

Brennan, Jason and Jaworski, Peter M.:

**MARKETS WITHOUT LIMITS:
MORAL VIRTUES AND
COMMERCIAL INTERESTS.**

New York: Routledge. 2016. 252 pages.

DOI: 10.5817/PC2018-2-179

There is a lot of criticism of the market itself in the world. Yet, some authors go further and propose it should be possible to sell even our votes, kidneys or children. Georgetown University scholars Jason Brennan, who specializes in politics, philosophy and economy, and Peter M. Jaworski, who specializes in applied ethics, social and political philosophy and normative ethics, wrote the provocatively titled *Markets without Limits: Moral Virtues and Commercial Interests*. But do they really support the idea of markets without any limits? In this review, I will briefly introduce the individual parts of this book and some of the authors' strongest arguments, and I will also bring attention to the parts that attracted my interest most of all.

Markets without Limits is a dispute with the so called anti-commodification theorists, and is divided into five parts totaling twenty-three separate chapters. In the first part, they discuss whether or not everything should be for sale. They examine whether there are some things money should not buy, introduce their own position in this debate, and claim that 'if you may do it for free, then you may do it for money' (p. 10).

They also specify what the commodification debate is and is not about, and then they explain that what is important is *how* to commodify things and not *what* to commodify. In the second part, Brennan and Jaworski answer one of the main objections of the anti-com-

modification theorists, i.e. whether markets signal disrespect. The book provides a very interesting debate on three semiotic objections: the commodity, the wrong signal, and the wrong currency.

In the third part, they answer the second main type of objection of the anti-commodification theorists, i.e., whether markets corrupt. They explain what a sound corruption objection is and how to make one. And then they examine the five main types of objections: selfishness, crowding out, immoral preference, low quality, and civics. There is not enough space here to introduce these in detail, but I would like to point out an interesting argument mentioned in the chapter regarding civics objection.

A civics objection is about *narrow* and *broad* conception of citizenship. In the former, being a good citizen means being engaged in political and quasi-political activities, such as voting, deliberating, running for office, serving in the military, and volunteering. But, in the latter it 'can instead mean working at a productive job, creating art, being a good parent, or pursuing knowledge'. In other words: 'Thomas Edison promoted the common good by making light bulbs' (p. 141). But why choose the broad conception of citizenship?

The authors say there might be objections like these: market activity only has a tiny, marginal impact on the common good; in order to serve this good, market activity needs to be imbedded in proper, well-functioning regulatory institutions; and agents need to behave rather well and practice some degree of social responsibility. Sometimes market activity even undermines the common good, sometimes greatly so, and it can be difficult for the market agent to determine whether she will serve the common good, undermine it, or have no effect upon it. And to have civic virtue, it's not enough that you promote the common good, but you must also have

a sufficiently strong desire to promote it, but many people are motivated only or predominantly by selfishness. These are strong objections but, according to the authors, they miss their mark, because they all 'apply to political activity just as much as they apply to activity in the market' (p. 143).

In the fourth part, Brennan and Jaworski respond to the other objections, including exploitation, harm to self and misallocation. Here their argument becomes more concrete, and they try to explain it based on three controversial cases. For me, this is the most interesting part of their book. They remind the reader that most complaints about commodification actually are not fundamentally about commodification. As they say: 'much of the time, when anti-commodification theorists intend to complain about the buying and selling of some good or service, their problem is not fundamentally with the buying and selling, but just with the goods or services, period' (p. 148). And sometimes the critic's real problem is not with the fact that goods and services are sold, but with how they are sold. I will briefly introduce two of the three examined cases.

The first of them, called 'Line up for expensive equality!', is explained on a case of whether it is right to pay someone to wait instead of you in a queue for a free outdoor performance of Shakespeare by New York City's Public Theater (p. 158). It could be considered a kind of cheating, and there are worries it would cause an undesirable composition of the audience, and thus it would not be available for everyone regardless of their ability to pay. However, Brennan and Jaworski remind us why economists favor markets over queues, and that substituting 'a queue for a market just substitutes the currency of time for the currency of money' (p. 160).

They admit that markets might crowd out the poor, but they note that queues crowd out the busy. They also recount that during our

human history the 'average (and median, and modal) person is getting richer in both time and wealth', but 'she is getting far richer in wealth than she is in time' (p. 162). Therefore, they remind us, that we 'are in some sense more equal in the amount of time we have than the amount of wealth we have, but time is in general much more scarce and precious than wealth', so we 'should be extremely wary of distributing anything via time' (p. 162). And after all, 'when a rich person pays a poor person to do something for him, they become more equal in wealth' (p. 163).

The second case is even more arguable. It is about the controversial idea of 'designer babies', where 'genes would be selected to boost the chances of a child having certain physical attributes, such as a particular eye or hair color.' For the authors, the most interesting worry is 'whether designer babies would lead to inequalities of ability', and that only the rich could afford it, which is for some people an argument why there should not be a market in it. However, Brennan and Jaworski argue that this is always the 'normal trend in technological development' (p. 170).

In terms of my concerns about social injustice, they provide a very strong argument: 'The rich buy the first units, get all of the benefits at first, but then also pay all of the upfront costs. They thereby pay for the basic infrastructure that makes it available for all. The rich pay for experimentation, innovation, and fund entrepreneurs in finding ways to market to the poor' (p. 171). And they add: 'Imagine a world like ours, but in which the overwhelming majority of people had extremely high IQs, were extremely healthy, had low risks of cancer or other diseases, lived long lives, had few behavioral problems, and were generally leading better lives. This is a world to aim for, not a world to avoid' (p. 172).

They, however, do not ignore the inequality argument, or that such technology might not

be available literally to everyone, but they say that it 'remains unclear to us why this would call for closing the market, rather than subsidizing the poor' (p. 172). Then they perform an economic exercise explaining why it is mutually beneficial for all, even if a more advanced group of individuals exists. They demonstrate this idea using a fictional alien race, the Vulcans from *Star Trek*, who would be something like the genetically improved humans, and they say that if 'we can't find the Vulcans, we can design them instead' (p. 177).

The authors expand their argument for baby buying with an example of the commodification of adoption. They say that a 'market in babies will increase the supply of babies' (p. 181). Therefore, they even assume that if, for example, college students were to receive a monetary reward carrying fetuses to term and then giving the babies up for adoption rather than having an abortion, more of them would choose to do so.

In the fifth, and the last, part of their book, they examine some of the common reasons people have such negative attitudes to markets, and almost at the end, they put all this debate into a historical perspective. They mention some examples of things that people had worried were being commodified, and which seem, from today's perspective, to have been based not on reason, but only on prejudice. They name examples, such as being paid for singing in the opera, for manual labor, for teaching, for playing sports, for charging interest, for children's insurance or for metered parking.

Markets Without Limits, in my opinion, sends its most important message almost at the end. The authors say: 'if markets in kidneys and sex disgust you, you should just get over it, the way we get over our feeling of disgust when we attend a live birth. It may be disgusting, but so what? A little reflection on what is happening, on the fact that a little baby

is about to enter the world, should fully trump how gross the whole thing is.' And they continue: 'instead of counting on a rough-and-ready heuristic grounded in our more primordial past to tell us what's right and what's wrong, we should instead rely on our considered judgments.' Because, and here comes their most passionate response, if 'there's anything to be disgusted by, it is the fact that many life-saving and life-improving markets get legally blocked for want of a little reason and a little reflection' (p. 221).

Then, they extend their moral accusation with admitting that they 'are not disgusted by markets in kidneys, nor by markets in sex, drugs, pornography, reading, or any of a thousand other markets,' but 'are, instead, disgusted by the fact that people are disgusted by these markets, and fail to overcome that disgust when presented with sufficient evidence that the good outweighs the bad, that a market would save or improve our lives, that we can preserve gift relationships within a market, that sacred things can be sold without undermining or challenging their sacred status.' Because we 'already know, to the extent that such things can be known, that a market in kidneys would save lives.' And the authors close by saying that unlike 'markets in organs, opposition to such markets is, truly, disgusting' (p. 221).

The last chapter is filled with a roadmap for how to prove them wrong. The main goal of their book was to respond to the left-communitarian scholar Michael Sandel's complaint that there is no proper anti-commodification conversation. And they express their hope that it will be a conversation, which according to them means 'leaving our guns at home.' Therefore, in the event of not reaching a 'consensus, we won't try to force the other side to comply with our point of view.' Thus, they 'assume that Sandel doesn't intend that this conversation carry over into the voting booth,' because this would mean that 'when we vote

on what can and can't be for sale, we're not having a conversation anymore', but we are 'instead just pushing around the people with the minority opinion', and we are 'using the coercive power of government to force them to submit to our point of view' (p. 226).

Finally, I would like to add that I would highly recommend their book to any reader who is ready to challenge not only her or his own opinion, but mostly her or his own disgust towards some issues, and who is also ready to challenge existing empirical evidence with his or her own normative-ethical bias. Even though it contains some level of philosophical abstraction, it is a very readable

book, and it could, in my opinion, be useful not only for scholars in political or normative philosophy, but also for legislators, their advisors, pundits and all citizens interested in the great debate on how to use or not to use the coercive power of the state to limit our economic and personal freedom. Overall, I consider Brennan's and Jaworski's publication to be one of the strongest advocates of the idea that we still can have a very human society even if (or when) we adopt the right principles of a market society.

Miroslav Návrat
Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University