

To Give, Receive, but Not Exchange: A Response to Milan Urbanik's Piece

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I agree with Milan Urbanik's claims that real, authentic love begets the reciprocity of more authentic love (Urbanik 50). However, I contend that the tension between loving and caring about being loved that Urbanik describes is contingent on a false dilemma. Rather than conflicting psychological urges that result in a painful and frustrating tension, loving and desiring love are just two concurrent and proximally connected phenomena. Here, the tension is the consequence of falsely believing that one's desire to be loved must be fulfilled by those whom we love ourselves. The proposed solution, while still an effective path towards fulfilling at least one and possibly both desires (i.e., the desire to love and the desire to be loved), is ultimately unnecessary.

This reasoning extends into the problem of unrequited love. If love really is disinterestedly promoting the interests of the beloved—that is to say, without ulterior motives—then acting in any way with the motivation of having the beloved return love betrays this definition. In Urbanik's example, a mother's love for her son means her son's interests are taken as her own. The example also establishes that the mother suffers when she is unloved by her beloved son because her desire to be loved is unfulfilled

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(Urbanik 46–47). However, claiming that the mother’s desire to be loved is especially directed to her loved ones—her son in this case—contradicts the given definition of love; her interest in being loved by whom she loves is inconsistent with her taking the beloved’s interests as her own. That is, she would have a drive to pursue her son’s interests (which, in the given scenario, does not include loving the mother) and a contradicting interest of her own (being loved by her son).

The son’s interests, as currently formulated in the example, do not include loving his mother in the way she desires love. Perhaps he does love her, but does not express it the way she wants, or perhaps he does not prioritize loving her enough. Either way, her desire to change is for her to effectively desire something that is not in the son’s interests. Urbanik’s argument asserts a certain definition of love while simultaneously allowing for this definition to be violated (i.e., by allowing for an interest that exists outside of and against the beloved’s). In other words, the argument is logically inconsistent. The problem of unrequited love, formulated in this way, creates not just tension but also contradiction. The example of the mother’s suffering, then, is contingent not only on a false dilemma but also an alteration to the original definition of love. One might attempt to sidestep this contradiction by asserting that the mother’s desire for her son to love her back does not go against his own interests. It is not that his interest is in not loving her but in that the interest to love her is simply absent. Or, one could even say that the son’s interests include making the mother feel loved instead of simply loving her. This argument might hold credence since it reframes the contradiction between the mother’s and son’s interests as the mother’s attempt to help the son better pursue his own interests.

Even if this logical inconsistency is sidestepped, Urbanik’s conclusion that the mother’s suffering is entailed by the tension between loving and caring about being loved is untenable. The suffering might arise because the mother loves her son and because he does not love her back, since the son’s absence of love for his mother creates an unrequited love. However, the mother’s suffering results from her failure to see how she might address the two concurrent phenomena—the loving and the desire to be loved (by someone who chooses, without persuasion or needing to be asked, to love her)—separately, without relying on external sources of love. This failure is a result of her mistakenly attributing her desire for love in general as a desire for love from her son in particular. Other than proximity (her son being someone close to her by virtue of her loving him), there is no special connection between the son and the mother’s desire to be loved.

Urbanik does suggest that there is, perhaps, a special connection between a mother and a son that generates a particular desire in the

mother to be loved by her son because the son is somehow tied to her identity. However, this identity connection is ultimately reduced to the son being special to the mother “because she loves him” (Urbanik 48). There is potential merit to the idea that familial bonds, such as those between a parent and child, are complicated by different, augmented conceptions of love in a way that create special connections to one’s identity. But, as long as the nature of these familial bonds and their implication for one’s identity are not expounded on, the considered criticism still stands. And even if they are established, the criticism applies for all cases of such tension (between loving and desiring love) that exist outside the boundaries of these unique, familial bonds.

Would it be satisfying and pleasurable to be loved back by those we love? Yes, of course. But to suffer otherwise is not an inevitable consequence of some failure on the part of the beloved to “accept the invitation” to requite the lover’s love. I opine that this suffering is exacerbated by a contemporary focus on the need for love being reciprocated externally when the essence of love is truly selfless. When love is treated like a commodity to be traded, a give-and-take, what manifests is not love but a veiled exchange of attention and affection. In this case, the suffering one feels when their love is unreciprocated is like the suffering caused by an unfair exchange, like being cheated out of one’s due wages. Of course, the mother in Urbanik’s example may not be consciously expecting her son to love her back. But the mother’s suffering, rather than being caused by some intrinsic tension within loving relationships, is caused by a culturally enforced commodification of love. True love expects nothing in return.

When love is understood in this truer sense, it can be directed not just towards others but also ourselves, circumventing the tension and suffering that Urbanik describes between the act of loving and the desire to be loved. Examples more akin to the true realization of love are evident in certain Buddhist traditions and, perhaps most famously, in Christianity’s account of Jesus Christ. I do not wish to deny that we have a desire to be loved, nor to denounce the benefits of being loved, particularly by our loved ones. Rather, I wish to deny the implication that unrequited love entails suffering to the extent of creating a tension that makes one wonder whether to keep loving at all; to love, truly, and the desire to be loved can coexist without limit.

Works Cited

Urbanik, Milan. "What Is the Tension, If Any, between Love and Caring about Being Loved?" *Aporia*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2019, pp. 45-52.