Friendship as Ethical Form of Love

1. Friendship is a form of love. But in what sense is it different from the other forms of love we have spoken about? Is there something particular about it, an unmistakable characteristic? Friendship distinguishes itself from other forms of love because it chooses and treats objects according to moral criteria. *Friendship is an ethical form of love.* This definition clashes with how friendship is usually spoken about. Are friendships of privilege, favour and utility not the opposite of that morality? Certainly. Those types of friendship have nothing to do with it. Can we, then, consider them true friendships? Take, for example, Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People.*1 In reality, true friends can’t be “won.” Is someone who applies Carnegie’s rules—who doesn’t tell me the truth, smiles at me constantly, always agrees with me and flatters me at every turn—a friend? Can I consider someone who treats me with hypocrisy, mendacity and adulation for their own ends a friend? Not even in my wildest dreams. Such behaviour is totally contrary to true friendship.2 First and foremost, friendship wants the other’s freedom, but even the slightest attempt to enforce that freedom instantly causes friendship to cease to exist.

The mother, too, wants her child to be free, yet the fear of losing the child’s affections may predispose her to manipulating its will. The mother’s task is an educative one. While the child is still young she must instil values and make the necessary corrections and continue to guide. Friends, however, meet as equals. They do not need to teach each other about life. They do, of course, communicate what they believe in, what according to their judgment is just. But the friend is not a master. He neither imposes nor enforces anything.

The process of falling in love too needs the other’s freedom. And yet it strives to enslave because it needs the certainty of being loved in return. It resembles the effects of a potion (a drug). It is as if the lover would make the beloved

2 It’s incredible how many people let themselves be deceived and corrupted by Carnegie’s hypocritical proposition. But it was no different in the past. Socrates and Plato attacked the Sophists who maintained that truth is what we can make others believe. Cicero wrote about flattery, “…nothing is to be considered a greater bane of friendship than fawning, cajolery, or flattery; for give it as many names as you choose, it deserves to be branded as a vice peculiar to fickle and false-hearted men who say everything with a view to pleasure and nothing with a view to truth.” Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Old Age, On Friendship, On Divination,* W.A. Falconer (trans.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1923, 199.
drink it and would go mad not knowing whether he is loved for himself or because of the potion. Ostensibly the achievement of certainty, it is in fact total uncertainty because this feeling of being in love derives from an act of most supreme freedom while the certainty conjured by the drug is absurd. The lover would find in his arms an idiot emptied of the capacity to say no and thus also yes; an automaton who repeats “yes, yes, yes” but does not think, nonetheless all the while looking for the potion which, while seemingly giving stability to the beloved’s response, kills love. All this because he wants to be in love and at the same time escape. He wants to be in love because he experiences true happiness but wants to escape for fear of losing it.

It is unthinkable that a friend would desire a friendship potion. Friendship is an accepted and desired state. We do not want to escape from it. It would never cross our minds to make a slave of our friend and so it is nonsensical to think of a friend as subject to our will. Were it so, we should free him in any way we could. If we have coerced or deceived him we cannot speak of him as our friend. For a friend in trouble, on the other hand, we will always try be a source of clarity, something we strive to remain, even if that means he will ask us to leave him alone.

No form of love has as much respect for the liberty of the other as friendship. It emerges at moments of extreme delicacy. For example, if a friend has done something useful for us, we will be grateful. But we will avoid asking him why he did it. The friend should not provide us with explanations. It’s even better that I don’t look for them. We must not analyse his behaviour to find his motivations. The friend’s acts should always be acts of complete freedom. If I seek explanations I will find a “because,” a justification, and hence something that is to their advantage. It is possible to find the determinants of each of our actions, including the most free, after the fact. An act can always be explained once it has been completed, and then it appears like a necessity. The act is free only before its completion. We can decide whether or not to carry it out and neither knows what the other will choose. But friends will not interrogate each other. They always want to act freely and in the act of creation choose freely whenever possible.

When in love, we wrack our brains in order to decipher the other’s behaviour. We ask each other anxiously why we acted in such and such a way. This is a consequence of the fact that the beloved holds a terrific power over us. Our needs, our desires, our happiness depend on her, and should we be unhappy we will want to remove the causes of unhappiness. Love alternately

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3 For this argument see the wonderful pages in Vladimir Jankélévitch, Traité des vertus, Flammarion, Paris, 1949, 7–36.