Most writers on love and friendship regard trust as a central feature of all close relationships, indeed of human relationships in general. But it is not so clear just what ‘trust’ is supposed to mean here. I want to try to explore this in more detail.

‘Trust’ (both the noun and the verb) is a fairly general or wide-ranging term, in that we talk of trusting or placing trust in all sort of people for all sorts of purposes. Such terms appear in other languages (fides, confiance, etc.): the concept is clearly a basic one which no society could do without. Some kind of reliability seems to be at the root of it. In modern English ‘trust’ is normally confined to people (perhaps to some animals: I may trust my dog to bring home the newspaper): I do not trust the plant to grow, though I may rely on it to grow. Perhaps I can trust or distrust the ice under my feet; but I do not trust the sun to rise. Anyway this difference, if it is a difference, may at least suggest that trusting people is something rather different from trusting things: hardly surprising, since people are importantly different from things.

In some cases, if we ask ‘Do you trust him/her?’ the sense is obvious. It is given by the background, which makes clear what we are supposed to trust him/her for or about. Can the messenger be relied on to deliver the message, will the buyer actually pay up what he/she owes for the goods received, will the kennel-owner look after my dog properly? We could ask, if the background did not already make it plain, ‘Do you trust him/her to do . . .?’ He/she is trusted to fulfil certain expectations. To this two things must be added. First, there are certain general expectations on which we rely even in the absence of a specific background. We trust people (or do not trust them) not to stab us in the streets, to tell the
truth under most circumstances, to refrain from stealing our property, and so on. To be trustworthy in this general sense is to be reliable in fulfilling these general expectations. Secondly, the question of trust comes to a head, as it were, or is brought to a point, when a person overtly and specifically promises to do something or not to do it, to keep some contract. A promises to be sexually faithful to B, C promises to complete the work by a certain date, and so on.

Trust comes to a head in that way because the idea of reliability is here made overt: attention is deliberately focused on it. A says to B, ‘Can I rely on you to do X, do you promise to do it?’ and B may give some more or less formal reply, perhaps actually signing a contract. Some sort of contract, or at least of mutual expectations, is always in the background. Trust does not normally include every kind of attitude or disposition that we might want to rely on. I can trust someone to behave properly at a dinner-party, but it is odd to say that I can trust him/her to enjoy it, or to make witty conversation at it. These things are not owed to me. I can only rely on him/her to enjoy it or to be witty (that may well be in my mind when I invite him/her to it). This (rather fine) linguistic point shows the connection of trust with justice, not with just any moral or other virtue. If I hire someone as a professional wit or entertainer at my party, it is another matter: there is then some kind of contract, he/she has to earn his/her fee.

To put this another way: we may rely on people in all sorts of ways without their being bound or obliged in any form, just as we may rely on the sun rising or the earth continuing to turn. I make a promise to my father on his death-bed to look after my mother: he then trusts me to do this. But he may not thus bind me: he may just rely on me to do it. If I abandon my mother, when I meet my father in the next world he may be sad: but he cannot be resentful or complain that I have failed in my trust or not kept my word. There was no deal, or promise, or contract. He may accuse me of unkindness, or disloyalty, or other things: but not of breaking my trust. I have not undertaken to look after my mother.

As we noted earlier, it is not impossible to trust people to retain and exercise certain dispositions and attitudes, as well as to perform certain actions. I trust the kennel-owner not only to feed my dog, but to care for it in a sense which implies certain feelings—kindness, concern, and so on. I trust my friend, perhaps even my boss, not only to talk to me when I need to talk but to want to do this, to be so disposed towards me that I can rely on his/her sympathy