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A Couple (of) Reasons in Favor of Monogamy

(I) Introduction

It would be morally fine for you and your partner to be monogamous. You don't have to be. You can be non-monogamous if you want. Either option is permissible. These stances are admittedly boring and commonsensical, but they are much more controversial in the monogamy/non-monogamy literature, so it's worthwhile to defend them. The ethics of monogamy and non-monogamy is a pretty new area of systematic research, and a lot of the writing on the topic has been critical of monogamy. Often, the goal has been to legitimize non-monogamous relationships.¹ But some philosophers, such as Harry Chalmers, think monogamous relationships—i.e., agreements between partners on restrictions against prototypically romantic and sexual behavior with others—are immoral. As Chalmers (2022, 1009) argues, “monogamy’s mutual restriction on having additional partners is morally analogous to a mutual restriction on having additional friends; just as the latter restriction—here I’ll call it simply ‘the friendship restriction’—is morally troubling, so, too, is the former.” Such restrictions are wrong, according to Chalmers (2019), because they block our partners’ freedom to pursue ‘human goods’ without a good reason for doing so.² Chalmers’ argument has been used by Justin Clardy (2019) as well as Ole Martin Moen and Aleksander Sørli (2022) to similarly condemn monogamy.

It might sound like Chalmers has no qualms with monogamy *per se*, but only with restrictive and enforced agreements to be monogamous. This is, by comparison, how Hallie Liberto (2017, 414) describes her own position, writing, “The person who practices monogamy chooses to live his life

¹ See, for example: Carrie Jenkins (2015) and Luke Brunning (2016). While most of the literature on non-monogamy comes from cultural studies and the social scientists, I’m here only interested in philosophical work on the subject.

² Weaver and Woollard (2008) deserve credit for introducing the initial question of how, if sex and erotic love are valuable things, romantic partners could rationally want to restrict one another from enjoying these things as much as possible. But for an early articulation of this sort of concern, see: Bertrand Russell (1929, 53).

narrowly along one dimension—but...he does not do anything wrong.” Chalmers, however, doesn’t think it counts as monogamy when partners merely act on a personal preference to not date anyone else. For Chalmers, monogamy necessarily includes an enforced restriction. He writes, “even if you have little desire to pursue multiple relationships at a time, you can [remain] non-monogamous...the key is simply that you remain open to your partner’s having multiple relationships ...It is this openness, rather than the actual state of being in multiple relationships at a time, that is the essence of non-monogamy” (2019, 241). It’s monogamy as involving restrictive agreements or commitments, not mere preferences, that Chalmers and Liberto object to and that I am interested in defending.

I’ve previously written on why I think such agreements are permissible ([Name Redacted], 2020). I’ve argued that the commonsensical reasons or ‘defenses’ for being monogamous—practicality, specialness, and even sometimes jealousy—seem right. Chalmers (2022) has since responded that none of my purported reasons succeed. I’d like to show why the usual reasons for monogamy still hold up against the ‘friendship restrictions’ argument. I will also briefly address Hallie Liberto’s argument against monogamy, which is based upon the moral status of sexual promises. But before I do anything else, I’ll quickly mention some general concerns I have about Chalmers’ argument.

(II) Getting Clear About Monogamous ‘Cost Imposition’

Chalmers (2022, 1013) describes monogamous people as ‘imposing costs’ when their partners violate monogamous restrictions, with the threat of these costs helping to keep each other in line. As previously noted, Chalmers doesn’t spell out what he has in mind by ‘imposing costs.’ The term has a number of senses. Sometimes, ‘imposing costs’ describes some aspect of a proposed differential distribution of costs in moral and political theories.³ Other times, ‘imposing costs’ refers to intentional sanctions or punishments for the sake of justice, deterrence, or contract enforcement. Call this the ‘sanctionary sense.’

³ See, for example, David Sobel (2016) and Vanessa Carbonell (2015).

I might even, somewhat awkwardly, use the phrase to attribute causal responsibility to someone for some cost that I face. For example, someone who accidentally hits me with their car might be said to have imposed a cost on me. Call this the ‘causal sense.’

It’s unclear which (if any one) sense of ‘cost imposition’ is most fitting for a definition of monogamy *per se*. Any of these senses might fit. Some couples do have punitive attitudes. Other couples know they’d be hurt if a partner cheated, don’t know how they’d react, and hope they won’t have to find out. Analogously, if my partner were sobbing, and I saw this and indifferently walked into the other room to watch TV, my actions might result in resentment, blame, or a loss of affection. Still, it would be odd to say that my partner is ‘imposing costs’ on me. If she is, it’s in the causal sense. I may be worse off as a result of her reaction, but her reaction’s not intended to enforce our agreement or punish me.⁴

Chalmers may say that a friendship-restricting agreement would be immoral whether the cost impositions are sanctionary or merely causal, since such costs arise from unwarranted and selfish reactions that deter one’s partner (if not *de jure*, then *de facto*) from accessing good things. But that’s not how Chalmers actually characterizes costs. He writes, for example, that “being monogamous...involve[s] trying to stop your partner from engaging in sex or romance with others, since it’s understood that you’ll impose a significant cost on your partner for doing so (such as becoming angry, withdrawing your affection, and, if the infidelity is repeated or severe enough, ending the relationship)” (2022, 1018). As he writes elsewhere, “Prospective romantic and sexual relationships...are liable to be the subject of intense desire... [so] one must be prepared to impose a correspondingly severe cost for violating that norm”

⁴ I might be accused of begging the question by assuming similar reactions—in the case of monogamy— are warranted. But in what sense a cost is imposed does not depend on whether the costs are warranted. One reviewer has noted of someone who involuntarily withdraws from his wife when she fails to wear his favorite color of lipstick that he is imposing more than merely causal costs. Assuming that this man really isn’t trying to punish or control his wife, I think there is still a sense in which the costs the wife incurs in this case are merely causal. Nonetheless, we might still say that the man is blameworthy for imposing them and is obliged to try to stop imposing such costs. In fact, as we’ll soon see, I think this is the sort of thing Chalmers needs to say to make his argument work.

(2022, 1013).⁵ This all sounds sanctionary to me. Besides, if Chalmers did think of cost impositions in the merely causal sense, wouldn't he have also described straying non-monogamists as imposing costs (e.g. jealousy or loneliness) on their partners when going out with someone else?

Monogamous agreements with sanctionary costs face more challenges than those featuring merely causal costs. When sanctionary costs are justifiable, causal costs seem justifiable *a fortiori*. Moreover, the relevant question of sanctionary costs concerns when sanctions are justified, while the relevant question of merely causal costs concerns when and how one may withdraw from one's partner. This difference will at least affect our intuitions. Imagine that Jane starts having sex with someone new and her boyfriend John loses his desire to have sex with her. So far, even Liberto would have no objections to John's response. "John might decide to leave the relationship if Jane tells him she is having sex with a third party," she writes, so long as this decision isn't "understood as a penalty" (2017, 409). Those who agree, however, may still think that it would be wrong for John to threaten to punish Jane by leaving her.

This is a problem for Chalmers. Recall that he wouldn't want to say that a friendship-restricting agreement with only causal costs would be morally fine. Similarly, although Chalmers makes implications about the sanctionary character of monogamous costs, he still needs to maintain that monogamous restrictions are wrong no matter what sorts of costs are involved. But to maintain that imposing merely casual costs is wrong, Chalmers must characterize John's withdraw as immoral. This doesn't mean Chalmers' position is hopeless, though. He wouldn't have to say that John is obliged to have sex with Jane. Rather, he'd likely say that John has a duty, incurred through his commitment to Jane, to try to work on his disposition to withdraw from Jane if there's no good reason for his disposition. At least, this is the minimal sort of claim that Chalmers would need to make in order to maintain his position at all. But, as noted, this duty seems different from the duty to not punish Jane. Let's call the question of when we owe

⁵ Moen and Sørliie (2022, 350) have similarly characterized monogamous agreements between partners as involving "an explicit or implicit threat of ending the relationship if they fail to comply."

it to our partners to try to get ourselves to stick with the relationship the ‘When I May Leave Framework.’ While many of my arguments will apply to monogamous agreements with cost impositions in any sense, some of my arguments will make special use of the When I May Leave Framework. With these considerations out of the way, let’s now turn to some particular defenses of monogamy.

(III) Practicality

Monogamy can provide extra time, attention, and emotional energy for your partner. Monogamy also allows partners who want to be long-term to better plan out their futures together. Consider, for example, these two cases.

Monogamous Moving Plans

Elio and Oliver are monogamous and live in the same place. They want to be with each other in the long term. Oliver, however, has to relocate to Kathmandu.

Non-Monogamous Moving Plans

Jack is in a non-monogamous relationship with Babette and Murray. Jack wants to be with both Babette and Murray in the long term. Murray, however, has relocate to Chengdu.

Clearly, *ceteris paribus*, things are going to be easier for Elio. He may have commitments that force him and Oliver to be apart for a time, but he still will have one important commitment less than Jack. And the more partners that Jack adds, the more difficult it would be to maintain commitments to any one partner if life circumstances similarly change. By analogy, it is also common for partners to make compromises regarding their careers to be able to live in the same place. When a couple does this, it seems morally fine. So why couldn’t we limit partners for similar reasons?

Chalmers (2022, 1020) objects that my sort of case “involves a restriction on careers that would physically separate the couple, whereas forming an additional relationship merely might do so,” but the disanalogy is irrelevant, since restrictive agreements on lines of work that are sufficiently likely to separate a couple are also fine. Chalmers (2022, 1020) further objects that,

monogamy prohibits even investigating the potential for additional relationships (e.g., using an online dating profile to scope out new potential partners, going on dates with others to gauge romantic compatibility, and so on). To be analogous to monogamy, then, the agreement in the career case should be that neither partner will even investigate other career options that might end up physically separating the couple.

Ignoring the fact that going on a date is itself a romantic activity, just as taking a drag from a cigarette to try it out is still smoking, it seems fine to disengage from a relationship if one's partner is busy flirting on Tinder. It's also fine to disengage from a relationship if one's partner is exploring career options known to be incompatible with the relationship. Let's return to the When I May Leave Framework. Imagine this case:

Penguin Counter

Katy wakes up to find her partner Ryan packing for a trip. Ryan informs her that he found a posting for a job as a penguin counter for the British Antarctic Survey. The British Antarctic Survey has agreed to fly him down for a week to try it out. Ryan knows that Katy will not be able to join him if he takes the job because her mother depends on her help.

Chalmers may assert that Katy may not restrict Ryan. This is trivially true in the sense that Katy may not cut up Ryan's flight tickets or lock him in the apartment. But it's far less obvious that she may 'impose' no costs on him. Does Katy have an obligation to try to stay as affectionate, committed, and oriented towards Ryan as ever? Would it be immorally selfish of Katy if she didn't try her best to stay invested in the relationship? It doesn't seem like it.

Chalmers may say that Ryan should at least be able to look at tempting job postings that *might* turn out to be incompatible with his relationship without worrying about Katy's reaction. That's fine, but this seems more analogous to the fact that Katy shouldn't be bothered if Ryan makes an attractive new friend than the suggestion Katy shouldn't be bothered if Ryan goes on a date with that new friend. As in the *Penguin Counter* case, Ryan's going on a date with someone new seems to forfeit at least a significant

amount of his purported entitlement to Katy's investment in the relationship. If Ryan's not sure whether he wants to plan his life to include Katy, it's mysterious why she'd be obliged to stick around.

(IV) Intimacy

Natasha McKeever (2015) has suggested that exclusivity can foster intimacy by allowing a couple to "feel more relaxed and confident knowing they are not being compared to others." Chalmers doubts this because "there's always the prospect of being compared to...past partners" (2022, 1016). But it seems more reasonable to worry about comparisons with current partners than with past partners. For one thing, there's not much risk that your partner is going to decline your invitation to come over on Friday night so she can instead spend time with her memory of a past partner. In any case, opening up one's relationship could lead to a decrease in intimacy with one's partner in other ways as well, such as by creating extremely private relationships with others. "If you spent last night doing something personally important and private with your lover Nia, and your other lover Sofia asks you what you did last night," I've illustrated ([Name Redacted] 2020, 544), "you can tell Sofia that it's private, but this in turn seems to risk undercutting your capacity for intimacy with Sofia."⁶ As Chalmers (2022, 1016) responds, "assuming...that 'something personally important and private' refers to sex, the case seems to me to have a straightforward solution: tell Sofia (1) that you had sex with Nia last night, (2) to what extent Nia has any known STIs, and (3) what level of protection, if any, you used—but don't provide detail beyond that." Sex wasn't what I had in mind. Perhaps Nina and you had an amazing and important (but private) conversation. Sofia has no right to know the content of this conversation, but insofar as this conversation was deeply meaningful to you, Sofia will know you slightly less than she did before. Applying this to Chalmers' case, if you had a really special sexual experience with Nia, you undercut your intimacy with

⁶ Although non-monogamous relationships often feature close relationships between metamours, but this is by no means guaranteed and indeed often doesn't occur.

Sophia a little if you can't tell her about what made it special. Therefore, Chalmer's (2022, 1016) objection that "being unwilling to divulge the additional details doesn't at all reflect a lack of trust in Sofia, but merely a need to respect Nia's privacy" misses the point.⁷

Monogamy can also foster certain features of close relationships especially well, such as the frequency and diversity of partners' influence on each other. If you're with a few different people, you'll have to split your time among them. Even if you and your lovers all spend time together as a group, this will still decrease your interaction frequency with any one partner, unless you just ignore the rest of the group. Monogamy, additionally, can help to increase the diversity of a couple's mutual influence by clustering together many different modes of interaction (sex, emotional closeness, conversation, long-term partnership, etc.) into a single relationship.⁸ Sørli and Moen (2022, 343) think that this is a win for non-monogamy, as it allows us to disentangle the 'conventional clusters' of our relationships and do different things with different people, such as living and raising children with one person but having sex with another, or meeting one's neighbor to cuddle "even if there is no desire for escalating the frequency of such encounters or to stress about dinner invitations." While there is nothing sexy about stressing over dinner invitations, if the person with whom you cuddle or have sex is *also* the person with whom you discuss philosophy and do laundry, you and this person will have an especially intimate bond.

(V) Specialness

When lovers have a shared identity that is shared exclusively, then "it will be important for the lovers to do some things exclusively" to "build, affirm and celebrate" their shared identity, with sex and romance often filling this role (McKeever 2015, 362). Chalmers wonders how specialness—understood as *value*—

⁷ Chalmers might point out that we also trust our friends with secrets. But it's often assumed in friendships that secrets can be shared with one's partner if no one else, and even when that's not the case, friendships don't typically feature as many intense, private experiences or exclusive secret-sharing.

⁸ These features of intimate relationships are drawn from Pamela Regan's (2011) research.

is gained through sharing an identity exclusively in the first place. It might seem to many that such an explanation comes from, for example, our evolutionary history. This, however, would be an external reason rather than an internal one (an internal reason provides a reflectively justificatory reason to the deliberating agent). Chalmers will only be happy with an internal reason, since, for example, an evolutionary explanation would leave open the question of why we should *follow* our evolutionarily ingrained evaluative attitudes on this matter.⁹

I've responded that the fact that many people *do* associate exclusivity and value is a *pro tanto* reason for regarding exclusivity as a good-making feature of their relationships. By analogy, it doesn't matter whether we have some further reason for our association between sex and a valuable kind of emotional closeness; the fact that we have such an association gives us a *pro tanto* reason to consider sex a source of a valuable kind of closeness.¹⁰ Thus, even if we weren't able to explain why sex is associated with closeness, that doesn't mean that we should cease considering it valuable. Chalmers (2022, 1017) has responded that,

This line of reasoning...is unmotivated. What matters here is that, regardless of to what extent people (individually or collectively) happen to associate sex with 'a special kind of emotional support and closeness,' they need not...and, in some salient ways, it'd be better if they didn't...In particular, it'd make open a prima facie valuable resource...That's all that's needed for the association between intimacy and exclusivity to...demand a reason.

Most people, monogamous or non-monogamous, associate sex with a special kind of closeness. Certainly it wouldn't be better if we didn't have *this* association. For one thing, aside from the good physical

⁹ Nonetheless, a defender of Chalmers ought to discern whether the relevant monogamous attitudes are deeply ingrained or malleable habits, since it may not be possible for many to simply decide not to follow what might be instinctive attitudes.

¹⁰ Of course, no one doubts that sex is a source of such valuable closeness, but that is precisely the point; we don't need a prior justification for the association to have a reason for maintaining it.

sensations, it is this very association that makes sex a *prima facie* valuable thing in the first place: the closeness of being vulnerable together, seen, mutually approved of, and so on.

What about the association between the value and exclusivity of a shared identity? We should keep in mind that for some couples, sex and romance with other people is not desired at all, making it difficult to imagine how it might be valuable for them. Even regarding couples who do get tempted by the prospect of sex with other people, it would be presumptuous to think that the value of enjoying this sex by shifting to a non-monogamous relationship would outweigh the value that their shared exclusive identity currently holds. Granted, if some association is troublesome (say, if it is racist), then this can be a defeater to whatever *pro tanto* reasons that association had given us ([Name Redacted] 2020, 545). Is the association between exclusivity and specialness itself morally troublesome? I've suggested that it's not, pointing out that people associate value and exclusivity in many aspects of their daily lives ([Name Redacted] 2020, 545). The association between value and exclusivity, for example, is there when groups of school kids share special slang, when friends share inside jokes, and when cultures and subcultures have unique fashions. It's uncontroversial that these things are morally fine. Chalmers (2022, 1018) has responded,

I'll concede that if the people sharing distinctive slang, fashions, or inside jokes are not trying to stop outsiders from using them, then there's no sense of entitlement or ownership present. But if they are trying to stop outsiders from using them (e.g., through shaming or complaints about cultural appropriation), then it seems that their attitude indeed involves a sense of entitlement and ownership.

It doesn't strike me as obvious that this would be bad, though. For example, it's plausible enough that a clothing brand can wrong a particular ethnic group through an uncredited use of their traditional patterns. It also seems perfectly permissible for the Johnsons to not welcome me to their family reunion. Similarly, C. Thi Nguyen writes that if, against his wishes, his friends were to use the pet names or funny dance that

he and his spouse made up for each other, this would “constitute a breach of intimacy” (Nguyen and Strohl 2019, 992-995).

Liberto (2017, 410) offers another reason why the association between sexual or romantic exclusivity and value might be morally troublesome. She thinks that we find this association attractive because we “tend to value things more when access to them is more exclusive or when they are rare goods.” Nonetheless, she writes, “Valuing either monogamy practices or monogamy promises for this reason is a way of objectifying our romantic partners” (Liberto 2017, 411).¹¹ I’m happy to agree with Liberto that it’s bad when this is the basis for a couple’s association between value and exclusivity. But these cases seem pathological insofar as they are based on a mistake about the relevant target of exclusivity. As with special slang and Nguyen’s funny dance, the relevant object of value is neither a person nor something about them. Rather, it is a practice shared by two or more people. A reasonable monogamous couple doesn’t think that they are entitled to each other but instead think that they are together entitled to the exclusive sharing of some practice or activity.¹²

Chalmers may respond that even if the association between exclusivity and specialness gives people a *pro tanto* reason for exclusivity, and even if that association isn’t immoral in itself, there’s something else wrong with it. What’s wrong, he could say, is that we have no reason to think that exclusivity’s apparent value is based on anything other than the fact that it makes people happy when they mistakenly think it is valuable. Thankfully, I think that we do have independent reasons to think that exclusivity can be valuable, or at least track a certain kind of value. Consider the following cases:

Very Much Picked Out

¹¹ C.f. McMurtry (1972, 596).

¹² Catherine Wesselinoff offers an additional and compelling understanding of attitudes of entitlement in monogamous relationships, one that also rebuffs accusations of objectification. As she writes, “parties in a monogamous commitment can expect each other to play by those rules—and are entitled to feel jealous when that does not happen. Based upon such an understanding, there seems to me nothing at all odd about the desire—required for jealousy—to be treated according to one’s entitlements” (Wesselinoff 2022, 8).

The musician Beck hears you playing guitar at a party and asks you if you want to help play for a song on his upcoming album. You show up and play together, just the two of you, in his small, private studio.

Just Slightly Picked Out

Beck hears you playing guitar at a party and asks you if you want to help play for a song on his upcoming album. You show up at his very large studio and discover that there are a hundred other guitarists that he also found at parties in the surrounding area.

I suppose that most of us, if expecting to be in *Very Much Picked Out* but finding ourselves in the *Just Slightly Picked Out*, would feel disappointment. It's nice being especially picked out. Typically, in cases where we are not selected with any exclusive criteria, we recognize that the basis for our being picked must be rather generic. So the exclusivity of a relationship or shared identity seems to track exclusive criteria, which in turn indicates being valuable to one's partner in a non-generic way. Chalmers might reply that you'd only feel good about being the only one picked out by Beck if it were because you were the only one good enough. If, however, the only reason that Beck didn't ask anyone else to play was because you wouldn't let him do so, then you actually shouldn't feel special. That's true, but that case would be more similar to getting together with someone who wants to be non-monogamous and making them be monogamous. You shouldn't feel special in that case. But it would be more analogous to monogamy to imagine in the *Very Much Picked Out* case that Beck already knew that he was just going to pick one guitarist out of hundreds, so when he picks you out, you indeed ought to feel special.¹³

Chalmers might finally object that non-monogamous people pick each other out in non-generic ways too. This is true, but it just goes to prove my point. Non-monogamous people also feel especially

¹³ Lyn Alison Radke (2022) has recently pointed out that, over time, monogamy may actually undermine one's sense of being picked out, since it becomes harder to reverse that choice. But the costs involved in reversing a chosen path later in time needn't undermine one's sense of that path being *chosen*. It may be true that it would be harder for a doctor to go into some new field a decade into her career, but it would seem strange to conclude that, at that point, being a doctor is no longer her choice or chosen career.

valued insofar as their relationships enjoy some amount of exclusivity.¹⁴ Monogamous people, however, will have to be *extremely* selective. I'll certainly feel more picked out if I show up to Beck's studio and there are only five other guitarists there, as opposed to a hundred, but still not as picked out as I'd feel if it were just me and Beck. This also answers Clardy's (2019, 31) question as to "how having additional friendships would make any particular friendship less special." While in the Beck case, there's no disadvantage to being extremely picked out, the value of being extremely picked out by one's friends isn't worth the loss in variety, group dynamics, and freedom. This difference in attitude seems warranted by the differences between how monogamous people want to relate to their friends vs. their partners. If my spouse asked me if I really wanted to be with her most of all, I'd understand the gravity of the question. We are sharing our whole *lives* together, after all. If the friend I meet for beer and conversation wanted to be sure that we were each other's top choice for such an activity, I'd encourage her to relax. It's good to have parts of one's social life that are casual, where standards are relaxed, and where group dynamics are more free-floating. Of course, non-monogamous people are not making some mistake by desiring more free-floating group dynamics in their romantic lives, nor are monogamous people mistaken for not wanting this; it's simply a matter of differing value-rankings, preferences, and personalities.¹⁵

(VI) Commitment

Non-monogamy can pose certain threats to commitment and stability in relationships. Avoiding these threats could be another reason to be monogamous.¹⁶ As I've argued elsewhere, engaging in outside

¹⁴ The relevant exclusion here is presumably of people deemed, for various reasons, not desirable enough to date.

¹⁵ An anonymous reviewer has pointed out to me that monogamous people sometimes are picked out for generic properties or because they're good enough and the only person in town. It seems to me, however, that even if this does occur sometimes, its occurrence is almost never desirable. If some couple had previously been the only single people in town, they might initially get together for this reason. But if, after time, this were still the primary reason the couple was together, this fact alone seems like understandable grounds for wanting to break up. After all, supposing that you were the only option in town, you'd probably still want it to be the case that your partner would have chosen you even when given more options.

¹⁶ This might seem to assume that any extra partners would have to be serious and committed, but as I argue elsewhere ([Name Redacted] 2020, 542), similar concerns can apply to casual partners.

relationships raises the risk that “implicit commitments may be entered into with the new party that make it difficult to sustain the other relationship as it was” ([Name Redacted] 2020, 547). Chalmers (2022, 1024) objects that if, for example, one **starts to spend** “a significant portion of her free time with a new partner,” raising the new partner’s expectations that she will always be able to spend that amount of time with him, this would not be “an indication that any such commitment has in fact developed, but simply that [the new partner] is being irrational.” This may be true if all the relevant cases were as simple as the one Chalmers imagines. But many commitments are not as easily explicable, quantitatively specifiable, or straightforward. What if my new partner reveals a traumatic memory to me and by encouraging her to open up and taking care of her, I am communicating that she can count on me emotionally? By doing this, I typically express an implicit commitment to be someone that, to the relevant extent, she can count on. Is it at all clear what acts these sorts of commitments will require over the long run, and whether they may affect my other relationship(s)? Would it be *irrational* for her to henceforth trust me as more dependable if I don’t explicitly tell her that I am, say, now available for three hours of emotional support per week? It doesn’t seem so.¹⁷

Non-monogamy can also increase the risk of trading up (leaving for someone else, moving in with someone else, spending most of one’s time with someone else, etc.), and people might want to avoid this risk.¹⁸ But given that trading up is, well, trading *up*, it probably qualifies as a *prima facie* good. Shouldn’t we want the best for our partners? Might it be, as Chalmers (2022:1027) suggests, “manipulative and controlling” to prevent our partners from seeing and experiencing the full extent of options out there in fear of the fact that we are not the best option? “However much it may crush us to see our partner leave us,” Chalmers (2019, 239) concludes, we should “want what’s best for her” and

¹⁷ As an aside, I don’t think it’s even possible in most real-world situations to avoid such implicit communication, and at any rate, interpersonal sensitivity often calls for it.

¹⁸ This risk, I think, will remain even if partners try *not* to compare their relationships or trade up (see: [Name Redacted] 2020, 542, 547.)

welcome this turn of events. I responded that this would be a commendable attitude on the part of the partner being left, but the corresponding attitude of the leaving partner— that however much it may crush my partner to see me leave, she should want what’s best for me— would be disturbing. It doesn’t seem kind, while imposing crushing (even if causal) costs on one’s partner, to find consolation in a rather saintly standard for the attitude one’s partner ought to be adopting towards feeling crushed.¹⁹ Moreover, having this attitude as a general disposition would seem to indicate a lack of commitment or loyalty on my part. “Like the value of friendship and promises,” I suggested, “a fully committed relationship is the kind of good available only when refraining from weighing its value comparatively to other potential goods” ([Name Redacted] 2020, 548).²⁰ Chalmers has responded that this attitude would only be disturbing if we were ‘pathologically’ rather than ‘healthily’ committed. As he writes,

To have a healthily committed relationship, one should in normal circumstances refrain from comparing its value to other potential goods, yet still be willing to think of such comparisons when they become a salient issue (e.g., when one is forced to choose between staying with one’s current partner and exploring a new relationship with someone who seems just as compatible)... commitment, on this proposal, would amount to something like this: being unwilling to abandon one’s relationship except for a very good reason. (Chalmers 2022, 1025)

It’s worth pointing out that if the mere option to “explore a relationship with someone who seems just as compatible” counts as a salient enough situation to start weighing the value of one’s current relationship against possible relationships with others, it’s mysterious whether Chalmers’ vision of healthy commitment contains any commitment at all. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to suppose that there is a limit to the demands of commitment. Still, this just means that reasonable commitments have release

¹⁹ This is true even if, as Chalmers suggests, such a thought only provides me with a slight amount of comfort.

²⁰ C.f. Norcross (2011).

conditions, such as when a significant enough harm is at stake. This fact isn't incompatible with monogamy.

Chalmers (2022, 1020) could repeat his objection that monogamy nonetheless keeps one's partner from even scoping out possibly better options, and this behavior "would be selfish." But it seems equally selfish to go into a committed relationship while keeping one's eyes open for better options. Trading up, after all, can end up leaving one's partner high and dry. Presumably, your partner needs to plan her future too. She has a rational interest in knowing whether you're going to leave her in a couple of years or want to be together long-term. If you give your partner the impression that you want to be together in the long term but then trade up in a few years, your partner may have, in the meantime, passed up the best opportunities she would have had to find a more permanent partner. Chalmers might respond here that the solution is simply for nobody to leave the impression that they wouldn't trade up. This solution would certainly let Chalmers consistently maintain his position in the face of worries about harming the traded partner. However, for those of us who don't think that ease of trading up is a good thing in the first place, there is no need for such a solution.

When I suggested that a committed relationship is the sort of good you can only have when you refrain from comparing it to other possible goods ([Name Redacted] 2020, 548), it is exactly the trading-up mindset that I had in mind. It is not loving to go into a relationship with an attitude that I'm only here unless I find someone better. If my well-being at some point compels me to leave a loving relationship, this should be an unexpected tragedy. It's not the sort of thing I should be able to anticipate, let alone the sort of thing for which I should be on the lookout. A loving attitude seems inconsistent with the sort of comparativeness that the ability to scope out better options requires. Troy Jollimore (2011, 96) puts this well, writing, "Love seems to demand that we often refuse to compare our beloveds with others, that we allow our appreciation of our beloveds to silence other values." Our lovers are usually taken to be non-fungible. As Nora Kreft (2022, 541) writes, "Lovers do not relate to their beloveds as seats of valuable qualities that would be replaceable for anyone with relevantly similar or more valuable qualities."

Granted, the irreplaceability of certain valuable things doesn't entail their incomparability.²¹ Still, it would be strange to bemoan the inability to seek out options for which to trade someone taken to be irreplaceable. Almost no one would trade their child or sibling in for one with more desirable qualities. Similarly, as long as one's parents were basically good, no normal person would jump at the chance to trade them in for even better parents.

At this point, Chalmers might change his strategy and respond that even if trading up isn't generally desirable, it is actually monogamous people that trade one partner in for another. Monogamous people, he could say, go from partner to partner, one at a time, while non-monogamous people avoid having to trade up with an attitude of 'the more, the merrier!' But, as I've noted before, our limited time and resources force us to choose with whom to spend time, with whom to live, and so on, whether or not we are monogamous. As a final thought, there are distinct joys in not scoping out better options. One can escape from, for lack of a better term, the consumeristic mindset of desiring, obtaining, discarding, and upgrading. As Zygmunt Bauman (2014, 49-58) suggests, "consumerism is not about accumulating goods...but about using them and disposing of them after use to make room for other goods and their uses" and accordingly, in matters of love, the consumerist keeps in mind that "the deeper and denser your attachments, commitments, engagement, the greater your risk" of being trapped.²² This mindset, however, can become both alienating and anxiety-inducing. One risks spending one's life with a foot always out the door, waiting for the perfect or at least the next better partner to come, afraid of missing out. It may come as a great relief to detach oneself from this net of craving and focus instead on appreciating what one currently has.

(VII) Jealousy

²¹ See: Heathwood (2015).

²² C.f. Zare (2001, 33) and H anh (2011, 15-18). Zare's work is cited in Brunning (2016). N.b. I am not criticizing non-monogamy in general here, but only the alleged value of having opportunities to scope out better options.

Some couples may choose to be monogamous either to avoid or spare their partners from the painfulness of jealousy. A lot of my responses to Chalmers' arguments concerning jealousy are in the above section, as they more closely relate to issues of commitment and trading up, which are the salient content of most cases of rational jealousy. But even in cases where jealousy is irrational, we might still take some concern over the painfulness of the experience. Chalmers (2022, 1028) denies that the pain of jealousy is worth serious moral consideration because "immature feelings more generally appear to lack the kind of moral weight needed to factor into our decision-making (or, at the very least, the moral weight needed to justify significantly restricting our behavior)."²³ For example, two friends thinking about forming a romantic relationship shouldn't restrict themselves just because it would make some third, single friend jealous. This seems right. Chalmers (2022, 1032) concludes by suggesting,

In the absence of any other, better defenses of monogamy...a mutual restriction on behaviors that might in themselves have been deeply fulfilling, would be justified not by some yet deeper beauty or fulfillment it alone made possible—but by the mere fact that the alternative...would be (even) worse. Such a justification flat-out fails to lend any of the specialness or dignity with which monogamy is usually perceived.

I see Chalmers' point here. If irrational jealousy *were* the only reason to be monogamous, that would be kind of sad. But irrational jealousy isn't really supposed to be doing that much work.

The reason that Chalmers (2022, 1027) considers irrational jealousy "the most plausible attempt at justifying monogamy" while I think that it is the least powerful and least interesting defense is because, unlike Chalmers, I think there are many positive reasons for being monogamous. Accordingly, I had originally only intended to consider irrational jealousy in the context of non-monogamous activity that had slipped through the cracks of the other defenses. Consider, for example, this case:

Sex Club

²³ It would probably be good to hear a bit more from Chalmers about why certain desires fail to provide reasons for actions and how to distinguish mature from immature desires, but his gist seems clear enough.

Sebastian and Cornelius are monogamous for a number of reasons, including practical reasons. They also consider close, intimate sex to be something special that they exclusively share. However, this attitude doesn't extend to casual sex. There is a sex club in town where neither Sebastian nor Cornelius would know anyone there or see anyone from there again. Sebastian and Cornelius wonder whether or not they should take turns visiting the club. On the one hand, they would probably enjoy it. On the other hand, they would probably get jealous.

This is the sort of encounter that I've called a 'tryst': a case where concerns about practicality, commitment, and stability don't apply ([Name Redacted] 2020, 542). Those, like Sebastian and Cornelius, who don't consider trysts to be a threat to the specialness of their relationship can be called 'tryst-indifferent'. Those who take trysts to violate specialness can be called 'tryst-concerned'. Importantly, a tryst-indifferent couple may still get jealous over trysts; they are simply indifferent with respect to trysts' effect on the specialness of their relationship. Similarly, a tryst-concerned couple needn't be jealous but need only take trysts to violate the specialness of their relationship.

It seems plausible enough that if a couple is tryst-indifferent, they might incur a duty to try their best to allow each other the occasional tryst. Whether or not a couple really incurs such a duty depends on factors like the severity of the jealousy, the enjoyability of the trysts, and the difficulty and costs involved in mollifying or otherwise enduring one's own negative emotions. If partners don't find the pleasures of trysts to outweigh their experiences of jealousy (however reduced), it seems fine for them to simply agree to restrict trysts. This, however, doesn't seem like that much of a blow to monogamy. All that we've established here for the case of obligatory non-monogamy is that *if* a couple is tryst-indifferent *and* their enjoyment of trysts outweighs their jealousy, then in such a case it would plausibly not be permissible to have a restriction against trysts. Chalmers might argue here that since Sebastian and Cornelius *can* reduce their jealousy, a restrictive agreement could not be justified in their case. I have suggested that perhaps some people can't sufficiently ameliorate their jealousy through voluntary means, at least not without

exceedingly burdensome costs.²⁴ Chalmers (2022, 1031) responds that there are many things we can do to effectively pacify jealousy, exercises either focused on the jealousy itself or factors that might make it worse. I am not convinced that the empirical literature he cites backs up this point.²⁵ At any rate, my goal was never to argue that people can't improve their health. Rather, my point was that it might be overly burdensome for many people to make their jealousy sufficiently unbothersome.

Chalmers (2022, 1032) finally objects that monogamy doesn't even help with jealousy (and perhaps makes it worse), writing, "Monogamy, in forcing your partner to choose between you and others, fosters a sense of competition in relationships—and competition is gunpowder to the fire of jealousy."²⁶ Whether monogamous or non-monogamous people experience more jealousy overall is an empirical question that seems unsettled.²⁷ I will simply offer some speculative counterpoints.²⁸ Firstly, as mentioned before, limitations on time, attention, and emotional resources will force everyone to make choices. If there's competition here, non-monogamy doesn't get rid of it. Perhaps the fact that monogamy makes you choose just one partner means that the competition will be more fierce. But it seems just as likely that the opposite is true. Fewer situations, within a monogamous relationship, seem as likely to give rise to jealousy in the first place. Long-term monogamous partners, having become so irreplaceable to each other after so many shared experiences and so much closeness and intimacy, aren't likely register the occasional crush or whatever as a significant threat *just because* their relationship has a one-partner limit. It's much

²⁴ This is one of those times when our evolutionary background might be important. See, e.g., Buss (1992).

²⁵ For example: Rausch, Gramling, and Auerbach's (2006) study was only on the effects of muscle relaxation on people shown disturbing images. The cognitive reappraisal study by Buss and Abrams (2017) showed it to be helpful in cases where one partner was irrationally paranoid or where partners had cheated but were repentant and trying to salvage the relationship. Similarly, friendlier expressions of jealousy were only shown by Yoshimura (2004) to provoke better responses from the partner who was the *target* of jealousy.

²⁶ Moen and Sørliie (2022, 349) likewise write, "Given the monogamy norm that only one person can be your partner's intimate partner, then others with whom your partner might be interested in being intimate are indeed a threat, since in that case, they will have to replace you."

²⁷ See: [Name Redacted] (2020, 549-551).

²⁸ But, for some slight support of my points, see: Pines and Aronson (1983) and Khanchandani and Durham (2009).

more likely that a significant threat to one's current relationship will emerge if one is actively forming sexual and romantic bonds with other people in the first place.

(VIII) Other Objections to Monogamy

I'm only aware of one other sort of argument against the moral permissibility of monogamy. This argument comes from Hallie Liberto (2017).²⁹ Liberto has argued that, just as it is wrong to accept someone's promise to have sex with you, it is wrong to accept someone's promise to not have sex with others. Liberto (2017, 395-399) suggests that sexual promises are always over-extensive, even when they "do not cause grave harms to well-being," because one's sexual choices are 'qualitatively inappropriate' for others to have discretion over (and promises transfer some discretionary power to others). Liberto offers a couple of compelling examples to illustrate the notion that some promises and deliberative roles ought not to be accepted. If there isn't any significant difference between her examples and monogamous agreements, this may give us a *pro tanto* reason to think that monogamy is bad. In one example, she invites us to imagine the case of a writer offering her benefactor the authorial credit for a book she wrote. "Accepting the role of recognized decider about certain things pertaining to another person's life," Liberto (2017, 397) writes, "is like accepting the recognized role (even if not the creative role) of author for someone else's book." But it seems like what could explain the inappropriateness in the authorship case is simply the fact that it would be dishonest for the benefactor to accept authorship for a book that he didn't write. Liberto offers another case, in which someone asks you to decide where she will go to college. Liberto is right that you probably shouldn't do that, although if you both want to stay close to each other and are trying to decide which college you shall both attend together, it seems reasonable for discretionary

²⁹ Liberto (2017, 385) notes that her argument only serves "a hefty blow against the moral acceptability of monogamy promises (although not against monogamy as a practice)" because she doesn't think that monogamy essentially involves restrictive agreements. But, as noted, I'm using the term 'monogamy' in Chalmers' sense, and Liberto (2017, 409) counts monogamous commitment as being promissory.

power to be shared. Granted, this group deliberation should be thoughtful and respectful and ensure that both people are happy, but this is also just what we want from good monogamous agreements.

Liberto (2017, 399) has anticipated this sort of reply and argued that reciprocity is not enough to make it moral to accept this kind of deliberative discretion, just as it wouldn't be enough to make "promises to reveal traumatic memories and promises to render bodily organs" permissible to accept. I'd invite the reader to check her own intuitions about these examples. As it seems to me, if I need a kidney and my friend needs a lung, it seems fine for us to make a promissory agreement to trade. Likewise, if my friend and I had both been assaulted by some criminal, and both witness each other's traumatic assault, it seems perfectly permissible for us to promise, despite the emotional difficulty, to testify in each other's court trials against that criminal. Liberto (2017, 398) does consider a case like this, but thinks it only shows that accepting such a promise necessitates a "powerful, overriding reason (e.g., I need your testimony in court to prosecute a dangerous criminal, and you will not provide it if I release you from your promise)." However, it doesn't seem to me that the stakes of the court case need to be that high. The two victims could permissibly promise to testify in each other's trials even if the criminal no longer posed a threat to society or even if they would have testified at any rate. Of course, I agree that, as with promises to trade organs, negative sexual promises shouldn't be made and accepted without good reasons (e.g. on a dare or a bet). But, as I've been suggesting throughout this article, there are good reasons for being monogamous.

Liberto (2017, 402) could respond that, despite appearances, the actions in all of these situations are impermissible because such "promises generate obligations for promisors to do things that...gravely diminish their own well-being or...defer to someone else's discretion about choices that are physically/emotionally profound." Of course, simply saying that such promises are wrong because they defer emotionally or physically profound choices to others would be to assume the very thing that we were supposed to be explaining. So let's instead consider the possibility that monogamous commitments are immoral because they can significantly diminish one's well-being (or otherwise only count as pseudo-

commitments). It's worth noting, however, that by taking this route, we will no longer be considering evidence to support Liberto's claim that monogamous agreements are wrong "even if they do not cause grave harms to well-being" (Liberto 2017, 395-399).

It seems plausible enough that in some cases, keeping a monogamous commitment—come what may—could become extremely harmful to someone. But this fact would only seem to establish that monogamous agreements ought to count as release conditions situations where keeping the agreement would be sufficiently harmful. For example, if you fall out of love with your partner or lose your sense of connection, do everything you can to rekindle the relationship, but just remain miserable, this seems like a commonsensical release condition for a committed relationship. Liberto would likely respond that the exact point where a significant enough harm is at stake also happens to be the point at which release conditions would make the promise a pseudo-promise. As she writes, if a promisor is released from her promise just in case she "changes her mind, all things considered," then her promise might not be morally troublesome, but it would only count as a pseudo-promise because it "never did transfer true discretionary authority into the hands of the promisee" (Liberto 2017, 413). Meanwhile, Liberto thinks, if the promiser isn't to be released in the case of changing her mind, the promise counts as over-extensive. Consider the example that Liberto gives of promising one's partner that one will have children. In ordinary cases, having children despite one's preference not to is likely to be very harmful. Moreover, there aren't any normal cases where there'd be a good, overriding reason to make such a promise. The promise to have children, therefore, indeed seems like the sort of promise that would necessitate a release whenever one's preferences change. And in turn, this would indeed make such promises either over-extensive or pseudo-promises. But I don't think the same holds for monogamous commitments. Granted, as I noted, keeping a monogamous commitment could in some cases become harmful enough to warrant a promissory release. But, unlike the case of having children, such cases don't seem to covary as cleanly with mere changes in one's overall preferences. Forgoing some preferences, e.g. to sleep with an attractive coworker or take on an additional girlfriend, doesn't seem sufficiently harmful to count as a release condition for a

monogamous commitment. One can still do these things, of course, but it doesn't seem clear that he should shoulder no blame for breaking a monogamous commitment just to do them (even if he informs his partner about this decision beforehand).

We have good reason to doubt, then, that a negative sexual promise is over-extensive whenever the promiser isn't released on the mere condition of changing his mind. How might Liberto reply here? Maybe, since sexual autonomy is a good thing, diminishing someone's sexual autonomy in any way would be, while not necessarily 'gravely harmful,' harmful enough in itself to be wrong. But it's not plausible that any diminishment to one's sexual autonomy automatically harms him. Consider this case:

The Pledge

Larry and George are easily tempted by but always end up regretting casual hookups, so they pledge to each other that neither will sleep with anyone at tonight's party. After the party, despite having been tempted, they are both glad that they made and kept their promises.

It seems very implausible that Larry and George have harmed each other. Liberto could reply here that although reductions to sexual autonomy aren't necessarily or intrinsically harmful, they risk being instrumentally harmful. Maybe Larry would have actually had a great, non-regrettable hookup that night, but his promise stopped him. On the other hand, Larry's promise, which reduces his sexual autonomy for that night, can also reduce the risk of harm. Larry and George made their pledge for exactly this reason.

(IX) Conclusion

I've tried to argue that monogamy is morally fine. I have defended monogamy on grounds like specialness, intimacy, and commitment, but I'm sure that Chalmers could still recommend non-monogamy on grounds such as freedom, novelty, and communality.³⁰ Kierkegaard's (1987, 38) aphorism, "Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way," echoes true here, just as it's true that you will enjoy it either way. Different sorts of things speak for monogamy and non-monogamy, and the choice of either

³⁰ C.f. Brunning (2016, 516-517).

will trade certain valuable things for others. To suppose that one option can better satisfy every category of romantic desire one might have, let alone doing so while remaining the only moral option, is overly idealistic. To borrow a phrase from Bernard Williams (1973, 260), “Everywhere there is loss, and to suppose that those dispositions demanded on the one hand by the external justification, and on the other by the drives of the self, can be made unwastefully to coincide is always illusion.” It might be added that even the various dispositions of the self can’t be made unwastefully to coincide, and promises to the contrary tend to warrant skepticism. Neither monogamy nor non-monogamy is a morally superior practice, nor is either a surer pathway to a good life, full-stop. Which one is better will differ from case to case, depending on personalities, circumstances, and so on. Legitimately endorsing one over the other can only ever take the form of a hypothetical imperative.

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