Addison Moss

In Cathy Mason’s piece *What’s Bad about Friendship with Bad People,* she affirms that being friends with someone who has deep moral failings is itself corrupt. (529) Indeed her claim is true, but it is fallacious as she mistakenly ascribes the wrongfulness of such relationships to friends taking each other’s opinions seriously. But the mere consideration of unethical views is not a moral fault but a virtue and a skill. The real problem is that in befriending amoral people, we by definition accept, approve of, and respect objectionable beliefs.

For some, friendship entails a mutual construction or shaping; we endow our friends’ interpretations of us not only with descriptive authority but prescriptive power so that they guide and influence our future selves. Mason rejects this as a reason being friends with morally corrupt people is a dishonorable act, (perhaps the more virtuous friend will improve the bad one’s character.) (526) She affirms that a central tenet of friendship is that the participants mutually take one another seriously; they embrace each other’s perspectives, beliefs, and overall attitudes as “prime facie valuable, choice worthy, and as things which one needs a reason to reject”. (528) The author argues for a somewhat “innocent until proven guilty” approach in the context of friends and their respective beliefs. To cursorily dismiss a friend’s viewpoint would be to shirk the responsibility of that partnership and to transgress the respect necessary in the relationship. Approaching friends’ ideas with regard and seriousness is not just consequential, but required, and a logical outcome of Mason’s conviction, therefore, becomes the inherent and problematic conflict in befriending an amoral person. She argues that, “taking such views, attitudes, and actions seriously seems itself to be morally bad; such views should not be among one’s moral options even if one ultimately rejects them”. (529) This is borne out, she suggests, if someone were to take misogynistic ideals seriously; the very willingness to even question women’s moral status, (for whatever sake), seems like a kind of contempt and prejudice itself. (529) In other words, friendship with an unethical person is by definition flawed because it demands the friend to consider nefarious views or behavior as compelling, worthwhile, or within the range of possible.

However, if one ends up rightly eschewing such an immoral belief, wouldn’t an initial, authentic consideration of it make its rejection all the more certain and powerful? If one opts not to even entertain an intuitively corrupt belief before vetoing it, that repudiation has no rational, well thought out basis, and therefore it lacks substance and worth. It is better to give thought to all views so that conclusions about those beliefs are ultimately more founded, assured, and credible. There is no moral value in rejecting something prima facie, before reflecting on or questioning it. Not only do I believe that considering objectionable views as possible is not itself a moral failing, but rather think that the cultivation of an independent moral code compels it. True ethos ought not originate in socially-held mores or even instinct, but in rational, comprehensive work. While I disagree with Mason’s reasoning, I support her claim that being friends with someone with deep moral foibles is wrong. Appealing to Kant’s definition of friendship, friends are unified through equal and mutual love and respect. Kantian respect is defined as regarding or taking another seriously as an individual, rational, capable agent. In friendships wherein one party is objectively corrupt, this account requires we respect their judgment; this is why friendships with bad people are fraught. In the service of maintaining estimation for a friend, we tacitly accept or permit their beliefs. The problem then is not with considering amoral views, but sustaining a friendship after rejecting those conceptions, as Kantian respect requires us to do.