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Do the Sexes Need Each Other?

In the opening chapter we saw something of the difficulties which surround the whole business of having wants and desires in close relationships, and how they have to be handled in a relationship of love between equals; and I have suggested, perhaps too boldly, that the two sexes characteristically have different difficulties in this respect – or at least (less boldly) that what are traditionally thought of as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ roles entail different difficulties. But it may still be asked whether in fact the two sexes need each other. One might argue, for instance, that the traditional conjunction of men and women in bonded pairs (in marriage, for instance) has been largely the product of economic or social forces: that some of these forces (perhaps, roughly, the domination of men who have most or all the power and wealth) ought to be removed: that others (for instance, the practical usefulness of men as warriors or protectors or inseminators) could at least in principle be removed, given sufficient technology or a more pacific and well-ordered society: and hence that there is ultimately no reason why women should need men at all. And the same sort of argument, with variations, could be used to suggest that men do not need women.

I shall start with the question ‘Do women need men?’, rather than ‘Do men need women?’, but not just because it is (in some societies) fashionable for that particular question to be raised. That indeed might be a good reason for raising it: an increasing number of women (again, in some societies) are beginning to wonder whether it is really worth the risk of allying themselves – particularly in marriage or some kind of permanent relationship – with a sex which is, to say the least, not notable for its qualities of tenderness, sensitivity, fidelity, reliability and kindness. Why should they trust
such creatures? Their track record does not commend them. But a
deep reason is also relevant. If, as a man, I ask why I might need
a woman, I may not find it so hard to answer – even though the
answer might be disreputable, at least in part. Women, or some
women, are beautiful, desirable, kind, caring: they will bear and
raise my children, tend my home, support me in my life generally:
how should I not need one? If indeed there are such things as
‘feminine’ qualities which are for the most part found in women,
these qualities may seem more obviously desirable than those of
men. I shall return to this later on.

I must remind the reader of a point made in the Preface: that I
do not want to commit myself to any large empirical generalisations.
Maybe ‘feminine’ qualities (however we are to describe these) are
in fact found amongst most women, and maybe ‘masculine’ quali-
ties amongst most men: but maybe not. Again, it will be an open
question how far these qualities (or some of them) are just the
result of ‘social conditioning’, which can and perhaps should be
reversed, or are more basic and (as it were) non-negotiable, some-
thing we must simply accept. On the other hand, I do not want to
write too vaguely, or to be too mealy-mouthered, about this, so I
shall speak boldly of ‘men’ and ‘women’, and hope that the reader
will be thus more easily able to grasp the thrust of what I am
saying. Strictly speaking (though I shall not always speak so strictly),
one might present the question in terms not of ‘women’ but some-
thing more like ‘those partners who display what are traditionally
thought of as feminine qualities’ (and similarly for ‘men’). That is
important, because I want what I say to be applicable to any love
between equals, including (most obviously) same-sex love. So I ask
the reader to restrain any indignation he/she may feel about the
way in which I present this, both here and in future chapters.

I want to make the nature of the question as clear as I can (that
is in some ways the hardest and most important thing): so I shall
rephrase the question a little more sharply, in the form ‘What might
women want men for?’ We may helpfully add the following:

1 I ask what women might want men for, rather than what women
do in fact want men for, since I do not wish to prejudge the
question of whether they do in fact want men at all (at least in
certain ways: see below). So I am asking what features of men
are, as it were, possible candidates for desirability: whether women
actually appoint such candidates, or ought to appoint any, are
further questions.