Episteme (2026), 1–18
doi:10.1017/epi.2026.10103

episteme

ARTICLE

Breaking Trust and Relocating Reactive Feelings

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(Received 17 September 2025; revised 12 December 2025; accepted 23 January 2026)

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that reactive feelings such as betrayal and personal disappointment are not inherent to the attitude of trust. Instead, such feelings are better understood as responses to impairments in relationships. Trust, I propose, is a fully doxastic mechanism that fundamentally consists of the belief that the trustee will follow through on the norms constitutive of the relationship, such that a breach of trust directly calls only for an epistemic reassessment of the trustee's trustworthiness. I further show that what warrants reactive feelings is not the mere fact of trust being broken, but whether, through the violation of trust, the person reveals a disregard for the relationship.

Keywords: belief; betrayal; reason; reactive attitudes; trust; trustworthiness

1. Introduction

When we trust someone, we are vulnerable to them – this is quite an uncontroversial point. Now the interesting question is: what and how exactly are we vulnerable? Annette Baier first characterizes this vulnerability in terms of reactive feelings we naturally associate with violations of trust, saying that "trusting can be betrayed, or at least let down" (1986: 235).[1] This point is followed by Richard Holton, who doubles down and distinguishes between trust and mere reliance through a disposition to having those feelings. Holton writes, "When you trust someone to do something… you have a readiness to feel betrayal should it be disappointed, and gratitude should it be upheld (1994: 67).[2]

[1]In this literature, reactive feelings are usually denoted as reactive attitudes (Holton 1994; Helm 2014; Marušić 2017). Nevertheless, the attitudes involved in violations of trust, such as disappointment, betrayal, and even resentment (which will not be discussed here), have a salient emotional character. I aim to emphasize this aspect here, as it accentuates the challenge of accommodating those feelings under fully doxastic accounts.

[2]In what follows, I purposely soften Holton's view to include disappointment as a reactive feeling less than full betrayal, as we often find in cases of violations of trust. Note that I mean disappointment in the same sense we may sense we have been let down, which is a second-person attitude, and not merely sadness or displeasure caused by the nonfulfillment of one's hopes that does not require another agent.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10103 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This view, which has become widely accepted in the literature, does more than say that we are vulnerable to experiencing personal disappointment or betrayal when we trust someone. The reactive-feeling view holds that these emotional dispositions are constitutive of trust itself: to trust someone is, by definition, to be disposed to feel betrayal if they fail to follow through and potentially gratitude if they do. These emotional dispositions are what distinguish trust from mere reliance, and so they are built into its very structure through the broader commitment to a participant stance.[3]

In this paper, I challenge the reactive-feelings view of trust. I focus particularly on its negative instances, that is, cases of trust violations. I argue that feelings of betrayal and personal disappointment in response to trust violations are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for trust. Instead, I propose that trust is a fully doxastic mechanism – i.e., an epistemic attitude – directed at the norms constitutive of relationships. Therefore, violations of trust only directly call for an epistemic reassessment of the trustee's trustworthiness, similar to other cases of belief disconfirmation. I then go on to explain the recurrence of reactive feelings with trust violations, arguing that they are better understood as responses to relationship impairments. That is, when someone violates our trust, this violation often just reveals that the person disregards something fundamental about our relationship.

My argument goes as follows: First, in Section 2, I explain what I find problematic and counterintuitive about the reactive-feelings view. In Section 3, I argue that reactive feelings are neither necessary nor sufficient for trust. To build my positive argument, in Section 4, I outline the core tenets of a relational account of trust, drawing on Israel (2025b). Sections 5 and 6 form the heart of the paper, elaborating on how trust functions as an epistemic mechanism and how reactive feelings arise from relationship impairments, thereby explaining their appropriateness without taking them to be intrinsic to trust.[4]

2. Why trouble?

We can quite easily accept the weaker claim that reactive feelings simply often happen in the context of trusting relationships. However, the stronger claim – that trust embeds and is defined by these feelings, as Holton argues when attributing this to the Strawsonian "participant stance" – is an overkill.[5]

First, trust is widely agreed to be a success-oriented or "optimistic" attitude (Baker 1987; Jones 1996; 2019). When we trust someone, we believe the trustee will follow through, which allows us to set aside skepticism and the need to make contingency plans.[6] This point is emphasized in many recent discussions: Keren (2014) argues that trust involves responding to "preemptive reasons" – that is, second-order reasons that

[3]See, for example, Jones (2004); Mullin (2005); Walker (2006); McGeer (2008); Wright (2010); and Marušić (2017).

[4]By "mechanism" I mean a process of epistemic nature that facilitates the formation and assessment of beliefs about one's trustworthiness.

[5]This alludes to what Strawson terms the "participant point-of-view," introduced in "Freedom and Resentment" (1962). This notion regards how we engage with others not simply as objects within our normative environment (the objective stance) but as responsible agents.

[6]There is, I should point out, a crucial difference between evidentialists and pragmatists regarding the direction of grounding between the two parts of this claim: while evidentialists about trust regard the belief that the trustee will follow through as the reason for trusting them, pragmatists hold that one believes that the trustee will follow through because they trust the trustee.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10103 Published online by Cambridge University Press

exclude or override certain other first-order reasons for action or belief; Marušić contends that "You trust someone if and only if, in light of her commitment as such, you believe that she will follow through" (2017, 5); Nguyen (2022) regards trust as an "unquestioning attitude;" and Chae (2022), who shows how making contingency plans to avoid violations undermines trusting relationships.

Given this success-driven character of trust, a charitable reading of Holton would be that trust does not require an active psychological anticipation of failure. Rather, the "readiness to feel betrayal" should be understood as merely a necessary disposition – the trustor is disposed to feel betrayal should trust be violated but doesn't actively expect or accept this possibility.[7]

Nevertheless, even when understood this way, the discomfort remains. Defining trust by its potential failure still makes the possibility of failure constitutive of trust, rather than, say, the special forms of cooperation that it enables. This concern is primarily conceptual: it is strange to define the concept of trust by its negative potential, just as it would be strange to define what a living organism is by what makes it sick or die rather than by its vital functions. A definition should, in principle, regard how the phenomena is successfully instantiated, rather than how things would look like if it failed.[8]

Furthermore, the mere addition of a disposition to disappointment or betrayal – which carries negative emotional weight – cannot be what differentiates trust and reliance if trust is to be appealing in any way. Trust and reliance are both attitudes that serve us in theoretical and practical reasoning, but trust seems to provide us with some unique advantage in our epistemic and practical projects. If, however, all that trust adds to reliance is making the stakes higher for the trustor, making them susceptible to feeling bad, then we'd take reliance over trust any day.

Holton gives us a view about trust's value over reliance, but one that just doesn't concern these projects in a substantial and direct way. He suggests that trust, as an attitude from a participant stance, is conducive to better relationships. He writes:

> "Suppose we are rock climbing together. I have a choice between taking your hand, or taking the rope. I might think each equally reliable; but I can have a reason for taking your hand that I do not have for taking the rope. In taking your hand, I trust you; in so doing our relationship moves a little further forward." (1994, 69)

Thus, for Holton, the advantage of trusting you over relying on a rope lies in what it would do to our relationship. Now, nurturing relationships is certainly important (this is especially true of my view, as I lay out in section 4), but can it be enough of a reason to decide to trust? In low-stakes scenarios, sure – I care about advancing our relationship "a little further forward." But in rock climbing? Where a failure can cost my life? In such a high-stakes scenario, this doesn't seem like a wise choice.

[7]I like to think of this more plausible reading of Holton in counterfactual terms – one may have full confidence that their trustee will act as trusted, but counterfactually agree that if they'd fail to act in trustworthy ways, then they would feel disappointed or betrayed.

[8]One may object to this point, pointing out that Holton also tells the sort of feelings enabled when trust is fulfilled, such as gratitude (1994, 67). However, there's a good case to be made against gratitude as well, as this feeling better describes cases where one goes above and beyond what is expected from them. For example, I can trust you not to hit me, but am I grateful when you don't hit me? Gratitude, similar to what I will argue about betrayal, seems to involve an especially significant upholding or going beyond the expectations of trust.

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Deciding to trust always adds a contingency: in addition to capacity (the rope's and your capacity to carry my weight), we suddenly also depend on the trustees' will and even on their attention. You and the rope may be equally reliable in carrying my weight, but the rope can't be distracted by a bird passing by or suddenly led by the evil intrusive thought that if it let me fall, it could marry my wife – but you certainly can![9] Trust, in this way, is more fragile – it can fail in ways that reliance is less susceptible to. Given these additional vulnerabilities (and adding to it the extra emotional burden of feeling betrayed/disappointed), if all that trust adds to reliance as its contribution to the relationship, we should still prefer the latter, at least when it really matters.[10]

A second concern is that reactive-feeling views are in tension with fully doxastic accounts of trust, which are often referred to as cognitive views (McMyler 2011).[11] Those have become prevalent in the literature for several reasons. First, they provide a unified explanatory framework that connects trust to our broader epistemic practices – explaining how trust functions in testimony and knowledge transmission, as well as in practical reasoning and coordination of action (Hardin 2002; Hieronymi 2008; McMyler 2011; Hawley 2014).[12] Second, doxastic accounts preserve trust's rational character by making it responsive to evidence and reasons, rather than treating it as a mere disposition or emotional stance. This responsiveness allows us to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate instances of trust based on evidence concerning the trustee's trustworthiness. Finally, by grounding trust in beliefs about another agent's trustworthiness, these accounts can talk about trust in terms of justification and account for when and how it can be rationally revised or withdrawn.

The tension between reactive feelings and doxastic accounts comes from the following: if trust consists of a belief regarding the truth of a trustee's assertion or commitment to act in a certain way, then a violation of trust would lead us only to engage in epistemic reassessment – determining whether the belief remains justified and the trustee is still to be held trustworthy (McMyler 2011, 131). If that is the case, it is not clear how we can accommodate this purely epistemic reassessment with a view that takes emotional responses to be a necessary component of trust violations.

To understand what this means, we may consider the distinct roles of beliefs and emotional responses: beliefs are cognitive states that can be evaluated for truth and evidence, and so when new information comes in, we usually update our beliefs.

[9]An objection that may arise to this point is that your willingness and levels of attention are also taken into account when evaluating your reliability. I accept that to some extent, but our ability to assess these psychological aspects, both in ourselves and others, is very limited. The rope's reliability can be measured against its characteristics and the environmental conditions, but trust in a person adds uncertainty that cannot be fully evaluated. Intrusive thoughts about my wife, or your reaction to a bird if it flies right above your head are somewhat involuntary, and your actions in light of these are always, at least somewhat opaque.

[10]To be clear, I still agree with Holton's verdict that we usually have good reasons to trust over merely relying, but that is because trust provides us with some unique advantage in our epistemic and practical projects. In the rock-climbing case, I have a reason for taking your hand over the rope because if my hand slips, you may grab my arm before I fall, or shout for backup from other climbers, and even be there and just say "it's okay, I got you," which can mean the world for me in such a dangerous situation.

[11]For contrast, non-cognitivist views may define trust as paradigmatically emotional/affective (Jones 1996; Lahno 2020; Faulkner 2014; Potter 2020) or as a special disposition or stance of the trustor (Jones 2004; Holton 1994).

[12]This is not to say that trust is nothing but reliance, but only that it's a form of reliance that should be responsive to reasons.

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Emotional responses, on the other hand, are usually conceived as reactive states that may or may not track reasons. Suppose, for example, that you're a scientist and you have high confidence in your hypothesis. If it turns out the data doesn't support your hypothesis, it's surely reasonable for you to feel disappointed and even angry. Again, emotions are connected to our beliefs in various ways, and that is particularly true in response to their confirmation or disconfirmation (Reisenzein 2009a; 2009b; Miceli and Castelfranchi 2015). Nevertheless, this connection is not intrinsic nor necessary to the belief – the epistemic process directly concerns only the evidence and the appropriate assessment and process of it.

Thus, when the data proves your hypothesis wrong, your direct cognitive response is to revise your belief about the hypothesis' truth based on evidential grounds. Your emotional response (disappointment/anger) is secondary, not fully governed by standards of evidence or truth-aptness, and doesn't take a necessary role in your epistemic project.[13] In other words, while it is reasonable for you to feel disappointed or angry when your hypothesis has been proved wrong, you could as well not feel that way for what concerns your epistemic aims as a scientist. The puzzle for doxastic accounts of trust is that according to reactive-feeling views, trust violations hold a necessary relation to emotional responses, exceeding mere epistemic reassessment. However, if trust is purely belief-based, we would expect violations to lead to epistemic reassessment of the kind we see in the scientist case, and if they elicit any emotional reactions, those should take a similar form to the scientist's as well – being secondary, not fully governed by standards of evidence or truth-aptness, and contingent.

Now, this is a problem that specifically challenges fully doxastic accounts. It doesn't, however, undermine impure doxastic ones (which take the relevant belief to be necessary but not sufficient for trust), if what they add to belief is something that can accommodate affective responses, such as goodwill (Baier 1986), optimism (Jones 1996), or a participant stance (Holton 1994; Marušić 2017). Nevertheless, if we can explain these emotional dimensions without positing additional elements to trust beyond belief, we would achieve a more elegant and parsimonious account. For this reason, in this paper, I engage in resolving this tension while maintaining a fully doxastic account of trust, demonstrating how the rich emotional responses to trust violations can be explained within a purely doxastic framework, alluding instead to what happens in the context of trust: the relationship.

3. Reasons to reject the reactive-feelings view

To keep you on track, what I argue for in this paper is that while there is quite a consensus that reactive feelings are an inherent characteristic of trust, this is only because we often conflate the characteristics of trust with those of the relationships where it takes place. Reactive feelings, I contend, belong to the latter.

Besides the challenges laid out above, in this section, I start the negative part of my argument (why we should reject the reactive-feelings views) by arguing that reactive

[13]When I say that emotions are not fully governed by standards of evidence or truth-aptness, I do not mean that they may not be influenced by evidence. Evidence may as well make us feel different, but it's not sensitive to it in the appropriate ways. For example, in the scientist case – if you found out that the debunking evidence was a product of a colleague doing a prank on you, the negative emotion may last after the hypothesis is reinstituted.

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feelings do not hold a necessary nor a sufficient relation to trust.[14] In addition, I contend that to distinguish warranted instances of feelings of betrayal vs. personal disappointment, we are prompted to look beyond the violation itself and toward the relationship where it takes place.[15]

To show how trust does not necessarily involve a potential for betrayal, let's think first of non-personal forms of trust, such as trust in institutions, where the disconnection between these becomes quite salient. Imagine you trust your bank to safely hold your deposits and process transactions. When the bank's system experiences a server failure and causes your mortgage payment to bounce, you may reasonably reassess the bank's operational competence and might switch to another institution. As Alfano and Huijts argue, institutional trustworthiness requires competence with respect to the institution's domain and the ability to reliably signal to others their competency (forthcoming, 8), and the bank has failed you in both aspects. This failure serves as evidence against the bank's trustworthiness, possibly warranting an attitude of distrust toward the bank (forthcoming, 11). Nevertheless, feeling betrayed by this institutional failure seems misplaced. This may be somewhat due to the non-personal nature of the interaction, which makes claiming you feel betrayed and personally disappointed seem like a misuse of language and poor emotional management.[16]

The same disconnection between trust and reactive feelings can also be found in instances of personal trust. Therapeutic trust is a good case for us to look at for this purpose. It represents scenarios where trust doesn't reflect a belief that the trustee will carry through their commitment and perform the expected action successfully, but instead it aims at growing trustworthiness in them (Nickel 2007, 318; Carter 2024; Horsburgh 1960; Jones 2004). McGeer illustrates this form of trust with the example of "parents deciding to trust their teenagers with the house or family car, believing that their offspring may well abuse their trust, but hoping by such trust to elicit, in the fullness of time, more responsible and responsive trustworthy behaviour" (2008, 241).

Arguably, trust can't be betrayed in such cases as the trustee is expected, at least up until a certain point, to fail.[17] For this reason, some scholars like Hieronymi (2008)

[14]A methodological note is in order here: My method in this section is largely the analytic one of exploring examples (often imaginary) to evoke intuitions. Some of these, such as institutional trust or therapeutic trust, are controversial as genuine instances of trust (see Hawley 2014 for a rejection of the former and Hieronymi 2008 for a rejection of the latter). For this reason, I provide multiple examples against each of the claims that reactive feelings are necessary or sufficient for trust. I only need you to be on board with one.

[15]As you may have sensed by now, I focus on negative reactive feelings, in particular feelings of betrayal and personal disappointment, with an emphasis on the former as the paradigm case for trust violations. By feelings of betrayal, I refer to a strong second-personal feeling that one has been wronged through a significant failure (while personal disappointment is usually taken to refer to more mild violations). This feeling may or may not be preceded by an actual violation or betrayal, as the feeling may be justified or not (as it is to be expected from emotional responses). However – an important (and probably uncontroversial) point is that every instance of betrayal does warrant and turn possible the betrayed party to feel so.

[16]This is not to say that no emotional responses are fitting. You may very well feel angry or frustrated *because* of the bank, but not so much *at* the bank. If, however, you hold a personal relationship with a bank representative, like your manager, and the failure is on their part, we may more easily see feelings of betrayal or personal disappointment becoming warranted.

[17]The question of whether therapeutic trust can be disappointed is more complex. After all, the trustor – in this case, the parents – may still feel disappointment if their teenager fails to become more trustworthy. But here, the disappointment does not stem from any specific act that fails to meet the expected standards, such as not keeping the house clean or driving recklessly. Rather, it reflects the teenager's lack of

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contend that therapeutic trust does not qualify as true or full-fledged trust, suggesting that the trustor merely acts "as if" they trust. I think, however, there is a plausible story to tell about the beliefs implied in such cases. It may not be a belief that the trustee will follow through with the particular action at hand, but instead, as Keren argues, that "the trusted person has a degree of trustworthiness" and a belief of "that our trusting her will help her become more trustworthy" (2020, 116–17).[18]

As for whether reactive feelings are a sufficient condition for trust, I argue that, similar to how therapeutic trust represents a form of trust devoid of reactive feelings such as feelings of betrayal or personal disappointment, we may also find cases where those feelings are warranted while trust is not to be found in the relationship. For example, consider a married couple who, after decades together, have settled into cold coexistence. Love has long faded, trust even before that, but they stay together out of inertia and fear of starting over. Even in such an unfortunate scenario, it would still be reasonable for the wife, upon discovering that the husband has a girlfriend, to feel deeply betrayed, even though she hadn't trusted him for years and, as a matter of fact, held no expectations of his fidelity. Her feeling of betrayal is grounded in the fact that she was factually betrayed. Hawley makes this point even stronger with an example of betrayal in cases of distrust. She argues that Jesus *knew* that Judas would betray him, which makes trust impossible, and yet he was betrayed by Judas and thus was justified in feeling betrayed (2014: 13).[19]

An additional worry that may be helpful in indicating the kind of relation between trust and reactive feelings is that we can't properly distinguish between instances where disappointment is warranted rather than feelings of betrayal (and vice versa) without appealing outside the violation of trust.[20] Baier contends that all trust must be susceptible to betrayal and holds mere disappointment to instances of mere reliance on someone (1986: 235). This description fails to grasp many mild cases where the trustee's failure merely justifies disappointment, perhaps because the matter in question was very minor or because we realize our expectations of them were unreasonable. Attempting to distinguish better between violations of trust that warrant disappointment and betrayal, Edward Hinchman expresses a similar concern for distinguishing when each attitude is appropriate. He argues that disappointment occurs when the trustee simply fails to do what they were trusted to do. Hinchman accounts for betrayal, contending that it operates "at a deeper level" when the trustee fails to properly engage with and respond to the trusting person's needs in the way demanded by their shared understanding of the

responsiveness to the trust placed in them – namely, their failure to develop trust. That is, the disappointment concerns not the immediate violation but what the violation reveals about the trustee's regard for the parents' expectations and for the trust extended to them.

[18]An alternative, and perhaps equally plausible, story that emphasizes the relational dimension I advance later in this paper would say that therapeutic trust consists of a belief that the trustee has some commitment to the relationship's norms and is capable of eventually getting better at following them.

[19]An additional consideration, which does not directly draw on a previous stance of trust, comes from Margalit's (2017) discussion of political betrayal, i.e., treason. Margalit contends that our reactions to treason are primarily shaped by external circumstances – in times of war, for example, treason is taken with genuine horror, and "settling scores with traitors after a bitter war is another occasion on which cries of 'treason' reach the highest pitch." I take this to demonstrate how treason is felt regardless of whether trust stands between the person who violated their allegiance and their political community.

[20]I think it's quite intuitive that there is such a distinction, but for those who need more convincing, see Hichman's (2021) discussion on instances of trust violations that warrant only disappointment but not betrayal.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10103 Published online by Cambridge University Press

trusting relationship (2020, 58–59). This direction sounds promising, as betrayal is accounted for in ways that go beyond the particular violation, but it is not clear what makes a particular failure of trust operate at a "deeper level" that reaches to one's understanding of the trusting relationship.

4. How should we think about trust?

If the objections above hold, then we would benefit from a theory of trust that explains the occurrence of reactive feelings but does not hold them as necessary nor sufficient for trust (in response to the first and second concerns raised) and explains why some breaches of trust warrant feelings of betrayal, while others warrant mere disappointment, thus providing an account of appropriate reactive feelings (in response to the third concern). As indicated by Hinchman's discussion above, the appropriateness of reactive feelings seems to lie in the context where both trust and its reactive feelings take place: relationships.[21] Accordingly, we will look now at a relational account of trust that may be helpful with the challenges listed above,[22] an account that considers trust not as an isolated attitude but locates it in the interpersonal or social contexts where agents connect and cooperate with each other.

Trust requires the trustor to be in some kind of relationship with the trustee and implies a belief that the trustee will follow through with what the relationship entails (Israel 2025, 13). By "relationships," I don't mean only the thick connections we have with family, friends, and loved ones. We normatively depend on and cooperate with other agents in ways that go far beyond our most intimate domains and also include many thin connections, like the ones we hold with colleagues, teammates, fellow citizens, and even fellow human beings (members of a shared moral community) – each carrying its own set of special duties and responsibilities (Scheffler 2002, 97).[23]

Relationships, insofar as they can accommodate trust, have a normative component. That is, norms of conduct apply – ways in which we are committed to acting with each

[21]If trust-related reactive feelings are to be associated with the trustee or the relationship itself, it seems like trust should be understood as a two-place relation, where its basic structure is "A trusts B" (Domenicucci and Holton 2017; Faulkner 2015). Such accounts emphasize the centrality of trusting relationships to the possibility of particular applications of trust, contending that trusting someone is, first and foremost, to trust them "as a person," and the attitude itself is to be "relative to the relationship that we have to them" (Domenicucci and Holton 2017, 156).# Such views place the trusting relationship within the basic form of trust. However, they give up on determining what it is that we trust other people with, i.e., the objects of one's trust.# This may be problematic in light of our need to get clear about what we expect and practically rely on within a trusting relationship. When we trust someone to do something, it is not enough that we direct that attitude toward someone, but we believe and act under the premise (i.e., we rely on) that what we expect or rely on is true or happens (McMyler 2011, 131).

[22]One might argue that Hawley's commitment account of trust offers a promising venue here. Although (as noted by Marušić 2017, n. 2) Hawley explicitly endorses Holton's participant-stance claim (2014, 7), her view does not require it and is clearly informed by the way trust shapes relationships and is mutually grounded in them. However, I do not think her view is sufficiently embedded in the relationship itself to meet these challenges. Her notion of "meta-commitments" explains how entering a relationship generates further, future commitments (2019, 77), such as the commitment to attend a friend's birthday party, but a failure to attend is still, on her view, a failure to meet that particular commitment, rather than a failure of the friendship itself. Hawley's account thus explains how such commitments are acquired, but not how their violation constitutes a breach of the relationship as such. By contrast, adequately distinguishing between mere disappointment and betrayal requires that the relationship itself be the direct object of trust.

[23]I borrow the terminology of "thick" and "thin" relations from Margalit (2017).

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other – as part of the relationship. This view of relationships is supported by Raz, who contends those are "constituted by norms which determine what conduct is appropriate between people in the relationships, between, for example, parents and children, as well as towards other people's children, etc." (Raz 2009, 316). These norms or rules aren't merely part of relationships but are constitutive of them, and "our knowledge of these norms, that is of the nature of the relationship, guides our behaviour within it" (2009, 317).

At a foundational level, the norms of a relationship establish its character – whether friendship, professional association, or kinship. For instance, what makes a relationship a friendship rather than a mere acquaintance is not just the frequency of interaction but the normative expectations that define friendship itself. More importantly, to our subject matter, relationship norms provide practical guides, establishing much of what participants owe to one another. These norms explain why we can reasonably expect certain forms of care from a doctor that we wouldn't from a neighbor, why we may form scientific knowledge from what a scientist says but not from what a social media influencer preaches, or why we might expect emotional support from a friend but not from a store clerk, constituting what Scanlon refers to as the "ground relationship" (2008, 155) that establishes the expectations against which many primary deviations are measured and constitutes the vulnerability agents are in when they relate to one another.

This level is shared by both personal and non-personal forms of trust. In institutional contexts, such as the one I raised in Section 3, these constitutive norms often take a more codified or explicit form, such as in professional codes and bylaws, but may still include the implicit social expectations embedded in a sense of "the way things are done" (Delacroix 2017). When we trust a bank, we don't merely predict that their servers will function, but we hold the institution to normative standards that constitute the "client-institution" relationship.[24]

Beyond what the ground relationship tells us, some of the norms that concern trust are shaped by the agents, personalizing the ground relationship and making it unique. These norms reflect what Raz describes as the way relationships are not only "socially structured" but also "individually explored and established" (Raz 2009, 317). For instance, what counts as appropriate communication in one friendship may differ substantially from another, based on the particular history and the conduct established between particular friends. As noted by Israel, "through repeated practice, trustors and trustees develop an understanding of how to apply rules in various contexts" (Israel 2025, 20).

By shifting the focus from actions to relationship norms, this view offers a unified framework for understanding how trust operates across different kinds of relationships. It does so by identifying a common underlying structure: relationships that are constituted by norms. In all instances of trust, the trustor holds a belief that the trustee will follow through on the norms that define their relationship. This allows us to treat trust as a single epistemic – or doxastic – mechanism, despite the variability of its content across contexts (different kinds of relationships, which we will explore further in the following section). On standard doxastic accounts, trust implies a belief that the trustee is trustworthy (McLeod 2023). Under the relational version I adopt here, trustworthiness consists in the trustee's norm-guided participation in the relationship. That is, when we interact within a

[24]This distinction helps us see why our attitude toward an institution, understood as collective agents, counts as trust rather than mere reliance. When we trust a bank, we believe it *ought* to safeguard our deposits, and we don't merely act or reason under this assumption because it is likely to be so. It is this normative demand that constitutes the client-bank relationship that distinguishes trust from reliance in such non-personal contexts.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10103 Published online by Cambridge University Press

trusting relationship, we treat the trustee's conduct as evidence for or against their commitment to the norms in force. This unified mechanism allows us to capture both the shared epistemic structure of trust and the diversity of expectations that arise across different relational contexts.

5. Trust as a doxastic mechanism

With this account of trust in hand, we may now turn to explore what happens when trust is violated. A key point of my argument lies in the distinction between the doxastic mechanism of trust and the plural character of the relationships in which it operates. Let us unpack the former first.

When trust is violated, the violation may stem from a localized mistake or a misunderstanding of expectations on the part of the trustee – one that doesn't necessarily reflect on their broader trustworthiness and thus doesn't warrant reassessing our belief.[25] Suppose, for example, you trusted a friend to water your plants while you were away, and upon returning, you find them all dead. You'd likely be upset, but after learning that she overwatered them – perhaps due to having experience only with other kinds of plants or a misreading of your message saying to water them "around 3 times," which she interpreted as per day rather than per week. In such a scenario, you would reasonably conclude that it was an honest mistake, and the failure does not seem to reflect on her general trustworthiness.

Note here the difference between the anger you feel about the dead plants and the potential to feel betrayed depending on the reasons for that outcome: your anger seems to be grounded in the facts (that your plants died or that your friend's actions are the causal reason for that), and you may as well be justifiably angry even after learning the details about what caused your friend to overwater your plants. The feelings of betrayal or personal disappointment, however, seem to be grounded elsewhere, in what the friend's action says about their care and level of commitment to you.

Similarly, a trustee might be genuinely committed to the relationship's norms while still developing their norm/rule-following capacities, as we see in cases of therapeutic trust. Think again of parents trusting their teenage son with the house for the weekend. Upon returning, they learn that the son had a girl over despite having agreed not to do so, but the house is clean, nothing is broken, and he even admitted it upfront. While this goes against what was entrusted, it doesn't suggest a lack of regard for the relationship or its norms – rather, it reflects a judgment lapse within the bounds of what the parents could reasonably expect, given the son's degree of trustworthiness (which again, they are working on).[26] Here, the violation falls within the margin of error anticipated by the trustors (the parents). This is not to say that epistemic reassessment does not occur;

[25]As I think about the relation between trust and belief, we are talking in terms of degrees (Kelp and Simion 2023; Keren 2020, 116). Thus, a violation, even a deliberate one, does not automatically "defeat" the belief and deem one untrustworthy but has an impact on how the trustor perceives their *level* of trustworthiness.

[26]I think that a similar consideration lies behind our general forgiveness toward someone's missteps when young rather than later in life. Many of us feel more comfortable admitting infidelities committed when we were young compared to infidelities committed when adults. We also seem to be more comfortable in hearing such admissions from others, in ways that do not necessarily change the ways we view their character. This may be explained by the fact that we take some violations to fall within the margin of what is to be expected from a teenager who is still learning how to navigate their relationships and, to some extent, "doesn't know better."

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rather, because the trust is directed at the trustee's potential to develop trustworthiness, the bar for revising the belief downward is higher, and the parents expect local failures as part of the learning curve. However, this belief is not immune to updates. For instance, a persistent pattern of violations would eventually wear out the trust, providing sufficient evidence that the trustee is not participating in the developmental process at all.[27]

However, some violations provide direct evidence against a trustee's trustworthiness, indicating their inability to properly engage in relationships of the relevant kind or simply their disregard for the particular relationship at hand. Consider a romantic partner's deliberate decision to have an affair. This decision and the acts that follow it represent a clear violation of a constitutive norm of monogamous relationships and reveal a fundamental disregard for the relationship itself. Alternatively, suppose that a political leader (fill in your own), during a public crisis, prioritizes their popularity and political allegiances over their citizens' security and well-being. These intentional violations call for trustors (the betrayed partner or the citizens) to reassess their belief in the trustworthiness of the trustees (the unfaithful partner or the political leader).[28]

Insofar as we discuss trust as an epistemic mechanism of cooperation, this is all that needs to be said: when violations occur, they may serve as evidence regarding the trustee's trustworthiness and may or may not impact the trustor's degree of belief. By mechanism of cooperation, I mean that trust functions as a belief-based process that enables cooperation in relationships, promoting our epistemic and practical projects. Whether or not the trust belief is to be reassessed depends largely on the reasons for the apparent violation. Namely, when the reasons for the violation are local (i.e., concerning a failure in execution or understanding in a particular action), we do not seem prompt to reassess trustworthiness. However, when the violation concerns the relationship norms, that may deem the trustee less trustworthy in the relationship.[29] In the event of the latter, the violation may lead us to engage in epistemic reassessment. The reassessment of the trustee's trustworthiness in light of a violation concerns solely the effectiveness of cooperation, and thus, it is sensitive to evidence, as to be expected from a doxastic mechanism.

6. Relocating reactive feelings

So far, I have demonstrated how trust, as a relational doxastic mechanism, only goes so far as allowing epistemic reassessment when violated.[30] That is, it does not necessarily move us to change the way we feel or regard the trustee who violated our trust. Instead, it

[27]I thank the anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point and highlighting that therapeutic trust can be worn out in this way.

[28]Trust's responsiveness to evidence has been widely discussed in the literature, with many arguing that trust requires some resistance to counter-evidence – creating challenges for evidence-based doxastic accounts. My account dissolves this problem by shifting focus from particular actions to the relationship as a whole. The main criticism of evidentialism is its failure to consider the trustee's overall commitment (Marušić 2015, 176–77), which my relational account addresses by evaluating evidence with respect to the broader relationship rather than isolated actions.

[29]Similar to how D'Cruz (2018) or Domenicucci and Holton (2017) argue that one may be trustworthy in certain domains or aspects but not others, one may be untrustworthy in one kind of relationship (or with one particular partner) but not in another.

[30]This is true, of course, also for fulfillments of trust, as those serve as evidence confirming the trustee's trustworthiness. I deliberately focus here on violations only for the sake of simplicity, as we are concerned with the nature of betrayal and personal disappointment.

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merely creates the grounds for such changes if we come to believe less of them in light of their behavior. Thus, reactive feelings like disappointment or betrayal cannot be inherent to trust or conceptualized as a distinctive characteristic of the attitude of trust.

This leaves us with some pressing questions regarding the occurrence of reactive feelings. First, where do these reactive feelings belong? Second, how can we account for the widely endorsed (and largely correct) observation that such feelings often happen in light of trust violations? Finally, what makes these feelings warranted if not the violation of trust itself? In this final section of the paper, I suggest that these reactive feelings are tied to the relationship. Thus, a particular failure in trust may lead to impairments or changes in the broader relationship.

As pointed out in the preceding section, there is a substantial difference between violations that are unintended or expected and violations we take to be done in disregard for the norms that constitute the relationship. For the former, we do not seem to be immediately prompted to update our belief on the trustee's trustworthiness, while for the latter, we do take the violation as the right kind of evidence for rethinking our trust in them. This difference, however, lies not in trust, but in the relationship itself.

To understand this difference more clearly, we should distinguish between two distinct (albeit interrelated) evaluative processes. While in the phenomenology of our everyday experience these assessments often occur simultaneously and rely on the same content, they differ in their aim and orientation. When a trust violation occurs:

1. We engage in an epistemic assessment of the violation and its circumstances, forming a judgment about the nature of the violation (e.g., if it was an honest mistake, due to local incompetence, intentional, etc.). This judgment is primarily forward-looking: it informs our belief about the trustee's trustworthiness and concerns the viability of future cooperation.[31]
2. Separately, we engage in a backward-looking relationship assessment. Here, we evaluate whether the violation reveals incompetence or disregard toward the relationship and its constitutive norms. Here, we're not assessing whether they're likely to follow through in the future, but whether they value and are truly committed to what our relationship entails.[32]

Trust as a doxastic mechanism is concerned with the epistemic process that guides our belief in the trustee's trustworthiness. Reactive feelings, however, arise from the relationship assessment process in response to judgments about the trustee's regard for the relationship. To further illustrate these processes, let us consider again the plant case. In the epistemic assessment process, when your friend fails to keep your plants alive, you may judge that she reasonably misunderstood your instructions rather than being careless or indifferent. This judgment doesn't (at least significantly) have to undermine your belief in her trustworthiness.

[31]I emphasize the relationship level because weaker forms of cooperation, by means of mere reliance or prediction, may still be available. Those forms, however, are local in nature (regarding a particular action instead of the general conduct of one's counterpart) and may require further guarantees in the form of external confirmation and contingency plans.

[32]This assessment can trigger a retroactive reinterpretation of the relationship's status. For example, discovering a long-term betrayal by a friend might lead not just to the realization that they are not trustworthy (forward-looking), but also to claims such as "I see now that we were never really friends" (backward-looking).

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Simultaneously, in the relationship assessment process, you evaluate what this violation reveals about your friend's attitude toward your friendship. You may consider factors like whether she made a genuine and sufficient effort to care for the plants, if your expectations of her were clearly laid out, whether she was reasonably expected to know better, and even if she apologized sincerely and tried to fix things in some way. After considering such factors, you might judge that she values our friendship and its norms, obviating the need to reassess the relationship. However, if through this process, you found that she never bothered to check on the plants or just overwatered to avoid coming over to your house multiple times, then you may conclude that her violation reveals a lack of regard for your friendship and its norms, constituting an impairment in the relationship.

In the latter alternative scenario, reactive feelings come in, responding to relationship impairments. Relationships, as noted, are plural in character. By plurality I mean, first, that relationships may take a variety of forms. We have multiple kinds of relationships, with different people, with different obligations and different levels of commitment.[33] However, it also means that there is more to relationships than just practical expectations. For instance, there are feelings we may feel when someone doesn't regard us as we would rightfully expect or wish them to. It follows then that the reactive feelings that are often associated with trust, such as disappointment and betrayal, are not truly characteristic of trust, and trust does not entail "a readiness to feel betrayal" (Holton 1994, 67). Violations of trust warrant only judgments and reassessments about the trustee's trustworthiness and may lead to distrusting the trustee depending on the recurrence or significance of the break and the aims of trust.

While violations of trust may only directly ground our assessment of a trustee's trustworthiness, guiding us on whether it is appropriate/justified to trust them, I argue that trust-related reactive feelings are responses to relationship impairments. Violations of trust may indeed reveal something about one's attitudes toward the relationship and even directly impair the relationship, as they consist of violations of the norms constitutive of the relationship. However, reactive feelings only become appropriate to the extent the relationship itself was impaired.

Accordingly, one may experience similar reactive feelings when trust is not present. For instance, consider again the case of the trustless married couple from section 3 – trust does not define the relationship between the couple, but the fact they are committed by their marriage vows to sexual exclusivity warrants feelings of betrayal when an affair is revealed. Similarly, to draw again on the example of political trust, one can appropriately feel disappointed and even betrayed by its government even if they did not trust their representatives to begin with.

This takes us back to the distinction between the mechanism of trust and the plurality found in our relationships that I opened this section with. Under the account I advance here, trust is a fully doxastic mechanism that targets effective cooperation within relationships. As a mere mechanism, it requires content within which it operates, and that content is found in the relationships where trust takes place. Whenever something goes wrong with trust, there are ways in which the mechanism needs to address what

[33]Because of the incredible plurality between different relationships, Thomas Simpson conceived of trust as reliance on one's "freely cooperative behaviour" (2012, 558) but rejected the idea of a unified mechanism that can be called trust in all its different instances, characterizing his genealogical view of trust as a pluralist one.

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might be an epistemic failure, that is, reassessing the nature of the violation and whether the trustee is still to be held trustworthy.

Now, if we look at it just as to how trust works, it seems to be indistinguishable from mere reliance. However, we should not forget that its content – the relationship norms – is inseparable from it. Trust is a form of reliance, in the sense that it is a cognitive attitude that guides one's reasoning, such that "relying on p involves a disposition to, among other things, deliberate on the basis of p, plan on the basis of p, act on the basis of p, and draw conclusions from p" (Alonso 2014, 166).[34]. However, one cannot trust without a relationship with norms that guide the parties' conduct toward one another, providing it with the particular kind of indeterminacy and agential stance that we value and nurture, allowing for trustee discretion and accountability.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have challenged the prevailing view that reactive feelings, such as personal disappointment and betrayal, are inherent to trust, showing how it faces serious difficulties, primarily in accounting for cases where trust exists without those feelings and vice versa. As an alternative, I have advanced a relational account of trust where trust is directed toward norms constitutive of our relationship. This view allows us to keep trust as a fully doxastic mechanism of cooperation while avoiding the tensions that typically arise between doxastic accounts and the emotional responses associated with trust violations.

The act of "Breaking Trust," as stated in this paper's title, doesn't only allude to my focus on trust violations but also to the move of setting apart trust as a mechanism from its content in relationships. – Under this account, violations of trust directly warrant only epistemic reassessments of trustworthiness – a purely cognitive adjustment that aligns with trust's doxastic nature; and reactive feelings are to be relocated to occurrences of relationship impairment. With this separation, we can maintain a parsimonious account of trust (avoiding hybrid or pluralistic notions) while still accounting for the emotional responses associated with it.

Note that I don't deny Holton's basic insight. It would be foolish to do so given the recurrence of betrayal and personal disappointment along with trust violations. Holton is right that reactive feelings occur in the same environment of trust violations, and that environment (the relationship) requires holding a participant stance of the kind that Strawson advances, granting reactive feelings. It is just the particular necessary tie between trust and reactive feelings that needs to be undone, as those represent two distinct features of our relationships.

[34]I think this is an appropriate way to account for what reliance is. Berislav Marušić (2017) contests this by claiming that the sort of reasons for which we rely on someone are different in kind from the reasons we trust, and that indicates that reliance and trust are different in kind. Marušić defines reliance as acting "in a way in which the success of your action – its achieving its end – depends on what or who you rely on" (2017, 3), and so, reasons for positing reliance on someone "are reasons that show relying on that person to be worthwhile or the thing to do." My main reservation about this claim is that it requires us to understand reliance not as a practical judgment but as an action – a response to practical reasons – rather than a practical belief. This claim is central to Marušić's distinction between trust and reliance. However, it is not only at odds with the account of reliance presented here (and the leading accounts in the literature as well) but also seems to be far-fetched. An action is not merely an event, but it consists of a determined physical event performed by an agent, and Marušić doesn't seem to be able to provide an account of what reliance is as an action.

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The breakdown of what happens in scenarios of trust violation explains not only the co-occurrence with reactive feelings by pointing at their shared object: the relationship norms. It may also shed light on what warrants and makes appropriate one kind of reactive feeling over another. Speaking to our focus on violations, it may better explain why some breaches of trust warrant feelings of betrayal, while others warrant mere disappointment, alluding to what Hinchman intended when making the distinction in terms of deeper and superficial levels where the violation occurs.

When someone violates trust, they violate norms constitutive of the relationship – norms that they were trusted to follow. What matters regarding the appropriateness of reactive feelings is not the violation of trust itself but what this reveals about the trustee's attitudes toward the relationship and how the violation affects the ways in which the parties interact. We may distinguish between betrayal and disappointment based on the nature of the relationship and the impact of the particular violation to its integrity.

Regarding the first, some relationships, by their very nature, are thin and can't accommodate feelings of betrayal because they lack the requisite normative structure or depth. For instance, if I trust my dance partner not to make inappropriate advances during a dance class, and they violate this trust by making unwanted sexual advances, blame and deep disappointment would be appropriate responses, while feelings of betrayal would generally not be warranted.[35] This is not because the violation wasn't severe (it certainly was), but because the relationship itself typically lacks the normative depth that would make betrayal an appropriate response. In contrast, I trust my therapist with intimate details about my personal life and mental health. If they violate this trust by sharing these details with others, feelings of betrayal would be appropriate. The relationship between therapist and client, while professional, carries significant normative weight regarding confidentiality and care in ways that some violations may occur, as suggested by Hinchman, "at a deeper level."[36]

Regarding the significance of impairment – even within relationships that can accommodate betrayal, not all violations warrant such an intense reactive attitude. What matters is the degree to which the violation impairs the relationship by revealing attitudes fundamentally incompatible with it. A spouse's infidelity, for example, typically warrants feelings of betrayal because it reveals attitudes fundamentally incompatible with the constitutive norms of monogamous marriage. Such violations of sexual and/or emotional exclusivity strike at the heart of what constitutes the relationship itself. On the other hand, a spouse bailing on a lunch date, while disappointing, generally wouldn't warrant feelings of betrayal. This violation, while certainly a failure to meet relationship expectations, doesn't reveal attitudes fundamentally incompatible with the relationship.

With this new setup, we may explain why therapeutic trust, as discussed in Section 2, does not immediately generate feelings of betrayal when the trustee fails. In such scenarios, the trustor suspends or calibrates differently the relation between the local violation and the relationship. The parent who trusts their teenager with the family car, expecting them to possibly fail, isn't betrayed when failure occurs because the relationship impairment itself was anticipated as part of the developmental process.

[35]Feelings of betrayal could be fitting here if, for instance, this is your regular dance partner, and you have a relationship of such that contains a certain level of personal regard and so more robust expectations.

[36]This distinction aligns with Margalit's (2017) differentiation between "thick" and "thin" relationships, contending that betrayal requires a certain thickness of relationship that carries with it substantial ethical expectations: "Betrayal is ungluing the glue of thick human relations" (2017, 48). Helm (2014) similarly suggests that not all trust relationships are sufficiently robust to warrant betrayal when violated.

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They may, however, feel disappointment, or even betrayal, if the violation regards the process of developing trustworthy conduct, or otherwise, if the teenager reveals a more profound disregard for their parents along with the particular violation.

We may also explain now cases where betrayal occurs without prior trust, such as the married couple example from Section 2. What matters for betrayal is not whether trust was broken but whether someone's conduct reveals attitudes that disregard the relationship. In the case of the married couple who have settled into cold coexistence, the relationship, however damaged, still exists, and its norms are still binding. The violation of this norm significantly impairs whatever relationship remains, warranting the wife feeling betrayed.

Thus, understanding reactive feelings as responses to relationship impairments rather than to trust violations *per se* also helps explain their appropriateness. If betrayal were inherent to trust, then feeling betrayed would be rational whenever trust is violated in a significant way. But this doesn't match our intuitions that mere nonconformity with expected actions is insufficient. We care about the reasons for a violation, and that is because we understand that not every failure to act as expected reflects a violation of the relevant norms, and also because some violations of the norms may be justified given the circumstances, in the sense that they do not warrant a reassessment of the relationship itself. Personal disappointment and feelings of betrayal are thus appropriate when they accurately track how violations reveal relationship-impairing attitudes.

Finally, the account in this paper may offer some interesting implications to be explored in the future, such as how to address relationships after a violation of trust. If reactive feelings target relationship impairments rather than trust itself, then repair efforts should focus on addressing the attitudes that caused the impairment and/or revisiting the norms that characterize the relationship, rather than simply rebuilding trust over flawed foundations. Namely, trust violations may tell us something about the trustee's trustworthiness, but failures of trustworthiness in one domain or relationship do not necessarily entail failures in another. Sometimes, if beyond the particular relationship we find value in maintaining a relationship with the other person, changing or establishing the relationship is what's really at stake, and so trust may be restored within a different relationship without being the primary target of repair.

Acknowledgments. For helpful comments on earlier versions, I thank Lee-Ann Chae, Eugene Chislenko, Sanford Goldberg, Miriam Solomon, and the anonymous reviewers for *Episteme*. I am also grateful to participants at the "From Bitterness to Disappointment and Back" workshop at the University of Vienna and the "Liberalism Rekindled" research project at the Hebrew University for valuable discussion. This research was supported by the Institute for Humane Studies under grant no. IHS018810.

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Cite this article: Israel E.B. (2026). "Breaking Trust and Relocating Reactive Feelings." *Episteme* 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10103

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10103 Published online by Cambridge University Press