
Come On, Come On, Love Me for the Money: A Critique of Sparks on Brennan and Jaworski

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A COMMENTARY ON Jacob Sparks (2017), “Can’t Buy Me Love: A Reply to Brennan and Jaworski,” *J Philos Res* 42: 341–352, <https://doi.org/10.5840/jpr2017425101>

ABSTRACT

Jacob Sparks critiques our recent work on commodification by arguing that purchasing love indicates one has defective preferences. We argue A) it is possible to purchase these things without having defective preferences, B) Sparks has not shown that acting such defective preferences is morally wrong, C) that Sparks’ misunderstands the Brennan–Jaworski Thesis, and so has not produced a counterexample to it, and finally D) that when we examine the processes by which love is gifted, it is unclear whether these processes should be preferred.

IN A RECENT article, Jacob Sparks (2017) defends what we call “semiotic objections” to commodification. “Semiotic objections” to commodification hold that buying and selling certain things is wrong because of what such transactions express (Brennan and Jaworski

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2015: 1055). In previous work, Brennan and Jaworski (2015, 2016) argued that if it is morally permissible to do something for free, then there is some way to configure the market to make it permissible to buy and sell it. Call this the Brennan–Jaworski Thesis.

Sparks claims that certain goods – such as love and admiration – cannot really be bought and sold; they must arise as “gifts” to qualify as genuine instances of those things. At most, what we can “buy” are defective imitations. Sparks uses this insight to attempt to refute the Brennan–Jaworski Thesis. We argue here his objection fails.

1. What You Say by What You Buy Into

Sparks’s main argument goes roughly follows.

1. Purchased love is inferior to freely given love.
2. It’s metaphysically impossible to purchase some good X without thereby expressing a preference for X.
3. Therefore, if you attempt to purchase love, you express that you have the morally defective attitude that you prefer purchased love to real love.

Let’s then turn to how he establishes 2 and 3. Sparks (2017: 3)² uses an example where a person must choose between getting love for “free” or somehow buying love from the intended lover, describing the case as follows:

Circumstances might be such that, in order to receive gifted-love, I’d need to invest lots of time and effort building a relationship. So if I purchase the purchasable kind of ‘love,’ what I’m really expressing is my preference for purchasable ‘love’ and time and effort I can spend elsewhere over gifted-love and some money.

Pace Sparks, this case does not quite tell us whether the buyer prefers purchased to gifted love. In this case, the buyer might well prefer gifted love to purchased love, if they were the same “price,” in terms of the total cost, including time and effort, it takes to acquire them. The buyer could have the “right,” non-defective preferences—he prefers gifted love to purchased love, *ceteris paribus*. But he might all things considered prefer the less expensive purchased love to highly expensive gifted love.

² Herein, page references for Sparks (2017) refer to the pre-publication version appearing on the website of the *Journal of Philosophical Research*.

Analogously, we might *ceteris paribus* prefer real Rolexes to imitations, but given differential costs, we might prefer the cheaper imitations. In both these cases – the love case and the Rolex case – the purchaser properly recognizes that the so-called real thing is better than the imitation/defective thing, and the choice to purchase the defective thing is compatible with that recognition. Thus, the choice to purchase the defective thing does not necessarily express a wrongful or defective preference.

We can modify Sparks's example to improve his argument. Imagine this:

Archie can enter a long-term loving relationship with Betty or Veronica. Betty has fallen in love with Archie as result of their time dating. Archie also spent the same time dating Veronica, but alas, she has not fallen in love, despite the fact that she is otherwise as compatible with Archie as Betty is. But Archie could pay her \$1000 to drink a love potion, which will cause her to feel love for him.

Let's presume on Spark's behalf that purchased love is inferior than gifted love. Thus, if Archie chooses Veronica's purchased love, he expresses a defective preference.

However, even granting this, Sparks hasn't yet shown us this defective preference is morally wrong or morally defective. Defective preferences need not be morally wrong. You should prefer Pink Floyd to Dave Matthews, but it's not a moral should. So, Sparks fails to show it is morally wrong for Archie to purchase Veronica's love.

But imagine Sparks later produces such an argument. This still wouldn't refute the Brennan–Jaworski Thesis. The Brennan–Jaworski Thesis holds that if a good may be given away for free, then there is some way to configure the market where it would be permissible to buy and sell that good. But they already agree that some ways of commodification of supposedly taboo goods and services may be wrong, but others are permissible. Even if Archie's purchase of Veronica's love is morally problematic, that does not mean that all purchases of love are morally problematic.

Sparks (2017: 4, emphasis in the original) himself acknowledges this:

It is not true that *anytime* someone buys votes, sex, acknowledgements or similar goods, they are expressing the wrong attitude towards love, re-

spect, admiration, approval, etc . . . What I've shown is that, sometimes when we buy certain market goods, we are expressing the wrong attitude toward the goods we can't buy (love, admiration, etc.).

But this is not even an objection to the Brennan–Jaworski Thesis. They are committed to the view that if it were metaphysically possible to sell love, then there is some way to sell love that is not objectionable. You don't falsify that thesis by showing that there are some other ways to sell it that are objectionable.

2. What's So Great about Gifted Love?

Sparks's argument above holds that freely gifted love is superior to purchased love. Should we grant him that in general, freely gifted love is superior to purchased love? On the contrary, the actual process that gives rise to real-world love is, frankly, not one worthy of much respect.

Consider the U.S. television series *The Bachelor(ette)*. In this series, the bachelor or bachelorette (the series alternates between them) dates 25 eligible mates for six weeks, gradually eliminating them until there is one left. Each season, the bachelor/ette will break up with one of his/her 25 suitors as follows:

We've been dating for weeks, and you are clearly perfect for me in terms of shared values, long-term computability, and sexual attractiveness. But I just don't feel any sparks. I wish I were in love with you, but I'm not. I must say goodbye.

When the bachelor/ette says this, he or she is usually right. We see how well the pair complement each other. But the heart wants what it wants: usually someone who is far less compatible. Final pairings have a low long-term success rate.

Imagine that right after the bachelor/ette makes this speech that, an inventor shows up and says, "I have here a love potion. You, the bachelorette, just said that this guy should be Mr. Right, but you just don't feel sparks. Well, no worry, drink this potion, and you'll feel all the dopamine and serotonin and hormones that usually accompany the early infatuation period of 'love'. The potion will make you feel in love, just like you want to be." We'd expect some of the bachelors and bachelorettes would love to drink the potion.

If you agree that it's permissible to take the potion for *free* in the above circumstances, then we have to ask, would it somehow be

impermissible to take it for money? If the inventor offered the bachelor/ette \$10,000 to drink the love potion on national TV, is that somehow morally wrong?

It's *weird*, but we don't see it as wrong. Drinking the potion for free seems like a great idea. Getting a bonus \$10,000 seems awesome.

Sparks thinks freely given love is preferable. We're not so sure. The evolution of feelings of romantic love, and the chemical processes behind it, make us skeptical. People fall in love for all sorts of dumb reasons and with the wrong people all the time. Relationships that start on the basis of "freely given love" usually fail. In the U.S., roughly half of marriages end in divorce. The chemical processes that give rise to love don't reliably track whether a person is a good long-term or even a good short-term mate.

When lovers reflect on what gives rise to romantic love, they might look sideways at their lovers. We want to be loved for the right reasons, and not because our ape brains "tricked" us into it in order to induce us to mate. Lovers have defective preferences if they are indifferent to whether or not the lovers love them *for the right reasons*. It is far from clear that freely given love usually arises for the right reasons.

Conclusion

Sparks's objection to the Brennan–Jaworski Thesis turns out not to be an objection at all. They are committed at most to the claim that there is some permissible way to sell love, not that all ways of selling love are permissible. Sparks at most has shown that some ways of buying love are objectionable. However, it is unclear he has shown that even these cases are morally wrong, as it is unclear why lovers should prefer "freely given" love in the first place, and further, Sparks never shows that defective preferences are *wrong*, rather than merely defective.

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