

Monogamy and Vulnerability

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Relationships are deeply personal. They are the smallest and most fundamental blocks that form our histories, our cultures, our societies. We are dependent, and thus deeply vulnerable, to other human relationships from the time we are born to the moment we die. Nothing human-made was made outside of relationships. Everything we make is a product of relationships. We are intrinsically tied to other people; such is the reality of human existence. To discuss relationships, then, will always be something that hits everyone in a way that is close, personal, and sometimes uncomfortable. We have insecurities we have yet been unable to quell and often reach for different forms of relationships as a salve to those insecurities. All of us, ultimately, wish to feel loved, cherished, and appreciated by other human beings, and almost all of our activities beyond basic survival activities (and very often even those basic survival activities) seem to bend towards that end. What will give me the adoration of others? What will earn me the love of others? What will make others impressed, drawn to me, trusting of me? When driven by such intense social need, it can be difficult to truthfully and genuinely assess the underlying values we hold when we seek out connection. What makes a relationship valuable? What makes a person valuable? What makes *me* valuable?

In discussions such as these, I find it important to recognize the inherent vulnerability required in calling the standards for our relationships into question. On the same coin, we cannot have the mutually fulfilling relationships we want to have in our lives without doing that questioning. As long as we keep taking the same things for granted about relationships we will continuously make the same mistakes that make us miss each other, or hurt each other. As long as relationship advice articles ask questions like “What top 3 romantic gestures will help strengthen your relationship?” and not “Why do you think your romantic relationships more important than your friendships?” or “Why do we all keep doing monogamy?” jealousy will return the same monster it’s always been, those flowers will wilt, those individual dates will fade from memory, and we will keep asking ourselves why love always seems to hurt us so badly.

It is time to have a frank conversation about monogamy.

In this essay, I will be discussing the underlying values of compulsory monogamy that our culture takes for granted—that jealousy is an expression of love, that possessing one’s partner is a sign of commitment, and that imposing boundaries on the autonomy of another is not only acceptable, but expected—and I will argue that these values work towards the end of foreclosing on our personal vulnerability, even as they fail to ultimately do so. In order to do so, a working definition of compulsory monogamy is in order. Compulsory monogamy is the social mandate (taught and enforced by family, schools, churches, law, custom, etc.) that for relationships to be considered valid and meaningful they must be romantic, sexual, and exclusive. It is compulsory because it is expected and because other options are either maligned, invisible, inaccessible, or any combination of the three. What I will generally leave out of the discussion is what I call self-imposed monogamy: the kind of monogamy that says “I won’t have more than one romantic/sexual partners,” without saying “*You can’t* have more than one romantic/sexual partners.” For the duration of this exploration, my focus will remain on the you-can’t monogamy.

What is it that makes you-can’t monogamy so generally acceptable to us? This is a question Harry Chalmers explores in his essay “Is Monogamy Morally Permissible?” He begins with a thought experiment:

Imagine that two partners are in a romantic relationship, and that they are also (or perhaps *a fortiori*) friends. Yet theirs is not a typical relationship, for the partners have agreed on a most unusual restriction: Neither is allowed to have additional friends. Should either partner become

friends with someone besides the other, the other partner will refuse to support it—indeed, will go so far as to withdraw her love, affection, and willingness to continue the relationship. (Chalmers 1)

Many of us, as Chalmers asserts, would find this arrangement, at minimum, morally troubling. Even if both of the people in the relationship in question were enthusiastically consenting to this agreement, it wouldn't shake our discomfort at the agreement itself. Friendships are an important human social need and good. They fulfill us, fill our days with joy, provide us important emotional support and perspective. To deny other friendships to our partners as the basis of our romantic relationship seems perverse, a wild overreach into someone else's autonomy. So why, then, is it so acceptable for us to place such limitations on the romantic and sexual partners our partners can have in their life? Chalmers, in his essay, directs a thorough exploration and break-down of the different defenses of monogamy generally offered up to such a question (The Specialness Defense, The Sexual Health Defense, The Children Defense, The Practicality Defense, and the Jealousy Defense), and it is not my intention to walk that same ground. Nor is it my intention to delve into the political structural reasons why we practice monogamy in the first place, of which there are many already investigated by feminist scholars. Instead, I want to open up inquiry into the values lurking beneath those defenses and hold them up to long-overdue scrutiny.

The fundamental moral assumption made in you-can't monogamy is that, once we have made a romantic/sexual connection with someone (one that we desire to make on a regular basis), it is reasonable and acceptable for us to impose limits on romantic/sexual relationships they can have with others for as long as they hope to maintain their connection to us. All other defenses of monogamy spring from this moral belief. What makes this belief unique is that the romantic/sexual component is the feature that makes such a belief acceptable. As Chalmers shows above, we would find such logic applied to nonromantic/nonsexual relationships like friendships morally unacceptable, so this tells us that monogamy can only make sense if we make a division between romantic/sexual love and nonromantic/nonsexual love, and then valorize the former over the latter. Not only valorize, but create a whole new set of standards and practices to go along with the distinction. While jealousy over one's friend having other friends is treated as something one must learn to cope with, jealousy over one's romantic/sexual partner having other romantic/sexual partners is seen as something one may justifiably act upon and grounds upon which one may justifiably impose sanctions in response.

To answer why such values and distinctions between romantic/sexual love and nonromantic/nonsexual love are so entrenched within our society one must delve into their roots, which are undoubtedly in the establishment of patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism; however, as I have said, delving into those roots is not my aim here. Instead, I explore the emotional reasons individuals might have to keep trying at making monogamy work, and why considering anything different (even if monogamy has historically not worked out for them) creates such an anxious, and sometimes reactionary, response. I believe there are two dominant emotional reasons for feeling secure in the story of you-can't monogamy: the inherent vulnerability of embodiment and insecure attachment.

I began this essay with a reflection on the inherent vulnerability of being human, and to there we will return, beginning with Judith Butler's words on that vulnerability: "Our very sense of personhood is linked to the desire for recognition, and that desire places us outside ourselves, in a realm of social norms that we do not fully choose, but that provides the horizon and the resource for any sense of choice that we have." (Butler 33). We are vulnerable to one another, always

and without pause. While the rugged individualist ideology of neoliberal capitalism seems to offer us a potential reprieve from this vulnerability, its practice of atomizing human social life actually exacerbates the rawness of such vulnerability. Most of us do not have one cohesive social life, but separate social relationships unconnected with one another, and fragile. For those of us who have been in committed romantic/sexual relationships, even tumultuous or toxic ones, those relationships sometimes represent the only people in our lives that we can come home to and reveal our deepest vulnerabilities we feel we cannot show in other social realms. It is such a freedom to be completely one's self in the presence of another, to be seen, affirmed, and held in our complexities. Additionally, when we are monogamous, our partner is the *only* person with which this is true for us, and we are also the only person with whom that is true for them. This is the representation of the "Specialness" argument that Chalmers argues against in his essay, which he defines thus: "One common defense of monogamy is that monogamy helps one's romantic relationships to be special. Many think that there is or can be a distinctive value in choosing, and being chosen by, just *one* person." (Chalmers 228). This, as Chalmers also points out, is actually a conflation with specialness and *exclusivity*. Non-monogamous people have been quite clear that their nonmonogamy has not diminished the special place individual people have in their hearts. Each person is unique and special to us in their own right, regardless of how many relationships—friendships, sexual relationships, or romantic relationships—does not diminish that specialness. Yet, I think that even pointing this out cannot shake the fundamental belief many people have that one's vulnerabilities will be protected and held in special regard only in monogamy. It is my argument that this is due to the prevalence of *insecure attachment*.

Insecure attachment, a term most often used in human psychology, is characterized by fear and uncertainty in one's relationships. Even when all the faulty reasoning mobilized in you-can't monogamy's defense has been soundly defeated, a staunch monogamy defender will still invariably be standing before you and saying, "I don't care, I could never do non-monogamy, I'd be too insecure!" We need, I believe, to speak compassionately, but directly, to that response before we can ever hope to deconstruct compulsory monogamy on a larger scale, because it comes, ultimately, from a place of fear and insecurity. People believe that if they cannot erect structures that help them capture and then solely possess someone else's love and affection, they will not ever have meaningful or safe love, a basic human need, *at all*. We believe love is a finite resource. We have been taught that it must be romantic and sexual to be of true and lasting value. We have internalized the message that we can only be really special to someone if we are *more* special to them than anyone else. And, most importantly, most of us, at some fundamental point in our lives, have been subjected to this scarcity and hierarchical mindset by people we were exceptionally vulnerable to: family, early romantic/sexual partners, teachers, friends, and even by mainstream media and State law. It is no wonder, then, that so many of us believe that it is acceptable for our insecurities to dictate what kind of relationships the people close to us have. In the current state of things, when all of us have scars of past attachment traumas on our hearts, it makes sense why we scramble to tie any meaningful and loving relationships to us by any means necessary, especially when compulsory monogamy leaves such means so easily at hand. However, this being understandable does not make it right, or healthy, or even actually effective to those ends.

In his book *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm writes that having faith is one of the most important conditions of loving someone well. Having faith, according to Fromm, requires us to believe that the attitudes person(s) we love will remain reliably unchanged—not that they will always stay the

same, but that the personal qualities we came to love them for will remain a part of them—and, also, faith that they will continue to love us in return. He writes further:

To have faith requires *courage*, the ability to take a risk, the readiness to accept pain and disappointment. Whoever insists on safety and security as primary conditions of life cannot have faith; whoever shuts himself off in a system of defense, where distance and possession are his means of security, makes himself a prisoner. (Fromm 116)

You-can't monogamy leaves little room for such courage or faith. We use possession as a foundational means to shore up our sense of safety and security, and not only does this keep us from having faith in our partners' desire to love us regardless of what other relationships they may have in their life, but doing so even often *heightens* our feelings of insecure attachment. As Chalmers writes in response to the Jealousy Defense: "Rather than confronting the underlying needs or problems that jealousy indicates, monogamy is instead simply a way of avoiding behaviors that trigger jealous feelings, even at the cost of restricting the partner's freedom and well-being." (Chalmers 236). This is what he terms, aptly, a *capitulation* to jealousy and insecure attachment. Rather than finding and building relationships that hold us in our insecurity and help us work through it in healthy ways, we find relationships that end up *feeding* that insecurity. Counterintuitive at first glance, it is actually monogamy that most often enhances and exacerbates our insecure attachment. Rather than learning to cope with our insecurity and fears of abandonment when a beloved partner goes out on a date with someone else, and then building up a new feeling of security and trust every time they come back to us with love and affection, we sit in constant fear that our partner in monogamy might run into someone who they have undeniable attraction for and leave us entirely in order to explore it. Rather than being able to be honest about what we can and cannot give to our partners and allowing them to freely fulfill their needs and desires we cannot sustainably give them with others, we manically seek to fulfill their every need, even at the expense of our life-goals and personal projects, just to make sure they never feel unfulfilled and seek out someone else. Rather than finding joy and happiness in seeing someone we love fill their life with all kinds of unique and special loves, we dread the potential for any new friendship they make to become romantic or sexual. Instead of seeing each person we begin relationships with as uniquely valuable because of the person in-themselves, we are driven to find whatever single relationship we believe will solve our insecurities the best.

We have, according to Indigenous scholar and Critical Polyamorist Kim Tallbear's interpretation, made a relational norm out of "hoarding another person's body and desire." (Tallbear 157), and it has, all things considered, done few of us much sustainable good. We use monogamy as a means of foreclosing on vulnerability in our relationships, even as our inherent interconnection with one another renders such an attempt impossible from the start. We try to put limits on ours and our loved one's interdependence with others. We assert sovereignty over one another's agency and autonomy. We have made acceptable putting boundaries on domains that are not ours to erect fences upon. We devalue our friendships, hold romantic/sexual love as supreme, and still quake with insecurity when our romantic partner goes out with friends for fear that they will discover their friendships to be something more. When relationships do end, we feel at a loss and isolated because the terms of compulsory monogamy demand that we pour our love and energy into one romantic/sexual relationship at the cost of all other connections, romantic/sexual or not. *At least 25%* of us (statistics have only been collected for marriage relationships) will be in a relationship where infidelity occurs (Blow & Harnett 219). Something is fundamentally

broken with how we build relationships in the United States, and no amount of material romantic gestures can fix that. Perhaps it is time to have more frank conversations about monogamy.

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