Love

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Love and Ideology

"Sex is the most filthy, disgusting thing on the Earth—and you should save it for someone you love."

-Chuck Hancock

unwittingly paraphrasing Kant

Love, we are often told, is a passion: if it is powerful enough to make the world go round, it often does so despite the will’s best efforts to control it. But what is less often remarked on is the extent to which our first-order feelings of love are constrained by second-order ideological assumptions.

Two recent books illustrate extremes in the range of those presuppositions. One is Sex at Dawn (Ryan & Jethá, 2010); the second is How Philosophers Fail at Love (Shaffer, 2011). Shaffer invites the reader to gloat over the “failure” of great thinkers from Socrates to Sartre. What counts as failure, insofar as he presents any coherent thesis, is anything that isn’t lifelong heterosexual monogamy. Homosexuality, bisexuality, multiple lovers, celibacy, even unrequited love (a misfortune, one might think, for which philosophy might be expected to offer consolation rather than immunity) all represent “failures”.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Ryan and Jethá argue that the ideology of monogamy goes so powerfully against the grain of human nature as to be counter-productive.

Standard treatments of love commonly stress the many forms of connection covered by the word, distinguishing eros, philia, “limerence” (Tennov, 1979), storge, affiliation, affection, filial and parental love, agape, and more. Some of these, notably eros and “limerence” are associated with sex, but often come with a prudish caveat against lust, or “mere sex”, which aligns them with books of Christian propaganda with titles such as Sex is Not the Problem, Lust is. Sociobiological hypotheses keep rearing back with theories about gender differences, leaving double standards firmly in place (Tavris, 1992).

Shaffer’s book illuminates neither love nor philosophy; but what is worth noting is the extent to which its inanities reflect the same prejudices as mainstream cultural artifacts. These prejudices have become somewhat more inclusive since the so-called “Sexual Revolution”; but they are not much changed. This is clearly illustrated by the acceptance of homosexual relationships in recent books, movies and TV. For most of those popular treatments cleanse homosexuality of the transgressive character that once provided gay lifestyles with moral seriousness—not to mention a touch of glamour. With the right to exist, or even marry, homosexuals have found how good it is to be monogamous. (As one cartoonist commented: “Marry? Haven’t they suffered enough?”) With the normalization of homosexuality, no visible group now carries the torch of erotic radicalism. That’s left for marginalised advocates of bisexuality and polyamory, such as the authors of The Ethical Slut (Easton & Hardy, 2010).

There are, of course, many rationalizations offered for the ideology of monogamy. The tradition of “Natural Law”, still official doctrine in the Vati...
can, based its conception of sexuality on what Thomas Aquinas thought he knew about the “natural” behaviour of animals and humans. The argument is slippery: since most animals aren’t monogamous, humans must “rise above” animality. But since homosexuality supposedly doesn’t occur in other species, those who practice it are “beneath” the animals. (I’m waiting for the Vatican to reverse its stand on the basis of the now common knowledge about “gay” penguins.)

Updating our conception of Nature, speculative sociobiologists have more recently put forward persuasive arguments derived from evolution. But many of these were premature. A striking example is the idea that patterns of male and female jealousy differ on account of the fact that men fear for their paternity, while women fear loss of parental cooperation. That looked very plausible, until Christine Harris, Ralph Hupka, and others showed that this effect is dependent on factors such as experience and culture and may fade with increased socio-economic sex equality. Furthermore, “men tend to think sexual infidelity would be more distressing because they infer that if a woman has sex with another man, she is probably also in love with him” (Harris, 2004)—and conversely for women. Thus the ideology of love and sex is convenient self-reinforcing, in that self-reports on this question tend to contain, like nested Russian dolls, assumptions about the significance of different forms of infidelity derived from the very ideology that the original sociobiological hypothesis was supposed to explain.

Ryan and Jethá retell the depressing story of the relentless attacks on female sexuality: devising all kinds of crippling mutilations (cliteridectomy, foot-binding, cauterization) against women’s insatiable lust, or denying the very existence of female desire. But their significant contribution is to call primatology, anthropology, and physiology to witness that monogamy is unnatural enough to cause more trouble than it’s worth.

A few primatologists have noted that in the light of the peaceable, egalitarian and promiscuous ways of our nearest cousins the bonobos, our murderous aggression and jealousy might not be as deeply ingrained as the observation of monogamous gibbons or polygamous chimps and gorillas suggested (de Waal, 1995). The anthropological evidence is especially intriguing. The institution of partible paternity provides an existence proof of the viability of attitudes celebrating female promiscuity. In a number of Amazonian cultures, offspring are regarded as all the more vigorous for having multiple fathers, all of whom take an interest in their upbringing (Beckerman & Valentine, 2002). And the physiological evidence for sperm competition in the womb (Baker & Bellis, 1995), while controversial, affords a possible way for biological male competition to be implemented at the level of sperm after insemination, rather than at the psychological level of overt rivalry and combat. It also removes the puzzle posed for sociobiology by the lack of difference between male and female jealousy.

Discovering that some trait depends heavily on psychosocial environment rather than genetic destiny is no panacea. Social forces, including the many faces of prejudice, may prove more immutable than genes. Still, it feels different to know one’s own attitudes are not bred in the bone; and such feelings have been known to trigger breaths of fresh air, if not gestures of liberation.


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