

# **Relationship Anarchism: Theory and Practice**

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## Relationship Anarchism

Relationship Anarchy, to be a Relationship Anarchist, is the incorporation of anarchist ideas into the practice of romantic-sexual and platonic relationships. It involves internalizing values of horizontalité, free association, autonomy, and mutual aid as a guide for how we structure and engage with our relationships. Relationship Anarchism is an approach to relationships. It's not a style of relationship. It's a means of how we engage as humans. Approaching our interpersonal relationships with an eye towards autonomy, towards realizing free association and mutual aid in our lives. Relationship Anarchism is renouncing ideas of control or management of others, refusing domination and seeing everyone as they are.

What are these core anarchist values that lead to Relationship Anarchism? Anarchism is a broad movement with many ideas including opposition to the state and capitalism, abolition of all hierarchy and core values of mutual aid, free association, horizontal organizing, autonomy, self-liberation, and direct action. As Peter Gelderloos explains:

**Autonomy and Horizontality:** All people deserve the freedom to define and organize themselves on their own terms. Decision-making structures should be horizontal rather than vertical, so no one dominates anyone else; they should foster power to act freely rather than power over others

**Mutual Aid:** People should help one another voluntarily; bonds of solidarity and generosity form a stronger social glue than the fear inspired by laws, borders, prisons, and armies. Mutual aid is neither a form of charity nor of zero-sum exchange; both giver and receiver are equal and interchangeable. Since neither holds power over the other, they increase their collective power by creating opportunities to work together.

**Free Association:** People should be free to cooperate with whomever they want, however they see fit; likewise, they should be free to refuse any relationship or arrangement they do not judge to be in their interest. Everyone should be able to move freely, both physically and socially. Anarchists oppose borders of all kinds and involuntary categorization by citizenship, gender, or race.

**Direct Action:** It is more empowering and effective to accomplish goals directly than to rely on authorities or representatives. Free people do not request the changes they want to see in the world; they make those changes.

**Self-Liberation:** People must be at the forefront of their own liberation. Freedom cannot be given; it must be taken.

–Peter Gelderloos, *Anarchy Works*

## Values Integration

In building relationships with anarchy we seek to structure them horizontally, without a hierarchy. In a horizontal relationship no one has power over another and individual relationships are not defined by the non/existence of other relationships. No one person is of a higher rank or status than another. Each individual relationship is able to exist autonomously without having

to be compared to others. Horizontalité is to let each relationship be enjoyed within it's own context.

The value of free association is what enables a genuine expression of autonomy. Allows one-self and those we are close to, to exercise their own decision making on who they associate with, without dictates of class, race or religion. This often manifests as a kind of polyamory although can include conscious and voluntary engagements with monogamy or other relationship forms. In allowing ourselves and others to associate with new and different people at all times or change existing relationship ties, our love isn't constrained to a closed loop and in doing so we are able to form complex and broad-based relationship networks. We don't place hard limits on how, who or when we engage with others because of cultural expectations or notions of ownership.

In structuring our relationships around autonomy we allow our relationships to engage with us genuinely and to never become owned or subservient, implicitly or explicitly. In viewing our partners as entirely autonomous and seeking to give them the most autonomy, we try to hold in mind, even if we don't like it, that ourselves and our partners deserve to exist in as much of themselves as possible without coercion towards being or acting in a certain way. We allow ourselves to pursue our own dreams and values and allow our partners to lead their lives without compromise. We refuse to let social notions that love is more valid or real through the sacrifice of autonomy exist within our relationship paradigm. We exercise autonomy over our own bodies/minds and respect the bodies/minds of others by seeking and maintaining clear consent. Whether that's kissing or off loading trauma. We let our partners decide where they want to live and we decide for ourselves what choices are most desirable to us without fear of being a bad partner or destroying the relationship.

Autonomy must become a cultivated perception. I remember years ago someone I knew was trying to marry someone so that they could benefit materially. It would've been a long-term commitment of energy and cohabitation for a good reason. I objected and gave an ultimatum. I infringed on their autonomy to the detriment of the person needing the material support. Fostering autonomy means seeking not to shape the person to be someone and do something different than is their desire. A desire which would cause no material harm to me or others. In trying to control our partners we cheat ourselves out of our own individuality and expression, as well as repressing theirs. This is not to say you shouldn't speak up as to your feelings. Working together to problem solve or speaking up when there's something you disagree with is good. Refraining from moral objection when someone you're close with assaults someone unnecessarily isn't.

In considering Mutual Aid as an important facet of a relationship we have to consider that human evolution itself has gifted us our present dominance through mutual aid. We must understand our relationships as existing in a state of reciprocation and that a relationship without reciprocation is an inherently hierarchical relationship. Often, relationships without reciprocation are ones of patriarchal slavery or abuse. Relationship Anarchy means understanding that a relationship survives off of a back and forth, of emotional, social and material exchange. It doesn't (necessarily) mean a one for one count of all things given and taken, more an intentional awareness of not creating a defacto hierarchy through means of status, class or ability, as far as is possible given the unfortunate realities of life under capitalism.

By implementing the values of anarchy into our relationships we create horizontal, egalitarian, and non-coercive relationships better suited for a joyful whole life.

## **Becoming Anarchy**

These values of horizontalité, free association, autonomy and mutual aid can be a struggle to realize in our lives and relationships. Relationship Anarchism is not a retrospective philosophical explanation, it is an active practice. We cannot be relationship anarchists in name only, we have to practice RA because we have been raised in a hierarchical, monogamous, domineering society. We grow up indoctrinated into a capitalist patriarchal society that pushes puritanical anti-pleasure ethics, compulsive monogamy and heterosexuality. We give birth to cops that live in our head that bring the nightstick down when we step out of line: the blood rushing to our cheeks and urge to hide when shame we've been taught to feel sets in. It's a shame and guilt that doesn't come from who we care about or from our own values. It's a shame and guilt 'gifted' to us by a hierarchical society. In order to exercise real autonomy over ourselves and others we have to kill the cop in our head. Realizing anarchy now.

We have to intentionally act opposite to urges to avoid communication and instead be willing to share our experiences of shame and through that sharing come to put them aside. American society says not only do we play favorites, but that it's good we do. Our society stokes twin fires of fears of abandonment and jealousy. America whispers to us that if we don't dominate our partners, make them ours, they will leave us. The premise itself is fake, people don't leave because they're enjoying time with another, with themselves or in community. We have to disabuse ourselves of any notion of control or ownership over other humans, whether we fuck them or not. This links to jealousy, which is a social emotion that communicates to us when we feel that an important relationship is threatened or in danger. We have to both realize and trust that if our partners do care for us, we don't have to coerce them into maintaining the relationship. We don't have to engage with a reduction to labels (girlfriend, husband, etc.) that do more to coerce behavior than enable joy. No relationship has to reach a socially determined point before deep love and affection are allowed to exist. Those feelings of love and affection don't require specific benchmarks of sex or action; we can love our friends whether we go down on them or not and express love quickly without expectation of being tied down. We can communicate directly and honestly when we feel we need something, disregarding puritanical notions of desire as sin to more completely connect as humans. Even if this egalitarian horizontal relationship style does result in someone drifting from you or you from them, it is an expression of their own autonomy and at the end of the day that means taking a deep breath and letting those we love be themselves most genuinely, even in separation. Living in Anarchy.

## **No-Categorization**

In our actual lives it's not weird to grow closer to one person or another, in the context of multiple partners this is often categorized into an implicit or explicit hierarchy. That might be distinctions between married/unmarried, casual, committed, steady etc. While inclination towards and away from people is not harmful, if we allow our desires to exist without awareness and mindfulness they can give form to harmful hierarchies. Hierarchies that create layers of exclusion and isolation within communities/families. These hierarchies can exacerbate attitudes of ownership and rather than evaluating relationships in the present, hierarchical structures and labels can pre-assign value in a way that becomes rigid and prescriptive rather than descrip-

tive. By dismantling the hierarchical labels used in relationships and describing them on a more behavioral and emotional level we give sharper focus to the realities of our connections. No compartmentalization to labels means it takes longer to explain yet in doing so nothing is obfuscated, presumed or coerced. This is a change that is reflected both in language and in the formulas in our head. Relationship Anarchism starts in your own head, dispelling the delusions of control, coercion and assignment to embrace reality in its own context.

Buoyed by direct communication, we create a culture of no-categorization that simplifies relationships in the abstract to allow them to grow in complexity in the specific. This means abandoning labels that obscure and embracing descriptive explanations. For example, instead of “Greyson my boyfriend” I’ve had the experience of finding that label misleading or confusing both to myself and others. Often the most accurate way to articulate my connection to Greyson was “my relationship with Greyson is one where we love each other, don’t have sex, sometimes we cuddle or do kink, we support each other when we’re in crisis and don’t hangout casually very much, I want them to be safe and happy”. Rather than a singular title, we can expound the specifics of our relationships. Focusing instead on the actual complexity of material reality and allowing that reality to exist without compartmentalization.

We can direct attention to our desires and approach them with awareness. Knowing we might rather spend time with one person or another, we remain aware that desires shift inevitably and that we don’t need to craft a present desire into an eternal object. We approach relationships with greater autonomy by dissolving a solidified hierarchy and approaching desires in relation to an acceptance of the present and future. We can engage in the present moment with a given person, accept and be aware of our desires as they change, and shift fluidly within multiple relationships.

Don’t cheat yourself out of your desires and dreams. By seeking to always be in connection with genuine feelings and thoughts we can embrace vulnerability with partners and use a foundation of mutual aid to ground our relationships, whether vulnerability leads to cum or commiseration.

## **Lines of Connection**

Relationship Anarchism makes major pronouncements on the various threads of connections between people. These connections are the relationship between:

- self & self
- self & other
- other & other
- other & itself

In the implementation of Relationship Anarchism we come against preconditioned beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about how we should or shouldn’t feel about the various lines of connection listed above. Under the cis-hetero-patriarchal monogamous relationship there are expected to be controls, or behavioral change on relationships of self & other as well as restrictions, interpretations, or judgments on relationships of other & other, other & itself and self & self. When we hit the bars of these cages seeking to control we can make a choice about how to approach our responses. We can practice non-attachment, empathetic joy (compersion) and cultivate autonomy of we can attempt to exercise change or control over a relationship. For example, exercising restraint or control over the relationship of the self & self might be something we do volitionally

in relationship to self improvement as when we seek to exercise behavioral change when one of our behaviors generates suffering for ourselves and/or others. Likewise we can take a step back and allow others to lead their own lives most genuinely without bowing to our personal desires for them. By looking closely at which line of connection we are concerned with we can evaluate and manage our behavior and emotions as they relate to our values.

In the relationships of other & other, or other & itself we ought to endeavor to practice non-attachment, empathetic joy and allowing of the various permutations, expressions and engagements of relationships without judgment or domination. Meaning we should seek to foster the greatest amount of autonomy when it comes to the relationships of others by being non-judgmental and accepting of what goes on in the relationship of other & other and other & itself. For example, it's not uncommon to see relationships wherein one person tries to control the other's diet. This is an unnecessary imposition that only creates distance and painful domination. We need to seek freedom within ourselves and how we perceive the relationships others have with themselves and to others in the interest of giving everyone the greatest control over that which directly affects them. We can set a direct aim of cultivating autonomy in terms of our own behavior being independent and rooted within ourselves, not seeking to control or manage the behaviors and relationships of others. RA means explicitly renouncing that we have a right over who others engage with or what they do. Relationship Anarchism means renouncing domination over those we care about, it means the people we care about should be allowed to genuinely be themselves and not who we want them to be, or who we think they should be. In reality, sometimes that means loss, or not getting what you want in the moment. If we endeavor to realize autonomy in our practical lives, it means recognizing and validating those emotional experiences, and then deciding that those feelings don't actually have to control what you say, do and think in the long term.

Relationship Anarchism advocates an open and directly communicative management of the relationship of self & other. Meaning that in practice we endeavor to allow others to most genuinely accept, engage, and change who they are. We allow ourselves to be most genuinely who we are, remaining honest with ourselves, refusing to change who we are for the total benefit of others unless it also aligns with our own goals, and we allow others to engage with others to their fullest and most desired extent. Being a relationship anarchist means looking out for your and their autonomy.

When it comes to the relationship of self & self we ought to cultivate emotional and behavioral honesty. Being genuine with ourselves about what we care about, what we do, and who we are in the moment. That can mean noticing directly when we're seeking to change ourselves solely for the benefit of others, especially in ways that might violate, denigrate, or invalidate our deeply held personal values. Relationship Anarchy to ourselves means a seizing of autonomy, personal responsibility, and internalized honesty. It means not compromising on our values for social ease.

When it comes to the relationship of self & other under Relationship Anarchism we ought to endeavor to build a relationship on a principle of mutual aid and autonomy. Seeking to have direct, clear and honest communication with those we are involved in. Seeking to cultivate a relationship that both allows us and others their autonomy, while at the same time cultivating deep and caring relationships that bring us together as humans and living beings. RA means refusing to see any other as greater, lesser or equal to another in our life. It means allowing people to stand genuinely on their own terms, in their own context, unique, without compartmentalization or control. It can be hard to let people do things that might distance us from them or that we don't think are

the most right thing to be doing now. Part of this practice is letting go of applying judgment to everything a person we're connected to does. It means letting go and appreciating in its own context what those we care about, care about.

Now I'm gonna address the current cop that's sitting in your head yelling at you. Because we live in a patriarchal monogamous society, people are essentially taught values of ownership and under this value of ownership people are encouraged or taught that they should have the ability to change, control and remix that which is in their ownership. Therefore meaning that because none of us are immune to propaganda there must be an intentional and ongoing practice of non-attachment, cultivating autonomy for others as well as cultivating emotional honesty and clarity within ourselves to better actualize our own autonomy given to us by those in our lives and the autonomy we have taken for ourselves.

So when we find ourselves having reactions and thoughts to various lines of connection in our life, we can ask the question directly. Is this about the relationship between me and myself, the relationship between myself and others, the relationship between others to themselves, or about the relationships between others? We might then derive from what type of relationship this is as to what our reaction ought to be in respect to the cultivation of our most deeply held values. Keeping in mind that frequently in close relationships, actions can cross many threads of relationship.

It's important to think about emotions often as patterns we've learned as reactions to various stimuli. Emotions serve to inform us as to our perceptions, our interpretations and to motivate behavior. It's perhaps even more important to remember that our emotional responses are deeply influenced by, if not directly dictated by, the societies under which we live. What we find brings us joy, fear, or arousal are all rooted in evolutionary biology and the culture under which we live. The actualization of autonomy is to look genuinely and honestly within ourselves to discern what we hold dear and then judge the various societies and cultures in which we are enmeshed by the measuring stick of our own values. Implementing that autonomy is recognizing and disowning the values that have been instilled in us through society that are actually bullshit while fortifying the values we believe in.

The actualization of Relationship Anarchism is an ongoing process that involves the centering of the value of autonomy, for ourselves and for those connected to us.

## **Networked and Unique Relationships**

Relationship Anarchism, in seeking to enable autonomy, creates vastly different expectations for relationships. Many traditional marriages lobby for a relationship that is singular and all encompassing. Marriage partner as friend, partner, lover and hiking buddy. This is both difficult to create and difficult to sustain. Only through capitalism's atomization and progressive isolation in the ability to offload various tasks onto other workers (whom we are implicitly alienated from) are such relationship styles able to function. Hired nannies, mechanics, restaurants.

Under Relationship Anarchism, rather than concentrate many functions within one or very few individuals, we can create larger networked relationships that draw on a broader function of community. Under the model of Relationship Anarchism, we are able to have multifaceted relationships, some of which serve a highly specific form. In this we see the danger of social labels, in how falling back on girlfriend/husband/fuck buddy creates a box that restricts the true



shape of the relationship. Although we can acknowledge our usage of marriage or boyfriend as not being as rigid as society says, it's all too easy to fall into the socially reinforced traps of labels as blueprint. As relationship anarchists we can renounce feeling the need for those relationships to follow a blueprint, to become all encompassing or broad. For example, having a partner you only have sex with, or a friend you only go hiking with; a buddy down the street who you talk cars with, someone you go on weekly dates with and part with every time at the bus stop. None of these relationships are taking power over one another, each being able to exist in their own autonomous and unique form. Each fitting together within our life as its own perfectly shaped puzzle piece.

Unique relationships are not always accessible under current circumstances. Rural areas, right wing culture and isolation under individualist capitalism promote estrangement from others. More and more functions become consolidated under a limited number of people, increasing strain, reducing ease. Yet through conscious awareness and changing our environment we can cultivate many relationships which serve unique functions, allowing them to change, shrink and grow without external pressure to expand, end or take on burden.

Networked specific relationships allow more complex emotional relations. We can differentiate feelings of love, respect, kinship and more. Loving someone doesn't mean I must believe or concede every point about community organizing. Respecting someone's organizing abilities doesn't mean I love them. Wanting to vigorously have sex on the floor of someone's kitchen doesn't necessitate love or all-encompassing respect (aside from basic respect we ought to have for all human beings).

Relationships which are confined to narrow parts of our lives are often devalued by society at large, not to mention cultural attitudes towards polyamory in general. There's often a belief, even in polyamorous people, that purely sexual relationships and short term encounters are less valuable or impactful than relationship forms that imitate traditional monogamous dating/marriage. It's assumed by many that highly sexual people are unwilling or unable to develop and maintain deep emotional connections. It's a puritanical devaluation of difference and buying into a false narrative peddled by conservative culture. Whether a given relationship is exclusively about sex or hiking does not create or remove the unique value it has in our lives.

We should allow relationships to take on unique and new forms. Recognizing that a multitude of engagements leads to valuable, unique relationships. These relationships often don't follow the blueprints of a Saturday morning cartoon or what sitcoms mean by boyfriend. Through intentional and mindful destruction of traditional relationship forms we can give birth to newer, more genuine and whole relationships that serve all of us better than ticky tacky little boxes that all look just the same.

## **Implications of Action**

Sometimes we want to kiss our friends. Kissing your friends culturally implies a variety of things: the kisser is a slut, there's "something" between two people kissing, it's "more than friends". Imagine a heterosexual relationship wherein one partner "kisses their friends", social media commenters would leap across the room to post a comment about inevitable cheating. Essentially buried in this idea is that physical expressions of love, intimacy or care are hard coded to be read as romantic and or sexual expressions. Attached to this is a broader cultural

assumption about a variety of behaviors being necessarily attached to various labels applied to relationships: spouses have sex, friends don't. We lack a deep language or cultural acceptance of expressing affection within a relationship that isn't sexual or romantic, for talking about a variety of relationships that don't fit neatly in a cardboard box. Physical affection is forced to be read as romantic-sexual and friendship demands a kind of space not expected of romantic sexual relationships. Yet this dynamic is oppressive both to romantic relationships that don't desire physical expression and for friendships that find value in physical expression.

If physical affection is culturally allowed it's between women and viewed by the patriarchy as not threatening to masculine hegemony (the same tired discounting of sapphic love). Conversely, physical affection between men carries stigma as implying homosexuality, weakness, being a sissy. These are constructs from a heterosexist patriarchy that serve to oppress our ability to express genuine feeling towards one another, either by discounting the affection itself or stoking fears behind the expression at all. Even outside the lens of the current cultural hegemony, the hard coding of physical affection as romantic-sexual stifles human expression into rigid categories. If we want the full expression of human connection, we must transcend the borders around physical expression or the lack thereof. Both in that the absence of physical touch implies romantic estrangement and that it's presence implies romantic sexual relations.

It's going to be awkward at first, we are products of our culture, the cop in our head is frothing at the mouth ready to interpret any touch as an expression of "fuck me" or "love me". But what is implied in a touch and what is said in a kiss? Connect these physical expressions to the emotive motivation behind them. Touching, kissing, expresses strong feelings of connection, like, love, camaraderie, not solely sexual desire. These expressions of emotional feeling are taken in our current cultural context to imply both more and less than they ought to. American culture currently doesn't allow physical expressions to exist independently, we inherently tie it to notions of commitment, larger labels that imply a host of behaviors and feelings. In doing so we rob ourselves of a variety of expressions towards our individually unique relationships.

By transcending expectations that physical affection or a lack thereof implies or negates a greater relationship dynamic we free ourselves to express our emotions more genuinely and uniquely to each particular relationship. We can have relationships that express physical intimacy without having to force them into awkward boxes. We can have relationships without physical intimacy that don't negate the romantic feeling. If we want to have dynamic, unique and complex relationships that don't force an artificial compromise to fit a predefined relationship, we must dissociate physical touch broadly from romantic and sexual dynamics. Let physical touch be understood in the specific and not as a road marker for other facets of a relationship.

## **To Embrace Romantic Anarchy**

Relationship Anarchism is the incorporation of autonomy within interpersonal relationships. RA seeks an end to domination and ownership based relationship models, embracing the values of Anarchism in both the small and large scale. A radical new take on recontextualizing the ways in which we relate to ourselves and others to live more freely and authentically. Creating multifaceted and complex relationship structures that don't have to follow traditional models of what it means to be a friend, lover or partner. To become a relationship anarchist is to cast off the shackles of a divine nuclear family and the boxes that seek to draw our relationships for us. To

become a relationship anarchist is to end the obfuscation of our desires and to reject a half joy found in unnecessary compromise. If we embrace Relationship Anarchism we can become free within ourselves and within our connections to others. We can live in anarchy.

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