

Polysecure Bonobos



Notes on polyamory, evolutionary theory, and existential freedom

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Jacqui is troubled by a recurring thought. I wonder, she says, if I'm becoming old-fashioned. How so? I ask. Well, for instance half of my younger friends are polyamorous. I support them but I'm also aware of the royal mess they get in. I mean, people can do what they like. The last thing I am is a moralizer, but I question this form of freedom. I mean, is it *freedom*? Or an attempt to manage the unmanageable? Is this, you know, *Eros Management Ltd*? Or a new kind of consumer choice? Do you mean, I ask, a little perplexed, having more than a partner in love is like shopping? She laughs. Well, it would seem that way, don't you think? I mean what is love? Big question, right? I don't really know, but it's clear to me that it's not about satisfying my needs. Half of my needs are false anyway. Haven't we learned that from Marx? Well, I reply, when you say love is not about satisfying one's needs, it sounds one-sided, don't you think? Surely both aspects are valid: satisfying at least some of our needs *and* being open to other dimensions of love. But maybe without the first bit, love becomes too idealized. I mean, love can be many things, right?

Of course, Jacqui says, I guess I'm overstating my point for the sake of the argument. But there's a sort of crass pragmatism in polyamorous talk that really grates with me. Like what? I ask. OK, it's like, I hang out with Dan because he knows all about Merleau-Ponty and maybe some of his cleverness will rub off me. I spend time with Joe because my oh my he's hot in bed and attentive to my erogenous zones, and what he does with his tongue opens up new pathways in my brain. Then there's Alex; he's a fabulous dresser, makes me laugh and I get a real kick when seen with him. And there is Joan, with whom I explore my queerness and who's keen to go to sex parties where I discover foreign landscapes within my so very interesting inner world, she says rolling her eyes. It's all good I guess, but is it satisfying? Nope. I'm still to find a polyamorous person who is not a bundle of messed-up fake needs and desires. Sure, the same can be said for all those complacent monogamous people who think they found the holy grail and look down on the rest of us.

I laugh. Jacqui beams at me, stirred up. Of course, she goes on, monogamy would present us with different problems. I'm not saying that monogamy is where's at. And yet. I'm beginning to think that this polyamory stuff is at heart a mix of middle-class tedium and Californian ideology. I'm beginning to wonder whether love is something else, something, well, can I even say that? ... *higher*. Not about meeting my needs, but a chance to give myself fully to another, to be able to say simply, I can't live without you. I'm so unconvinced about this need to control, manage, and make everything under the sun transparent. A lot of pressure, she says, and perhaps even coercion?

This last point Jacqui made reminded me of a book by the late philosopher/psychoanalyst Anne Dufourmantelle, *In Defense of Secrets*, where the author makes a broader case in favour of the dignity of the secret, trampled by a dominant worldview that values scientific truth at the expense of mystery, sacrifice, and the sacred – a view that fails to recognize the opacity of much of our deeper experiences. She questions the facile view of opposing truth and the secret. Reading the book upset me, because it made me see that psychoanalysis has relegated the secret to a grey zone between the symbolic and the real. And that psychotherapy, a space where the communication of secrets is paramount, has become invested in the sub-Heideggerian acting out of *aletheia*, the unveiling of a debatable 'truth' which far from being true is a conditioned product of contemporary fears and pseudo-ethical apprehensions.

The difficult question implied in my client's narrative might tentatively be formulated as follows: "Could it be that polyamory – for all its valuable questioning of monogamy's obvious

trappings; for its spirited stance towards openness and new forms of loving – ends up reasserting the patriarchal norm in disguise, namely as Logos overruling Eros via an overwrought demand for consensus?” Remarkably, the most popular books on polyamory appear to rely on Attachment Theory (AT), an approach that has done much to affirm the patriarchal norm under the guise of maternal nurture. Pivoting around “polysecure” set-ups, they corroborate most of AT’s conservative epigons, from polyvagal theory to emotional trigger work to emotion focus therapy (EFT). Focusing on idealized notions of security, they seem to be driven by an ethos of cognitive control over the uncanny workings of Eros.

I believe that Attachment Theory has sanitized the psychic landscape and exiled Eros out of the consulting room, offsetting potential psychological transformation – an argument advanced by several queer theorists/psychoanalysts. That such a deeply conservative frame constitutes the basis for practices such as consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) and polyamory should give us pause for thought. It also begs another uncomfortable question: “Is polyamory – with its insistence on cognitive/managerial control of one’s own and one’s partner’s sexuality – at heart *puritanical*?”

Peace-loving, liberated hunter-gatherers

Published in 2010, *Sex at Dawn* is a self-defined study of the “prehistoric origins of modern sexuality”. It is equal in sensationalism and crass literalism to the Kinsey Report of 1948. Long before the advent of AI’s technofascism, the Kinsey Report pioneered methods (shoddy research and biased, robotic use of data) and viewpoints (above all, a superficial view of sexuality) that are now the norm. Swamped in sloppy science, half-baked claims, and a sub-standard understanding of evolutionary theory, *Sex at Dawn* provided ideological ground for *ingénue*, opportunists, academics who should know better, and for advocates of arranged polyamory.

Drawing on nineteenth century anthropologist’s Lewis Henry Morgan’s opinions on the nature of ancient human sexuality, the book’s core argument is the rejection of the chimpanzee model and the embracing of the bonobo model as illustrative of early hominin. The preference is based on similarities the authors see between human and bonobo social behaviour and ontogeny. The book is driven by its authors’ ridiculous question: “Why presume the monogamous pair-based model of human evolution currently favoured would have been adaptive for early humans, but not for bonobos in the jungles of central Africa?” – a question

that exposes the authors' ignorance of paleo-anthropology. At the basis of the book is the inadequate description of primate behaviour and specifically of bonobos'. The book's mantra is that ancestral humans were bonobo-like and the story told to readers only begins with bonobos and chimpanzees, promptly jumping to modern humans from 200,000 years ago, as primatologist and evolutionary biologist Lynn Saxon makes clear in her dazzling point-by-point rebuttal *Sex at Dusk*. Saxon also makes clear that the evolutionary process does not automatically (in fact rarely) results in happiness, harmony, or well-being. The book's central claim is that pair-bonding, jealousy, worries about the assurance of paternity are not "natural" aspects of human sexuality but the outcome of social groupings following the emergence of agriculture some 10,000 years ago. Our true nature, the authors opine, is akin to the bonobos', which they rosily portray as fluid, uncomplicatedly promiscuous, and entirely devoid of sexual conflict. All these marvellous characteristics are associated, in a predictable move, to our hunter-gatherer past, before the advent of agriculture, where all evils that befell humanity allegedly started. This depiction may well be the basis for a mildly interesting sci-fi Netflix series, but not for a book that claims to break new ground for human sexuality.

There is also no mention in the book of longstanding monogamous or polygynous pairings in non-agricultural human societies. Admittedly, the fantasy of ancestral hunters as nomadic, egalitarian, cooperative, peace-loving folks with no territorial or aggressive instincts, no competitiveness or meanness, rejoicing in the undifferentiating, ecstatic satisfaction of their sexual wants is irresistibly cute. But it also promotes an insidious *ideology* – a representation of the world not as it is but as we wish it to be.

The phantom of liberty

Two weeks ago Holly said she wanted to see someone else, Gavin says, someone called Rafa. She met him at a party and she finds him attractive. Of course I said yes. But I feel conflicted and I do my best not to feel jealous. If I do, if I express it, she'll say that I am being patriarchal, possessive. I agree with her. In any case, things will become difficult. Well, to be honest, things are difficult anyway.

Gavin is in his late thirties, married to Holly and together they have two kids. He says well, maybe now there's a chance for me to hook up with someone else and have a nice time. I don't really want to do that but it may give me some respite from these intense feelings. Do you mean jealousy? I venture. He looks away. Well no, I don't know if it's jealousy. I'm certainly

sad, confused, and unable to concentrate. So you don't feel jealous that she is seeing someone else, I say, and if you were jealous, that'd be wrong somehow.

After some silence Gavin says well, when you put it like that, I don't know, I guess I want to do the right thing, I don't want to have demands on her. We're good friends and besides, since she started seeing Rafa for some reasons sex between us got more exciting, not sure why. And if it's jealousy I feel, and if I do express it, I am scared she'll leave me, she'll think I want to possess her, that I am exclusive, but that's just not me. I am, you know, open-minded, I can't suddenly be making demands. Not even telling her how upset you are? Well, I think she knows that. But I love her and want her to be happy. So I must get over these messy feelings that interfere with who I *really* am, an open-minded, kind, and generous man.

What happens to us when we ignore powerful feelings because we deem them incompatible with an ideology we have embraced? Gavin embarked on an agonizing path, battling with the organismic emergence of feelings he deems inconsistent with the cultural-social-erotic principles he endorses, principles that feels vital to him because they help substantiate his identity. The unwillingness to even admit, let alone embrace jealousy, hurt, and anger may in the long run weaken the love he does feel for Holly; it may weaken his own sense of strength, the ability to hold contradictions without falling apart. At the time of writing, our work has stalled. He wants me to support him in his choices but feels that my bringing up the issue of jealousy is a spanner in the works that hinders rather than help the process.

Liberty and existential freedom

The view of human nature promoted by *Sex at Dawn* and possibly replicated by current polyamorous narratives is phantasmatic, a mixture of projection and wishful thinking. The book's depiction and endorsement of uncomplicated promiscuity is prescriptive and ideological to the core, rigidly endorsing promiscuous instincts as the biological norm while chastising the formation of exclusive long-term bonds as unnatural, the mere product of adjustments to social conditions.

Behind the phantom of human nature depicted in the book is the phantom of liberty. Jacqui's point about freedom could be more readily apply to *liberty*, a notion more akin to *licence*, a misapprehension of freedom, a mode very much in vogue at present among a host of murderous buffoons in positions of power today and sadly in the culture at large. I have not

been immune to this misunderstanding myself, personally and professionally, and having paid a dear price for my mistakes obliged me to viscerally reconsider my stance.

Clearly, we did not pay heed to De Beauvoir and Sartre's warning that to be free is not having the power to do what we want but to be able to *exceed the given towards an open future* – a future of *solidarity with others*. When solidarity and fellow-feeling are out of the picture, we get easily caught in *parasitical transcendence*, the conflation of the ego-self to staggering proportions, a scenario where others become mere props for one's own delusional pseudo-development. An accurate term for this, some may suggest, is narcissism, But narcissism is also the deep-seated belief, charmingly voiced by Gavin, of seeing oneself as open, generous, harbouring no "negative" feelings. In some ways, Gavin's statement chimes with one incident that took place during Ernest Jones's 1910 US lecture tour on psychoanalysis. On one particular occasion, he was discussing dreams and the unconscious. All that darkness in dreams, a woman objected, may apply to old Europe and to Austrians like Freud, but in her case, as with her fellow Americans, all dreams were positive and altruistic.

De Beauvoir presents us with an altogether different view of freedom, at variance with narcissistic notions of liberty and licence. This view is ambiguous. The ambiguity originates from our intrinsic paradox of being both subject and object, of *being* an interior life at a slight remove from the world as well as a *thing* in the world. To be an interior life implies to some degree acknowledging and embracing difficult emotions even when they do not align with our conditions of worth and super-ego's commandments. The latter do not exclusively belong to suppression and inhibition; they may also spur us into a phoney, perilously "Trumpian" sense of unlimited licence.

The challenge posed by existential thought as I see it is to work with and work through this inescapable ambivalence. How? By holding close to our heart what matters to us while also actively engaging in our projects in the world. The ambiguity consists in being at all times *situated*: embodied subjects in a world that both enables and constrains our projects. Pursuing what matters to us is an act of freedom/responsibility. What is to this day both formidable and relevant within existential thought is the notion that we cannot ascribe to so-called "nature" either our behaviour or least of all our wishful thinking. No concoction of dubious evolutionary theory or deterministic starry-eyed thinking about what is "natural" can be a substitute for keen awareness of our *situation* as humans.

While the former turns us into mere objects at the mercy of badly-conceived natural forces, the latter gives us a chance – a *choice* – to be at once more optimistic and more response-able about our pursuit within the sphere of shared experience. For de Beauvoir, the body itself is a situation, “our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects”. The socio-cultural and the natural aspects must be considered together lest we fall prey to phoney notions of freedom.

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