

Loving Vulnerability

Fragments on Polyamory

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Abstract: Social norms, values and habits concerning our intimate lives are changing. For instance, more and more people are willing to experience romance, passion and parenthood beyond the limits of monogamous relationships and traditional family structures. This exploration of love, sexuality and friendship is currently known as “polyamory”. In this article, I philosophically explore the theory and practice of polyamory in 12 fragments. The aim is twofold: firstly, I wish to dispel misleading prejudices and convictions around the topic and, secondly, I seek to convey a deflationary view, which accounts for the ambiguity of polyamory. Polyamory, in my view, is an existential, psychological and political praxis of dealing with the troubles inherent in our emotional lives, and in our social lives more generally. It is an exercise in embracing the dangers opened up by our constitutive vulnerability as human beings. Its ethical and political value consists in exploring and experimenting the potentially transformative and emancipating consequences that come with human interdependence. It is a thorny, exhausting project. It does not offer any guarantee of happiness, but it might be worth it.

Keywords: polyamory, vulnerability, interdependence, compersion, ambiguity.

Resum: Normes socials, valors i costums de les nostres vides íntimes estan en fase de transformació. Per exemple, cada cop més persones aspiren a tenir experiències romàntiques, passionals i progenitores més enllà dels límits de la monogàmia i d'estructures familiars tradicionals. Aquesta exploració de l'amor, la sexualitat i l'amistat es coneix avui com a «poliamor». En aquest article, s'explora filosòficament la teoria i la pràctica del poliamor en dotze fragments i amb un doble objectiu: en primer lloc, per escombrar prejudicis i conviccions equivocades; en segon lloc, per proposar una visió deflacionista que tingui en compte l'ambigüitat del poliamor. Perquè el poliamor és una praxi existencial, psicològica i política per enfrontar-se amb els problemes inherents a les nostres vides emocionals i, més en general, a les nostres vides socials. És l'exercici d'assumir els perills que ens deixa oberts la vulnerabilitat que ens constitueix com a éssers humans. El seu valor ètic i polític pot derivar d'una «experimentació» amb conseqüències potencialment transformadores i alliberadores intrínseques a la interdependència humana. És un projecte complex i fatigós. Dur-lo a terme no ofereix cap garantia de felicitat, però potser en val la pena.

Paraules clau: poliamor, vulnerabilitat, interdependència, *compersion*, ambigüitat.

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Our social norms, values and habits concerning sex, romance, passion and care are changing. This is exciting, but also troubling news: the new affective norms, values and habits may have disrupting/disruptive consequences not only for individual, but also communal, political and economic practices as well. Scenarios are various: sex and intimacy with robots and artificial intelligence devices are quickly exceeding the realm of science fiction; asexual romantic relationships are becoming recognizable and recognized; radical critiques of the institution of marriage, both from queer and hetero voices, are blossoming; experiencing romance, passion and parenthood beyond the limits of the monogamous couple and traditional family is something that more and more people are willing to explore.

The reflections of this contribution are dedicated to the latter scenario, also known as “polyamory”. Persons who call themselves polyamorists acknowledge that they can be in love with more than one person at the same time – crucially, (also) romantically, passionately in love – and are open about it. They want to prove that multiplicity in love should not be considered and experienced as problematic, neither from a moral nor pragmatic point of view. It seems that, lately, theorists and practitioners of polyamory are being quite (if not completely) successful in meeting the burden of proof. Polyamory is not an abstract and bizarre idea anymore: it has begun to be practiced beyond the supposedly radical and progressive circles of intellectuals and artists in San Francisco or Berlin; TV shows on Netflix and mainstream television in many contexts are intrigued by it; *The Ethical Slut* (Hardy and Easton, 2017), and other kinds of practical guides on the topic (e.g., Anapol, 1997; 2010), are to be found in many bookstores. Even philosophers, who are notoriously always pretty late to the party, have started to take it as a serious object of inquiry.¹

In fact, this is a good moment for philosophers to intervene. Since polyamory has not imposed itself as a norm (or an ideology) yet, and emotional habits are still heavily conditioned by monogamous conventions, uncertainties proliferate. How should we tell our partners that, yes, we do love and care for them dearly, but we are in love also with someone else? How much should we tell them, and when? How should we react when these confessions are made by the only person we love and desire? How should we behave when children are involved? Are we being too egoistic, or optimistic, or idealistic in pursuing multiple affairs? What

is the best way to “come out of the closet” as a polyamorist – is it just a private choice or does it also have political connotations?

Philosophers are not asked to provide direct and concrete answers to (all) these questions. Philosophy should not tell us how to live. Philosophical tools help us, rather, to shed some light on underlying presuppositions and implications, to clarify confusing concepts, to fluidify encrusted points of view and patterns of thought, and to propose new ones with the aim, or the hope, of sparking meaningful debate.

I have put together some fragmentary thoughts on polyamory. The formulation of the fragments is predominantly negative. This is, first, to dispel what I see as the main misleading prejudices and convictions around the topic. Second, I would like to convey a deflationary view; one that accounts for the ambiguity of polyamory. I do not intend to exhaustively sum up current theoretical and non-theoretical discussions, or to present an encompassing picture. I prefer to sketch out my own take, which hinges upon one core idea: polyamory is an existential, psychological and political *praxis of staying with the troubles* inherent in our emotional lives – and in our social lives more generally. It is an exercise of *embracing the dangers opened up by our constitutive vulnerability as human beings*. Its ethical and political value consists in exploring and experimenting with the *potentially transformative and emancipating consequences that come with human interdependence*. It is a thorny, exhausting project. It does not offer any guarantee of happiness: the dark sides of vulnerability – power, oppression, exploitation – are not easily dismissed by and in polyamorous practices. Vulnerability is not always loving, very often it is unloving. But loving vulnerability means trying to embrace it nevertheless, waiting to see what will come out of it. In the following twelve fragments, I move around this core idea.

1. This is not a manifesto. Polyamory is not a lifestyle or a form of life to be viewed as intrinsically better than others. It is not necessarily conducive to social justice and to social freedom – a better society, however, is a society that recognizes and fosters the possibility of poly relationships. Changes in the habits, values, norms, and laws that concern our emotional lives contribute to the path towards a better society. This is a “highway of despair”,² to reuse Hegel’s famous expression, which does at the same time open potentialities for joy.

2 Despite the openness I have optimistically stated at the beginning, people advocating for and theorizing polyamory do still face great resistance (mockery, hostility, adverse feelings, discrimination, insults, humiliation).

1 See in particular Carrie Jenkins’ rigorous analyses, e.g., Jenkins 2015; 2017.

2. We are not born polyamorous, or monogamous. Polyamory is not more natural than monogamy. The nature of individual impulses, drives, desires, affects and emotions is anarchic, contingent, messy and diverse, it is not reducible to universal, fixed laws. Some people, regardless of gender and sex(uality), can feel “naturally” (i.e., strongly, uncontrollably) attracted and in love with more than one person at the same time, others do not.³ Both poly and mono orders of desires and emotions are natural. Both can make us vulnerable, in different ways. The naturalness of erotic experiences and encounters has often been neglected in the philosophy of love and sex, dominated by social constructivist positions. Especially feminist and queer conceptions of love and sex are suspicious of every mention of biological, neurological, physiological determinations, and for good reasons. However, an account of *natural affectivity* can have critical, including feminist critical potential. In a pragmatist and, more specifically, Deweyan sense, nature must be viewed as “an intersection of spontaneity and necessity, the regular and the novel, the finished and the beginning” (Dewey, 1925, 270-271), as something “problematic, undecided, still going-on and as yet unfinished and indeterminate [...] For the immediately given is always the dubious; it is always a matter for subsequent events to determine, to assign character to. *It is a cry for something not given*” (ibid., 262).

3. Polyamory is not (only) the result of a conscious decision based on good reasons. We do not decide to live poly because it is “cool”, or more “ethical”, or because we want to make it into a political project. We fall into polyamory as we fall in love: without planning it, and knowing whether it is a good idea or not. It happens – it happens to many people (not to all of us), sometimes only once in a lifetime, sometimes more than once. Some of us might, for sure, have a consistent tendency to multiple, simultaneous sexual and romantic desires, and decide to be honest about it. But the polyamorous project’s most decisive movement is a *response* to what is happening to us and to our loved ones. It is a decision to take up vulnerability – the uncertainty, the fear of loss and change – with courage. There might be good reasons to not wanting to take this decision. Reasons of the sort have to be weighed up by taking into consideration one’s own “nature” (inclinations, dispositions, true desires, character, projects), but also the “nature” of our beloved ones.

³ The idea of monogamy’s ‘naturalness’, especially when it comes to romantic love, is well-known; on the naturalness of polyamory, see Ryan and Jethá, 2010.

4. Polyamory’s focus is not the individual self – the I – but the other, and the *we*. We understand what it means to be and to live poly when we are not just interested in satisfying our egoistic whims and wishes, but when we understand, accept, and welcome the other’s whims and wishes (which might collide with our own). Polyamory is an exercise in decentering perspective – assuming the perspective of the other, without assuming to know everything about them; when we let go of the fantasy of control of the others’ desires. Polyamory is not an expression of individual, negative freedom, and thus, of (self-)control. It builds up a new *we*; it suggests new ways of living collectively. It could make us realize that we are not free unless everyone else is free. It is thus an exercise in “social freedom” (Honneth, 2017; see also Gregoratto, 2021). If we can, at least for certain portions and phases of our existence, be free together with others, in our intimate relationships, we might learn what social freedom might look like, also on social and political levels.

5. A polyamorous relationship is not (reducible to) a contract, or a series of contracts (it is different, essentially, from marriage – although of course there can be married people who decide to live poly). Lovers might want to establish rules for themselves and to draw boundaries. This is important as an exercise in self-knowledge and self-expression: rules and boundaries reveal who we are and what we want to do and be. But when love and sex are involved, rules are inevitably broken, boundaries are trespassed. The “art” of polyamory is a contingent, contextual, ambiguous praxis – one could say, a queer one.⁴ How to go through such transgressions, accept and welcome deviations, renegotiate and modify our rules? How do we overcome the fear implied in doing so? These are decisive questions that are not answered *a priori*, only on a theoretical level. As for other kinds of “arts”, polyamory must rely on specific capacities or powers. We could rely on some version of what the Romantic poet John Keats hinted at as a *negative capability*: “that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Scott, 2002: 60).

6. Polyamory is not about safeness and invincibility, it is not a sort of emotional bank-deposit. We might think, “if something goes wrong with someone, I have another asset”. It does not work like that. Every love

⁴ Queer could be here understood as, “less as an identity than as a movement of thought and language contrary to accepted norms of authority, always deviating, and so opening up spaces for desire that would not always be openly recognized within established norm” (Butler, 2016: 17).

and sexual relationship has the (cognitive and affective) consequence of revealing our own radical vulnerability. When we are involved, sexually and emotionally, with more than one person, vulnerability is multiplied. With more vulnerability comes more opportunity not only for pain (e.g., fear of abandonment), but also for forms of manipulation and exploitation (Petherbridge, 2016). Polyamory can become then an exercise in critical thinking: how and to which extent can dependence on other people – on their recognition, care, desire – cease to be dangerous and become fruitful and generative? The answers to this question have feminist, but also anti-capitalist/neoliberal relevance.

7. Polyamory is not about efficacy, or self-optimization: dealing with our vulnerability is a difficult, troublesome, and time-consuming endeavor. We waste time, squandering our emotional and material resources. The time we spend with our lovers, trying to figure out what we want and how we want to live, is time stolen (or bought) from productive activities: sleepless nights; endless, often painful conversations; self-searching, things that do not bring to any concrete results. Polyamory is a project that does not fit with economic rationality. But it is also the sleepless, endless, self-transformative ecstasy of being together; the multiplied and contagious joy of multiple bodies and minds that connect, merge, and create together, beyond what is expected from us and in contrast to the imperatives of neoliberal productivity and resilience.

8. Polyamory is not only about sex. It is also about valuing friendship in ways that are not envisioned in current social organizations. But it is also about sex; about the interrelations between sex and other forms of intimacy (Lucido Johnson, 2018): it pushes us to explore different possibilities concerning life and love. In this sense, theorists have criticized the regime of so-called “amatonormativity”. Amatonormativity “consists in the assumption that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types. The assumption that valuable relationships must be marital or amorous devalues friendship and other caring relationships” (Brake, 2012: 88-89). Polyamory might bring us to thinking more thoroughly about and to reconfiguring our values and priorities regarding friends, romantic partners, affairs, and so on. As such, it sets in motion a process of becoming subjects of desire. In social, cultural, political and economic contexts where women and gender-nonconforming people are not trained to become subjects, engaging in multiple intimate, loving, erotic bonds can thus become a feminist critical practice. There are

many forms that poly relationships can take: V (when one person is engaged romantically and/or sexually with two persons, who are themselves however not involved with each other); a proper triad (when each person in the relationship is romantically and/or sexually involved at the same time with the other two); quad (four people involved); intimate networks (a combination of some of the previous forms, with more or less fixed and defined rules of conduct); relationship anarchy (a constellation of various relationship forms, but also more fleeting erotic situations and encounters, without fixed and defined rules of conduct), and others. Sometimes it is helpful to know how to define oneself. Sometimes categories (and related rules and boundaries) block the process of erotic subjectification.

9. Polyamory is not about overcoming jealousy. First of all, it is about understanding the social and psychological roots of jealousy. It is an exercise in (self-) knowledge, on both individual and socio-political levels. The opposite of jealousy has been called “compersion” (see e.g. de Sousa, 2017; Anapol 2010: 22; 121), namely when we rejoice in the joy our loved ones feel thanks to their other lovers (or – something that has not been investigated so far! – when we grieve because our loved ones become lovesick). This implies a conception of emotions as contagious. Compersion feels good, but it must resist the will to full transparency (and thus control). Shadows and dark spots – in communication, mutual understanding, trust – feed poly relationships, in both uncanny and precious ways.

10. Polyamory is not anti or post-romantic. An indelible halo of romanticism permeates the whole project. As a matter of fact, some of the first experiments in polyamorous practices go back to the English Romantics (Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and their circle of friends). But the beauty of polyamory resides also in the modification and inventions of aspects of forms of life that are traditionally not romantic – rearing and education of children, for example (Sheff, 2014), or reshaping our urban communities, landscapes, and territories beyond the scheme of the traditional couple and family.

11. Polyamory might become an ethical and political project, as some previous theses suggest. But it is not always and does not have to be this.⁵ Domination, coercion, violence, disrespect, lies, and other unpleasant things happen in poly relationships just as they do in non-poly relationships. Since more persons are involved,

⁵ My take, then, is different from those who seem to suggest the ethical and political superiority of polyamory, see e.g., Klesse, 2014; Brake, 2017.

poly constellations open up more opportunities for pernicious power struggles. More vulnerability opens up more opportunities for control, domination, and harmful influence. At the same time, enhanced vulnerability pushes us to learn new ways to address and sustain ambiguities and doubts, and thus to build up novel solidarity ties, to cooperate in creative ways, and to overcome individualism and egoism, also by building up adequate legal, cultural, architectonic infrastructures.⁶

12. Polyamory is a practical endeavor, but it can also become a philosophical project. Indeed, there are big and deep philosophical issues that lie at the bottom of polyamory theories and praxis: What is love, and what does it mean to be in love? How to distinguish between various kinds and types of love? How to draw boundaries between the problematic and non-problematic, for example, between moral and immoral, sustainable and unsustainable love relationships? These complex questions make us engage with various philosophical traditions (both in Western and non-Western contexts). After all, one of the seminal texts in the Western history of philosophy, Plato's *Symposium*, shows that philosophy is precisely this: a series of *conversations between friends*, circling around one troubling issue, held in an intimate space at the threshold between the private and the public (a "dinner party", whose cultural and political relevance is made clear in the opening of the story). This is a conversation in which different and, even, incompatible positions are staged, oscillating in phases between levity and intensity, fed by drama and conflict, which ultimately does not lead to any agreement.

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⁶ Judith Butler (2016; 2020) has recently put forward intriguing thoughts in this sense, when talking about people's vulnerability to various forms of state violence. In a nutshell, she believes that displaying, and thus exposing, one's vulnerable body in a non-safe public space contributes to the making of an agency of resistance and even counter-power. Similarly, one might argue that the acknowledgment, exhibition, sharing of and discussion around our enhanced vulnerabilities in multiple love relationships do reveal the truth but also the difficulty of the following statement by Theodor W. Adorno: "Love you will find only where you may show yourself weak without provoking strength" (Adorno, 2005: 192).

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