

The Ethical Importance of Close Relationships

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The main task of this paper is to draw a normative picture of close interpersonal bonds and demonstrate why they are ethically relevant and important. I start by showing that the notion of ‘close relationships’ is a notion in its own right—overlapping with but not reducible to the notion of ‘love,’ ‘friendship,’ or ‘kinship.’ Then, I go on to discuss particular features of close relationships. I start with consensuality, reciprocity, persistence in time. After that, I move on to non-instrumental treatment and the mutual sharing of responsibility, which is connected with treating the interests of the close other as one’s own. Another features I discuss are truthfulness in the way we narrate our autobiographical stories, openness to the close other’s co-creation of our narrative truth, and the readiness to co-create the narrative truth of the close other in return. Finally, I focus on trust; I show that the kind of trust which is characteristic of close relationships is connected with particular competences that a person should manifest in order to be a trustworthy close-relationship partner. From the fact that no person is morally infallible, it can be inferred that we need to depend on competent others in order to take full responsibility for ourselves as moral agents (we need to be *inter-responsible*). The people we choose to be in close relationships with are precisely such competent others; they are the guardians and the co-authors of our moral agency and our narrative identity.

Close relationships have always been a part of the human discourse. They are a topic of private conversations, public debates (legal, religious, political, etc.), and cultural representations. In fact, close relationships constitute a subject that we, as human beings, never cease to discuss, using words, images, sound, even movement.¹ In the light of this tendency characteristic of the human species in general, it is no wonder that academics would also feel compelled to communicate on this subject, using the language of their respective disciplines.

¹ A good example is modern dance; examples of choreographies composed around the topic of close relationships range from the classical pieces, such as *Deaths and Entrances* (1942) by M. Graham—which explores the close familial relationships between the Brontë sisters—to the very contemporary dance performances, such as *Poliamoria* by E. Makohon (2014)—which explores the multiplicity of close relationships (romantic and metamour relationships) within the conceptual framework of polyamory; see: H. Thomas, *Dance, Modernity and Culture: Explorations in the Sociology of Dance*, London, Routledge 1995, p. 117.

The question that I would like to explore in this paper is how philosophers address the theme of close relationships and what conclusions their joint discourse allows us to draw regarding the notion of a close relationship, as a notion which is philosophically—and especially *ethically*—relevant and important. The main task of this paper is to sketch an ethics-oriented definition of the phenomenon of close relationships by trying to identify such features which, taken jointly, draw a normative picture of close interpersonal bonds—a picture that could be entitled: what a relationship *should be* in order to be classified as ‘close’ from the point of view of ethics.

I start by showing that the notion of ‘close relationships’ is a notion in its own right—not reducible to the notion of ‘love,’ ‘friendship,’ or ‘kinship’—and, therefore, that it merits its own definition. Then, I go on to discuss particular features of close relationships. I start with consensuality, reciprocity, persistence in time. After that, I move on to non-instrumental treatment and the mutual sharing of responsibility connected with treating the interests of the close other as one’s own. Other features I discuss are truthfulness in the way we narrate our autobiographical stories, openness to the close other’s co-creation of our narrative truth, and the readiness to co-create the narrative truth of the close other in return. Finally, I focus on trust, and this makes me transform my original discourse from talking about features of close relationships into talking about competences that a person should manifest in order to be a trustworthy close-relationship partner.

Close relationships as a notion in its own right

Despite the fact that some philosophical attention has revolved around the topic of close relationships, it seems that a more comprehensive definition of this notion is lacking. One possible reason for this state of affairs is that the notion of close relationships is reducible to some other notion. Let us briefly explore this possibility.

Can interpersonal closeness be defined simply as love, for example? It seems not. Imagine a stalking voyeur who gradually falls in love with the person they are spying on. After years of regular spying and stalking, it is probable that what the perpetrator feels towards the other person might be a kind of love; according to common intuitions though, we can hardly say that these two people are in a close relationship.

The notion of a close relationship cannot be reduced to the notion of friendship either. Think of Thomas Stanley, the first Earl of Derby, who managed to remain in favor of many successive kings throughout the Wars of the Roses, no matter whether the kings were Lancastrians or Yorkists. Stanley was famous for forging temporary alliances that served his interests; most relationships with other people were a means

to his end of staying in the position of power. Thus, he was a *friend* of many people on account of their utility and not for the sake of those people. Aristotle allowed for such relationships to be identified as a particular kind of friendship² (he would call them ‘friendships of utility’), but he explicitly described them as more distant and less stable.³ All in all, it seems reasonable to say that Stanley and his friends were not genuinely close to one another.

Interestingly, just like love or friendship do not automatically imply the existence of a close interpersonal bond, neither do the blood-ties. To take the easiest example, numerous are cases of adopted children wanting but not being able to develop a close relationship with their birth parent simply because the birth parent refuses such connection altogether.

A conclusion that might be drawn from this brief initial discussion is that since there are kinds of friendship, or love, or family ties which cannot be classified as close, then ‘close relationships’ are not reducible to either of the general categories of friendship, love, or blood-ties; therefore, close relationships are a separate category and merit a separate definition.

Here and there within the philosophical discourse, philosophers have made more or less direct observations from which the defining elements of close relationships can be extracted. In this paper, I wish to try and put all of those scattered pieces together, thus forming a normative picture of close interpersonal bonds. In the process of formulation of this definition, I wish to show why close relationships constitute a topic of philosophical research in its own right.

In the course of such research, it might sometimes make sense to resort to talking about certain kinds of love, or friendship, or familial ties, but not all kinds. I believe it is possible for certain kinds of love, or friendship, or blood ties to be close relationships: for example, there might be a relationship which fulfills both the criteria of belonging to the friendship category and the criteria of belonging to the close relationship category; we can call such a relationship a *close friendship*. Similarly, it is also possible for some kinds of love relationships and family bonds to be *close* love relationships and *close* family bonds. However, the fact that some kinds of friendship, or love, or blood ties can be classified as close does not prove that the general category of close relationships can be reduced to the general categories of friendship, love, or family relationships, since those general categories include also those kinds of relationships

2 A good example of a philosopher who disagreed that such relationships could be classified as ‘friendship’ is Seneca. See: L. A. Seneca, *On True and False Friendship*, [in:] idem, *Ad Lucillum Epistulae Morales*, Vol. I, trans. R. M. Gummere, eds. E. Capps, T. E. Page, W. H. D. Rouse, London, The Loeb Classical Library 1925, pp. 9–13.

3 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. C. Bartlett, S. D. Collins, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 2011, 1157a.

which are unclassifiable as close. In other words, the general category of close relationships and the general categories of friendship, love, or family relationships will partially overlap, but they will not be fully coextensive.

Consensuality, reciprocity, persistence in time

The claim that I would like to begin with is that one of the most basic conditions to be fulfilled in order for interpersonal proximity to grow between any two individuals is consensuality. Interpersonal closeness can grow if and only if both individuals agree to a further dose of proximity between them. If at least one of them says ‘no,’ or is not given a chance to voice their consent or the lack of it, then the closeness between them does not evolve.⁴

Through a long series of consensual choices to become closer to one another, a close relationship is formed. As indicated in the previous paragraph, I cannot be said to form a close relationship with somebody without their consent to have developed and co-authored the *interpersonal* proximity between us. However, it is equally important to stress that in order for the close relationship to be the case, the interpersonal proximity between us has to be chosen repeatedly; it has to persist in time. Two consensually chosen doses of interpersonal proximity between strangers may draw them nearer to one another, but they do not amount to a close relationship between them yet. If we imagine that there is a whole spectrum of kinds of interpersonal proximity between people, then what I refer to as ‘close relationships’ is situated at one extreme end of that spectrum, and the state in which people are strangers is situated at the other extreme end. Between those two extremes, a range of interaction and relationship kinds are possible, and all of them involve a certain amount of interpersonal proximity. I acknowledge this diversity of possible interaction and relationship types, and I do not deny that they involve some interpersonal proximity, but I choose to focus on such relationships that instantiate a highly accumulated interpersonal proximity, the accumulation of which has taken place through a diachronically stretched series of repeated consensual choices to draw nearer to one another. It is such relationships, referred to hereinafter as ‘close relationships’ that are the subject of this paper.

Before ending this section, a final remark concerning consensuality is in order. Interestingly, the fact that the climbing of the consecutive bars of the proximity ladder

4 This paragraph is a paraphrase from my paper entitled *The Tree of Proximity in Metamour Relationships*, presented at the 5th International Symposium ‘Love, Lust and Longing: Rethinking Intimacy,’ Barcelona, May 11–13, 2015.

can only take place through a series of consensual choices entails that a close relationship is, of necessity, reciprocal in nature.⁵ This confirms the initial intuition that the above-mentioned instances of unreciprocated love and unwanted kinship connection are *not* instances of any kind of interpersonal proximity but of different bonds—such whose existence is possible *despite* a lack of consensuality and *despite* a lack of reciprocity. Finally, let me stress that the fulfillment of the condition of reciprocity alone does not suffice for a relationship to be close: a relationship can be reciprocal without being close.

Non-instrumental treatment

Another very basic condition for a close relationship to be the case is treating the close other non-instrumentally. It is for the sake of the close person that we wish to be close to them and not because they bring us benefit or pleasure;⁶ also, not because they are an instrument in our game, whether this is a game of avoiding authenticity and maintaining a certain image (of the perfect man/woman, or of a morally good person),⁷ or a game of wanting to escape loneliness,⁸ or a game of staying irresponsible or overly responsible,⁹ or yet some other game. In other words, although it is possible to derive collateral pleasure or benefit from a close relationship, doing so cannot be the driving force behind wanting to be close with another person.

Notice that non-instrumental treatment of the close other harmonizes nicely with the principle of consensuality. Since we are close to another subject, not an object, we are watchful of their consent in response to whatever proximity steps we might propose to make, and we are respectful of the expression of the other person's will in these matters. Neither side of a close relationship should be pushy or needy,

5 The examples of philosophers who stressed reciprocity as one of the construction elements of a close relationship include Aristotle and Immanuel Kant (both talking about reciprocity in a close friendship), Simone de Beauvoir and Julie K. Ward (who stresses the importance of reciprocity in close relationships in de Beauvoir's philosophy), Kyla Ebels-Duggan (talking about reciprocity in a love-based close relationship between adults), Frank Jackson (talking about *mutual* trust, affection, and respect in close relationships). See: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155b–1156a, I. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1991, p. 261 [469–470] §46, S. de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe I*, Paris, Gallimard 2012, pp. 395–396, J. K. Ward, *Reciprocity and Friendship in Beauvoir's Thought*, [in:] *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, ed. M. A. Simmons, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press 2006, pp. 146–162, K. Ebels-Duggan, *Against Beneficence: A Normative Account of Love*, 'Ethics' 2008, Vol. 119, pp. 162–170, F. Jackson, *Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection*, 'Ethics' 1991, Vol. 101, No. 3, pp. 474–475.

6 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1157b.

7 S. de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe II*, Paris, Gallimard 2012, pp. 636–638, Aristotle, *op. cit.*, 1159a.

8 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1166b.

9 S. de Beauvoir, *op. cit.*, pp. 639–640.

since it is the proximity with this particular person that matters and not a way of creating ‘proximity’ that would be abstracted from who that person is, what they wish to give us, and how they would like to be approached.

Interestingly, there has been much debate as to the metaphysics that underlies the idea of being close with another person for the sake of who they are as a unique individual, an irreplaceable end.¹⁰ One of the voices in this debate is Robert Nozick who said that “An adult may come to love another because of the other’s characteristics; but it is the other person, and not the characteristics that is loved. The love is not transferrable to someone else with the same characteristics ... love endures through changes of characteristics that gave rise to it.”¹¹ Supposing that this kind of love could be characteristic of close relationships, does this mean that being close with somebody is about seeing them as a bare particular and that genuine interpersonal proximity can endure any change of characteristics in a given person? Does it imply that we *should not* care as to what kind of a person the close other becomes?

Neera K. Badhwar comments that Nozick’s account is more descriptive of addiction than of love,¹² and that what makes each person unique is neither their being a bare particular, nor their being a bundle of abstract properties. An individuating factor, according to Badhwar, is *the way* one expresses their characteristics.¹³

Coming back to Nozick, I would be more permissive than Badhwar and see Nozick’s account as descriptive of some kind of love. If this love makes the loving person completely uncritical of the changes of characteristics that the beloved goes through, then it might be described as a state of addiction, or—to use the words of Barbara Skarga—as a *blind kind of love* which seeks only to please and never critically scrutinize the object of affection. However, Skarga says that a *wise kind of love* exists as well—such love which is not merely focused on pleasing, but knows how to be critical.¹⁴ Notice that the kind of love that Nozick describes could be the wise kind of love, which endures all changes of characteristics on the one hand, but which includes being actively critical as well, even to the point of separating oneself from the beloved, when all other measures have failed. The mistake that Badhwar makes is that

10 Other voices in the debate, apart from the ones discussed in this paper, are, for example: A. Soble, *Irreplaceability*, [in:] *Sex, Love, and Friendship: Studies of the Society for the Philosophy of Sex and Love 1977–1992*, Atlanta, Rodopi 1997, pp. 355–357, D. Velleman, *Love as a Moral Emotion*, ‘Ethics’ 1999, Vol. 109, pp. 338–374.

11 R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers 1999, p. 168.

12 N. K. Badhwar, *Love*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Practical Ethics*, ed. H. LaFollette, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2005, p. 61. In her diagnosis, Badhwar refers to a classic book by two psychologists; see: S. Peele, A. Brodsky, *Love and Addiction*, London, Abacus 1975.

13 N. K. Badhwar, op. cit., p. 64.

14 See: an interview of Leszek Kołakowski with Barbara Skarga, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjPg-PXMzLzc> [02.11.2015].

of identifying the persistence of love through unwelcome changes with a completely uncritical attitude towards the beloved.

I maintain that this wise kind of affection is characteristic of close relationships, and the next two sections shall be devoted to elaborating on this claim and addressing the issue of caring for the kind of person the close other becomes.

The sharing of responsibility

Being with another person for their sake—because they are a specific, unique individual, and not because they bring us pleasure or benefit of some sort—is a necessary condition for a close relationship to be the case, but it is not sufficient. The fulfillment of that condition guarantees only that a relationship is personal, not yet that it is close.¹⁵ As Hugh LaFollette rightly points out, in order for a relationship to qualify as a close personal relationship, another condition has to be fulfilled as well, namely that each of the parties involved takes the interests of the close other as their own.¹⁶ What does that mean?

For Callicles from Plato's *Gorgias*, taking the interests of the close others as one's own would mean providing them with as many pleasures as possible, no matter whether it is good for them or not.¹⁷ But this, Plato's Socrates would retort, is contradictory. Not caring about the goodness or the badness of what the close others are provided with amounts to not caring for their interests. Callicles' interpretation of 'taking the interests of the close other as one's own' implies that Callicles does not know how to take care of his own interests in the first place.¹⁸

For Plato's Socrates, taking the interests of the close others as one's own means striving after the good condition of their souls to an equal extent as we strive after the good condition of our own soul. Doing so implies a) choosing carefully between the pleasures we provide our close others with, and b) offering them our most honest judgment of their behavior. If the people we are in a close relationship with commit injustice, we should strive after their good by being the first and the most honest ones in telling them to their face where they have erred and encouraging them to undergo a punishment. By displaying such an attitude we protect those who are dear to us from the worst possible misery of not being free from the injustice committed, and

15 H. LaFollette, *Personal Relationships: Love, Identity, and Morality*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers 1996, p. 194.

16 Ibidem, pp. 194, 209–210.

17 Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. W. Hamilton, C. Emlyn-Jones, London, Penguin Classics 2004, 491 E, 501 B C, 505 B

18 Ibidem, 493 D–494 B.

thus we protect them from the perturbation of the soul.¹⁹ Only through acknowledging the error and accepting the punishment can a person come back to the state of balance and well-being. Otherwise, the inner source of the wrongdoer's injustice becomes solidified and turns into a state of chronic injustice, which Plato identifies with the state of internal imbalance and misery.²⁰

A practical illustration of Plato's views can be found in Jane Austen's *Emma*, where George Knightley rebukes his very close friend, Emma Woodhouse, for having humiliated a mutual friend of theirs, Miss Bates. In his reproach, Mr. Knightley uses the following words: "This is not pleasant to you, Emma—and it is very far from pleasant to me; but I must ... tell you truths while I can; satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel"²¹ From this fragment, it is visible that Mr. Knightley offers Emma his most honest judgment of her behavior ('very faithful counsel,' 'truths'). Moreover, instead of applying Calicles' method of indiscriminately showering the close other with pleasures, Mr. Knightley applies the bitter medicine of his reproach, because this is something that he thinks will do Emma good. And finally, Mr. Knightley feels that he has a special standing, as Emma's very close friend, that makes it possible ('can') and also obligatory for him ('must') to reproach her in the way he does ('I must tell you truths while I can'). Mr. Knightley's 'while I can' expression signifies his awareness of the fact that Emma could potentially decide to withdraw from the close relationship between them, and if she did, Mr. Knightley would no longer be in the position to rebuke her the way he does now.

Plato's *Gorgias* and Jane Austen's *Emma* exemplify an ethical standpoint according to which we are uniquely positioned towards the people we are in close relationships with,²² and while we may have certain ethical duties towards all people, there is

19 Plato's views in this respect do not seem philosophically isolated. Even Epicurus, who identified pleasure with the good, was convinced that the tranquility of the soul is an important part of a person's well-being and that it is worth to deprive oneself of certain pleasures and endure some kind of pain in order to achieve *ataraxia*: the state of internal freedom from disturbances (*tarache*). Plato extends this thought and shows that one of the sources of disturbance is not being free from the injustice committed. Applying Epicurus to Plato, it is worthwhile to listen to the unpleasant reproach of the close other and undergo an unpleasant punishment but achieve a greater and more long-lasting kind of pleasure: the tranquility of the soul. See: Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/menoec.html> [25.03.2016]. Apart from Plato, another example of philosophers who identified the general freedom from injustice (understood as both freedom from committing injustice and from being its target) with the state of well-being are the Stoics. Seneca's sage, for example, is portrayed as free from injustice and full of continuous joy. See: L. A. Seneca, *To Serenus on the Firmness of the Wise Man*, [in:] idem, *Moral Essays*, trans. J. W. Basore, eds. E. Capps, T. E. Page, W. H. D. Rouse, London, The Loeb Classical Library 1928, pp. 49–105.

20 Plato, op.cit., 479 D–480 D, 508 B D, 509 B C.

21 J. Austen, *Emma*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/158/158-pdf.pdf> [23.05.2014], p. 201.

22 Good recent examples of philosophers who think this way are Garrath Williams and Linda Radzik (in her response to Stephen Darwall who seems to imply that everybody has an equal standing to rebuke every wrong-

a sub-set of individuals that comprises ourselves and our close others to whom we owe the most active kind of caring about what kind of a person they morally become.

The question is why, and the answer is that high interpersonal proximity entails responsibility. The intimately close relationship we have with ourselves makes us hold a special kind of responsibility for what we do and who we become as a person.²³ Drawing on Garath Williams' thought, by forming close relationships we invite other people to share that responsibility with us, to be co-responsible for who we become as a person.²⁴ Williams claims that a total responsibility for oneself, in which we are completely independent from others, is too heavy a burden for anybody to bear. Consequently, it is an important human need to share that responsibility, to be inter-dependent in our responsibility for ourselves,²⁵ or (if I may coin a new term here) to be inter-responsible. The closer we are to others, the more intimately *inter-responsible* we accept to become.²⁶

Apart from the Jane Austen example, the close others' inter-responsibility for one another's moral agency is an explicit and prominent motif in *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Although more than one character in the novel (Porfiry Petrovitch,²⁷ Svidrigailov,²⁸ Sonia) thinks and sometimes even expresses to Raskolnikov that it would be in his best interest to confess to murder and accept the punishment for it, it is the attitude of the person closest to him, Sonia, that has the most profound impact on him. It is Sonia that Raskolnikov comes to in order to tell her that he will undergo punishment as she recommended, and it is her words he suddenly recalls on his way to the police station: "Go to the crossroads, bow down to the people, kiss the earth, for you have sinned against it too, and say aloud to the whole world, 'I am a murderer.'"²⁹ Furthermore, the moment Raskolnikov is overcome with emotions

doer for every wrong). See: G. Williams, *Sharing Responsibility and Holding Responsible*, 'Journal of Applied Philosophy' 2013, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 351–364; L. Radzik, *On Minding Your Own Business: Differentiating Accountability Relations within the Moral Community*, 'Social Theory and Practice' 2011, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 574–598.

23 G. Williams, *op.cit.*, p. 355.

24 *Ibidem*, pp. 355–357.

25 *Ibidem*, p. 356.

26 Note that this view nicely accounts for a certain distance children tend to build up towards their parents in the process of growing up. The need for more distance in the parent–child relationship is an important signal that the offspring wants to gradually take more and more responsibility for themselves, and also that they need to construct their own bonds of inter-responsibility of choice with people other than the parents. Recalling the very beginning of this paper, it is crucial that the child's consent or the lack of consent for proximity with the parent is respected, if the relationship aspires to be a close relationship. Lack of such respect indicates that the parent is interested in something else than genuine interpersonal proximity with their offspring.

27 F. Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, e-book available at <http://www.e-booksdirectory.com/> [08.04.2016], pp. 571–575.

28 *Ibidem*, p. 625.

29 *Ibidem*, pp. 653–654, 657.

and feels too weak to come forward with his confession, it is the view of Sonia's face in front of the police station that rekindles his resolve and gives him the final impulse he needed to admit he is guilty of murder.³⁰ It is also Sonia's supporting presence during Raskolnikov's imprisonment that triggers his full transformation from the state of indifference towards morality, coupled with anxiety, despair, and aloofness, to the state in which he becomes capable of experiencing love, repentance, hope, and tranquility.³¹ Drawing an implication from Dostoyevsky's words describing Raskolnikov's initial internal torment—"Oh, how happy he would have been if he could have blamed himself!"³²—we can say that Raskolnikov is restored to the state of well-being once he embraces the principle of justice and applies it to the judgment of his own conduct.³³ *Crime and Punishment* is, therefore, another vivid literary instantiation of the ethical claim that having the close other's best interest at heart involves encouraging the close person to acknowledge their wrongdoing and undergo punishment.

To recap the main argument of this section: 1) (after LaFollette) in order for a relationship to be classified as a close relationship each of the parties involved must take the interests of the close other as their own; 2) (after Plato and Williams) promoting our own interests entails taking responsibility for the kind of person we become and doing our best to be a morally good person; 3) from 1 and 2, it follows that taking the interests of the close others as our own means sharing responsibility for the kind of person they become and doing our best to ensure that they are morally good people.

Finally, it can be concluded that one of the ways to test whether a person has our best interest at heart—thus proving that they are genuinely close to us—is to check whether they are able to be honest with us about our errors and wrongdoings, in such a way that allows us to better ourselves in terms of the moral judgment and moral conduct we display.

The sharing of self-narrative truth

Steve Matthews and Jeanette Kennett draw attention to another constitutive element of close relationships: being truthful in the way we narrate our autobiographical

30 Ibidem, pp. 663–664.

31 Ibidem, pp. 675–677, 681–685.

32 Ibidem, p. 675.

33 There is an interesting conversation in the novel in which Porfiry Petrovitch explains to Raskolnikov that there is a link between a person embracing the demands of justice, even if it involves suffering, and that person being able to genuinely appreciate and enjoy life. See: Ibidem, pp. 573–574. According to Dostoyevsky then, there are two kinds of suffering: one which amounts to nothing else than continuous anxiety and despair, and one which is cathartic and leads to moral betterment, regeneration, tranquility, happiness, and appreciation of life.

stories.³⁴ In their paper *Truth, Lies, and the Narrative Self*, the authors give two examples of individuals who continually provided people in their immediate surroundings with false self-narratives, thus blocking the possibility of developing any genuine close relationship, even with people who were their family and friends. The first person is Jean-Claude Romand who had been lying to his parents, wife, and two children for twenty years about having a successful medical career, when in fact he had not managed to finish his medical studies in the first place. The second individual is Rex Crane who, for almost thirty years, had been deceitful towards his family, friends, and the Australian federal government about being the World War II veteran, when in fact his career in the army had never gone beyond the failed attempt to join the navy at the age of fifteen.³⁵

Matthews and Kennett point out that liars like Romand and Crane “simply cannot engage openly and freely with the person to whom they are telling the story of their past. Their false stories are fixed and unrevisable, and they are on guard to ensure compatibility between one telling and another. Their core narrative claims are not open in the right way to correction and elaboration or to an emotional analysis.”³⁶ The impenetrability of the false self-narrative of a liar to another person’s input is directly proportional to the liar being unapproachable in terms of interpersonal proximity. Just as his false self-narrative cannot be approached and interacted with but only admired from afar, so cannot he.³⁷

In contrast, allowing certain individuals to interact intimately with our self-narratives is indicative of our closeness with them. Being in a close relationship with another person means that they are invited to correct us, where they remember some facts better than we do (we might have been too nervous, too emotional, too tired to remember something well), and that they are welcome to truthfully elaborate on our self-narrative, when they know some relevant details that we are not aware of.³⁸

Additionally, our self-narrative is open to the close others’ analysis and interpretation;³⁹ we want to know how they understand and interpret our experiences; we are eager to be confronted with their best judgment in order to make our judgment clearer. In fact, the close others become the co-narrators or co-authors of our true

34 S. Matthews, J. Kennett, *Truth, Lies, and the Narrative Self*, ‘American Philosophical Quarterly’ 2012, Vol. 49, No.4, pp. 301–302, 305–306

35 Ibidem, p. 302.

36 Ibidem, p. 311.

37 Ibidem, p. 312.

38 Ibidem, p. 311.

39 Ibidem, p. 312.

self-narrative; they help us to keep our self-narrative as true as possible, whenever we might fall short of fulfilling that role on our own.

However, as Matthews and Kennett underscore, in order to enjoy such intimate support characteristic of close relationships, we have to first be truthful on our own in the way we narrate our autobiographical stories to others. If that condition is not fulfilled, a genuinely close relationship is impossible.⁴⁰

In fact, the analysis of Matthews and Kennett gives us three important features of close interpersonal bonds: 1) truthfulness in the way we narrate our autobiographical stories to others, 2) openness to our close others correcting and interpreting—and thus co-authoring—our self-narrative with us, 3) (when the roles are reversed) truthfulness in the way we correct and interpret the self-narrative of a person who is near and dear to us. Let it be stressed once again that if 1 does not obtain, 2 is blocked from obtaining. Also, notice that 3 is another way of caring about who the close other becomes as a person. Just as we should care about the moral judgment and moral behavior the close person displays, we should also care about the truthfulness of their self-narrative. Why? For Immanuel Kant, being truthful in all aspects of life is among the moral duties one has towards oneself.⁴¹ Therefore, helping the close other to maintain truthfulness in general and the truthfulness of their self-narrative in particular is helping them fulfill one of their moral self-duties. From this it can be inferred that supporting the close person in this way is a kind of moral support.

By the same token, allowing the close other to support us in accomplishing the task of self-narrative truthfulness—because we embrace the fact that we are somewhat limited in our truthfulness-maintaining powers—is, in fact, a realistic way of fulfilling the moral self-duty we have towards ourselves. Since we are not infallible, since we cannot always be fully focused, since we may be too emotionally agitated to remember something well, etc., accepting a trusted close other's moral support is the best way to take full responsibility for the truthfulness in our self-narratives.

Trust

Another element constitutive of close relationships is trust.⁴² To use the words of Hugh LaFollette, “[c]lose relationships ... are possible only inasmuch as each party trusts the

40 Ibidem, pp. 301–302, 305–306.

41 “The greatest violation of man’s duty to himself regarded merely as a moral being (the humanity in his own person) is the contrary of truthfulness, *lying*...”; see: I. Kant, op. cit., p. 247 [429] §9.

42 When Kant writes about moral friendship, which seems to be the closest and truest kind of friendship to him, he says that its foundation is absolute confidence in one another and the resulting mutual openness to one another. See: I. Kant, op. cit., p. 263 [471] § 47.

other ... Each must trust the other will not hurt or abuse her; each must trust the other to care for her.”⁴³ How to establish such trust? Aristotle says that the way to do that is to test the person ‘over a long time.’⁴⁴ If that person passes the tests over and over again, we can trust them. But what are those tests exactly, and what is this competence or set of competences that we are testing for in close relationships? In order to answer those questions, let us discuss the connection between trust and competence, as well as the connection between trust and consensuality.

Apart from the philosophically well-established distinction between trust and mere reliance,⁴⁵ it is important to distinguish between varieties of trust as well. As Richard Holton says, “Even when you do trust a person, you need not trust them in every way. Trust is a three-place relation: one person trusts another to do certain things. You can trust a person to do some things without trusting them to do others.”⁴⁶ The quotation seems to imply that rather than looking at trust in a binary way, where we either trust another person or we do not, we should look at trust as pertaining to particular tasks that we entrust other people with.

If what has been written in the previous sections is right, then close relationships are special within the landscape of trust not because we will entrust the close others with everything (with all possible tasks), but because the tasks we entrust them with will be very intimately linked to our moral agency and our narrative identity. For example, unless my close others happen to be hepatologists, I should not trust them to diagnose my liver, as they will lack the competence to do that.⁴⁷ It is more appropriate to trust my hepatologist in this respect. In contrast, it would be inappropriate to entrust my hepatologist with the task of sharing responsibility for the kind of moral agent I become. Even if there is some proximity between us—more than between me and a complete stranger—we are not in a close relationship. Therefore, trust characteristic of a close relationship would be out of place between us.

43 H. LaFollette, op. cit., p. 210.

44 Aristotle, op.cit., 1157a.

45 A. Baier, *Trust and Antitrust*, ‘Ethics’ 1986, Vol. 96, p. 234. Other philosophers that follow Annette Baier in distinguishing between trust and mere reliance include: P. Hieronymi, *The Reasons of Trust*, ‘Australasian Journal of Philosophy’ 2008, Vol. 86, No. 2, p. 215; C. McLeod, *Trust*, [in:] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published 2006/ revised 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trust/> [02.11.2015]; O. O’Neill, *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2002, p. 15; N. N. Potter, *How Can I Be Trusted?*, Lanham, Rowan and Littlefield 2002, pp. 3–4, P. Pettit, *The Cunning of Trust*, ‘Philosophy and Public Affairs’ 1995, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 205.

46 R. Holton, *Deciding to Trust, Coming to Believe*, ‘Australasian Journal of Philosophy’ 1994, Vol. 72, p. 66. Originally, trust has been defined as a three-place relation by Baier. See: A. Baier, op. cit., p. 236.

47 Katherine Hawley stresses the connection between trust and competence. See: K. Hawley, *Trust, Distrust and Commitment*, ‘Nous’ 2014, Vol. 48, No. 1, p. 1.

The second important point about trust is connected with the role of consensuality in the way close relationships are constructed. Because trust entails responsibility, it is important to acknowledge the fact that trust can be unwelcome.⁴⁸ As has been discussed above, the level of responsibility connected with close relationships is very high, not only because of the stakes—a person's moral agency and narrative identity—but also because of the constancy of responsibility. Just like being responsible for ourselves—for who we are and how we live—is not a one-time or an *ad hoc* task, but a steady one, so is the case with sharing responsibility for the self-narrative and moral constitution of the close other.

For that reason, it is doubly important to stress that trust connected with close relationships cannot be thrown at anybody without their consent; the fact that one human being is willing to trust another in such an intimate, but also burdensome way, is something that can only be embraced consensually. If somebody does not want to be entrusted with the tasks characteristic of close relationships, such choice has to be respected, even if it is made by a person one would stereotypically associate with being 'trustworthy of necessity,' such as a parent, for example. Notice that that person may still prove to be trustworthy in a different sense than the one characteristic of close relationships; it may be impossible to maintain the parent-child relationship as a close relationship, but possible to maintain it as a different, more distant kind of a relationship.

Finally, just as nobody can be forced to receive the kind of trust characteristic of close relationships, no person can be forced to give such high-level trust either. Both trust-giving and trust-receiving in close relationships can only be consensual.

All in all, both competence and consensuality play an important role in understanding the kind of trust which is to be expected in close relationships. Just like there is a set of competences associated with being a hepatologist, there is also a set of competences connected with being somebody's close other; in fact, this paper is devoted to identifying these competences or, to be more precise, such of these competences which are ethically relevant. These competences will be summarized in the conclusions section.

Mere competences are not enough though. Imagine that my hepatologist and I are both competent in constructing close relationships, but we lack consent to exercise these competences with one another.⁴⁹ Or maybe only one of us is unwilling to do

⁴⁸ The idea that trust can be unwelcome is stressed by such philosophers as Katherine Hawley or Thomas W. Simpson. See: T.W. Simpson, *What is Trust?*, 'Pacific Philosophical Quarterly' 2012, Vol. 93, p. 563; K. Hawley, *op.cit.*, pp. 1, 11.

⁴⁹ An anonymous reviewer has pointed out to me that it seems that a person could be competent in constructing a close relationship with person A but not with person B and that my analysis does not capture this. Indeed, my

that. In any case, the fact that we are both competent in the area of close relationships is too little for the close relationship between us to be the case; there has to be a two-sided consent to become much closer to one another and, at some point, to accept exchanging trust characteristic of close relationships.

Conclusions

I wish to start the conclusions section by putting together all the ethically relevant features that a relationship should have in order to be classified as a close relationship. However, because these features are intimately connected with the competences that a person should possess in order to construct a close relationship, I will talk about the *close-relationship competences*, instead of talking about the *features*. The definition of the notion of a close relationship will, thus, be given indirectly through the portrayal of an ideal close other.

First of all, a person who is capable of forming close relationships with others will be skilled in voicing their own consent or the lack of it, and they will also be skilled in respecting another's consent or the lack of it. Moreover, they will know how to be reciprocal and how to treat the close other non-instrumentally. Importantly, they will be capable of taking responsibility for themselves, partially on their own and partially by sharing responsibility for themselves with the close other; the most ethically relevant kind of responsibility to be shared in this way is the one connected with the person's self-narrative truth and the kind of moral agent they become. In the spirit of reciprocity, that person will also know how to share responsibility for the close other's moral constitution and the close other's self-narrative truth. From this it follows that they will be able to welcome another person's trust and also that they will be able to trust back, after checking whether the trust is welcome. Finally, it is important to stress that the above mentioned sharing of responsibility is connected with the ability to give criticism to and receive criticism from the close other, especially in the field of morals.

These are the competences we should test for, when checking if we can trust another person to perform the role of the close other in our life. Most of all, we should observe whether this person displays these qualities in a relationship with us.

analysis is not meant to capture such intuitions. The ethically relevant close relationship competences I portray in this paper are universal: a person who has these competences *could* theoretically construct a close relationship with any other person who also has the competences required. If I have close relationship competences, but I do not develop a close relationship with person B, it happens for one or more of the following reasons: 1) I do not have the willingness to do it, 2) I do not have the opportunity to do it, 3) B has failed to acquire close relationship competences, 4) B does not have the willingness to have a close relationship with me.

However, even before that, we can sometimes monitor that person's behavior in their pre-existing close relationships with other people; the fact that somebody who aspires to be close to us displays the close-relationship competences with other people is a good sign for the kind of relationship they can develop with us. Most importantly though, as Aristotle said, the tests have to be performed 'over a long time' to check whether the manifestation of the competences is steady.

One possible objection that might arise is the following: if it is necessary to have these competences in order to form close relationships, then what about the people who are willing to construct close relationships but are lacking in these competences; the normative account presented in this paper seems to ban these individuals from having close relationships. This leads to an *impasse*: how are such people to acquire these competences if not through the practice of 'close-relationshiping'?

The first part of the answer to this objection would be the following: a person lacking in these competences has the close-relationships options limited, but not closed altogether. The normative account offered in this paper presents close relationships as a space for moral improvement and moral growth. The competences necessary for a close relationship can be acquired through the pre-close-relationship-proper proximity with other people. At a certain point of progressive construction of interpersonal closeness (which encompasses a whole spectrum of proximity possibilities), the competences are gradually acquired and, eventually, a close relationship can be formed. Once the close relationship is constructed, these competences can continue being improved while 'close-relationshiping.' After all, close relationships are a great source of moral practice not only in the general sense, but also in terms of one's betterment at being a close other.

However, a second part of the response to the objection is the following: yes, there is a normative suggestion here that people who declare that they are willing to have close relationships, and yet seem forever unable to acquire the close-relationship competences, are, in fact, unable to form close relationships; if they have some relationships in their lives, these relationships are not close relationships. Noticing that some individuals may display a discrepancy between stating their willingness to have close relationships and never developing the close-relationship competences, despite having an opportunity to do so, opens up an area for future research in the field of close relationships that could be connected to the problem of weak will.

Another possible objection could be of a different kind: it seems that the vision of close relationships presented in this paper is very compatible with the Aristotelian friendship of the virtuous, which is the closest kind of friendship in Aristotle; if the compatibility were so high that, in fact, there were no difference between the defini-

tion of close relationships presented here and the Aristotelian description of proximity in virtue friendships, then we would not need the new definition of close relationships because we could simply apply the Aristotelian definition of virtue friendship to describe the proximity in close relationships.⁵⁰

To this objection I would respond in two steps. In the first step, I wish to acknowledge that my definition of close relationships is, indeed, very compatible with Aristotle's vision of proximity in virtue friendships. Like me, Aristotle stresses the following features of the kind of relationship he has in mind: reciprocity and its connection with choice,⁵¹ persistence in time,⁵² non-instrumental treatment (being somebody's friend for the sake of that person),⁵³ moral betterment through the practice of being a friend,⁵⁴ trust,⁵⁵ higher responsibility towards the close others than towards strangers.⁵⁶ Also, since truthfulness is one of the virtues Aristotle mentions as characteristic of a virtuous person,⁵⁷ and only virtuous people can create virtue friendships,⁵⁸ then it can also be assumed that Aristotle would see truthfulness as constitutive of virtue friendships.

Having acknowledged the similarities, let me now move on to the second step of my response and underscore the differences between my account of close relationships and Aristotle's account of friendships of the virtuous. The first difference is my emphasis on consensuality. As I already said, Aristotle does mention that reciprocity in virtue friendships is a matter of choice. My account, however, goes further than that. I explicitly stress that in order for a person to be capable of forming close relationships, this person has to be skilled in voicing their own consent or the lack of it; furthermore, this person has to have the ability to respect another person's consent or the lack of it. Such a description stresses the interactive nature of the process of choosing proximity with another person, which in Aristotle's description remains unexplored.

As to the further differences, even though my account goes in line with Aristotle's when he says that living together with other virtuous people gives one an opportunity

50 I owe the idea of this objection to an anonymous reviewer of this paper.

51 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1157b.

52 Ibidem, 1157b, 1159a.

53 Ibidem, 1157a–1157b.

54 Ibidem, 1172a.

55 Ibidem, 1157a.

56 Ibidem, 1126b, 1160a.

57 Ibidem, 1127a–1127b.

58 Ibidem, 1157a–1157b.

to practice one's virtue,⁵⁹ Aristotle does not explicitly address the question why it is particularly beneficial to have *close* relationships with those people. He simply says that virtue friendships accord us an opportunity to be exposed to other virtuous individuals and that being exposed to such people solidifies what is good in ourselves and makes us absorb the virtues we admire in our friends.⁶⁰ However, if the mere exposition to other virtuous individuals were ethically beneficial for a moral agent, it might be equally favorable for that person to have more distant relationships with virtuous others, without having a *close* relationship with anyone. Why we should need a more intimate proximity with virtuous people to better ourselves morally is a subject which Aristotle does not explore in detail. Some information on this topic can be found in *Magna Moralia*, where Aristotle says that being able to observe the virtues (and also vices) of a friend is an invaluable means to attaining self-knowledge: while it is very difficult or even impossible to observe ourselves, it is possible to observe our second and externalized self—our friend—and, in this indirect way, gain self-knowledge.⁶¹ Since (it might be assumed that) we do not perceive the more distant others as our second self, we cannot obtain the same effect in a relationship with them.

In my account, on the other hand, the influence of the close others' on one's moral agency is not limited to being exposed to the close others' virtuous conduct; nor is it limited to Aristotle's very general statement that interactions with virtuous friends give us an opportunity to practice virtue (which does not rule out that interactions with the more distant virtuous others could have the same effect). Instead, I have explicitly stressed that being in a close relationship implies sharing responsibility for one another's moral agency and self-narrative truth. In contrast, although Aristotle's virtuous moral agent is under the imperative of being truthful and just⁶² towards the virtuous friend, Aristotle does not elaborate on any kind of inter-responsibility between virtuous friends in this respect. Rather, he seems to think that while being truthful and just is an obligation *towards* the close friends, every moral agent should attend to the performance of this duty *in isolation from* her close friends. For Aristotle, even in such close friendships as the friendships of the virtuous, it seems to be everybody's own business to remain truthful and just (although the close friends are useful as objects of practice of these virtues). In my vision of close relationships, the way for every moral agent to take full responsibility for herself (for her moral agency

59 Ibidem, 1172a.

60 Ibidem, 1172a.

61 Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, trans. St.G. Stock [in:] idem, *Aristotle's Ethics: Writings from the Complete Books*, eds. J. Barnes, A. Kenny, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press 2014, 1213a.

62 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1159b–1160a.

and self-narrative truth) is to *share* that responsibility with the close others whose willingness to participate in such sharing differentiates them from the more distant individuals.

Furthermore, although Aristotle does say that being in a close relationship entails more responsibility towards the people we are close with, he does not extend this thought the way I do. For him, higher responsibility characteristic of close relationships is higher mostly in degree—for example, I am more obliged to help my close others than to help strangers.⁶³ According to my account, however, the responsibility between the close others is higher because it entails responsibility for a special group of tasks, namely for making sure that the close other's moral agency and self-narrative truth remain in good shape. Also, the responsibility is higher because of its constancy and steadiness—such responsibility is not a one-time or an *ad hoc* task.

Finally, it should be noted that even though Aristotle talks quite a lot about various kinds of sharing between close friends (i.e. the sharing of thoughts,⁶⁴ the sharing of joy and of sorrow,⁶⁵ the sharing of favorite activities⁶⁶), he never mentions the sharing of responsibility or the sharing of truth in my understanding of this term. The only truth sharing that could be ascribed to Aristotle is limited to not lying to the friend;⁶⁷ such truth sharing does not entail the close friends' mutual guardianship of one another's self-narrative truth.

All in all, despite having many common points with the Aristotelian account of virtue friendships, my account of close relationships seems to differ when it comes to certain important details of these common points. Furthermore, I sometimes explore topics on which Aristotle remains rather silent. Therefore, my account of close relationships is not reducible to the Aristotelian account. However, because the Aristotelian virtue friendship is so highly compatible with my portrayal of close relationships, we could say that a virtue friendship is a case of a *close friendship* (a relationship which, to a high extent, meets the criteria of being a friendship and a close relationship at the same time). For that reason, Aristotle's analysis of the friendship of the virtuous is valuable to the analysis of close relationships. It needs to be stressed though that the analysis of proximity should not be restricted to the analysis of virtue friendship or any other type of friendship. The ethical analysis of what a close relationship is goes beyond the discussion of friendship, even though the discussion

63 Ibidem, 1160a.

64 Ibidem, 1170b.

65 Ibidem, 1171a–1171b.

66 Ibidem, 1172a.

67 Interestingly, Aristotle seems to be opposed to absolute honesty between close friends. For example, there is an implicit recommendation not to encumber the friend with all of one's sorrows. See: Ibidem, 1171b.

of some kinds of friendship may constitute an important part of the discussion concerning close relationships.

Let me now move on to the third possible objection that could be voiced in connection with the vision of close relationships presented in this paper. This objection could be formulated in the following way: 1) children are born into ‘close relationships’ with their parents; 2) they are incapable of displaying the competences in question; 3) so, ‘close relationships’ can obtain without those competences being the case in the ‘close others;’ this shows that these competences do not really define what ‘close relationships’ are.

I would respond that the objection is built on the false belief that a parent–child relationship is close by the mere virtue of being a parent–child relationship. If that were the case, then a birth parent who resigns from being present in the child’s life would forever remain in a close relationship with the child, against their own will. That cannot be true. Close relationships, as has been stressed in this paper, cannot be formed against anybody’s will. They require consensuality of everybody involved. Notice an interesting implication: just like the parent’s consent is crucial for the relationship to become close, so is the child’s. The child may be forced to maintain some kind of a relationship with their parent, but she cannot be forced to have a *close relationship* with the parent. Therefore, children are not *born into* close relationships with their parents. They are merely born into certain kinship relationships with the parents, which may transform into close relationships but need not. The fact that some parents *think* they have a close relationship with their child from the very beginning of the child’s life is an expression of a certain emotional need, but the existence of such a need does not automatically imply and guarantee the existence of a close relationship.

What it takes for the parent–child relationship to be transformed into a close relationship constitutes material for another paper. One thing can be stated though: the child’s birth is, at best, a beginning of a long path of constructing a close relationship with the parent—a path during which a willing parent should serve as a guide in the child’s acquisition of close-relationship competences, and during which the parent should be respectful of the child’s consent or the lack of consent concerning the proximity between them.⁶⁸

68 That it is not only possible but also advisable to respect the child’s consent or the lack of consent from the very first minutes of the child’s life is stressed by a French obstetrician, Frederick Leboyer, and an English midwife and child care expert, Tracy Hogg. Both these authors are proponents of constructing a relationship with a newborn in a consensual way. See: F. Leboyer, *Pour une naissance sans violence*, Paris, Editions de Seuil 2008, part III, sections 6, 24–25, T. Hogg, with M. Blau, *Secrets of the Baby Whisperer: How to Calm, Connect and Communicate with Your Baby*, Kent, Mackays and Chatham Plc 2001, p. 7.

This brings us to an important conclusion of this paper, namely that close relationships are always a matter of choice. While people may have no choice of whether to be or not to be in a certain kind of relationship with another person, they do have a choice regarding the degree of proximity this relationship will involve. Nobody can force a person to trust another in a way which is characteristic of close relationships and to share such intimate kind of responsibility as the one that has been described in this paper.

Another conclusion is that close relationships constitute an optimum way of taking full responsibility for ourselves. Since 1) I am not infallible, and 2) it is impossible for me to see all my errors on my own, because—as Wittgenstein said—“whatever is going to seem right to me is right,”⁶⁹ then 3) it is, in fact, impossible for me to take full responsibility for myself on my own. Just like there is no private language, there is no ‘private responsibility’ and no ‘private moral agency.’ Similarly to the way I need other competent language users in order to make sure I am using the language correctly, I need competent others to be a fully responsible moral agent. To some extent, certain more distant others may be helpful in that task, but their help will have shortcomings. People who are genuinely close to me, on the other hand, are like the Special Forces with pertinent skills and willingness to undertake the task of being inter-responsible for me: there is a very particular kind of trust between us, and this kind of trust would be out of place between me and the more distant others.

All in all, close relationships play a significant role in the field of morals. By constructing close relationships with other people we appoint them as benevolent but vigilant guardians of our moral constitution and of our self-narrative truth, and we agree to perform that role for them as well. In a way, close others co-author one another’s moral agencies and one another’s self-narratives. In terms of ethics, one cannot become closer to another person than that. This shows that close relationships are ‘close’ not only because they involve high emotional proximity, but also because they involve high ethical proximity.

Abstrakt

Etyczne znaczenie bliskich relacji

Głównym zadaniem niniejszego artykułu jest nakreślenie normatywnego obrazu bliskich relacji międzyludzkich i pokazanie dlaczego są one istotne i relewantne z perspektywy etyki. W pierwszym kroku wskazuję, że choć zbiór elementów do jakich pojęcie bliskich relacji się odnosi ma

69 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M., Anscombe, Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1986, entry 258.

pewne elementy wspólne ze zbiorami do jakich odnoszą się takie pojęcia jak „miłość”, „przyjaźń” czy „więzy rodzinne”, to jednak pojęcie bliskich relacji nie jest redukowalne do żadnego z wyżej wymienionych pojęć, a zatem zasługuje na własną definicję. W drugim kroku, omawiam cechy jakie charakteryzują bliskie relacje – wymieniam kolejno konsensualność, wzajemność, rozciągłość w czasie, nieinstrumentalne traktowanie oraz wspólne dzielenie się odpowiedzialnością. Do tego zestawu cech dołączam również prawdomówność w autonarracji, otwartość na to, że bliska osoba współtworzy z nami narracyjną prawdę o nas samych, a także gotowość by – w odruchu wzajemności – współtworzyć narracyjną prawdę bliskiej osoby o niej. Jako ostatnią z cech wymieniam zaufanie, pokazując, że zaufanie charakterystyczne dla bliskich relacji wiąże się z zestawem kompetencji jakie dana osoba powinna posiadać, aby być godnym zaufania partnerem w bliskiej relacji. Z faktu, że żadna osoba nie jest nieomylna w kwestiach etycznych wynika, iż aby być w pełni odpowiedzialni za samych siebie, musimy polegać na innych osobach, które mają odpowiednie kompetencje. Bliscy nam ludzie są właśnie takimi osobami; są oni stróżami i współautorami naszej moralności oraz naszej narracyjnej tożsamości.