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Jorge N. Ferrer

*California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, California, USA*

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# From Romantic Jealousy to Sympathetic Joy: Monogamy, Polyamory, and Beyond

*Jorge N. Ferrer.*

Cailornia Institute of Integral Studies  
San Francisco, CA, USA

This paper explores how the extension of contemplative qualities to intimate relationships can transform human sexual/emotional responses and relationship choices. The paper reviews contemporary findings from the field of evolutionary psychology on the twin origins of jealousy and monogamy, argues for the possibility to transform jealousy into sympathetic joy (or *compersion*), addresses the common objections against polyamory (or nonmonogamy), and challenges the culturally prevalent belief that the only spiritually correct sexual options are either celibacy or (lifelong or serial) monogamy. To conclude, it is suggested that the cultivation of sympathetic joy in intimate bonds can pave the way to overcome the problematic dichotomy between monogamy and polyamory, grounding individuals in a radical openness to the dynamic unfolding of life that eludes any fixed relational identity or structure.

**Keywords:** jealousy, monogamy, polyamory, sympathetic joy, Buddhism

In Buddhism, sympathetic joy (*mudita*) is regarded as one of the “four immeasurable states” (*brahmaviharas*) or qualities of an enlightened person—the other three being loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), and equanimity (*upeksha*; see Tuffley, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Sympathetic joy refers to the human capability to participate in the joy of others, to feel happy when others feel happy. Although with different emphases, such an understanding can also be found in the contemplative teachings of many other religious traditions such as the Kabbalah, Christianity, or Sufism, which in their respective languages talk about empathic joy, for example, in terms of opening the “eye of the heart” that also allows seeing the divine mystery everywhere (e.g., Ozturk, 1988). According to these and other traditions, the cultivation of sympathetic joy can break through the ultimately false duality between self and others, being therefore a potent aid on the path toward overcoming self-centeredness and achieving liberation.

Although the ultimate aim of many religious practices is to develop sympathetic joy for all sentient beings, intimate relationships offer human beings—whether they are spiritual practitioners or not—a precious opportunity to taste its experiential flavor. Most psychologically balanced individuals naturally share to some degree in the happiness of their mates. Bliss and delight can effortlessly emerge within as one feels the joy of a partner’s ecstatic dance, enjoyment of an art performance, relishing of a favorite dish, or serene contemplation of a splendid sunset. This innate capacity for sympathetic joy in intimate relationships often reaches its peak in deeply emotional shared experiences, sensual exchange, and lovemaking. When we are in love, the embodied joy of our beloved becomes extremely contagious.

## Jealousy in Monogamous Relationships

But what if my partner’s sensuous or emotional joy were to arise in relation not to me but to someone else? For the vast majority of people,

the immediate reaction would likely be not one of expansive openness and love, but rather of contracting fear, anger, and perhaps even violent rage. The change of a single variable has rapidly turned the selfless contentment of sympathetic joy into the “green-eyed monster” of jealousy, as Shakespeare famously called this compulsive emotion.

Perhaps due to its prevalence, jealousy is widely accepted as “normal” in most cultures, and many of its violent consequences have often been regarded as understandable, morally justified, and even legally permissible. (It is worth remembering that as late as the 1970s the law of states such as Texas, Utah, and New Mexico considered “reasonable” the homicide of one’s adulterous partner if it happened at the scene of discovery; Buss, 2000). Although there are circumstances in which the mindful expression of rightful anger (not violence) may be a temporary appropriate response (see Masters, 2006)—for example, in the case of cheating and the adulterous breaking of monogamous vows—jealousy frequently makes its appearance in interpersonal situations where no betrayal has taken place or when one rationally knows that no real threat actually exists (e.g., watching a partner’s sensuous dance with an attractive person at a party). In general, the awakening of sympathetic joy in observing the happiness of one’s mate in relationship with perceived “rivals” is an extremely rare pearl to find. In the context of romantic relationships, jealousy functions as a hindrance to sympathetic joy.

What are the roots of this widespread difficulty in experiencing sympathetic joy in the arenas of sexuality and sensuous experience? What is ultimately lurking behind such an apparently degraded behavior as jealousy? Can jealousy be transformed through a fuller embodiment of sympathetic joy in intimate relationships? What emotional response can take the place of jealousy? And what are the implications of transforming jealousy for spiritually informed relationship choices? To begin exploring these questions, I turn to the discoveries of modern evolutionary psychology.

### **Genetic Selfishness: An Evolutionary Account of Jealousy and Monogamy**

The evolutionary origins and function of jealousy have been mapped by contemporary evolutionary psychologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, and zoologists. Despite its tragic impact in the modern world—the overwhelming majority of cases of mate battering and spousal murders worldwide are caused by jealous violence (Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Goetz, Shackelford, Romero, Kaighobadi, & Miner, 2008; Wilson & Daly, 1996)—jealousy very likely emerged around 3.5 million years ago in our hominid ancestors as an adaptive response of vital evolutionary value for both genders (Buss, 2000). Whereas the reproductive payoff of jealousy for males was to secure certainty of paternity and to avoid spending resources in support of another male’s genetic offspring, for females it evolved as a mechanism for guaranteeing protection and resources for biological children by having a steady partner. In short, jealousy emerged in human ancestral past to protect males from being cuckolded and to protect women from being abandoned. This is why even today men tend to experience more intense feelings of jealousy than women do when they suspect sexual infidelity, while women are more likely than men to feel threatened when their mates become emotionally attached to another female and spend time and money with her (Buss, 2000; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004; Sesardic, 2002). Modern research shows that this evolutionary logic in relation to gender-specific jealousy patterns operates widely across disparate cultures and countries, from Sweden to China and from North America and the Netherlands to Japan and Korea (Buss, 1994, 2000; however, see DeSteno, Barlett, Braverman, & Salovey, 2002; Harris, 2003).

The problem, of course, is that many instinctive reactions that may have had evolutionary significance in ancestral times do not make much sense in the modern world. There are today many single mothers, for example, who do not need or want financial—or even emotional—support from their children’s fathers, yet still feel jealous when their ex-partners pay attention to other women.

In addition, most contemporary men and women suffer from jealousy independently of whether they want children or plan to have them with their partners. As evolutionary psychologist David Buss (1994) put it, most human mating mechanisms and responses are actually “living fossils” (p. 222) shaped by the genetic pressures of human evolutionary history.

Interestingly, the genetic roots of jealousy are precisely the same as those behind the desire for sexual exclusivity (or possessiveness) that we in the West have come to call *monogamy*. In contrast to conventional use, however, the term *monogamy* simply means “one spouse” and does not necessarily entail sexual fidelity (Barash & Lipton, 2001). In any event, whereas jealousy is not exclusive to monogamous bonds (swingers and polyamorous people can also feel jealous; see Bergstrand & Sinski, 2010; Deri, 2015; Easton, 2010; Veaux & Rickert, 2014), the origins of jealousy and monogamy are intimately connected in the human primeval past. Indeed, evolutionary psychology tells us, jealousy emerged as a hypersensitive defense mechanism against the genetically disastrous possibility of having one’s partner stray from monogamy. In the ancestral savannah, it was as imperative for females to secure a stable partner who would provide food and protect their children from predators as it was for males to make sure they were not investing their time and energy in someone else’s progeny (Buss, 2000; Fisher, 1994).<sup>2</sup> Put simply, from an evolutionary standpoint the main purpose of both monogamy and jealousy is to secure the dissemination of one’s DNA.

In a context of spiritual aspiration aimed at the gradual uncovering and transformation of increasingly subtle forms of self-centeredness, it may be possible to recognize that jealousy ultimately serves a biologically engrained form of egotism that might be called *genetic selfishness*—not to be confused with Dawkins’ (1978) infamous “selfish gene” theory, which reduces human beings to the status of survival machines at the service of gene replication. Genetic selfishness is so archaic, pandemic, and deeply seated in human nature that it invariably goes unnoticed in contemporary culture and spiritual circles. An example may help

to reveal the elusive nature of genetic selfishness. In the movie *Cinderella Man*, an officer from the electric company is about to cut off the power of the residence of three children who will very likely die without heat—it is winter in New York at the time of the Great Depression. When the children’s mother appeals to the compassion of the officer, begging him not to cut off the power, he responds that his own children will suffer the same fate if he does not do his job because he will be fired. As I looked around the theater, I noted a large number of people in the audience nodding their heads in poignant understanding. It is easy to empathize with the officer’s stance. After all, who would not do the same in similar circumstances? Is it not both humanely understandable and morally justifiable to favor the survival of one’s own progeny over that of others? But, it is worth pondering, was the officer’s decision the most enlightened action to take? What if by saving my own child I am condemning to death the offspring of another person? What if instead of three children I am condemning ten, one hundred, or one thousand? Should numbers be of any significance in these decisions? What course of action is most aligned with universal compassion in these admittedly extreme situations? Any effort to reach a generalized answer to these questions is likely misguided; each concrete situation requires careful examination within its context and from a variety of perspectives and ways of knowing. My aim in raising these questions is not to offer solutions, but merely to convey how tacitly genetic selfishness is embedded as “second nature” in the human condition.<sup>3</sup>

### **Transforming Jealousy into Sympathetic Joy**

The discussion of the twin evolutionary origins of jealousy and monogamy raises further questions: Can jealousy be truly transformed? What emotional response can take the place of jealousy in human experience? How can the transformation of jealousy affect relationship choices?

To my knowledge, in contrast to most other emotional states, jealousy has no antonym in any human language. This is probably why the Kerista community—a polyamorous group located in San Francisco that was disbanded in the early

1990s—coined the term *compersion* to refer to the emotional response opposite to jealousy (Kerista Commune, 1984). Compersion is usually defined as “the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves” (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 595). Since the term emerged in the context of the practice of *polyfidelity* (faithfulness to many; see Kerista Commune, 1984), sensuous and sexual joy were included, but compersion was only cultivated in the context of loving bonds with members of the commune. However, the feeling of compersion can also be extended to any situation in which one’s mate feels emotional/sensuous joy with others in wholesome and constructive ways (e.g., Deri, 2015). In these situations, one can rejoice in one’s partner’s joy even if not knowing the third parties. Experientially, compersion can be felt as a tangible presence in the heart whose awakening may be accompanied by waves of warmth, pleasure, and appreciation at the idea of one’s partner loving others and being loved by them in non-harmful and mutually beneficial ways. In this light, I suggest that compersion can be seen as a novel extension of sympathetic joy to the realm of intimate relationships and, in particular, to interpersonal situations that conventionally evoke feelings of jealousy.

The reader acquainted with Vajrayana Buddhism may wonder whether such extension is novel at all. Has not the transformation of jealousy into sympathetic joy been described in the tantric literature? Well, yes and no. In Vajrayana Buddhism, jealousy is considered an imperfection (*klesha*) associated with attachment and self-centeredness that is transmuted into sympathetic joy, equanimity, and wisdom by the power of the Lord of Karma, Amoghasiddhi, one of the Five Dhyani Buddhas (Buddhas visualized in meditation; e.g., Thrangu Rimponche, 2013). From the green body of Amoghasiddhi emanates his consort, the goddess Green Tara, who is said to also have the power of turning jealousy into the ability to dwell in the happiness of others.

At first sight, it may look as if the green gods and goddesses of the Buddhist pantheon have defeated the green-eyed monster of jealousy. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that this perception needs correction. The problem is that

the Buddhist terms translated as jealousy—such as *issa* (Pali), *phrag dog* (Tibetan), or *irshya* (Sanskrit)—are more accurately read as envy. In the various Buddhist descriptions of “jealousy” one generally finds illustrations of bitterness and resentment at the happiness, talents, or good fortune of others, but very rarely, if ever, of contracting fear and anger in response to a mate’s sexual or emotional connection to others. In the *Abhidhamma*, for example, jealousy (*issa*) is considered an immoral mental state characterized by feelings of ill will at the success and prosperity of others (Dessein & Teng, 2016). The description of the jealous gods realm (*asura-loka*) also supports this assertion. Though commonly called “jealous,” the *asuras* are said to be envious of the gods of the heaven realm (*devas*) and possessed by feelings of ambition, hatred, and paranoia. Discussing the *samsaric* mandala, Chögyam Trungpa (1991) wrote, “It is not exactly jealousy; we do not seem to have the proper term in the English language. It is a paranoid attitude of comparison rather than purely jealousy . . . a sense of competition” (p. 32). As should be obvious, all these descriptions refer to envy, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “To feel displeasure and ill-will at the superiority of (another person) in happiness, success, reputation, or the possession of anything desirable” (1989, 5.316) and not to jealousy, which is a response to the real or imagined threat of losing one’s partner or valued relationship to a third party. Since Buddhist teachings about jealousy were originally aimed at monks who were not supposed to develop emotional attachments (even those who engaged in tantric sexual acts), the lack of systematic reflection in Buddhism upon romantic jealousy should not come as a surprise.

To close this section, I explore the implications of transforming jealousy for intimate relationships. I suggest that the transformation of jealousy through the cultivation of sympathetic joy bolsters the awakening of the enlightened heart. As jealousy dissolves, universal compassion and unconditional love become more easily available to the individual. Human compassion is universal in its embrace of all sentient beings without qualifications. Human love is also all-inclusive and unconditional—a love that is both free from the tendency to possess and that

does not expect anything in return. Although to love without conditions is generally easier in the case of brotherly and spiritual love, I suggest that as human beings heal the historical split between spiritual love (*agape*) and sensuous love (*eros*; see Irwin, 1991; Nygren, 1982), the extension of sympathetic joy to more embodied forms of love becomes a natural development. Furthermore, when embodied love is emancipated from possessiveness, a richer range of spiritually legitimate relationship options organically emerges. As human beings become more whole and are freed from certain basic fears (e.g., of abandonment, of unworthiness, of engulfment), new possibilities for the expression of embodied love open up which may feel natural, safe, and wholesome rather than undesirable, threatening, or even morally questionable. For example, once jealousy turns into sympathetic joy and sensuous and spiritual love are integrated, a couple may feel drawn to extend their love to other individuals beyond the structure of the pair bond. In short, once jealousy loosens its grip on the contemporary self, love can attain a wider dimension of embodiment in human lives that may naturally lead to the mindful cultivation of more inclusive intimate connections.

### **Social Monogamy as a Mask for Sexual Polyamory**

Even if mindful and open, the inclusion of other loving connections in the context of a partnership can elicit the two classic objections to nonmonogamy (or polyamory).<sup>4</sup> First, it does not work in practice, and second, it leads to the destruction of relationships. (I am leaving aside here the deeply engrained moral opposition to the very idea of polyamory associated with the legacy of Christianity in the West; see Witte, 2015.) As for the first objection, though polygyny (“many wives”) is still culturally prevalent on the globe—out of 853 known human cultures, 84 percent permit polygyny (Fisher, 1994; Murdock, 1981; see also Koktvedgaard Zeitzen, 2008)—it seems undeniable that with a few exceptions modern attempts at more gender-egalitarian open relationships have not been too successful; for example, research shows that patriarchal and monogamous tropes are reproduced in many polyamorous relationships (Barker, 2005;

Finn & Malson, 2008; Jamieson, 2004). Nevertheless, the same could be said about monogamy. After all, the history of monogamy is the history of adultery. As H. H. Munro famously wrote, monogamy is “the Western custom of one wife and hardly any mistresses.” Summing up the available evidence, Buss (2000) estimated that “approximately 20 to 40 percent of American women and 30 to 50 percent of American men have at least one affair over the course of the marriage” (p. 133), and pointed out that recent surveys suggest that the chance of *either* member of a modern couple committing infidelity at some point in their marriage may be as high as 76 percent—with these numbers increasing every year and with women’s affairs equating in number those from men (see Lampe, 1987; Thompson, 1983; Treas & Giesen, 2000).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, according to Brizendine (2006), human genetic studies show that “up to 10 percent of the supposed fathers researchers have tested are not genetically related to the children these men feel certain they fathered” (p. 88). In sum, although most people in modern Western culture consider themselves—and are believed to be—monogamous, both anonymous surveys and genetic studies reveal that many are so socially but not biologically (see also Barash & Lipton, 2001; Schmitt, 2005a).

In other words, social monogamy frequently masks sexual polyamory in an increasingly significant number of couples. In *Anatomy of Love*, Fisher (1994) suggested that the human desire for clandestine extramarital sex is genetically grounded in the evolutionary advantages that having other mates provided for both genders in ancestral times: extra opportunities to spread DNA for males, and extra protection and resources plus the acquisition of potentially better sperm for females. It may also be important to note that the prevalent relationship paradigm in the modern West is no longer lifelong monogamy (“till death do us part”) but serial monogamy (many partners sequentially), often punctuated with adultery.<sup>6</sup> Serial monogamy plus clandestine adultery is in many respects not too different from polyamory, except perhaps in that the latter is arguably more honest, ethical, and less harmful.<sup>7</sup> In this context, the mindful exploration of polyamory (i.e., practiced with the full knowledge

and approval of all concerned) may help alleviating the suffering caused by the staggering number of clandestine affairs in modern culture.

Furthermore, to disregard a potentially emancipatory cultural development because its early manifestations did not succeed may be unwise. Looking back at the history of emancipatory movements in the West—from feminism to the abolition of slavery to the gaining of civil rights by African-Americans—one can see that the first waves of the Promethean impulse were frequently burdened with problems and distortions that only later could be recognized and resolved. This article is not the place to review this historical evidence, but to dismiss polyamory because of its previous failures may be equivalent to having written off feminism on the grounds that its first waves failed to reclaim genuine feminine values or free women from patriarchy (e.g., turning women into masculinized “superwomen” capable of succeeding in a patriarchal world).<sup>8</sup>

### **Polyamory as a Path toward Emotional and Spiritual Growth**

**B**ut wait a moment. Dyadic relationships are already challenging enough. Why complicate them further by adding extra parties to the equation? Response: From a psychospiritual standpoint, an intimate relationship can be viewed as a structure through which human beings can learn to express and receive love in many forms. Although I refuse to declare polyamory more spiritual or evolved than monogamy, it is clear that if a person has not mastered the lessons and challenges of the dyadic structure he or she may not be ready to take on the challenges of arguably more complex (at least at interpersonal and communicative levels) forms of relationships (for a discussion of emotional complexity in polyamory, see Ben-Ze'ev & Brunning, 2017). It is important to note here that in the same way homosexual and bisexual people have the right to make mistakes in their socially disadvantaged and thus arguably “more complex” relationships, polyamorous people should be allowed to do so in theirs, including, if they are so inclined, learning how to do poly relationships without dyadic experience. In addition, it may be also the case that some people cannot

engage in dyadic relationships due to their very strong poly dispositions and may thus not need any prior dyadic “practice.” In any case, the objection of impracticability may be valid in some cases.

The second common objection to polyamory is that it results in the dissolution of pair bonds. The rationale is that the intimate contact with others will increase the chances that one member of the couple will abandon the other and run off with a more appealing mate. This concern is understandable, but the fact is that people are having affairs, falling in love, and leaving their partners all the time in the context of monogamous vows. As discussed above, adultery goes hand in hand with monogamy, and lifelong monogamy has been mostly replaced with serial monogamy (or sequential polyamory) in Western culture. Parenthetically, vows of lifelong monogamy create often-unrealistic expectations that arguably add suffering to the pain involved in the termination of any relationship—and one could also raise questions about the wholesomeness of the psychological needs for certainty and security that such vows normally meet (e.g., Charles, 2002). In any event, although it may sound counterintuitive at first, the threat of abandonment may be actually reduced in polyamory, since the loving bond that my partner may develop with another person does not necessarily mean that he or she must choose between me and this other person (or lie to me). The available empirical research supports this view. On the one hand, Rubin and Adams (1986) found no significant differences in length of relationship between sexually exclusive and sexually open couples. On the other hand, Hagemann (2018) conducted an online survey on attendees of 17 alt. polycon conventions (1996-2008) and reported that “54% (22/41) of respondents with partners were in at least one relationship lasting over 21 years and 83% (34/41) of respondents with partners were in at least one relationship lasting over a decade” (p. 15). Thus, the view that polyamory or consensual nonmonogamy is unsustainable—or is less sustainable than monogamy—is not supported by evidence.

More positively, the new qualities and passions that novel intimate connections can awaken within a person can also bring a renewed

sense of creative dynamism to the sexual/emotional life of the couple, whose frequent stagnation after three or four years (seven in some cases) is a chief cause of clandestine affairs and separation (Haag, 2011; Kipnis, 2003; Robinson, 2009). As surveys show, the number of couples who successfully navigate the so-called four- and seven-year itches has been decreasing over the last decades (Lewis, 2001). According to the United Census Bureau, for example, 8.8 years was the average length of U.S. marriages in 2009 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011); even if divorce rates have dropped in the United States since 1980 (Amato, 2010), it is estimated that 52.7% of today's marriages will end in divorce (Cohen, 2016). In addition—and crucially—none of the available statistical data include the surely much larger number of separations in unmarried couples. Mindful polyamory may also offer an alternative to the usually unfulfilling nature of currently prevalent serial monogamy in which people change partners every few years, never benefiting from the emotional and spiritual depth that, for many individuals in Western culture, can only be provided by an enduring connection with another human being.<sup>9</sup> Feminist author Sonia Johnson (1991) captured well the hopelessness many experience today after endless attempts at monogamous relationships:

Thousands of us are completely fed up with the self-betrayal of marriage of any sort, including the self-betrayal of “serial monogamy.” (Perhaps “serial agony” is a more apt description.) The thought of going through even one more relationship cycle, to say nothing of one after another until we die—ecstasy, contentment, boredom, numbness, pain, misery, breakup, recuperation—makes us feel suicidal when it doesn't bore us senseless. (p. 118)

In a context of psychospiritual growth, such an exploration can create unique opportunities for the development of emotional maturity, the transmutation of jealousy into sympathetic joy (or compersion), the emancipation of embodied love from possessiveness, and the integration of sensuous and spiritual love. As Christian mystic Richard of St. Victor maintained, mature love between lover and beloved naturally reaches beyond itself toward a

third reality (Studebaker, 2012), and this opening, I suggest, might in some cases be crucial both to overcome codependent tendencies and to foster the health, creative vitality, and perhaps even longevity of intimate relationships.<sup>10</sup>

I should stress that my intent is not to argue for the overall superiority of any relationship style over others—a discussion I find both pointless and misleading.<sup>11</sup> Human beings are endowed with wildly diverse biological, psychological, and spiritual dispositions that may predispose them toward different relationship styles: celibacy, monogamy, serial monogamy, open marriage, swinging, and polyamory, among other possibilities. In other words, many equally valid psychospiritual trajectories may call individuals to engage in one or another relationship style either for life or at specific junctures in their paths (see Ferrer, 2018a, 2018b). Whereas the psychospiritual foundation for this diversity of mating responses cannot be empirically established, recent discoveries in neuroscience support the idea of a genetic base. When scientists inserted a piece of DNA from a monogamous species of mice (prairie voles) into males from a different—and highly promiscuous—mice species, the latter turned fervently monogamous (Young, Nilsen, Waymire, MacGregor, & Insel, 1999). What is more striking is that some human males tending to pair-bonding behavior (e.g., marriage, cohabitation) carry an extra bit of DNA in a gene responsible for the distribution of vasopressin receptors in the brain (a hormone associated with attachment bonds), and that piece of DNA is very similar to the one found in the monogamous prairie voles (Walum et al., 2008); for a similar finding regarding an oxytocin receptor, see Walum et al. (2012).

Although the implications of these findings for the understanding of human mating await further clarification, they suggest that a diversity of relationship styles—both monogamous and polyamorous—*might* be genetically imprinted in humans. Another biological mark found in non-monogamous men and women is higher levels of testosterone (van Anders, Hamilton, & Watson, 2007); however, it remains undetermined whether such higher levels (in relation to monogamous people, that is) are a cause or an outcome of their



relational style (cf. Brandon, 2010). As Wiley (2016) argued after doing ethnographic fieldwork in Young's neuroscience laboratory, it is important to be mindful of the possible ideological biases in the attempts to "biologize" or "naturalize" either monogamy or polyamory.<sup>12</sup> In any event, as cross-cultural findings from evolutionary psychology convey, it seems undeniable that "humans are designed and adapted for more than one mating strategy" (Schmitt, 2005b, p. 268).

### Religious Decree on Sexual Behavior

Address the objections to polyamory because lifelong or serial monogamy (together with celibacy) are still widely considered the only or most "spiritually correct" relationship styles in the modern West. In addition to the traditional Christian prescription of lifelong monogamy, many influential contemporary Buddhist teachers in the West make similar recommendations. Consider, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh's reading of the Buddhist precept of "refraining from sexual misconduct." Originally, this precept meant, for the monks, to avoid engaging in any sexual act whatsoever and, for lay people, to not engage in a list of "inappropriate" sexual behaviors having to do with specific body parts, times, and places. In *For a Future to Be Possible*, Thich Nhat Hanh (2007) explained that the monks of his order follow the traditional celibate vow in order to use sexual energy as a catalyst for spiritual breakthrough. For lay practitioners, however, he read the precept to mean avoiding all sexual contact unless it takes place in the context of a "long-term commitment between two people" (p. 29), because there is an incompatibility between love and casual sex (monogamous marriage is a common practice for lay people in his order). In this reading, the Buddhist precept was reinterpreted as a prescription for long-term monogamy, excluding the possibility of not only wholesome polyamorous relations, but also spiritually edifying occasional sexual encounters (e.g., Wade, 2004). (It is important to note, however, that "long-term commitment" is not equivalent to "monogamy," since it is perfectly feasible to hold a long-term commitment with more than one intimate partner.) In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso, 1998) also assumed a monogamous

structure as the container for appropriate sex in intimate relationships. Since reproduction is the biological purpose of sexual relations, he wrote, long-term commitment and sexual exclusivity are desirable for the wholesomeness of love relationships. Needless to say, the reduction of sexuality to reproduction blatantly overlooks its recreational, bonding, healing, transformational, and spiritual functions, among others (e.g., Chopel, 1992; Eliens, 2009; M. Robinson, 2009).

Despite the great respect I feel for these and other spiritual teachers who speak in similar fashion, I must confess my perplexity. These assessments of appropriate sexual expression, which have become influential guidelines for many contemporary spiritual seekers, are often offered by celibate individuals whose relational sexual experience is likely to be limited; or even nonexistent. A major lesson from developmental psychology is that an individual needs to perform a number of developmental tasks to gain competence (and wisdom) in various arenas: cognitive, emotional, sexual, and so forth (e.g., Uhlenhorff, 2004). Even when offered with the best of intentions, advice offered about aspects of life in which one has not achieved developmental competence through direct experience may be both questionable and misleading. When this advice is given by figures culturally venerated as spiritual authorities, the situation becomes even more problematic. What is more, in the context of spiritual praxis, these assertions can arguably be seen as incongruent with the emphasis on direct knowledge characteristic of Buddhism.

It may be worth remembering that the Buddha himself encouraged polyamory (polygyny, actually) over monogamy in certain situations. In the *Jataka 200* (the Jatakas are stories of Buddha's former births), a Brahmin asks the Buddha for advice regarding four suitors who are courting his four daughters. The Brahmin says, "One was fine and handsome, one was old and well advanced in years, the third a man of family [noble birth], and the fourth was good" (Cowell, 1895, p. 96). "Even though there be beauty and the like qualities," the Buddha answered, "a man is to be despised if he fails in virtue. Therefore, the former is not the

measure of a man; those that I like are the virtuous” (Cowell, p. 96). After hearing this, the Brahmin gave all his daughters to the virtuous suitor.

As the Buddha’s advice illustrated, several forms of relationship may be spiritually wholesome (in the Buddhist sense of leading to liberation) according to various human dispositions and contextual situations. Historically, Buddhism hardly ever considered one relationship style intrinsically more wholesome than others for lay people and tended to support different relationship styles depending on cultural and karmic factors (see Harvey, 2000; Sangharakshita, 1999). From the Buddhist perspective of skillful means (*upaya*) and of the soteriological nature of Buddhist ethics, it also follows that the key factor in evaluating the appropriateness of any intimate connection may not be its form but rather its power to eradicate the suffering of self and others. There is much to learn today, I believe, from the nondogmatic and pragmatic approach of historical Buddhism to intimate relationships—an approach that was not attached to any specific relationship structure but was essentially guided by a radical emphasis on liberation.

For a variety of evolutionary and historical reasons, polyamory has received “bad press” in mainstream Western culture and spiritual circles—being automatically linked, for example, with promiscuity, irresponsibility, inability to commit, and even narcissistic hedonism (see Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2012; Ferrer, 2018a). Given the current crisis of monogamy in contemporary culture, however, it may be valuable to explore seriously the social potential of responsible forms of non-monogamy. In addition, given the psychospiritual potential of such an exploration, it may also be important to expand the range of spiritually legitimate relationship choices that individuals can make at the various developmental crossroads of their lives.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **Beyond Monogamy and Polyamory**

It is my hope that this essay opens avenues for dialogue and inquiry in spiritual circles about the transformation of intimate relationships. I also hope that it contributes to the extension of spiritual

virtues, such as sympathetic joy, to all areas of life and in particular to those which, due to historical, cultural, and perhaps evolutionary reasons, have been traditionally excluded or overlooked—areas such as sexuality and romantic love.

The culturally prevalent belief—supported by many contemporary spiritual teachers—that the only spiritually correct sexual options are either celibacy or monogamy, is a myth that may be causing unnecessary suffering and that needs, therefore, to be laid to rest. It may be perfectly plausible to hold simultaneously more than one loving or sexual bond in a context of mindfulness, ethical integrity, and spiritual growth, for example, while working toward the transformation of jealousy into sympathetic joy and the integration of sensuous and spiritual love. I should add that, ultimately, I believe that the greatest expression of spiritual freedom in intimate relationships may not lie in strictly sticking to any particular relationship style—whether monogamous or polyamorous—but rather in a radical openness to the dynamic unfolding of life that eludes any fixed or predetermined structure of relationships (see Ferrer, 2018b). It should be obvious, for example, that one can follow a specific relationship style for the “right” (e.g., life-enhancing) or “wrong” (e.g., fear-based) reasons; that there are more and less mature forms of both monogamy and polyamory; that all relationship styles can become equally limiting ideologies; and that different internal and external conditions may rightfully call individuals to engage in different relationship styles at various junctures of their lives. It is in this open space catalyzed by the movement beyond ideological monogamy and ideological polyamory, I believe, that an existential stance deeply attuned to the standpoint of the mystery out of which everything arises can truly emerge.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, gaining awareness about the ancestral—and mostly obsolete—nature of the evolutionary impulses that direct human sexual/emotional responses and relationship choices may empower individuals to consciously co-create a future in which expanded forms of spiritual freedom may have a greater chance to bloom. Who knows, perhaps as spiritual practice is extended to intimate relationships, new petals of liberation will blossom

that may not only emancipate minds, hearts, and consciousness, but also bodies and the instinctive world. In this light, I can envision—and invite other to join in—an “integral *bodhisattva* vow” in which the conscious mind renounces its own full liberation until the body and the primary world can be free as well.<sup>14</sup>

### Notes

1. Earlier versions of this paper appeared in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Ferrer, 2006) and *Tikkun: Culture, Spirituality, Politics* (Ferrer, 2007). Although this scholarly version updates my perspective in significant ways, a more extended discussion of the experiential and conceptual territory beyond the monogamy/polyamory binary (a territory I call *nougamy*) can be found in Ferrer (2018b).
2. This standard evolutionary narrative of an ancestral pair-bonding culture and archaically seated sexual jealousy was challenged by Ryan and Jethá (2010), who argued for a far more sexually promiscuous human pre-historic past and a link between the origins of sexual jealousy and the emergence of agriculture about ten thousand years ago; for critiques of this proposal, see Ellsworth (2011) and Saxon (2011). Although it is very likely that the emergence of agriculture (and thus of human settlements and private property) increased men’s concern for paternity and sexual possessiveness (e.g., Stearns, 2009), the exact (pre-)historical origins of sexual jealousy are probably multifarious and definitively not clear-cut; after all, many hunter-gatherer cultures practice marriage (Walker, Hill, Flinn, & Ellsworth, 2011) and sexual jealousy exists even in cultures practicing shared paternity (Beckerman & Valentine, 2002).
3. After introducing this understandably controversial notion about a decade ago (Ferrer, 2007), I was recently reassured by the fact that a mother of the moral and intellectual stature of Marcia Angell (2016) shared similar feelings. In her essay, Angell denounced the potential selfishness involved in parents’ focus on their own progeny over anyone else’s, as well as its pernicious social consequences such as lesser solidarity with the poor, unwillingness to pay higher taxes, and, I would add, hiding immense fortunes in undeclared offshore accounts.
4. *Nonmonogamy* is a more encompassing term than *polyamory* (“many loves”). Whereas the former includes any type of nonmonogamous relationship—including open marriage, swinging, and promiscuity—the latter is normally used to refer to the consensual, long-term maintenance of more than one romantic, sexual, and/or emotional bond (see Anapol, 2010; Barker & Landridge, 2010a, 2010b; Klesse, 2006). Also known as *responsible nonmonogamy* (e.g., Anapol, 1992; Klesse, 2006), polyamory is usually valued over not only monogamy and patriarchal polygamy, but also swinging, casual sex, and promiscuity (for criticisms of these poly-hierarchies, see Klesse 2006; Noël 2006; Petrella, 2007).
5. For discussions of how contemporary individuals and couples are redefining the meanings of fidelity and infidelity (and thus of monogamy), see Duncombe, Harrison, Allen, and Marsden (2004); Haag (2011); Perel (2006); and Wosick (2012).
6. Although serial monogamy did not become prevalent in Western society until the late 20th century, views supporting it began to appear in the 18th century (Dabhoiwala, 2012). For a critical examination of serial monogamy as the normative project of romantic self-actualization in the modern Western world, see Petrella (2005). As for serial monogamy’s institutional function, Kipnis (2003) wrote:
 

It’s clear that serial monogamy evolved as a pressure-release valve to protect the system from imploding. No, there is nothing wrong with the institution or its premises, no, you just happened to get the wrong person. But next time around you’d better make the best of it, because too many strikes and you’re out—you’re the problem. In serial monogamy, the players change, but the institution remains the same. (176)
7. For a witty—and deliberately polemical—defense of adultery in the context of modern

Western mononormative culture, see Kipnis (1998, 2003). In this connection, see also Anderson's (2012) argument that cheating is a rational response to the irrational predicament in which mononormativity places people with its demand for dyadic sexual exclusivity—that is, it not only rectifies the dissonance many people feel between their monogamous self-identity and their desire for sexual diversity (cf. Mint, 2004), but also allows them to access sexual variety while staying in a long-term relationship. Compare here Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky's (2008) related argument that adultery actually helps to maintain the social institution of monogamy. Similarly, VanderVoort and Duck (2004) wrote, "The implication [of the adulterer's need for therapy] is that it is the transgressor, not the structure [monogamous marriage], that needs adjustment" (p. 8). In referring to these works I am by no means justifying adultery; however, the above arguments are worth pondering—and the point remains that adultery exists only in a monogamous context. As Mint (2004) put it, "monogamy and cheating . . . are conceptually interdependent . . . They represent two sides of the same coin, one shiny and one tarnished" (p. 61).

8. Actually, a new wave of greater cultural acceptance of nonmonogamy seems to be under way. After researching contemporary marriage trends in the United States, Haag (2011) concluded: "Marital nonmonogamy may be to the 21st century what premarital sex was to the 20th: a behavior that shifts gradually from proscribed and limited, to tolerated and common" (p. 247).
9. On the emotional precariousness of serial monogamy, Jackson and Scott (2004) poignantly wrote:

Why should monogamy be equated with security? We talk a great deal about the importance of trust in relationships, but if everything important is circumscribed then there is no need for trust. Trust is necessary in a context of risk. Forbidding something and then "trusting" someone not to break the

rules somehow misses the point. In a social climate where serial monogamy prevails, promising monogamy and assuming that the relationship will end if the promise is broken surely creates conditions for the ultimate insecurity. (p. 156)

- Other authors have stressed the pernicious impact of serial monogamy for children, identifying this prevalent relational trend as the major cause of "the current epidemic of broken homes and single-parent families" (Ryan & Jethá, 2010, p. 300; cf. Bergstrand & Sinski, 2010; Squire, 2008). In this regard, a polyamorous mother wrote: "I'm not going to ditch one loved one just because I love someone else. That's called serial monogamy, more like serial heartbreak! And what it does to the kids!" (Naomi, cited in Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010, p. 41).
10. Although desirable and growth-promoting in many cases, I no longer think of longevity as the paramount or even a central benchmark to assess the success of intimate relationships. Instead of this arguably monocentric standard (clearly a residue of the traditional vow of lifelong monogamy), I suggest that more appropriate criteria are the quality of relationship (cf. Deri, 2015; Rowan, 1995) as well as its healing and transformative power (Ferrer, 2018a).
  11. Despite the widespread variety of arguments for the superiority or advantageousness of monogamy (e.g., Barash & Lipton, 2009; Fisher, 2004; Jenkins, 2015; Masters, 2007) or polyamory (e.g., Barker & Langdridge, 2010b; Bergstrand & Sinski, 2010; Petrella, 2007), the available empirical evidence supports a more egalitarian and pluralistic scenario (see Ferrer, 2018a). In a comparative study of 284 self-identified monogamous and polyamorous men and women, for example, Morrison, Beaulieu, Brockman, and Beaglaioich (2013) found no significant group differences in scores indicative of relational quality (i.e., passion, trust, and attachment)—although poly men and women showed greater levels of intimacy as measured by the Intimacy Attitude Scale-Revised (IAS-R; Amidon, Kumar, & Treadwell, 1983). In addition,

against popular assumptions about monogamous and polyamorous individuals' attachment issues (for discussion, see Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2012), a secure attachment style was found to predominate in both groups. Similarly, Tibbets (2001) found no differences regarding relationship commitment between monogamous and polyamorous lesbian and bisexual women. In a review of the literature, Conley et al. (2012) found no evidence for monogamy to be advantageous over polyamory on improved sexuality and sexual safety (cf. Loue, 2006; however, see Conley, Moors, Ziegler, & Karathanasis, 2012; Lehmler, 2015), relationship quality (cf. Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985), healthy attachment style (cf. Morrison et al., 2013), and benefits for family life and child rearing (cf. Pallota-Chiarolli, 2010; Sheff, 2013). In any event, as Wiley (2015) pointed out, such a pluralistic account should not eschew the critique of compulsory monogamy's ideological standards of healthy adult bonding (see also Emens, 2004).

12. In addition to important methodological flaws in Young et al.'s (1999) research designs (e.g., in the test to measure voles' monogamy), Wiley (2016) discovered that monogamy was ideologically associated with optimal human development: "In this model, monogamy in voles is compared to social health and promiscuity in voles to autism in humans" (p. 57). Wiley's work is invaluable in revealing the ideological character of "naturalizing" discourses about not only monogamy but also polyamory. In this regard, see also Robinson's (2013) critique of considering polyamory and monogamy as "natural" or fixed sexual orientations (like heterosexuality or homosexuality) and her proposal to instead regard them as *strategic identities* that people (bisexual women, in Robinson's study) can freely select at different psycho-socio-political situations. This discussion is related to Barker's (2005) finding that whereas some people think of their polyamory as how they naturally are, others describe it as something they choose to do. My sense is that it is likely that people could be situated in a continuum from "very monogamous" to "very polyamorous" with many falling somewhere

between depending on diverse personal, social, and cultural factors and circumstances. If this were the case, I hypothesize that whereas those at both ends of the continuum may tend to naturalize their relationship style, those falling somewhere between may tend to describe it as a personal or strategic choice. In any event, for a critical discussion of the potentially pernicious social and political implications of regarding polyamory as sexual orientation, see Klesse (2014).

13. For a discussion of both the ongoing "mono/poly wars" and different pathways to overcome the monogamy/polyamory binary, see Ferrer (2018a, 2018b).
14. For an extended discussion of the integral bodhisattva vow and its implications for spiritual discernment and practice, see Ferrer (2017).

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### About the Author

Jorge N. Ferrer, Ph.D., is core faculty of the departments of East-West Psychology and Integral and Transpersonal Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), San Francisco. He is the author of *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (SUNY Press, 2002) and *Participation and the Mystery: Transpersonal Essays in Psychology, Education, and Religion* (SUNY Press, 2017), as well as the coeditor of *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (SUNY Press, 2008). Ferrer has taught courses and workshops on sexuality and intimate relationships at CIIS and other institutions since 2000. His essays on these topics have appeared in numerous journals, including *Psychology and Sexuality*, *Sexuality and Culture*, *ReVision*, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, and *Turning Wheel*. He is currently preparing a book on transbinary forms of intimate relationships beyond monogamy and polyamory. He was born in Barcelona, Spain.

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