, we can mitigate, if not entirely resolve, the conflict between the deep importance of felt security and the values of (1) the attachment object's freedom of association; (2) the attached person's ability to manage their relationships while retaining felt security; and (3) the robustness of the attached person's felt security. In the next section, we enact this shift of perspective.

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[15] Of course, if the attachment object is truly, madly, deeply committed, there might be little risk (though death is always on the cards). Luara Ferracioli makes this point about parent-child dyads (Ferracioli 2018). Our point below will be that the very s*tructure* of security-inducing networks mitigates this risk; with security-inducing dyads, the risk is not mitigated by the dyad's structure, even if it can be mitigated by the attitudes of our dyad partner.

[16] We will return to this cultural norm below, under the label of 'duo-normativity'.

2. Security-Inducing Networks

Our aim in this section is to demonstrate that felt security can be provided by security inducing networks, not only by dyads. To do so we contrast the lives of two characters: Dylan and Neta.

Dylan is in a dyad: a committed monogamous romantic partnership, in which both Dylan and his partner provide one another with the good of felt security. They serve as one another's 'secure base' (platform from which to grow) and 'safe harbour' (place to return when things get rough). Dylan has many other relationships in his life—with colleagues, friends, acquaintances, and so on—but these relationships do not contribute anything to his felt security. This can be seen from the fungibility of these relationships: if Dylan and his partner were to move countries, such that he lost all his other relationships and replaced them with new ones, Dylan would not feel like a less safe, competent, or steady person.

Contrast Neta, who is in a network. Neta has no one person who can give her felt security all on their own. She has no children or primary romantic partner. Instead, Neta has a wide variety of relationships—she has friends, colleagues, siblings, hobby groups, sports teams, church members, and those she encounters in her wider community. These people don't all know one another, and they're not knowingly coordinated around Neta's felt security. Yet each of these relationships gives Neta *partial* felt security within *part* of her life. The contributions of the network members *combine* to give Neta *overall felt security* in her life as a whole. Each member's contribution to her felt security complements the others, such that the felt security is provided only by the group, not the individuals. They are analogous to a sports team who together play the perfect game, without the whole game being attributed to any one member (though, unlike in a sports team, Neta's network members do not intentionally coordinate with one another). The perfect game can be attributed only to the

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team as a whole: likewise, Neta's overall felt security can be attributed only to the network as a whole.

Of course, in real cases, few people have their felt security underpinned in either of these extreme ways. Most people have both networks and dyads, each of which contribute somewhat to felt security. But the sharp distinction between Dylan and Neta helps to highlight the distinctive ways in which dyads and networks provide felt security and, therefore, the distinctive ways in which these relationship structures are valuable.

To see how Neta might gather felt security from her network, consider the wide variety of *types* of relations in her network. Each relationship contributes to felt security in a different *domain* of her life, or might give her *partial* but not complete felt security across many of life's domains. Because Neta gathers felt security from a network rather than a dyad, each relationship is not a self-contained 'full diet' of felt security. Rather, each relationship contributes partly to security-related nutrition, sustenance, and fulfilment. The *overall result* might be the equivalent (in felt-security terms) of one dyadic attachment-care relationship. To see how networks do this, consider a few examples of relationship-types.

To begin, consider the distinctive security-related goods that come from colleague relationships. Monika Betzler and Jörg Löschke have recently theorised colleague relationships as a distinctive category of personal relationship.[17] They analyse such relationships as containing distinctive goods, including assisting one another with work-related tasks and providing recognition of one another's work-related skills, where the provision of these goods derives from the fact that the colleagues respect one another as equals. When these goods are exchanged between colleagues, the result can be felt security *within the domain of workplace*—which enables us to take workplace risks, to trust and be

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[17] Betzler and Löschke 2021.

trusted in our workplace, and turn to our colleagues when things go wrong in the workplace. This is a kind of workplace-situated felt security, with our colleagues as our secure base. Given the importance of the modern workplace for many people's sense of self-identity, such workplace-situated felt security is not to be undervalued—even though colleague relationships are far from the usual remit of attachment theory.[18]

Another under-theorised example is siblinghood.[19] Jonathan Seglow has recently argued that sibling relationships are unlike friendships, and that they generate duties and resources because of the goods siblings co-create and co-enjoy. These goods include familial continuity, self-recognition, and extended egalitarian concern.[20] Few adults may have dyadic attachments with their siblings—that is, few adults may experience their felt security as beholden to ongoing engagement with their siblings. Nonetheless, the distinctive sibling goods can provide us with felt security in distinctive domains, especially in conjunction with other relationships. These domains include the domains of ancestry, connection to our personal history, and a sense of fraternity. Like colleagues, then, our siblings can distinctively contribute to our felt security within an important domain of our lives—even if they cannot be a complete secure base on their own.

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[18] On the value of work for identity and meaning, see Gheaus and Herzog 2016. Mlonyeni (2023) provides a different account of the goods of colleague relationships. According to Mlonyeni, good colleagues are more than just the 'Kantian colleagues' theorised by Betzler and Löschke. Mlonyeni theorises 'collegial friendships' as relationships in which the colleagues "'transcend' the collegial relationship – [they] are interested in one another as 'whole' individuals, not 'just' as colleagues." (Mlonyeni 2023, 118) We are neutral between Mlonyeni's account and Betzler and Löschke's account. Our point is simply that colleague relationships can be an important source of workplace-situated felt security.

[19] Mills 2003; Benziman unpublished; Shields unpublished.

[20] Seglow forthcoming.

The same goes for those with whom we engage in leisure pursuits, artistic endeavours, civic engagement, and hobbies, including academic co-authors. Within these domains, the people with whom we pursue the activity are often important for facilitating *domain-specific* felt security. Being embedded within an affirming activity-related community can boost our capacity to take risks, pursue self-growth, and feel empowered within the activity's domain.[21] It may be rare for a person to have a dyadic attachment to any one member of their quilting circle or activist group—certainly simply in virtue of sharing such activity-group membership. Nonetheless, such individuals can—*qua* fellow activity-group member—each contribute to our felt security in that specific domain. The community (e.g., team, club, group, movement) within which we pursue the activity can be what sustains our sense that the activity's domain (e.g., sport, art, politics) is navigable for us. Such domain-specific felt security in turn contributes to our general felt security within our life as a whole, especially if the domain is important to our self-identity, self-esteem, and self-understanding.

Even more broadly, consider people with whom we interact only fleetingly or in chance encounters (Brownlee 2020, ch. 4, and Brownlee 2024).[22] Consider fellow dog owners at the dog park, shop assistants at the market, or fellow attendees at a large cultural or religious event. We may not know these people by name and may interact with them only once. Yet, again, they can contribute (in small ways) to our sense of being at home in the world. If such people respond to us with grace and kindness, their actions can aggregate to transform the relevant domain into a place where we can take risks, grow, and return with ease and comfort. They can, in other words, provide us with domain-specific felt security, in

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[21] See, e.g., Burt and Atkinson 2016; Christens, Peterson, and Speer 2011; and Downton and Wehr 1998 for literature on how hobby groups, community groups, and activist groups can provide security-related goods.

[22] In more recent work, Brownlee and Neal (forthcoming) discuss the normative status of neighbourly relations.

the sense of 'felt security' that is relevant to attachment theory (as summarised in Section 1). In turn, the domains in which we interact with such people might play an important role in our self-conception, such that felt security in these domains feeds into our overall sense of felt security in the world. Yet it would be bizarre to suggest that we have a security-based attachment to any given shop assistant. And these strangers do not provide us with felt security throughout all domains of our lives. Our overall sense of felt security derives from the wider relational network of which such people are a small part. The network is not merely a large number of dyads.

Security-inducing networks can thus include colleagues, non-immediate family members, activity participants, and wider community members. In such networks, it is specific individuals (alone or in concert) that provide us the attention that *contributes* to our felt security. But it is the network as a whole—the colleagues *plus* the siblings *plus* the teammates *plus* all the others—that, over time, and across many instances, provides the felt security. The felt security is an 'emergent property.' There is nothing mysterious here: the felt security emerges from the network just as the shape and size of a wall emerges from the configuration of the bricks, or just as the motorcycle's speed emerges from the configuration of its parts, or just as the beauty of a sports games emerges from the configuration of the players. Sometimes, combinations of objects have properties (such as the property 'induces security') that none of the objects have on its own.

To further see how a network of relationships can operate to produce felt security, consider the timeline of a week, a month, or a year. Neta might go to work and see her colleagues, go out for dinner with a sibling, play sport on the weekend, and attend a political protest—all the while engaging in fleeting encounters within wider society. Different domains might occasion stress and anxiety (the deadline at work, the loss at the sport game, and so on). These stresses are somewhat ameliorated by their domain-specific security-

inducing relationships (the colleagues, the teammates, and so on). But more broadly than this, stress and anxiety in one domain can be offset by security and esteem emanating from another domain: when work is going poorly, family can be a respite; when family stressors arise, work can be a solace. The overall combination of relationship-types can thus maintain Neta's felt security in her life as a whole, even if her domain-specific security is threatened. This explains how these relationships can work together to deliver felt security more globally.

Of course, colleagues, siblings, activity-partners, and community members are simply four under-appreciated examples. We do not mean to delimit, or over-categorise, the variety of relationships that might be embedded in a security-inducing network. Our point is simply that this variety is rich and diverse, and that different types of relationships might, overall, combine to provide a person with felt security, even if none of the relationships in a network rises to the status of being a dyadic attachment-care relationship. In this way, the network itself, and its contribution to security, is not reducible to individual relationships within it. The overarching felt security we derive from the network is missed when we focus on dyads as the only source of felt security. This is a significant oversight.

3. The Virtues of the Network

As was noted in Section One, there is an ambivalence to dyadic felt-security. In this section, we aim to show the distinct advantages of networks in light of dyadic ambivalence. Specifically, we here identify three positive values that arise when an attached person has a security-inducing network, which are missed when we focus solely on dyads as the source of felt security. Of course, in most lives dyads and networks can be, and are, combined. There is no inherent rivalry between dyads and networks. But there are some specific reasons for paying more attention to the way networks deliver felt security (whether alone or in

combination with dyads), and not only because they have been neglected in the philosophy of personal relationships.

First, consider the benefits for the *attachment objects*—that is, the parties in the network who together provide Neta with felt security. From their perspective, the fact that Neta has a network means that the commitment required of any one of them is weaker, relative to the commitment required of Dylan's partner. In a security-inducing network, commitment therefore loses some of its instrumental normative force, as that force was characterised in Section 2. The commitment required of any one network member is therefore reduced. This is because, if any one network member were to sever their connection to Neta, Neta would still have most of her relational tapestry in-place. The remainder of the tapestry would keep Neta feeling mostly secure (or secure across most of life's domains), even given the loss of one network-member. This is good for the same reasons that Calhoun is sceptical of commitment's intrinsic value, namely that it can keep us from doing what reason dictates.

Commitment's lowered normative force has important social-political implications. In networks, the value of felt security becomes more easily reconcilable with liberal freedom of association. Liberal political philosophers who champion the importance of personal relationships have recently confronted the seeming conflict between the value of personal relationships and the value of freedom of association.[23] Some—such as Kimberly Brownlee—have adopted the position that liberal freedom of association does not warrant the wide range of rights with which it is traditionally associated.[24] Some would argue that this sacrifices an attractive feature of liberalism. By centring security-inducing networks rather than security-inducing dyads, we acquire the tools to uphold traditional liberal freedom of association consistent with acknowledging the importance of one of the most important

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[23] Brownlee 2020, ch. 5-6; Betzler 2022; Brake 2023.

[24] Brownlee 2020, ch. 5-6.

relationship goods: felt security. Simply: because the value resides in the network, any one network party can leave the network—thus exercising their traditional liberal freedoms—without destroying the entire package of value contained within the network. This is not so for dyads. A focus on networks dramatically reduces the tension between the insight that felt security is of great value, and the insight that individual autonomy and independence are of great value. Thus, many liberals have good reasons to endorse, support, and protect networks in social-political life.

The second distinctive value of networks accrues to the attached person. This value concerns the resources the attached person has to autonomously manage, repair, remove, or add relationships within their network. This pertains to the attached person's ability to manage how they receive the agency-sustaining good of felt security. In dyads, our felt security is hostage to our relationship partner, making the attached person more vulnerable to "settling" and, even worse, abuse and exploitation—particularly if they have only one dyad in their life, or one dyad that is more important than the others regarding the good of felt-security. The stakes of negotiating such a relationship are very high. The relationships end only with deep grief.[25] As noted in Section 1, the stakes are high even if the attached person has numerous dyads in their life: the ending of any one of these dyads shakes the foundations of felt security.

In a network, by contrast, we can replace any given relationship without a rupture to our fundamental sense of security, which lowers the stakes. This is because we still enjoy a strong degree of felt security from the remaining participants in the network. When one relationship is being initiated, developed, repaired, or removed, the rest of the network

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[25] It has been argued that there are benefits to grief, which we do not dispute, but it is unarguable that grief can be extremely painful and that the loss of someone so close always engenders a risk of quite catastrophic outcomes. On grief and its benefits see Cholbi 2017; 2021.

provides the secure base from which such alteration can occur without a threat to fundamental security. When Neta is considering making or breaking a piece of her attachment network, the rest of the network can sustain her in the security needed to enact this change. This confident curation of relationships enables Neta to manage her own self-esteem, self-confidence, and agency. Notably, this value of autonomous relationship-management arises from the network as a whole, not from any relationship within the network. It arises only from the way in which the relationships interact and combine. This value of the network is therefore another 'emergent property,' which arises from the way the parts are arranged rather than residing in any one part itself.

Third and finally, there is a difference in the *type* of felt security that's derived from a network as opposed to a dyad. The felt security that's garnered from a network is more robust, resilient, and reliable—at least, all else being equal. This robustness is what facilitates the good of autonomous relationship-management (discussed in the previous paragraph). But the robustness is also, we suggest, valuable in itself. Here, we utilise Philip Pettit's analysis of 'modally robust goods.'[26] In Pettit's framework, there are 'thin' goods, which a person enjoys just in case the goods are actually provided in the situation in which the person finds themselves. 'Felt security' is a thin good. Additionally, there are 'thick' or 'robust' goods, which a person enjoys just in case the 'thin' good is provided across a wide range of possible ways things might go, or might have gone. When a person would enjoy felt security (a thin good) *across a wide range of ways things might yet go or might have gone*, the person enjoys a distinct 'thick' good. We can label this thick good 'robust felt security.' Neta enjoys *robust felt security*, because her felt security is not dependent on the continuance of any of her particular relationships. Dylan, by contrast, is in a relationship whose structure does not

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[26] Pettit 2015.

embed *robust* felt security: Dylan's enjoyment of the thin good (felt security) is contingent upon the continuation of his specific dyadic relationship. Dylan's felt security is only as secure as the attitudes and commitments of his partner. While these commitments might be deeply robust, such robustness is not built into the structure of the relationship. The robustness of Neta's network may be where the value of the network-as-a-whole is most vivid.

None of this is to say that Neta should value her network-members *purely* by dint of their contribution to the network. She can value her network-members as distinctive and unique individuals, while also valuing the way they all fit together to provide her with felt security. This point borrows from recent work on the value of dyadic relationships. As Samuel Scheffler has argued, we can value *both* the person we are in a relationship with *and* the relationship we have with them.[27] Similarly, in the network case, we can value *both* the person *and* the contribution they make to the network. Additionally, we can value the overall felt security that we garner from the entire network of which they are a part. To value the network-as-a-whole is not to diminish the value of the people or relationships within the network, but rather to enhance it, by seeing it as *also* contributing to a larger source of value.

Despite these ways in which relational networks are valuable, there is still a deep vulnerability involved in them. If the entire network breaks down at once, for example if all Neta's friends die in a plane crash, then she is left relationally unmoored. The loss of the group (though not the loss of any individual in the group) can be as devastating as the loss of one dyadic attachment-care relationship. Yet the larger one's network is—and the greater the variety of relationships within the network—the less likely one may be to find oneself in this situation. Conversely, the smaller the network, and the smaller the number of domains in

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[27] Scheffler 2022. For the idea that love is valuing a *relationship*, see Kolodny 2003.

which the network is concentrated, the greater the risks, and the more closely such a network will resemble a dyad.

Neta might face other challenges that Dylan does not. A security-inducing network may require more time or effort to maintain, since each relationship within the network may be less able to rely on inertia or social scripts for its continuation or initiation. And Neta might be missing out on certain goods—such as the goods of intimacy, love, and loyalty.[28] It is an interesting question, not addressed here, how such goods might feature in a dyad-less life. Yet our point is not that there are no downsides to networks: it is that there are interesting upsides, specifically vis-à-vis felt security, which may be overlooked in a dyad-focused culture. Nor is our point that networks and dyads are opposing strategies for achieving felt security. We want to support the claim that networks have some particular advantages as one strategy for achieving felt security.

In the ideal case, a person with a security-inducing network will weave their tapestry of relationships carefully, and will repair, replace, and extend this tapestry overtime as needed, so as to (1) respect network participants' liberal right to freedom of association, (2) foster their own capacity for autonomous relationship-management, and (3) retain their own enjoyment of the thick good of robust felt security. But the real world is far from ideal. In the next section, we consider some of the social and political implications of attending to security-inducing networks in the world as we find it.

3. Implications and Upshots

In this section we discuss the practical importance of our argument, first by highlighting the way it allows us to get critical purchase on culturally dominate relationship models, and

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[28] We thank Monika Betzler and Kimberley Brownlee for emphasising these points to us.

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second by drawing out the institutional implications of taking networks seriously as an alternative site for the provision of felt security.

We have argued that security-inducing networks embed three overlooked moral values. Yet in the world as we find it, these values can be difficult to realise. One reason is the cultural expectation (found within many Western societies) that dyadic attachments are the norm. We label this cultural expectation 'duo-normativity.' The ideology of duo-normativity is reflected in assumptions that the most valuable and important human relationships are those in which two parties each serve as the safe harbour for the other, and in which the loss of one party would undermine the overall felt security of the other party. In Neta's security-inducing network, it's not true that any one person can serve as a safe harbour for any and all of life's difficulties. And it's not true that the loss of one person would rock Neta's overall felt security. Yet this does not diminish the value or importance of security-inducing networks. In fact, we have argued, these facts enhance networks' value along important dimensions. Duo-normativity thus contains a false assumption.

Duo-normativity is a broad genus, of which one species is 'amatonormativity.' The latter concept has been extensively theorised by Elizabeth Brake, who characterises amatonormativity as "the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it *should* be aimed at in preference to other relationship types."[29] While amatonormativity is prominent in Western societies today, it is not the only species of duo-normativity. Amatonormativity focuses on romantic dyads. Another species of duo-normativity is (what we might call) 'matrinormativity': the assumption that a child should have a primary dyadic attachment to their maternal caregiver. Matrinormativity was implicit

[29] Brake 2012, 88-89.

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in the early attachment research of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, who examined children's relationships to their mothers alone.[30] Duo-normativity is also present in the schoolyard category of 'best friends.' It is thus a fairly broad cultural phenomenon.

Philosophers should be at the forefront of criticising assumptions of duo-normativity, just as philosophers such as Brake have recently criticised amatonormativity. This means that philosophers should be involved in challenging social norms around duo-normativity as found in everyday life. But it also means not putting 'close' personal relationships on a pedestal within our academic theorising—going beyond relationships of love, parenthood, and intimate friendship, to consider the unique value of more 'distant' relationships as part of a network.[31] In Section 2.1, we noted how philosophers have recently started to conceptualise the security-related goods that we enjoy in various more distant relationships. But there is more work to be done in this domain. Even in the philosophy of friendship, for example, the

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[30] Bowlby 1969; Bowlby 1973; Bowlby 1980; Ainsworth 1969; Ainsworth 1991.

[31] It's notable that Brake herself is arguably guilty of duo-normativity. She privileges 'caring relationships', which she defines as relationships in which "the parties know one another well, share a history of interaction, and stand in a non-fungible relationship with one another. While degrees of caring and its content and expression may differ, caring relationships do require, minimally, some degree of intimacy, commitment towards the future, and non-fungibility. The other party in a relationship is not simply replaceable with a similar person; this is what it means for a relationship to exist between persons." (2014, 28) While Brake does talk about "polyamorous networks" and "urban tribes"—which she argues should be socially and legally recognized on terms analogous to marriage— still, she discusses these groups as though they are tight-knit and small groups of people who all care for one another. By contrast, our focus has been on the ways in which one person might come to enjoy the good of felt security through the combination of their relationships with a number of distinct people, where not all of the people in the network might even be known to each other, let alone care for one another.

focus tends to be on close, intimate, or life-shaping friendships—not the more distant

friendships that might nonetheless contribute to a person's security-inducing network.[32]

Of course, philosophical attention will only go so far. What might our formal social

institutions do, in light of the value of security-inducing networks? The options here are

numerous, and will vary greatly depending on local conditions. For example, in societies

where housing is insecure, such insecurity may undermine people's ability to maintain a

security-inducing network within a reasonable geographical distance from their home. Under

such circumstances, the value of security-inducing networks gives us another argument in

favour of reliable and secure affordable housing options. Or in circumstances where work is

isolating or remote, security-inducing networks may give another argument in favour of

bringing workers together physically.[33] Some such policies cannot be regulated by the liberal

state, but they can be promoted by unions and other civil society organizations.

There are also implications for education and children's social development. When a

person is lonely and doesn't have a security-inducing network, it is all the more difficult and

anxiety-inducing for them to take the actions necessary for building such a network. After all,

such a person lacks the felt security that is provided by the network; yet such felt security is

the bedrock from which the network can be built, maintained, and altered. There is great

difficulty in commencing the building of a relational tapestry, as compared to expanding,

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[32] See, for example, the recent *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Friendship* (Jeske (ed.) 2023), which focuses on friendship as a close relation between two people, rather than the values that might arise from having a large network of loose or more distant friends. See also the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on 'Friendship,' which defines friendship as "a distinctively personal relationship that is grounded in a concern on the part of each friend for the welfare of the other, for the other's sake, and that involves some degree of intimacy." (Helm 2021) Again, this embeds duo-normative assumptions and overlooks the friendship-related goods that can arise from have a number of non-intimate networked relations.

[33] As has recently been argued by Mlonyeni (2023).

mending, and revising a tapestry once it is firmly established. The practical question for social and political action here is: how can we help people to develop the skills needed to build a security-inducing network? These skills must be developed from a young age. Not only that, but the tapestries we have in childhood may continue to be patched and altered throughout our lives; thus, ensuring children have well-built tapestries will help to ensure that they are never in the position of having to build a tapestry from scratch. A very daunting prospect.

Fostering these skills and relationships in children will require intense interaction between value theory and social science, including psychology. The pressing question for institutional design is how to help people develop the *skills* required to build security-inducing networks. This is to be distinguished from a view that says everyone must actually *have* such a network. Some people may be entirely capable of retaining their own felt security without the need of any relational tapestry. Others might be constituted to enjoy felt security only in dyads of Dylan's type. People are likely to be varied when it comes to which configuration of relationships best provide them with felt security. Our view does not entail thrusting a varied relational tapestry on everyone. While our view does imply that there are distinct goods in security-inducing networks, outlined in the previous section, we also acknowledge that there are distinct goods—such as self-sufficiency or intimacy—that might be missing for those who rely on a security-inducing network. Even if not everyone needs a tapestry, everyone should enjoy the capability to exercise this functioning if they so choose. The capability gives us agency over our relationships and, in turn, over our felt security.

The loss to children of opportunities to form networks during the covid-19 pandemic, rather than dyads with members of their immediate family, was, in light of our analysis, a major loss indeed. Limiting gatherings to very small numbers will have deprived younger children of opportunities to engage socially and learn the skills of developing and managing a

network of relationships, instead placing greater focus and opportunity on dyads with their attending problems. For adults and older children with established networks, these limits will have mandated difficult decisions between distinct dyads or network members, in some cases destroying their wider network beyond repair. These limits to socialising will have effectively set back their interest in felt security, instead placing them in a much more vulnerable situation where managing the few dyads they could maintain was very high stakes. The closing of nurseries and schools no doubt set back these agential capacities, and a duo-normative approach would fail to see why. The same is true of workplaces that had to close down, effectively ending colleague relationships or putting them on hold in ways that left many with limited sources of felt security. Our analysis expands our capacity to correctly diagnose these and related problems.

Another important upshot of our analysis concerns those who are at risk of grief (such as those with terminally ill partners), or those in risky occupations (such as military personnel), or the elderly. For these people, establishing robust security-inducing *networks* is a high priority in order that they (and their loved ones) be spared the full disorientation and agential disabling associated with grief at the loss of their dyadic attachment-care relationships. Many people go to great lengths to consider how they will "take care" of their loved ones after death, through financial planning. An implication of the significance of networks is to direct our attention at least as much to truly "taking care" of our network members after our death. It might be taken for granted that our network members' family and friends will step up after we die, but often enough this is not the case. Network members may need to be considered in our social norms and legal frameworks for end-of-life planning.

While no one can generate a network overnight, we can, with determined forward planning, increase the chances of as many people as possible avoiding the worst if their dyads break down, and retaining a network. Rather than dealing with the misery of felt insecurity

induced by the loss of a close partner with whom we are in an attachment-care dyad, there are things we can do to mitigate against it.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that relationship networks are a potential source of felt security and that there are some advantages to deriving felt security from these networks rather than relying solely on dyadic forms. We focused on the comparison between Dylan, who has a dyad (but no network), and Neta, who has a network (but no dyad); however, the two are not mutually exclusive. Someone who has a dyad might benefit from *also* having a security-inducing network, as we hope our analysis has made clear.

We have discussed the wide variety of relationships that are not generally considered to provide felt security, but that can provide it when the relationships are combined. We highlighted how networks make good on some of the defects of dyadic security in three ways: reconciling security-based attachment with liberal freedom, because of the lower levels of commitment required; providing opportunities to develop our autonomy in the sphere of relationships and our ability to manage our own need of security; and providing robust felt security, which is resilient in the face of loss of any individual within the network.

The arguments presented here represent an attempt to shift the paradigm of theorising about personal relationships, from dyads to networks. We believe that, with networks given more prominence, we can address many of the philosophical difficulties in our understanding of personal relationships and help guide and assess individual action, policies, and institutional design. We have only begun to show this here, using the specific value of felt security. There is much more to explore in the philosophy of relational networks.

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