

An Unfortunate State Of Affairs

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Ashley Madison is an online extramarital dating service, running with the succinct subtitle “Life is short. Have an affair.” On July 20, 2015, the service announced that hackers had breached its data security defences, and obtained identifying details for the site’s 37 million members. In the months that have since past, the newspapers have reported case after case of divorce, resignation from top jobs, blackmail and, tragically, suicide.¹

Reactions to the Ashley Madison scandal have been many and various, ranging from unreserved sympathy for the ‘victims’ to the view that subscribers to Ashley Madison were stupid and ‘therefore’ deserve everything they get. My own reaction to any case of family trauma caused by infidelity is rather one of sadness: the sadness of witnessing suffering that seems, in many or most cases, so eminently *avoidable*.

I do not mean that the suffering would have been avoided if the straying parties had kept strictly to their vows of monogamy, true though that may be. What strikes me most is rather the frequency of the refrain that what really hurt the wronged partner was “not the sex, but the betrayal of trust”. This raises the urgent question of why the vows of monogamy were made in the first place. Of course, *once a promise is made*, (a) it should be kept and (b) one feels cheated, even humiliated, if one is on the receiving end of a promise-breaking; but those observations imply nothing about which promises are good ones to make. If one’s partner really, really likes strawberries, to the point at which he or she would find them a source of great temptation if they became forbidden fruit, it would be a bad idea to make one’s relationship conditional on an oath of strawberry-abstinence, and then to be torn apart by the betrayal of trust when said oath is inevitably broken. The advocate of monogamy should take a long, hard look at whether the arguments for insisting on sexual abstinence are any stronger than the arguments for insisting on strawberry abstinence.

Sexual exclusivity is not the only way. In a relationship in which, for example, it is understood that this is one’s primary relationship for the foreseeable future but that either or both partners may legitimately desire and have sexual relations with others, there is no reason to feel ‘cheated’ if indeed such additional sexual relations occur. In another model, successfully adhered to by a significant minority, a household might consist of multiple men and multiple women, where each household member has relationships with two or more other household members, on equal footings, and children might have any biologically possible combination of parents. Far from being a hell of intrigue and suspicion, if asked to describe the nature of their relationships to outsiders, people actually in such polyamorous relationships tend to place *more* emphasis on honesty, open communication and trust than those in monogamous relationships. Polyamory is not for everyone, but its existence does lend additional credence to the idea that it is trust that is really the key to a relationship, rather than sexual exclusivity *per se*.

Some advocates of monogamy think that no such alternative arrangement could be stable.

Husbands and wives of many years, they worry, would be torn apart by the ever-shifting process of

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3208907/The-Ashley-Madison-suicide-Texas-police-chief-takes-life-just-days-email-leaked-cheating-website-hack.html>; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3227253/Pastor-seminary-teacher-outed-member-Ashley-Madison-commits-suicide-carried-shame.html>

following their sexual inclinations and romantic whims; the value of long-term shared experience and commitment would be pushed into the background, and we would all end up alone and isolated. But experience belies these claims; and, for better or worse, neither does the data on divorce rates in supposedly monogamous societies support the claim that a system of monogamy is any more conducive to long-term stability.

It is also instructive to recall that most of us succumb to an urge towards exclusivity in the domain of *friendship* when we are children. In my primary school and early high school years, all but the most unfortunate girls in the class had a 'best friend'. Any excessive degree of favouritism towards another – say, giggling and whispering with a girl who was not one's current best friend and refusing to share the secret with the chosen one – was a serious business, and the occasional actual rearrangement of the best-friend partnerships were matters of minor trauma. We have since grown out of this infantile insistence in the case of friendships, and we would have no truck with arguments that this was a mistake. The advocate of monogamy should take a long, hard look at whether the arguments for insisting on exclusivity of sexual relationships are any stronger than the arguments for insisting on exclusivity of friendships.

Some advocates of monogamy insist that once in a committed relationship, one *should not desire* sexual relations with anybody else. In the ideal case, they say, one's chosen partner is the ultimate focus of one's desire and provides for all one's needs and tastes, so there is no need to look elsewhere. This is not a particularly convincing claim (again, it seems no more plausible than the analogous and highly dubious claim regarding friendship), but even if true, it is irrelevant. Our question is what the norms of relationships should be *given* the tendencies and desires that we actually have, not which tendencies or desires we 'should' have, a matter that is anyway largely beyond our control.

The monogamy-monger's final argument is usually an appeal to some sort of biological necessity: as irrational as it may be, they say, humans are just biologically hard-wired to feel anxiety and jealousy if a sexual partner also has other sexual partners. Those who try to escape the mould of monogamy, according to this final argument, are attempting to fly in the face of their biological destiny, and are doomed to failure.

The core 'hard-wiring' claim in this argument may or may not be true, as a matter of biology. Certainly, it is easy to think of evolutionary-style explanations of why it might be true: evolutionary ancestors who fought off or even killed their sexual rivals were, perhaps, more likely to pass on their genes than would-be ancestors who did not. (Equally certainly, there are some thoroughly non-monogamous species, and they evolved too; but let that pass.) Even if the 'hard-wiring' claim is accepted, though, it does not follow that we should institute a rule of monogamy in our relationships. For, first, the fact that some *tendency* is inbuilt does not mean that we cannot overcome it: it does not mean that we have to *actually feel* jealousy. We probably all have some inbuilt tendency to seek out fatty foods, but that does not mean that one cannot get oneself, through habituation and reflection, into a state in which one's reactions to such foods are ones of indifference or even repulsion. And, second, the fact, if it does remain a fact, that one feels some jealousy, does not mean that one has to bow to it, instead of dismissing it as an irrationality, a defect. Many of the factors that might once have made monogamy adaptive are anyway no longer applicable in the modern world: contraception can largely prevent the creation of undesired

offspring from extra-pair copulations, and DNA testing can establish paternity in case this is in doubt. We may balk at allowing such an outdated evolutionary inheritance to keep us prisoner.

The users of Ashley Madison were acting on the basis of urges they could not help feeling, desires they could not help having. In some distant possible world, all relationships permit open acknowledgement of the participants' desires, and permit, nay encourage, explorations of harmless opportunities for the enrichment of life. In that world, the Ashley Madison hackers have no power to cause even a sleepless night.