We were married earlier this year. That's common knowledge; it's the sort of thing we tell people pretty indiscriminately. The finer details of our relationship we tend not to advertise. Nevertheless, people seem to take themselves to know quite a lot about them, too.

We're both academic philosophers from liberal democracies. So relatively speaking, we exist in a very socially liberal pocket of a relatively socially liberal part of the world. Our wedding guests were not exactly closed-minded reactionaries; neither are our other friends and intellectual peers. None of them would bat an eyelid if they learned, for instance, that a friend or colleague was gay or bisexual. And on the whole, these people tend to be pretty sensible about avoiding casually homophobic language, heteronormative assumptions, and suchlike.

But even our very liberal pocket of our relatively liberal society is massively—and, to us, surprisingly—mononormative. Acquaintances, friends, and colleagues are constantly assuming that our relationship, and indeed every relationship that they think of as 'serious', is a sexually monogamous one.

Although the assumption is ubiquitous, we rarely make a point of correcting it—even when an individual makes it explicitly and repeatedly. One reason we don’t is the simple fact that we don’t always feel like initiating conversations about the details of our personal lives with people to whom we’re not particularly close (even though they’re taking themselves to know quite a lot about it). Or sometimes, although we’d be happy to have that sort of conversation with that person at some point, it’s come up at the wrong time and/or place. (And then raising it later feels like announcing that it is now time to have a conversation about our personal lives, which we don’t often like to do.)

But truth be told, there’s more to the story. At least part of the reason we tend to be reluctant to correct mononormative assumptions is that, when push comes to shove, we’re a little bit afraid of it. We don’t want to deal with the kinds of negative attitudes that seem to hover around non-monogamy, and we often don’t feel that we have a good enough sense, in advance of disclosing our situation, of who will have those negative attitudes and who won’t.

Sometimes, people (presumably, people who haven’t given the matter much thought) talk as if 'non-monogamy' were more or less synonymous with 'infidelity'. In mentioning that one’s in a non-monogamous relationship, one doesn’t, of course, want to be interpreted as having announced that one is a cheater. (If you’re one of those struggling with the difference, consider that a necessary condition of cheating on a partner is doing something that your partner is not OK with; something you have, explicitly or otherwise, agreed not to do. To cheat is to break the rules of the relationship.) And we hate rather a lot the prospect of people making insidious gender-stereotypical assumptions about us, for example that Jonathan must have coerced Carrie into a relationship style that she doesn’t actually want. (The assumption that women could never want an open relationship is no less ridiculous than the assumption that women never want sex. But in neither case, unfortunately, does the ridiculousness of the assumption prevent it from being widely held.)

We’re also afraid that people might take away the idea that our relationship isn’t serious. In our experience, many people will infer from non-monogamy to non-
seriousness without skipping a beat. A very common piece of word processing software includes a thesaurus which, when asked for synonyms (synonyms) of ‘monogamy’, will offer (among other things) ‘stability’, ‘fidelity’ and ‘commitment’. In fact, some common ways of thinking and talking can implicate that a non-monogamous relationship is considered to be **no relationship at all**; for instance, ‘I think we should see other people’ is widely used in effect to mean ‘I want to terminate this relationship’. Most of all, we don’t want people attributing to us immorality, immaturity, fickleness, or other serious character failings. And we certainly don’t want to have a long and detailed enough conversation to guard against all these possibilities, when all that’s happened is that someone has made some no-doubt-hilarious joke about our having forsaken all others or whatever. (For the record, our wedding vows didn’t include this phrase, or anything else incompatible with what we’re doing now.) So it’s pretty easy to find reasons not to bother to correct mistaken assumptions.

Of course, those reasons extend further—for pretty much the same reasons, we don’t make deliberate decisions to tell many people about the workings of our relationship. And although (at least most of the time) the people we have told reacted without negativity (at least as far as we could see), there are certain kinds of people we wish we hadn’t come out to. After one of us shared some of these personal details with one acquaintance, that acquaintance proceeded to bring up the topic of our ‘unconventional’ personal life in almost every subsequent private conversation, regardless of topic. (Just to be clear: that’s not cool. Imagine if someone wanted almost every conversation with you to be about your race, or your clothing, or the fact that you are single. You’d—rightly—pretty quickly start to worry about whether you were being treated as a human being in the round.) Other people we’ve told and they thought it was no big deal; those are the people who get it. It isn’t a big deal.

But any nervousness about over-interest, while uncomfortable, is nothing like as much of an issue as our nervousness about negative judgment. So where might this envisaged negativity come from? We know of some pretty bad justifications for mononormativity, but frankly, they’re so bad that we find it difficult to take seriously the idea that they lie behind any (reasonably intelligent, reasonably compassionate) person’s having a genuinely negative attitude to non-monogamy. Here are some of them:

(1) **It’s unhealthy to have a large number of sexual partners.** This is silly for many reasons. First, it’s false: one can maintain good sexual health by taking sensible precautions even if one does have several partners. Second, non-monogamy doesn’t entail having a large number of partners; that association is based on prejudice. If you have only two partners in your whole life, but you have them at the same time, you’re being non-monogamous. Conversely, having a large number of partners doesn’t entail non-monogamy, so this sort of health-based concern should be applied equally to promiscuous single people and the multiply serially monogamous. Third, considered and ethical non-monogamy is likely to be a substantially better option health-wise than the frustrated drunken flings, clandestine affairs, or otherwise ill-considered hook-ups that are the fate of many of those who attempt monogamy despite not being well suited to it and eventually fail in the attempt.

(2) **Non-monogamy is inevitably psychologically damaging.** Sexual jealousy is unmanageable, always and for everyone, so all non-monogamous relationships eventually suffer and break down.
Different people are different. It's a silly mistake to assume that just because you (for example) find the idea of sharing a partner deeply uncomfortable, nobody else will ever be able to handle it. Actually, it's not even a particularly good sign that you will never be able to handle it; non-monogamous people who have trouble with jealousy often find they get better at dealing with it over time, by thinking and talking carefully and explicitly about what it is that they're feeling. (Certainly our own attitudes and dispositions have changed over time and with experience.) And, of course, sexual jealousy is often a big problem in monogamous relationships; the connections between jealousy and sexual restriction/freedom are complex and highly interpersonally variable. It might also be useful to stress here that non-monogamous relationships are generally not sexual free-for-alls, as some people assume. (Again, it's only prejudice that drives this assumption.) The parties to a non-monogamous relationship get to decide what they are comfortable with and what they are not; it's not about letting things happen that make you feel awful. No ethical relationship, monogamous or otherwise, is about that.

What's unusual is that non-monogamous people choose rules for their relationships based on the particular situations of the individuals involved, as opposed to adopting a standard set. One particularly silly way to get to the silly view that non-monogamy is inevitably damaging is to premise it on some thought like: 'One of my friends once tried a non-monogamous relationship in college, and it made him/her really unhappy'. (To see how silly that is, just try replacing 'non-monogamous relationship' with e.g. 'heterosexual relationship' or 'relationship with another human being'.) Most relationships, monogamous or otherwise, eventually suffer and break down for some reason or other. Sometimes, for sure, it's because they're non-monogamous and that didn't suit the people involved. Other times, it's because they're monogamous and that didn't suit the people involved. Different people are different. You know: obviously.

(3) Non-monogamy is unnatural.
This is just a weird claim. We're not even quite sure what it's supposed to mean, but maybe it is the sort of claim that might make it relevant to point out that hardly any species is sexually monogamous. (No, swans aren't. They do often pair bond for life, we understand, but there's a difference between a life-long bond and a sexually exclusive one; assumptions to the contrary are yet more prejudice.) And humans aren't particularly monogamous either, if you look at their practice as opposed to their policy, and/or if you look at more of their history than the last little bit. What it would take for humans nevertheless to count as 'monogamous by nature' escapes us. But this whole discussion is silly in any case, because lots of very awesome things are totally unnatural, like MacBooks and ibuprofen. So the (putative) unnaturalness of non-monogamy is just irrelevant to whether or not it's a good idea.

(4) Non-monogamy is forbidden by some religion or other.
If you think that settles it, there's probably not much we can do to help. For what it's worth, we don't think it's OK to delegate moral decisions like this one to outside authorities, and we stand ready to modus tollens any conjunction of religious views which entails that ethical non-monogamy is unethical.

(5) Non-monogamy is never ethical.
Non-monogamy requires explicit (and ongoing) reflection and decisions about what sorts of freedoms and restrictions are ethical given the particular individuals concerned. It emphatically isn't about ignoring or overruling ethical considerations. So by itself, the claim that non-monogamy is never ethical has about as much plausibility as the claim that heterosexuality is never ethical, or that interracial relationships are never ethical, or that relationships that start on a Tuesday are never ethical. If everyone involved is honest, happy and healthy, it's hard to see
what the problem is supposed to be. It can't be just wrong. (Not even if it makes some people feel a bit uncomfortable; more on that in a moment.)

So, reasons like (1)-(5) for being down on non-monogamy are bad. (This isn't an exhaustive list of bad reasons, obviously; just a representative selection.) And yet so many people—otherwise open-minded people, including many of our past temporal slices—are going around making all these casually mononormative assumptions all the time. How come?

A lot of it surely has to do with their simply not thinking about the matter. We imagine that a lot of people may have never seriously considered the option of having an ethical non-monogamous relationship, or taken seriously the possibility that their friends or acquaintances might be having them. In our experience, this just isn’t something a lot of people talk about. It’s more or less universally assumed that when one commits seriously, it’ll be in a monogamous way. The spectrum of non-monogamous relationship styles (and just to emphasize, we’re talking about a wide range of options here; it’s not a one-size-fits-all situation) aren’t getting themselves onto people’s agendas. The people who’ve made false assumptions about our relationship presumably had no idea they might have been making us feel a bit like freaks. We’ve made similar assumptions about other people ourselves. We try not to now, but it’s a lot easier to be careful now because we’ve been thinking about this stuff (a lot).

The not thinking problem, while it is indeed a problem, is the most optimistic part of our explanation of the mononormative behavior that we’re used to. Is there anything else going on? Anything we should be more worried about? Is some of the mononormativity around here due to a genuine and considered negative attitude to non-monogamy? We’re not sure, but we fear that it might be. But assuming that such negativity isn’t really motivated by bad reasons like (1)-(5), what could motivate it? That’s to say, what could motivate it in the kind of reasonably intelligent, reasonably compassionate people whose judgment of us we actually care about?

We worry that there’s an analogy to be drawn with a certain pernicious kind of homophobia. It’s not news that some of the most vocal and hateful anti-gay protests come from closeted homosexuals. They are the people made most uncomfortable by the existence of happy, comfortably out gay people: people, that is, who are living the lives that these vocal homophobes want for themselves but (for whatever reason) feel unable to claim. Feelings of guilt and shame are likely to play an important role in this dynamic: people who are ashamed of their own homosexual feelings, and working very hard to suppress them, are more likely to be intensely aggravated by seeing other people openly embracing and enjoying theirs. And they’re more likely to feel the need to ensure that such behaviour gets labelled as disgusting or immoral. This unfortunate psychological state might not be consciously owned by its subjects, of course. But people who are happy and secure with their own sexuality and relationship situation just don’t have that same kind of motivation to resent other people’s.

It does seem to us somewhat likely that some people may harbour negative attitudes towards non-monogamy because, whether they are aware of it or not, they would like to have some sort of non-monogamous relationship themselves, and they resent people who are living the lives that they want but (for whatever reason) feel unable to claim. We imagine that people who feel guilty or ashamed about their own feelings of attraction to people besides their partners, and are working very hard to suppress those feelings, are particularly likely to be intensely aggravated by seeing others
openly embracing and enjoying their attraction to more than one person, and to feel the need to ensure that such behaviour gets labelled as disgusting or immoral. (We’re also pretty confident that feelings of guilt and shame about being attracted to people besides one’s partner are pretty common.) But if we suspected this sort of thing was behind someone’s negative attitude toward us and our relationship style, how on earth could we convey this to that person without causing offence and being dismissed?

So much for nervousness about being judged. There’s another factor that’s partly responsible for our non-disclosure: we don’t really want to look like the only ones in certain circles (particularly, the parts of academic philosophy that we frequent). It’s not especially nice to feel different in that way.

This point raises to salience another interesting question: if non-monogamy is not actually wrong, why aren’t more people doing it? There are several relevant considerations here. First, there’s the thing about different people being different; non-monogamy isn’t everyone’s cup of tea. And then there’s the thing about how much people are just not thinking about this sort of possibility. (In particular, people are not thinking about the various options they have when they go into relationships, and such things are a lot harder to negotiate if you get into a serious monogamous relationship and figure out years later that it might not be the best relationship style for you.) And finally: you know, maybe they are. That is to say, it might be that more people are doing it than you think. Your friends or acquaintances who are doing it might just not be telling you. (If you’re a friend or acquaintance of ours, then it’s very likely that that was the case.) Maybe that’s partly because you’re making those mononormative assumptions and it doesn’t encourage disclosure. Or maybe it’s just because they’re private people, and/or they don’t know you that well, and/or it hasn’t happened to come up yet. Or maybe they don’t want to look like the only ones.

Despite these various kinds of nervousness (justified or otherwise) about disclosure, being closetedly non-monogamous (effectively, mono-acting) has its disadvantages too. We’re ready to be done with it. Academic philosophy is a small world; certain areas of it are very small indeed. What if someone happens to see one of us with somebody else, and assumes (not thinking about the alternatives) that we’re cheating? We each hate the idea of being taken for a cheater, or of being pitied as the spouse of a cheater. And we hate very much indeed the idea of some poor well-meaning friend feeling awful about having witnessed some apparent cheating, and agonizing over whether they ought to say or do something.

We’re not the type to like the idea of going round making a series of announcements to people—as we mentioned, our attitude is that our situation is something that should be no big deal. And in many cases, we wouldn’t want to assume that people are interested enough in the inner workings of our personal lives to make it appropriate to make an announcement to them. Hence the present strategy: we’ve written something about our situation. This way, we’re not forcing the conversation on anyone who doesn’t want to have it, and at the same time, there’s some chance that we might help (a bit) with the not thinking problem. And knowing the speed at which academic gossip travels, we can safely assume this will effectively dismantle our closet.

A final, but not at all trivial, consideration is that other people may be able to relate. Certainly, it would’ve helped us feel less we were the only ones if someone else had written this article and we’d read it. If there’s a chance we can do the same
for someone else by writing this article, then so much the better for our writing this article.

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