A Utilitarian Defense of Non-Monogamy

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In Western societies, monogamous relationships dominate the normative view of romantic bonds. Despite our cultural adherence to it, monogamy features several inherent flaws tied to its restrictions on romantic feeling. For some people, non-monogamy solves those problems. In this paper I argue that non-monogamous relationships are both permissible and favorable when the individuals desire the additional satisfaction of multiple romantic partners and negotiate the rules of engagement, taking support from an article on the morality of monogamy and evidence culled from a series of interviews conducted with members of open relationships.

I must establish my definitions of the major terms I will use throughout this essay. By monogamy I mean any romantic relationship featuring only two people. In a non-monogamous, or polyamorous, relationship the individuals involved have multiple partners, or multiple lovers view their relationship as one between a group rather than a single set of dyadic interactions. For the purposes of this paper, I define a romantic relationship as the bond between persons who share a high level of emotional intimacy, involving freely granted support and sharing significant moments. Sexual intimacy is not an essential feature of romantic relationships, but is often desired and important.

On the whole, a utilitarian perspective permeates this paper. I view pleasure as an intrinsic good, and believe that true happiness should be the ultimate goal of any member of any society. As pleasure’s opposite, suffering is inherently bad. To that end, I hold that people should work to maximize the amount of pleasure they experience. However, harming another person to achieve joy is impermissible, since this causes suffering and takes away from the victim’s right to happiness. I adhere to Freud’s belief in the pleasure principle, his theory that people “strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so. This endeavor has two sides, a positive and a negative aim. It aims . . . at an absence of pain and unpleasure, and . . . at the experiencing of strong feelings of
pleasure.” Emotional satisfaction is one source of immense pleasure. We work, play, read, and love for the pleasant feelings these activities provide. The cathartic release of desire satisfaction pushes us into a place where we are content with the state of our lives. Our happiness runs inverse with the build-up of unfulfilled wants, so meeting our emotional needs secures pleasure, the utilitarian goal.

Under proper circumstances, non-monogamous relationships fulfill otherwise unmet emotional needs. People form romantic relationships to experience greater pleasure than they could have otherwise. I agree with Bryan Weaver and Fiona Woollard’s claim that “both sex and erotic love have a certain default value; that an action will . . . cultivate feelings of erotic love . . . speak[s] in favour of the action.” The duo also argue that romantic love is highly valued in our culture, something reinforced by monogamy; it attempts to protect that value through exclusivity. Our normative view marks happiness as important, and we engage in bonds with other people which make us happy.

Unfortunately, monogamy restricts love’s valuable pleasure to dyadic relationships. As a social norm, monogamy exerts pressure on individuals to be satisfied by a single partner. Tying romantic pleasure to exclusivity restricts people from cultivating similar feelings with others. Exclusivity conflicts with our desires to freely love one another. Weaver and Woollard capture the truth of most human experience when claiming that “each partner [in a long-term relationship] will usually . . . experience . . . feelings of erotic love for another [person]” and the tight constriction normative monogamy places on romantic interactions stops people from acting on those emotions. Of course not everyone feels the need to engage in multiple romantic relationships simultaneously, but normative monogamy limits those who do from satisfying their several romantic desires, causing them undue harm.

Non-monogamy encourages a plurality of pleasures and ultimately emotional contentment by lifting monogamous restrictions. People dissatisfied

3. Ibid., 509.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 512.
with their monogamous relationship may need an additional lover. Weaver and Woollard note that “the erotic love shared between partners differs where the partners differ.” If every partnership provides different romantic pleasures, than having a second partner grants different emotional delights which can overcome the shortcomings found in one’s initial bond. When individuals are unfulfilled by their original mate, additional lovers can grant them emotional satisfaction. If we hold emotional satisfaction as a valuable piece of the human experience, then non-monogamy appears to perform a noble duty by enabling greater pleasure.

Simple utilitarian joy is not enough; for non-monogamy to be morally permissible the individuals involved must consent to its features. My categorical imperative states that we cannot cause more suffering in our personal pursuit of happiness. In her article “Intimacy, Negotiated Nonmonogamy, and the Limits of the Couple,” Lynn Jamieson describes the findings of several interviews she conducted with non-monogamous partners. Jamieson claims that secret affairs are morally problematic because they “typically involve not only secrecy but also active deceit . . . in this sense, they clearly are a breach of trust between the couple.” A partner breaching another’s trust violates the latter’s consent to engage in a normative monogamous relationship, making them suffer from undue heartache. For peaceful non-monogamy, the relationship’s members must carefully negotiate the new boundaries within which they will operate. Since most people adhere to normative monogamy, one cannot simply assume that a lover will be okay with additional partners. People who decide to open relationships to other lovers do so because they think it necessary for their personal satisfaction. Monogamy represents the opposite belief; Jamieson cites a study of closed partnerships in which the respondents stated that the “stability of the couple was typically given priority over individual autonomy.”

The tension between polyamorous and monogamous tenets illustrates the need for deliberations and consensual agreement; if one partner favors the former and the other the latter, it would be extraordinarily difficult to resolve those differing opinions without open discussion.

Incredibly, Jamieson describes a couple who were able to overcome and satisfy their different needs through negotiation. The two women, Karen and

6. Ibid., 508.
8. Ibid., 40.
Phillipa, began their relationship monogamously. Eventually, Karen found that she was unable to maintain a long-term commitment without the ability to pursue other partners, while Phillipa was disinterested in holding multiple concurrent relationships. Despite the radically different needs and desires each partner expressed, they were able to negotiate a compromise under which Karen was able to develop short-term sexual relationships with “agreements about the extent to which she [Phillipa] was to be informed,” allowing Phillipa to understand her partner’s love life without discomforting levels of secrecy or disclosure. The example set by Karen and Phillipa illustrates the importance of honest discussion when lovers attempt to maximize their individual pleasures without harming one another.

Another utilitarian good potentially coming from a situation like Karen and Phillipa’s is the ability to personally fulfill oneself regained by people who do not wish to engage in polyamory but allow their partners to seek other lovers. Suppose Karen aimed to satisfy all of her sexual and emotional needs through her relationship with Phillipa. Phillipa would have to devote considerable time, energy, and other tangible resources trying to sustain Karen, or simply refuse and retain those resources for activities of her choice. The former option drains Phillipa and fails to satiate Karen, who desires non-monogamy, while the latter almost certainly leads to displeasure on both sides and possibly the end of the relationship. Becoming non-monogamous removes the strain on Phillipa to provide all for Karen, since Karen will be enjoying time with others. Simultaneously, Phillipa gets back some of the personal time and resources she would have otherwise spent with Karen. Phillipa, or anyone in her situation, could reallocate those resources towards personal flourishing, perhaps engaging in activities previously overlooked in favor of her relationship. Even if the gains are modest, maybe just a few hours per week, they can be used by Phillipa for Phillipa, or anyone in her shoes. Devoting oneself to one’s own needs can be another valuable result of non-monogamy.

The following is a response to the potential objection to my argument, specifically the objection claiming additional partners in polyamorous relationships are objectified. Rae Langton writes about objectification in her essay “Sexual Solipsism,” which focuses on the problems arising from the use of

9. Ibid., 43.
10. Ibid., 43, 53.
pornography as a substitute for real women. Langton argues that objectification, or treating people as things, “diminishes, or destroys... some human qualities of the person [treated] as a thing.”\textsuperscript{11} Langton also discusses Immanuel Kant at length, including his categorical imperative forbidding the use of people as means to end.\textsuperscript{12} Later in her essay, Langton describes the way people treat things, noting that “things provide us with tools. We take them... make them more amenable to our purposes, and use them for whatever we want... when things are worn out, you throw them away.”\textsuperscript{13} When thinking of people being treated the same way, we are morally outraged. Yet, when a person dissatisfied with their relationship turns to additional partners, they appear to use them as means to an end. The additional partner becomes a mere resource for emotional pleasure to be tapped into whenever the original dyadic bond does not fulfill someone’s needs. This pattern may lead to what Langton calls “objectifying attitudes” which reduces the abused lover to the status of “something... to be used, to be possessed.”\textsuperscript{14} Non-monogamy appears to facilitate objectifying attitudes insofar as it turns partners into tools for one’s gratification.

I have no defense for any relationship, romantic or otherwise, in which any member is objectified, abused, and treated only as a simple resource. I believe non-monogamous relationships, like all others, must consist of members who respect each other equally and work towards mutual benefit. Polyamorous bonds hinge on the consent of each person involved; without it, the situation is morally reprehensible. This is why negotiations are a necessary step in any valid non-monogamous relationship. They ensure that each person involved shapes the relationship’s contours. Since every member plays a role in forming the partnership, they necessarily agree to the boundaries they will adhere to; if they do not, then there is no partnership. The partners also dictate how they wish to be treated, respected, and loved. If any members of the group deem the original agreements violated, they have solid grounds to launch grievances and demand proper respect. Negotiations force each person to treat the others as equals under their own negotiated rules, creating a system safe from objectifying attitudes.

\textsuperscript{11} Rae Langton, “Sexual Solipsism,” \textit{Philosophical Topics} 23, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 151.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 155.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 165.
One may still object that natural favoritism will seep into the relationships, causing an imbalance of time and energy application and ultimately objectification. In this view the neglected partner would become a mere secondary option called upon when one’s primary partner cannot be reached. Again I stress the importance of standing firm by the negotiated guidelines. The partner being neglected would have a legitimate gripe to point to their mistreatment and force a return to the agreed terms or dissolve the open relationship.

The objection raises an important point beyond moral practicality, however. Non-monogamy is not easy, nor is it for everyone. Even beginning to negotiate raises a challenge. Some people will never assent to opening their relationship up, and discovering that their partner desires polyamory may cause them stress and drive them to end the partnership. If a woman recognizes her inability to remain monogamous and knows that her partner will never agree to non-monogamy, she should not place her partner in the position of choosing his own happiness or hers; the woman should explain why she needs to see other people and end the relationship. If she believes that he will be receptive or even simply tolerant of the proposal, the negotiations should not cause a terrible strain and could yield greater joy for them both. In this case she should discuss the option. Relationships mandate risk and difficulty, regardless of the number and status of partners involved. If possible harm always outweighed possible pleasure, there would be no relationships at all.

I hope to have outlined some of normative monogamy’s inherent flaws while presenting non-monogamy as a viable alternative whenever lovers find themselves unsatisfied by the restrictions the former places upon them and agree to engage in new romantic interactions with others. Polyamory not only alleviates the incredible pressures society places on us to experience normalized romance, it aligns with our natural human tendency to become attached to people we interact with in our daily lives. Monogamy maintains its place as the dominant form of erotic love because we are socialized through the monogamous married couples around us, marriage’s presentation as the happy ending in countless pieces of entertainment, and the shame wrought upon adults not settled into long-term single partner relationships, who are called immature or disgusting for their actions. Despite being no more than a social construct, which may have origins in the belief that one partner possesses the other, monogamy has and may continue to hold sway over Western culture until the current liberalization of social
practices overcomes it. Hopefully non-monogamy will soon be accepted as a viable and desirable method of romantic expression.

Bibliography


