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## Can't Buy Approval: A Response to Taylor

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A RESPONSE TO James Stacey Taylor (2017), “Semiotic Arguments and Markets in Votes: A Comment on Sparks,” *Bus Ethics J Rev* 5(6): 35–39, <http://doi.org/10.12747/bejr2017.05.06>

### ABSTRACT

James Stacey Taylor claims that my argument in “Can’t Buy Me Love” is both incomplete and doomed to fail. I grant some of Taylor’s points, but remind him that semiotic objections to the commodification of certain goods are strongest when we think not about individual market transactions, but about what it means for a society to support the market in question.

**SUPPOSE I OFFER** to pay Taylor \$20 to take a pill that will make him believe I’ve developed a devastating critique of Brennan and Jaworski’s (2015a) thesis in “Markets Without Symbolic Limits.” What, if anything, would be wrong with him accepting my offer? What, if anything, would be wrong with a market for beliefs?

*Nothing*, says Brennan, Jaworski and Taylor. *As long as no one is harmed, exploited, defrauded, corrupted, as long as no goods are mis-*

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*allocated and no rights are violated, then there's nothing wrong with Sparks' purchase of Taylor's belief or with belief markets in general.*<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the reader will feel a vague sense of unease with belief markets. Many writers have felt a (similarly vague) sense of unease with markets in sex, votes, thank-you notes, recommendations and other goods that involve expressions of love, respect, and admiration. "Can't Buy Me Love" was my attempt to clarify and justify part of this unease.

An important feature of beliefs is that they are responses to certain kinds of reasons. In normal cases you can't believe P unless you have a reason for thinking that P is true. That's why beliefs are different than suppositions, imaginings, perceptions and other cognitive states. It's also why beliefs are an especially important and valuable kind of attitude. If Taylor accepts \$20 to take the belief pill, you want to say to him, "That's not what beliefs are about! You misunderstand the value of believing if you think it's alright to induce belief for money."

There is a similar story to tell about attitudes like love, respect, and admiration. What distinguishes these attitudes and makes them valuable is that they are responsive to certain kinds of reasons. If I offered to pay Taylor \$20 to take a love, respect or admiration pill, we might feel similarly disturbed. In all these cases, you want to say to Taylor, "You don't understand the value of these attitudes if you're willing to buy or sell them."

Taylor warns us against drawing the conclusion that his preferences express attitudes incompatible with the value of, e.g., beliefs, from the fact he's willing to engage in the belief-market. Maybe Taylor *does* have reasons for thinking I've developed a devastating critique of Brennan and Jaworski, but for whatever reason he doesn't find himself believing what he ought to believe about the cogency of semiotic anti-commodification arguments. So when I offer him \$20 to take the pill, he views this as a windfall. I'm going to *pay* him to have his beliefs modified in a way that makes them true! Engaging in such a market, far from showing that Taylor fails to appreciate the dis-

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<sup>2</sup> This seems to be a consequence of the position defended by Brennan and Jaworski (2015a, 2015b). In private correspondence, however, Jaworski has expressed reservations about belief markets that don't result in true beliefs.

tinctive value of beliefs, actually shows his deep appreciation of that value.

You could imagine a similar dialectic with other attitudes. If someone is in the love, admiration or respect pill business – either as a buyer or a seller – you might suspect them of failing to appreciate the value of love, admiration or respect. But then again, maybe the market is set up in such a way that it helps people to fall in love with the people they really ought to love, to admire the people they ought to admire or to respect those they ought to respect. Engaging in such market transactions doesn't itself show that one has preferences that fail to reflect the value of these attitudes.

Taylor gives a response along these lines to demonstrate the failure of my semiotic argument against the commodification of votes. I claimed that votes should be connected to a certain kind of political approval. Taylor says that, through price discrimination, market architecture, or some similar mechanism, it's possible to respect the value of that kind of political approval even while engaging in the vote market.

I grant that one may still have the right attitude towards love, admiration, respect, political approval or beliefs even when engaging in the buying or selling of these things (or of goods that ought to be connected to them). But if we ask not about individual market transactions, but about the society that supports or legitimizes markets in these attitudes (or goods connected to them), we'll find a stronger semiotic objection. Markets introduce certain kinds of conditionality. Allowing a market for beliefs is a way of saying, "we're fine with beliefs-contingent-on-payment." Likewise, if you allow a market for votes, you're approving of votes-contingent-on-money. That's the wrong attitude towards beliefs and the wrong attitude towards votes.

I'm not the only one to find the conditionality inherent in market transactions objectionable. In *Markets Without Limits*, Brennan and Jaworski argue that anything you may do for free you may do for money. A powerful objection to this claim – due to Mark Wells – starts with the observation that it's wrong to place conditions on fulfilling your obligations. Markets, because they always involve a giving-of-this for a getting-of-that, sometimes introduce objectionable conditionality. For example, it may be permissible (because obligatory) for me to save a child drowning in a nearby pond, but it isn't

right for me to market my life saving act. Though Wells (2017) only discusses cases where it would be wrong to sell goods or services that one is otherwise obligated to supply, my claims in “Can’t Buy Me Love” have broader implications. For instance, in cases where there is room for reasonable disagreement, approving of an argument is not obligatory in the way that saving the child is. Still, your approval should respond only to certain kinds of reasons. Markets for approval and similar goods can therefore introduce a conditionality that is incompatible with the value of those attitudes. Taylor should not accept payment to approve of this argument; he should approve of it for free.

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