

Book Review by Valentin Gerlier

What Money Can't Buy

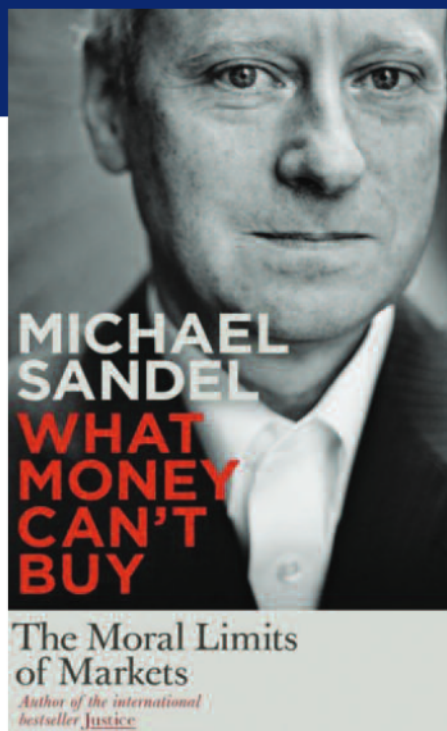
EVERYTHING HAS ITS PRICE' - a tired refrain that we too often hear. While philosophers and political thinkers may ponder the meaning of human society, economists, we are often told, practice a 'realistic' social science, founded on the age-old understanding that human beings are fundamentally self-interested creatures, for whom things only truly make sense when seen as tradable resources and financially valued goods.

Economics, it is said, is unencumbered by ethical considerations, since economic value is monetary, and hence morally neutral. 'Free markets', furthermore, appear to go hand in hand with the growth of democracy and liberal freedom, so why can't everything, ultimately, be up for sale? In recent years, however, this 'market triumphalism' has extended well beyond the sphere of what is usually viewed as tradable goods, and has come to involve areas of citizenship which, traditionally, were held to be of moral worth and civil virtue and thus financially beyond value: medicine, education, law, governmental issues and even family relations have now been invaded by ideas of 'incentives', naming rights and other market-related concepts.

In *What Money Can't Buy*, the moral and political philosopher Michael Sandel sets out a powerful argument that the value-neutrality of markets is a myth; that market-oriented thinking actually does constitute a certain kind of ethical commitment; and that the 'crowding out' of moral questions by market norms constitutes nothing less than a threat to the spirit of democracy.

Market Norms are part of our everyday life

Though steeped in a clear understanding of the history of moral philosophy, this book is, in fact, a clearly laid out, easy to follow empirical study. Its goals are to show, by means of a multitude of examples from a variety of fields, how and how much market norms are part of our everyday life. Whether exploring the history of life insurance, the widespread use of monetary incentives or the relentless sale of naming rights in the public and private sector, Sandel shows how, in each case, a tacit,



unarticulated 'market morality' actually ends up restricting the moral debate by replacing it, for in each of the cases, Sandel argues, 'What begins as a market mechanism becomes a market norm.' Paying children to get good grades, for example, may succeed in achieving better exam results, but it completely circumvents the question of the true end of education as something that might be valued in and of itself, or what might constitute mindful or meaningful study, and why such a thing should be considered as an important part of our society. And, in the same way, selling naming rights of private and public property inevitably bypasses the civic attitudes and virtues places such as a park, school or sports hall are seen to represent, uphold and stand for.

If market systems become accepted as norms, Sandel points out, they absolve citizens from their prime responsibility as members of a democracy: that of asking ethical questions, questions which refer to our ultimate ethical and spiritual values, and what he terms - after Aristotle - 'the good life'. 'We have to argue', says Sandel, 'about the meaning of social practices and the good they embody', and we have to ask ourselves 'whether commercialising the practice would degrade it'. For this reason, he notes, market mentality contains within itself an 'anti-democratic impulse': it removes the philosophical and enquiring spirit that is a foundational and essential requirement of

democratic societies. At the heart of Sandel's thesis is the simple insight that societies and social life are founded not on economic welfare or financial growth, but on a shared understanding of what this 'good life' is - and that is, what we ultimately value, morally, culturally, and also spiritually. Thus, to truly flourish, a democratic enterprise ought to have the forum for an open, thoughtful and frank debate as to the essential nature of the good life, and what virtues and practices we should promote and value above all else. What such an account of the good life would turn out to be, Sandel does not say - his task, in this book, is simply to show that market triumphalism is making such debate increasingly muted and restricted.

Arguments for and against market triumphalism

It is worth noting that, though concerned with moral questions, the book is in no way 'moralistic' in the usual sense. Sandel does not settle for an easy condemnation of commercialism. Instead, he points out how even critics of a commercial society appeal, by implications at least, 'to conceptions of the good life'. He carefully sets out the leading arguments for and against market triumphalism, pointing out how, in most cases, and despite the sense that many of us share that something distinctly ethical is being violated - the fundamental question of social life is rarely being addressed, neither by proponents nor critics.

This book, cogently, urgently and intelligently written, is fruit of the insight of a mature, clear thinker, who has his finger on the pulse of an ethical crisis that moves, unseen, behind the social thinking of our times. In his own way, Sandel brilliantly shows a modern audience that an age-old Aristotelian insight still holds true today: how injustice results, inevitably, from a human failure in thinking on the nature of Justice itself.

What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets by Michael Sandel,
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