

## 'Relational vertigo' in *Before Midnight*

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I want to explore a phenomenon that should be familiar to most adults who have been in long-term intimate romantic-sexual relationships. I have not seen this phenomenon named, but I will call it *relational vertigo*. I have in mind that moment when one participant, perhaps both, suddenly become aware of the very real risk that the relationship is unravelling or will soon unravel irretrievably. There might be the same distinctive hollowing-out *feeling* as with physical vertigo, but the phenomenon mostly comprises a kind of sudden, numbing *understanding* of one's existential vulnerability.

I am assuming that if the relationship has been genuinely intimate and trusting, then it will also be identity-conferring. Each party will have partly adopted the ends and projects of the other, will feel on-going concern for the concerns of the other, will feel vicarious pain and joy at the pain and joy of the other. The failure of such a relationship is therefore not the failure of a discreet project, resulting in mere disappointment or frustration; rather, the vertigo has to do with a much deeper threat to one's identity. I'm not sure how more can be said about the existential vulnerability in question: it involves an awareness of the stark limits of words and actions to fix the situation, of the radical unpredictability of the near future, and of the power of brute fortune. Once the words run out, one can only undergo the vertigo while floundering, wincing and dreading. And even when both participants recoil from the brink, the ripples of the vertigo remain on the surface, a sign of a deeper discord that could surface anytime in the future.

Richard Linklater's film *Before Midnight* (2013) is a fascinating representation of such vertigo, and I propose to use its protagonists to focus my discussion.<sup>1</sup> The film's commercial and artistic success is somewhat surprising, since the film is very static and does not have much of a story. The entire 'third act' of the film (from p. 56 through to the end on p. 114) depicts no more than the protagonists talking. But this is where the vertigo takes place, and so I will focus on it.

### *The situation of Before Midnight*

Although this paper is not meant to be a plot summary or a critical review, a certain amount of plot and character detail will be necessary in order to make my subsequent discussion of relational vertigo more precise. This is the third film in a trilogy directed by Richard Linklater. The same actors,

playing the same characters, Jesse and Celine (the characters are roughly the same age as the actors), appeared in all three films, with nine-year intervals, so we see them age from 23 to 32 to 41. By the time of *Before Midnight*, they seem to have been married for 8 years, they have two twin daughters who seem to be about seven. For most of their 8-year marriage they have been living in Paris. During the film's tight 12-hour timespan, they are nearing the end of a six-week sojourn at a writers' retreat in rural Greece with half a dozen others: the second act comprises an extended multi-group discussion during the preparation and consumption of a communal lunch.<sup>2</sup>

Celine is French, an environmental activist, working for a French NGO in Paris. In an early dialogue of the film (p. 8), she learns of a setback in one of her projects. This is the last straw, and she is slowly deciding to return to work in a government department, even though she has deep concerns about inflexible and underfunded government policy and about working for the same cretin boss she had before.

Jesse is a commercially successful American novelist. He has a child, Hank, now aged 14, from a previous marriage with an American woman, now living in Chicago, and with custody of Hank. At the beginning of *Before Midnight*, we get a brief glimpse of Jesse saying goodbye to Hank at the Greek airport: Hank has just spent a week visiting Jesse and Celine at the retreat, and is now flying back to the US on his own. As part of an already awkward discussion, Hank tells Jesse that his mother still "hates" him (p. 4), which impedes the communication and reunions between father and son. One of the themes of the film is Jesse's fear of losing touch with Hank, especially during his teenage years. It is unclear to what degree his fear has crystallised into a desire to move his Parisian family to Chicago, but Celine recognises that potential desire and rejects it forcefully – and Jesse quickly denies that he had any such desire – although he becomes more concrete about it later (p. 93). This is one of the 'fault lines' of their relationship. As we learn later, Celine is tied to Paris by her professional life, despite its setbacks, her family is in Paris, and she cares enough about the French language to speak it with her girls.

The second and deeper fault line has to do with a classic gendered disagreement in parenting policy and work-family balance. Jesse has clearly left the bulk of the parenting and housework to Celine, and this is hardly the first time that Celine has complained about this. Perhaps Jesse feels that his artistic success entitles him to devote more of his time to writing and to promotional tours – and to bringing in more money for the family. In contrast, Celine's professional frustrations are closely linked with the priority she accords to her children and to the unreliability and absence of their father. One of the virtues of the film script is the tragic irony of watching Jesse discussing his next novel with some of the other guests at the retreat. The novel sounds terrible: self-important,

rambling, incoherent, glazed with a cheap mysticism. The film spectator marvels at how such a charlatan can find commercial success.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, we never see Celine at work. (She is “on holiday”, although this means extra work for her to look after the twins’ needs out of school, while Jesse lounges around discussing literature). And while we may have doubts about Jesse’s dubious aesthetic values, we do understand the genuine value of the environmental ideals to which she is committed, just as we understand her frustration at not being able to fight for them more effectively.

These two fault lines are *overt* in the sense that the characters themselves refer to them regularly – whether in passing or whether in high-stake conflict situations – as long-standing reasons for grievance. And neither character is surprised to hear such grievances in the mouth of the other: there really is nothing further to say about them, and during the third act each character defends themselves with a lame ‘global’ response of “you should have known before you married me,” in order to implicate the other – perhaps dishonestly – as co-responsible for their present predicament.<sup>4</sup>

Of course there will be other fault lines in the relationship, of which the characters are more or less aware. One essential feature of intimate relationships is that they are richly and impenetrably *opaque*, not only to outsiders, but even to the participants themselves; such relationships therefore represent a profound challenge to the Cartesian ideal of first-personal ‘privileged access’ to mental states, partly because there exists an entity – the relationship – with its own history, its own potential, above and beyond the history and potential of the two individuals. Sometimes the situation might be clearer to contemporaneous third parties, or to the participants themselves later in retrospection, but of course never perfectly clear.<sup>5</sup>

The overt and covert fault lines will lead to the vertiginous fissures in the third act. In the first and second act, however, the overall impression of the relationship has been crafted to be harmonious enough. The couple are clearly familiar and comfortable with each other, with each other’s professional situations, with how to deal with each other’s extended families, and they share enough by way of parenting values and policies. They are comfortable using the first person plural in group situations such as the second-act lunch scene.<sup>6</sup>

Now that we have something of a grasp on Celine, Jesse and their marriage, we can take a more philosophical turn. In the next three sections I want to briefly summarise three inter-related notions of recent philosophical interest, after which we can pull them together into a better understanding of relational vertigo. The three notions are as follows: (i) relational *autonomy*, and the special kind of vulnerable dependency on an ultimately unknowable other; (ii) Bernard Williams’s *moral luck*, with

reference to the special kind of vulnerability to contingent misfortune in intimate relationships; and (iii) the problem of one person's *imaginative understanding* of the other person.

### *Relational autonomy and relational vertigo*

The contemporary discussion of relational autonomy dates back at least to Nedelsky (1989), but its roots are in Hegel.<sup>7</sup> "If we ask ourselves what actually enables people to be autonomous, the answer is not isolation, but relationships — with parents, teachers, friends, loved ones" (1989 p. 12). The concept of relational autonomy is a response to the familiar traditional understanding of liberal 'atomistic' autonomy, according to which a Cartesian person is autonomous insofar as she is free to act on her desires, without external obstacle (prison walls, poverty), without internal obstacle (fear, alcoholism), and without the desires themselves having been non-rationally implanted (hypnotism, oppressive socialisation). Harry Frankfurt (1971) famously bolstered this substantive conception with a procedural conception whereby the atomistic individual could endorse or repudiate their first-order desires in their quest for autonomy.

In contrast to the atomistic conception, the concept of relational autonomy begins with the observation that each of us grows up within intimate relationships with significant others: at first family members, then teachers, but later the intense friendships of adolescence, during which the self takes shape. To put it crudely, according to the relational view, the self can only define itself in attraction or opposition to various other selves. I develop and discover my values and priorities during everyday interactions and experiments and conflicts with others. But even the healthy adult self requires intimate relationships in order to be fully autonomous. The relational autonomy conception will point at those moments of crisis in my life where I have to *talk it over* with a close friend, someone I am confident understands me, someone who has the authority, concern and knowledge to give the good advice that I cannot see, someone who can confirm or reject my inclinations, someone who can help me to make sense of what I am going through, and help me deal with the consequences of my decision.

Our intimate relationships thereby provide the *forum* for the development of the autonomous self, and what's more, they go on to partly *constitute* the autonomous self, and blur the boundaries of the self. Sometimes I pursue my likely self-interest, only to discover the 'impossibility' of continuing such pursuit once I realise that it will harm someone I care about. Sometimes it might be worse for something to happen to someone I care about than for the same thing to happen to me.<sup>8</sup>

This conception of the relational autonomy takes us a good way to understanding the special kind of vulnerability, not only to the fate of the intimate other, but also to the fate of the relationship itself. This vulnerability is essential to relational vertigo. Normal situations of conflict with a non-intimate

other – for example in the workplace – essentially present themselves as another external challenge, to be navigated in more or less the same way as finding the best route to one's destination using a map. There will be better and worse options, there will be hunches and probabilities, there may well be regret and recrimination. But as with so much of one's life, one can muddle through without letting the situation or the obstacles or antagonists get to one. When the relationship is truly intimate, then serious discord is *not* experienced as external to the self, does *not* present external options for the self to decide between; rather, it undermines the very self, undermines the value structures within which the self can make meaningful choices about external options, undermines the conception of possible futures presupposed by the stable self. This is the vertigo I am talking about.

There is a question about whether to use the metaphor of vertigo to describe this undermining of the self. Why not simply call it a kind of depression or despair, for example? In my search for greater precision, I think there are distinctive features. First, one can be depressed about all sorts of things, whereas I am focusing on a relatively narrow experience, with the explicit link to the relationship. Second, vertigo is essentially sudden in a way that depression is not. In the physical version of vertigo, it only begins when I go out on the balcony, and I am overcome by a very distinctive kind of unease associated with losing the ground beneath my feet. Third, vertigo is linked to a fear of *falling*, or *falling apart*, physically or metaphorically; whereas depression need not be associated with any particular fear. Fourth, depression is normally understood as essentially individual, whereas relational vertigo is something that may be experienced by one or both partners at the same time. Fifth, I am inclined to say that depression is essentially focused on the world (including the future world), or experienced as a failure to fit into that world; whereas the vertigo is experienced as a wobble of the self, and perhaps even as an attack. Perhaps the purest form of vertigo has to do with jealousy (even though in Celine and Jesse's case there is more annoyance than jealousy about past infidelities.)

What physical and relational vertigo has in common with depression is cognitive impenetrability to reassuring beliefs. With physical vertigo, one can genuinely and firmly believe the balcony to be safe, and yet one is too terrified to venture out onto it. In a similar way, relational vertigo is immune to the genuine reassuring belief about the other's love, commitment, desires; or to genuine memories about surviving past discord.

### *Anna Karenina*

Most of the subsequent philosophical discussion about Bernard Williams's classic paper 'Moral Luck' (1981) concerned his examples of the lorry driver and of Gauguin. There has been far less discussion

of his example of Anna Karenina, but this is much more relevant for my purposes.<sup>9</sup> Williams's overall project is to criticise the view – implicit in such diverse moral schemata as Christian morality, Kantian moral autonomy and legal culpability – that true morality is immune to luck: it is fair to hold someone morally responsible only for those actions within their control and their understanding. In response to this 'immunity' assumption, Williams demonstrated that our ordinary practices of blaming are shot through with luck. The non-negligent lorry driver, skilled, sober, cautious, his brakes recently checked etc. is not blameworthy at all, and yet a child runs in front of the lorry and is killed. It is perfectly intelligible for the lorry-driver to blame himself, and we would be suspicious of any driver who dismissed such a tragedy as having nothing morally to do with him. The semi-fictional Gauguin aspires to be a great painter, and to that end abandons his family in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Paris to a predictably grim fate. The abandonment – *at the time* of the abandonment – is clearly not justified since Gauguin's future artistic success will depend on a huge amount of luck; and yet he is lucky, he is successful, and this success, writes Williams, retrospectively justifies the abandonment.<sup>10</sup>

The above two examples concern individuals, and the impact of luck on their moral status. In contrast, the Anna Karenina example concerns two people. Karenina<sup>11</sup> is married to Karenin, and they have a 10-year-old boy together. Like Gauguin, she abandons her family for the sake of a very risky project. Like Gauguin, her project will be vulnerable to the 'extrinsic' luck of whether they are physically able to be together; but while Gauguin needed the 'intrinsic' luck of artistic talent, Karenina needs more than talent: she needs the 'extrinsic-intrinsic' luck of relationship chemistry.<sup>12</sup> She might cease to love him, he might cease to love her, or the relationship might founder for any number of reasons despite their continuing love.

The essentially asymmetry of the relationship does not help, in the sense that she needs it to work much more than he does, given the sexist double standards of the time (remember she has left a husband *and* a child), and as time goes on her desperation increases, and this makes things even more claustrophobic for Vronsky. Throughout Karenina is conscious of two things: the cost of her relationship, especially to her son; and the fact that her relationship with Vronsky, although under stress, *might still* go better. Certainly at the moment of abandoning her family, she perceived their relationship as something that could go well – it was not mere wishful thinking, Tolstoy is at pains to imply that it might have gone well, and his readership at one level must surely be cheering her on, cheering *them* on, even while they might condemn the general practice of mothers abandoning husbands and children. The climax of the novel (spoiler alert!) constitutes what might be called the ultimate form of relational vertigo, a situation of such pain and disorientation that can only be resolved by suicide.

Williams describes different ways that the 'project' could end, and the different meanings of such endings. If Vronsky dies from an accident or a disease, Karenina could still say that it was worth leaving her family for whatever time she had been 'allowed' with him. Their relationship could remain intact in her memories, and she might console herself with thoughts about reunion in the afterworld. She might even commit suicide with the thought that there was nothing left for her in the world *because* her lover was not in it (1981 p. 27). If, however, Vronsky leaves her, or seems to be on the verge of leaving her (we are never sure what his thoughts are, how much Karenina's paranoia and desperation was distorting her interpretation – indeed, perhaps Vronsky was not even sure about his thoughts and feelings), then the failure seems to be *extrinsic* to Karenina, but *intrinsic* to the relationship and therefore effectively intrinsic to Anna. He is leaving her because of who she is, or of what she has done or said, and this will suddenly give new and devastating meaning – retroactively – to the abandonment of her husband and child. As a result, the suicide she does end up committing will be accompanied by very different thoughts; as Williams puts it: "What she did, she now finds insupportable, because she could have been justified only by the life she hoped for, and those hopes were not just negated, but refuted, by what happened" (1981 p. 27).

As an extreme form of relational vertigo, Karenina's case is useful to reveal an essential component, the experience of *radical contingency*. When things are going well in an intimate relationship, it is tempting to settle into a comfortable, even a complacent sense of necessity. The longer the relationship, the greater the sense of something like fate. The thought that "we belong together" so easily slides into "we will be together forever." This is compatible with minor discord, sacrifice, fleeting irritation, and an awareness of the need for hard work to make it work. But long-term couples retain an essential and not unreasonable faith in their joint project, such that, whatever the current reality, we can make it work with enough good will, enough communication, enough respect.

What Williams's discussion of Anna shows, I think, is the ineliminable role of luck in *every* intimate relationship. Obviously the extrinsic luck of good health is important, but its extrinsicness does not threaten the relationship as such. To put it another way, since we are all equally vulnerable to the extrinsic misfortune of illness and accidents, there is no *additional* threat to the relationship. When serious discord strikes an intimate relationship as a form of *intrinsic* misfortune, however, this can be vertiginous precisely because it exposes the role of brute, uncontrollable luck in the feelings one has for the other, and in the bluntly opaque chemistry of our interactions.

When a relationship ends because one of the participants dies, it is an occasion for grief. But at least the cause of the end is very clear, and third parties will be able to console the survivor through a

shared awareness of human mortality. But when the relationship ends through discord, then it might not be at all clear what happened; one realises with horror that there is nothing necessary holding it together at all – no love, no resolve, no expectations, no fate. It is often tempting for the participants, and for third parties, to use the language of faultless natural catastrophe, but this will only distract one from the gnawing truth that the end might have involved no more than human cruelty, ignorance, fear and anger – destructive forces that could be unleashed at any time on any other relationship in one’s life. The opacity of intimate relationships is mirrored by the opacity of the origins, shapes, and consequences of these forces.

In Anna’s case, the vertigo had fatal consequences; in the case of Jesse and Celine, there is a nervous reconciliation at the end of the film, but nothing has resolved, nothing has been learned, no new marital commitments have been made, and both can predict and dread the next crisis.

### *Love and understanding*

We’re almost in a position where we can start talking about the relational vertigo in the film itself. But in this section I need to warn against a simplistic understanding of relational vertigo as mere evidence of the relationship’s intrinsic weakness. An unsympathetic third party might say that the couple were insufficiently loving or insufficiently understanding, and that the vertigo (perhaps predictably) merely reveals such insufficiency. Such a third party might not even be inclined to blame either participant, and merely speak about the parties’ incompatibility. This ‘Darwinian’ conception of intimate relationships would see vertigo as a form of healthy destruction, allowing both participants to separate, learn, and move on in their lives.

Certainly this is sometimes the case. But I would resist the suggestion that it is inevitably the case. Relational vertigo can happen to those relationships with the greatest love and understanding between the participants – among whom I consider Jesse and Celine. Because of the essential opacity of intimate relationships, because of the merging of identities in a way that undermines familiar atomistic notions of contract and informed consent, because of the multi-layered contexts that influence the meaning of individual acts and utterances (present *and* past), it is usually very hard to pin specific blame on specific instances of carelessness or ignorance or insensitivity as “the cause” of the vertigo. It is more honest to accept that relational vertigo can strike at any time in any relationship. I hasten to add, however, that genuine love cannot endure *under the assumption* that “vertigo might strike” at any time: mature love needs a robust kind of confidence about the future, and understanding needs a confidence that enough can be understood.<sup>13</sup>

There have been long-standing debates in philosophy about the nature of love, about the nature of interpersonal understanding, and about the relation between the two – and this is not the place to



get bogged down in either. Suffice to summarise some important points about the complexity of both concepts, again to help us grasp the contours of the phenomenon of relational vertigo, especially as exemplified by Celine and Jesse in the film.

The most important misconception of love is as a kind of passive feeling (into which one “falls”), which comes and goes uncontrollably. Instead, it is better understood as a complex disposition involving ways of feeling, but also ways of seeing, ways of thinking and ways of spontaneously acting. It is at least partly under one’s control; at the simplest level, one can “promise to abstain from activities that will endanger love. One can more positively promise to nurture conditions that are conducive to love. One can even promise to adopt or strive for attitudes and perspectives which are constitutive of love” (Solomon 2002 p. 26). Two important such attitudes are attention and generosity: one chooses to attend more closely to the other’s concerns, and/or chooses to give the benefit of the doubt, while also choosing whether or not to admit one’s anxiety or shame to the other.<sup>14</sup> Far from vertigo revealing the couple’s love as inadequate, it is the partly chosen self-exposure necessary for genuine love that makes the couple vulnerable to vertigo.

The concept of ‘understanding’ is hugely variegated, especially in philosophy. For our purposes, the important thing is to distinguish between one person’s *biographical* understanding and her *imaginative* understanding of the other. The first concept is more like a kind of knowledge, and invokes the detached enquiry of the psychotherapist or the biographer. I can know a person very well in the sense that I know what they believe about how the world is and how it should be; what they desire, long for, or are averse to; what they hope for and feel ashamed about etc. I can understand such a person in the sense that I can render their *prima facie* perplexing action intelligible, and in the sense that I can reliably predict their dispositional behaviour – and reliably avoid certain situations likely to provoke conflict within our relationship. I do not wish to downplay the importance of such biographical understanding as part of intimacy; clearly someone without any biographical *interest* in the other cannot seriously claim to love them. Importantly, however, biographical understanding is compatible with a kind of risk-averse hardness that will stifle love. (And of course biographical knowledge is also compatible with cruelty, manipulation, coercion and deceit.)<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, ‘imaginative’ understanding of another person starts with the familiar notion of imagining oneself “in the other’s shoes.” But there is a real question about what exactly those shoes contain, and how imaginatively accessible they are to others. Obviously they contain shared conceptions of the general vulnerabilities of the human body and mind; but how much of the particular do they contain, and how is such understanding of the particular governed by the

normative? For a very simple representation of these complexities, let's take A and B in a relationship. One day B loses his job because of company down-sizing, and he is sad and angry. (Clearly I am thinking about Celine's difficulties with her NGO job, but I want to simplify to make a point.) A's initial thought is that B is over-dramatizing it; but A wants to help him, and wants to understand. A starts by asking herself: "how would I feel if I lost my job?" But this is not enough, because A's job happens to play a different role in A's life than B's job did in B's life. B is also much more ambitious (in career terms) than A, and B had identified much more closely with his job than A does with hers. So the next question is whether A can imagine herself as *that* ambitious, as so closely identifying with her job, and *then* imagine herself as unemployed – how would she feel? But even that might not be enough, let's say, because of B's particular history of needing to make up for youthful profligacy, of his need to prove himself in front of his sceptical parents, of his need to be seen as the 'masculine' breadwinner, etc.

My point is this: we can see love as motivating enquiry and sympathy, but this might only be possible to a point. The failure of imaginative understanding – against the background of long-term sufficient understanding – could be an essential component to the relational vertigo. Indeed, the articulation of the experience of the vertigo might take the form "I can't understand this person anymore." Perhaps if the other's incomprehensible identity-conferring commitment can be 'quarantined' so as not to disrupt the healthy parts of the loving relationship, then both parties could agree to disagree. This might be the case with strongly divergent political allegiances, for example.

### *Back to the film*

With the adumbration of these three key concepts – relational autonomy, moral luck, and imaginative understanding – we are in a better position to understand relational vertigo, and especially the particular kind exemplified so well in the third act of the film. I have already expressed my surprise that such a static drama could win commercial acclaim. Even low-budget soap operas have more plot movement and gladiatorial spectacle than this film, and nowhere is the film's austerity so evident than in the scene leading up to Celine's blunt but catastrophic declaration: "You know what's going on here? It's simple – I don't think I love you anymore" (p. 107). After that there is only sullen silence and deep division, Jesse in the hotel room, Celine at a table on the terrace, with the future wide, wide open.<sup>16</sup>

One of the important contextual features of relational vertigo has to do with "exit options". The idea is that if a person has a unilateral low-cost option to exit a situation (not just in money and logistical terms, but also in power-political terms), then the fact that they do *not* exit means that their continuing presence can be taken as consent. Ignoring the absence of realistic exit options leads to

systematic misunderstanding of domestic abuse situations, as when the frustrated friend says “why doesn’t she just leave him?”

The problem for the two protagonists in *Before Midnight* is that they are ‘trapped’ abroad, which makes unilateral exit very costly. After the end-of-film split, Jesse makes the first reconciliatory move by coming down to the terrace, and Celine accepts his presence by playing the cutesy time machine game, although it is not clear what is going through her mind. She might just be buying time until they get back to their Paris existence, where she has old friends to consult and stay with, where she knows how to rent a new flat, where she can borrow money from her parents etc. Typically, exiting a heterosexual relationship will almost always be more costly for the woman because her salary might well be lower (and we can presume that Celine has not saved much from her NGO work), because she will be more likely to keep the children and therefore to be responsible for them alone (as well as concerned for the effects of the exit on them), and because there might be a real question of whether the man will support them financially after separation. So Celine might still find herself trapped in her marriage after their return to Paris.

Although the Greek holiday was meant to be relaxing, it turns out to have been the worst thing the couple could do. The characters start the third act by expressing their joy in “Walking, having a conversation [...] About something else than scheduling, food, work” (p. 61), but they soon begin probing and picking at the fault lines to pass the time, and without the safety valve of their respective Parisian friends to complain to. Like sausages, some (otherwise perfectly healthy) intimate relationships can only be enjoyed if they are not examined too closely.<sup>17</sup>

Alternatively, in setting the film in a holiday retreat, perhaps Linklater believed that this would expose the ‘naked’ characters, away from their layers of mundane occupational ‘clothing’ and distracting family baggage. But it could also be said that such extraction was *unfair* – to them, and to the relationship – in releasing inauthentic destructive paranoias and insecurities normally kept in check. Jesse seems to be essentially nomadic, and would be happy anywhere as long as he could read and write. But Celine seems much more rooted in Paris life, in her Paris-based work opportunities, and in her various understandings of her Parisian past and future. I think she draws much more sustenance from that place than she perhaps realises, especially given her central self-identification as a mother of children with whom she speaks French.

There is a real question of what a film of Celine’s and Jesse’s vertiginous crisis would have looked like in Paris, where the poignancy of the non-happy end would be much greater if the couple had nowhere to retreat to afterwards.<sup>18</sup> Presumably Linklater and the two actors considered this while writing the script, especially when the second film took place in Paris. It would have been good for

us viewers to see more of the parenting politics in action, for example, especially since this is one of the most important fault lines for Celine. On the one hand is Celine, who says: “I can tell you every detail of the past seven years based on what was happening in the girls' lives” (p. 62). On the other hand is Jesse, who while slowly immersing himself in parental responsibilities seven years earlier, decided to participate *up to this point* and no further – presumably in parallel with his growing success as an author. It would have been good to see Jesse’s avoidance and Celine’s compensation in this sphere of their marriage, since this would have informed our understanding of any later vertiginous crisis catalysed by this fault line.

It might also have prompted a humbled Jesse to offer a detailed and verifiable parental commitment rather than the time machine game as his peace offering. This would, however, imbalance the film by shifting the spectator’s interest and concern toward the basic on-going question of what Celine wants and what she’ll settle for, and the subsidiary question of how explicitly she can or ought to articulate this to herself.

Staging the film in Paris would have allowed a deeper look at Celine’s professional commitments and frustrations, rather than hearing about it in a brief phone call. This would have lifted Celine out of her wifely and motherly roles, and given her some kind of accomplishments and ambitions to rival her husband’s. Otherwise, all we hear is the threat that she feels.<sup>19</sup> It is true that Jesse does have some understanding, and some sympathy for Celine’s professional predicament, but for us viewers it is all at one remove from the dilemma that Celine physically has to face in Paris.

One final thought. At some point in the past Jesse also made the decision not to work on his French language skills, and it would have been good to see him in his arrogant monolingualism in the very capital of the French language and the city he had committed to living in. (It would also have been useful to see something of his awkward relationship with Celine’s parents, once they had tired of his charm.) Presumably Linklater was limited by the actor Ethan Hawke’s own language skills, and perhaps Linklater shares Jesse’s lack of interest in French language and culture. Although Celine does not pick up on this, there is something deeply disrespectful about English-speakers refusing to learn the mother tongue of their partners, for it prevents those partners from the full range of self-expression in moments of passion, anger or humour. The disrespect is doubled when such English-speakers choose to live in their spouse’s country. Perhaps Celine had resigned herself to this, choosing instead to focus on the parenting equality battle. But the very fact that the film’s vertiginous crisis played itself out entirely in English emphasised the deep linguistic and cultural gap between them. One can only hope that the fourth film – which ought to come out in 2022, if the

pattern continues – will address this. By 2022, the twins will be 16 years old, they will have strong opinions, and that will bring in an interesting new dynamic as well.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I take the pagination of the screenplay from the PDF available at Linklater et al (2013): [http://www.sonyclassics.com/awards-information/beforemidnight\\_screenplay.pdf](http://www.sonyclassics.com/awards-information/beforemidnight_screenplay.pdf)

The Wikipedia entry describes something of the film’s success. It gathered 98% approval on the Rotten Tomatoes website, it was nominated for an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay, among other awards:

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Before\\_Midnight\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Before_Midnight_(film))

As a representative of the many positive reviews, Guardian film critic Peter Bradshaw gave it five stars in *The Guardian*, 20 June 2013:

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jun/20/before-midnight-review>

For completeness, I should cite one negative review, by Ellie Bramley in *The Guardian* on 19 November 2014:

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/nov/19/before-midnight-my-most-overrated-film>

[all websites accessed November 2019]

<sup>2</sup> I am dividing the film into three acts. The first act mainly focuses on the couple talking in the car with the twin girls asleep in the back seat. The third act focuses on the couple talking during a stroll and then in the hotel room.

<sup>3</sup> It is also troubling that he mines his private sexual relationship with Celine for material, and agrees to discuss it at the public lunch (p. 28). During the third act (p. 99), she forcefully prohibits him from doing that again, but this is surprising. If she feels that strongly about it, she would have told him when the book first came out, and he would have been a lot more sheepish about it at the lunch.

<sup>4</sup> So Celine says “You mean you f\*\*\*ed up by moving to Paris to be with me?” (p. 95). And soon thereafter Jesse says “You shouldn’t have hooked up with a writer” (p. 99).

<sup>5</sup> There is also a question of whether the *actors* are aware of the fault-lines as part of their efforts to ‘inhabit’ the role by understanding themselves as emerging from a determinate biography; so the actor might inhabit the fault line without the character being explicitly aware of it. The actor Ethan Hawke has to ‘become’ the divorced Jesse, and carry that trauma ‘under’ his performance.

<sup>6</sup> One revealing scene occurs early on (p. 13). Celine and Jesse are driving with their twins asleep in the back of the car. As they drive, Celine notices some ancient ruins (remember that they’re in Greece), and reminds Jesse that they promised to take the twins to see the ruins. Jesse responds by saying that it would be a shame to wake them up. He then proposes a compromise: that they stop at the ruins the next day on the way to the airport (to return to Paris). Celine responds “You know we won’t,” and Jesse concurs “Yeah, probably not.” Later, Celine concludes: “Oh my god, we are sh\*\*\* parents. We should have stopped.” But Jesse is comfortable: “Aw, it’s okay,” and they laugh affectionately. Parenting is an obvious source of stress and discord in any couple, and we learn about some of that later on, but here we have broad agreement on what ought to be done and on what will be done, and on the deception and excuses that will now have to be told to the twins when they awake.

<sup>7</sup> See Nedelsky 1989; Christman 2004. See also the important collection by Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000.

<sup>8</sup> There are two bigger questions which I cannot address in adequate detail here: first, the degree to which issues about *relational* autonomy overlap with more general issues about *social* autonomy; second, the degree to which issues about relational *autonomy* are distinct from issues about the relational *self*.

<sup>9</sup> In Williams (1981), Gauguin is on p. 22, the lorry-driver is on p. 28, and Anna Karenina is on p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Williams can be reproached for drawing this conclusion too much from *Gauguin’s* own self-serving perspective. It is not obvious that his family would or should accept the abandonment as justified, no matter what success he finds; nor is it obvious that we art-lovers should accept that the abandonment was even necessary for the art.

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<sup>11</sup> Williams shares the common practice of referring to Anna Karenina by her first name, while referring to Gauguin and Vronsky by their surnames, as if Karenina were a child.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Extrinsic’ and ‘intrinsic’ are Williams’s terms to distinguish two kinds of luck, two corresponding kinds of unlucky failure, and two different ways that the failing protagonist can experience the failure. In the case of extrinsic failure, the protagonist can say to himself: “I might have been a contender.”

<sup>13</sup> Would I go so far as to call this a form of illusion or even self-deception? Some might, I wouldn't. I would prefer words like optimism or trust. I am not saying that the lovers need to *deny* the possibility of vertigo; just that they do not need to be called insecure if the possibility does not spontaneously occur to them. I guess I am not persuaded by those who would argue that the most authentic kind of love is only to be found in *carpe diem* or prior to the Apocalypse.

<sup>14</sup> The philosophically rich notion of attention is of course inspired by Murdoch (1970). One classic example of the near-vertiginous dilemma of giving or withholding the benefit of the doubt can be seen during the heated argument in Act three from the film:

Jesse: If you don't want to move back to the States we won't. End of story. I'm just trying to find a way where I can be more of a consistent presence in his life, and ideally I'd like to do that as a family.

Celine: I feel a passive aggressive threat in everything you say. Either do this, or I will resent you for the rest of our lives. (p. 95-96)

Is Jesse serious in calling it “End of story”? Was Celine ‘entitled’ to deny Jesse the benefit of the doubt here, to read this threat into the exchange? Who knows? But she did. And it is followed by a very pregnant silence.

<sup>15</sup> Niko Kolodny (2003 p. 141) makes a similar point about the limits of biographical knowledge. He takes a biographer who has a very detailed biographical knowledge of his subject, but never meets her. He publishes the book, and then meets her, falls in love with her, and begins a long-term relationship with her. A few years later, he has a special kind of amnesia that obliterates all his memories *since* the book's publication. Kolodny argues that we would not then expect him to fall in love with her again *merely* on the basis of his biographical knowledge, if he has no memory of their relationship.

<sup>16</sup> One general criticism of the film is the priority given to Jesse's story over Celine, and this imbalance undermines the drama by encouraging greater sympathy for Jesse. We meet a member of Jesse's wider family (Hank) but not Celia's. We learn a lot more about Jesse's job and life than about Celia's. And as James MacDowell points out in his contribution to this volume, at the end of the film, when the couple splits, the camera stays with Jesse in the hotel room rather than with Celia on the terrace.

<sup>17</sup> Many American films seem to demand a moment where one protagonist declares “we have to talk about our relationship,” as though this open contractual stage were necessary in any serious relationship. While fresh air is generally a good disinfectant, I suggest that some aspects of some relationships do not benefit from close examination.

<sup>18</sup> Since the vertigo happened abroad, then there is a sense in which it was a safer outlet for pent-up frustration. If they survive the vertiginous crisis (and at the end of the film we're not at all sure), they can re-package it as something that happened “over there”. They might even reach a point of joking about their “disastrous” trip, while reassuring themselves that all is well back home in Paris.

<sup>19</sup> Celine: “I think the problem is that you don't want me to have a more substantial job. On some level, you feel threatened by my achieving anything that could diminish your status in our relationship” (p. 96). This argument is very articulate, and suggests that she has adopted it from a friend, and rehearsed it several times. Of course it is too confrontational, since it will only get the obvious defensive denial from Jesse. Once she reaches this point, she has given up.

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<sup>20</sup> My deep thanks to Katrien Schaubroeck and Hans Mies for very insightful comments on an earlier draft.