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What is Intimacy?

People share things, Joel! That's what intimacy is!

-Charlie Kaufman, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

Abstract:

Why is it typically more violating to grab someone's thigh or to stroke their face than it is to grab their finger? Why is it worse to read someone's dream journal without permission than it is to read their bird watching field notes? Intimacy, I argue, is key to understanding these cases, and to explaining many of our most stringent rights.

I present two ways of thinking about intimacy, Relationship-First Accounts and the Intimate Zones Account. I argue that only the Intimate Zones Account lets us cohesively understand intimacy's importance, and the scope of our intimate rights. I characterize our intimate zones as meeting the Hiddenness and Importance Conditions, and show how a feature's meeting these conditions makes it a locus of special vulnerability by which our persons can be fundamentally altered. This special vulnerability explains why we must respect the intimate boundaries of others.

1. Introduction:

Intimacy is both one of the most longed for and repulsing facets of human experience. Desired intimacy with desired persons is essential for our lives as social creatures. Undesired intimacy repels and unnerves us as little else can. At its worst, it is a tremendous and life-shattering violation. Intimacy with others shapes our persons, our personalities, and the trajectory of our lives. And yet, intimacy takes so many different forms. There are intimate conversations, intimate sexual experiences, intimate friendships, intimate therapy sessions. But it is not obvious what these all share. I argue that a common thread runs through all these cases and more, and renders us vulnerable. And this vulnerability grounds our stringent rights against intimate violations. In this paper, I give an account of intimacy that can account for its multitudinal occurrences, explain why it make us vulnerable, and ground our intimate rights.

Unfortunately, intimacy is massively undertheorized. It has played, of course, a central role in arguments about privacy, sexual rights, abortion, care ethics, cultural appropriation, and humor.¹ But

¹ Julie Inness, James Rachels, and Jeffrey Reiman talk about intimacy when giving arguments about the nature of privacy (Inness 1996, Rachels 1975, Reiman 1976). Feminist philosophers such as Maggie Little and Eva Feder Kittay discuss

such arguments rarely make clear how they are conceptualizing intimacy, and more rarely still give arguments for conceptualizing intimacy in this way. This is not a criticism of such arguments. We all, of course, must take some concepts for granted in our work. Rather, this is an offering. By rationally reconstructing what has been said about intimacy in the literature and in ordinary life, and making clear the implications of such views, we are better positioned to investigate its importance.

There are two broad approaches to thinking about intimacy. As Pavel Nitchovski observes about Julie Inness, she has a “general ‘relationship-first’ approach” (82, 2022). Accordingly, I name the first class of views, of which Inness’s view is one, ‘Relationship-First Accounts.’ Though they have not been all grouped together before, nor the view made explicit, many views running through the background of arguments about privacy, abortion, and care ethics fit share common commitments and assumptions.²

Relationship-First Accounts: An act is intimate in virtue of its being performed in certain types of relationships, or from motivations which arise in those relationships.

I will argue that Relationship-First Accounts are not sufficiently unifying, nor informative. They do not accurately predict which acts are intimate, nor can they adequately explain *why* some acts are intimate and others are not. They cannot tell us why sharing a bed with a romantic partner is intimate, but sharing a garbage disposal is not. Relationship-First Accounts also have trouble capturing intimate exchanges that occur outside the contexts of relationships.³

intimacy in the context of pregnancy and care ethics (Little 1999, Feder Kittay 1999, 2011). Thi Nguyen and Matthew Strohl argue that much cultural appropriation is wrong because it interferes with ‘the intimacy of groups’ (2019). Ted Cohen discusses the role of intimacy in humor (1978).

² See Feder Kittay 1999, 2011, Inness 1996, Little 1999, Rachels 1975, and Reiman 1976.

³ Nitchovski (2022) also argues that such approaches cannot capture intimate interactions which occur outside of relationships.

Imagine that Maria has been in a fight with her partner, and posts about it anonymously on an online forum. She talks about why she fears she is incompatible with her partner, and in doing so appears to be revealing something intimate. But as she is posting for the first time and is unfamiliar with the commenters, the relationship she has with them is minimal at best. Relationship-First Accounts cannot tell us why this forum disclosure seems intimate in a way that posting about one's dog's favorite food is not. Nor can they explain what Maria's posting on a forum has in common with an act such as cuddling, and why what they share *matters*.

Unlike theorists who take intimate relationships to be primary, I argue that the intimacy of such relationships stems from their exposure of intimate areas of our selves.

Intimate Zones Account: Certain zones of persons are intimate. Intimate acts are those that expose intimate zones. Intimate relationships are relationships in which intimate zones are exposed.

I will argue that intimate zones, not relationships, are most fundamental. This is not to say that intimacy is *identical* to our intimate zones. 'Intimacy' describes our intimate zones, intimate acts, *and* intimate relationships, and the way they relate. Intimacy is the whole phenomenon. Rather, the claim is that to cohesively understand this phenomenon, and why it is so important to us, we must build intimacy up from our intimate zones. That intimate areas of the self are primary allows us to see how intimacy is self-shaping, and why it is imperative we have control over our intimate boundaries. Having our intimate zones exposed without our consent is not just uncomfortable, but renders us vulnerable to being fundamentally altered.

I have three goals in this paper. The first is to add structure to our thinking about intimacy, a roadmap to possible unified theories. The second is to show that the Intimate Zones Account is

superior to Relationships-First Accounts, that it better captures all the cases it should. And the third is to defend a substantive account of what these intimate zones are. I argue that our intimate zones are characterized by two features, their hiddenness and their importance to our conception of our identity. I call these the ‘Hiddenness Condition’ and the ‘Importance Condition’ and together they make up the Hidden Importance (HI) Thesis. Together, they show why intimate violations are unique and severe.

2. A Concept of Intimacy

People use ‘intimacy’ and ‘intimate’ in a huge variety of ways. They’re used to describe relationships, actions, and information. ‘An intimate’ can refer to a confidante. ‘They were intimate’ euphemistically refers to a sexual encounter. In the social sciences ‘intimate labor’ often refers to sexual, reproductive, domestic, and care labor.⁴ How could all these cases share some common, substantive core? We can think of this as the Capture Problem for an account of intimacy.

There is also substantial overlap between ‘privacy’, ‘intimacy’, and ‘closeness’, both in conception and in usage. A couple whispering to each other might be said to be having ‘an intimate moment’ by one observer, while another would fairly call it ‘a private moment.’ These sorts of concepts don’t seem to be natural kinds and it’s reasonable to be skeptical that we can disentangle and catalogue them. And given that there is a huge literature on privacy, if intimacy is to be a useful concept, it is particularly important that it is meaningfully different from privacy. We can think of this as the Distinction Problem for an account of intimacy. I tackle the Distinction Problem in section 6.15, once I have fleshed out part of the picture of intimacy. There, I show that some acts are private without being intimate, necessitating that the concepts are distinct.

⁴ See Cohen (2002) and Salazar Parreñas and Boris (2010) for examples.

The Capture Problem is, admittedly, more difficult. To begin, exactly capturing the current extension of ‘intimacy’ is not my goal. Rather, I am interested in a conception of intimacy that can do important explanatory work.⁵ I seek an account that can tell us why close and loving relationships, secret sharing, and sexual acts are all paradigmatically intimate, and why sexual assault is a paradigmatic intimate violation. It should be close to our common-sense conception of intimacy, so that it can explain how we use this concept and why we already believe intimacy is so important. It should explain why intimacy makes us vulnerable and shapes us, and how this gives rise to our stringent rights against intimate violations.⁶

Having such an account of intimacy can then help us adjudicate the scope of our legal and moral rights. It can explain why it is typically so much more violating when a stranger grabs our butt than when they grab our elbow, and so why we require more robust legal protections against the former. It also can adjudicate conflicts currently being hashed out in the political realm. Those who push against mask mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic have co-opted the phrase “my body, my choice” from the pro-choice movement. The concept of bodily autonomy alone cannot tell us why forcing someone to continue a pregnancy is so much more violating than requiring someone to wear a mask or to get a vaccine. Rather, we need to understand why pregnancy is intimate in a way wearing a mask is not, and why that makes it much more grave to force on someone.

⁵ This could be thought of as a Carnapian explication project. As Georg Brun explains, Carnap’s explication is done to advance our theorizing. This new concept, the explicatum, must be generally useable in the same circumstances as the original term, and “should be as fruitful as possible” (Brun 2016). It is not, however, an ameliorative project. As Sally Haslanger argues, ameliorative analyses “elucidate ‘our’ legitimate purposes and what concept of Fness (if any) would serve them best. . . Normative input is needed” (2005). My Intimate Zones Account does not require normative input. Rather, though my account delivers results that I believe will be morally beneficial, its structure is motivated by facts about human psychology, and does not rest on any moral assumptions. It explains why intimate zones are loci of vulnerability. That loci of vulnerability are deserving of special protections is normative, though not especially controversial, but this only explains why intimate zones deserve special protections. It is not required to explain what they are.

⁶ I am more concerned with crafting an account of intimacy that can ground our negative rights, our right against intimate intrusion, than I am with one that can explain positive rights to intimacy (if there are any).

This account can also help us better regulate intimate labor. We can acknowledge that sex work is typically different from much other work without being essentialist about sexuality. We can see why sex often makes us vulnerable without relying on inaccurate (and often sexist) claims about sex's 'natural role'. However, once we have a measuring stick to test for intimacy, we see that it is not only sexual and reproductive labor that are intimate, but that work such as nursing, teaching, therapy, and art are as well. Recognizing these similarities, and being guided by principles of fairness, we can see that we ought to treat these similar labors similarly. This understanding can guide us to meaningful social policy reform, informed by the unique way in which intimacy makes us vulnerable.

If some use of 'intimacy' appears not to be captured by my account, there are two ways to respond. First, I can counter that if we correctly understand the case, it does involve revelation of intimate zones. I'll demonstrate how this works for less obvious cases in section 10. But of course, for any potential counterexample I can translate into the language of intimate zones, another awaits in the wing. And so while I do think anything that can plausibly be called 'intimate' is in fact a revelation of intimate zones, it's pertinent to address what should be done if some counterexample were to be found. If there was a case that could not be understood in terms of intimate zones, I would have to hold it to be a less fundamental sort of intimacy, that it is derivative or even parasitic on genuine intimacy. And so it would not be protected by the special weight of an intimate right.

3. Intimate Zones Account

There is something intuitively appealing about the idea that intimacy *exposes us*. Robert Nozick elegantly captures this when he writes "In intimacy, we let another within the boundaries we normally maintain around ourselves, boundaries marked by clothing and by full self-control and monitoring" (1989, 60). Literal nakedness is intimate, but metaphorical nakedness also captures this sense of vulnerability, of exposure. George Yancy describes "being undone by the intensity of the intimacy"

when he watches the film *Moonlight*. He says that by ‘intimacy’ he means that which “is inmost or deepest within or farthest from the outside” (Yancy 2019, 66). To understand intimacy, we must understand this sense of exposure, of a hidden core revealed. Intimate zones help capture this:

Intimate Zone: A feature of a person which renders them vulnerable. These are features we are disposed to hide, which give insight into how we see ourselves.

Intimate Act: An act that exposes, or relies on the exposure of, at least one intimate zone.

Intimate Relationship: A relationship characterized by the performance of intimate acts.⁷

We can think of intimate zones as the building blocks of intimacy, from which intimate acts and intimate relationships are formed. There are, of course, constraints on how “the building blocks of intimacy” may be put together. Some of these constraints stem from the meaning of ‘act’ and ‘relationship’. Some constraints come from the requirements of various act types. Having a conversation, for instance, requires multiple parties. So for there to be an intimate conversation, at least two people must be engaged in a conversation in which intimate zones are revealed. Likewise, an intimate relationship entails the existence of a relationship, which requires there is some interaction between the parties.

⁷ Or a series of acts which are not individually intimate, but are intimate when considered as a collective. A single instance of sitting next to someone at a coffee shop is typically not intimate, but sitting next to someone every day for years is likely to reveal intimate information through patterns, such as how they look when confused or joyful.

4. Cases:

I now introduce some cases that motivate my account. There intuitively seems to be something intimate happening in each of them, something that an account of intimacy should capture. However, the relationships presented in them are minimal or nonexistent.

4.1 Minimal Relationship Cases

Dominatrix:

Suzanne is a dominatrix and Lizbeth is her client. She has monthly sessions with Lizbeth for many years, and in these sessions she learns about Lizbeth's patterns of sexual response. They talk about Lizbeth's desires, Suzanne's boundaries, the origins of both of these, and they come to genuinely like each other.⁸ Lizbeth prefers seeing Suzanne to other dominatrixes, and Lizbeth is one of Suzanne's favorite clients, for whom she has some genuine affection. However, though Lizbeth enjoys their encounters, she would not wish to cultivate an outside friendship with Suzanne, nor enter into a romantic relationship with her. And should Lizbeth stop paying Suzanne, Suzanne would stop engaging in sexual activities with her, and would not see her socially.

Support Group:

Valencia is trying to treat her alcohol dependency. When she is craving a drink, she attends a local AA meeting. She doesn't agree with all of the group's methods, doesn't have a sponsor, and doesn't socialize with people before or after the meeting. She quietly enters as they start, and quietly leaves as they end. However, she listens to other people's stories during the meetings, and occasionally

⁸ It is not necessary for the case to be intimate under the Intimate Zones Account that there is some affection between the parties. Rather, as will become clear in section 5.1, I include this in the description so we can see that even in versions of Dominatrix where care is involved, the motivation account cannot adequately capture it without becoming too wide in scope.

shares her own struggles. She, like many others there, has opened up about the lowest moments of her life. In most settings, she would find it too uncomfortable and painful to share these.

4.2 No Relationship Cases

Stranger on a Train:

Omar is traveling out of the country by himself for the first time. He is visiting Japan, but does not read or speak Japanese. After hours on the train, he realizes he is traveling in the wrong direction. Frustrated and exhausted, he begins to cry. A stranger on the train notices, and tries to help him. After this stranger gives him directions, Omar opens up to them about how alone he has felt in his travels. The stranger nods along kindly, and shares an embarrassing travel story of his own. They laugh together, and spend the next hour of the train ride discussing why they love to see new places, what they fear traveling alone, and what they have learned from their travels. They do not exchange details, and never see each other again.

Memoir:

Author Roxanne Gay writes *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*. This is the first time she publicly shares her story of being raped at twelve years old, and the repercussions this has had for her life and relationship with her body. Though it is easier to “write around what happened” because she doesn’t “want to have to deal with the horror of such exposure,” she decides to tell her story anyway (2017, 39). The back cover describes the book as an “intimate and searing memoir.”

Relationship-First Accounts define intimacy in terms of relationships, and so are unequipped to explain the intimacy in the above cases. One could reject that these cases contain intimacy despite the intuitive pull that they do. Just because someone writes that a memoir is “intimate” does not make

it so, of course. However, even if what occurs in these cases was not genuine intimacy, we'd want to say something about why there was *pseudo*-intimacy in them, about why they appear so similar to intimacy. Relationships-First Accounts have no obvious resources available to do this. In contrast, it is very easy to see how each of these cases reveals an intimate feature of a person. Granting their similarity, and that something special is revealed in each, is not only appealing because it conforms to our intuitions, however. If we can identify something special they share in common, then this special thing can explain why these exchanges and disclosures deserve robust protections.

5. Relationship-First Accounts:

Relationship-First Views take intimate relationships to be foundational. There is something very natural about using relationships as the starting point in explorations of intimacy. Intimate relationships very obviously impact us. We decide to share a living space with a partner, move across country to be closer to our children, develop hobbies our friends share with us. They are often where we feel intimacy's force, how it changes us. And so it is easy to take for granted that we should begin our investigation of intimacy here. But that intimacy is most *apparent* to us in intimate relationships does not mean that intimate relationships are most *foundational*.

I separate these Relationship-First Views into two broad camps, the Motivation Account and the Intertwinement Account. I argue that they cannot stand on their own if they are to capture all and only intimacy, nor all and only intimate relationships. Rather, they must be supplemented with a preexisting account of intimacy, and that is what I offer with Intimate Zones Account.

5.1 Motivation Account:

In *Privacy, Intimacy, and Isolation*, Julie Inness explicitly defines and defends an account of intimacy. She lays out a model Relationship-First View, one she believes will provide a unified

justification of privacy law. She is clear and careful, and though I believe intimacy and privacy come apart, I take inspiration from her ambitious goals for an account of intimacy.

Inness sees two possible forms an account of intimacy could take. The first she calls “behaviorist.” This is the view that “we might find some characteristic of the behavior constituting intimate acts and activities that could identify them as intimate” (1996, 74). She rejects this view because she thinks any particular behavior we might identify, such as a kiss, is only intimate in some cultural and historical contexts. This is an insightful line of critique. Given the diversity of human psychology, I am very skeptical there are any act types that are always intimate for everyone.

Inness argues we should instead embrace a motivational account of intimacy. She argues that intimacy is that which draws its motivation, “meaning, and value from . . . love, liking, or care” (75). As she puts it, “when I claim that an act, such as kissing another, is intimate, I am not discussing the nature of the behavior; I am referring to the fact that the kiss expresses my affection for another” (10). However, a dilemma is revealed when we explore the notion of care and affection required here. If it’s too thin, she’ll have to say that anything done out of a mild sense of care is intimate. But if it is any thicker, it will leave out cases like *Dominatrix*, *Support Group*, *Stranger on a Train*, and *Memoir*. I begin by discussing the non-intimate acts her account lets in, and proceed by proposing and rejecting two amendments that attempt to solve her scope problem.

Not all acts that express affection and draw their meaning from this are intimate. I might like my coworkers, and want to express my affection in the form of bringing in a box of donuts. And this is valuable not only because donuts taste good, but because it expresses my care. However, bringing donuts into the office is not intimate.⁹ So if the account is to avoid being absurdly wide, the kind of care or affection required must be more substantial.

⁹ There are variations on this case which could be intimate, however. If one of your coworker has confided in you that they love chocolate old-fashioned donuts because they used to get them with their beloved grandmother, then bringing in a chocolate-old fashioned for them could be an intimate act. But the adjustment to the case which makes it intimate is not

It is helpful here to look to what others have said about the emotional component of intimacy. Jeffrey Reiman, in “Privacy, Intimacy, and Personhood,” offers an account that seeks to capture the sort of feeling which must ‘animate’ intimacy. He says it consists of a “reciprocal desire to share present and future intense and important experiences” (Reiman 1976, 34). My bringing donuts is not motivated by a desire to share intense experiences with my coworkers. And so defining care this way could prevent an Inness-like account from being too wide.

However, this definition would preclude the existence of intimacy in the cases discussed above. In *Stranger on a Train*, Omar knows he’ll probably never see the stranger again, and is fine with that. In fact, the fleetingness of the encounter could be what makes it so intimate. Because they’re confident they’ll never see each other again, they don’t worry about the repercussions of what they reveal. And certainly at least some casual, one-time sexual encounters are intimate. So desiring *future* shared experiences is not necessary. Additionally, we can be motivated by a desire for shared future experiences to do non-intimate acts. If my partner is extremely annoyed by my leaving condiments slightly ajar, and I worry they might leave me over this, I can be motivated by a desire for a shared future to develop a habit of better closing lids. But closing the lids of condiments is not intimate. The reciprocity component will also leave out one-sided intimate disclosures, such as *Memoir*.¹⁰ So the future and reciprocity conditions must be eliminated.

What does that leave us with? Let’s try to shore up Inness’ Account with the pieces of Reiman’s account of care that remain. Might intimacy be that which is motivated by care, where care is ‘reciprocal desire to share present and future intense and important experiences’?

adding more care, but that it relies on some special knowledge about the coworker, the previous exposure of an intimate zone.

¹⁰ The reciprocity requirement also gives the verdict that pregnancy cannot be intimate, contrary to the experiences of many pregnant people, because fetuses can’t desire shared future experiences. We then could not ground the wrongness of forced pregnancy in its forced intimacy, as Maggie Little (1999) does.

Such a definition would still leave out most intimate labor, and many other intimate agreements. Because they would not continue to engage if Lisbeth were not paying Suzanne, neither of them is sufficiently motivated by a desire to share an intense experience with the other. This is also a problem for many familiar cases of personal intimate exchange. A person might agree to give their partner a massage only on the condition that they'll receive one in return. What's genuinely motivating them here is not the desire for a shared intense experience, but to get the knots out of their own neck. But exchanging massages with a partner does seem intimate.

To see why there is a problem with drawing a tight connection between intimacy and care, let us look to two final cases. Imagine that your sister has had a baby during the COVID-19 pandemic, but due to lockdowns you've been unable to meet him. You've been unable to form a relationship with him, unable to hold or feed him, unable to establish trust. But knowing that he is your sister's son, you can care deeply for him. This love could motivate you to do small things, like watch long videos of him sent by your sister. It could also motivate you to sacrifice significantly, to run into a burning building to save him. Love and care can be found where there is not intimacy, and intimacy can be found where there is not love, nor care.

And it is not only that there can be intimacy where there is no care, but even where there is malice and disregard. Torture illustrates this saliently. As David Sussman puts it, "the most intimate and private parts of a victim's life and body become publicly available tools for the torturer to exploit as he will . . . the victim is in a position of complete vulnerability and exposure" (2005, 7). One could, of course, deny that there is any intimacy in torture. But by recognizing it as intimate, we are better positioned to understand its great wrongness, wrongness that is not grounded in pain and fear alone.¹¹

¹¹ Though Sussman focuses on the wrong of one's agency being turned against oneself, of being made to be complicit in one's own violation, he gestures at the intimacy of this being an important wrong making feature of torture. He says "in the most intimate aspects of his agency, the sufferer is made to experience himself not just as a passive victim, but as an active accomplice in his own debasement" (2005, 23).

I believe we only understand the importance of our intimate rights when the intimacy of egregious violations, like torture and sexual assault, is recognized.¹² That these are acts of *forced intimacy* is part of what makes them such grave wrongs.

Inness is right that we can't look to particular act types to identify the intimate, but must instead look to psychological states. However, being motivated by care and affection is not the right state to look to. Rather, I will argue that we must instead look to Hiddenness and Importance to identify the intimate.

5.2 Intertwinement Account:

There is something very natural about thinking of intimacy as a kind of merging, a coming together, an intertwining. People often speak about romantic love this way, and romantic love is paradigmatically intimate. It is also apt to describe pregnancy this way. In "Abortion, Intimacy, and the Duty to Gestate," Maggie Little argues that forcing someone to carry a pregnancy is gravely wrong not just because of the health or financial risks imposed, but because forced intimacy is so violating (Little 1999). In highlighting the intimacy of pregnancy, she speaks of it as an "intertwinement." I think Little is right to emphasize the role of intimacy in justifying abortion rights. But for her argument to helpfully generalize to cover other intimate arenas, we must have a better understanding of the intimate. And understanding intimacy as 'intertwinement' will not work.

I live in a thin-walled apartment, and so there are many ways my life is intertwined with the lives of my neighbors. Some of these ways are intimate. I might overhear a couple's unsparing late

¹² Nitchovski astutely observes that Inness's account makes it hard to understand why abusive relationships count as intimate. However, while his own proposed alternative account of intimacy does a good job capturing both good intimacy and much of the bad, as well as intimate one-offs, it does not seem able to explain intimate violations. He argues that intimacy requires taking the 'intimate stance. As he puts it, "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?'" (iii, 2020). We very well may not treat those who violate us as if they are engaged in cooperative activity.

night arguments. But there are also non-intimate ways my life might be intertwined with theirs. Imagine that, because of faulty wiring, every time my neighbor turns on their air conditioner, my kitchen lights go out. Any time I'd like to cook a meal or eat a snack, I'll have to think about how hot it is outside, how hot they might be in their apartment, and decide if they're likely to be turning on their AC. They might think about typical meal times before they turn on their air conditioner. Our lives are intertwined, especially if we're both spending all day in our homes, but this is not a particularly intimate kind of intertwinement. For an intertwinement to be intimate, we must be intertwined in intimate ways. So while Little's notion of intertwinement is very helpful for understanding how intimate relationships work, to use it we must have a prior conception of the intimate parts of people and their lives. That is, we must know what intimate zones are.

And as I've argued, there can be intimacy without an intimate relationship, and Little's Account does not capture such cases. Someone can expose their intimate zones, and be made vulnerable, without there being any intertwinement. Though there is some mutuality between Omar and the stranger on the train because they laugh together and listen kindly, it is a stretch to describe this fleeting mutuality as 'intertwinement'. And there is even more obviously no 'intertwinement' between Roxanne Gay and the reader of her memoir. The reader might take some lessons from the book and apply them to their life, identify with Gay, and even find that the memoir changed them in ways that are perceptible years later. And so Gay could be woven into their life. But unless the reader reaches out and successfully makes significant contact with her, Gay will not weave them into her life. There is an intimate exposure without any intertwinement. So though intertwinement is helpful for understanding the richness of intimate relationships, even when it's filled out with prior understandings about intimate zones, intertwinement cannot capture all intimacy.

6. Hidden Importance Thesis

Now that I have argued that the Intimate Zones Account is better positioned to cohesively explain intimacy, and capture its scope so as to explain our intimate rights, I develop my particular theory of intimate zones. Though I hope to convince the reader this theory is right, someone could accept the Intimate Zones Account without thinking I have correctly circumscribed these zones. I will now argue that for a zone to be intimate, the Hiddenness Condition and the Importance Condition must be met. I call this the Hidden Importance Thesis (HI Thesis).

6.1 Hiddenness

The first condition is Hiddenness. That there is some connection between intimacy and hiddenness is intuitive. Prime examples of intimacy are secrets whispered under the cover of darkness and sex had behind closed doors. Intimate decisions are those made with a partner or doctor, those which we typically have a right to make away from prying eyes. There is a tension between something's being intimate and its being shouted from rooftops. But of course, sometimes the intimate *is* made public. A blackmailer might expose a secret, a woman might share her abortion story in a speech about the necessity of abortion access. So the tricky piece is not establishing that there is a Hiddenness Condition, but specifying it correctly.

Hiddenness Condition: A feature X of a person is Hidden if and only if the person is disposed to hide X, and would feel psychological discomfort at X's being exposed to a general audience.

It is not that intimate features must always be hidden, nor be hidden most of the time, nor around most people. Rather, we must be generally disposed to hide this feature of ourselves. This disposition can manifest in many ways. I might steer conversations away from this feature of myself.

I might avoid activities which will reveal this feature. Importantly, a disposition to *hide* a feature X is distinct from a disposition *not to mention* feature X. These dispositions will often come apart because of norms of politeness. Cindy might be happy to talk about an award she won if asked about it, but not be disposed to mention it without prompting because she does not wish to brag.

6.11 Hiddenness and the Individual

What we have a disposition to hide is different for different people. Imagine Malcom is embarrassed about his love of Pokémon. He hides his collection of Pokémon cards when casual friends visit his apartment, and when something reminds him of something that happened in an episode of Pokémon, he keeps it to himself. In contrast, Lexie is very open about her love of Pokémon. She has a Bulbasaur sticker on her laptop, and loves to tell people which Pokémon they remind her of. For Malcom loving Pokémon is a Hidden feature, while for Lexie it is not. This means Malcom and Lexie will have different intimate zones.

Because of this individuality, many kinds of ‘intimate labor’ do not actually reveal the intimate zones of all who participate in them. Sex will not be intimate for all those who do sex work, for instance. Importantly, however, this does mean we may not grant special protections to practices which, for biological or sociocultural reasons, will commonly be intimate. We can likewise legally protect ‘intimate rights’ even though these legal protections will not perfectly conform to everyone’s intimate zones.

6.12 Hiddenness, Culture, and Social Relationships

However, though what is Hidden is specific to an individual, it is influenced by our cultural and familial environments. Perhaps Malcom was teased by his middle school friends for liking Pokémon, while at Lexie’s school everyone played the card game at lunch. Lexie could be more

comfortable talking about Pokémon in professional contexts because she remembers the 2016 Democratic Presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, telling young people to “Pokemon GO to the polls.” It is not just our dispositions regarding revealing our hobbies which are affected by our cultural environments, of course. How much of our bodies we feel comfortable showing when we go to the grocery store and to the beach is affected by cultural norms. Whether we think it appropriate for a casual acquaintance to kiss us on the cheek, or give us a hug, or even shake our hand, will be affected by the culture(s) in which we are immersed.

This is not to say, however, that X is a Hidden feature if and only if X is typically hidden in our culture. Though our culture influences what about ourselves we hide, it is not the determinate influence, nor is it explanatory. We may be very open about something which most of our fellows hide. Most people in the contemporary United States are disposed to hide their nude bodies, and this is so culturally salient that we have the term ‘private parts.’ Despite this, some nudists have no disposition to hide their naked bodies. Though most nudists typically hide their naked bodies due to legal concerns, or knowledge that they won’t be hired if they show up naked to an interview, exposure does not make them feel the requisite psychological discomfort. This discomfort happens when we do not want others’ eyes or thoughts on this part of us. We are fearful not just of the downstream consequences of the exposure, but of the exposure itself.

It’s not that having some fear of the legal consequences of exposure means the feature of yourself is not Hidden. People who are disposed to hide their naked body because they think it private will also typically want to avoid the legal consequences of public nudity. Rather, for it to be intimate, they must be disposed to hide it *even if* they knew no legal trouble, economic recourse, or external consequences would ensue. To meet the Hiddenness Condition, we must adopt the internal point of

view in relation to the norm in question, and so be liable to feel shame about the norm-violating feature itself.¹³ We can then be altered not only via a rational choice to change ourselves, but via shame.

6.13 Hiddenness Through Time and Place

Our Hidden features need not be static. A bisexual man's coming out could make his sexual orientation a non-Hidden feature of himself. Where his bisexuality was once something he only talked about with his closest friends, as he becomes more inclined to mention that he is bisexual to acquaintances or hold his boyfriend's hand around town, this feature of himself becomes un-Hidden. This can also go the other direction. After an openly trans* teenager faces transphobic abuse from her family, she might decide to temporarily present as male again to avoid their derogatory comments, turning her gender into a Hidden feature of herself.

One might worry that the Hiddenness Condition will rule out public displays of our intimate features. That is, if we are sharing a feature X publicly, does that mean we are not disposed to hide X, entailing X is not intimate? This objection rests on a misunderstanding of what it means to be disposed to hide a feature of ourselves.¹⁴ Amy might be disposed to keep hidden the fact she was sexually assaulted. The incident was deeply harmful to her, she considers its details very personal, and it is painful to talk about. And yet, as the #MeToo movement unfolded, Amy came to believe that sharing her story would help change a culture which enables sexual assault. So, despite her discomfort, Amy shared her story on social media. Amy's sharing this despite discomfort does not mean this is not a Hidden feature of herself. Rather, the discomfort indicates it is a Hidden feature. Discomfort is common when we are disposed to keep something Hidden, and yet choose to reveal it. This is the "horror of exposure" Roxanne Gay identified in deciding to speak publicly about being sexually

¹³ I am here thinking of the internal point of view as described by H.L.A. Hart (1961).

¹⁴ Though there is significant disagreement about the nature of dispositions, there is wide agreement that being disposed to X under Y conditions does not require always Xing under Y. A glass, because of its fragility, is disposed to break when dropped even if it does not break many times it is dropped (Choi and Fara 2018).

assaulted. When we reveal something we are disposed to keep Hidden, it feels as if we are overcoming a desire not to share it, as if there is a psychological barrier we must surmount.

This does not mean that Amy's being sexually assaulted will always be a Hidden feature of her. Amy might be inspired to become an activist, to speak often about her sexual assault in order to effect policy change. After doing this for some time, she might come to feel comfortable with sharing. Her disposition to keep this feature Hidden could alter.

6.14 Hiding What?

A second concern one might have about the Hiddenness Condition is that it can't capture the intimacy of interacting with a person's public features in very familiar ways. For instance, though faces are very public, touching someone's face is usually an intimate gesture. If a person is not disposed to hide their face, how can we say someone's touching it exposes a hidden feature? This problem only arises when our features are carved up in sloppy ways. Though it is true that the look of our face is not hidden, the feel of our face is. We would be uncomfortable at the exposure of the feel of our face. And it is not only that we would be uncomfortable with someone being close enough to touch it, or feeling entitled to put their hands on us, though violations of these relationship-building norms explain part of the discomfort. We can know this because many of us would be uncomfortable if a scan was used to make a 3-D printed model of our face, which was then available for anyone to touch.

Likewise, though what our face looks like at some time T_1 might be public, what our face looks like through time is not. The public does not have access to the patterns of my facial expressions or physicality. A pattern can be hidden even though a single instance of my instantiating the pattern is not. Jenna's touching her eyebrows once might be public, but her pattern of rubbing them when stressed can remain hidden even so. That one of our features can be a pattern we engage in is a very important detail. A 70 year old man who doesn't much talk may still be known very intimately by a spouse who has seen his intimate features revealed through 50 years of daily patterns.

We also monitor our facial expressions more closely in public. Though my neutral expression might be public, my expression of intense anguish is not. I, like most people, feel deeply uncomfortable crying in public. When we describe features in adequate detail, we can see that it is too simple and too quick to declare the face to be un-Hidden.

There is, I grant, something strange about speaking of intimacy so informationally. It does feel a bit unnatural to describe the intimacy of having one's face touched as someone getting information about the feel of one's face. However, we often speak of intimacy in terms of special knowledge. We talk of "really knowing" someone. So though speaking of intimate information seems a bit awkward, it is not discontinuous to conceive of the foundations of intimacy this way.

6.15 The Insufficiency of Hiddenness

Meeting the Hiddenness Condition alone is not sufficient for intimacy. There are some features of ourselves which we are disposed to hide, which would make us uncomfortable if exposed, and yet are not intimate. How we cut our toe nails is usually one such feature. We are disposed not to cut our toenails in public, or even with friends. We would find it very uncomfortable should someone make public a secret recording of us cutting our toenails. However, for most of us, we do not think our toenail cutting technique reveals anything intensely personal about us. A secret recording of this would not be nearly as violating as a secret recording of us engaged in an intimate act, such as having sex or telling a secret to our partner. Acts like cutting our toenails, while being *private*, are not typically intimate. Seeing that intimacy and privacy come apart helps us see one way accounts of intimacy can go wrong. Features of ourselves that are Hidden, but not intimate, reveal the need for a second condition on intimate zones.

6.2 Importance

What this second condition should be is less obvious. We can begin our search from the case that revealed the Hiddenness Condition alone to be inadequate. We saw that though cutting one's toenails is something one is typically disposed to hide, there is something about this act that seems too trivial, too inconsequential, to play the role that intimacy place in our lives. And remembering that we are seeking to describe why intimate violations are so serious, it is natural to posit an Importance Condition. Figuring how to spell out this Importance Condition is the challenge. What features are so central to our lives, that they are in need of special protection? I posit that they are the ones which are related to how we see ourselves, which are related to our self-conception. This colors how we move in the world, and our ability to act autonomously (Oshana 2005), a central feature of personhood.

Importance Condition: A feature X of a person is Important if and only if they believe, fear, or worry X reveals a facet of their identity.

Important features are those we think make us who we are. This is a subjective condition. Our believing something to be an identity-related feature of ourselves is enough for it to be Important. This is not to say that we are always right about what features are part of our identity. Someone can be a racist even if they do not themselves think of themselves as a racist. A man's being a father could be an objectively important part of his identity even if he neglects his child and does not think his being a father defines him. We are not the sole authority on who we are. However, only aspects of our identity which we think are important can make us uniquely vulnerable in the way intimacy does.¹⁵

¹⁵ Because how we see ourselves is what is important for vulnerability, the account side-steps many worries about the nature of identity. Even if there is no fact of the matter about which parts of us are central (see Mogensen 2020), we are vulnerable merely when we think some parts of ourselves are central. This is true even of Mogensen, who does not believe there is a fact of the matter about which parts of him are central to his identity. The 'identity' concept I'm using here would instead match onto some concept such as 'personality' for him, and will still lead to vulnerability in the relevant manner.

Intimacy makes us uniquely vulnerable because it makes us liable to shame. Where emotions like guilt are felt about our actions, shame is felt about our person, our self (Lindsay-Hartz 1984; Niedenthal, Price Tangney, and Gavanski 1994). We feel shame about characteristics we believe, fear, or worry are tied to our selves, that might partially constitute who we are.

6.21 The Insufficiency of Importance, and Sufficiency of HI

The Importance Condition alone is not sufficient for intimacy. We believe many public features our ourselves reveal a facet of our identity. But though my being a philosopher is Important, it is not Hidden, and so it is not an intimate feature.

However, Hiddenness and Importance together are able to capture the cases Relationship-First Views could not. They explain why there is intimacy in *Dominatrix*, *Support Group*, *Stranger on a Train*, and *Memoir*. Someone’s sexual desires, their alcohol dependency, their fear of being alone in a new country, the assault which shaped their relationship to their body, these are all zones many will be disposed to hide, and will see as part of who they are. It is not only such obviously significant features that can be intimate zones. And the HI Thesis can explain this. A birthmark may come to take on outsized importance in a person’s psychology and sense of self, and be kept hidden. What one threw in the trash this week can even be an intimate zone. This sentiment is captured amusingly by comedic documentarian John Wilson when he muses about his trash removal: “on Tuesday and Friday every week, all the evidence of my shameful lifestyle is removed without any question.”¹⁶

6.22 Importance and the Body

Some might worry that the Importance Condition fails to capture the intimacy of the body. We often feel as if our bodies are very private. We go to the bathroom and groom ourselves behind closed doors. Some go to great lengths to hide their body’s “indecencies” from even romantic partners. Midge, in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, wakes up before her husband every morning and sneaks out of

¹⁶ This is from *How to With John Wilson*, “How to Throw out Your Batteries.”

bed to put on her makeup and do her hair, returning to bed before he wakes up so he never sees her bedhead or bare face. However, the way one excretes waste or how one's hair looks in the morning are not obviously Important features about one's self.

Though it is right that many of these particular bodily functions are not connected to our personality, having a body itself is an important feature about us. We live our lives as embodied creatures and this is tremendously connected to our identity, to our concerns. We feed ourselves multiple times a day, seek out bathrooms on extended trips away from our homes, fear disease, know others will make judgments about us based on the way we style our bodies, and know our existence will be over when our body dies. And so even if our bed head is not specifically an important part of us, it is a manifestation of something important about us: that we are embodied, that our bodies are unruly and can communicate things about us that we cannot control. And so any uncontrollable feature of our body can come to take on outsized importance in our self-conception.

Moreover, even if we don't consciously believe that some bodily feature reveals an important part of ourselves, we often worry it will be interpreted in such a way, and that perhaps such interpretations might be right. We might worry that our leg hair or smell after a run will make people think they've gotten insight into our personality, and have judged us to be fundamentally unhygienic or gross. We might, knowing stereotypes people apply to fat bodies, worry that people will think our fatness gives them insight into our personality traits; that they'll conclude we're lazy or uncaring. We worry that a cancer or IBS diagnosis could inspire some to think that we should have taken better care of ourselves, or are disgusting. We feel shame not only about what we believe is true, but what we fear or worry might be true about us. Therefore, it is unsurprising that bodily features often meet the Importance Condition, and are intimate.

6.23 Importance and Others' Beliefs

As comes through the discussion of the Importance of bodily features, other people's beliefs influence which of our features meet the Importance Condition. And through this mechanism, our culture and relationships influence which of our features are intimate.

Stigma and social oppression clearly affect what beliefs, worries, and fears we have. Stigma can make seemingly minor features of ourselves into something that, as Erving Goffman argues, 'spoils' our identity. Others see a stigmatized feature as connected to, and ruining in some way, our whole person. The characteristic takes on outsized social importance, and possessing it can mean we are "disqualified from full social acceptance" (Goffman 1963). When the people around us respond to a feature of our persons in such a way, it is nearly inevitable that it will meet the Importance Condition, at least sometimes. Even if we steel ourselves, and do not believe the feature negatively reflects on who we are, it is exceedingly difficult to never worry or fear that it does. And so for those of us with more stigmatized features, fear and worry will tend to play a bigger role in determining which features meet the Importance Condition.¹⁷

Others can also influence which features are Important in less socially systematic ways. So it is not only our broader culture, but individual relationships and interactions, that can alter our intimate zones. Imagine that you are having an online Zoom meeting from your home. Some of what is visible in your background does feel intimate, such as a piece of art a friend made you for. However, right as you're logging onto Zoom, your dog knocks a pile of clothes onto the floor. You are disposed to keep messes in your home Hidden, but don't have another room from which to work. The mess in the background is not itself intimate, at least initially, because you don't think it reveals something Important about you. After all, your dog just coincidentally knocked over the clothes and you had no

¹⁷ That stigmatized individuals are pushed into interpreting themselves through the lens society applies to their stigmatized identities is similar to what W.E.B Du Bois gets at with his notion of 'double-consciousness' (1903).

chance to clean it up. However, as the meeting drags on, you notice your colleague's eyes dart across the screen. It looks like they might have landed on the piles of clothes. You might initially be confident that they would be wrong in assuming that the mess reveals anything substantial about you. However, contemplating what they might be thinking could induce a change in you that makes the pile of clothes intimate. You could start to fear that it does reveal something about you, that you could have picked it up if only you had better time management, for instance. Our awareness of what others take to be important then, can affect what about us is important through this mechanism.¹⁸ And so our intimate zones are influenced by others through both the Hiddenness and Importance Conditions.

7. Difficult Cases and Intimate Wrongs

I am presenting the Intimate Zones Account, and the HI Thesis, as all-encompassing enough to capture all genuine intimacy, to protect all of our intimate rights. But there is some intimacy that might seem like it's unable to be captured by the account, where it's not obvious that any intimate zones are being revealed. These are cases in which something is paradigmatically shared only in intimate relationships, and yet doesn't seem especially revealing. If the intimate zones account couldn't make sense of why these cases seem intimate to us, this would be a reason to doubt it. In this section, I'll turn to the case of pet names.

Pet names are used as an example of "interpersonal intimacy" by Thi Nguyen and Matthew Strohl.¹⁹ They share that Nguyen and his spouse call each other by "odd pet names" (2019, 988). And there is something seemingly intimate about having a goofy pet name for someone. Though not confined to romantic contexts, we nearly invariably give pet names only to people we're very close with. A dear friend of mine calls me "Jamblies," a term she invented accidentally, when she misspoke

¹⁸ This is reminiscent of Charles Cooley's influential concept of the 'looking glass self' (1902). This is one mechanism by which others' imagined perceptions of us can influence our self.

¹⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to think about this case.

while meaning to affectionately insult my “rambley voice.” This pet name encapsulates so much of our friendship: our comfort and security and knowledge of each other, that I can poke fun at her tendency to misspeak and she can do the same at my tendency to prattle on. Can the Hidden Importance Thesis give us insight into the phenomenon of pet names, and why they strike us as so intimate? Let’s take a look at five cases. Only one showcases what I call an ‘intimate violation.’ Three showcase wrongs having to do with intimacy, wrongs that the account gives us the ingredients to make sense of.

1. Pet Name Alex calls their wife, Beatrice, “smooshie.” Alex calls her this in public, and Beatrice is comfortable with that.

It’s not obvious what could be Hidden here, given their public usage of the nickname. And it’s not obvious how ‘smooshie’, let alone more common pet names like ‘honey’, captures anything someone would see as related to their identity. So how might the HI Thesis make sense of the intimacy that seems to be here?

Alex might call Beatrice ‘smooshie’ because the term sounds soft and squishy, and they know a soft and squishy side of Beatrice. This side might be Important to Beatrice’s identity, and also Hidden from the general view. Because dubbing Beatrice ‘smooshie’ is the result of an intimate exposure of this softer side, giving her the nickname can be recognized as an intimate act.

7.1 Intimate Violation

2. Spying A stranger secretly puts a camera into Alex and Beatrice’s home, and witnesses the softer side of Beatrice that way. The stranger calls Beatrice “smooshie” next time they see her in town.

The spying is an intimate (violating) act because it (unwillingly, unwittingly) exposes Beatrice's intimate zones.. The Intimate Zones Account helps us identify exactly where the intimate rights-violations occur. It also allows us to distinguish this sort of case from nearby cases which, while sometimes wrong for other reasons, do not violate intimate rights. Let's take a look at three of them.

7.2 The Threat of Intimate Violation

3. Catcaller: Beatrice is walking alone at night. She is on the phone with Alex, who uses her nickname when they say goodbye. A man overhears. He wolf whistles and yells "Come say hello, smooshie!"

In Catcaller, the usage of the nickname isn't responsive to Beatrice's intimate features. Rather, because pet names are a common *marker* of intimacy, they can be used to pretend some intimacy already exists between the parties, communicate that intimacy is desired, or even to assert power. It is tempting to think that the wrong committed in Catcaller is an intimate one. But it is better to understand it as a *threat* of intimate wrongs. Alone at night, Beatrice might very well be afraid that the catcalling might escalate. Catcalling is sometimes succeeded by being followed down the street, or even sexual assault, and women are well-aware of this. Someone who catcalls a woman alone at night demonstrates that they either don't care if a woman is made afraid, or like causing that fear. This makes it eminently reasonable, and prudent for staying safe, to find them threatening. The threat of intimate violence is a grave wrong, and so we can strongly condemn this even though an 'intimate violation' does not occur. In parallel, the reasons physical violence is wrong make the

threat of physical violence wrong, but we wouldn't call a threat to hit someone an act of physical violence.

7.3 Undermining Intimacy

4. Crush: Alex develops a crush on a friend and starts to call her “smooshie”.

Beatrice overhears the nickname usage and is hurt.

Beatrice is wronged in Crush, but there is no violation of her *intimate rights*. It is our *own* intimate zones that make us uniquely vulnerable, and give rise to the special protection of intimate rights. Our intimate rights are rights *over ourselves*, not rights over how people behave with others. Alex would wrong Beatrice if he slept with someone else without Beatrice's consent. But she doesn't have an intimate right against him doing this, as she does have an intimate right to refuse to continue to have sex with him. Alex wrongs Beatrice, and does so in a way that has to do with intimacy. He takes a nickname that made her feel special and taints it. In doing so, he can undermine her trust in him. And as I argue in “Shame, Self-Shaping, and Intimate Rights” (redacted, manuscript), because intimacy makes us vulnerable, we typically only choose to expose our intimate zones when we trust, at least in the domain of exposure, those to whom we expose ourselves. So when Alex undermines Beatrice's trust, he's likely to undermine her comfort revealing her intimate zones, and thus undermine the continuing of their intimate relationship.

7.4 Undermining the Perception of Intimacy

5. Overstepping Friends: After overhearing Alex use the nickname, Alex and Beatrice friends' begin to call Beatrice “smooshie.” They occasionally persist even

after she reminds them she only likes it when Alex calls her that. The friends have not witnessed the softer side of Beatrice.

As Nguyen and Strohl put it when talking about what Nguyen shares with his wife: “Are their friends allowed to witness, use and transmit those pet names and that funny dance? There is no independently grounded fact of the matter; it simply depends on where the couple decides the boundary should be” (988). Beatrice’s asking her friends not to use the pet name makes it wrong for them to use it. But their usage isn’t wrong only because of the request to avoid it. Rather, their usage can also undermine the symbolism of the pet name. The non-intimate utterances can have a swamping effect on the intimate ones. Others might not realize that when Alex uses the pet name, it is different, and an intimate act. And so others’ perception of the intimacy shared between Alex and Beatrice can be undermined. And for Alex and Beatrice too, the association with intimate exposure might weaken. They might instead come to more heavily associate it with feelings of annoyance, as their friends overstep bounds, or even use it to make fun of the couple.

Though I’ve focused here on pet names, this pattern applies broadly. Many things that are shared paradigmatically in intimate relationships, from inside jokes to mannerisms to a couch, are not intrinsically intimate. But even when there is no revelation of anyone’s intimate zones, my Intimate Zones Account and exploration of how intimacy builds can help us better understand why they’re associated with intimacy, and why they can make people vulnerable to special sorts of harms.

8. Exposure and Vulnerability

Now that we can see how Hiddenness and Importance make for an intimate zone, let’s turn our attention to how these zones can make us vulnerable. Recall that I have defined an intimate act as “an act that exposes, or relies on the exposure of, at least one intimate zone.” And recall in “Support Group,” Valencia attends a meeting of Alcoholic Anonymous. Given that “Anonymous”

is in the name of the group, and members do not share their last names with each other to partially conceal their identities, in what sense are Valencia's intimate zones 'exposed'?²⁰ And what if Valencia introduced herself with a fake name, and wore a disguise to the meeting? Understanding why these count as exposures is helpful for seeing why intimate exposure makes us vulnerable, and thus why our intimate rights are so stringent.

Valencia's intimate zones can be exposed even if they are not revealed to be *Valencia's* intimate zones. In parallel, imagine that a tornado rips the wall off of Valencia's room, leaving the room visible to passersby. A passing stranger might be unaware the room belongs to her as they peer inside. Her room is exposed even though its being *her* room is not.

Recall that when we discussed Hiddenness and Importance, shame came up in relation to both conditions. And as I argue elsewhere (redacted, manuscript), shame can warp us. Though I don't have space here to fully develop and defend the view, I'll sketch it enough that the reader can see how shame could be the sort of thing to, in conjunction with Hiddenness and Importance, explain why intimate violations are so serious. Shame can subvert our rational decision making processes about how we'd like to change, instead making us feel so badly that we can become desperate to change the feature we see as responsible for the feeling. And shame about our intimate features, because they meet the Importance Condition, threatens to alter us not only in some incidental way, but along axes we see as important to who we are. I call this the 'shame-warping thesis'.

Even when we don't share our real name or show our face to someone, their reactions still have the power to induce shame in us. If Valencia shares her rock bottom moment in an AA meeting, and someone reacts with "you're a disgusting human being!", she might feel shame even if

²⁰ I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to explore what "exposure" requires, particular in light of this example.

she's wearing a disguise and introduced herself as 'Veronica'. Others' interactions with our intimate zones can be tremendously affecting even if they don't know who we are. We can be exposed and altered even when our name and face are concealed. As long as we feel others' eyes on our intimate features, we can have the psychological reactions characteristic of exposure.

9. Other Candidate Conditions

The reader might be suspicious that there is an additional condition (or conditions) necessary for a zone to be intimate. Though I cannot present a counterexample to every possible additional condition, there are two possibilities particularly worthy of address.

9.1 Positive Regard Condition:

Psychologists Karen Prager and Linda Roberts stipulate that intimate interactions require "positive involvement" which "precludes attacking, defensive, distancing, or alienating behavior" (2004, 45). Though Prager and Roberts reject a requirement of positive affect, this is reminiscent of Inness's Motivation Account. Does intimacy require, if not positive feelings, some kind of positive involvement? That is, should I also include a 'Positive Regard Condition'?

Intimate violations typically preclude positive involvement, and so an account of intimacy that is to capture them cannot have this condition. Sexual assault, reading someone's diary without consent, torture: the performances of these actions display a total lack of regard for the violated. The violated is not seen as a collaborator. The assault can certainly distancing and alienating. Yet they intimately expose the victim and leave them uniquely vulnerable, and this makes them gravely wrong. To add a Positive Regard Condition would undermine the goal of giving an account that can explain the unique significance of intimate violations.

To take an example that is less theoretically loaded, we can look to fights between loved ones. Surely a couple can have an intimate fight in which both parties become defensive. Someone might

even be prone to becoming defensive when their intimate zones are being discussed. Because our intimate zones are loci of vulnerability, it is unsurprising that discussion of them might breed defensiveness. However, though positive regard is not necessary for an act to be intimate, this does not mean it is unimportant to intimacy. Rather than characterizing *what* is intimate, positive regard tells us when intimacy goes *well*.

9.2 Entitlement Condition:

Though we are *disposed* to hide our intimate features, we are not always *entitled* to hide them. To see why someone might think there is an Entitlement Condition on intimate zones, consider the following case.

Karl the Kidnapper: Karl has kidnapped someone and is keeping them trapped in his basement. Unlike some other kidnapers who only worry about the legal consequences of their victims being discovered, he is very self-conscious about being a kidnapper, and so keeps it Hidden. Being a kidnapper is integral to Karl's self-conception, so having someone in his basement also meets the Importance Condition.

According to the Intimate Zones Account, Karl's having someone in his basement is intimate. This understandably will strike many as odd, and as reason to add an additional condition. Because kidnapping someone is obviously wrong, and keeping this fact hidden interferes with the victim's rescue, one is not entitled to hide this fact. That someone is trapped in one's basement is simply not the kind of thing one is allowed to keep to oneself. By adding that one must be entitled to keep a feature hidden for the feature to be intimate, such cases would be ruled out.

It is a bit awkward to call having a person in one's basement 'intimate information,' but that is in part because of the conversational implications of calling something 'intimate.' When you assert

that something is “intimate,” you’re often communicating “mind your own business.” And this would be clearly inappropriate to utter if someone was inquiring into your having a kidnapping victim. But that this would be an inappropriate conversational move does not mean that the fact isn’t intimate.

Similarly, we have an obligation to reveal a shameful secret if a villain will otherwise murder a crowd. And there are many non-fictional examples of our being obligated to reveal intimate features. Though we are *prima facie* entitled to hide our health conditions, there are some jobs which legally and morally obligate us to disclose them, such as being a commercial airline pilot. That they are intimate, even though we must disclose them, explains why such disclosure requirements can be so discomfoting. Leaving off an Entitlement Condition helps us see that requiring such employment disclosures makes people vulnerable, and is a *pro tanto* wrong. It is more accurate to see that this vulnerability is outweighed by other considerations, rather than to think that there is nothing to outweigh.

Finally, adding an Entitlement Condition passes the buck. Rather than our intimate features being loci of vulnerability because of our psychology, and this vulnerability grounding our intimate rights, the story would be much less informative. To say we have intimate rights *because* we are entitled to keep our intimate zones hidden would leave us wondering: but why are we entitled to keep these features hidden? Rather than claiming that we are entitled to keep the intimate hidden, we should seek to understand *why* the nature of our intimate features make us vulnerable, and so typically entitled to control them.

10. The Objection from Self-Centeredness

There is something a little strange, I grant, about building intimacy up from exposure of the self. This concern is helpfully developed by Candace Vogler. In “Sex and Talk,” she states that her purpose is “not to argue against the thought that intimacy is sometimes a matter of reciprocal self-

expression and self-scrutiny . . . but to contend, first, that not all intimacies are affairs of the self” (1998, 328-9). Vogler parodies Nozick’s views about the self-expressive nature of intimacy. She quips that “Nozickian romance is made of autobiographies” (1998, 361). Such an intimate encounter is quite silly to imagine: each party listing facts about themselves and their history. However, our intimate zones are not revealed only by our listing facts. Someone’s shyness, for instance, tends to be revealed by their seldom speaking rather than by an utterance of “I am shy.” Our self is often revealed through our actions and patterns. And so our selves are often revealed more naturally, and not solely by awkward listings of biographical facts.

But there is something deeper to this line of criticism. It is not only that autobiographical revelations would be comedic and strange, but that there is something morally objectionable about approaching intimate interactions this way. It seems too self-centered. It seems to risk encouraging what Mark Johnston calls the ‘pornographic attitude’ in our intimate interactions. Johnston defines the ‘pornographic attitude’ as “the change of attentive focus from the appeal of other things and other people to their agreeable effect on us” (2001, 201). It’s right that there is something morally troubling about exclusively focusing on ourselves during intimate exchanges. But this again tells us about how to do intimacy *well*, not what intimacy *is*. Though intimacy reveals our intimate zones, we should not spend all our time being intimate with others thinking about our own zones. Not only does this take us out of the moment, but it can distract us to the point we don’t give uptake to the intimate exposures of others. This disrupts intimacy building. Deeply intimate relationships require two people get to know each other’s intimate zones, not solely spout off about their own.

12. Conclusion

In this paper, I have developed the landscape of possible views about intimacy. It is my hope that adding this structure will make investigations into intimacy easier, more fruitful, and more

common. Whether or not the reader is persuaded by the Intimate Zones Account, I hope the reader is persuaded that we think clearly and systematically about intimacy, and that it requires our attention.

Intimacy is powerful. It's vital for human flourishing. It can be powerfully transformative or deeply violating. But without a philosophical account of intimacy's nature, how this is possible is obscured. That intimacy makes us vulnerable helps us understand this valence. Being vulnerable to others is required if they are to really know us, if we are to build loving relationships. But being vulnerable to others also risks the worst sorts of abuses. Not only might we be subject to violence, or to our secrets being used to exploit us, but we also risk others' judgments about the deepest and most sensitive parts of ourselves wriggling their way into our heads.

Relationship-First Accounts describe something important. They tell us about some kinds of intimate relationships, close and loving ones. And they do give us important insight into why these are worthy of protection. However, there is intimacy outside of such relationships, and we need to understand the full nature of intimacy if we are going to understand how it makes us vulnerable and what policies are appropriate to govern intimate interactions in our personal and professional lives. What is so deserving of protection in loving relationships can be found elsewhere, and must be protected there as well. The Intimate Zones Account lets us see this. Intimacy, whether in loving relationships or in encounters between strangers, reveals Hidden and Important features of persons.

It is my conviction that the Intimate Zones Account can explain the stringency of our intimate rights, and settle disputes about their scope. Perhaps, I grant, I have been too ambitious in claiming that it is a complete theory of intimacy, that intimate zones are at bottom of it all. Maybe my conception of intimacy is so far from our everyday conception that it is only fit to be called intimacy*. Whether the Intimate Zones Account describes intimacy or intimacy* does not matter as much to me as its being helpful for understanding and protecting our rights.

Intimacy lets others deeply know us, and so makes us vulnerable to being shaped by them. Given this, we must have control over how and when we reveal our intimate zones, and not just with whom we are in loving relationships. This ought to guide us in our investigations not only of abortion, surrogacy, and sex work, but also of therapy, teaching, and art. Intimacy's importance has been gestured at in many of these arenas, but a theory of intimacy in hand can help us make new progress with them.

Intimacy is very risky. But many tremendously rewarding activities are risky. It would be a grave mistake to always run from such risks, or to prohibit others from accepting them. But these risks must guide us in our pursuits. And we must remember that others can reasonably weight these risks and their rewards differently from us. In such deeply personal and risky matters, we must abide by others' decisions about their boundaries.

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