

Is Human Love Essentially Transactional? An Examination of Unconditional Love and Reciprocity

This paper examines whether human love inherently follows transactional logic – requiring reciprocity and mutual benefit – or if it can exist authentically as unconditional love, independent of reciprocal conditions. Through everyday analogies and philosophical exploration, the essay argues that genuine love, particularly unconditional love, does not necessitate reciprocity. Instead, its authenticity lies in the intrinsic value of love and its associated emotions. To contextualize unconditional love, the essay first contrasts it with transactional relationships, exemplified by capitalist exchanges like selling handmade items. These economic interactions clearly illustrate the human tendency toward reciprocity and mutual benefit. However, not all attachments or affections strictly follow transactional logic. Examples such as the human fascination with indifferent creatures like cats, nurturing a flowerless plant, or a swimming coach experiencing genuine happiness through students' successes illustrate love or care that persists without explicit reciprocity. These examples set the stage for deeper philosophical analysis. The paper then explores Greek Philosopher Aristotle's three categories of friendship – utility, pleasure, and goodness – to distinguish conditional relationships that inherently require mutuality. Subsequently, it examines German Philosopher Immanuel Kant's ethical framework, emphasizing good will and moral actions undertaken purely for intrinsic value rather than external rewards, which aligns closely with the concept of unconditional love. Finally, Persian Poet Rumi's perspective underscores love as fundamentally unconditional, selfless, and free from transactional

expectations, reinforcing the authenticity of unconditional love. Addressing potential objections, the essay clarifies that unconditional love does not imply tolerance of harmful or emotionally draining situations but coexists with self-respect and healthy boundaries. Ultimately, unconditional love is presented as an authentic, meaningful, and practically relevant aspect of human experience – real, sincere, and fundamentally independent of reciprocity or conditions.

Have you ever experienced the condition of loving someone who does not reciprocate your feelings? Imagine the moment of excitement and anxiety when, after considerable self-encouragement, you finally pose a question to your professor in your first week at the university. A mixture of anxiety, excitement and pride fills you at that moment. Yet, as your professor answers, you find yourself unable to fully listen, because your mind is stuck in the triumphant realization – “You did it; you asked the question!” The turbulent emotions of this predicament are similar to the moment when you are next to the person you unconditionally love. Just being next to the person you love, and engaging in casual conversations with them can trigger an internal celebration or emotional turmoil. In such cases, one’s internal dialogue might exclaim, “You did it, you are sitting next to them,” or “They are here with you,” overwhelming the present moment and inhibiting genuine engagement. Although you may not hear their favorites such as chocolate, poet, etc. But the idea of seeing the sparkle in their eyes is enough to deepen the desire to learn and be the source of that brightness. However, when they don’t love you back, does your love need to end or does it need to see the same/similar reaction to you? This paper argues that genuine love, specifically unconditional love, does not require reciprocity or similar reactions from the

beloved. Instead, love's authenticity resides in the act itself rather than in the response it receives.

To better understand unconditional love, it helps to first examine relationships explicitly based on conditions or transactions, such as those seen in capitalism. Capitalism is defined by private ownership aimed at profit, often involving transactions where value is exchanged for mutual benefit. When crocheting an amigurumi doll or baking handmade pastries for sale, several factors contribute to its price, including the time and effort invested, the cost of materials, and the craftsmanship or baking skills involved. Products from such artisan endeavors typically command higher prices due to the skill and dedication required to create them. We set our prices accordingly, not only to cover expenses but also to ensure a fair profit for our hard work. However, handmade items are crafted with significant care and love, their value in the capitalist market remains conditional. When an item previously held so much love by its creator does not sell, it loses perceived value, highlighting capitalism incapable of unconditional love. These examples illustrate relationships and interactions grounded explicitly in mutual exchange and reciprocal benefit.

Yet not all affection or attachment strictly follows this transactional logic. People adore creatures that show little to no affection toward us—cats. This fascination is even reflected in pop culture, such as in the second episode in *Love, Death & Robots*, there are three robots exploring the Earth after humans are all died. One cat is appearing, and robots don't understand the meaning of people having cats. Despite cats turning away when we try to pet them, we continue to love them. They are totally indifferent to us, but does this unconditional affection apply to insects? Typically, people react to insects with disgust,

often choosing to kill or shoo them away without hesitation. Without even expecting mutual affection, we rarely attempt to love insects. Could it mean that our love for cats is based on what we gain from them, making it conditional rather than purely selfless? Imagine a flowerless plant—the reason we think about flowerless plants instead of blooming plants is that a flower might have a mutual relationship, like you are taking care of it, and it blooms—that you have been watering for years. You continue to provide it with water, sunlight, fertilizer, your love, and perhaps your daily conversations carefully attending to its every need. Despite receiving no tangible rewards, no vibrant blossoms, no fruits or fragrant scents, you persist in caring for it. This ongoing devotion directly benefits the plant, allowing it to grow, thrive, and remain healthy. Even without visible returns, your consistent care ensures its survival and well-being. Similarly, consider being a trainer for swimmers, you teach them how to swim, and they go on to win a competition. Even though you are not the one competing, you still feel a sense of happiness because you witness their development with you just being an intermediary. It is as if you were their parent and you feel proud of them, seeing your work on them. You watered them. Now, think about someone you love finding happiness without you. Is this not a similar experience—finding fulfillment in another's happiness, even when you are not directly a part of it? These examples illustrate the many emotions that we continue to nurture in our hearts unrequitedly.

Having examined examples from everyday life, let's now explore philosophical views on relationships and affection. According to Aristotle, there are three kinds of friendship (Aristotle 1999, VIII.3, 1156a6-1156b30). The first is friendship based on utility, where both people derive some benefit from each other. The second is friendship based on pleasure, where

both people are drawn to the other's wit, good looks, or other pleasant qualities. The third is friendship based on goodness, where both people admire the other's goodness and help one another strive for goodness.

Each of these kinds has mutuality, but these categories are exceeded by unconditional love. If we try to fit previous examples to Aristotle, I would say a flowerless plant, if you care for the plant simply because it adds aesthetic value to your living space, your action is compatible with friendship based on utility. However, continuing to nurture the plant even though it never blooms may indicate a deeper, more virtuous attachment, maybe I can say friendship based on pleasure. Similarly, the swimming trainer's joy when their students succeed could initially seem utility-based since success may indirectly benefit the trainer's reputation. Yet, if the trainer genuinely prioritizes the swimmers' well-being over personal accolades, this aligns closely with Aristotle's friendship based on goodness. Still, Aristotle's concept inherently includes mutuality, differentiating it from forms of affection that persist without reciprocal expectation.

Immanuel Kant clarifies this distinction further by emphasizing actions done purely out of duty rather than for consequential benefits. According to Kant, the only unconditionally good thing is goodwill (Kant 1998, 7-15), actions done simply because they are morally the right thing to do, not for any external reward or condition. Loving someone genuinely, then, would imply loving them independently of any benefits or rewards one might receive in return. Kant would argue that true love is unconditional and based solely on recognizing the inherent worth of another person, not on what we gain from the relationship. For instance, continuing to water

a flowerless plant or feeling genuine happiness for someone else's joy – even when their happiness is completely unrelated to oneself – reflects a Kantian perspective on love. Such actions demonstrate a good will, as they are motivated purely by the intrinsic value of the act itself, rather than any external gratification or personal gain.

Rumi, who loves God without expecting heaven or hell, also emphasizes the unconditional nature of genuine love, asserting that “there is no bargaining in love” (Rumi 2004, 34-35) and that true love accepts the beloved as they are. “Love cannot be conditional,” genuine love should be unconditional, unselfish, and free from expectations. Placing conditions on love diminishes its purity and authenticity because conditional love is built upon expectations rather than love itself. Therefore, true love should be offered without expecting anything in return or seeking personal gain. Rumi embraced the idea of loving someone simply because love was his true nature. He loved people despite their flaws, mistakes, and imperfections, believing that love must remain pure, selfless, and unconditional.

Thus, unconditional love is not merely idealistic; it genuinely exists within human experience, separate from relationships defined by conditions or reciprocity. Its authenticity derives not from the rewards it may bring, but from the internal worth of the loving act itself. Although Aristotle offers valuable insights into relationships based on mutuality, the views of Kant and Rumi emphasize unconditional love as morally authentic and emotionally sincere, grounded purely in the act of love. Ultimately, unconditional love meaningfully enriches human life by demonstrating our capacity for sincerity and emotional depth, independent of what we gain in return.

Everyone can relate the pleasure of being the trainer when the student has success in the swimming competition. This joy emerges even without financial reward or explicit acknowledgment, exemplifying an unconditional aspect of love—one that values the swimmers' growth and success intrinsically rather than instrumentally. Our fondness for cats despite their indifference shows that love comes even without reciprocity. In fact, love can persist robustly even when its object provides no emotional or tangible benefit in return, emphasizing the philosophical claim that authentic love is unconditional in nature.

One might object that relationships without reciprocity are inherently unsustainable or bound to fade over time. Without mutual acknowledgment or emotional exchange, love could become exploitative, emotionally harmful, or simply fade away — an issue captured by the Turkish saying, "If it is far from your eyes, it will be far from your heart." However, recognizing unconditional love as authentic does not imply unconditional acceptance of mistreatment, emotional neglect, or harm. Rather, true unconditional love can coexist with clear boundaries and self-care. For example, one can continue to genuinely wish happiness for someone who does not reciprocate affection, while simultaneously maintaining healthy emotional boundaries and self-respect. Thus, unconditional love's authenticity lies not in endless self-sacrifice or tolerance of unhealthy situations, but in the pure recognition of the intrinsic value of another, independent from personal gain or reciprocity.

Rumi insists genuine love must accept the beloved as they are, without bargaining or conditions. This view aligns precisely with Kant's notion of moral purity and demonstrates a deeper

philosophical truth—love's highest form is free from expectations or returns.

It is possible that a different interpretation of Aristotle's philosophy, or viewing his ideas from another perspective, might significantly alter the conclusions drawn in this argument. Perhaps, under such alternative interpretations, Aristotle's framework could indeed account for aspects of unconditional love. Nevertheless, as argued here, unconditional love aligns more directly and explicitly with philosophical ideals of moral authenticity and emotional sincerity. It preserves the intrinsic value of love, emphasizing genuine connection beyond transactional or contingent relationships, thereby offering a philosophically richer understanding of human emotions.

In conclusion, unconditional love represents love in its most authentic form. Although conditional love plays an important role in our daily interactions, unconditional love uniquely reveals love's true essence—existing genuinely and sincerely, independent of reciprocity. While Aristotle highlights valuable insights regarding reciprocal relationships, the views of Kant and Rumi emphasize love as morally authentic and selfless, grounded purely in the act of loving. Unconditional love is thus real, not just an abstract ideal, and it meaningfully enriches human life by demonstrating the capacity for sincerity and emotional depth, independent of what we gain in return.

References

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