



Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. 244 pages.

For readers who approach Michael Sandel's recent book from a Catholic perspective, there is much that is worthwhile in *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, although the book is dramatically incomplete. Let's start with the positives. The book is a call to greater awareness of the dangers of the ongoing commodification of modern life. In so doing, Sandel describes in vivid detail existing markets or credible proposals to buy all sorts of things including human kidneys, human embryos, babies for adoption, admissions into prestigious schools, honorific prizes, friends, sexual services, naming rights, and so on. That such trends exist cannot be seriously doubted, as commodification is a defining feature of modern life.

To his credit, Sandel proposes a re-moralization of life that recognizes that some things or activities *cannot* be sold or bought, while others *should not* be bought and sold. Some things cannot actually be commodified because the act of selling and buying changes the nature of the thing traded: a hired friend is not a friend; a bought Nobel Prize is not really a Nobel Prize. Sandel calls this effect the corrupting or degrading effect of markets. Sandel is at his best when he reaches the core of this issue and states, "regardless of the outcome, treating people as commodities leads to degradation" (64). Sandel thus defends the dignity of the human person. This aspect of the book is very reminiscent of much in the Catholic social tradition.

Other things can be bought and sold, in the sense that the nature of the thing remains during and after the trade, yet, Sandel argues, they should not be traded. Here, Sandel relies on the modern commitment to free consent and fairness. For example, he argues that a market for human kidneys will result in many poor people selling kidneys out of necessity rather than freely. Thus, both voluntary consent and fairness will be violated. Sandel provides many other examples in vivid detail.

The argument of the book seems incomplete, as it appears to lack a coherent moral framework. The principles seem to arise from consideration of individual cases; if not, the source is not mentioned. From a Catholic point of view, the fairness principle (which "points to the injustice that can arise when people buy and sell things under conditions of inequality or dire economic necessity," p.111) is nothing other than Leo XIII's principle that agreement of the contracting parties is necessary but not sufficient for the justice of the contractual agreement, a principle stated in 1891 in the context of starvation wages being "freely" contracted to starving workers

based on Malthus and Ricardo's scientific theory of wages. Sandel appears unaware of the Catholic intellectual tradition. Without making reference to the social encyclicals, Sandel independently rediscovers the same principle of justice described in *Rerum Novarum*; this is for the good, since there can be no doubt that contracting under conditions of economic necessity is a real problem faced by real people. History testifies that people in dire necessity agree to sell even their own children and their freedom. Such arrangements are not genuinely "free" trades, but exploitation of another's need. That is why a wise society outlaws such trade and tries to mitigate the conditions that give rise to such desperation in the first place.

Regarding the corruption principle, namely that the act of pricing and selling a good or service may change its nature, the Church has always argued that certain goods and services should not be objects of trade precisely because doing so corrupts the family, civil society, or the state. Prostitution comes immediately to mind, as well as bribery or trading influence to vitiate the rule of law. Thus, a marriage market would weaken the institution of the family, and selling ambassadorships and judicial positions would corrupt the functioning of the state. Paying corporate board members to ignore their fiduciary duties compromises civil institutions and the limited self-governance of institutions, thus weakening personal participation in the graduated social order encouraged by the principle of subsidiarity. Selling highly addictive substances to consenting adults imperils individual liberty, which is an essential component of responsible civic participation and the common good. There is no doubt that people sometimes engage in these and similar activities, and that when prohibited, so-called black markets arise to meet these demands. These processes are well understood by the Church, since many of these markets existed in pagan antiquity. Indeed, the commodification of life is an aspect of the re-paganization of modern economic life. The fundamental question is whether a wise society legalizes such behavior with its associated enforcement issues, and by doing so teaches that ultimately purchasing power is more important than the rule of law, personal good, and the common good. Sandel does not discuss these larger issues.

Thus, by the end of the book one is persuaded by careful application of the case method that not everything should be commoditized, but how society should make these decisions seems arbitrary. Sandel simply does not address the issue of how society should set demarcation lines between what should or should not become a commodity. While Sandel argues coherently that markets should not corrupt civil life, he seems to offer no clear parameters on what are the demarcation lines, or on what grounds such decisions are to be made. Without such a framework or serious dis-

cussion of these problems, one wonders how such decisions will be made. Will they be left to well-meaning, progressive elite technocrats to decide what should or should not get commoditized for the good of the rest of us?

Ultimately, absent the recognition of a moral law, ethics always degenerates into libertine anarchy or the few imposing their capricious will on the many under the guise of morality, law, or science. In a world without objective moral standards, can human beings, who are susceptible to greed, avoid becoming corrupted in the ways Sandel describes? Thus, in the end, the only source of demarcation between what should and should not be bought seems to be left in the hands of a powerful political elite who themselves may be benefiting financially and politically from the lines they set. This is why the book is dramatically incomplete. Perhaps Sandel will address these issues in his next book.

Even with these weaknesses, the book is a compelling read, both because an incomplete call to re-moralize the economy is better than no call at all, and because of the vividness of the examples Sandel has chosen.

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