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# 6

## Sexual Jealousy and Sexual Infidelity

Natasha McKeever and Luke Brunning

### Introduction

Few people have evaded the torment of some jealousy in their romantic life. Jealousy is painful, and can be destructive. However, it is also widely believed that jealousy is a sign of love. Peter Goldie describes it as ‘the price that has to be paid for there to be a certain sort of love from a certain sort of person’,<sup>1</sup> and Jerome Neu argues that, ‘at the centre of jealousy is the desire to be desired or for affection, the need to be loved’.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, we consider jealousy in the context of romantic love, questioning how we should best understand what jealousy is, and how we should respond to it. The structure of the chapter is as follows. In section one, we ask what jealousy is, and suggest jealousy is best understood as an emotional response to the threatened loss of love or attention, to which one feels deserving, because of a rival. In section two, we consider the relationship between romantic love and jealousy, and the question of whether it can be consistent to feel jealousy towards someone we love. We argue that jealousy is not necessarily inconsistent with love, though it can make people behave in ways which are. Not all forms of romantic life involve love, however, and the general value of jealousy can be questioned, so in section three we evaluate claims made in support of jealousy’s instrumental value, and argue that they have to be balanced against a range of potential harms. The risk of these harms arising needs to be taken seriously. In section four, we assess two potential ways of managing jealousy (which are not mutually exclusive)

– firstly by adopting a policy of monogamy and secondly by engaging in emotional work. Neither of these methods is easy, and neither will solve jealousy altogether, but we argue that the second strategy should be taken more seriously.

## 1. What is Jealousy?

Jealousy is a familiar experience, but its nature is more elusive. How does jealousy relate to other aspects of mental life? What are its foundations? Is it a valuable experience? In this section, we chart a course through the philosophical literature on jealousy. Our focus is jealousy in romantic life, but we will not presuppose that such jealousy differs radically from jealousy in other contexts. Sexual jealousy is one form of jealousy which occurs in romantic life – that is, jealousy experienced as a result of sexual activity. But jealousy in romantic life is not always about sex. For example, it might be about a partner's close emotional relationship with another.

When people describe being jealous, they are usually describing some form of episode. Most plausibly, they describe an emotional episode. Unlike a lingering mood, which has a diffuse object, if it has one at all, jealousy is usually brief with a sharp focus. Even when jealousy lasts longer, it does so as an episode, rather than being present all the time. Most people experience these episodes occasionally and, unless specified, they are our focus below. This is not to deny that people may be disposed to have pangs of jealousy, or state correctly that they 'are a jealous person'.

Jealousy is messy. Philosophical attempts to understand this mess differ in how they describe jealousy's *components*, *structure*, and *content*. In turn, these attempts are situated within specific theories of emotion. Those theories differ in the emphasis they place on emotions' affective or cognitive nature. Most philosophers take a middle way between the view that emotions are just feelings, or just judgments, to suggest they involve a mixture of affect and cognitive content.<sup>3</sup> We follow suit here. Importantly, this mixture needn't be simple. Emotions involve changes to our physiology (pulse, sweat,

muscle tension, pupil dilations) as well as distinct kinds of phenomenological tone (elation, foreboding). Cognitively they involve both beliefs and evaluations, about or of our environment (*'that's a viper!'* *'vipers are dangerous!'*). Emotions also motivate and give behavior a typical shape. We may be drawn to the target of our emotion or we may be inclined to flee.

Different emotions can make us feel or behave in similar ways. The bodily changes associated with nervousness and excitement, for instance, are not that different, and both love and hate may see us fixate on someone. As a result, it is useful to distinguish emotions in terms of their intentional content: what they are *about*. This approach sets the stage for moral discussion of emotions, as they might be about, or refer to, moral notions (e.g. fairness, or respect). Yet we must not fixate on an emotion's content to the detriment of its other constituents, such as how it feels. Analyses of emotions in terms of their content must accord with their felt character. With this in mind, let's consider how jealousy makes people feel, before considering its content.

Imagine being jealous. A partner talks fondly of a new work colleague; a teacher's gaze sweeps over us as they pick on a classmate; a sibling is praised for yet another achievement. These experiences are often painful. But unlike other pains, such as sadness or disappointment, jealousy *agitates*, and leaves us anxious and bewildered. We may feel on edge, fired up, ready for confrontation.

There is a fertility to jealousy, too, in eliciting other emotions. In some situations, jealousy is layered with anger or spite, and, if the rival is as hapless as we had hoped, *schadenfreude*. In other situations, jealousy is fringed with sadness, fear, or ennui. Jealousy can also be shadowed by envy and longing, which look outward towards what others have, or insecurity and self-loathing, which are more introverted. *The fact* that we are jealous rarely goes unnoticed either, so jealousy is often accompanied by meta-emotions like pride, shame, or humiliation, which have our agitated state as their object.

Jealousy also motivates in characteristic ways. Perhaps the most common desire associated with jealousy is that the rival (the work colleague, classmate, or sibling) is *set back*; they do not get attention,

squander the limelight, or just go away. A second, arguably less common drive, is to protect or improve what is valued; to recapture attention, or amplify love.<sup>4</sup> These desires lie behind our efforts to admonish or thwart others, or to make ourselves more visible. (All are common romantic comedy tropes.)

Jealousy is often discussed alongside fear of loss. But the two emotions yield different motivations. Although jealousy is similar to being startled, in that it prompts people to see what is going on, jealous people are less easily assuaged. They attend intently, focus on a rival, or seek out threats. This attention is sometimes visual, as in the intense persistent looking central to Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *Jealousy*, but it can also be auditory; ears have prominence in many visual depictions of jealous people.<sup>5</sup> This attention lingers and can tip over into rumination and obsession. As such, jealousy is unlike fear. Settled fear of something can motivate action against it, but it more usually motivates us to withdraw, to turn away, even to embrace denial.

Jealousy feels bad and motivates us in some characteristic ways, but what characterizes the emotion, and sets it apart from similar feelings like envy? One claim often made of jealousy is that it has a tripartite structure.<sup>6</sup> *We* are jealous of our *partner* over the attention they get from their *colleague*. This claim is used to distinguish jealousy from emotions like fear which are held to have a bipartite structure (*we* are scared of *spiders*.) Although useful in drawing our attention to the potential importance of third parties when considering jealousy, it is debatable whether this claim about structure helps to distinguish jealousy from envy. Sara Protasi, for example, argues that envy should also be thought of as tripartite, to be distinguished from coveting;<sup>7</sup> *I* am envious of *the wealth* of *my sister*.

A more profitable strategy is to consider the *evaluative* aspect of jealousy. What are the assessments at the heart of the emotion? When we are jealous, we evaluate that *something which we value, is lost or changed, or under threat of loss or change, and this loss or change is due to a rival*.<sup>8</sup> And by changed, we mean changed for the worse. This is a vague starting point, but jealousy often feels vague. Right away, someone will ask: *what* is the central good we fear will be lost or changed? As we shall see,

answers to this question in the form of a philosophical account of jealousy are open to counterexamples which may suggest a tidy account may not be forthcoming.

To begin with, we might think the good at stake in jealousy is another *person*; that we do not want to lose *them*. Stated thus, this view is mysterious: what is it to ‘have’ someone in the first place? The view also cannot account for cases where we feel jealous towards people we do not ‘have’. In response, someone might suggest that *relationships* are actually at stake in jealousy; that we have to have a relationship with someone (a lover, parent, teacher) to feel jealous. But this also seems implausible. Much jealousy arises precisely because we want, but lack, a relationship with someone.<sup>9</sup> For example, I might feel jealous when a work colleague to whom I am attracted begins dating someone else.

So perhaps what is at stake in jealousy is the *love* of another person,<sup>10</sup> or their *affection* or *intimacy*?<sup>11</sup> These analyses capture cases where people care for each other but cannot enshrine that concern into a relationship, but they cannot account for situations where people are jealous *because* their love or affection is totally unrequited. We might love someone from afar and feel jealous when another person has better luck with them, for example, or feel jealous when our jaded or even ex-spouse turns elsewhere. This focus on love or intimacy can also make jealousy seem akin to disappointment, envy, or fear of loss where we are pained because we lack something we want. Not only would such a view struggle to give a distinct characterization of jealousy, it neglects how jealousy can be tumultuous and disorienting. Finally, although these analyses may accurately portray jealousy in romantic or family life, where love, affection, and intimacy are expected, those feelings are less central to other contexts where jealousy is common, like the office or classroom.

To accommodate these concerns, we can shift emphasis from love and affection to *attention*. Not just any attention, but that which shapes our sense of self. Leila Tov-Ruach argues that when we are jealous, we are gripped by the felt absence of someone’s ‘formative attentive regard’.<sup>12</sup> Her basic idea is that our sense of self is shaped by the interest and attention of other people over time, whether lovers, family members, friends, or mentors. We are jealous when that important kind of concern is threatened, and

jealousy is disorienting precisely because it threatens our sense of self, rather than something trivial. This view overcomes some of the problems above, especially as it does not confine jealousy to one kind of context, and it can acknowledge variety in the kinds of formative regard that shape who we are. That said, it is vulnerable to the observation that we are often jealous in petty situations where our sense of self is not under threat.

Tov-Ruach's understanding of jealousy, and indeed any view which emphasizes love, intimacy, affection, or formative attention, is also prone to a final problem; namely, that we might experience *more* of these things from someone as a consequence of the fact that they are also attending to other people.<sup>13</sup> Parents with a new baby may be more attentive to their first born; a person in an open-relationship may be more intimate with their spouse; a teacher who has to help stragglers may be more appreciative of a gifted student. In each case, that child, spouse, or student might still be jealous. Put simply: jealousy does not seem to track the 'amount' of love, affection, or attention we experience.

Let's take stock. The views above try to capture what is central to jealousy. In different ways, they emphasize our vulnerability in the face of other people and connect jealousy to fear of loss of love, affection, and attention: all aspects of interpersonal life that have a big impact on our sense of self, especially in romantic life. Three problems remain. First, these views can struggle to differentiate jealousy from envy or fear of loss. Second, people can be jealous when they have plenty of love and attention. And, finally, the role of the 'rival', or third party, takes a backseat in these views where perhaps it should not.<sup>14</sup>

To accommodate these worries, and foreground third parties, some theorists add a further condition to the analysis of jealousy. They suggest that we are pained not simply because something we care about is threatened or lost, but because that thing is, in some sense, not properly *ours* in the first place. Jealousy thus serves as a reminder that we have less control over that which we care about than we had previously thought. Moreover, this valued good is being threatened by a rival, which is usually, though not always, a person. Someone could, for example, be jealous of football if it seems like it is taking their partner

away from them.<sup>15</sup> Viewed with these points in mind, jealousy is often seen as responding to *affront*, not mere absence. At stake is not just love, or the self, but also social concepts of legitimate expectations, entitlement, or desert.

As Peter Goldie puts it, for example, jealousy often arises when people feel their ‘legitimate expectations’ of a love relationship have been violated.<sup>16</sup> The notion of legitimacy, here, is similar to what other philosophers call *entitlement*. Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, for instance, thinks that ‘at the very foundation of romantic jealousy lies the concept of entitlement’ where the notion of entitlement is understood as ‘our assumed right to exert control’.<sup>17</sup> However, a person can have legitimate expectations to things to which they are not entitled. We are not entitled to a birthday card from our partners, but we have a legitimate expectation they will get us one.

Perhaps desert is a more helpful concept here. Kristján Kristjánsson suggests that jealousy is an emotion that is sensitive to what people *deserve* (or what they think they deserve). We might think desert is a narrower, but stronger, concept than mere entitlement because people can be entitled to things that they do not deserve, and deserve things to which they are not entitled. For example, being married to someone might make us entitled to receive some of their wealth if we divorce, but, having been a terrible spouse to them might mean that we deserve nothing. Conversely, being a kind and generous partner might mean that we deserve to be treated kindly and generously back by a partner, but we are not *entitled* to be treated as such. In practice though, Kristjánsson thinks that in many sexual and romantic contexts, jealousy is probably irrational because ‘the sexually jealous person overlooks the fact that love is not a matter of will and no one deserves to be sexually attractive to another’.<sup>18</sup> Because it is often irrational, he thinks the question of whether such jealousy is *morally* justified does not emerge, unlike cases of jealousy in the family or towards a teacher.

Is Kristjánsson right here? Whether jealousy is rational, arational, or irrational will depend on how we are understanding what it would mean for jealousy to be rational. There are various different ways that we could approach this question; due to considerations of space we will try only one. Let us suppose

that jealousy is rational if what it aims at is possible or plausible and irrational if it is impossible or implausible.

Kristjánsson is right that love is not a matter of will, but what jealousy aims at might be. Sometimes a partner might have a significant degree of control over their behaviour which makes us jealous. In addition, there might be elements of control that we can exert in order to regain their attention. If our jealousy indicates that what we want is more of their attention, affection, or intimacy, then, by spurring us into action, jealousy can be a step on the way to our getting this. This might be particularly true if our partner has diverted attention to others because we have been neglecting them. To this end, jealousy can be rational. It can also be a useful reminder that what is threatened was never properly *ours* in the first place and must be worked for.

On the other hand, if what we want is for our partner to be attracted to us exclusively, then our jealousy will be rather hopeless. Such a desire is unlikely to be satisfied and, if it is, it might be only by chance. Our jealousy in this case might be thought of as irrational, since it is implausible and perhaps impossible that our partner will never be attracted to anyone else.

Therefore, some jealousy at least will be rational, and thus open to being assessed morally, and arguably even irrational jealousy can still be assessed morally, since we could be under a broader moral obligation to correct the irrational beliefs that underly it. For example, a husband who, because of his patriarchal beliefs, becomes irrationally jealous whenever his wife talks to another man has a moral obligation to try and manage and correct those beliefs.

## **2. Jealousy and Romantic Love**

Jealousy may be rational in some cases, but is it consistent with a loving attitude towards someone? Rachel Fredricks argues that the self-interested desires at the heart of jealousy are ‘in tension with a

caring attitude towards someone, where you value things for their sake'.<sup>19</sup> These jealous desires aim, in a purely self-interested way, at securing the thing we want as a jealous person, such as affection from a partner, or the exclusivity of their sexual attention. Thus, Fredricks' view is that 'what is *paradigmatic* about jealousy from a moral perspective is that it undermines the moral value of relationships between jealous subjects and targets, and it does so in a way that is traceable to the particular kind of desire that is necessary for the jealousy'.<sup>20</sup>

It is, of course, true that jealousy is self-interested. The jealous person is preoccupied with securing whatever it is that they are jealous over, often at the cost of the wellbeing of others involved. On the face of it, jealousy thus seems inconsistent with love, insofar as love requires caring for the beloved for their own sake. If Jake loves Jemma, but Jemma wants to have sex with Paul, then, arguably, if Jake really cares about her, he should be happy for her to do so. As Harry Chalmers puts it: 'when we see our partner find joy in someone else, would it not make more sense for us to be happy for her? Would it not be truer to our love, truer to our good will, to share in her joy?'<sup>21</sup>

This seems like the right response for Jake to have if we accept a 'disinterested concern' view of love, such as Harry Frankfurt's, who argues that love 'consists most basically in a disinterested concern for the well-being or flourishing of the person who is loved'.<sup>22</sup> This means that in authentic love, the lover's only concern is for the interests of the beloved; the lover is not in love for self-interest. If we accepted a view of love like this, then Goldie would be wrong that jealousy often arises when people feel their 'legitimate expectations' of a love relationship have been violated<sup>23</sup> because there would be no such thing as legitimate expectations in a love relationship. To love in the expectation of getting something back would not really be love at all. And Kristjánsson would be wrong that jealousy could be a virtue because it shows sensitivity to what we justly deserve, since justice and desert would not come into love either.

However, there is also truth in the claim that romantic love *should* make us feel happy and good about ourselves, and that is one of the reasons why we want it in their lives.<sup>24</sup> Romantic relationships which

make people unhappy are generally considered bad relationships and often the people within them are encouraged by third parties to leave the relationship. Indeed, romantic love without any self-interest might actually be undesirable or even seem to be not love at all, as illustrated in Monique Wonderly's example of Alejandro and Denise:

Alejandro claims to love his fiancée Denise. His feelings for her are wholly selfless. In seeking to preserve and promote her well-being, he thinks nothing of himself or his own interests. In their interactions, he is concerned exclusively with how best to contribute to her welfare. He also sees her as special and unique, and cannot imagine valuing anyone else in the same way that he values her. This morning, Denise learned that she has been offered a wonderful opportunity to realize her life's dream of embarking on a six-year space mission. Unfortunately, during this time, she would be unreachable to all earth dwellers, including her beloved fiancé. When she relays the news to Alejandro, he is overjoyed and immediately offers to help her pack. When she expresses concern over being apart from him for such a long time, he cheerfully replies, "This is what's best for you, and that's really all that matters to me!"<sup>25</sup>

Wonderly writes that although there is 'something noble and pure' in Alejandro's response to Denise telling him he won't see her for six years, there is also something 'quite disturbing' about his attitude. This is because he does not seem to consider Denise to be 'important for him'; he does not see her 'as an essential source of enrichment in his life'.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, if Jemma had sex with Paul and then left Jake for Paul, and all Jake had to say is 'if that's what's best for you that's all that matters to me', Jemma might, fairly, question whether Jake really thought of her as important to his life.

In order to explain why romantic love has a self-interested element, Wonderly turns to attachment theory, first developed by psychologists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in the mid-twentieth century. They looked at the way that infants develop attachment bonds with their primary caregivers, treating them as a 'secure base' and a 'safe haven'.<sup>27</sup> The need to have secure attachment bonds is a basic human need, which, if not satisfied has a significant negative effect on functioning and flourishing.

Psychologists have also argued that we develop attachment bonds with romantic partners and our partners fulfil the function of secure bases and safe havens for us in our adult life; we feel more confident when they are there, and we turn to them for comfort in times of distress.<sup>28</sup> Thus, one of the reasons romantic relationships are valuable to people is that they provide security via attachment bonds.

It is partly because we want romantic love to be a source of security and enrichment to our lives that Frankfurt does not view romantic relationships as ‘very authentic or illuminating paradigms of love’ as he construes it. He lists a number of other ‘distracting elements’<sup>29</sup> of romantic love which render it inauthentic in his view: ‘a hope to be loved in return or to acquire certain other goods that are distinct from the well-being of the beloved—for instance, companionship, emotional and material security, sexual gratification, prestige, or the like’.<sup>30</sup>

Frankfurt is right that people hope to be loved in return or to acquire other goods from romantic love, and this does make it self-interested, to an extent. He is also right that, *if* love is disinterested concern, then romantic love is not paradigmatic of love. However, perhaps romantic love is just a different kind of love to that which interests Frankfurt; love rooted both in caring for the other and in an attachment bond to them. Or perhaps all love, even parental love, is like this.<sup>31</sup> On either approach, romantic love is valuable, in part, *because* it contributes to our self-interest. This does not make it selfish, or entail that caring is not an important feature of love. Romantic love is inherently reciprocal – even in cases of unrequited love the lover almost always *desires* for their beloved to love them back. The lover wants to be a source of security and enrichment to the beloved’s life. Indeed, romantic love makes us feel good about ourselves in part because we know that we are contributing to the self-interest of our beloved.<sup>32</sup> Making the beloved happy makes the lover happy, and the beloved knowing that the lover is happy in turn makes them happy.

Incidentally, even on the disinterested concern view of love, we face a dilemma working out who should prevail between Jake and Jemma, since, if Jemma loves Jake in a disinterested concern way, then her only goal will be to promote his wellbeing. Therefore, if having sex with Paul will make Jake feel

jealous, if she loves him, she ought not to do it. However, if Jake loves her back in this way then he will want her to do it. Applied to reciprocal relationships, the notion of disinterested concern will often come unstuck in dilemmas such as this, because fulfilling reciprocal relationships require not only caring for each other, but also decisions over whose interests take priority, which will involve the application of principles such as fairness and reasonableness.

Self-interested desires do not, therefore, render romantic love inauthentic; they are just part of the distinct kind of love it is and part of a reciprocal and equal relationship. As Wonderly puts it, self-interestedness in romantic love does not ‘spoil love, but rather adds to its shape and substance’.<sup>33</sup> In reciprocal romantic love, the lovers care about each other for both their own sake and the sake of the other. They *matter* to each other, and they want a *relationship* to continue and to be fulfilling for both of them. As Georgie Tsai notes, such desires mean that romantic love involves vulnerability: ‘loving someone renders one susceptible to sorrow when the beloved is harmed or when the relationship is impaired’.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, people can and often do treat each other badly in romantic relationships, and the moral value of such relationships lies not only in concern and caring for each other, but also in the ability to act fairly, and to negotiate and compromise so that all parties in the relationship get approximately the same degree of fulfilment from it.

Therefore, it *is* right that concepts such as legitimate expectations and desert come into romantic relationships, as they might come into all relationships. Put differently, La Rochefoucauld might have been correct to think that ‘in jealousy there is more self-love than love’,<sup>35</sup> only to overlook the fact that love is not *purely* other-interested. However, working out what one can expect from a relationship is not easy and this is where assessments of the reasonability of jealousy get particularly murky. If Jake is jealous of Jemma’s friendship with Paul, does he *deserve* for her to stop being friends with Paul? Indeed, does he *deserve* for Jemma to not have sex with Paul because for her to do so would make him jealous? Or, conversely, does Jemma deserve to be able to do what she wants despite how Jake feels about it?

Jealousy may be compatible with a loving attitude towards someone, but not all jealousy arises in romantic relationships where people love each other, it can strike at the heart of more casual relationships, too. We should also ask whether there is anything else to be said for jealousy. Just because it may be compatible with loving attitudes does not mean it is the best way of relating to someone romantically. Does jealousy have further value in romantic life?

### **3. Jealousy's Value?**

Is it good to be someone who can be jealous? Jealousy is said to have instrumental benefits. For instance, jealousy has expressive significance. In experiencing it, we may come to realize we care about someone,<sup>36</sup> and someone else may realize we care about them.<sup>37</sup> Jealousy's expressive power can also disturb any relationship between someone we care about and a rival.<sup>38</sup> As such, jealousy may help us defend our sense of self, insofar as that is bound up in the affection or attention of other people.<sup>39</sup> Jealousy is also said to prevent people from becoming indifferent to each other<sup>40</sup> and to strengthen existing relationships.<sup>41</sup> A specific way it could help relationships is by functioning as an erotic catalyst<sup>42</sup>; it may even be directly enjoyable as a masochistic pleasure.<sup>43</sup> More generally, jealous experiences may help people reflect on their relationship.<sup>44</sup> Undertones of jealousy may even make us better people, and better partners, as it purportedly encourages 'creativity and competitive achievement'.<sup>45</sup>

But jealousy is not straightforwardly beneficial. Many of these apparent benefits are attained only in a fragile way. To access some of them e.g. jealousy as a prompt to reflection, we have to already be the kind of people who can manage emotions well and situate them in the context of our mental life and circumstances. But if we are like this, we are less likely to need jealousy to learn about our feelings, or to show another person we care about them, in the first place.<sup>46</sup>

More worryingly, these benefits need to be balanced against a range of potential harms stemming from romantic jealousy. Rachel Fredricks documents a litany of these harms.<sup>47</sup> When we are jealous, we often go awry *epistemically*, with false beliefs about what we desire, the true extent of our entitlements, and rivals. This is especially true when jealous people ruminate on their predicament, or tip over into more obsessive patterns of thought.

Morally speaking, jealousy eats away at the wellbeing of everyone involved. Suspicion, false accusation, snide behaviour and general acrimony all contribute to damage valued relationships and destabilise family life. Jealousy can also motivate violence. Indeed, it is the leading cause of the murder of partners and ex-partners, particularly female ones.<sup>48</sup> Jealousy wastes time and distracts people from what they care about. Jealousy can destabilise our sense of self; it generates painful meta-emotions of guilt and shame; can feed into anxiety or low self-esteem; and may be at odds with our self-image of ourselves as people in command of our feelings, or as people who want others to flourish.

Our jealousy may prevent us from respecting the autonomy of other people. The expressive force of jealousy, and the behaviours it motivates, pre-empt what is good for the other person or people involved, and we may fail to give *them* the appropriate scope to maintain boundaries for themselves. Jealousy is a backseat driver in the emotional life of other people, which is disrespectful to them.

These considerations lead us to doubt the value of jealousy as an emotional trait. Although it is compatible with loving attitudes, jealousy is risky to cultivate. A natural response to these risks would be to try and reduce or manage them. We now consider two strategies for doing this.

#### **4. Responding to Jealousy**

It is not in anyone's interests to simply let jealousy run riot. There are various ways to respond to jealousy. Here we consider the two which are probably the most common: (i) partners can adopt a policy

of monogamy to minimise how much jealousy enters the relationship; (ii) partners can learn to manage their jealousy, possibly developing feelings of compersion (which we define below). These are not mutually exclusive.

### **(i) Monogamy as a response to jealousy**

Monogamy between people in marriages or romantic relationships is often recommended as a way to quell jealousy. Roger Scruton, for example, argues that erotic love is naturally monogamous and must be so because love is prone to jealousy and jealousy can be destructive; 'it is in the deepest human interest, therefore, that we form the habit of fidelity', a habit he describes as 'natural and normal' but also 'easily broken.'<sup>49</sup> On the flipside, views about the natural jealousy of humans are sometimes used to argue that polyamory is inherently unstable.<sup>50</sup>

Sexual and romantic fidelity involves sacrifice, however, which often goes unrecognised. People in monogamous relationships must give up the possibility of romantic love or sex with anybody else. Due to the restrictions placed on partners' powers to engage in sex or love, monogamy has been likened to private property<sup>51</sup> and has been argued to be morally unjustifiable.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, as noted by Chalmers, monogamy does not get rid of jealousy, as it just helps us to avoid jealousy triggers, rather than dealing with the underlying fears. Chalmers argues that monogamy is a 'capitulation to jealousy' and actually perpetuates it, by encouraging a competitive view of love, and making us worry that our shortcomings and mistakes will lead our partner to wonder if they'd be happier with someone else.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, rather than being merely a response to our jealousy, it seems right that the norm of monogamy in turn reinforces and promotes jealousy, not only by encouraging people to think that it is reasonable to expect to have a monogamous romantic relationship, but also by encouraging other problematic beliefs, such as that if a partner is attracted to someone else then this implies that we are not 'enough' for them and that we ought to feel shamed by this. Jeffrie Murphy argues that the significance of the rival in jealousy and the shame we feel by being 'beaten out in a competition over a loved person,' but not when

that person dies<sup>54</sup> must be understood as, at least in part, based on a competitive account of human intimacy and love'.<sup>55</sup> This competitive account is intricately linked to the norm of monogamy – it is because our partner can only have *one* romantic partner that we are in constant competition with rivals to fill that position.

On the other hand, it is important to remember that even those who do not subscribe to a competitive account of love, or embrace the norm of monogamy, still experience jealousy.<sup>56</sup> While it seems right that the norm of monogamy reinforces jealousy, it is also likely such a dominant norm because most people have a predisposition towards jealousy or that jealousy is anchored deeply in our attachments to other people.<sup>57</sup> In addition, not everyone experiences monogamy as a sacrifice; some people find it fulfilling and are genuinely not interested in sexual and romantic relationships with others outside of their relationship. In those cases, monogamy might not be experienced as a response to jealousy, but simply as the most fulfilling sort of relationship. Having minimal opportunities to feel jealous would be an added bonus in such cases. However, there is a different approach to jealousy that can be taken which aims, not at limiting the opportunities or actions of those involved, but rather at managing the negative emotional response to those actions. Emotional management can be engaged in in conjunction with monogamy, but it is also a promising strategy for people who do not find monogamy fulfilling, or who do not find that monogamy stops them from feeling jealous.

## **(ii) Emotional management as a response to jealousy**

Whether it is reasonable to expect people to manage their jealousy will depend, at least in part, on the extent to which doing so is possible for them. It is probably true that humans have a natural propensity towards jealousy, and particularly towards sexual jealousy, based on biological and psychological factors related to our evolutionary history.<sup>58</sup> Some have argued that jealousy is useful from an evolutionary perspective as a way of protecting paternity by motivating people to retain a single partner,<sup>59</sup> or underlying a strategy to protect important caring relationships.<sup>60</sup> Buss argues that sexual

jealousy is a so-called 'basic emotion', that is an emotion which evolved because it contributed to reproductive fitness.<sup>61</sup>

Nonetheless, this does not mean that we must simply accept jealousy as an inescapable feature of us and our romantic lives. We should not equate evolutionary value with moral value. <sup>62</sup>Racist traits, for example, are not morally valuable, even if in-group favouritism was evolutionarily useful. We have the capacity to manage and change our predispositions and natural impulses. Doing so is not easy, but if there is a compelling enough reason to do so, we ought to try.

What would managing jealousy involve? A first step might be to recognise that it is possible to do so. As Dossie Easton points out, 'we are taught that jealousy is the one intolerable emotion. We are taught to manage other emotions such as anger, aggression, or sadness...But we are all taught emotionally that jealousy is some state where we would just explode'.<sup>63</sup> The second step is to try and interpret our emotions: 'anxiety, insecurity, fear, and other negative associations and memories are often mistaken for jealousy, and legitimate jealousy can be accompanied by other negative emotions. Moreover, jealousy is prompted by a range of characteristic reasons that can be easily confused with each other'.<sup>64</sup> A couple could work together to dissect their jealous experiences. In doing so they might find, for example, that underlying it is low self-esteem and fear of abandonment, or lingering feelings of entitlement anchored in their experience of a patriarchal upbringing.

Further emotional work might involve reflecting upon our sense of entitlement, vulnerability and ideals of romantic love, as well as gradually exposing ourselves to situations which ordinarily would make us feel jealous, and trying to focus on the flourishing of others rather than ruminating on threats to ourselves.<sup>65</sup>

The ultimate aim might be to feel compersion when a partner has sexual or romantic relationships with others. Compersion can be defined as feelings of joy and positivity towards a partner's romantic and sexual relationships with others and it is an emotional ideal for many polyamorous people.<sup>66</sup>

Compersion is clearly much less destructive and harmful than jealousy, and the compersive partner shows that they care for their partner's wellbeing, thus retaining the benefit of jealousy that it can signal care or affection.<sup>67</sup>

However, despite compersion's clear benefits, managing jealousy is harder for some than others, and it will be extremely difficult for some people. As Kyle York points out, 'anxious attachment systems, poor mental or physical health, and low self-esteem are all predictors of higher jealousy' and not all jealousy operates at a psychological level which is responsive to rational reflection.<sup>68</sup> There are further factors to take into account such as whether the jealous person's partner is supportive of and reassuring towards them while they try to manage their jealousy, whether the jealous person has a support network outside of the relationship, and the time and resources they have to devote to their emotional work. Equality of opportunity and reciprocity should also factor. For example, in a case where a woman is at home looking after a baby, given the lack of opportunity she has for other sexual and romantic relationships, it could be unreasonable for her partner to ask her to engage in the emotional work necessary to develop a compersive attitude towards him having relationships with others.

Of course, though, monogamy is not free from emotional work either; it is just that the emotional work involved in monogamy is sanctioned by cultural and societal values and norms, so we are less likely to consider it to be work or to question whether it is reasonable or valuable. In the example above, if the couple are monogamous, they will still both have to engage in emotional work to maintain their relationship, which might involve managing other painful emotions, such as anger and frustration. Given that, for many people at least, monogamy does impose significant restrictions and sacrifice, and can be hard work, it ought not to be engaged in in an unreflective way, and there should be better understanding of and support for alternative ways of dealing with jealousy and developing compersion.

## **5. Conclusion**

Jealousy is a complex emotion. We are jealous because we care about people, think we are deserving of their attention, and assume a competitive attitude towards romantic life. Often these attitudes are implicit, and not well articulated, but they are not always irrational. Jealousy is a self-interested emotion which can make it seem in tension with romantic love. But romantic love is seldom entirely selfless, and on reflection it would be strange if it was. Jealousy can therefore express the ordinary sense that to love someone is for them to be important to us, not just in themselves. People have tried to defend jealousy more substantively, attributing to it a range of instrumental benefits, but it is often harmful and, occasionally, extremely so. These harms must be taken seriously. Although we can be forgiven for a degree of self-interest in our romantic lives, this does not justify harm. These harms need to be mitigated directly. Embracing monogamy to do so fails to address the underlying issue, and for some, jealousy's potential to hurt is reason enough to try and get rid of the emotion entirely, or to replace it with compersion. Other people may think this is unrealistic. At the very least, we should try to manage jealousy in romantic life.

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<sup>1</sup> Goldie, 2002: 240

<sup>2</sup> Neu, 1980: 433

<sup>3</sup> For example, Ben-Ze'ev, 2000. Exponents of the former view are influenced by William James, exponents of the latter, like Martha Nussbaum or Robert Solomon are influenced by ancient Stoicism. For the purposes of this chapter we set aside questions about what *kind* of cognitive content features in emotions, i.e. whether emotions are more like beliefs, or perceptions, or something else.

<sup>4</sup> The fact that jealousy can motivate acts of shocking violence prompts our caution here.

<sup>5</sup> Toohey, 2014: Chapter three

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Farrell, 1980. These claims are disputed. For instance, Kingsley Davis suggests jealousy is also oriented to a public, real or implied, and thus has a quadripartite form (c.f. Davis, 1936: 395). For our purposes, these disputes matter only insofar as they encourage us to focus on typical features of jealousy, such as the role of a third party.

<sup>7</sup> Protasi, 2017

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<sup>8</sup> Threat of loss seems more common than situations where one is jealous that a rival has secured some good we valued. Threat of change seems to cover cases where our relationship or affection etc. continues (or improves) but is altered. Perhaps nonmonogamous cases are like this.

<sup>9</sup> The possibility of jealousy in the absence of a relationship would also suggest that fidelity (Prinz, 2004, 98–99) or exclusivity (Ben-Ze'ev 2010), understood as properties of *relationships*, are not always at stake in jealousy in a central way.

<sup>10</sup> Neu, 2000

<sup>11</sup> Solomon, 2007

<sup>12</sup> Tov-Ruach, 1980: 467

<sup>13</sup> Ben-Ze'ev, 1990: 494

<sup>14</sup> Murphy, 2012. The topic of the 'rival' is complex. We can distinguish between situations where other people are active competitors for the good we value, from those when they are not. In the latter, perhaps they have no interest in the person we care about at all. Similarly, jealousy can be elicited by imagined situations, mere suspicions, and perhaps even towards the dead (such as a partner's ex-spouse). One dispute concerning rivals is whether they are part of the object of jealousy, or not. Robert C. Roberts thinks that any of the lover, beloved, and rival can be the focus of the emotion (2003: 257); whereas others, like Justin D'Arms think jealousy focuses more squarely on the person we care about: 'The jealous person's real locus of concern is the beloved—the person whose affection he is losing or fears losing—not his rival. [...] The envious person's locus of concerns is the rival. [...] Roughly for the jealous person the rival is fungible, and the beloved is not fungible. [...] Whereas in envy it is the other way around' (D'Arms, 2009: 3–4).

<sup>15</sup> For examples of these views, see Ben-Ze'ev 2010: 289-97; Farrell, 1980; Goldie 2000: 225 and Roberts 2003

<sup>16</sup> Goldie, 2000: 237

<sup>17</sup> Ben-Ze'ev, 2010: 44

<sup>18</sup> Kristjánsson, 2018: 105

<sup>19</sup> Fredericks, 2013: 98

<sup>20</sup> Fredericks, 2013: 100

<sup>21</sup> Chalmers, 2018: 235

<sup>22</sup> Frankfurt, 2004: 79

<sup>23</sup> Goldie, 2000: 237

<sup>24</sup> Keller, 2000: 163

<sup>25</sup> Wonderly, 2017: 240

<sup>26</sup> Wonderly, 2017: 240-241

<sup>27</sup> Wonderly 2016: 229

<sup>28</sup> Hazan & Shaver 1987; 1994; McCarthy 1999

<sup>29</sup> Frankfurt, 2004: 43

<sup>30</sup> Frankfurt, 2004: 83

<sup>31</sup> After all, attachment theory arose from studying parental bonds.

<sup>32</sup> McKeever 2019: 214

<sup>33</sup> Wonderly, 2017: 241

<sup>34</sup> Tsai, 2016: 170

<sup>35</sup> La Rochefoucauld, 2007: 91

<sup>36</sup> Neu, 2000: 63

<sup>37</sup> White, 1980

<sup>38</sup> Welpinghus, 2017

<sup>39</sup> Wreen, 1989: 651

<sup>40</sup> Ben-Ze'ev 2000: 324; Toohey 2014: 190

<sup>41</sup> Kristjánsson 2002: 160. Kristjánsson later (2018) changed his mind on this after reading Fredricks (2012).

<sup>42</sup> Perel, 2017: 99–100

<sup>43</sup> Brunning, 2020: 7-8

<sup>44</sup> Pines, 1998: 199

<sup>45</sup> Toohey, 2014: 221

<sup>46</sup> Brunning, 2020: 15

<sup>47</sup> Fredericks, 2013

<sup>48</sup> Buss, 2013: 160

<sup>49</sup> Scruton, 2001: 339

<sup>50</sup> Brunning, 2018: 517

<sup>51</sup> McMurtry 1972

<sup>52</sup> Chalmers 2018

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- <sup>53</sup> Chalmers, 2018: 237  
<sup>54</sup> Murphy, 2002: 148  
<sup>55</sup> Murphy, 2002: 147  
<sup>56</sup> Mogilski et al. 2019  
<sup>57</sup> Brunning 2020  
<sup>58</sup> Buss, 2000  
<sup>59</sup> Buss, 1994; 2000  
<sup>60</sup> Chung & Harris, 2018  
<sup>61</sup> Buss, 2013: 158  
<sup>62</sup> Solomon, 2007: 107-09  
<sup>63</sup> Easton, 2006: 646  
<sup>64</sup> Brunning, 2016: 522  
<sup>65</sup> Brunning, 2020: 236-7  
<sup>66</sup> Brunning, 2020: 226  
<sup>67</sup> Brunning, 2020: 239  
<sup>68</sup> York, 2019: 11