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The Reviewer

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FERRER, JORGE N. (2022). *Love and Freedom: Transcending Monogamy and Polyamory*. London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield. ix + 212 pp. ISBN: 978-1538156575. Paperback. \$29.00. *Reviewed by Marie Thouin*.

Can romantic love and individual freedom coexist in intimate relationships? This question, which has warranted much ink in both academic and popular spheres (e.g., Haag, 2011; Perel, 2010; Ryan & Jethá, 2010), is not new—but Jorge Ferrer's

contribution to the conversation in his new book *Love and Freedom: Transcending Monogamy and Polyamory* is genuinely novel.

Building on seminal works that have pointed to the possibility of creating inclusive intimate relationships beyond the monogamy and polyamory binary (e.g., Barker, 2013; Gahran, 2017; Michaels & Johnson, 2015), *Love and Freedom* innovates by drafting a conceptual-experiential map of the territory of transbinary relationships, suggesting original vocabulary to describe this territory, as well as providing a detailed discussion on overcoming romantic jealousy to support readers who wish to explore intimacy beyond existing normativities and orthodoxies.

While delivering tangible solutions toward its practical aim to “minimize the suffering of the growing number of individuals who feel excluded from—and thus oppressed by—the non/monogamy system and attendant mono/poly bipolarity” (p. 103), it is also the first book to build some bridges among the scholarly fields of transpersonal psychology, religious studies, and contemporary relationship diversity.

The book opens with a well-documented description of the age-old, yet increasingly relevant quandary around the paradoxical human needs for long-term bonding and sexual variety, as well as the pervasive role that mononormativity or monocentrism (i.e., the assumption that monogamy, either lifelong or serial, is the only valid relational model for healthy romantic relationship) has played within these conversations.

Holding a hopeful lens to this loaded topic, Ferrer proposes that the difficulties plaguing traditional marriage today, such as sky-high divorce and affairs rates, *might not be all bad*—and that in fact, they may be guiding us to a brighter future where love and intimacy can bloom in more diverse, more authentic, and less oppressive ways. To this end, he asks:

What if, rather than trying to conform to outmoded or inadequate relational structures, people boldly cocreate intimate lives more attuned to their essential dispositions, changing needs, and deepest desires? What if we exorcise the monocentric spell and realize that “the problem” might not be, after all, a problem? (p. 2)

To which he suggests the following thesis:

Behind the inability to exclusively commit to a single person for life or an indefinite period of time, there may be emerging wisdom at play. In other words, some of the fears, conflicts, and challenges modern individuals experience in monogamous pledges may arise from an often-unconscious discernment of that relational structure as no longer appropriate for their personal development or even for our culture’s historical moment. (p. 2)

To look at intimate relationships free from normativity or ideological orthodoxy first requires an understanding of the different sources of conditioning that limit both the imagination and the real-life possibilities when it comes to intimacy. This

task is undertaken in Chapter 1, “Relational Freedom and the Crisis of Modern Relationships,” where Ferrer describes six main sources of conditioning at play around relationships: evolutionary, biological, historical, cultural, social, and biographical. He also introduces the conception of *relational freedom*, as a person’s ability to choose intimate relationship styles and configurations based on personal growth and mutual care, rather than on conditioned forces and relational ideologies. While Ferrer denounces mononormativity as impinging upon what should be the fundamental human right of loving “as many people as one desires in constructive, nonharmful ways” (p. 4), he also supports “mindful monogamy” (p. 2) as a legitimate relationship choice when it is chosen outside of monocentric pressures and rejects hierarchies between relationship styles.

Ferrer’s analysis of these hierarchies is deepened in the following chapter, “Mononormativity, Polypride, and the ‘Mono–Poly Wars’.” While mononormativity is the dominant paradigm across modern Western countries, emerging sub-cultures around polyamory and consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) often describe monogamous relating as inferior, unhealthy, or otherwise deficient—leading to a “predicament of mutual competition and condescension among monogamists and polyamorists” (p. 38). Ferrer critiques both forms of relational normativity—monopride/polyphobia and polypride/monophobia—and demonstrates the need to look at relationships beyond *both* monocentrism and emerging polynormativities. He shows, using a review of the empirical literature on the psychological health and relationship quality of monogamous and polyamorous individuals and couples, the ideological nature of these wars—and that no one side is more “correct” than the other.

The next chapter, “Sympathetic Joy: Beyond Jealousy, Toward Relational Freedom” focuses on one of the most prominent roadblocks to achieving relational freedom: romantic jealousy. Because the experience of jealousy “ensures the supremacy of monogamy and monogamous love [serving] a property-owning patriarchal culture” (Tsoulis, 1987, p. 25) and commonly affects CNM relationships as well, Ferrer argues, “the pursuit of relational freedom requires a new approach to jealousy” (p. 61). To this end, Ferrer explores how the application of *mudita*, the Buddhist contemplative practice of sympathetic joy, to intimate relationships can transform jealousy and expand relational choices. According to Ferrer, the transformation of jealousy into *compersion*—a term that was coined in CNM contexts to describe empathic joy (for a review of literature on compersion, see Thouin-Savard [2021])—can show that “several forms of relationship may be spiritually wholesome (in the Buddhist sense of leading to liberation) according to various human dispositions and contextual situations” (p. 76).

Chapter 4, “The Dawn of Transbinary Relationships,” is where the most unprecedented contribution of the book lies. Ferrer elaborates on the conceptual and experiential territory beyond the non/monogamy system and proposes a navigational map. In the same way that transgender and gender diversity movements opened possibilities of expression beyond the male/female binary, transbinary relationship styles introduce the space beyond the mono/poly binary. To this end, he proposes three plural relational modes—fluidity, hybridity, and

transcendence—and describes several transbinary pathways (e.g., developmental, contextual, intrapersonal, transcategorical) that may take place within each mode. He then coins the term *novogamy* to refer to the “fuzzy, liminal, and multivocal semantic–existential space” (p. 82) beyond the mono/poly binary. Finally, he addresses the concern that transbinary relationship modes may lead to a lack of coherent identity by arguing that “by more fully embracing their inner diversity, complexity, and dynamism, people can foster their personal individuation” (p. 103).

In the final chapter, “Relational Freedom and the Transformation of Intimate Relationships,” Ferrer considers “the future of romance after the deconstruction of the belief in a single ‘soul mate’,” and proposes that “romantic love can stay perfectly alive—and perhaps even more freely flourish—outside patriarchal and monocentric dungeons” (p. 107). He proposes new criteria for evaluating romantic relationships as alternatives to the standard of relationship longevity, and instead suggests “emancipatory, healing, and transformational relationship standards in relation to both individuals and societies” (p. 107). The chapter closes with a discussion of social justice, privilege, and collective responsibility, admitting that “social locations drastically impact the degree of relational freedom available to different populations” (p. 114) and that exercising relational freedom “must be balanced with a caring awareness and examination of the impact of one’s choices on others—no matter how ‘right’ or ‘truthful’ a decision may feel for any individual” (p. 118).

Love and Freedom is consistent with Ferrer’s previous philosophical work: it applies both participatory (see Ferrer, 2002, 2017; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008) and embodied spirituality (Ferrer, 2008) lenses to the realm of intimate relationships. In the same way that his past writings on religion sought to replace ideological hierarchies with an ethical and critical pluralistic approach, Ferrer suggests here that monogamy and polyamory (along with other forms of CNM) are not intrinsically good or bad; instead, people can choose those relational styles for “good” or “bad” reasons—“good” being relational predispositions, developmental and sociopolitical conditions, and personal growth, and “bad” being a socially conditioned, reactionary, or unconscious decision-making process.

In sum, *Love and Freedom* is a valuable book to diverse audiences—scholars, therapists, health professionals, and the general public. In a style unique to Ferrer, it blends a rigorous, well-informed academic voice with a compassionate and personal tone that makes the text readable to non-academics. The original and visionary content of this book ensures that it will become foundational to the development of many new avenues of theory and conversation in the transpersonal field and beyond.

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The Reviewer

Marie Thouin, PhD, is the founder of Love InSight, a mindful dating and relationship coaching practice where she supports growth-minded people of all relationship styles to foster intentional love lives. Her doctoral research focused on the experience of compersion (empathic joy) in consensually nonmonogamous relationships, which she discusses at www.whatiscompersion.com. Her interests also include the intersection of mindfulness and human sexuality. Marie serves as Editor at the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, where she co-edited a special issue on Transpersonal Sexuality. Learn more at www.loveinsight-dating.com.