

# 1 Introduction

The term *free love* has two meanings, one philosophical and one practical. Its philosophical meaning consists of a theory of love—this is, a set of ideas with respect to what love is, how it ought to be exercised, and what is its purpose and place in human life. The practical meaning is the consensual practice and exercise of free love with others.

Before delving into these meanings and the way in which both relate to one another, I think it is important to contextualize our discussion and understand its place and relative importance in human affairs. From the perspectives of social organization as well as the individual pursuit of satisfaction and happiness, the matter is of definite importance. The organization of family, with its wide range of variation across the temporal and cultural domains, has implications on social order which cannot be disregarded, and which anthropology has pointed out from Morgan and Engels onwards. Furthermore, love is, beyond any doubt, one of the deepest wells of meaning, and one of the most important drivers of human action alongside the search for knowledge, the desire of money or power, and the pursuit of creative and artistic realization.

Of course, as love is a source of joy, it is perhaps among the cruelest sources of anguish, conflict, and even hatred. I grew up involved in the divorce of my parents, which saw a genuinely loving couple disintegrate under the most tempestuous storm of hatred, misunderstanding, wickedness and confusion; one which drove otherwise decent people to commit cruel, manipulative and unworthy acts. It is my firm belief that, as in most things, love is lived with conflict and unhappiness due to a lack of a proper education and an incorrect understanding of its nature and the way it bounds us with one another. If we could reach a better understanding of love, one guided by freedom, compassion and tolerance, we would reduce much of the pains it typically brings about in individual life.

Notwithstanding its personal and social importance, it is crucial to understand as well that the question of whether love ought to be exercised freely or not—in the sense in which we will discuss—pales in comparison with other matters. The concentration of power, the fragility of the democratic order, the fight against state and private tyranny, and the threat of nuclear or climate disaster, are all examples of questions which surpass the one we will discuss in importance.

It may seem superfluous to emphasize the relative inferiority of our question with regards to, for instance, nuclear disaster or state tyranny. But I believe my generation has mistakenly devoted too much energy into questions surrounding

love, sexuality and identity, while disregarding others which are more important to human dignity and which affect a greater number of people. It is impossible not to observe that, in general, only the privileged have the time as well as the cultural resources to inquire on the philosophy of free love, not to mention that so aristocratic form of irreverence that allows certain people to follow practices which stand completely opposite to accepted customs. As a rule, an irreverence which would have a significant social cost to a marginalized person is, with some luck, condescendingly tolerated as a curious eccentricity in more educated or privileged circles.

## **2 Philosophy of free love**

### **2.1 What is free love**

Like anarchism, free love is not a definite ideology, but a set of flexible and relatively unstructured beliefs inspired by a few common and fundamental principles. These principles are, in general, adaptations or extensions of more general ones which are widely accepted. For instance, it is relatively easy to have someone accept the following statement:

As long as no-one's freedom is being limited by their actions, and no harm is being done unto others, I have no right to limit the freedom of another person.

However widely accepted this principle is, people struggle to extrapolate it to the freedom to love. But one cannot accept the general principle and abstain from such extrapolation, specially when love is—as most people would accept—a virtuous thing.

The essential principle which guides free love was formulated in general terms by Bakunin in *God and State*:

The liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has himself recognized them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon him by any extrinsic will whatever, divine or human, collective or individual.

Thus, believers in free love claim that everyone should be able to exercise their love of others without the exterior imposition of any limiting conditions. We accept axiomatically that love is a virtuous thing, and thus that limiting its exercise

and expression is morally equivalent to limiting the exercise and expression of generosity or kindness.

Exterior impositions to love come in many ways. For centuries, the state has taken upon itself to handle the private affairs of men and women alike. The legal institution of marriage, the informal and consuetudinary precepts of this or that culture, the various religious principles which establish what forms of love are chaste and which are vile, are all examples of exterior limitations to the free exercise of love. All of these, if one adheres at least rudimentary to liberal principles or their anarchist continuation, ought to be utterly rejected: their social existence should be dismantled, and their laws, when organizing our individual life, should be exchanged for others which we have set for ourselves.

Equivalently, if one believes in free love, one gives up completely any pretension to impose limitations on the way others exercise, express, and practice their love affairs. This includes our partners, our sons and daughters, our friends, and our neighbours. One must recognize that an individual's pursuit of affective or sexual satisfaction lies absolutely without the scope of one's domain, surrender altogether all desire to influence it, and achieve a radical acceptance of it. One must accept as axiomatic that romantic or sexual interactions between consenting adults lack any inherent evil and, on the contrary, comprise at least potentially a virtuous and positive act.

## **2.2 Free love and non-monogamy**

It should be self-evident that advocating for free love is not logically equivalent to advocating the idea that one should love multiple people, or that monogamy should not be practised. The only advocacy in place is this: that no exterior element—be it a person or an institution—can impose any restriction upon you with regards to who you love, how you express your love, nor how many people you love. Such matters fall entirely within the boundaries of your individual freedom.

Thus, free love is not equivalent to non-monogamy. A monogamous couple may be in pure accordance with the principles of free love, and a non-monogamous couple may fall in entire violation of them. The kind of contract which suits a couple is a highly idiosyncratic matter, and one cannot seriously propose that a *generally* superior one exists. As stated earlier, to believe in free love is to believe that *exterior* impositions are utterly contrary to the spirit of all virtue, including love and affection—interior conditions are not only appropriate, but unavoidable.

Notwithstanding, two things ought to be said in this regard. Firstly, it is easier to conceive non-monogamous arrangements if one believes in free love. The philosophy of free love simply makes one more open to the idea, and free from the misconception that love or sex among consenting adults can, under any circumstance, be a sin. Secondly, an absolutely rigid form of monogamy—i.e. a form of monogamy which allows absolutely no exceptions—is inconsistent with the philosophy of free love. Everybody will, sooner or later, feel sexual or romantic attraction to people beyond their partner—this is natural and lies well within normal human nature, and only a dishonest denial of facts could pretend otherwise. When this happens, insofar as the desire already exists, though the freedom of the individual is left untouched—we are assuming they have agreed to the monogamous contract freely and voluntarily—the free expression of their romantic or sexual desire is being limited. Their past self has agreed to this limitation, but their present self, ignited by desire, infatuation or even love, will feel it is alien and exterior. To avoid such contradiction, any agreement respecting of the philosophy of free love must lie, so to speak, in a semi-open interval between absolute anarchy (included in the spectrum) and absolute monogamy (excluded from the spectrum).

Mary Wollstonecraft, in her famous *Vindication*, said with respect to women:

Make them free, and they will quickly become wise and virtuous

I venture, with regards to free love and non-monogamy, that an equivalent statement holds: *Make them free, and they will quickly become non-monogamous*. This, in my opinion, is a positive thing: a world where love and affection are abundant is superior to its alternative. Non-monogamy, just like monogamy, is filled with bittersweetness, gains, and losses. However, human affection is the purest form of ecstasy, and the benefits non-monogamy brings not only to the individuals, but (surprisingly to many) to the couple involved, far surpass the costs.

## 2.3 Objections to free love

I should wish to examine some common objections to free love and non-monogamy. It is my belief that these objections are invalid and should not be accepted. Some of these are the fact that people suffer when their partners have romantic or sexual relations with others, the importance of true commitment, the risk of spreading disease and unwanted pregnancies, and the need for relational stability and a nurturing environment in the raising of children.

### **2.3.1 Free love produces suffering**

Any self-respecting philosophy which deals with human affairs must be inspired by compassion and kindness. It should strive to produce beliefs whose corresponding acts induce the proliferation of joy and happiness or, at least, the avoidance of suffering. Though a certain degree of pain is unavoidable in all human relations, I am not inclined to the romantic idea that inextricably ties love to suffering, turmoil, and sorrow. If conditions are met for love to be exercised, it should be exercised with innocence, delight and candour.

However, as pointed out before, love can be a terrible source of anguish. Among the causes which make love an unhappy matter, there are exogenous and endogenous ones. Among the first, we have the existence of objective obstacles which split lovers apart—e.g. distance, jail, war, or death—and the submission to institutions which bound the expression and exercise of love within socially acceptable bounds—e.g. marriage, religious prohibitions, state intervention, etc—. The latter may be reduced to the lack of a proper sentimental education which impedes people from enjoying love, even when its object lies within their reach and its potential for free and spontaneous expression is not limited from without.

Discussing the exogenous factors which limit the free exercise of love lies not within the scope of this writing. Those which are forceful factors, like war and death, are not the subject of philosophy; those which are social or political factors, like certain social institutions, have been widely discussed in the anarchist and feminist traditions. So, I should wish to discuss the manners in which we impose endogenous limitations both on the expression of our love and on that of others. The suffering which is caused by the idea or the fact of a loved one having a sexual or romantic interaction with another, which is the core of the objection we are dealing with, lies within the category of endogenous evils against the enjoyment of love.

Any worthy sentimental education must begin by recognizing the facts. Thus, we must accept that, in most people, true suffering is felt when their partners have sexual or romantic affairs with others. Though there are exceptions, the majority dislikes the idea of "sharing" their partners with others, due to insecurity, possessiveness, jealousy, or fear of losing them. It is important to recognize that this is a visceral reaction, which typically occurs without much cognitive elaboration: it simply feels bad, and we may not know exactly why. There is nothing inherently vile about these feelings, and they lie well within the bounds of normal human experience.

It is also a fact, however, that these feelings can be nullified, or at least alleviated, if a proper outlook is taken. Since these feelings are not equally caused in people by the idea of their partners loving someone else, on one hand, and their partners having sex with someone else, on the other, we should discuss the sexual and (so to speak) romantic freedom of our partners, with the feelings they cause in us, separately for the time being.

With regards to sex, it is obvious that it is not a transformative act. After a sexual encounter, the same individuals persist. Thus, it is not rational to conceive that, if we love another person, this love could suffer any change after that person had sex with another. More radically, we must accept that sex, assuming normal conditions—no coercion involved, no diseases are spread, unwanted pregnancies are avoided—is a positive thing. If a person feels sexual desire towards another, it is certainly a source of joy and happiness to realize that desire, and a world where such realization is not bounded by exterior limitations is morally superior to its alternative.

With regards to love, the matter is different, insofar as love can be transformative. The influence of love, when the passion is too strong, can begin wars, induce the abandonment of children, and revolutionize a person's life. Thus, it is not irrational to conceive that if a partner falls in-love with someone else, they may forget or leave us. However, three things ought to be said with regards to what we do with this legitimate fear.

Firstly, it is a fact that a person can love many others, and hence that multiple loves do not cancel each other out. This is obviously true in friendship and it is a moral mistake not to acknowledge that it is true in all other kinds of love. Thus, if our partner falls in-love with someone else, it really does not mean that it will love us any less. We may feel certain sadness if our partner has less time for us now, but this feeling is not peculiar to love: many feel the same when a friend befriends a new person. And even if, for some strange reason, we cannot overcome these distasteful feelings, to argue that because of this our partner should limit their romantic lives to us only is as absurd as arguing that our friends should limit their friendship to us.

Secondly, we may assume our fear is true and that our partner finds somebody who satisfies more than us, or brings them more joy. Should this be the case, there is no non-selfish reason not to allow them to explore the opportunity. We have absolutely no right to limit the scope of another person's reach, specially in matters which relate directly to their personal development and the exercise of their passions and virtues. And it is simply a display of brutality to respond

to this scenario with a limitation to another person's freedom, instead of with a willingness to let people discover who they belong with.

Thirdly, not exercising free love does not protect us from the suffering induced by the idea or fact of a partner loving, or having sex with, someone else. Monogamous and non-free couples constantly suffer from this, either in imagination (jealousy) or in fact (infidelity). Monogamy provides only an illusory protection against the possibility of our partner (or ourselves, for that matter) falling in-love with someone else. One may argue that allowing the exploration of an infatuation increases the risk of such infatuation growing into love, while the monogamic limit extinguishes the fire before it begins to grow. However, I would argue the exact opposite: infatuation grows more passionate and idealistic the less its exploration is allowed, and generally the person which infatuates us quickly becomes humanized, or even uninteresting, when we are allowed to pursue her. Thus, an illusion which may cause serious distress in a monogamous arrangement can be rapidly dissolved in non-monogamy, if only we allow ourselves and our partners to pursue a romantic affair with the illusion master.

In summary, not only a reasonable understanding of sex and love educates our feelings into accepting, alleviating, and perhaps extinguishing the pain of our partner loving someone else, but it is also false that this pain is avoided in non-monogamous arrangements. Thus, even if we do not accept the points in which I conceive non-monogamy to be superior, we must recognize that it is *at least* as bad as monogamy in this regard.

A final point of principle is to be made. It is a general rule that we do not have the right to limit the freedom of others simply because their acts dislike us. No material nor moral harm is done unto us when our partner shares a sexual or romantic bond with another person. Furthermore, if we accept love is a virtue and sex is a positive thing, not only our partners aren't doing us any harm: they are acting virtuously. Hence, the fact that we dislike our partners seeing other people may be unpleasant, but it constitutes no argument in favour of restricting our partner's liberty to do it.

### **2.3.2 The importance of true commitment**

When asked to justify their rejection of non-monogamy, it is quite common for people to claim that they value true commitment. The hidden assumption is that true commitment is impossible without monogamy. This assumption is of course factually wrong, insofar as many cultures, across the temporal and cultural domains, practise or have practised non-monogamy without a lack of allegiance, responsi-

bility, and dedication between the parts. However, putting aside its disregard of facts, the assumption is also revealing of a perverse concept of commitment.

Commitment should consist of the voluntary dedication to another person, the satisfaction of their affective needs, and the advancement of whatever life project one has with them, if any. It is true that it is easier to become inattentive of a person's needs, or careless with a relationship, if one has to attend romantically to many people. However, once more, lack of commitment and inattentiveness are widespread problems in monogamous arrangements too. It seems to me that, in this regard, *les extrêmes se touchent*: both not seeing other people as well as seeing other people carry the risk of producing emotional negligence.

People underestimate how much sharing a romantic affair with a person can boost our romantic connection with another: my virtues and singularities become apparent when you get the chance to explore those of others, while at the same time the acknowledgement of flaws in others will allow you to become more compassionate with my own. Monogamy produces negligence because it produces boredom, it makes couples take each other for granted, it erodes the positive impression which virtues produce, and it exacerbates our partner's flaws. Seeing other people, for the reasons aforementioned, makes it easier for true commitment and genuine connection to last in time.

Furthermore, depending on one's life conditions, it is conceivable that having not too great a number of other romantic bonds still leaves time for managing a true commitment with another person. Here, however, I believe a certain hierarchy is unavoidable: a working adult has little time for leisure, and dividing such time equally among their partners will necessarily leave too little time for each, making commitment impossible. Some people dislike the idea of placing their romantic affairs in a hierarchy, but in my view this is a natural phenomenon which occurs spontaneously. For instance, this occurs spontaneously in friendship: not all friends are equally close to us, nor do we distribute our time equally among them. This is reasonable, because we cannot expect to click with everybody in equally profound fashion. And what applies to friendship, in most cases, applies to love as well.

Thus, not only is free love compatible with true commitment, both from a sentimental as well as a practical perspective, but it is also superior to monogamy in allowing true commitment to survive in time. Furthermore, while it is true that certain characteristics of free love, if handled irresponsibly, can facilitate detachment, the same is true of monogamy.



### **2.3.3 The risk of disease and unwanted pregnancies**

The more sexual encounters one has, the greater the risk of having an unwanted pregnancy or getting a disease. These two factors, I believe, were absolutely paramount in making sense of monogamy. Maternal death was, and still is, a serious issue, specially among the great majority of the population living with limited resources. (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/maternal-mortality>) Assuming the mother survived an unwanted pregnancy, the caring of an unplanned child still implied severe changes in life conditions for the whole family. Sexually transmitted diseases were more common and harder to avoid in the past, due to a lack of scientific sophistication in medicine as well as poorer understanding of sexual affairs in the general public.

If material conditions were the same as before, true sexual freedom would be impossible. However, the existence of contraceptive pills and prophylactics, the (slowly) increasing degree of sexual education among the general public, and in some places the legalization of abortion, have radically changed the risks associated with sexual relations. Such risk is not null, insofar as even the best prophylactic measures have a margin of error, but it is close to negligible, and even extreme promiscuity falls well within reasonable behavior, when analyzed solely from this perspective, if safety measures are taken to avoid pregnancy and disease transmission.

### **2.3.4 The need for a nurturing environment in the raising of children**

It is unclear whether the exercise of free love is compatible with the raising of children. The free love spectrum is too wide and comprises too many forms of organizing an eventual family for a general position to be taken. For instance, we cannot take as the same a polyamorous family where children live with many adults in the same household, all or many of whom are romantically related, with a quasi-monogamous family where the children live with two biological parents who occasionally see other people outside the familiar home. Furthermore, there are too many factors to control for: the same arrangement may produce a stimulating and rich environment provided that children are nurtured with quality education as well as material stability, while producing a negative environment if some of these factors are lacking.

I would venture that those forms of free love which are closer to monogamy are at least as bad for the raising of children, and arguably better, than monogamy itself. But arguing in favour of this conjecture would take too long, and it is best not to spend too much energy on a conjecture which I myself deem so weak and

insecure. Thus, in what comes to the raising of children, I suspend my judgement for the time being, and concede that it is the one objection against the exercise of free love which has reasonable grounds.