



## The temporality of intimacy: Promise, world, and death



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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the temporal character of intimacy. I begin by examining the significance of “promise” and “habit” in intimate relationships. These themes are developed through the work of M. Merleau-Ponty and J.H. van den Berg to reveal the embedded or en-worlded character of intimacy. These analyses help to articulate and to problematize the sense we often have of “established” relationships as possessing a fixed, already determined character. The final section discusses the issues of intimacy that surround the situation of dying. Specifically, it analyses (1) ways in which the issue in death is the stripping away of one’s world, but also ways in which the meaning of one’s death is still something futural, and thus “to be shaped”; and, (2) ways in which the shaping of this meaning with intimate others is significant both for the one manifestly dying and for those whose death seems distant.

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“Intimacy,” paradoxically, names what is simultaneously most personal to us, and most fully shared with another. Because we are beings defined by the possibility of intimacy, our own nature propels us into the dynamism of interpersonal sharing, and this paper will use the resources of phenomenology to study more fully the character of this *being oneself by being-with* by exploring the temporal character of intimacy. Drawing upon the work of M. Merleau-Ponty and J.H. van den Berg, I will examine, in Sections 1 and 2 respectively, the significance of *promise* and *habit* in intimate relationships, to reveal both the *futurity* that is inherent to intimacy, and the embedded or en-worlded character that constitutes the essential *past* of intimacy. These temporal analyses help to clarify what it is for a relationship to be “established,” with its attendant issues of openness and closedness, and also provide the terms for assessing the health of relationships. The final section brings out the essential weight of the *present* of intimacy, through a discussion of the issues of intimacy and urgency that surround the situation of dying. Specifically, this section analyzes (1) ways in which the issue in death is the stripping away of one’s world, but also ways in which the meaning of one’s death is still something futural, and thus *to be shaped*; and, (2) ways in which the shaping of this meaning with intimate others is significant both for the one manifestly dying and for those whose death seems distant. As a means of coming closer to some of the most characteristic dimensions of intimacy, I will

appeal throughout to generalized scenarios of intimate connections as well as to some specific situations from my own experience of facing the death of my grandmother.

### 1. The future of intimacy: the promise

Meaning does not arrive readymade from without and force itself upon us, nor does meaning arise automatically from within us as a pre-structured form of how things will count for us. If meaning were to have this power, we would be captivated beings. As Merleau-Ponty argues:

If man is not to be embedded in the matrix of that syncretic setting in which animals lead their lives in a sort of *ek-stase*...then between himself and what elicits his action a distance must be set, and, as Malebranche put it, forms of stimulation from outside must henceforth impinge on him ‘respectfully’; each momentary situation must cease to be, for him, the totality of being, each particular response must no longer fill his whole field of action (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 87).

Without this distance from that which stimulates us, there would be no freedom in our existence, only force. Indeed, our actions only have value on the basis of this open, ambiguous character of meaning.<sup>1</sup> To see more deeply into a particularly rich site of the open character of meaning, let us look first at the nature of a

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<sup>1</sup> See de Beauvoir, 1948, 13–15; and Sartre, 1956, 37–40.

promise—an *activity* that we can undertake precisely only insofar as the situations of our lives do not “fill” our field of action. Examining this exemplary site of human freedom, we will also begin to see how the intimacy of our relationships is marked in general by such a structure of promise.

While a promise is set down with a certain specific meaning and inaugurated at a specific time, and in this sense is a finished fact, the meaning of a promise is not finished in this its initial making. The promise of a marriage, of a parent to care for a child, of a friendship, of a caregiver to tend to a patient, of a secret to be kept: such promises are forever in need of being renewed, and forever in danger of being violated. Only for this reason are promises meaningful and important. Let us consider more closely the temporality of the promise, and the way in which its temporality allows for its meaning as something with both a certain fixity and a certain openness.

Though a promise, once made, is a fixed happening that belongs to the past—“I promised”—the very meaning of this fixity comes from the future in two related but distinct ways.<sup>2</sup> Logically, the sense of a promise is always already something that called upon the future in its meaning, i.e., it “intended” the future in its very utterance. Practically, we ongoingly comport ourselves in a futural way toward the promise, and in so doing we give a certain “look” to that past promise—a look of fulfillment, or change, or perhaps of failure—that continues to unfold both in the present and in the attitude we have toward it as a commitment that is still “to come” in future. By the promise, we bind our own significance to the future, and how we behave carves out concretely and determinately how that binding is being enacted and realized.

This futural character of the promise both allows us to fix our past promise—to prove, that is, that we “really did” promise—and also makes it possible to change the significance of this promise, of this past. In some cases, this change could indeed be a breaking of a promise, but in other cases the spirit of the promise may very much live on, though the shape of how the promise is to be fulfilled has changed significantly. Indeed, it is the character of many longtime or lifelong promises—such as that undertaken in marriage, in friendship, or the raising of a child—that such change is essential to continuing to honor the promise: what may have been suitable as a way to honor a relationship and its promise at its start may be quite inappropriate years later; indeed, it may be the very process of honoring the promise through which we learn how to honor that promise, perhaps in ways that differ from what we originally imagined. Our malleable relationship with our future makes it possible for us to have this renewed relationship with the past, a past which may otherwise seem like a bygone—i.e., a finished and static—aspect of our lives. We live *meaningfully* in view of this balance. Let us consider an example to see this point.

A woman has recently met someone with whom she feels quite an immediate kinship. They talk easily with one another, share interests in a notable way, and they quickly feel quite happy in one another’s company. This seems likely to be a welcome dawning of a new friendship. Rather early in the beginning of their growing acquaintance, the woman experiences a significant change in her life that sinks her into a period of intense struggle and a desire and need for care. She turns at key moments to her new friend, and spends a great deal of their new friendship time talking about this change in her life. The new friend spends this same time offering herself as a listener, a supporter, and at times an advisor. There is no precedent for this form of exchange in their relationship; there are no precedents for them. While both women are presumably

“getting” something from the exchange, it is definitely the case that one woman is receiving more support from the other. If the friendship were to end at this point, there is arguably a way in which the relationship could be characterized as *giving* more to the first woman than to the second.<sup>3</sup> To be comfortable giving so freely as well as to be comfortable receiving so freely is possible insofar as both women experience this present moment of giving and receiving in terms of a future in which the relationship between them will have other faces. This is not to say that there is an explicit or even an implicit promise that an equal share of giving will at one point in time travel in the reverse direction as it is now, but rather that there is a certain faith in an openness in their relationship such that different balances may be attained; or, perhaps if that balance cannot be attained, there is a recognition (again perhaps only implicitly) that the relationship can be ended in the future if need be, or even that the “giving” friend will find support for herself in other relationships. Whichever of these scenarios obtains, the ability to be open to engaging this present for the two women is contextualized by a future in which other forms of this or other relationships will allow their diverse emotional needs and wants to be met. It is with this faith in an open future that they are able to take on the present without fearing that it will become a static prison. This same openness to the future is also what makes this present action meaningful, not simply determinate or determined. There is no absolute security in this present. In the next moments of their friendship, either woman could pull back and change her level of involvement with the other. Each is vulnerable to not receiving what she may hope to receive in the future. The intention toward the future is only an intention, a sense of there being promise here, not a guarantee. Thus, at each step in which either friend offers herself—either by giving or being open to receiving—there is a gift of vulnerability to the other that is offered. The future, thus, both protects us and also exposes us. While the “promise” in this friendship is not of the sort we find in a stated or even an understood vow, it is, as is the vow, marked essentially by this orientation toward what may come and the participants’ roles in shaping that future, as well by a certain felt hopefulness that this future will indeed come to fruition.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, while it may be most obvious to think first and foremost of a promise as the sort of thing that arrives in a specific and explicit utterance, it is arguably the case that an underlying and much more ambiguous promise of simply “being there” or of “showing up for” or “standing by” someone is the girding structure that must exist for any particular pledge of promise to be both articulable and trusted.

This futural relationship to meaning is equally present in actions or events that are less explicitly futurally oriented than that of the promise. For instance, consider a situation in which a person has told a lie and it is now known to both parties in a relationship.<sup>5</sup> The fact of the lie is settled. Yet, the meaning of that lie is, again, forever unfolding. That lie looks very different, for instance, if it ends up being an isolated instance than if it is one in a plentiful series of lies. That lie also looks very different to the parties involved if it is something that breaks the relationship or something that turns out to be capable of being handled well and perhaps even allows for a

<sup>3</sup> Of course, the act of giving to someone else (and being both allowed to offer such support to someone and also, ideally, being appreciated for such support) can also be counted as a true benefit. The second woman in this case may indeed “need” or want to be entrusted in the role of being able to give care to the first woman. In this way, both parties can be seen as “getting” something.

<sup>4</sup> Here, we see a sense of “promise” that is used in expressions such as “the child shows promise in mathematics” or “that young piano player shows promise.” In these cases, too, the child or the musician is so talented in a given arena that she seems to behave as if she had made a commitment to mathematics or music.

<sup>5</sup> Compare the discussion of honesty and betrayal in [Russon, 2009](#), pp 88–94.

<sup>2</sup> For a more expansive argument regarding the shaping power of the future on our present and our past experiences, see [van den Berg, 1972](#), 84–101.

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