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Why Monogamy Is Marvelous

In Defence Of Fidelity

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This is a preview article for The Critique’s upcoming 2018 Valentine’s Day Issue
“What Is Love? Friendship, Sex, And Romance In The 21st Century.”

This Valentine's Day, couples around the world will celebrate their relationships. In doing so, they will almost certainly assume that part of what makes those relationships so wonderful is that they have found one special person whom they plan to love exclusively. They might send a card to their Valentine promising "You're the only one for me!" They may dance to Frank Sinatra's "My One and Only Love". They might hold hands in the candlelight while Dean Martin warbles that memories are made of "One man, one wife. One love through life". Those with more modern tastes might listen to Adele singing to her "One and Only" or to Hot Chip asking for a "One Life Stand". It's a deeply engrained assumption in our culture that erotic love, the kind of love we celebrate on Valentine's Day, is or should be *monogamous*: you should have that kind of love with only one person (or perhaps with only one person at a time) and while you are in love with that person you should not have, or want to have, sex with anyone else. This assumption of monogamy is ordinarily just accepted without question. However, when you think about it. It's rather odd. We don't assume that we should only love one child, one sibling or one friend. What's special about erotic love? I'm going to suggest that we shouldn't unreflectively assume that "true" erotic love is monogamous. In fact, a requirement to be monogamous is philosophically puzzling and requires defence. Nonetheless, I'll show that under the right conditions, monogamy can be defended. Indeed, under the right conditions, monogamy can be marvelous!

Why Monogamy is Mysterious

I've said that a requirement to be monogamous is philosophically puzzling and requires defence. But why? What's the mystery? There are a couple of problems here.

The first is that requiring your lover to be monogamous seems to treat erotic love differently from all other types of love. There is no other type of love where we require such strict exclusivity. Children might worry that their parents will love them less if they have a little brother or sister, but most parents will tell you that they just find more love. It's true that love does seem to require some kind of limit or exclusion. Aristotle famously says that "A friend to all is a friend to none." But no one thinks that it is a problem to have more than one friend. Why does erotic love require not just that we limit our affections but focus exclusively on one single person? Now, you might be thinking that erotic love is *different* from the love we have for our children or our friends. But for philosophers it is not enough to just say that erotic love and parental love are different. Differences are puzzling. We need an explanation of what is different about erotic love and why that difference justifies monogamy.

A second mystery is that requiring your lover to be monogamous seems to conflict with what we normally want for the people we love. Monogamy assumes that both erotic love and sexual pleasure are good. But normally, when I think something is good, I don't want to restrict my lover's access to it. I want him to have lots of good things. Now, of course, you can have too much of a good thing. My lover enjoys profiteroles but I don't want him to have an infinite number of profiteroles. Pretty soon, he would stop enjoying them – and soon after that they would probably start affecting his health. It makes sense to limit access to things that are initially good if (a) having too much undermines the initial good effects or (b) having too much interferes with other, more important, good things. Many people will want to argue that too much erotic love or too much sexual pleasure is bad for one or both of these reasons. But that needs to be argued for – and in particular it needs to be shown why anything more than one lover or sexual partner (at a time) involves too

much love or too much sexual pleasure. I never limit my lover to one single profiterole – nor do I insist that he must choose whether to have profiteroles or cheesecake for the rest of his life!

You might say that it is just a bare fact that you want to be the only one. You can only be happy in a monogamous relationship and that's that. Maybe you're just the jealous type. But then it becomes mysterious why we see monogamy as something to celebrate. You wouldn't send a card to your lover saying "Hooray! I get grumpy if you talk to me before I've had my coffee." If we're only monogamous to combat jealousy and jealousy is an irrational need that we just have to live with, then why the hearts and flowers?

You might be getting the impression from all this that I am anti-monogamy. I'm not. I think that we can solve the mystery of monogamy. We can show that in some circumstances, a couple should agree to be monogamous. More than this, we can show that the desire to be monogamous is something to celebrate – to send cards about. Monogamy can be marvelous. However, monogamy is only marvelous when it is adopted in the right circumstances and for the right reasons. In other circumstances, non-monogamy can be marvelous. And when monogamy is adopted for the wrong reasons, it can be a very bad thing indeed.

Reasons to be Faithful – Part One

Requiring your lover to be monogamous involves placing two restrictions on them. First, you require them not to have sex with anyone they aren't in love with: you require them to restrict sexual activity to relationships of erotic love. (We can deal with the fact that masturbation is normally seen as compatible with monogamy

either by saying that masturbation is sex with someone you love or by implicitly excluding solo sex from the sexual activity under discussion.) Second, you require them not to fall in love with anyone other than you: you require them to restrict relationships of erotic love to one single relationship (yours!). So to defend monogamy, we need to defend both these restrictions.

Why would it make sense to restrict sexual activity to relationships of erotic love? Why would it make sense to require your lover not to have casual sex? Many people would say that they just hate the thought of their lover having sex with someone they don't love. They find the very thought extremely hurtful. Normally, we expect our lovers to avoid doing things that cause us pain. Can we just simply say that the hurt I feel at the idea of my lover having casual sex justifies this restriction?

We can't. Hurt feelings can be reasonable or unreasonable. My lover might hate the idea of me eating cookies with someone I don't love, or laughing with someone I don't love, or sitting next to a member of the opposite sex that I don't love. He might be extremely hurt at the very idea that I might want to do such things. Should I react to this by agreeing to avoid casual cookie eating? Or by never cracking a smile when outside the home? Or by avoiding public places altogether? It is clear that I should not. Instead, we should work on my lover's unreasonable jealousy. Normally, the appropriate response to reasonable hurt is to try to avoid the behaviour that cause the hurt, while the appropriate response to unreasonable hurt is to deal with the unreasonable attitudes. So before we can work out whether my lover should avoid having casual sex because it would hurt me, we need to know whether my hurt is reasonable or unreasonable.

I suggest that it can be reasonable to be hurt by the idea of your lover having casual sex. This is because sex plays a very special role in a relationship of erotic love. Sex

is not just something you happen to do together. It is a way to show your love – and to make your love grow stronger. It is not for nothing that sex can be referred to as ‘making love’. If one lover has casual sex, the other lover can reasonably see this as undermining the role of sex in their relationship. You might think that having casual sex shows that he does not understand sex as intimately connected to love. In having casual sex, he has undertaken what to you is a very special, significant activity, deeply connected to love, without precisely this sense of love. You can see this as implicitly denying that what you do together is connected to love. It is as if you called each other by a special pet name, which you saw as an expression of love, and suddenly you found out that he called his work colleagues, shop assistants and telephone survey people by the same name. Your special pet name would not mean the same thing anymore. You wouldn’t be able to use it to express your love in the same way anymore. Even worse, it could retrospectively undermine the meaning of all the times when you thought he was using the name to show you that he loved you. Finding out that your lover has had casual sex can make it difficult for your sexual intimacy to express and develop love in the future and can retrospectively undermine the significance of previous lovemaking. Because sex can play such a central role in relationships of erotic love, this can be devastating.

I say that it can be reasonable to be hurt by the idea of your lover having casual sex because you see casual sex as undermining the role of sex within your relationship of erotic love. By this I mean that extreme hurt is one of several reasonable reactions. This depends in part on whether sex does play an important role in your relationship of erotic love. Some people might see sex as simply one, relatively unimportant, aspect of their relationship. (There are deep and interesting questions about whether this still counts as a relationship of erotic love.) Others might see sex as playing a central role in their relationship, but draw a clear distinction between

the sex they have together and sex outside the relationship. If you don't see casual sex as the same activity as the sex that plays the important role in your relationship, then you won't see your partner having casual sex as implicitly denying that what you do together is a very special significant activity. In these cases, you might not feel reasonable hurt at the idea of your partner having casual sex. All I am trying to show here is that in some circumstances, this hurt can be reasonable. It is reasonable to see sex as playing an important role in a loving relationship. It is also reasonable to have a relatively expansive understanding of sex, so that having casual sex counts as doing the same thing. Thus, all things considered, it is reasonable to be hurt by the idea of your partner having casual sex given these assumptions. Because your hurt is reasonable, other things being equal, you can require that your partner avoid the hurtful behaviour i.e. you can ask him not to have casual sex.

Reasons to be Faithful – Part Two

What about the second restriction in monogamy, the requirement not to fall in love with anyone else? How can this be defended?

I think that to make sense of the requirement not to fall in love with anyone else, we need to think of relationships of erotic love in a certain way. We need to see them as provisionally aiming to fit a certain model, which I will call 'Happy Ever After'. Happy Ever After is your paradigm relationship of erotic love. The traditional version of Happy Ever After is nicely summed up in the children's rhyme: "First comes love, second comes marriage, third comes a baby in a golden carriage." Not all modern versions of Happy Ever After will involve either formal marriage or children. Nonetheless, they will involve a similar kind of life partnership in which each lover's life is built around the other. I'll suggest that it can make sense

to require your partner not to fall in love with anyone else to protect your Happy Ever After. For other relationships, the requirement not to fall in love with anyone else can be justified insofar as these relationships are thought of as early stages of a potential Happy Ever After.

Happy Ever After is, as the name suggests, good. In fact, such relationships are one of the fundamental human goods in that they will form a key part of many versions of the good life. Nonetheless, unlike the fairy tales, in the real world Happy Ever After takes work. True life-partnerships are extremely demanding: they take up a lot of time, energy, money and emotion. They also require counterfactual commitments: in a true life-partnership, you know that your partner would pretty much drop everything if you really needed him. Because the life-partnership of Happy Every After is both extremely valuable and extremely demanding, it can make sense to protect an existing relationship by ring-fencing those resources by agreeing to avoid creating new relationships which would compete for resources.

There is a further puzzle here. New relationships of erotic love are just one type of threat to an existing life partnership. Careers, hobbies, relationships with family – all of these can also compete for those precious resources. Yet we don't ban our lovers from having careers or mothers. Why do we treat relationships of erotic love differently from other such threats? Why do we say that our lovers are not allowed *any* other relationships of erotic love? Why don't we provide stronger protections against these other threats?

A successful Happy Ever After does not involve sacrificing everything to the partnership. Good life-partnerships consist of two individuals who also have good, well-rounded lives in their own right. In addition, we cannot require our lovers to protect the relationship at the cost of violating pre-existing or unavoidable commit-

ments. So we cannot protect our Happy Ever After by asking our lovers to give up their careers, hobbies, and relationships with family members. Other extremely demanding relationships can be seen as part of the life-partnership: the children in the golden carriage may compete with your lover for time, energy and emotional investment, but they also deepen the relationship itself.

I suggest that a restriction to protect a life-partnership should meet three conditions: (a) it should not require either lover to sacrifice a key aspect of a well-rounded life; (b) it should not require either lover to abandon pre-existing or unavoidable obligations; (c) it should take account of whether competitors are extensions of the relationship itself.

Often, the requirement not to fall in love with someone else meets all three conditions. In particular, this requirement often does not require either lover to sacrifice a key aspect of a well-rounded life. This can be so, even though, as I noted in the introduction, erotic love is good, so by restricting access to relationships of erotic love you restrict your lover's access to something good. I know that by being monogamous I am missing out on valuable relationships of erotic love. These would be additional goods. Nonetheless, I don't need these additional goods to have a well-rounded life. This is because the relationship I already have gives me all I need in this area. Given this, and given the immense value of that relationship, it makes sense to avoid additional relationships of erotic love that would compete for resources.

It's worth noting here that an additional relationship of erotic love does not inevitably threaten the existing relationship. This need not always be a zero-sum game. The additional relationship may support the existing relationship. It may bring additional resources, more hands to share in the labour of life. Some people find amaz-

ing joy in such arrangements. Yet, we should not pretend that they do not present challenges, from the emotional challenges of navigating an extremely intimate relationship with the person with whom your partner falls in love to the logistical issues of combining the hopes and dreams of three or more adults. The question here is how we assess and respond to the risks. There are, of course, risks on both sides: risks in being open to an additional relationship and risks in avoiding such relationships (and the additional help they might bring). I don't suggest that avoidance is the right decision for everyone. Nonetheless, given the risks, avoidance of additional relationships can be justified as a way of protecting the original relationship – in part as recognition of the high value of this life partnership.

Something to Celebrate

So I have argued that it can make sense to require your lover to avoid casual sex because it would cause reasonable hurt. Your lover having casual sex causes reasonable hurt when you see sex as a deeply significant activity in the relationship and have a wide enough conception of 'the significant activity' so that casual sex would count as doing the same thing. In such a case, your lover having casual sex can undermine the valuable role of sex within the relationship.

I've also argued that it can make sense to require your lover not to fall in love with someone else. This makes sense when you see your relationship as a Happy Ever After life partnership – or as an early stage of a potential life partnership – which you value so much you want to protect it. In addition, the relationship must provide all you need when it comes to erotic love.

So far, this might not sound very marvelous. Monogamy sounds like something necessary to avoid reasonable hurt and to protect resources. But I think that agreeing to be monogamous in these conditions can be marvelous. First, there seems to me to be something valuable about the wide conception of the special activity of sex. Yes, you might think that it is more sophisticated to distinguish (significant) sex within the relationship from (casual) sex outside it. But, the wider conception involves seeing a certain activity as so deeply imbued with significance, as so much an expression of love, that this significance spreads to the same activity with other people. There seems to me to be something valuable in that. Similarly, there seems to me to be something very valuable in the recognition that the relationship is so important that one is prepared to give up additional goods to protect it – and perhaps even more so in the simple declaration of faith: you can give me all that I need in this area. When that is what is meant by “all I want is you”, monogamy is indeed marvelous.

[Editor’s Note: The arguments discussed in this article were developed with Bryan R. Weaver for the paper “Marriage and the Norm of the Monogamy”, *The Monist*, co-authored with Bryan R. Weaver].

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