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Scarce Or Abundant, Nothing About Love Should Be Casual

William Gillis

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The allure, to me, of polyamory has always been its promise of addressing reality head on. Of communicating and grappling with the complexities in our lives and relationships in an honest and audacious manner. But I am not so on board with those who define it as in terms of “casual love.”

The comparison to casual sex is entirely misguided in my opinion. ...Of course I freely admit I may not have the highest credentials in this area. Casual sex will probably always seem like a crazy scifi concept to me, completely detached from far more realistic and tangible notions like space elevators and time travel devices the size of galaxies. In some sense it’s silly to pay such an outlandish notion too much attention when there’s toy spacetime metrics to solve, but I appreciate on some level that this probably isn’t the case for all you cool kids. And you’re probably all making out with each other or something the moment I leave the room. Sounds wonderful. However, even though it might be experimentally unfeasible to test in a Type I Civilization, I’ve done the calculations and casual sex, casual flirtation, casual infatuation, all of those

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are quite workable at high frequencies and there don't seem to be any exclusion principles to their wavefunctions. The hairy bits are ultimately just engineering problems. And since y'all seem to be on such a higher Kardashev coolness scale than myself, with your hip dance parties and your zero-point energy extraction devices that spit out exotic matter like socially conventional small talk, I have no doubt you can solve these issues.

But casual love? I may be hanging too much on either of those words, yet I still suspect I disagree more than I agree.

Mostly because love isn't some kind of passive entertainment or fleeting hunger, love involves serious ontological reconfigurations. Or at least there's a thing that happens, when you grow to *know* a person, when that person is smart, creative, and kind, when they can surprise you, see the same things you can see, and behave with either such compassion or regularity that you can relax your shields around them, where they become qualitatively more real to you. Almost as real as yourself. Where your mirror neurons jiggle and dance in tune with them, a ghost of them moving alongside you at all times.

Loving someone remakes yourself. But most importantly, even if that ghost fades to a silent unnoticed echo, the impression left by the experience reshapes your ethical reality. You are not alone. Tangibly. Provably. There are other minds. In a way impossible to ascertain merely kicking balls with the shrieking automatons on the playground or banging one in a bathroom or being overcome with the novelty of a new automaton with handsome hydraulics. And this implies an absolute ethical obligation.

To love is to mesh so rawly with another storm of thoughts your identity blurs with theirs. Which is no reason to shy away! But falling in love marks a phase change in the ethical landscape. Whereas before you at least cared about them in an abstract or probabilistic way, afterward that empathy is hardwired, absolute, and immediate.

While your obliged behavior might remain precisely the same (avoiding smothering them, non-dramatically wishing them goodbye as they take off for Mars the next day, distancing yourself or others from them if they grow abusive...) if you can dismiss the rewiring in yourself as no biggie then I wouldn't remotely call that love. There's a plethora of lesser words available for mere passing emotions.

Certainly one could argue that in a world of higher bandwidth communication, of greater security and default intimacy, the phase boundary might break down a bit. But I would argue that even if we were to handwave away the limitations of human brains and even the possible proportional synchronization limits to any mind, loving someone is never in any sense a "casual" affair. Even if you could fully love everyone on the planet that wouldn't or shouldn't defang your love of its intensity. Love isn't a fleeting selfish craving where the loss of one in seven billion available sources to death by malnutrition would be a near infinitesimal concern. Just as your love is not a pie that can only be subdivided into smaller unworthier pieces, love is not something you can fill a limited stomach with by simply having many cartons to spoon from.

The power of love doesn't and shouldn't lie in its scarcity.

Yes, there are deep problems with our current society, but I'd diagnose those problems as constraints on and impediments to our capacity to deal with intensity, not the existence of intensity itself!

The impulse to water down feelings and consequently declare oneself "mature" is a deadening, cheapening, and unethical approach to life. Rationality, self-knowledge, and clarity of mind are in no sense antithetical to intensity. And resisting the latter is *certainly* not a good path to any of the former.