

## 0.1 Chapter 3: relationships: Conflicts

### 0.2 Conflicts

#### 1 If You Loved Me, You Wouldnt Want to Change Me

There are when you start adding incidents up rather a lot of things about you that your partner seems keen to change. They notice how you put off ringing your mother. They want you to be more adventurous in how you dress. Three times recently they said they want you to get a grip on your finances. Theyve also hinted theyd like you to take more of an interest in the childrens homework and to help to host more dinner parties. It doesnt feel very pleasant. But, then again, theyre not alone: if you are honest with yourself, there is plenty about them that you would ideally like to change as well.



This all feels very wrong. The impulse to alter our lovers appears to run counter to the spirit of love. If we loved and were loved, surely there wouldnt be any talk of change? Isnt love about the acceptance of an entire being, in their high and low points?

The idea of wanting to change our partners sounds incongruous and disturbing because, collectively, we have been deeply influenced by a Romantic conception of love. This states that the principal marker of love is the capacity to accept another person in their totality, in all their good and bad sides and in a sense, particularly their bad sides. To love someone is, quite simply, according to Romantic philosophy, to love them **as they are** without any wish to alter them. We must embrace the whole person to be worthy of the emotion we claim to feel.

At certain moments of love, it does feel particularly poignant and moving to be loved for things that

others have condemned us for or not seen the point of. It can seem the ultimate proof of love that the trickier sides of us can arouse interest, charity and even desire. Through life, we are always conscious that there are things about us that other people might not like very much and we try to protect ourselves from scorn and criticism. What excitement then when our lovers seem to treat certain failings generously. When they find you shy at parties, they don't laugh they are sweet and take your tongue-tiedness as a sign of sincerity. They're not embarrassed by your slightly unfashionable clothes, for them, it's about honesty and the strength to ignore public opinion. When you have a hangover, they don't say it was your own fault for drinking too much; they rub your neck, bring you tea and keep the curtains closed.

From these moments, an extremely unfortunate conviction develops around love: the idea that loving someone must always mean accepting them in every area and that being loved must invariably mean being endorsed for everything one is and does. Any desire for change must, according to this Romantic ideology, arouse upset, annoyance and deep resistance. It seems proof that there can't be love, that something has gone terribly wrong that one should break up...

But there is another more workable and mature philosophy of love available, this one traceable back to the ancient Greeks. It states that love is first and foremost an admiration for the good sides, the perfections, of another human being. Love is the excitement we feel when we come face to face with something that is strong, clever, kind, honest, witty or magnanimous in another person. The Greeks took the view that love is not an obscure emotion. To love someone is not an odd chemical phenomenon indescribable in words. It just means being awed by another person for all the sort of things about them that truly are right and accomplished.



So, what do we do with weaknesses, the problems, the not-so-nice bits? The Romantic philosophy tells us to embrace, even cherish them all of them. We do this with a certain number of them: a relationship

wouldnt get off the ground if we couldnt. But at a certain point, we reach our limit. Being told we simply have to love someone for all that they are, or else think of ourselves as bad people, is asking too much. How could someone never want to change any part of us if they know us properly? Do they lack all ambition for our true potential? Do we not ourselves aspire to change and improvement? Then why blame them for wanting from us what we at heart want from ourselves?

At this point, the Greek idea of love turns to a notion to which we desperately need to rehabilitate ourselves: **education**. For the Greeks, given that we are all very imperfect, part of what it means to deepen love is to want to teach and to be taught. Two people should see a relationship as a constant opportunity to improve and be improved. When lovers teach each other uncomfortable truths, they are not giving up on love. They are trying to do something very true to love: which is to make their partners more loveable.



We should stop feeling guilty for simply wanting to change our partners, and we should never resent our partners for simply wanting to change us. Both these projects are, in theory, highly legitimate, even necessary. The desire to put ones lover right is, in fact, utterly loyal to the essential task of love to help another person to become the best version of themselves.

Unfortunately, under the sway of Romantic ideology, most of us end up being terrible teachers and equally terrible students. Thats because we dont accept that its legitimate (let alone noble) to have things we might want to teach and areas where we might need to be taught. We rebel against the very structure of a lovers education that would enable criticism to be moulded into sensible-sounding lessons and to be heard as caring attempts to rejig our troublesome personalities.



Instead, in the student role, at the first sign that the other is adopting a pedagogical tone (maybe pointing out something that we said rather too loudly at dinner, or a habit that is cropping up again at work), we tend to assume that we are being attacked and betrayed and therefore close our ears to the instruction, reacting with sarcasm and aggression to the teacher.



Correspondingly, when there is something we would like to teach, so unsure are we that we are going to be heard (we develop experience of how these things usually go) or that we have the right to speak, our lessons tend to come out in a tone of hurried annoyance. We are frightened teachers, because we recognise that we have committed ourselves to pupils who don't even want to learn and in the process, are ruining our lives as well as theirs (most pupils don't have as much power over their teachers' lives as they do in the Romantic scenario, which is why they are generally better). What might have been an opportunity for a thoughtful lesson will come out under the panicky, scared classroom conditions of the average relationship as a series of shouted, belittling insults met with by rebellion and fury by the student body. We don't use any of the techniques that we are careful to use when trying to teach a child or a colleague. Here we know to use extraordinary tact, to make ten compliments for every one negative remark, to leave ourselves plenty of time... But in love's classroom, we are the worst teachers we are ever likely to be.

Yet we should stop judging these faulty attempts at instruction so harshly. Rather than reading every lesson as an assault on our whole being, as a sign we are about to be abandoned or humiliated, we should take it for what it is: an indication, however flawed, that someone can be bothered even if they aren't yet breaking the news perfectly (our friends are less critical not because they're nicer, but because

they dont need to bother: they get to leave us behind after a few hours in a restaurant).

We should never feel ashamed of instructing or of needing instruction. The only fault is to reject the opportunity for education if it is offered however clumsily. Love should be a nurturing attempt by two people to reach their full potential never just a crucible in which to look for endorsement for all ones existing failings.