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Love, Jealousy, and Compersion

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Abstract and Keywords

Jealousy is widely regarded as a “negative emotion.” Recently, however, there have been attempts to rehabilitate it, either as biologically functional or even as a moral virtue. This chapter rejects these defenses. It suggests that the standard jealousy-eliciting sexual or romantic situation can and sometimes should be re-gestalted as an occasion for “compersion,” or joy taken in the loved one’s pleasure and happiness. The possibility of such a transmutation is suggested by the fact that a common core of arousal can sometimes elicit contrary emotional responses, depending on the framing story in terms of which it is construed. The idea also draws support from an analogy with the dual nature of pain, as both sensation and aversive/motivation. If an aversive jealousy response can be converted into compersion in the way suggested, it would illustrate an important aspect of the mutability of emotions. It would also have highly desirable practical consequences.

Keywords: jealousy, emotional ideology, aversiveness, sensation, pain, polyamory, compersion, arousal

Man observes certain facts. For instance, that in all his life he never sees the day that he can satisfy one woman; also, that no woman ever sees the day that she can't overwork, and defeat, and put out of commission any ten masculine plants that can be put to bed to her. He puts those strikingly suggestive and luminous facts together, and from them draws this astonishing conclusion: The Creator intended the woman to be restricted to one man.

—Mark Twain

Felix, the narrator in Howard Jacobson’s *The Act of Love*, obsessively facilitates his wife’s affair, with the express purpose of causing himself an agony of jealousy. He incarnates one variant of “Candaulism,” which is the desire to show off or share one’s lover. In the

story told by Herodotus, King Candaules loves his wife so intensely that he recruits his bodyguard Gyges to witness her naked beauty. He does so because it gives him pleasure. In the words of Felix, “this is a love story before it is anything else. First the rare and unexpected love which King Candaules bears his wife, then the conviction of her superlative beauty, then the wish to have it seen. To my mind an ineluctable progression.” The progression, in the case of Felix, culminates in a consuming desire to provoke the beloved into having a sexual and romantic affair. Felix derives from this a kind of painful jealousy that he intensely desires. He believes that this is really every man’s desire; yet he snobbishly despises those who, like the original Candaules, derive unalloyed pleasure from sharing their lovers—those who frequent “swingers” parties, or happily watch their “hot wife” advertise her availability with an ankle bracelet and have sex with other men. The “vulgarity” of those happy versions of Candaulism repulses him, perhaps precisely because they are indulged in for pleasure, while he does it for the pain:

On the one hand I insist that what I feel all men feel, the only difference between us being that they will not admit it. On the other I no sooner see evidence of a commonality of sexual impulse than I turn against myself. If such wretches as one sees crawling between heaven and earth want what I want then would I not be better among the wantless dead?¹

Jealousy, the “green-eyed monster,” has traditionally had a bad name. Jacobson’s novel illustrates the fact that it can be desired even though it is painful. It also opens up the possibility that sexual and romantic situations that generally give rise to jealousy can sometimes be simply enjoyed without masochism. In this chapter, I examine certain recent attempts to rehabilitate jealousy. I argue that these attempts are misplaced, but that it is sometimes both possible and desirable to effect something like a transmutation of jealousy into a happy rather than an aversive emotion. *Compersion* is the pleasure taken in the thought of one’s lover enjoying love or sex with another. I shall be urging that certain emotional strategies can be used to convert jealousy into compersion. That possibility brings out important aspects of the relations among the phenomenological aspects of emotions, their situational settings, and the stories that frame them for both subject and observer. It also illustrates the extent to which our emotional responses, in matters of love and sex, may be dictated by ideological assumptions that we mistakenly take for biological necessities.

What it means for jealousy to be described as a “negative” emotion is far from clear.² A negative emotion might be one that is unpleasant to experience; or that carries an unfavorable evaluation of its target (the person at which it is directed); or that is harmful in its consequences for the jealous subject, the target, or both. In that last case, the harm might be merely practical, like the failure to conclude a deal following a fit of ill-considered anger, or moral, if the fit of anger resulted in an injustice. Jealousy has been regarded as “negative” for all these reasons: It can be agony to endure; it commonly amounts to a condemnation of its targets (both the person “of whom” and the person “on

account of whom” one is jealous—the person British divorce courts call the “co-respondent”); and the harm caused may range from minor inconvenience to death.

1. Biological Defenses of Jealousy

Nevertheless, jealousy has had defenders, especially in the last quarter century. One tack has been biological. If, as is sometimes claimed, a disposition to jealousy is universal, it seems plausible to postulate a biological basis for it. On a common Panglossian view of natural selection as a kind of providence, the additional assumption is often made that jealousy serves some sort of useful purpose: If survival reflects “fitness,” whatever has survived has to be good somehow. Sociobiology has rushed in with compelling explanations of its supposed inevitability, as well as for some alleged ways in which male jealousy differs from that of females.³

The problem with those explanations is that some of the “facts” they are wheeled in to explain actually turn out to be nonexistent. As we shall see, there is reason to question both the universality of sexual jealousy and the supposed gender difference in the conditions that give rise to it.

The sociobiological framework predicts that male jealousy should be driven by the uncertainty of paternity. Male lions routinely kill the offspring of the females with whom they become paired. Similarly, it has been suggested, the fear of being cuckolded seems rational in any male anxious to pass on his own genes rather than contribute to the proliferation of his rivals'. The logic is impeccable.

In fact, however, cross-cultural studies have found that such a pattern admits of enough exceptions to refute any claim of biological determinism. Alternative arrangements exist that, while compatible with the biological interest males should take in the propagation of their genes, require neither sexual exclusiveness nor the jealousy that is supposed to defend it. The Mosuo, for example, are a matrilineal ethnic minority in southwest China where marriage is not practiced. Mosuo women take as many lovers as they please, and their brothers, not their lovers, contribute to the raising of their children—and thus to the perpetuation of their genes.⁴ Perhaps this does not guarantee that no one ever feels jealous; but Yang Erche Namu, a woman who has written about her childhood in that tribe, reports, “in Mosuo eyes, no one is more ridiculous than a jealous lover.”⁵ The Toda of South India, who practiced fraternal polyandry, had no great interest in the biological paternity of the children they were raising, and took a relaxed view of recreational sex.⁶ And in the “parti-paternity” practiced in certain Amazonian tribes, a woman will have many sexual partners, each of whom is deemed to have contributed his strengths to her offspring, and all of whom share the responsibilities of fatherhood.⁷ A broad cross-cultural study found that jealousy was correlated not with preoccupation with offspring but with “the social structures and behavioral patterns that are associated with pair-

bonding, sexual gratification, and property. The contribution of the behavioral patterns that are associated with personal descendants was negligible.”⁸

While male uncertainty about paternity supposedly induces men to feel particularly upset over women’s sexual infidelity, the sociobiological hypothesis predicts that women’s jealousy will focus on their mate’s emotional involvements. For the latter is driven by the need for a cooperative mate who can help with child care.⁹ Again, the logic is neat; the problem is that the difference observed by Buss in the United States appears to vanish in countries where gender equality is more advanced.¹⁰ Power and status, rather than gender, are more likely to be the cause of such gender differences in motives for jealousy as are observed in the United States. More likely, they can simply be explained, like many other alleged gender differences, by the expectations generated by the myth of difference itself.¹¹ If a man is convinced that his wife could not want sex without love, he is highly likely to be anxious about her sexual affairs.

The biological argument is sometimes boosted by reference to other primates. The primatologist Sarah Brosnan has demonstrated that “capuchin monkeys and chimpanzees both respond negatively to distributional inequity.” But she adds that “chimpanzees show significant variation in response depending upon the social group they inhabit, with those from a short-term group or a relatively asocial living situation showing a much greater response to inequity than those from a long-term stable group. This mirrors human variation in responses to inequity, which are based upon the quality of the relationship.”¹²

At first sight, analogies with other primates might seem to provide a solid reason to regard jealousy as at least partly hard-wired. But Brosnan speaks of “inequity aversion” rather than jealousy. And “inequity aversion” is not sexual jealousy. In the cliché human scenario, the mistress keeps trying to convince her lover to divorce his wife. From her point of view, the inequality favors the spouse. Human sexual jealousy is not so much a protest against inequity as a more or less violent expression of the desire to preserve it in one’s own favor. Other cases of nonsexual jealousy, as in professional rivalries, sometimes involve bosses who do their utmost to thwart their gifted juniors: these cases too are about preserving inequity rather than undermining it. In illustration, Peter Toohey quotes a writer admitting, “when one of my friends gets a bad review, it’s a little hard not to be pleased,” but he notes that the sentiment is better described as *Schadenfreude* rather than jealousy.¹³

Jealousy fits no one simple template. In truth, it is driven less by a deep lioness-like desire to ensure paternity of the offspring one helps to nurture, than by a variety of socially variable conditions. The diversity found in experiences of jealousy, as well as in attitudes toward it, is a clue to its nature as a product of culturally variable ideology rather than biological necessity. That may give us reason to think it might be tamed.

Champions of jealousy, however, regard it as both inevitable and desirable without reference to biology. For Jerome Neu, “there are reasons for believing jealousy ineliminable no matter what the social arrangements.”¹⁴ Peter Toohey purports to “show how such an apparently awful emotion is as helpful as it’s harmful and how it has a

valuable role to play in private life by protecting and strengthening relationships.” It is, he asserts, “at the heart of the social bond,” and constitutes a “potent means for the assertion of individual rights and the encouragement of cooperation and equitable treatment.”¹⁵ And although many of Toohey’s examples are not focused on sexual jealousy as such, he takes a sunny view of even that:

After all, jealousy is practiced in a ritualized manner in most partnerships. Unless a relationship is completely bovine then it’s likely to be slit through with uncertainty. Women and men in these circumstances constantly test and tease one another using jealousy. It can also make a relationship more exciting.¹⁶

About excitement, I say more later; but Toohey’s insouciant attitude rather underplays the loathing, disgust, and murderous rage of some of the more notorious exemplars he cites from literature, such as Othello and Leontes.

2. Is Jealousy a Virtue?

Those quotations give the flavor of some of the recent attempts to rehabilitate jealousy. I want to look in more detail at a particularly interesting and elaborate defense of jealousy. I refer to Kristjan Kristjánsson, who argues that jealousy is nothing less than an Aristotelian virtue.

Jealousy qua virtue ... would then constitute a mean between two vices: too much sensitivity to undeserved treatment which overshadows other appropriate responses, such as forgivingness, benevolence, etc., and too little sensitivity to such treatment which is the sign of excessive magnanimity toward others or servile sheepishness.¹⁷

Kristjánsson builds an ingenious case for assimilating jealousy to a species of envy. That analysis does not work all that well when applied to sexual jealousy. The reason is that sexual jealousy has two human targets—the lover and the rival—and rests on an assumption of entitlement. Envy, by contrast, has only one target, and focuses on that target’s enjoyment of some good, whether deserved or not. Hence Kristjánsson, like Toohey, avers that “it is unwise to present the commonly distorted lens of sexual jealousy as a paradigm of jealousy in general.” He concedes that sexual jealousy is not typically a rational response. Indeed, he sees sexual jealousy as an anomaly, in that “the belief that a person has treated you undeservedly through failing to love you romantically as much as another person [is irrational] ... because ... romantic love has by its very nature nothing to do with deserts.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, he professes to “agree with David Buss that, properly used, sexual jealousy can strengthen commitment and enrich relationships.”¹⁹

Here is Kristjánsson’s summary of his argument:

Jealousy is a necessary condition of pridefulness, and hence ... it both acts as an important guardian of self-respect and also contributes, at a deeper level, to the formation and maintenance of personhood. The emotion of jealousy in this sense is a value which should be fostered rather than discouraged in moral education.²⁰

Pride has been regarded as both a mortal sin and a noble virtue. That same Janus-character belongs to jealousy. As Descartes noted, those who are “jealous” of their honor are praised for being vigilant in guarding something of great value; on the other hand, like a miser jealous of his hoard, “a jealous husband is despised, in so far as his jealousy indicates that he does not so much love her, as the good that he imagines to derive from his sole possession of her.”²¹

Even if we ignore the dark side of pride, however, Kristjánsson’s appeal to pridefulness begs the question of its value and what it should be invested in. Some cultures interpret pride as demanding the “honor killing” of a daughter or sister who has been raped. The husband that Descartes says is despised is actually all too often approved of. But culture is not determinism, still less is it the last word in morality.

Kristjánsson would no doubt classify some jealous lovers’ obsessive need for control as illustrating “too much sensitivity.” But he notes approvingly, “exclusive affiliation is typically valued from the very start of a loving relationship; and indications of complete indifference in this matter are likely to be considered morally defective.” Hence, “those who have high-mindedly overcome the tendency to become jealous,” far from being entitled to “moral superiority,” are “seriously misguided.”²²

Here again, the question-begging is breathtaking: “considered morally defective” *by whom?* As Kristjánsson writes just a few lines earlier, “once two persons have entered such a relationship, *it is considered proper* that they do things ‘for’ each other, make mutual sacrifices” [my emphasis]. What is “typically valued,” by definition, depends on the ambient ideology. But as an individual I am not bound to take pride in whatever “my” culture endorses. It is the very notion that a “loving relationship” requires sexual exclusiveness that should be at issue.

Talk of “sacrifice” calls to mind the stark verdict on the Countess of Champagne, presiding in a Court of Love in 1176, on the question whether love was compatible with marriage. “We state and affirm by this judgment,” she wrote, “that love cannot extend its power to a married couple, for lovers give one another everything freely, without obligation or any necessity; conjugal partners, by contrast, are committed to doing one another’s will and not to deny anything to one another.”²³

This could be regarded as an argument against marriage, on behalf of love. More modestly, it could be viewed as a reason to dissociate the two without disparaging either. Any collaborative venture may require some individual sacrifices; but if the fact that sexual exclusiveness entails a *sacrifice* is adduced as a *reason* in its favor, the demand is somewhat self-defeating. You cannot be making a sacrifice unless you refrain from acting on a pressing desire. But lusting for a person not your spouse, Christians maintain,

amounts to “committing adultery in your heart.” So if my partner is making a sacrifice, it follows that I have already failed to be the sole focus of her attention and desire. Better by far to give up on the presupposition that for her to take pleasure in another person is ipso facto for me to have lost something.

The alternative is not far to seek. It seems to be implied by a familiar truism: that love is *wanting the happiness of the other*. Unfortunately that maxim often comes with a proviso: *But only if I cause it*. That proviso does not apply only to sexual or romantic pleasures, as attested by the ten-page list, collected by Laura Kipnis, of things you are not allowed to do when you are in a couple.²⁴ The ideal of altruistic devotion suggested by the maxim just cited is obviously more easily approached (let alone sustained) by lovers than by spouses. That is the point made by the Countess of Champagne. But it is not the point I am making here. In a technological and social context in which exclusive paternity does not require sexual exclusiveness, the fact that something is regarded as “typical” justifies nothing. On the contrary, it is precisely what is in need of justification. Kristjánsson’s tut-tutting about what is “likely to be regarded as morally defective” assumes that the only alternative to possessive jealousy is “complete indifference.” But there is another alternative: namely, “compersion,” the joy taken in one’s lover’s sexual or romantic pleasure even when one is not its current cause.

What it might take for that prospect to be realistic is discussed in a growing body of work about the containment of jealousy when it arises in polyamorous contexts.²⁵ Like fear of flying, jealousy is a “recalcitrant emotion”: Like a stubborn visual illusion, it is not easily annulled merely by the realization that it is mistaken.²⁶ Still, once the statistics have convinced you that fear of flying is unwarranted, you can condition yourself to transmute fear into exhilaration—by regarding it, perhaps, as a thrill comparable to that of a roller-coaster.

The methods of persuasion used by those who want to weaken the hold of aversive jealousy are not all that different from those used by the multi-million-dollar “couples therapy” industry to strengthen and legitimize it.²⁷ The difference lies in the aim pursued: Those who would overcome jealousy mean to accept rather than repress the reality of sexual attraction. Love, for them, entails prizing their partner’s autonomy. Instead of mere containment or control, their aim is to transmute jealousy into compersion. The reality of pleasurable variants of Candaulism—whether it be driven by a distasteful need for control or by commendable generosity—shows that to be possible. But how might it be achieved, and what would it actually amount to?

To attempt an answer, I begin with an analogy.

3. The Analogy of Pain

In recent decades, the neuroscience of pain has made two intriguing discoveries. First, it has been shown that social exclusion, which is often triggered by situations that give rise to painful jealousy, affects the same brain circuitry as physical pain, and can be ameliorated by the same drugs.²⁸ A second fact, now well established, is that the normal experience of pain is compounded of two separable phenomena: a sensory component that can be described in terms of its characteristic qualia (is it a jabbing pain? a throbbing pain? where exactly is it felt?) and an aversive affective character, “painfulness,” which motivates avoidance behavior.²⁹ Nikola Grahec has summarized evidence that in certain circumstances, it is possible to experience the *sensations* of pain without its *aversiveness*, or “pain without painfulness.” Some of these circumstances involve unusual neural disturbances; others result from surgical or chemical interventions. “In contrast to the pain perception threshold, the pain tolerance threshold is not closely related to the sensory discriminated component of pain. Rather, the pain perception threshold is thought to be much more closely linked to pain’s evaluative and affective motivational components.”³⁰ There is a neurological difference between the sensory component of pain and its aversive, motivational component. Patients suffering from “pain asymbolia,” that is, those in whom the aversive character of pain is dissociated from its sensory component, sometimes respond to pain by smiling or laughing.

The main reason pain asymbolia patients laugh at the pain they feel is that they are not experiencing or perceiving it as a threat, a danger, or as damage to the integrity of their bodies.... Nothing horrible, frightening, or awful is experienced in the pain that they feel upon being, for instance, severely pinpricked. But pinpricks, particularly severe ones, are “supposed to” evoke strongly aversive or frightening sensation ... the pain that asymbolics feel on such occasions flies in the face of these expectations.

(Grahec 2007, 74)

Asymbolia can be a severe handicap, since it is undeniably the function of physical pain to help us avoid injury. From the cognitive point of view, it amounts to a misclassification of the stimulus in question, a failure to do justice to its role as a danger signal. Asymbolics do not construe the situation in terms of the scenario it is “supposed to” evoke.

Now here is the analogy I want to suggest: Perhaps an aversive emotion like jealousy might also have a situational core to which it is possible to attach opposite valences. That would explain the existence of a variety of kinds of Candaulism, enacted in the context of different desires and different ways of construing the type of situation that “normally” induces jealousy. This might pave the way for a conversion of aversive jealousy into joyful compersion. That such a conversion would be desirable seems to follow from something that is commonly admitted by all parties: Whether they regard lust as good or bad, most

people distinguish between attachment and lust. It would be good, then, if we could make the latter less of a threat to the former.

There is also a crucial disanalogy between jealousy and pain. When asymbolics miss the role of the pain stimulus as a danger signal, their response fails at the level of pain's biological function. Pain sensations are "supposed to" evoke an aversive response. In the case of jealousy, by contrast, there is no good reason to insist that there is, in the same sense, a correct interpretation of the situation and a true sense of the "signal" being conveyed.

The analogy with pain suggests that conversion of aversive jealousy into joyful compersion might be possible. The disanalogy just noted suggests that this might be desirable. But by what mechanisms could it be achieved?

4. Emotion Ascriptions Are Anchored in Scenarios

A crucial observation in Grahek's account is that the asymbolic may be laughing at the very fact that laughing is not how she is "supposed" to react. This highlights a complexity in the way we understand the semantics of emotion.

The ascription of an emotion seems to be guided by three partly independent factors: (a) a "dictionary definition," which typically refers to a subjective experience (*she feels sad, or scared*); (b) the social norms, or "feeling rules," that regulate that subjective experience and its expression (*although she's trying not to show it because she might be embarrassed to be seen crying*),³¹ and (c) the way in which both feeling rules and display rules are anchored in a standard scenario (*she failed her driving test, so she is expected to feel sad and show it*). I refer to (a)–(c) as "semantic attractors," to mark the fact that each of them might compete with the others for the role of criterion for the ascription of an emotion, whether to oneself or to another. The third attractor (c) is easily taken for granted, and for that very reason one can fail to notice when it conflicts with the other two. When that happens, we can have a situation analogous to the way that the sensory experience of pain occasions laughter in the asymbolic. Because it fails to result in the response it is supposed to produce, the situation may seem odd or comical.

When offering a definition of jealousy, philosophers are frequently anxious to distinguish it from envy (if only to argue, as Kristjánsson does, that the first is merely a species of the latter). A serviceable definition of this sort is given by Daniel Farrell:

To be jealous is to be bothered or pained by the fact that, as we believe, we are not favored by others in some way in which we want to be favored (some other

party apparently being so favored by those other people instead); to be envious is to be bothered or pained by the fact that (as we believe) someone else has something that we want but do not have.³²

This definition focuses on the experience of jealousy and on the desire “to be favored” which makes sense of its aversive character. That desire is entirely congruent with (b), the social approbation it is likely to meet with from those, like Kristjánsson, who would regard its absence as “morally defective.” I can, of course, want things that are generally disdained or disapproved of. I might want recognition for my ability to ride a unicycle, or move my ears; and I may resent the low status that others accord to my special talents. But I will likely claim an *entitlement* only for those things that are sanctioned by my peers. And the class of those things is identified by the objective nature of the situation. That is just (c), the third attractor, consisting in the standard triggering situation, which is sufficient to warrant both endorsement or condemnation and the ascription of the subjective experience that “must” presumably ensue. The social conventions that constitute (b), the second attractor, owe their normative power to the general assumption that *people will feel what is normal in that sort of situation*. That assumption needs no evidence about the actual quality of the experience. On the contrary, the ascription of a subjective experience—typically, of painfully aversive jealousy—is inferred from the presumptive fact that the situation warrants it.

In this way, attractor (c) introduces an element of creative rationalization or even confabulation into the identification of an emotional response. This is likely to affect not merely an observer but also the subject herself. Confabulation on the basis of what is expected, substituting for what is experienced, is a familiar phenomenon in several domains. In our understanding of how emotions relate to the situations that give rise to them, we all more or less resemble Thucydides, who put into the mouths of his historical characters not their actual words, but words that would be appropriate in such circumstances.³³ If an emotion is regarded as normal and expected, then that is the emotion that will be ascribed, not only to others but even to the subject herself—regardless of what she is actually experiencing.³⁴

I have drawn an analogy between the possibility of separating having pain from being in pain and the possibility of separating the factual adequacy of jealousy’s cognitive component (my lover is enjoying love or sex with another) from its aversive character. If the *aptness* of jealousy depends primarily on the factual situation that gives rise to it, the valence “normally” associated with it will likely be ascribed as well. Hence it will automatically be taken to be a “negative” or “nasty” emotion, at least in the sense of being painful to endure. But I have offered some reasons for thinking that its aversive character is not entailed by the content (the situational facts of the matter) of the experience of jealousy. In the absence of a necessary connection between a scenario that typically elicits jealousy and the pain that is supposed to follow from its aversive character, the valence of that scenario depends on the stories that frame it. When we ascribe an emotion—to oneself as well as another—on the basis of a scenario according to criterion (c), the aversive character of the emotion may be taken for granted. But that

need not preclude its alteration if the scenario can be convincingly framed as part of a different story. The annoying surprise of finding your house full of unexpected guests may turn into a pleasant experience when realizing that the guests have been asked to celebrate your birthday. Similarly, the valence of the experience of witnessing one's lover with another might be reversed when a suitable alternative context is provided.

5. Valence versus Arousal

To be sure, the cases may seem wide apart in important ways. The narrative that governs the asymbolic's laughter at her own injury can plausibly be viewed as "seriously misguided," and her condition is pathological in that it typically supervenes on brain lesions. Is there any reason to think that the transmutation I have been speaking of could be grounded in nonpathological psychological reality?

There is, in fact, evidence that typical emotional states involve a condition of arousal that in itself is tied neither to an interpretation nor to a positive or negative valence. In a classic experiment, subjects who had been put in a physiologically aroused state by the administration of a dose of epinephrine experienced anger or euphoria, depending on the social situation that they were led (by acolytes of the experimenters) to think they were in.³⁵ An almost equally well known experiment found that men subjected to a form of arousal generated by crossing a scary footbridge could be induced to interpret their arousal as sexual attraction.³⁶ In the same vein, Christine Harris found that in her lab,

men showed the same degree of increased physiological reactivity when they imagined themselves having sex with their girlfriends as they experienced when imagining someone else having sex with their girlfriends.... Thus, men's increased reactivity may reflect sexual arousal rather than, or as well as, sexual jealousy.³⁷

More generally, Lisa Feldman Barrett has argued, the identification of our emotions is "guided by knowledge about emotion that is acquired from prior experience, tailored to the immediate situation, and designed for action."³⁸ I myself ventured, some years ago, the somewhat similar hypothesis that our repertoire of emotions is learned on the basis of early experience of "paradigm scenarios." These are built up out of simpler responses that are weaved into stories, and are triggered in adult life by situations similar to those in which they were learned. But our acquaintance with art and literature, as well as our general knowledge of the world, is able to reconfigure some of those stories; thus the situations to which they are pegged can acquire a new significance and different sorts of value.³⁹

In light of that possibility, I have argued that Kristjánsson's attempts to justify jealousy consistently begged the question of the value of sexual and romantic exclusiveness. Insofar as his justification depends on the expectation of a kind of possessive entitlement,

it will be weakened or nullified if alternative framing scenarios are available that carry no such entitlement.

Explicit agreements can, of course, create prima facie obligations, about sexual exclusivity or anything else. But for Kristjánsson jealousy requires no such agreements. He writes:

Perhaps A's lover, C, never promised, or even gave A to understand, that C would not sleep with others during their relationship, and thus violated no moral obligation with respect to A by doing so. But it does not follow that it is necessarily irrational of A to think that C owed him something and treated him in an undeserving way. That is, it is not necessarily *irrational* of A to be jealous.⁴⁰

Just what sort of "rationality" is being appealed to here is not clear. This passage suggests, perhaps, that it is not merely the morality of jealousy that is at stake but its *intelligibility*—what others, following Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, call "fittingness."⁴¹ The fittingness of jealousy depends on whether it is framed by a story in which the subject is "owed" something, regardless of any formal obligation incurred by, say, a marriage vow.⁴² Whether the subject thinks or feels that there is such an entitlement is one thing; whether others agree, is another. Neither is equivalent to yet a third question: whether the entitlement actually *ought* to exist. In some societies, the social context makes the expectation of exclusiveness unquestionably "normal": for many people, that is how it stands in marriage, for which children are groomed at a young age with a culture of "dating," "going steady," and other rigid conventions that set up rules for entitlement and encourage possessive attitudes. This happens, not without much heartache, well before the age at which sex comes to complicate things further. When we hear from primary schoolchildren the tangled tales of their jealousies and betrayals, we smile indulgently at their childish ways. Unlike other infantile patterns of behavior, however—tantrums, or possessiveness in regard to nonromantic friendships—jealousy continues to be regarded as *normal*, perhaps on just such grounds of "pridefulness" and "self-respect" as Kristjánsson adduces.

The key role played by the defining scenario—what I have referred to as attractor (c)—suggests that the feeling of jealousy typically comes with a rationalization of entitlement: "I am *owed* sexual exclusiveness: because I love you, you are obligated to me." That rationalization is encouraged by the prevalent monogamist ideology according to which (as Kristjánsson starkly puts it) the absence of jealousy is "likely to be regarded as morally defective."

But again, if there are alternatives, why assume that infantile emotions are desirable in adult life? Why not, instead, confine them to childhood, where they belong?⁴³ For those of us who are lucky enough to live in some of the liberal enclaves of the modern world, the alternatives exist, and the assumptions can be questioned.

6. Alternative Framing Ideologies: Polyamory and Nonmonogamy

It is time to look more closely at those alternative framing stories that could change the valence of a jealousy-triggering situation. What kind of thoughts might be involved?

Apart from the arguments in favor of jealousy discussed above, sexually exclusive monogamy is sometimes said to provide a number of advantages. Chief among them is security: A commitment of sexual fidelity, interpreted as exclusiveness, is supposed to protect one from the fear of loss. Against this, the polyamorist (in the broadest sense that can be given to that term) will contend that there is no need to assume that sex or even romance with another must shut out a present partner. On that score alone, polyamory seems the better bet. Neither a partner's lust nor her love for another entails that I have lost her. Both lust and intense romantic love (or what polyamorists aptly call "NRE," for "new relationship energy") have relatively short shelf-lives: And both grow notoriously out of step with long-term attachment.⁴⁴ Bearing this fact in mind, a lover who is trusting of her partner might feel some sense of deprivation when that partner spends time with other sexual or romantic partners; but responding with compersion rather than hostile jealousy is far more likely to preserve the relationship. Unlike monogamous partners, a polyamorist is not expected to dump one partner merely because they love another.

Yet another consideration adduced in favor of sexual exclusiveness is that it fosters a unique and uniquely rich and deep relationship, which in turn is vital to one's sense of self. This may often well be true. But a *unique* relationship and a *uniquely deep and rich* relationship are different demands. The former can be satisfied many times over: as individuals are unique, so should be the relationships that link them. No one finds it odd that a parent can relate uniquely to each of several children, or siblings to one another. The very diversity of those unique relationships can enrich all their lives. If two parents are better than one, three may well be better than two. If "uniquely rich" entails an unmatched degree of complexity, however, it is a matter of logic that not every relationship can deserve the compliment. Polyamorists sometimes identify a "primary partner" with whom their connection is deeper and richer than with any other. But among the factors that can enhance and deepen the primary relationship, open-ended, intimate, sensual, or sexual relations with others can play an important role. Such benefits of nonprimary intimacy have been neatly highlighted by Elizabeth Sperry:

My partner's varied intimacies benefit our relationship when they generate new insights and emotional strengths ... processing one's perspective outside a primary relationship is not only possible; it may be necessary, [because] our beloveds cannot always be relied upon to interpret us helpfully; ... we enhance our relationships by determining some interpretations elsewhere.⁴⁵

As we have seen, jealousy typically comes with a feeling of entitlement.⁴⁶ That rationalization is encouraged by the prevalent monogamist ideology, which presupposes certain beliefs. That means that the control one has over one's emotional reaction will in part depend on the extent to which we control our beliefs. That control is more limited than one might wish, but might be greater than we think. Jillian Deri, quoting Kathy Labriola, points out that there is a core myth that "if my partner really loved me, they wouldn't have any desire for a sexual relationship with anyone else."⁴⁷ In addition to noting how false that is to most people's experience, she urges that one might say instead: "My partner loves me so much that they trust our relationship to expand and be enriched by experiencing even more love from others."⁴⁸

Such "core myths" of monogamy are also incompatible with commonplace truisms that most people would assent to. Instead of possession and control, one might find the core of love in the other's difference, in the wonder of her autonomous subjectivity. In the light of that focus of attention, the pang of jealousy may just serve to remind one of the existentialist maxim that what makes the other worth loving, as opposed to merely exploiting, is precisely the impossibility of possessing her.⁴⁹ The situation that in the monogamist's rulebook looks like one of "infidelity" now looks like the expression of the beloved's essential freedom. The lover can then both empathize with the other's autonomous desire and delight in the thought of her pleasure. For both parties, in the mutual knowledge of their compersion, a lover's encounter with a third party, whether sexual or affectionate, becomes an occasion for deepened intimacy and understanding.

That, in brief, is what is to be gained by becoming responsible for the "feeling rules" one has chosen to live by. To be sure, the extent to which these feeling rules are genuinely *chosen* remains very much debatable. To some extent, no doubt, we are all slaves to social norms we had no part in choosing. In addition, we should remember the diversity of motivations embodied in the various examples of Candalism with which I began. Many will still regard those with distaste, and suspect them of expressing precisely the attitudes they claim to transcend. For although an attitude of possessiveness usually goes with an insistence on sexual exclusiveness, it can also be expressed in other ways. The need for control, reinforced as an entitlement by the social pressure of monogamist ideology, is sometimes expressed in the "gift" of one's lover to others. In the *Story of O*, for example, O seals her love by letting her lover give her away to others of his choosing.⁵⁰

Such variations, however, only confirm the power of ideology or "framing stories" to shape the significance of jealousy-triggering situations.

7. Philosophy of Emotion as Practical Philosophy

I have argued that the aversive character of jealousy, as distinct both from the types of situations in which it arises and from the appraisal of its subject as virtuous or reprehensible, is largely dependent on the stories that frame the subject's experience. Those stories constitute an ideology of emotions. At the most basic level, the basic situation that triggers sexual jealousy can be described objectively. It involves a lover whose beloved is sexually and romantically engaged with a third party. But what is made of that basic situation, including notably the valence of the resulting attitudes, depends on the framing ideology espoused by the participants. That ideology comprises several components, including the subject's attitude to their own identity and sense of self: Are you the kind of person who needs to assert control over those whom you love? Or do you, on the contrary, relish their independence and vitality? The latter seems at least as worthy of "pridefulness"—not to speak of moral commendation—as the former. Whether you are able to achieve the re-gestalt of a jealousy-triggering scenario into one that instead evokes compersion, will depend in part on what is expected by those around you. It will be a good deal harder if you are surrounded by traditional monogamists like Kristjánsson, who cannot conceive of any possibilities beyond indifference and entitled possessiveness. In that case, you might do well to heed an anecdote involving Charles de Gaulle. Told by an aide that all the latter's friends opposed his plan for Algerian independence, de Gaulle replied, "Change your friends."

If, by contrast, those around you include happily polyamorous persons, who even when experiencing aversive jealousy regard it as their weakness rather than as resulting from a violation of entitlement, you will be much more likely to succeed. The polyamorist, rather like the asymbolic patient—but without the latter's reason to regard his condition as undesirable—will be able to laugh at the prejudice of those who assume that when their lover is engaged romantically or sexually with another, they must experience that as painful. Instead, they will celebrate their loved one's happiness. The latter stance, after all, is closer to the platitude that love desires what is best for the beloved. Seen in that light, the situation that once prompted jealousy is a reason for joy. In turn, the beloved's joy in the arms of another may be enhanced by the beloved's knowledge of her lover's compersion.

The case of jealousy illustrates one mode of emotions' mutability. What is in some sense "the same" situation can be construed in radically different ways, and acquire opposite affective valences. Jealousy might be viewed as both the same as, and as the polar opposite of, compersion—with endless variants in between, exemplified in different forms of Candaulism. This is related to the way that the "same" emotions can feel very different when aestheticized—as in the much discussed paradox of the pleasure we take in the contemplation of horror or sorrow, when those are presented in books or movies. What in other contexts would cause suffering now gives us pleasure. Like the analogy of pain,

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with its dual nature as qualitative sensation and aversive motivating power, the analogy with the aesthetic case suggests a model for the way that jealousy can get transmuted into compersion.

To be sure, it might be doubted whether jealousy and compersion are in any sense “the same” emotion. Yet in addition to the identity of what I have called the objective situation, the forms of behavior involved might be indistinguishable in all respects but those that directly express their valence. Both compersion and jealousy, for example, are likely to focus attention intensely on the details of the lover’s activities. Like a loving parent eager to witness a child’s growing autonomy and empathically share the child’s pleasures, a lover might be extremely curious to follow the beloved’s every move, to know at every moment just what they are doing and who they are with. The difference is that jealousy finds in this only pain, where compersion finds pleasure. Thus one might view jealousy indifferently as the same or as the polar opposite of compersion. Just as horror or sorrow give pleasure when presented in books or movies, so, too, we can take pleasure in what would cause suffering in the context of a different framing story. Like the analogy of the dual nature of pain as *quale* and as aversion, the analogy with the aesthetic attitude offers a model for the transmutation of jealousy into compersion.

...

It was once assumed that the point of philosophy was to learn to live better. That view is not currently fashionable. And yet, when philosophy concerns itself with emotions, it does not seem strange to think we should give it pride of place among the determinants of our choices. This chapter has been intended as an exercise in practical philosophy, conceived as the attempt to come to see some familiar territory in a different light by argument and redescription. As Jerome Neu has observed, conceptual analysis is not as distant as we tend to assume from the practical concerns of life: “Our lives do not simply fall apart, they collapse in structured ways, and the fault lines are marked by our concepts.”⁵¹ I have stressed a converse of Neu’s aphorism: Reconstructing the concepts in terms of which we understand ourselves can cause our lives to come together. Statistics about satisfaction among theoretically monogamous and openly nonmonogamous marriage tend to show little difference in duration or subjective satisfaction⁵² But little can be inferred from such statistics, including those that show chronic failure of monogamous marriage. For the very criteria of a relationship’s success and failure are disputable.

This chapter has not been intended to convince the reader of the superiority for everyone of the polyamorous lifestyle. As an exercise in practical philosophy, its ambition has been to show some familiar territory in a different light. Not everyone, it should be too obvious to need saying, will have found here any reason to see their own lives differently. But in the light of the chronic failure of monogamous marriage, perhaps some will find comfort and opportunity in the possibility of an alternative.

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(²⁷) A “relationship column” for the *Daily Mail*, for example, scolds “the increasing number of women who claim to be unable to choose between two men,” claiming they “are simply putting a romantic gloss on infidelity.” To “pull back from an affair,” the author recommends such stratagems as “Destroy keepsakes.... Don’t wallow.... Use distraction techniques.” Andrew G. Marshall, “Torn between Two Lovers,” *Daily Mail*, June 22, 2015.

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(³¹) Arlie Hochschild, “Emotion Work, Feeling Rules and Social Structure,” *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1979): 551–575.

(³²) See Daniel Farrell, “Jealousy,” *Philosophical Review* 89, no. 4 (October 1980): 527–559.

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⁽³⁴⁾ On the power of confabulation based on presumed appropriateness rather than fact, see William Hirstein, *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2005).

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⁽⁴²⁾ For a lucid discussion of what might be expected of a vow, or the "making" (as opposed to "having") of a commitment in love, see Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality and the Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 44.

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(⁴⁸) Jillian Deri, *Love's Refraction: Jealousy and Compersion in Queer Women's Polyamorous Relationships* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 31.

(⁴⁹) Cf. David Velleman, "Love as a Moral Emotion," *Ethics* 109 (1999): 360: "Love does not feel (to me, at least) like an urge or impulse or inclination toward anything; it feels rather like a state of attentive suspension, similar to wonder or amazement or awe."

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