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Arina Pismenny

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When Is Jealousy Appropriate?

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What makes romantic jealousy rational or fitting? Psychologists view jealousy's function as preserving a relationship against a "threat" from a "rival". I argue that its more specific aim is to preserve a certain privileged status of the lover in relation to the beloved. Jealousy is apt when the threat to that status is real, otherwise inapt. Aptness assessments of jealousy must determine what counts as a "threat" and as a "rival". They commonly take for granted monogamous norms. Hence, compared with jealousy in monogamous relationships, norms of polyamory set the thresholds for what counts both as a "threat" and as a "rival" much higher.

When is it appropriate to feel jealousy in a romantic relationship?[1] To answer this question, I explore the various rational norms of jealousy in the light of rational norms generally applicable to emotions. In particular, I analyze the relevance of moral, prudential, social, and aptness assessments to jealousy. I attempt to elucidate the formal object of jealousy—the *jealousy-worthy*—to show that it lacks the moral dimension required to justify the moral desert that the jealous person often takes themselves to have with respect to the beloved. I argue further that the aptness norms of romantic jealousy are significantly influenced by the specific romantic ideology that is taken for granted in the majority of romantic relationships. I show that monogamy provides conditions for numerous cases of apt and inapt jealousy, whereas polyamory significantly reduces the possibility of apt jealousy. That seems to mark a respect in which the latter type of relationship is not inferior and may even be thought superior from a moral point of view.

In section 1 I construct a psychological profile of jealousy, outlining its defining features. Section 2 presents various rational assessments applicable to jealousy. Section 3 analyzes the aptness conditions of jealousy, and presents

1 In this paper, I concentrate on romantic jealousy as opposed to other kinds of jealousy such as sibling jealousy, workplace jealousy, friendship jealousy, etc. I use "jealousy" to refer to romantic jealousy unless otherwise specified.

arguments for thinking that jealousy is not an intrinsically moral emotion. This conclusion undercuts arguments that present a moral justification of jealousy as a strategy to protect what is rightfully one's own—namely the affections of one's beloved. Section 4 outlines the ways in which monogamous and polyamorous ideologies affect the aptness conditions of jealousy. I argue that in polyamory the conditions for apt jealousy are minimal compared to monogamy. I conclude that the questionable moral character of jealousy raises concerns about the moral status of monogamy, which is a great facilitator of jealousy.

1 Jealousy—A Psychological Profile

Without endorsing any particular theory of emotion, I take emotions to be intentional states that represent organism-environment relationships (Prinz 2004). Emotions are quick automatic responses that inform the organism of how it is faring in the world by making particular features of the situation salient to it (DeSousa 1987; Deonna and Teroni 2012). The *phenomenology* of an emotion makes a crucial contribution to the achievement of that task. Although emotional episodes can be unconscious, an occurrence of an emotion defines the domain of relevant features, informing other kinds of cognition in the subject (Damasio 1994; DeSousa 1987; **?**). Furthermore, emotions have characteristic *action tendencies*, preparing an organism to respond to a particular situation in a meaningful way (Frijda 1987; Scarantino 2017).

The intentionality of emotions is characterized by two kinds of objects. The emotion is directed at a *particular object* or *target*, and represents the target as having a particular evaluative property—the *formal object* of the emotion (Kenny 1963; DeSousa 1987). Emotions can misrepresent their targets when the target lacks the properties that ground the formal object of the emotion. The intentionality of emotions necessitates that they have correctness conditions—aptness. An emotion is apt when it correctly represents the target as having a particular evaluative property that supervenes on a set of natural properties of the target. Fear, for example, is apt when its formal object—*the fearsome*—supervenes on the properties (the menacing teeth, attacking posture) of its target (the dog). An emotion is inapt when the target that it represents as having a particular evaluative property lacks natural properties sufficient to ground the evaluative property. Thus, an instance of fear of a dog is inapt when the dog poses no danger. On the basis of this characterization, emotions have two functions: (1) to inform the organism of how it is faring by

correctly identifying evaluative properties of the target, and (2) to prepare an organism to respond to the situation by facilitating a response appropriate to those evaluative properties—in the case of fear, flight, or some other means of evading the danger.

Jealousy can be characterized along these and other parameters pertaining to emotions. Emotions are individuated by their formal objects (DeSousa 1987; Deonna and Teroni 2012; Tappolet 2016). In order to zoom in on the formal object of jealousy, the *jealousy-worthy*, it is important to identify the *eliciting conditions* of jealousy. Jealousy's defining eliciting condition involves a love triangle composed of the lover, the beloved, and a rival.[2] The negative hedonic character of jealousy indicates that the presence of a rival is a threat to the relationship or some aspect of the relationship between the lover and the beloved (Ben-Zeév 1990; Protasi 2017). Jealousy makes salient the features of the situation that constitute this threat. I will have a lot more to say about the formal object of jealousy in the upcoming sections. For now, we can say that the formal object of jealousy is a *threat-of-a-loss* posed by a rival to one's romantic relationship. If this is right, then jealousy is apt when the threat posed by a rival is real, and inapt when it is not.

The action tendency of jealousy offers further support for thinking that jealousy is a response to a threat because in romantic contexts the jealous engages in a variety of behaviors that appear to constitute *mate guarding*. These include interrupting the interaction between the beloved and the perceived rival, aggression against the beloved, or withdrawing (Chung and Harris 2018). Given the eliciting conditions of jealousy and its action tendency, the *function* of jealousy seems to be warding off rivals in order to protect one's relationship.

The diversity of mate guarding behaviors raises questions about the *target* of jealousy. Is it directed at the rival or the beloved? The grammatical structure of jealousy says that one is jealous *of* the rival. However, one is a rival only if one is receiving affection and attention from the jealous subject's beloved. Furthermore, it is the beloved whom the lover does not want to lose. Mingi Chung and Christine Harris report that the actions of mate guarding tend to be directed at the beloved more often than the rival. They hypothesize that this is because it is easier to secure the beloved's faithfulness than to discourage all others from attempting to lure the beloved away. Since it is the stability of the beloved's affections that the lover is trying to secure, it makes sense

2 The three-party relationship is one feature that distinguishes jealousy from envy. For discussion see Farrell (1980), Ben-Zeév (1990), Kristjánsson (2002, 2018), and Protasi (2017).

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that jealousy should be directed primarily at the beloved. At the same time, the rivalrous nature of jealousy indicates competitiveness of the lover for a privileged status with respect to the beloved (Farrell 1980). Therefore, the target of jealousy is both the beloved and the rival. The particular strategy employed in a given case may be indicative of the *focus* of the lover's jealousy.

If jealousy is about responding to threats from rivals, how should these threats be characterized? In the psychology literature on jealousy it has been defined in the following two ways. First, a threat may be constituted by an actual transgression of the beloved with a rival—e.g., a flirtation or an affair. In this case one experiences *reactive jealousy*—a jealous response to an actual infidelity.[3] Second, an aspect of the situation may be construed as a potential threat to one's relationship. In this case one experiences *suspicious jealousy*—a jealous reaction to a potential infidelity of the beloved with a rival (Rydell and Bringle 2007; Attridge 2013).[4]

Reactive and suspicious jealousy are typically distinguished by their antecedent conditions. Each kind is also associated with different qualities of the lover's personality. Reactive jealousy is associated with dependency and trust, secure and avoidant attachment styles, and extroversion. Suspicious jealousy is associated with insecurity and low self-esteem, and is correlated with anxious attachment style, and neuroticism (Marazziti et al. 2006; Chung and Harris 2018). Given these associations and antecedent conditions of each kind of jealousy, it may appear that reactive jealousy is always apt because it correctly identifies a threat, whereas suspicious jealousy may be more prone to error since it arises in cases where the threat is not obvious. Furthermore, the association with neuroticism and anxious attachment style suggests that suspicious jealousy, as an occurrent emotion, can sometimes be regarded as manifesting a character trait: a *jealous person* is one who often endures episodes of unfounded jealousy. Trait jealousy is associated with particular individual dispositions—anxiety, distrust, and suspicion—and is better described as a dimension of personality. In fact, Chung and Harris propose to delineate the distinction between suspicious and reactive jealousy not by construing them as two types of jealousy but rather as two aspects of the same emotion. They maintain that since the function of jealousy is to detect a

3 Of course, infidelity may not constitute a threat to the relationship if the lovers have an arrangement about allowing extra-dyadic sex. Here I am assuming that it does for the sake of argument.

4 For other kinds of characterizations of jealousy see Pfeiffer and Wong (1989), and Buunk et al. (2020).

threat, suspicious jealousy may be thought to be the initial stage of jealousy, when the jealous is gathering and examining the evidence for a potential transgression by the beloved. This way suspicious jealousy, no less than reactive jealousy, fulfills the function of protecting the relationship from threats. If suspicious jealousy arises in circumstances that do not ground it, then it simply fails to perform its presumed function. However, it need not fail to do so. Distinguishing between reactive and suspicious jealousy does not commit us to thinking of one as always apt and the other inapt.

Thus far we can say that romantic jealousy is an emotion that arises in response to a perceived threat posed by a rival with respect to one's beloved. Jealousy aims to correctly identify the threat, and to facilitate action designed to protect one's relationship from the rival.

2 Jealousy and Norms

If jealousy has the twofold function specified above, how effective is it in warding off rivals and sustaining a relationship? To answer this question, we need to examine the different ways—moral, prudential, and social—in which jealousy's effectiveness is assessed. That is the aim of this section.

I begin with social attitudes to jealousy, illustrating their variability across and within cultures. I then examine the prudential value of jealousy, in terms both of its social meaning and of its biological function. Lastly, I assess jealousy from a moral point of view: can it be said to be a moral emotion? As will become clear, these assessments call into question the value of jealousy and lay the groundwork for the critical evaluation of the formal object of jealousy in the next section.

One finds a variety of *social attitudes* to jealousy across and within cultures (Hupka and Ryan 1990; Buunk et al. 2020). For instance, in the so-called honor cultures—cultures in which reputation and status matter greatly—men are thought to be justified in violent outbursts triggered by jealousy (Cihangir 2013; Canto et al. 2017). In the matriarchal society of Mosuo in Southwest China jealousy is frowned upon (Cai 2001). In the United States attitudes towards jealousy are mixed (Puente and Cohen 2003; Vandello and Cohen 2008).[5] On the one hand, jealousy is praised as an expression of love, care, attachment, and vulnerability (Buss 2000). The jealous lover is clearly invested in the beloved and the status of their relationship: they are hurt by the potential

5 For the study of honor culture in the U.S. see (**?**).

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loss of the relationship. They wish to keep it and protect it from intruders who might take their beloved away from them. On the other hand, jealousy is disapproved of as it signals insecurity, low self-esteem, possessiveness, lack of trust, and immaturity. It portrays the lover as suspicious, mistrustful, and controlling (Salovey 1991).

The diversity of opinions on jealousy in the United States is partly explained by the changing attitudes towards the conception of men's honor and women's purity (Stearns 2010). At the same time, it is clear from these meta-attitudes that jealousy has multiple complex, conflicting social meanings. One way to attempt to reconcile them is to appeal to the distinction between apt reactive jealousy and inapt suspicious jealousy. Furthermore, pathological or morbid jealousy is associated with violence and homicide, and may stem from both reactive and suspicious jealousy (Pfeiffer and Wong 1989; Mullen 1993; Wilson and Daly 1996).[6] That might also be motivating negative attitudes towards jealousy.

While it is unlikely that negative and positive attitudes towards jealousy neatly map onto these distinctions, the purported function of jealousy might justify some of the positive attitudes towards it. We must look at the different ways in which this function is to be understood in order to assess some of the justifications of jealousy it might provide. The usefulness of jealousy can be construed in terms of its supposed biological, social, and personal functions. These are not mutually exclusive but differentiating between them sheds light on the utility of jealousy. I begin with the biological function of jealousy.

An evolutionary psychologist, David Buss, and his colleagues have argued that romantic jealousy is an adaptation. It was selected to ensure pair-bonding and successful childrearing in human reproduction, by securing sexual exclusivity from women and emotional exclusivity from men (Buss and Schmitt 1993; Buss 2000, 2006). Buss argues that the perceived sex differences with respect to jealousy reflect different evolutionary challenges for the sexes: securing paternity makes men more jealous of women's sexual infidelity, and securing resources makes women more jealous of men's emotional infidelity. Buss's findings have been challenged in the light of wide cultural variations with respect to sex differences in jealousy. Notably, in more egalitarian societies both men and women care more about emotional fidelity (DeSteno and Salovey 1996; Harris 2003; see also Hupka and Ryan 1990).

6 Peter Stearns (2010) outlines other social changes in the twentieth century that contributed to the negative shift in opinion regarding jealousy.

Putting the question of the best explanation for sex differences in jealousy aside, there is reason to think that jealousy may be adaptive because it is universal and traceable in infants as young as three months old. Sybil Hart and her colleagues found that infants react negatively to their mother talking sweetly to a lifelike doll but not to a book, suggesting that the mechanism for jealousy is hardwired to enable infants to secure vital resources from their caregivers by taking their attention away from real rivals (Hart 2010). One can speculate whether the jealousy response in infants is co-opted in romantic jealousy or whether an innate disposition to sexual jealousy is already expressed in infant jealousy. Regardless, the universality of a trait and its presence in infants are insufficient to establish that it is adaptive. As illustrated by the presence of the vermiform appendix, and by our preference for fatty and sugary foods, some features of an organism, while they might have been adapted in our evolutionary past, are no longer adaptive and may even be deleterious in our current environments (DeSousa 2017). Lastly, the presumed adaptive function does little to justify a normative assessment of jealousy since the adaptiveness of a trait does not imply that it is socially or personally beneficial.

Another way to approach the functionality of jealousy is to think of the role it plays in society. Given the general twofold function outlined above, it may be that jealousy contributes to maintaining social structures such as families by sustaining pair bonds. However, we must ask to what extent jealousy is a successful strategy in preserving these institutions. Furthermore, we must weigh the costs placed on the members of these institutions to assess whether jealousy is a justifiable means to achieve those aims.[7]

Assessing the success of jealousy is difficult since numerous factors contribute to sustaining a relationship. One possible measure of jealousy's contribution is its correlation with relationship satisfaction—an individual's assessment of the quality of their relationship. Relationship satisfaction can serve as a predictor of the relationship's endurance (Hendrick 1988). In some studies of jealousy, after testing participants' jealousy responses to vignettes and asking them to assess the jealousy reactions of their partners to their potential infidelities, the participants were asked to answer questions rating their relationship satisfaction. Different studies found different correlations between jealousy and relationship satisfaction. For example, a study by Laura Guerrero and Sylvie Eloy found a negative correlation between all types of

7 One could also question the value of the institutions jealousy is said to protect. See, for instance, Brake (2012; Brake 2016). But that project is well beyond the scope of this paper.

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jealousy and relationship satisfaction (1992; see also Andersen et al. 1995). Others found that relationship satisfaction positively correlates with reactive jealousy but negatively correlates with suspicious jealousy (Barelds and Barelds-Dijkstra 2007; Dandurand and Lafontaine 2014).[8]

Furthermore, studies of jealousy expression and communication found that aggressive expression or manipulative behavior designed to control or hurt one's partner is negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction. The same was true for aggression against the rival. On the other hand, constructive communication that focused on discussing relationship issues and aimed at restoring the relationship was positively correlated with relationship satisfaction (Sheets, Fredendall, and Claypool 1997; Guerrero, Hannawa, and Babin 2011). This suggests that when thinking about the correlation between jealousy and relationship satisfaction, people report how they perceive different types of jealousy as well as how they react to communications of jealousy.

These reports shed light on people's attitudes to jealousy and its expression. The correlations tracked in these studies are inconclusive, however, because of the mixed results and also because correlation does not establish causation. Even if we assume that there is a positive correlation between reactive jealousy and relationship satisfaction and a negative correlation between suspicious jealousy and relationship satisfaction, it does not mean that reactive jealousy in fact improves the relationship. Yet these correlations are telling, because they demonstrate that for many people jealousy is an important part of the romantic love narrative. No doubt, for some jealousy is a sign of love and commitment. But violence perpetuated and justified by jealousy imposes a disproportionate cost on women in romantic relationships (Mullen and Maack 1985; Daly and Wilson 1988; White and Mullen 1989; Mathes and Verstraete 1993; Puente and Cohen 2003; Vandello and Cohen 2008). Thus, in light of current research, one is left doubting the social usefulness of jealousy.

While biological and social justifications of jealousy do not appear promising, one might assess the prudential value of jealousy on an individual level. Jealousy might improve a relationship by correctly identifying threats and employing successful strategies for securing it. It would then be contributing to relationship satisfaction. Many other things would have to be true for this picture to be correct. Personality, character, attachment styles of the individuals involved, their beliefs about romantic love, a particular type of jealousy and

8 Dandurand and Lafontaine (2014) have found that people react more positively to their own jealousy that they direct at their beloveds, and more negatively when the jealousy of their beloveds is directed at them.

jealousy expression, together with other factors will determine the prudential value of jealousy for those individuals. Therefore, while jealousy may have prudential value in particular cases, that value depends on numerous factors that are difficult to generalize.

The analysis of social attitudes towards jealousy and of jealousy's role on the biological, social, and individual levels puts pressure on the significance of jealousy and casts doubt on its functionality. However, despite its questionable utility, jealousy might turn out to have a positive *moral* value. The moral value of jealousy can be cashed out in two ways: (1) if jealousy's formal object is a moral property, and (2) if it turns out to be morally praiseworthy. These two ways in which jealousy might relate to morality are independent of one another but can overlap.

If jealousy is a moral emotion, its formal object—the *jealousy-worthy*—is a moral property. Its aptness conditions would be defined by considerations of whether the target of jealousy instantiates the moral property of the *jealousy-worthy*. Since jealousy aims to identify threats to one's relationship posed by a rival-beloved interaction, the *jealousy-worthy* could be a moral property if it designates an injustice constituted by the rival-beloved relationship. It is important to note that if jealousy turns out not to be a moral emotion, rejecting its aptness on moral grounds would amount to committing a moralistic fallacy (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000). That is, if jealousy is deemed irrational on the grounds that it is immoral to feel, there would be a conflation of moral assessment and the aptness norms of jealousy. This is the case regardless of whether the *jealousy-worthy* is a moral property. I explore these questions in the next section.

3 The Formal Object of Jealousy: Moral or Non-Moral?

Does the formal object of jealousy consist of a moral property? To answer this question I examine moral and nonmoral accounts of the formal object of jealousy. I consider the implications of characterizing jealousy as a moral and a nonmoral emotion. I argue that if jealousy is a moral emotion then it is always inapt. If jealousy is a nonmoral emotion, it can be apt but it is morally problematic.

An account of the formal object of jealousy as a *moral property* is defended by Kristján Kristjánsson. He construes jealousy as an Aristotelian virtue of self-respect (2002, 2018). For Kristjánsson jealousy is a mean between two extremes: too much sensitivity to perceived disrespect, and too little sensitivity

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to the disrespect manifested by the beloved who responds favorably to a rival. According to this view, jealousy is an emotion that protects one's self-respect as a response to disrespect from others. It defends that which is due to and deserved by the lover. It is an emotion that responds to an injustice akin to anger and indignation, as opposed to fear, which responds to a danger. Kristjánsson construes jealousy as a moral emotion, the formal object of which is the violation of *moral deserts* (2002, 153). He argues that jealousy is necessary for a good life because it serves the function of preserving self-respect and respect from one's beloved. Therefore, jealousy is a moral emotion in virtue both of (1) the moral nature of its formal object, and of (2) its praiseworthy character.

In contrast to Krisjánsson, several accounts construe the *jealousy-worthy* as a nonmoral property. Daniel Farrell says, "[T]o be jealous is to be bothered by the very fact that one is not favored in some way in which one wants to be favored" (Farrell 1980, 543; see also Ben-Zeév 1990, 2010). More specifically, the jealous person perceives the beloved-rival interaction as a threat to their *privileged status* with respect to the beloved. Farrell's view brings out the rivalrous nature of jealousy—the jealous person wants to be favored *more* than anyone else by the beloved in the ways that a romantic lover is favored. Farrell denies that jealousy is a response to a threat of a loss of a relationship since a person might still be jealous, even if they could be assured that they would not lose it. The formal object of jealousy in his view is a *threat-to-one's-privileged-status*. It is not a moral property since it is not grounded in desert. Instead, it is simply a fact about human psychology.

Similarly, Sara Protasi describes jealousy as *threat-of-a-loss-of-comparative-advantage* to a rival. She says, "[T]he jealous is motivated to protect her comparative advantage, possibly by fending attacks from the rival and/or locking away the good" (2017, 323).

Both Farrell and Protasi point out that the formal object of jealousy reflects the *exclusivity* criterion associated with monogamy.[9] The monogamous framework requires that only one partner be the recipient of sexual and emotional favors from the beloved. The presence of a more favored rival threatens the privileged status of the lover. It devalues the goods of love and sex by undermining exclusivity. I will have more to say about these features of monogamy below. For now, it is important to emphasize that in a romantic context, sexual and emotional exclusivity determine the status of being favored.

9 By "monogamy" I mean a romantic relationship governed by the norms of sexual and emotional exclusivity.

The three accounts just cited—from Kristjánsson, Farrell, and Protasi—illustrate ways in which the formal object of jealousy can be construed. I first turn to the moral property accounts.

Kristjánsson argues that jealousy is a moral emotion, whose formal object is a *threat-to-moral-desert* that supervenes on the beloved-rival interaction, and on the relationship between the lover and the beloved. Jealousy upholds one's self-respect when one is mistreated by the beloved. According to him, "jealousy can properly be felt by *A*, other things being equal, when *B* receives from *C* a favor that *A* deserves more than, or at least as much as, *B*" (Kristjánsson 2002, 163). But what determines whether *A* deserves favors from *C* more than does *B*? Kristjánsson says it is the expectations of fairness provided by rules of commitment and faithfulness in the romantic love institutions: "[E]xclusive 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" (2002, 158–159). Hence, one deserves favors from one's beloved more than a stranger or friend does because one is in a romantic relationship with them. The desert is cashed out in terms of sexual and emotional exclusivity. That, we are to understand, is dictated by monogamy, the default mode of romantic relationships. The jealous person deserves not to be made jealous since if they are experiencing apt jealousy, they have been disrespected.

Kristjánsson thinks that following these rules of romantic relationships amounts to respecting one's romantic partner, while not reacting with jealousy towards the beloved's transgressions indicates a lack of self-respect. Kristjánsson recognizes that social rules dictate how self-worth should be understood, what boosts it and undermines it (2002, 161). Jealousy for him, therefore, as a protection of self-worth, is connected with one's reputation and status. For example, since cuckoldry is shameful, especially in certain cultures, jealousy is justified as a means to guard against it.

Kristjánsson's argument for the morality of jealousy goes as follows: there are social rules that govern relationship structures. These rules create expectations for the members of society. One such rule is about sexual and emotional exclusivity between romantic partners. When people enter romantic relationships, they take these rules for granted. Following these rules fulfills the expectations of the romantic partners. Violating these rules amounts to disrespecting one's partner because such violations undermine their expectations. Therefore, one ought to follow the rules in place in order to treat one's partner well.

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The argument assumes a moral obligation to uphold and follow social rules. This assumption is clearly indefensible: the moral status of such rules can always be questioned.[10] Hence it remains to be demonstrated that monogamous norms are morally defensible.[11]

Kristjánsson makes a leap from socially defined expectations to moral desert. In fact, his account seems, paradoxically, to imply that jealousy can never be apt. To see this, consider that the formal object of jealousy in his view, *threat-to-moral-desert*, is grounded in one's expectations, which are in turn grounded in social conventions (for Kritjánsson recognizes that they take different forms in different times and places).[12] But moral desert cannot be grounded in social norms. It follows that on Kristjánsson's account jealousy can never be apt since the value property it represents is not grounded in the features of the world he has in mind.

If we cannot ground moral desert in social norms, then we might characterize jealousy as representing not moral desert but a certain form of socially sanctioned *entitlement*. The formal object of jealousy would then be *threat-to-entitlement*. Entitlement arises from participating in social or legal institutions that specify how one ought to be treated (Feldman and Skow 2020). For example, a customer is entitled to a refund from a store when they are not satisfied with their purchase if the store's policy specifies that such refunds will be provided on this basis. An athlete is entitled to a gold medal if they have won the competition, and a gold medal is the way in which the winner is rewarded.

If jealousy is about entitlement and entitlement is not a moral property, then jealousy is not a moral emotion, and cannot be a virtue. But in any case, how strong is the case for the claim that the institution of monogamy entitles one to sexual and emotional exclusivity? Is it the kind of institution that can provide conditions for entitlement? The institutions presented in the examples above are formal institutions with explicit rules that can be enforced. Monogamy (in the restricted sense in which I have used the word) is an institution in a different sense—it is an informal institution, a widely accepted social practice. The rules are not explicit, and there is no formal way

10 Slavery, segregation, and inequitable gender norms demonstrate this point.

11 For extensive criticism of monogamy see Brake (2017); Brunning (2016, 2020); DeSousa (2017; Sousa 2018); Jenkins (2017).

12 E.g., "In Mediterranean societies, for instance, people have tended to be extremely sensitive to pride and shame in matters concerning sexual fidelity […] whereas transgressions of that kind may have been viewed more lightly in liberal France" (Kristjánsson 2002, 161).

for them to be enforced except for the court of public opinion. In that sense, monogamy can be viewed as a social convention.

The practice of monogamy can be formalized through the formal institution of marriage. In marriage, the rules of monogamy are explicit and have been enforceable until the introduction of no-fault divorce. Is one entitled to exclusive affection and sexual attraction from one's spouse? Indeed, the marriage contract seems to entitle one to such exclusivity. However, it should now be clear that formal and informal social institutions on their own cannot *morally* justify a social practice. Simply accepting them without further argument ignores their variability across time and cultures, and commits one to embracing an objectionable social conservatism. If the aptness conditions of jealousy are simply defined by social norms, they tell us nothing about its moral value.

We could try to show that jealousy is a moral emotion by grounding *threat-to-moral-desert* in some other way. One possibility is to adopt a contractarian framework and cash out moral desert in terms of an implicit agreement to "terms and conditions" of a monogamous romantic relationship. The contractarian framework establishes rights and obligations for all parties involved. On this view, one's romantic partner has a moral claim to one's sexual and emotional favors that outweighs any such demands from third parties, by virtue solely of the romantic relationship's existence. The relationship entails rights, and jealousy is an emotion that guards those rights.

But can one really ever assert a right to be loved? That is surely questionable because love is neither a matter of desert, nor of the will (Neu 1980, ch. 3).[13] Construed in this way, jealousy is then always inapt since the *threat-to-moral-desert* is really a *threat-to-one's-rights*, and there are no such rights.[14]

It could be insisted that while one may not have a right to be loved, according to the romantic contract, one has a right to sexual and emotional exclusivity for as long as the partner can provide them. That is, if the beloved falls in love with someone else, the romantic contract is terminated since the conditions of the original agreement are no longer satisfied. The contract only lasts as long as its conditions endure.

Another possibility is to acknowledge that sexual and emotional attraction are not in fact exclusive. The monogamous contract prohibits *acting* upon

13 This seems true even in the case of child-parent love. For discussion, see Liao (2015) and Protasi (2019).

14 Although jealous people might often feel that they do have such rights. For more details see Neu (1980, ch. 3), and Wreen (1989).

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attractions towards others. Pursuing them would violate the obligation of exclusivity. In this case, jealousy is the insistence that one honor the contract of exclusivity despite other attractions. Yet, jealousy is clearly not just about prohibiting the beloved to act upon their attractions. It is about being *preferred* to all others by the beloved. Can it be shown that one has a moral obligation to prefer one's partner to all others sexually and emotionally? It seems not, for, as we have said, there are no moral obligations to love, or to be exclusively sexually attracted to someone. Given these considerations, the contractarian framework cannot sustain jealousy's claim to be a moral emotion.

Another attempt might be made to show that jealousy is a matter of moral desert. Consider the concept of cheating. Cheating constitutes not only a transgression of the rules of a romantic relationship but a betrayal of the partner's trust. Why? Because the expectation of exclusivity was violated. How does one acquire such an expectation and why does one trust that it will be fulfilled? The expectation is a default assumption in a romantic relationship since monogamy is the default kind of romantic relationship. Through their actions and words, the partners lead one another to believe that both will be sexually and emotionally exclusive. As the relationship develops, the partners can explicitly state or otherwise indicate that they are "not seeing anyone else", thereby tacitly or explicitly endorsing monogamy. One reason why cheating is wrong is not because one's expectations are violated but rather because one's trust is.[15] Can it be said that a threat posed by a rival-beloved interaction is the kind of threat that endangers the trust between the lover and the beloved such that jealousy is an apt response to the situation? While it is clear that the threat to trust is real and that the beloved has a moral duty not to deceive the lover, the threat to trust does not make jealousy apt because jealousy is about deserving to be valued more than the rival. It is about having a greater claim to the affections of the beloved than the rival. A violation of trust constitutes a condition for apt anger and apt sadness but not apt jealousy.

In sum, jealousy construed as tracking injustice fails to be apt. To be sure, this reason is insufficient to rule out the possibility that the formal object of jealousy is *threat-to-moral-desert* or *threat-to-one's-rights*. It could well be that the formal object of jealousy is one of these moral properties. But if so, then jealousy is always unfitting because the properties that are supposed to ground the formal object thus specified fail to do so.[16] The same can be said

15 For a discussion of how duties of trust arise in intimate relationships, see Wallace (2012).

16 Perhaps regret, contempt, grief, and hatred (if the latter is an emotion) are also examples of inherently inapt emotions. For discussion see Landman (1993), Bell (2013), DeSousa (2019), Price

about a *threat-to-entitlement.* I will not attempt to settle the matter of whether the formal object of jealousy is a moral property here.

Let us now move on to the critical analysis of the proposed nonmoral formal object of jealousy discussed by Farrell and Protasi. Recall that Farrell and Protasi construe the formal object of jealousy as a *threat-to-one's-privileged-status* and *threat-of-a-loss-of-comparative-advantage* respectively. According to them, jealousy is an emotion that aims to protect one's priority standing with respect to the beloved. It is a response to a threat to one's status by a rival. In their views, jealousy is apt when one's privileged status is actually threatened by a rival, and inapt when it is not. This seems like a very plausible account of jealousy because it captures the rivalrous nature of jealousy. It also does not attempt to justify it from a moral standpoint as it does not insist that the jealous person deserves to be valued this way.

Farrell raises the question of the intelligibility of jealousy. He points out that there is something strange about a mature adult having this emotion (Farrell 1980, 546). Indeed, this characterization makes the jealous person look selfish, self-absorbed, and insecure. Farrell suggests that being favored more than anyone else could be intrinsically pleasurable for some people just as it seems to be for children and nonhuman animals (1980, 553). While this may be so, it is still puzzling since children are discouraged from being jealous. Why should jealousy be an appropriate emotion in a romantic context?

Farrell's and Protasi's accounts present a plausible picture of the formal object of jealousy and its aptness conditions. There remains the question of whether jealousy is morally justifiable or praiseworthy. It would seem that the jealous person confuses being valued as special and being the only one valued. In addition, they want to be in a superior position to everyone else.

It might seem that jealousy is justified by a monogamous ideology because it is based on an underlying assumption that "true love" can only be for one person at a time. Such an assumption implies that if love is not exclusive then it is not really love, or a love that is worthwhile, as it is not true love. Whether one can experience romantic love for more than one person at a time is an empirical question. Given numerous polyamorous accounts, it seems that it is indeed possible (Brake 2017; Jenkins 2017).[17] Defining "true love" as necessarily exclusive, therefore, begs the question.

(2020), Brogaard (2020), and Aumer and Erickson (2022). Caroline Price makes a case for the rationality of grief (2018). But she reduces aptness to prudence.

17 Polyamory is a form of ethical nonmonogamy, in which individuals have (or are open to having) multiple romantic partners with voluntary informed consent of everyone involved.

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It might also seem that what the jealous person wants is to be valued as unique and special. It might seem that being the only one valued satisfies this desire since if one is the only one loved in this way, one appears to be preferred to everyone else. However, it is a mistake to equate exclusivity with being valued as unique because exclusivity does not by itself take care of the Problem of Trading Up—the idea that if someone better comes along, the lover will prefer them to their current beloved (Nozick 1989). To address the problem, we must move away from equating being valued as unique with being valued exclusively. Neither entails the other. Exclusivity by itself does not preclude one from regarding one's beloved as fungible. Instead, valuing the beloved as unique is best captured by valuing them as irreplaceable where the lover simply refuses to compare the beloved to others (Grau 2004).[18] Valuing the beloved as unique is a normative attitude grounded in the love-attitude of the lover, and not in some set of features of the beloved. If uniqueness is characterized empirically, it is contingent.

It is also a mistake to think that one cannot be valued as unique if one's partner has other lovers. Each one can be valued in this way by virtue of being loved. Therefore, exclusivity by itself does not provide conditions for being valued as unique or irreplaceable. Rather, it is the normative attitude of the lover that perceives their beloved as irreplaceable, i.e., not fitting for comparison or ranking.

One further defense of the claim that uniqueness stems from sexual and emotional exclusivity might appeal to the "relationship first" view elaborated by Niko (**?**). In Kolodny's view, a relationship might be defined by a requirement of exclusivity; in such a case the uniqueness of the relationship might be due to precisely that defining commitment.[19] But that is true of any commitment mutually undertaken—never to use tobacco, or never to see an Orson Welles movie without the other. Such commitments might create "reasons of love" for that kind of exclusivity, but reasons of love may not be moral reasons. They give rise to disappointment and hurt, but that is very different from the moral indignation that is warranted in response to a moral transgression (see Albrecht 2017; Pismenny 2021). Such intentional commitments, then, cannot

18 J. David Velleman (1999) and Troy Jollimore (2011) make a similar point about what it means to being valued as unique or special.

19 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for noting the possibility that lovers might decide to make a relationship "intentionally exclusive, for whatever reason".

amount to a *moral* entitlement for sexual or emotional (as opposed to any other kind of) exclusivity.[20]

The desire to be valued as unique or special, according to Farrell's and Protasi's accounts, is not the mark of jealousy. Rather, it is that the jealous wants to be valued *more* than anyone else. If they are the sole recipient of the beloved's sexual and emotional favors, they may be said to be loved more than anyone else, since no one else is getting those favors from the beloved. How should we assess such a desire? At the very least, it demands that the beloved close themselves off from other romantic opportunities. Such jealousy seems driven not so much by love or concern with the relationship as by egoism (see Brunning 2020). We can conclude that while Farrell's and Protasi's accounts present a plausible view of jealousy and its aptness conditions, they provide reasons to doubt its moral value.

To sum up, the accounts of the formal object of jealousy I have considered here all seem to suggest that the jealous person reacts to a threat to their privileged status with respect to the beloved, and aims to preserve that status from the encroachment of a rival. The moral accounts I have considered attempt to show that the jealous person has a moral claim on the beloved such that the jealous deserves to maintain their privileged status either because of existing expectations or because they have a right to be favored in this way. However, construing the formal object of jealousy as a moral property renders jealousy inapt because moral obligations cannot be grounded in social conventions, and because rights claims do not seem to apply to love and sexual desire. Social conventions cannot ground entitlement claims for exclusivity. Entitlement claims are not moral claims, and require further moral assessment.

The nonmoral accounts of the formal object of jealousy suggest that the jealous wants to be favored above all others, which is cashed out in terms of maintaining their privileged status or comparative advantage over others. While these accounts can provide for apt cases of jealousy, they bring out the ethically problematic nature of jealousy by showing that the jealous person is concerned with occupying a position of privilege which they aim to achieve through excluding everyone else. While romantic love is partial and cannot be directed towards everyone, the demands of jealousy are not justified by the partiality of love. The desire to be loved exclusively or to be loved more than anyone else is either based on a misconception about what it means to

20 It might also be noted that on Kolodny's view, every relationship is trivially unique, inasmuch as no two different relationships could share a single history.

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be valued as unique, or on a self-centered desire that does not cast the jealous in a favorable light.

The discussion of the formal object and aptness of jealousy sheds light on the intentionality of jealousy, on its representational content. How does this connect with the function of jealousy outlined by psychologists who say that its function is to identify and ward off threats from rivals? The intentional content of jealousy is supposed to fulfill the function of correctly identifying threats. What is not spelled out in psychological accounts is what that content amounts to. In particular, the examined psychological accounts say nothing about the privileged status that the lover is afraid to lose and aims to protect. Yet, it is clear that the threat to the relationship is understood by them in terms of maintaining an exclusive monogamous relationship. Therefore, what is threatened is the privileged status of the lover, understood as requiring exclusivity.[21] Furthermore, as should be clear, jealousy is different from other emotions that represent loss, such as sadness and grief (or even fear of a loss) because it is a rivalrous emotion. Thus, when describing the twofold function of jealousy, it is important to recognize its intentional content in order to capture its competitive nature.

4 Romantic Norms and Aptness

As we have seen, the condition of exclusivity figures prominently in the discussion of the rationality of jealousy. It is often appealed to in order to show that jealousy is apt. In this last section, I consider the ways in which relationship norms influence the aptness norms of jealousy. I argue that the exclusivity norms infiltrate the aptness conditions of jealousy in monogamous relationships by specifying when and who counts as a rival. The "rivalry" conditions are determined differently in polyamorous relationships. I argue that the norms of polyamory provide fewer conditions for apt jealousy compared to monogamy.

Recall that the formal object of jealousy speaks to its representational content—representing the situation as a threat to one's privileged status posed by a rival. It is apt when the threat is real and inapt when it is not. The threat is real when the lover could lose their privileged status. As we have seen, the privileged status in a monogamous relationship is cashed out in terms of

21 This is true for Kristjánsson's account as well, for he thinks that the lover deserves to be valued more than the rival.

sexual and emotional exclusivity between the lover and the beloved. Therefore, when the norms of exclusivity are violated, the privileged status of the lover is undermined.

The exclusivity conditions determine what counts as a threat, thereby informing the aptness conditions of jealousy. What about other kinds of relationships in which exclusivity is not one of the norms? There are numerous romantic relationship styles that are nonmonogamous.[22] Given the scope of this paper, I only consider the practice of polyamory—a form of ethical nonmonogamy in which individuals cultivate multiple romantic relationships with the consent of everyone involved.

Polyamorous relationships can take many different forms, and vary in degrees of sexual and emotional connection and intimacy. Some relationships have rigid hierarchical structures that specify the rules for primary and secondary partners. Primary partners might enjoy more intimacy and emotional connection than secondary partners. Typically, though not necessarily, primary partners spend more time with one another, run a joint household, and share financial resources. They also often have a direct influence on their primary partner's romantic activity with others by negotiating their rules of engagement with others. Other polyamorists have no such rules, and reject any kind of hierarchy.[23] They might still have nesting partners—partners with whom they live. But that is not necessarily an indication of a relationship priority. Others still form polyamorous families of which all members live together, engage with one another sexually and emotionally in various ways, and jointly co-parent all the children in the household.

What does jealousy look like in polyamorous relationships? When is it apt? Since the function of jealousy is to correctly detect and respond to threats that come from rivals, we need to identify conditions under which such threats are possible in polyamory. In a hierarchically-structured polyamorous relationship, the primary partner might be threatened by the secondary partner who might try to take their place, for the secondary partner might want to receive privileges of the primary partner from which they are excluded. However, generally, polyamorists do not consider other lovers to be rivals. The practice of polyamory rests on a number of principles that include honesty, openness, communication, non-possessiveness, trust, and respect for the partners' autonomy. Other lovers, therefore, do not pose a threat to one's existing or

22 They include swinging, certain instances of polygamy, group marriages, etc.

23 This is called "relationship anarchy". For discussion see Nordgren (2006), Barker and Langdridge (2010), and Heras Gómez (2018).

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potential relationships. Polyamorists value compersion—the feeling of joy one experiences when one's partner is made happy by another (DeSousa 2017; Brunning 2020).

Given these considerations, a threat posed by a rival is defined differently in monogamy and polyamory. In monogamy, the threshold for a threat is low—any potential mutual romantic interest between the beloved and a third party presents real danger to the privileged status of the lover. This is because love is perceived as either being possible or worthy only in a dyad. In polyamory the threshold for a threat is high—other lovers are not rivals, and, therefore, do not as such pose a threat to the lover. In monogamy one is likely to have numerous cases of apt and inapt jealousy because of the way in which interactions between the beloved and others are assessed. Since there are more possibilities of real threats, there are more opportunities for apt jealousy. Even if threats do not occur, one is likely to be more vigilant and engage in more mate guarding in a monogamous framework. By contrast, in polyamorous relationships there are fewer possibilities for apt jealousy since the ideology of polyamory rejects competitiveness and exclusivity. Nonetheless, polyamorists experience jealousy. Often jealousy can be *recalcitrant*—it occurs despite one's judgment that it is inappropriate (D'Arms and Jacobson 2003; Brady 2009; Döring 2015). Such an occurrence may be particularly prevalent for those who have transitioned from monogamous to polyamorous relationships. Most polyamorists are aware of the recalcitrance of jealousy; they learn to manage it in various ways.

Cases of apt jealousy are nonetheless possible in a polyamorous framework, especially in hierarchical polyamorous relationships.[24] Apt jealousy could also occur in cases where the lover has fallen out of love, and is pursuing someone else. In this case, one's "privileged status" would simply amount to being loved, rather than being loved *more* than others. Overall, given the polyamorous framework, other lovers of one's beloved are not rivals because they don't constitute a threat to one's relationship. In general, it rejects competition for a privileged position with respect to the beloved.

Jealousy aims to identify threats to one's privileged status. As I hope to have shown, the criteria for what counts as a threat is partly determined by the norms of a particular romantic ideology. Social norms pertaining to romantic relationships infiltrate the aptness conditions of jealousy by specifying the

24 At the same time, hierarchical polyamorous relationships, and uneven distribution of time and attention could not trigger jealousy if everyone is happy with the arrangement.

threshold for threats from others. In monogamy the threat criteria are easy to satisfy, in polyamory, much less so.

5 Conclusion

When is jealousy appropriate? To answer this question, I have considered the twofold function of jealousy of correctly identifying a threat to the lover by a rival, and engaging in mate guarding in order to counter the threat. Given these functions, I have examined the value of jealousy from biological, social, and personal points of view. I have raised doubts about the value of jealousy in light of the inconclusive data regarding its contribution to relationship satisfaction, and its justification of violence disproportionately directed at women. Although it is possible that jealousy can sometimes be useful in helping partners maintain a relationship, it is difficult to determine the extent to which it does so reliably. Furthermore, there are better ways to maintain a fulfilling relationship such as communication, trust, respect, etc.

To zoom in on the nature of the threat to which jealousy is a response, and to explicate the relationship between jealousy and morality, I have examined a variety of ways in which the formal object of jealousy, the *jealousy-worthy*, could be defined. In specifying the formal object of jealousy, it became clear how dominant the norms of sexual and emotional exclusivity are in making sense of romantic jealousy.

If the formal object of jealousy is a moral property characterized as a *threat-to-moral-desert* or a *threat-to-one's-moral-rights*, jealousy is always inapt because social conventions of monogamy can never ground moral properties. The same is true if the formal object of jealousy is a *threat-to-one's-entitlement* because although that is not a moral property, the institution of monogamy is an informal institution, and cannot, therefore, ground strict entitlement.

If the formal object of jealousy is defined as a *threat-to-one's-privileged-status* or a *threat-to-one's-comparative-advantage,* jealousy is apt when that status is threatened and inapt when it is not. While characterizing the formal object of jealousy in this way allows for apt jealousy, I have questioned whether the emotion is morally praiseworthy. The desire to be loved more than everyone else is morally dubious, and it raises concerns about the person's character.

The painfulness of jealousy is intelligible when one assumes the monogamous framework, since it only allows for an exclusive dyad, and the beloved's new romantic interest may well indicate a loss of interest on the lover's part.

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In the monogamous ideology, love is a zero-sum game. Thus, protecting one's privileged status can be equated with protecting one's love status. This is why anyone in whom the beloved might express a romantic interest constitutes a threat to the lover. This is clear from the comparison of monogamy to polyamory. Polyamory sets a high bar for apt jealousy and discounts the majority of jealousy occurrences as recalcitrant because other romantic partners of one's beloved are not rivals, and therefore constitute no real threat to the lover. The moral problems raised by jealousy raise concerns about the moral standing of monogamy since it facilitates numerous occasions for apt or inapt jealousy.*

Arina Pismenny
0000-0001-8988-5121
University of Florida
arinapismenny@ufl.edu

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