

# Trusting Relationships and the Ethics of Interpersonal Action

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*Abstract:* Trust has generally been understood as an intentional mental phenomenon that one party (the truster) has towards another party (the trusted) with respect to some object of value for the truster. In the landmark work of Annette Baier, this trust is described as a three-place predicate: A entrusts B with the care of C, such that B has discretionary powers in caring for C. In this paper we propose that, within the context of thick interpersonal relationships, trust manifests in a different way: as a property of the relationship itself. We argue that this conceptualization has important implications for the debate over the ethics of interpersonal interventions. In particular, when trust is understood in this way, actions that would otherwise be deemed morally troubling may be permissible, or even morally desirable, on account of their role in strengthening trusting relationships.

*Keywords:* trust, interpersonal relations, Annette Baier, consent, maternalism

## I. Introduction

Contemporary philosophical work on trust is still in its relative youth. Annette Baier's "Trust and Antitrust" (1986), the landmark paper in this area, is only thirty years old. While many philosophers have taken up Baier's call to attend to the morality of trust relationships, Baier's account remains among the most influential and has substantially shaped the debate's development. Trust, on Baier's view, is an intentional, unidirectional mental phenomenon with respect to some object of interest or value. It is thus conceptualized as a three-place predicate: A entrusts B with care of C, thereby giving B some discretionary powers over caring for C (Baier 1986: 240).

In this paper, we challenge this dominant view's applicability for a specific form of trust. Baier contends that "we obviously need to distinguish different forms of trust, and to look for some morally relevant features they may possess" (1986: 232).<sup>1</sup> We agree, and take up the tasks, first, of conceptualizing the form of trust found within "thick" interpersonal relationships (Hardin 2002; Tsai 2016) and, second, of explaining how the "morally relevant features" of this form of trust alter commonly-held views on the ethics of interpersonal action, that is, on which actions taken on behalf of another are morally troubling. To clarify the contours of our site of investigation, the property of thickness is here intended to capture ongoing relationships in which parties have a certain shared history.<sup>2</sup> As a result, this category most often will refer to committed romantic relationships, close friendships, familial relationships such as that between a parent and his/her (adult) child, and so on (Tsai 2016: 2). Nonetheless, on our view, it can in principle also apply within professional contexts, such as physician-patient relationships, so long as the relevant relational conditions are met.

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<sup>1</sup> There has been philosophical work on different forms of trust, such as trust in government, institutional trust, and self-trust, though the "dominant paradigm is interpersonal" (Macleod 2015). Rather than interpersonal trust being a singular category, we suggest that it is comprised of distinct interpersonal forms. We focus our attention in this paper on one such form. This differs from the approach taken by some others, for whom the measure of the success of their view is how well "it can account for the similarities and differences between [the various] interpersonal trust relations" (Jones 1996: 5; see also Hardin 2002 on this being a virtue of his *encapsulated-interest* conception).

<sup>2</sup> For simplicity's sake, we focus on two-party relationships. We recognize that there may be separate questions relating to thick relational groups (e.g., families), but leave consideration of such questions aside in this paper.

Within these kinds of relationships, we propose that trust is better understood as a *property of the relationship* itself than as an attitude that one party has towards another (with respect to some specific good). Just as we would not characterize a “good relationship” by referring to the attitudes or intentions that either party has for the other, so should we refrain from describing trusting relationships in terms of the trust that one party has in another.<sup>3</sup> In these types of relationships, trust is part of the relational environment and cannot be reduced. This has implications for the types of acts that can enrich and damage the trusting nature of the relationship. We further propose that when trust is understood in this way, consent, often thought of as a “ritual of trust” (Wolpe 1998: 48, quoted in O’Neill 2002: 19), can in fact undermine the trusting nature of the relationship.

Our discussion is comprised of four parts. First, we outline Baier’s account of trust in more detail and consider others that have emerged from it (section II). Second, we highlight how Baier herself seems concerned with the types of relationships we describe, and we explain how this creates a tension within her argument (section III). Third, we argue that another form of trust – trust as part of the “relational ecology” of a relationship – can resolve this tension by offering a further conceptualization by which to understand the meaning of trust (also in section III).<sup>4</sup> Finally, we contend that certain acts that would be judged impermissible within the context of other relationships can be permissible within the context of the thick relationships we focus on, and we explicate this difference through the example of consent (section IV). We conclude that the relational ecology model that we propose makes headway towards Baier’s own mission of accounting for trust within a complete moral philosophy (section V).

## II. Conceptualizing Trust

Drawing on Annette Baier’s seminal article, the debate on trust has thus far been concerned primarily with distinguishing trust from mere reliance, even while taking reliance to be a central feature of trust. For Baier, trust is a species of reliance, since A’s trusting B means that A depends (or relies) on B’s good will toward her regarding a particular thing that A cares about. Trust involves *entrusting* a valued thing to someone else, that is, “letting other persons [...] take care of something the truster cares about, where such “caring for” involves some exercise of discretionary power” (Baier 1986: 240). Thus, a key feature of this account is that if I trust you, I trust you to *do* something in particular: my trust does not cover our relationship in general, but is relative to some other thing (your discretionary power is not overarching, but limited). Yet trust is distinct from reliance in an important way: trust is reliance on another’s “good will towards one, as distinct from their dependable habits” (1986: 234). I may rely on others’ consistency, but if I trust you, my (reasonable) trust is based on a certain measure of confidence that you will consider, or care about, my interests with respect to a certain matter enough to try to secure them.

In some respects, this model is not surprising given that Baier’s starting point is social cooperation and trust’s enabling of the cooperative relationships through which certain goods are realized. Baier’s examples are notable: trust between opposing sides in war; trust between strangers when asking for directions; trust in mailmen, grocers, and day-care providers (1986: 234). Her most intimate example is somewhat surprising – an infant’s trust in his or her parent (1986: 240-244). Her principal aim in using infant trust as an extended example is to

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<sup>3</sup> Note that we use the gerund phrase “trusting relationships” in our argument, rather than the more commonly used term “trust relationships” (though we do use this latter term when explicating the accounts of others in so far as they employ this term). We discuss this terminological issue in greater detail below (section III).

<sup>4</sup> Our adoption of the language of “ecology” is informed in part by Susan Hurley’s work on public ecologies (2011), though we apply it to the interpersonal, rather than the public domain. As discussed below, it also fits with part of the language used by Baier.

critique received contractarian accounts of trust. She emphasizes that the Lockean view on trust and cooperation, whereby trust is conceptualized as a kind of contract similar to a promise, is rejected for its being “a poor model for swathes of moral life, in which we cooperate with and care for each other” (Faulkner and Simpson 2017: 1-2). Baier exposes the historical reasons for this contractual bias within philosophical work on trust and rejects the “self-assertive individualism” present within the “fairly cool”, chosen relationships between free persons of roughly equal power and capacities – the main social experience of the male philosophers who proffered this view – as the basis for an ethics of trust (1986: 249). Even within male experience, Baier notes that this account fails to capture or describe how cooperation and care manifest for “lovers, husbands, fathers, the ill, the very young, and the elderly” (1986: 248). Baier herself is especially interested in trust relationships where there is inequality in power between the parties (hence the interest in parent-child relations, which necessarily have this feature), although she acknowledges that “a complete moral philosophy would tell us how and why we should act and feel towards others in relationships of shifting and varying power asymmetry and shifting and varying intimacy” (Baier 1986: 252).

In reflecting on Baier’s examples and on the focus of the philosophical debate thus far, we are struck that much of the discussion has maintained Baier’s initial focus on trust as a species of reliance. Karen Jones, for instance, offers a similar view in which trust is “an attitude of optimism that the good will and competence of another will extend to cover the domain of our interaction with her” (1996: 4). Importantly, Jones adds to this reliance condition an expectation condition, specifically, the *expectation* on the part of the truster that the trusted party will be “directly and favorably moved by the thought that someone is counting on her” (1996: 8). This is now a key part of the standard theory, such that trust is generally taken to differ from reliance in so far as the former, but not the latter, involves the expectation that the trusted party will see the truster’s dependence *as a reason* to do what the truster expects (McGeer and Pettit 2017: 15; see, also, the Darwall, Jones, Faulkner, and Stern chapters in Faulkner and Simpson 2017).

While we find this debate valuable, we question whether it satisfactorily accounts for all relationships, particularly vis-à-vis the diversity implied by Baier’s language of “shifting and varying intimacy”. We acknowledge that such accounts aim to set out a general theory of trust, but contest the success of this by questioning whether they are able to capture the special character of trust within thick trusting relationships of the kinds we describe above. It does not seem correct to say of such relationships that one party (say, a wife) trusts the other (say, her husband) because she “depends” on his good will towards her when using his “discretionary powers” in taking care of some thing (or set of things) she values, and because she expects he will be moved to act in this caretaker role by the thought that she is “counting on him” to do so. This conceptualization displays both an *individualism* and *unidirectionality* that seems not to capture accurately the way in which these persons relate to one another. The discussion is framed in terms of what it means for A to trust B, rather than what it means for A and B to be in a trusting relationship in which both parties generally feel comfortable about trusting the other, and in which both parties generally act in ways that are supportive of the other persons, as well as their shared ends.

Unlike the dominant account, the trust we are interested in here is not directed toward a specific good that either member of the relationship has discretionary power over, but rather it is a general feature of the relationship that is tested and is either proven or refuted by particular acts within that relationship. We describe trust as a feature of relationships in more detail in the next section, before suggesting in section IV that these particular acts

themselves, when successful, can actually reinforce the trusting nature of a given relationship – even if they are acts that would be deemed unethical within a different relationship model.<sup>5</sup>

### III. From Trust as Reliance to Trust as Relational Ecology

Baier's discussion of the moral dimensions of trust relationships followed a period of attention on trust from a range of disciplines: political science research on the role of trust in cooperation within prisoner's dilemma-type games (e.g., Held 1968, Axelrod 1980), related experimental psychology research into human behaviour in such games (e.g., Tedeschi et al. 1969), as well as sustained inquiry into trust as a sociological topic (Luhmann 1979, Barber 1983). It is interesting to note that the philosophical discussion has taken its lead more from the political and psychological, than the sociological, work: in this context, trust is studied from the point of view of an individual, as an intentional mental phenomenon, where it is assumed that "there are subtle reasons for an individualistic pragmatist to be optimistic about the other person's responsiveness", as has been shown to be the case in the prisoner's dilemma (Axelrod 1980: 3).<sup>6</sup>

*Contra* this individualist philosophical orientation, we suggest that there are important insights from the sociological perspective that are relevant when thinking about the nature of trust in intimate relationships. On sociological views, trust is "a property of *collective* units (ongoing dyads, groups, collectivities), not of isolated individuals"; in other words, it is taken to be "applicable to the relations among people rather than to their psychological states taken individually" (Lewis and Weigert 1985: 968; emphasis in original). This perspective has not been completely neglected within philosophical work on trust: some philosophers and political theorists have engaged with questions regarding *public trust* in governments (Hardin 2006) and in certain institutions and professions, such as the medical profession (O'Neill 2002). But this is rather different from the idea of interpersonal trust as a property of "ongoing dyads", which is our focus here.<sup>7</sup>

What is interesting from the perspective of the development of the philosophical debate is that we can see a similar tension – individualistic versus collective – if we return to Baier's argument. Her article opens with a reference to Sissela Bok's description of trust as an "atmosphere", and proceeds to extend the ecological metaphor by speaking of "climates of trust" (1986: 232). There is a disconnect, however, between this language and the account of trust she goes on to defend; in short, they refer to different levels of relations. The notion of "climates of trust" relates, in Baier's discussion, to "society-wide phenomena" (1986: 258), that is, to the third-personal attitudes relevant in the questions about public trust mentioned above. By contrast, the account she develops is individualistic (or first-personal): trust is conceptualized as one party entrusting another with something they value. A question that arises, for readers and indeed for Baier herself, is whether this account is "sufficiently liberated from contractarian prejudices", and specifically the "individualist limitations" of

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<sup>5</sup> The question of *trustworthiness* is a central feature of the dominant account of trust that we seek to supplement here. However, as "trustworthiness" raises questions concerning the merit of conferring *unidirectional* trust (trustworthiness directly relates to whether it is reasonable to depend or rely on a trustee's good will), and not concerning the trusting nature of a given relationship, we do not take up the issue of trustworthiness here.

<sup>6</sup> This quotation highlights terminological, as well as deeper conceptual, similarities with respect to work in politics and the ensuing philosophical discussion. As we saw above, on Jones' account trust has two parts: first, an "attitude of optimism" and, second, an expectation that the other person will be responsive to your dependence, which McGeer and Pettit call "trust-responsiveness" (2017: 16).

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that similar proposals have not cropped up elsewhere in philosophy. Marilyn Friedman, for instance, notes Jurgen Habermas's distinction between monological and dialogical approaches to ethics, where monological approaches describe a "discipline of thought that may be practiced by an individual moral reasoner in isolation" (Friedman 1993: 17). While Friedman defends the significance of dialogue in arriving at impartial moral perspectives, here we are interested in how trust within thick relationships may be different from trust that is "monologically" construed.

contract-based views (Baier 1986: 258), even despite its anti-contractarian ambitions.<sup>8</sup> This is a product, at least in part, of Baier's particular interest in relationships of unequal power; while important, this predetermines the argument as one focused on reliance and dependency, which plays a role in constraining it along individualist lines.<sup>9</sup>

This tension between individualistic and more sociological perspectives is a productive one, and we acknowledge Baier's efforts to capture various elements of the truth about trust. We contend, however, that this tension need not apply within thick interpersonal relationships. In bridging the two sides, and bringing the idea of an "atmosphere" of trust down to the interpersonal level, we can gain insight into the particular nature of trusting relationships between intimates. It seems not only plausible, but intuitive that there are "climates of trust" at the interpersonal level too, and that it is part of what it means to be in a healthy, ongoing relationship that both parties are involved in the work of maintaining this relational atmosphere of trust.

Indeed, when considering relationships between intimates and other well-acquainted individuals who recognize each other as equals, it strikes us as odd to characterize their trusting relationships in terms of reliance and dependence. Although this view is often expressed in a unidirectional way, the same charge holds for mutual or bidirectional characterizations, i.e., that A relies on B and has the expectation that B is trust-responsive, *and vice versa*. Rather than attaching to certain mental states in A and/or B, trust is more accurately conceptualized as a property of the relationship *between* A and B. In the framework offered by Lewis and Weigert cited above, it is "applicable to the relations [between A and B] rather than to [A's and/or B's] psychological states taken individually". It grows as a function of their *interdependence*, rather than their (mutual) dependence. Further, while it is certainly true to say that within intimate relationships both parties depend on each other, this is certainly not the basis of their trust (indeed, there is an extensive psychological literature on the dangers of co-dependency).<sup>10</sup> Instead, trust within relationships of this kind grows as the environment of shared experiences between the two of them grows thicker – the more they know about each other, and the more they display and confirm this knowledge through mutual (often mundane) acts of care and concern, the stronger the felt trust within their relationship.

There is a seemingly small terminological issue that, we think, highlights a rather key difference in this regard. Some theorists of trust, such as Baier, refer to "trust relationships" – a general term that captures the idea of a relation of trust, where A and B could be strangers just as easily as intimates. In contrast, we use the term "trusting relationships", because this captures the notion that the relationship itself is one characterized by trust. We propose that a trusting relationship has a number of defining features. First, it is one in which there is mutual understanding, either through a shared personal history or a shared cultural or social background. Second, a trusting relationship is one in which there is mutual concern, i.e., that individuals take up each other's ends as ends in which they themselves have an interest.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Baier also acknowledges that the entrusting account is unable to capture the truth in the idea that we only trust someone *with something* if we first trust them, that is, if we are already in a trusting relationship with them (1986: 258-259).

<sup>9</sup> Our point is not that relations in which trust is (correctly) understood as a species of reliance are insignificant relationships, nor that trust within the context of these relationships does not matter. Rather, we propose that trust within such relationships is just one way in which trust can manifest; between intimate equals, trust is a different sort of thing.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example: <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/co-dependency>.

<sup>11</sup> There is a sense in which this is similar to Russell Hardin's conception of trust as "encapsulated interest". This view states that: "I trust you because I think that it is in your interest to take my interests in the relevant matter seriously in the following sense: You value the continuation of our relationship, and you therefore have your own interests in taking my interests into account" (2002: 1). Hardin argues that this account applies to three

Indeed, at a high level of intimacy ownership of ends becomes blurred, as the ends of the individual become the ends of the couple or pair.

In the next section, we further explore the meaning of a relational environment of trust through an examination of how some actions deemed impermissible within the context of other types of relationships are not only permissible within trusting relationships, but in some cases can serve to reinforce the trusting environment itself.

#### IV. Ethical Dynamics of Interpersonal Action in Trusting Relationships

In earlier work, we have argued that when autonomy is conceptualized *relationally* (cf. Mackenzie and Stojlar 2000), a novel conceptual and normative space comes into sight vis-à-vis interpersonal action (Specker Sullivan and Niker 2017). Specifically, the act of making a decision for another person in their best interests and without their consent need not be conceptualized as a case of paternalism; when certain relational conditions are met, namely trust and understanding, such acts fall instead into the category of *maternalism* (Specker Sullivan 2016). Our arguments in this paper do not rely on our earlier arguments about maternalism, and we explain this concept in more detail below. Nonetheless, if successful, the arguments presented here would serve further to develop the philosophical underpinnings of maternalism as a distinctive conceptual framework for assessing ethical issues in certain kinds of interpersonal action and decision-making.

Our point of departure here is the observation that in some types of relationships, consent can actually *undermine* trust as a feature of that relationship. In other words, where there is an environment of trust, a requirement of consent can compromise that trust, because it implies that mutual understanding and mutual reliance are not present. This is in contrast to Baier, who incorporates consent into her definition of trust: for example, when she speaks of trust as the truster “letting” another take care of something she cares about and in so doing giving the trusted some “discretionary power” over how to care for it (1986: 240). As Stephen Darwall points out, this language indicates consent: “to *let* someone take care of something is, *inter alia*, to consent to his doing so” (2017: 39).<sup>12</sup> Thus, it can be argued that consent is doing the normative work here: through my consent, I give you discretionary power over some sphere of action in which it otherwise would have been impermissible for you to act, on account of its being within my legitimate domain of control. Yet this overly individualistic view does not capture the relationality of trust described above. Baier proposes

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distinct categories of interactions: iterated one-way trust game interactions, iterated exchange interactions as modelled by the prisoner’s dilemma, as well as the interactions in thick relationships that interest us here (2002: 3). It is true, in one sense, that part of the motivation for trustworthiness within thick relationships is that each person has an “interest” in the continuation of the relationship. Our close relationships with our family, friends, and partners are among the most valued things in our lives, and so their healthy maintenance and growth is often a central part of our lives going well. We do not think, however, that the trust (and trustworthiness) in these relationships can be explained, ultimately, by the self-interest of each of the parties. Hardin, who approaches the topic of trust from the game-theoretical perspective in political science, is clear that his account views trust as “essentially rational expectations about the self-interested behavior of the trusted” (2002: 6). So, despite making the important point that trust is relational and is “commonly to be explained by relational considerations” (2002: 26), Hardin’s conception of trust is relational in a trivial sense – it depends on the existence of a relationship (2002: 3) – but trust itself is still viewed as unidirectional and individualistic. As we have argued in this section, we are focused on trust as itself a quality of a relationship, which makes the claim about the relationality of trust more robust.

<sup>12</sup> A feature of entrusting shared with contracts is *explicitness*; on this point Baier makes clear that her entrusting model is meant to be compatible with the fact that “trusting is rarely begun by making up one’s mind to trust, and often it has no definite initiation of any sort but grows up slowly and imperceptibly” (1986: 240).

that with some sorts of enemies, “a contract may be too intimate a relation” (1986: 259). We propose the opposite: with some kinds of intimates, consent may be too *foreign* a relation.<sup>13</sup>

For example, let us consider the day-to-day life of a given couple. Baier herself considers couples, but her analysis is restricted to the care of children between an “old-style father” and an “old-style mother” (1986:253). Yet, what of the new style couple? Surely, there is equality here, but it is not the “fairly cool” equality between independent men that Baier identifies. Rather, it is the rich and deep equality between interdependent persons. Take a couple, Susan and Cathy, who have been together for seven years. Susan is a busy lawyer and Cathy is a professor. Susan’s work life is hectic; most days, she leaves early for the office and returns home fairly late. Cathy has much more flexibility in her job – she teaches three days a week, and has many meetings to attend and students to supervise, but there is no set time that she must be at the office. Naturally, Cathy has taken over many of the household tasks that must be done day-to-day – cooking, washing dishes, and so on. Susan has less time at home for these tasks but devotes a weekend day to tasks – laundry, grocery shopping, and meal planning. This division of household work has been arrived at largely without discussion, and has arisen naturally from each person’s schedule and predilections. It would be strange to say that Cathy depends on Susan to accomplish these tasks or that Susan depends on Cathy; neither relies on the other but they have reached an agreeable and mutually beneficial homeostasis. This separation of chores, while seemingly inconsequential in the grand scheme of their relationship, is in fact quite important to their relationship’s relational ecology. The more stable their balance of habits, the more security they feel, and the deeper the trust within their relationship.

Now, let us imagine that something unexpected occurs to throw off this balance. Susan trips on the stone steps outside of a courthouse and breaks one of the small bones on the top of her foot. Recovery will be painful, and she is forced to remain home for two weeks before she can use a walking cast. For those two weeks, Cathy takes on the bulk of the household chores, grocery shopping, doing laundry, and meal planning in addition to her other responsibilities. Susan begins to feel bad that Cathy is so busy – it is the end of the semester, and Cathy is overwhelmed with grading and meeting with anxious students. Susan begins to weigh her options, and she comes up with two: she can either subscribe to a meal delivery service for the next few weeks while her foot heals, thus removing a significant burden from Cathy, or she can book a vacation for when her foot is healed and the semester is over. Money is tight, though, and she cannot choose both. She would like to surprise Cathy with her choice. How does she decide what to do?

We contend that, while this decision is seemingly mundane, Susan’s choice will be significant for the relational ecology in her relationship with Cathy, and in particular the level of trust that they share. She must decide not only what both of them prefer, but what will be best for their relationship going forward. For instance, she might decide to go ahead with the meal delivery service. If she has been right in reading the relational signs, some of which may be that Cathy is overburdened with the additional food preparation-related chores, and as a result their evening conversations have been tense and strained, then this decision will enrich their mutual trust – Cathy will feel that Susan knows her well and cares for her, and Susan will have the accuracy of her knowledge about Cathy and her ability to care confirmed.

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<sup>13</sup> Darwall’s recent account of trust as a “second personal attitude of the heart” makes a similar point. Darwall argues that unlike many second-personal attitudes, trust is *non-deontic*. Like promise, consent is a normative power that is linked with deontic or juridical attitudes. A trusting relationship, by contrast, is a “kind of personal relationship in which truster and trusted make themselves vulnerable to one another *personally* rather than juridically” (2017: 46). This parallels our argument here. Yet we believe that in identifying trust as an individual attitude, even if that attitude is *reciprocating* (2017: 41-42), it is still the attitude of an individual and not the quality of a relationship, which is what we wish to highlight.

However, suppose that Cathy enjoys the opportunity to cook and care for Susan while she is sick, and has been motivated to spend more time at home preparing food for Susan – in this case, Cathy might feel that Susan does not really know her all that well and resents that they are spending so much time together, and Susan might feel that she does not really know Cathy as well as she thought.

The intertwining of these two aspects of Susan and Cathy – their knowledge of and care for each other – together comprise the trusting nature of their relationship. Yet these are not the sole determinants of the degree of trust in the relationship. Rather, as Susan’s decision about how to move forward is meant to show, particular acts and decisions within the relationship can themselves *make manifest* that trust and thus *reinforce* it, or they can *undermine* that trust and thus *damage* it. The success or failure of these acts and decisions are difficult to predetermine, and so they are themselves risky. Yet the benefits to the trusting relationship of such acts, if successful, are often worth the risks. And, if these acts were *not* risky, they would not be nearly as significant.

The example above is relatively mundane – it is not necessarily a decision of major consequence in the life of Susan and Cathy. To better understand the point, let us consider a situation that is a bit more serious. Let us suppose that instead of tripping and breaking her foot, Susan experiences sudden abdominal pain one morning before she has left for work. Concerned, Cathy makes a doctor appointment for Susan, as she knows that Susan will not do so for herself, and she forwards the information to Susan. Susan, understanding that the appointment reflects Cathy’s concern, and a bit relieved that she did not have to take the initiative herself, goes to the appointment. At the appointment, a mass is found in Susan’s ovary – it is a large cyst, likely benign, but it needs to be removed. After the surgery, while Susan is still under the influence of anaesthesia, the doctors tell Cathy that the mass looked more worrisome than initially supposed, and that they will be in touch once the results are confirmed. Once Susan wakes up, Cathy does not tell Susan about her discussion with the physicians. She knows that Susan is taxed from the surgery, and needs her energy to recover. When it turns out that the mass is indeed benign, Cathy is relieved, and tells Susan what the doctors had said when she was asleep. Here, Susan might respond in one of two ways. She might be incensed that Cathy has hidden this information from her; alternatively, she could be grateful that Cathy knew not to make her anxious when it was unnecessary. Importantly, Cathy has acted without Susan’s consent twice: she made her an appointment with her physician and she withheld medical information from her.

On face value, these are *paternalistic* acts – they are decisions made without consulting Susan and ostensibly in her best interests. Yet we suggest that these acts, especially the latter one, diverge from the standard definition of paternalism in an important way: if Cathy is correct about the trusting nature of their relationship, and the mutual understanding and concern on which it rests, this decision is not made against Susan’s will or in violation of her autonomy. Susan, after all, is interested in the maintenance of the trusting relationship, as is Cathy. We propose that this decision is *maternalistic*, a concept we have outlined elsewhere (Specker Sullivan 2016, Specker Sullivan and Niker 2017). What is crucial here – and this is the crux of the difference between paternalism and maternalism – is that *if this decision successfully interprets the trusting nature of the relationship*, it neither violates Susan’s will in a morally significant sense nor impairs her interests. Indeed, if successful, the decision enriches the trust in the relationship. As in the example above, it is another data point in the long history between Susan and Cathy of acts and decisions that display their mutual understanding and care.

This is why the language of “discretionary power,” “consent,” “reliance,” and “dependence” seem out of place in the context of intimate, trusting relationships. While it is correct to say that Susan and Cathy *rely* and *depend* on each other, neither the reliance nor the

dependence are the core of their trust. Neither party ever explicitly *consents* to the other's *discretionary power* over certain shared goods in their relationship. Rather, the trusting nature of their relationship develops through *risky* acts and decisions that test their mutual understanding and concern, either confirming these features and reinforcing their mutual trust or refuting them and damaging that trust. If the acts that we describe above as maternalistic were carried out first by asking explicit consent, we offer that this would actually damage the trusting nature of the relationship by demonstrating that the assumed mutual understanding in the relationship was in fact not as deep as supposed.

Moreover, the ability successfully to interpret the trusting nature of a relationship is a matter of "a kind of *moral competence*" (Jones 1996: 7). In the course of a relationship, attentive and perceptive friends, partners, and so on, will become adept at reading and decoding each other's signals. One of the conditions for trusting relationships is that parties are able, generally speaking, to have a good understanding not only of the contours of where maternalistic action would be appropriate, but also of the textured nature of what acting on the other's behalf would best look like in the particular situation, from the other's point of view. In any relationship, no matter how intimate or long-standing, this target will be missed from time to time – thus the element of risk. Continuation of healthy trusting relationships also requires a different type of moral competence; it requires "some tact and willingness to forgive on the part of the truster and some willingness on the part of the trusted both to be forgiven and to forgive unfair criticisms" (Baier 1986: 238). That is to say that, where maternalistic acts fail, a trusting relationship cannot maintain its trusting nature without one party forgiving the other for the mistake, along with (we would argue) an apology on the part of the maternalistic party with an effort to understand why the maternalistic act failed. In the first example above, if Susan books the meal service and Cathy is upset, Susan must not only apologize for the mistake but also try to comprehend the source of Cathy's displeasure. This may be an easy mistake to rectify: Susan need only act in such a way that demonstrates she understands the reason for the earlier mistake, perhaps by buying Cathy a much-desired cookbook. The second example is more difficult to resolve – if Susan is upset that Cathy did not share medical information with her, she may not have another similar opportunity to show to Cathy that she does indeed understand her and can act on this understanding with care.

Finally, there is one additional element that we think is crucial to our proposal that trust be understood as a relational ecology for thick interpersonal relationships. This is the fact that, in such relationships, our partner's understanding of certain aspects of our selves – consisting of interests, needs, desires, and habits of thought – can at times be better than our own. This means that, in these cases, consent could be irrelevant. Our partner might be able to perceive better than we can ourselves what we need, and can intuit what would support the further development of our well-being and autonomy. This is especially relevant when our own self-understanding is compromised, as when we are busy, stressed, or vulnerable in some other significant way. In such circumstances, our partner's understanding of who we are and what we need is both crucial for our well-being and central to the constitution of our trusting relationship.

Recently there has been increased philosophical attention given both to trust and to the ethics of influence and interpersonal action. Our analysis here has brought together these two strands of debate, and has explored an aspect of this morally complex terrain. Public policy and law cannot often capture the moral complexities of any given issue; nonetheless, for the purpose of accounting for trust within a complete moral philosophy, it is important that we examine whether and how trust, and in particular the form of trust in the thick trusting relationships we have focused on, alters the ethical dynamics of interpersonal intervention. We believe that this is not an unnecessarily abstract or irrelevant point: people generally have

an intuitive sense about what to do and how to act within trusting relationships and about how to manage trust in their day-to-day lives. We contend that the concept of maternalism helps to move us closer to capturing this same phenomenon philosophically.

## V. Conclusion

Despite a recent upsurge of philosophical interest in trust, little attention has been directed toward whether, and if so how, trusting relationships alter the normative dynamics of interpersonal interventions. Within the context of “thick” trusting relationships, this paper has argued that making decisions for another person without their consent can be justifiable, and can even enhance the trust within that relationship. This argument not only responds to Annette Baier’s call to “tell us how and why we should act and feel towards others in relationships of shifting and varying power asymmetry and shifting and varying intimacy” (Baier 1986: 252); it also builds on concerns that Baier had with the individualism and contractarianism of her own account of trust. While the types of trusting relationships we describe here are not exhaustive, they supplement Baier’s account in necessary ways. We hope that the *maternalistic* acts and decisions identified here will be the subject of future discussion about the ethics of acts and decisions within thick, interpersonal relationships distinguished by relational ecologies of trust.

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