

WEEK 2 – EXPLOITATION AND COMMODIFICATION

Definitions

Exploitation – Exploitation is the act of taking unfair advantage of others. Exploitation is generally considered to be a morally wrong action. There can be variations of what qualifies as exploitation such as using someone purely instrumentally to achieve an end or a scenario where there's a feasible alternative where the members would be better off.

The concept of exploitation can be found throughout the unit topics. For example, in it can be found in discussions regarding prostitution, organ-selling, genetic and medical research and commercial surrogacy. However, the concept of exploitation itself was most thoroughly discussed in Week 2.

Mutually advantageous exploitation (MAE) was a central issue in discussions of exploitation. In MAE, the exploited party benefits from the transaction, more so than if the transaction had not existed. However, they are still exploited as the transaction may take advantage of their vulnerabilities without which they would not have participated (e.g. poverty), or is unfair as there are feasible alternatives where parties would have been better off.

An example of MAE is when a poor person in a developing country exchanges their kidney for monetary gain. The seller benefits from the monetary gain, however is being exploited due to their circumstances of poverty. The seller is paid less than their developed-country counterpart and arguably, if they were not experiencing poverty, they would not have been as inclined to sell their kidney.

Commodification – Commodification is the process of turning a good or activity into a commodity, something that can be bought or sold, available on the market. A commodity has a use-value and an exchange-value. The use-value it is worth to the person using it, and its exchange-value is its value on the market or its price.

The concept of commodification can be found throughout the unit topics. For example, in it can be found in discussions regarding prostitution, organ-selling, gene patenting and commercial surrogacy. However, the concept of commodification mostly emerged in Week 2.

A central tension regards the extent of commodification and should the human body and its components be able to be commodified. Tensions arise between the idea that if you have complete ownership of your own body you should be able to commodify it should you choose, and the issue that commodification may undermine the status of an activity.

An example of this tension arises in the commodification of human blood. From a libertarian perspective, if it is your blood you should be able to sell it if you please. However, there are concerns that this will undermine the valuable altruistic systems of blood donation.

SA Questions

Write an exposition of the main argument of the readings; consider its potential objections; evaluate these potential objections

SEP Reading – A transaction is only exploitative if it is unfair. The wrongness of exploitation does not tell us whether we should prohibit or refrain from enabling exploitative transactions.

Exploitation is: using someone purely as a means to an end; what the exploiter gains, the exploited loses; incommensurate outcomes; violations of moral norms protecting the vulnerable; if there's a feasible alternative where parties are better off

Obvious exploitation if A gains and B is harmed, harder to explain if A gains and B benefits *and* voluntarily consents

→ Harmful exploitation vs. mutually exclusive exploitation

Is it the outcome being unfair make it exploitation? Or does the transaction being unfair make it exploitation?

More commonly with an unfair outcome, not the actual process of transacting.

MAE = hard to say something's seriously wrong with the transaction, because B would be worse off without it

Non-worseness claim (NWC): transaction between A and B can't be worse outcome if there were no interaction. Transaction is MAE, consensual, free from negative externalities

→ If NWC is correct, arguably no issue with overcharging ("price gouging") bc B is still benefiting

Can justify intervening in MAE because of: paternalism; moralistic grounds?

Walsh Reading – What should be the range of commodification?

Marxist/Socialist perspective: commercial relations are exploitative; morally corrosive; in capitalism, profits are achieved through exploitation and commodification is inclusion into this exploitation.

Modern liberal critique: special features of money and markets may make a difference to the moral status of an activity. E.g. commercialising blood banks undermines blood donation THEREFORE should limit the commercial market; Walzer – certain sphere of goods should be eliminated from market

Defence of commodification:

- State has no right to intervene (libertarian perspective)
- Increase the effectiveness of the market
- Perhaps intuitive feelings of repugnance, and not a rational examination, suggest us to limiting commodification

Mini-essay questions

Discuss relevant readings

Omit intro and conclusion, but have clear thesis statement

Develop own view, support with reasons, defend against potential objection

My view: Commodification is a difficult issue. Obviously, there are some things, such as as entire person (slavery) that should not be commodified, and there are some things that arguable cannot be commodified (romantic love). But separate to those sorts of things, we should allow the commodification of objects/aspects of the human body. If someone themselves chooses to commodify aspects of themselves/services then perhaps this is not an issue.

Issue of potential exploitation arises with this view. May be slightly utopian/unrealistic but if programs and solutions were put in place for things such as poverty, then arguably this exploitation/undue inducement would be seriously minimised/diminished.

WEEK 3 – WHAT MONEY CAN'T BUY

Definitions

No relevant definitions

SA Questions

Write an exposition of the main argument of the readings; consider its potential objections; evaluate these potential objections

Sandel's reading

Author looks at what money does not have the ability to purchase

Cases where monetary exchange can completely spoil the good being bought, and other cases where the good survives but is arguably diminished value.

Cases of diminished value (but good survives): apologies, wedding toasts, monetary gifts, honorific goods (e.g. honorary degrees)

Two kinds of arguments about what money should and shouldn't buy: Fairness objection and Corruption objection.

Fairness objection – injustice when people buy and sell things under conditions of inequality.

→ Response: does not object to buying and selling things but to unfair backgrounds / disadvantages

Also means you have to identify at what point inequality coerces consent

Corruption objection – degrading effect of exchange on certain goods/practices (idea that some things should not be bought)

→ Response: maybe this degrading effect stems more from a social stigma?

For commodification:

Economic argument: if commodifying a good doesn't alter its character (argues it doesn't), then market exchanges make both parties better off

→ This argument assumes there are no underlying inequalities

- Commercialising an activity doesn't change it (assumption that money doesn't corrupt)

- Ethical behaviour (e.g. donation) is a limited/scarce resource that is depleted with use and thus needs to be economised

Sandel focuses more on the impact on *social values* than individuals