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Money, markets and meaning
*An exploration of meaning-based objections
to commodification*

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Ned Lis-Clarke

February 2026

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Abstract

In contemporary capitalist economies, many goods are distributed through markets or valued primarily for the price they could obtain on a market. These kinds of goods are *commodified*.

While markets are powerful tools to allocate scarce resources, many people object to commodifying certain goods. One common class of objection in philosophical debates about the moral limits of markets can be called *meaning-based objections*. These are claims that certain goods should not be commodified because to do so would violate their meaning.

In this thesis, I first develop a taxonomy of meaning-based objections that systematises and distinguishes between a range of objections that have been advanced in the philosophical literature. I then defend this taxonomy and its component parts against criticisms that cast doubt on whether the meaning of a good can serve as a sound basis for ethical deliberations about commodification. I finally apply the meaning-based objections to a range of case studies: the sports betting industry; housing policy in Australia; music and the concept of ‘selling out’; and the public sector consulting market. By exploring these case studies, I show that an analysis that gives primacy to the meaning of goods can be illuminating in commodification debates.

I argue for a context-sensitive approach to ethical deliberations about commodification, one that is attentive to the heterogeneous character of markets and the shortcomings of other, non-market, methods of distribution and modes of valuation. I argue that the soundness of meaning-based objections cannot be decided in advance of applying them to the particular facts of different cases. In these ways, I aim to build on existing accounts that either treat markets as monolithic entities, fail to adequately consider alternative allocative methods, or seek to demonstrate the validity or invalidity of meaning-based objections without being attentive to important contextual factors.

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Introduction

A brief introduction to the moral limits of markets debate

In contemporary capitalist economies, many goods are distributed through markets or valued for the price they could obtain on a market. These kinds of goods are *commodified*.¹ While markets are powerful tools to efficiently allocate scarce resources in a manner consistent with the freedom of participants to exchange, many philosophers and laypeople alike argue that certain goods should not be treated as commodities – they should be insulated from market forces or kept outside the scope of the market altogether. Critics cite a range of reasons. For example, markets may lead to distributive injustice, exploitation, objectionable social hierarchies, corruption of character, or they may be inimical to the flourishing of persons.

Over the last forty years, a range of moral philosophers and political and legal theorists have developed substantive theories to explain why certain types of goods – such as human body parts, political goods and environmental goods – should not be traded on markets or valued in monetary terms. The moral limits of markets debate is concerned with articulating a principled distinction between the goods that can permissibly be bought and sold and those that cannot. It also seeks to understand – where markets are permissible – how they should be designed, structured and constrained to mitigate or prevent potential harms. As technological developments make possible the commodification of an increasing range of goods, and as legal and cultural changes facilitate market expansion, the scope of goods that lie beyond the technical limits of markets will decline. Understanding the moral limits of markets is thus increasingly important for ethical and practical deliberations.

¹ Across this thesis, I mainly use the term ‘good’ to describe the object of commodification. This is to avoid using the more cumbersome phrase ‘good or service’ or ‘goods and services.’

A common argument in this debate is that the commodification of certain goods is objectionable and thus ought to be prevented or restricted because it *violates the meaning of those goods*. On such a view, assigning a dollar value to a good or putting it up for sale may misvalue or devalue it given the nature of that good. This is especially true of what can be called ‘meaning-first’ accounts of the moral limits of markets, such as those offered by Michael Walzer, Elizabeth Anderson and Michael Sandel. These accounts give conceptual primacy to the norms, values and ideals expressed by and embodied within goods – or the practices within which those goods are embedded – to determine whether and how they should be commodified. Such arguments can also be found in other accounts of the moral limits of markets that do not place the meaning of goods at the centre of analysis. This includes Margaret Radin’s theory, which is focussed on how commodification can be inimical to the flourishing of persons, and Debra Satz’s theory, which is underpinned by a social democratic commitment to a society of equals.

While such arguments are common in the philosophical literature, they are subject to a range of criticisms. One might argue that the meaning of a good is too contested to give it normative force in deliberations about how the good should be valued or allocated. This is a common critique especially of Walzer – which is unsurprising given his unabashed conventionalism about the meaning of goods – though it can be applied to any argument that appeals to the meanings that attach to goods as a basis to object to commodification. One might also doubt that there is often a close connection between the meaning of a good and its method of distribution. For example, Satz has advanced this argument to critique other accounts of the moral limits of markets. On this view, commodification does not violate the meaning of a good because markets are usually instrumental mechanisms to achieve our ends; they do not directly express our evaluative attitudes towards goods. A related objection, one that has been forcefully made by Jason Brennan and Peter Jaworski against what they

call ‘semiotic objections’, draws attention to cultural variability in the meaning of money and market exchanges. On this view, the claim that commodification violates the meaning of a good is a result of contingent semiotic norms attached to money and markets that are in principle revisable and should themselves be subject to moral evaluation. A final criticism draws attention to cases where commodification might transform the meaning of a good in positive ways; for example, by liberating that good from objectionable traditional meanings or by furnishing and promoting the non-commodified aspects of a good’s value. Collectively these criticisms might reasonably lead one to doubt whether arguments that appeal to the meaning of a good provide a firm basis on which to ground philosophical deliberations about the moral limits of markets.

An overview of my central claims and contribution

This thesis comprises a theoretical section and an application section. It has two main goals to contribute to and advance the moral limits of markets debate.

The theoretical section develops several meaning-based objections to commodification – in the spirit of Anderson, Walzer and Sandel – and shows how these objections can be revised to withstand a range of criticisms. I propose a four-part taxonomy of meaning-based objections that provide a set of considerations for determining whether goods can or should be commodified. These objections are set out in Table 1 overleaf. The first objection pertains to the conceptual limits of markets. The other three objections relate to the moral limits; each of these suggest defeasible reasons for prohibiting, limiting or condemning commodification.

The theoretical section argues for a cautious and context-sensitive analysis, one that is attentive to the heterogeneous character of markets and the shortcomings of other, non-market, methods of distribution and modes of valuation. I argue that the soundness of meaning-based objections to commodification cannot be decided in advance of applying

them to the particular facts of different cases. In these ways, my account builds on accounts in the anti-commodificationist literature which err either by tending to treat markets as monolithic entities, by failing to adequately consider alternative allocative methods in their analysis, or by seeking to demonstrate the validity or invalidity of meaning-based objections without being attentive to the context of different cases.

Table 1 | A summary of meaning-based objections to commodification

1. **Conceptual Error Objection** – X cannot be commodified if it has a nature that precludes being bought and sold.
2. **Bad Attitude Objection** – Commodification of X is morally objectionable if it expresses an objectionable attitude towards X by:
 - a. cultivating objectionable attitudes among participants to exchange or third parties; or
 - b. communicating objectionable attitudes (given a culture’s contingent semiotic norms attached to money and markets) in a manner that produces harmful consequences or infringes a moral duty.
3. **Crowding Out Objection** – Commodification of X is morally objectionable if it makes unavailable non-commodified understandings of X either:
 - a. intra-personally (i.e., because of the psychology of some valuing agent); or
 - b. inter-personally (i.e., because of spillover effects of commodification for third parties).
4. **Transformation Objection** – Commodification of X is morally objectionable if it transforms X in a way that diminishes its value.

My aim in the theoretical part of the thesis is not to present an outright defence of the meaning-based objections described in Table 1, but rather to show that a range of plausible criticisms to these objections do not successfully refute them. Whether the objections are ultimately successful in grounding a moral critique of the commodification of certain goods thus depends on exploring in detail a range of case studies.

The applied section of this thesis aims to show that the meaning-based objections to commodification developed earlier can be vindicated through their application to a range of case studies that are seldom discussed in contemporary moral limits of markets debates. The

main contributions to the literature in this part of the thesis are to show that analysis that gives primacy to the meaning of a good can be used to:

- 1) develop a novel ethical critique of sports betting;
- 2) understand and develop policy solutions to Australia's housing affordability crisis;
- 3) defend the folk concept of 'selling out' as a coherent, meaningful and useful criticism that can legitimately be applied to musicians; and
- 4) demonstrate that the public sector consulting market can, contrary to popular opinion, realise, sustain and nurture the ideals and values of public sector administration.

Collectively these case studies aim to vindicate the ethics of commodification I have developed across this thesis in two ways. First, they each show that an analysis that gives primacy to the meaning of a good can be illuminating in deliberations about commodification. Second, while much of the contemporary philosophical debate on this topic is focussed on questions of whether it is ever appropriate to buy and sell certain goods (what I call 'formal commodification'), each of the case studies I consider are instead questions about the extent to which goods, practices, institutions and domains of life should be governed by the market (what I call 'substantive commodification'). In a society where the range of goods distributed through markets and understood in market terms seems to be expanding, this is where the philosophical action is.

A summary of the arguments of this thesis by chapter

The claims of this thesis unfold over four argumentative stages, which is reflected in the four parts into which it is divided. First, I draw from and build on the existing philosophical literature to develop a taxonomy of *meaning-based objections* (Chapters 1-2). Second, I raise general criticisms that apply to all the moral meaning-based objections and argue that these do not refute an account of the ethics of commodification that appeals to the meaning of

goods (Chapters 3-4). Third, I revisit each moral objection within the taxonomy, in light of further specific criticisms, to identify conditions that need to be met for a successful instance of each. I develop a framework to show how this taxonomy can be operationalised to assess contested cases of commodification (Chapters 5-8). Finally, I apply the framework to four case studies – sports betting, housing policy, music and public sector consulting – to show how it is illuminating in moral deliberations about commodification (Chapters 9-12).

Part 1. Developing a taxonomy of meaning-based objections (Chapters 1-2)

Part 1 offers a definition of commodification and develops a taxonomy of meaning-based objections. Commodification is the process by which goods are transformed into commodities that are bought and sold on markets or valued in monetary terms. Goods are *formally commodified* when they acquire an exchange value in addition to their use value. Goods are *substantively commodified* when exchange value dominates use value in how a good is produced, distributed, consumed or regarded.

Chapter 1 defines commodification and develops a taxonomy of the ethical issues that commodification raises. I distinguish six ethical dimensions: distributive justice; freedom; efficiency; character; social relations; and the meaning of goods. Each dimension includes arguments for and against commodification. Chapter 2 focuses on the final ethical dimension; that is, arguments about the meaning of goods, and in particular arguments that commodification is objectionable because it violates the meaning of goods. Such arguments can be characterised as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 | *A general schema for meaning-based objections to commodification*

<p>P1. X has a meaning that is relevant to determine how it should be valued or allocated.</p> <p>P2. Commodification violates the meaning of X.</p> <p>C1. Therefore, commodifying X is morally objectionable.</p>
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This class of argument appeals to the nature of a good – and the values that inhere in or are promoted by that good – as the basis for objection to commodification. The nature of a good could be determined by its essential characteristics or how it is understood within a community at some point in time. Such arguments can involve one or two general forms of violation which I call *Misvaluing Cases* and *Devaluing Cases*. The former involves failing to adequately express or realise the value that a good has. In such cases commodification involves a mistake in how to properly value a good. The latter involves undermining, removing or destroying the value of a good or some dimension of its value. These cases are closely related but they are conceptually distinct. Each general form of violation comprises two more specific objections. Devaluing Cases can involve the complete destruction of a good’s value, because some goods have a nature that inherently precludes being commodified. Or commodification can transform a good in a way that diminishes its value but does not destroy it. Misvaluing Cases can involve expressing an objectionable attitude towards a good that fails to accord that good (or something to which it is closely related) appropriate respect. Alternatively, misvaluation can involve making unavailable morally desirable ways of valuing a good because of the tendency for commodified understandings of goods to crowd out their non-commodified counterparts. These objections are summarised at Table 3 overleaf. I set aside the Conceptual Error Objection, focussing on the other three meaning-based objections which are about the moral limits of markets rather than their ontological limits.

Table 3 | A conceptual schema for meaning-based objections to commodification

1	Devaluation Cases	1a.	Conceptual Error Objection	Commodification is conceptually impossible because some goods have a nature that precludes being bought and sold.
	<i>(Reducing the value of a good)</i>	1b.	Transformation Objection	Commodification is morally objectionable because it transforms a good in a way that diminishes its value.

2	Misvaluation Cases <i>(Mistakenly valuing a good)</i>	2a.	Bad Attitude Objection	Commodification is morally objectionable because it expresses an objectionable attitude towards a good – either: (1) by making manifest attitudes that participants to exchange have (<i>attitude-manifesting formulation</i>), or (2) due to the conventional symbolic significance attached to buying and selling a good (<i>attitude-communicating formulation</i>).
		2b.	Crowding Out Objection	Commodification is morally objectionable because it makes unavailable morally desirable ways of valuing a good – either intra-personally or interpersonally.

Part 2. Evaluating general criticisms of meaning-based objections (Chapters 3 and 4)

Part 2 considers four *general criticisms* which, if successful, would refute all moral meaning-based objections. I show that these criticisms do not refute this class of objection but that whether a given objection is successful will depend on a close analysis of the circumstances of the case. My intention is twofold. First, I show that appeals to the meaning of goods, and the violation of this meaning through monetary valuation or market exchange, can provide a sound basis for an ethics of commodification. Second, I introduce strategies that will be useful in Part 3, when I revisit each moral meaning-based objection.

Chapter 3 introduces the general criticisms. An opponent of meaning-based objections to commodification can criticise each of the two premises or the conclusion of this class of argument. If successful, such criticisms could derail a meaning-based critique of commodification. The critic can object to P1 by arguing that the meaning of a good is too contested to give it normative force in deliberations about how it should be valued and allocated (the *Contested Meaning Criticism*). The critic can object to P2 either by arguing that there is a limited connection between the meaning of a good and the mechanism used to distribute it (the *Neutrality Criticism*) or by showing there are circumstances where commodification reflects or transforms the meaning of a good in morally desirable ways (the

Expressive Potential Criticism). Finally, the critic can accept the premises of meaning-based objections but reject the conclusion by arguing that even if commodification violates the meaning of a good, it does not follow that this is morally objectionable (the *No Moral Upshot Criticism*). Table 4 summarises the general criticisms.

Table 4 | Summary of general criticisms to meaning-based objections to commodification

Premise of objection	General criticism	Description of general criticism
P1. X has a meaning that is relevant to determine how it should be valued or allocated	Contested Meaning Criticism	The meaning of a good, or the scope of the community that determines its meaning, is too contested to give it normative force in deliberations about how the good should be valued and allocated.
P2. Commodification violates the meaning of X.	Neutrality Criticism	There is rarely a direct connection between the meaning of a good and its distribution via a market, as markets are typically instrumental mechanisms for achieving our ends.
	Expressive Potential Criticism	Commodification can reflect or transform the meaning of a good in positive ways.
C1. Therefore, commodifying X is morally objectionable.	No Moral Upshot Criticism	Even if commodifying a good violates its meaning, it does not necessarily follow that commodification is morally objectionable.

Chapter 4 evaluates the general criticisms. My aim is not to vindicate each moral meaning-based objection, but rather to show that the class of objection is not refuted by the general criticisms. I begin by arguing that both essentialists and conventionalists have the resources to rebut the Contested Meaning Criticism. The former can insist that there is a fact of the matter about the meaning and value of a good even if people disagree about it. A conventionalist can insist that rival conceptions of the meaning of a good are not incommensurable and are themselves subject to normative evaluation.

I argue that the Neutrality Criticism and the Expressive Potential Criticism do not refute meaning-based objections because the proponent of these objections is not committed to the claim that commodification always violates the meaning of a good. They only argue that *if* violation occurs *then* it is morally objectionable. But each criticism calls for a nuanced account of how commodification affects the meaning of a good, one that is not guilty of a reflexive hostility and pessimism towards money and markets. The Neutrality Criticism underscores that the anti-commodificationist needs to show, for any given case, that there is a close connection between the meaning of a good and its method of distribution or mode of valuation. The Expressive Potential Criticism requires that the proponent of meaning-based objections acknowledge circumstances where commodification positively reflects or transforms the meaning of a good. Both responses show the need for a context-sensitive approach to ethical deliberations about commodification, one which recognises that markets are not monolithic entities, and which can explain when and how commodification will have deleterious impacts on the meaning of goods, as opposed to being benign or benevolent.

In response to the No Moral Upshot Criticism, I argue that meaning-based objections are best understood as making pro tanto claims rather than all-things-considered claims about the wrongness of commodification. I also argue that different kinds of moral conclusions can be drawn from meaning-based objections to commodification depending on the circumstances. While individuals or states may indeed act morally badly by commodifying a good, there may be separate reasons to curtail commodification even if no one acts badly, for example because individuals or states have reasons or duties to preserve non-commodified understandings of goods. In other cases, commodification should be morally condemned even if it should not be prevented.

By the end of this part, I have defended the meaning-based objections against general criticisms that cast doubt on whether this class of objection can provide a sound basis for an ethical critique of commodification.

Part 3. Revisiting each meaning-based objection (Chapters 5-8)

In Part 3, I revisit each of the moral meaning-based objections in turn to identify the conditions that have to be met for a successful instance of each. This involves considering and responding to specific criticisms that can be levelled at each.

Chapter 5 considers the Bad Attitude Objection in light of two criticisms developed by Jason Brennan & Peter Jaworski. The first criticism argues that commodification does not necessarily show that participants to exchange regard a good to be only instrumentally valuable. The second criticism draws attention to the culturally contingent and variable meaning of money and market exchange to reject the claim that commodification essentially expresses disrespect towards a good. Because semiotic norms attached to money and markets can be harmful, we should revise them rather than prevent commodification because of them.

I argue that both forms of the Bad Attitude Objection can be revised to withstand these criticisms. The attitude-manifesting form should be characterised in probabilistic terms; that is, commodification is of moral concern insofar as it has a significant tendency to give rise to objectionable attitudes towards a good. The attitude-communicating form can be understood as applying within a particular social context. Such an objection can be grounded in consequentialist terms (because semiotic norms serve as guardrails for interests and values that we have reason to protect), or deontological terms (because people have a duty to treat a good in a manner that may be infringed by commodifying it).

Chapter 6 revisits the Crowding Out Objection in light of three specific criticisms. These are that: (1) the objection is underpinned by a simplistic understanding of the relationship between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods; (2) there has been little work to provide an account of how, why and when crowding out occurs; and (3) this objection does not have normative implications. I argue that the objection can be revised to withstand these criticisms. I propose a multifaceted understanding of how commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods interact. The relationship between these two understandings can be described in terms of Entailment, Corrosion, Coexistence or Complementarity. The objection raises significant concerns where Entailment or Corrosion relations obtain. I then argue that there are plausible explanatory mechanisms to account for crowding out, both in its intrapersonal and interpersonal forms. Finally, I argue that both forms of the objection can be normatively significant and provide reasons to prevent, limit or at least condemn the commodification of certain goods.

Chapter 7 considers the Transformation Objection in light of three specific criticisms. These are that: (1) the objection is underpinned by a simplistic view of the transformational effects of commodification; (2) the objection is metaphysically confused as commodification creates a new distinct type of good; and (3) that the objection does not have any moral implications. In response, I clarify the assumptions that must hold for a successful Transformation Objection. Such objections need to show that (1) a good persists when it is commodified but that it has different properties from its non-commodified form; (2) the latter is inferior to the former; (3) the two forms are, in some sense, incompatible; and (4) this transformation ought morally to be prevented, mitigated or condemned, or at least not facilitated.

Chapter 8 compiles these findings into a framework that tests whether commodification is pro tanto morally objectionable on the grounds that it violates the meaning of a good. This begins by characterising the meaning of a good; that is, the values and ideals that a good should

embody, express or realised. It then applies each of the meaning-based objections to consider whether commodification is pro tanto morally objectionable. The framework finally considers (1) whether identified violations are sensitive to the design of the market for that good; and (2) whether different allocative methods can better represent or realise its meaning. This part provides the basis for determining whether, all else equal, a good should be formally or substantively commodified, or whether it is more appropriately valued or allocated through other modes of valuation or methods of allocation.

Part 4. Applying meaning-based objections to commodification (Chapters 9-12)

At this point, I have developed a taxonomy of meaning-based objections to commodification, shown that an ethical critique of commodification that gives conceptual primacy to the meaning of goods is a viable project, and shown that each of the moral meaning-based objection can be revised to withstand specific criticisms. I now come to the applied section of the thesis. I apply the framework introduced above to four case studies.

Chapter 9 analyses sports betting as a form of the commodification of sport. I apply the Bad Attitude and Crowding Out Objections to show that traditional critiques of sports betting – which relate to problem gambling and betting-related corruption – do not exhaust what is ethically objectionable about the practice. I argue that gambling on sport is objectionable if it leads individuals to cultivate instrumental modes of regard towards sport, or if it changes the social context in which sport is enjoyed in ways that make it harder to appreciate sport for its own sake. I argue that these objections provide grounds for both moral exhortation about sports betting and state-imposed restrictions on the industry. Such restrictions can be justified to prevent third-party harms and to protect culturally valuable goods.

Chapter 10 applies the conceptual lens of commodification to Australia's housing affordability crisis. I defend an ethical appraisal of housing affordability that gives primacy to

the meaning and value of housing, against accounts that view the crisis exclusively through an economic lens. I argue that housing in Australia is substantively commodified as the exchange value of housing dominates its use values. I apply the Crowding Out Objection to argue that, from the perspective of government policy, the two conceptions of housing are incompatible. I argue that government policy should change to reprioritise the use values of housing over its exchange value and suggest some policy implications of this.

Chapter 11 considers the commodification of music by exploring what it means for a musician to “sell out” and why it matters. I argue, against many cultural critics, that it is a meaningful and useful normative criticism. In this endeavour, I apply each moral meaning-based objection. The Bad Attitude Objection shows how, within certain sub-cultures, selling out expresses an objectionable attitude towards music. The Crowding Out Objection shows how selling out can make unavailable desirable attitudes towards music. The Transformation Objection shows that when artists or aesthetic communities treat art as a means to profit this can compromise the aesthetic quality, diversity and political potential of music.

Chapter 12 provides an ethical appraisal of the market for public sector consulting by applying the Transformation Objection. I show that three different forms of this objection are plausible and normatively significant – where the market reduces the capability of the public sector, undermines democratic ideals, or leads to worse policy outcomes. Notwithstanding this, I argue that the industry can help to realise, sustain and nurture the ideals and values of an efficient, effective and accountable public sector that serves the public interest. I suggest strategies that would ensure that the public sector consulting market serves the public interest.

Part 1.

In this part of the thesis, I define commodification as both a method of allocation and a mode of valuation. I distinguish six ethical dimensions of commodification. I focus on one of these dimensions in detail: claims that commodification is morally objectionable if it violates the meaning of a good. I develop a taxonomy of meaning-based objections.

Chapter 1. Dollars and Sense

The meaning and ethical dimensions of commodification

Introduction

Commodification is a term widely used in debates about the appropriate scope of markets, especially by those concerned about their expansionist tendencies. Critiques of commodification come from a range of disciplines, including economics, cultural studies, sociology, and art criticism. Commodification has also become an object of study among moral and political philosophers interested in what goods should and should not be for sale and how such debates should be adjudicated. Critics identify many objections to commodification that highlight a range of morally salient features of markets and money. Some objections focus on commodification as a *mechanism to allocate resources*. These take concern with using markets to regulate the production, distribution and consumption of certain goods. Other objections focus on commodification as a *mode of valuation*. These focus on whether goods can appropriately be valued in monetary terms and the attitudes expressed when a good is treated as a commodity.

Notwithstanding growing use of the term, there is not a single accepted definition of commodification. This creates issues for debates about commodification. If the term is widely used by critics of markets and seldom by advocates, the term risks becoming – perhaps like neoliberalism – a vague reference point for an array of features of money and markets that people find unsavoury or insidious; one that lacks the precision required to give it conceptual primacy in debates about the moral limits of markets. Conceptual issues extend beyond definitional matters. As Brennan & Jaworski (2022) show in an influential critique of anti-commodificationists, many examples of goods that should not be commodified are really

goods that should not be owned, possessed or given away at all. Such goods should indeed not be bought and sold, but this is hardly because commodification itself is doing the moral work. Ethical critiques risk unfairly blaming money and markets for a plethora of concerns that are not strictly related to commodification.

This chapter is concerned with two questions designed to make sense of commodification and provide conceptual clarity in philosophical debates about it: (1) how should commodification be defined?; and (2) what ethical issues does commodification raise? **Section 1.1** proposes a broad definition of commodification that understands it both as an allocative method and as a mode of valuation. A good is commodified when it is exchanged for money on markets or when it is valued in monetary terms. I understand commodification as a process that admits of degrees. I use the distinction between *use value* and *exchange value* to discuss the different forms that commodification can take. Understood as an allocative method, a good is commodified to the extent that exchange value dominates use value in how a good is produced, distributed or consumed. Understood as a mode of valuation, a good is commodified to the extent that monetary valuation of a good monopolises how it is regarded. **Section 1.2** develops a taxonomy of ethical dimensions of commodification. I distinguish six dimensions. These are: (1) distributive justice; (2) social relations; (3) individual character; (4) freedom; (5) efficiency; and (6) the meaning of goods. Each dimension includes arguments for and against commodification. While this thesis focuses on the final dimension, I introduce all of them to show the diversity of the ethical terrain.

1.1 Defining commodification

The term commodification is widely used in debates about the ethical limits of markets, but it is defined in different ways that highlight a range of objectionable features of the application of market norms to different goods and activities. This section considers how the term can

best be defined to make sense of how it is used in practice and to capture its ethical import. I begin by surveying different definitions. I then present four desiderata of a definition. I finally present a definition and describe the forms that commodification can take.

1.1.1 Definitions of commodification

Notwithstanding widespread use of the term commodification, there is little consensus on precisely what it means.² While at a very general level commodification can be understood as the process (and the resulting state of affairs) by which a good, service or activity is transformed into a commodity, definitions vary in scope and emphasis. For example, Hermann (2021) observes that definitions of commodification within the social sciences work with different understandings of a commodity, including anything that is provided for exchange (Appadurai 1986); provided for exchange through a market (Healy 2006); sold through the medium of money (Castree 2003); or provided for exchange on a market underpinned by the profit-motive (Leys 2001). While these definitions are descriptive in nature, within the philosophical literature, definitions of commodification often seek to provide a more explicit normative valence. Several examples are considered below.

Acquiring an exchange value – Walsh (2013) and Hermann (2021)

Walsh (2013) defines commodification by drawing on the distinction initially made by Aristotle between *use value* and *exchange value*. A good's use value represents its utility in satisfying people's needs and desires, while exchange value represents what the good can be exchanged for (in modern terms, the price that it could sell for on a market). Walsh defines commodification as "the process of transforming a thing that has only use-value into a good with both use-value and exchange-value."

² Hermann (2021: 21) surveys different definitions of commodification available in the literature and observes that, in spite of the popularity of the term, "there is little consensus on what commodification actually means."

Hermann (2021) also employs this distinction (though he prefers the term ‘market value’ to ‘exchange value’³) but goes a step further, describing commodification as the “subjugation of use value to market value” (28). He characterises commodification as a process wherein market value comes to “dominate” use value in the form and content of what is produced (28). He distinguishes between *formal* commodification, where a good is given a market value, and *real* commodification, where market value dominates use value (29-34). He also introduces a separate category called *fictional* commodification that applies to a range of phenomena – such as conceiving of service users as consumers and introducing quantitative indicators in the provision of public services – and which does not depend on the actual exchange of goods for money.

Walsh and Hermann’s approaches are useful in conceiving of commodification as a process that happens to goods when they are incorporated into the logic and norms of markets. This helps to make sense of the complexity of commodification and to account for the variety of ways that goods can be commodified. One immediate question, however, is what is meant by *use value* in these accounts. Understood narrowly – as how a good can satisfy human needs and desires – this could imply that goods with intrinsic value (i.e., value independent of satisfying needs) could not be commodified. This is surely too narrow an understanding of use value, seeing as goods with intrinsic value are often contested in commodification debates precisely because they have intrinsic value. For this reason, *use value* should be understood broadly to include a range of ways that goods can have value.⁴ Moreover, conceiving of commodification as something that happens to a good – one that presumably

³ Hermann distinguishes between exchange value (which, following Marx, depends on the amount of abstract labour embodied in commodities) and market value (which is the monetary price of a good determined by the interplay of supply and demand). He prefers the latter because it does not depend on Marx’s labour theory of value and because it, unlike exchange value, is open to manipulation and speculation, which are examples he gives of the pernicious structural effects of commodification.

⁴ Indeed, in the applied section of this thesis, I sometimes speak of the *use values* of a good, recognising that a good can be valuable or a range of reasons not related to exchange.

existed in some previous non-commodified state – raises the question: *are there goods that are always already commodities?* The t-shirt that I’m wearing, for instance, came into the world as a commodity – it was produced to be sold. The more general category of t-shirts did not, given that clothing predates markets, but this raises the question about whether it makes sense to speak of goods that are commodified without some process of transformation.

Hermann’s account also raises further issues. While he helpfully draws on Marx to define commodification as a process whereby market value dominates use value, he never explicitly defines what this domination consists in, and thus what constitutes *real commodification*.

Moreover, while his category of *fictitious commodification* can capture atypical examples where market understandings extend to new contexts, it is too imprecise to be useful.

Described as a form of commodification “based on the introduction of quasi-markets” (38), he primarily refers to the New Public Management (NPM) approach to public administration. But by including as two examples of this form of commodification, “forcing different parts of the same organization to compete with each other” (38) and “the application of performance indicators” (38), the concept risks unnecessarily opening itself up to ridicule. Do we really want public sector organisations not to measure their performance? Is intra-organisational competition always bad? Were public sector bodies working as harmonious entities prior to NPM reforms? In these ways, Hermann’s account is instructive but faces shortcomings.

Incomplete commodification and commodification rhetoric – Margaret Radin (1996)

Radin (1996: 118) adopts a more expansive definition of commodification that includes conceptual commodification in addition to exchange of goods on markets:

My view is that literal complete commodification is characterised by (1) exchanges of things in the world; (2) for money, (3) in the social context of markets, and (4) in conjunction with four indicia of commodification in conceptualisation. These four

conceptual indicia characterise complete commodification in rhetoric. They are (i) objectification, (ii) fungibility, (iii) commensurability, and (iv) money equivalence.

Radin identifies a range of phenomena of commodification in rhetoric, including cost benefit analysis, public choice theory and conceiving of free speech as a ‘marketplace of ideas.’ She argues that market rhetoric is not a harmless metaphor or model; rather it helps create reality because “words and world are linked” (88). When we describe the world through a ‘commodification discourse’ it shapes our understanding, attitudes, actions, policies and self-understanding: “the way we conceive of things matters to who we are” (89).

In this way, Radin’s account provides the conceptual resources to consider commodification as a way of understanding goods, even if they are not actually exchanged. Given that objections to commodification are often connected to discussions about the morality of putting a price on certain goods, her broad definition is helpful. For reasons discussed below, however, I prefer to conceive of the conceptual indicia as *consequences* of treating a good as a commodity, rather than *conditions* built into the definition.

Radin also complicates the picture by introducing an account of *incomplete commodification*. A good is incompletely commodified when commodified understandings of a good or transaction co-exist with non-commodified understandings (102). This can either be due to people’s understandings of an interaction (because internally plural meanings are embodied in a transaction) or because of social policies (such as regulation). In this way, Radin conceives of commodification as a concept that admits of degrees. While incomplete commodification is a useful concept, it is arguably too broad to be useful in moral deliberations. Given that government regulation is a ubiquitous feature of contemporary markets, and given that people are capable of all sorts of evaluative attitudes towards goods at different times, it raises questions about how many goods are ever truly completely

commodified.⁵ Moreover, because Radin argues that individuals' attitudes and government regulation are two ways to ensure that goods are only incompletely commodified, the concept risks conflating two different sets of issues (individual states of mind and collective regulation) that are best kept distinct.

Attitudinal features – Elizabeth Anderson (1993)

Anderson adopts a definition of a commodity – and by extension commodification – that encompasses non-traditional cases where a good is treated as a commodity even if it is not bought and sold on a market. In place of Radin's 'conceptual indicia', however, Anderson provides a more fulsome analysis of the attitudes of market agents towards commodified goods and practices. She characterises commodities as economic goods that are defined by a mode of valuation – 'use'⁶ – which is "a lower, impersonal and exclusive mode of valuation ... to merely use something is to subordinate it to one's own ends, without regard for its intrinsic value" (144). She goes on to identify five features of norms structuring market relations that are appropriate for economic goods. They are impersonal, egoistic, exclusive, want-regarding and oriented to 'exit' rather than 'voice' (145). Anderson's definition of a commodity thus also provides a framework for understanding whether a good should be commodified; that is, whether its dimensions of value are best realised through an economic mode of valuation.

Anderson's emphasis on attitudinal features is helpful in drawing attention to how a good is regarded by a valuing agent when it is treated as a commodity. It helps to explicate concerns raised by different theorists around the pernicious attitudes that can be expressed when

⁵ Incomplete commodification is introduced in opposition to what Radin calls *universal commodification* according to which "all things desired or valued – from personal attributes to good government – are commodities" (2). I concur with Mack's (1989) argument that "universal commodification is so clearly false that it cannot be very seductive and, further, that it is more of a parody than an expression of the underlying character of the market" (205).

⁶ This should not be confused with *use value*, as described above.

something is valued in monetary terms. One concern with her account, however, is the high bar that it sets for a commodity – that is, it requires that an agent has no regard for a good’s intrinsic value. This means that many goods that are commodified (in the sense that they are bought and sold on a market) may not be economic goods on her definition. Consequently, Anderson’s account does not readily provide the conceptual resources to analyse commodified goods – such as artwork, pets, houses and holidays – where regard for a good’s intrinsic value can co-exist with an economic mode of valuation. A definition should be able to delineate between treating something as a commodity and treating it as a *mere* commodity.

1.1.2 Desiderata of a definition

A definition of commodification should be consistent with how the term is used in philosophical debates and should capture the morally salient features that participants to these debates assume the term has. Four desiderata ensure that a definition meets these conditions.

First, commodification should be understood as a process that admits of degrees. This allows a definition to be attentive to different degrees and forms of commodification. Goods that are exchanged in highly regulated markets, or in social contexts with norms that serve as a counterweight to market forces, raise different ethical questions than goods that are sold by profit maximising firms in largely unregulated markets.

Second, the definition of commodification should be grounded in market exchange but be sufficiently broad to capture atypical examples. Debates about commodification are intimately linked to debates about the morality of money and markets. A definition should therefore capture that commodification involves a particular way to allocate goods. But critics of commodification often also object to conceptual schemes, analytical tools and ways of thinking that make use of market norms and logic. A definition should capture examples where something is treated as a commodity even if it is not exchanged.

Third, the definition should include reference to the attitudes of valuing agents. Some objections to commodification refer to changes in how goods are regarded when they are commodified. Commodification should thus be understood as a mode of valuation as well as a method of allocation.

Fourth, the definition should describe how commodification transforms goods. Critics of commodification often claim that markets are not neutral mechanisms to value and allocate goods, but rather embody certain norms and values that can undermine the ideals associated with a good. Goods are transformed when they are commodified. A definition should help to make sense of what this transformation involves.

1.1.3 Commodification defined

Having surveyed different definitions of commodification and suggested desiderata of a definition, I am now in a position to provide one. The definition below characterises commodification as a process where a good is transformed into a commodity, before describing two critical points in this process. It is most similar to Hermann's definition but it includes the attitudinal features that can be found in Anderson and Radin's accounts. I elaborate on several elements of this definition below.

Table 5 | *A definition of commodification*

Commodification is the process (and the resulting state of affairs) by which a good is transformed into (or used to create) a commodity; that is something that is (a) bought and sold in the social context of a market, or (b) valued in terms of the price that it could (hypothetically or actually) obtain on a market.

Formal commodification is the point in this process (and the resulting state of affairs) when that good (or the good that it is used to create) acquires an exchange value; that is (a) when a market for that good is created, or (b) when a dollar value is ascribed to that good.

Substantive commodification is the point in this process (and the resulting state of affairs) when the exchange value of that good (or the good that it is used to create) dominates other forms of value that the good has; that is (a) when profit becomes the primary driver governing its production and distribution; or (b) when the good's exchange value is regarded as sufficient to represent all dimensions of its value.

This definition suggests two ways of characterising the process of commodification – as a method of allocation and as a mode of valuation. The former involves the actual exchange of a good on a market; the latter involves a way of valuing a good irrespective of whether it is bought and sold. They are captured by condition (a) and (b) in each definition, respectively. The former makes commodification relative to a society and primarily raises questions about whether markets should be permitted and, if so, how they should be regulated. The latter makes commodification relative to an individual and primarily raises questions about whether individuals should value goods in monetary terms.

In many cases these two ways of characterising commodification will align. For instance, the t-shirt that I am wearing was bought at the Belconnen Mall and I would be willing to part ways with it for the \$40 that it cost me. But not always. For example, using cost benefit analysis to value environmental goods or human lives to aid public policy deliberations involves valuing goods in monetary terms without exchanging them. Similarly, I might value a precious family heirloom exclusively in terms of its high monetary value, though I never actually try to sell it. Conversely, certain goods might be routinely bought and sold while usually being regarded by market participants as having high intrinsic value. These goods are

commodified in that they are exchanged on a market, but they are not valued as commodities by participants to exchange. Commodification as a method of allocation and as a mode of valuation are not co-extensive.

This definition suggests two critical points in the transformation process⁷ – what I call formal and substantive commodification. A good is formally commodified when it acquires an exchange value or an amount of money that it could sell for on a market (its ‘going rate’). A good is substantively commodified when the exchange value is the primary or sole determinant in how it is produced, distributed or valued. Understood as a method of allocation, this occurs where patterns of production and distribution are principally dictated by and responsive to market forces. Where a good is only valued in monetary terms, without actually being bought or sold, this occurs where monetary value monopolises how a good is valued. This distinction is important because philosophical debates about different goods relate to different forms of commodification – they are more fine-grained than simply where or not to commodify a good. Ethical deliberations about kidney markets, prostitution and commercial surrogacy typically are questions about formal commodification (can such goods ever permissibly be bought and sold), while discussions of housing, education and healthcare are usually questions about substantive commodification (to what extent should such goods be governed by market forces).

The definition also stipulates that commodification includes cases where a good is *used to create a commodity*, not just when it is itself transformed into a commodity. This clause captures circumstances where the good itself is not directly bought and sold but facilitates the

⁷ Importantly, by characterising commodification as a process – that is, something that happens to a good – the reader may observe that my definition excludes goods that have always been commodities. This is not a shortcoming of the definition. One can still talk about the commodification of a type of good (such as t-shirts) even if the token of that good (my particular t-shirt) was produced as a commodity, so long as the type precedes the market system. Goods with shorter histories, like iPhones, can be described as *commodities*, but they have not been *commodified* on my definition because they were always in the commodity form. One can still object to such goods being commodities.

creation of markets, often in closely related goods. The attention economy can be described as the commodification of attention, even though it is really advertisements that are bought and sold, which depend on attention for their value. Similarly with the wellness industry – it is not buying and selling wellness directly, but the range of products and services offered to promote wellness can still be characterised as the commodification of wellness. This clause becomes relevant in Chapter 9 when I discuss sports betting. On my definition, the rise of the sports betting industry can be characterised as one form of the commodification of sport because sport is used to create betting markets and other economic relationships between gambling companies and sporting institutions. It is also relevant in Chapter 12 when I characterise the public sector consulting market as a form of commodification.

1.1.4 The forms of commodification

The definition above is sufficiently capacious to accommodate a range of forms of commodification. Understood as a method of allocation, a good is commodified insofar as it is bought and sold in the social context of a market regardless of the design and structure of the market for that good. At one extreme, this is a situation where a good is: (a) produced by firms seeking to maximise profit; (b) distributed through the market mechanism based on ability and willingness to pay where the interplay of supply and demand determines a market-clearing price for the good; and (c) consumed by individuals seeking to maximise utility. This is an extreme case of substantive commodification. However, different forms of government regulation can limit the extent to which exchange value dominates other forms of value in a good's production, distribution or consumption. Price controls, access controls, quality controls and quantity controls can limit the degree to which goods are commodified. Social norms that encourage non-profit motives and promote the provision of goods outside the narrow criterion of ability to pay can limit the degree to which goods are commodified.

Understood as mode of valuation, commodification can also take many forms.⁸ Many of the beliefs we hold and the ways we conceive goods and talk about them reflect commodified understandings of goods and the world. For example, we may commodify goods in casual conversation, such as when my father returned from East Arnhem Land and started talking about the ‘good deals’ he got on the artworks he bought there. We might also have persistent beliefs and tendencies to value goods in terms of their market price, such as the person that cannot help but measure the value of their professional work in terms of their salary to the exclusion of non-monetary aspects of their work. Commodification as a mode of valuation can also be formalised through analytical methods or conceptual schemes that frame how we conceive of the world and make decisions. For instance, cost benefit analysis is a method for evaluating public policies that compares the expected costs and benefits by quantifying them in monetary terms. In cost benefit analysis, goods are commodified insofar as they are treated as things whose worth can be expressed in monetary terms.

When someone commodifies a good by valuing it in monetary terms – in any of the ways described above – there is a range of different attitudes that they may hold and express towards the good in question. This includes instrumentality, substitutability, impersonality, commensurability and objectification. I say more about these in Chapter 2. For now, it should be noted that these are attitudes that might be implicated in or caused by commodification but they do not, on my view, constitute commodification. Partly this is because people are capable of a wide range of competing or contradictory attitudes towards goods, but also because these attitudes are not exclusive to commodified ways of valuing or market

⁸ Notice that the definition I have offered involves a broader understanding of commodification as a mode of valuation than Anderson’s account of an economic good. As noted above, Anderson’s definition of a commodity sets a high bar as it assumes that the valuing agent has no regard for a good’s intrinsic value. On my account, goods that are bought and sold – but are still valued intrinsically – would be *formally* commodified but not *substantively* commodified. When something is valued in monetary terms, it is always a further question about whether one’s attitude towards that object accords with the features of an economic mode of valuation.

interactions. For example, one is perfectly capable of regarding other people as mere means or as fungible even where no money or market is involved.

Clearly it is possible to value a good in multiple ways. For instance, I can appreciate my adolescent CD collection both in terms of its aesthetic quality (*I think I had pretty good tastes as a teenager*) and for its sentimental value (*it's endearing that I liked Death Cab for Cutie so much back then*), but also want to maximise the return I can get for them at a garage sale.

Radin (1996) discusses this in the context of “internally plural meanings” embodied in a transaction or understandings of a good. Mack (1989: 203) similarly argues that “people have at least some capacity to continue to appreciate the non-monetarized aspects of their activities and relations even in a world that allows considerable monetarization.” Nevertheless, it is possible that non-monetary ways of valuing a good can be subordinated to monetary forms of value; or that money can monopolise how a good is valued by an agent. For instance, people that purchase artwork or property as an investment – rather than for aesthetic beauty or value in providing shelter – likely value those goods exclusively in monetary terms, and see them as vehicles for profit. Understood as mode of valuation, something is commodified to the extent that it is primarily or solely valued in monetary terms.

Having defined commodification and considered the forms that it can take, I am now in a position to explore the moral dimensions of commodification: the factors that will bear on a fulsome ethical appraisal of whether or how a good should be commodified.

1.2 Ethical dimensions of commodification

Philosophical debates about commodification include a wide range of arguments for and against using money and markets to value and distribute goods. In this section I present a taxonomy of ethical dimensions of commodification. I distinguish six kinds of moral concerns. While my focus in this thesis is on the final dimension, it is helpful to introduce all

the dimensions. This shows the diversity of the ethical terrain around commodification and helps to distinguish the dimension that I am principally concerned with from other kinds of objections. This taxonomy helps to introduce a central theme of this thesis. Because each dimension includes arguments for and against commodification, it suggests that moral deliberations about commodification need to be attentive to the circumstances and context of the good in question.

Before I present this taxonomy, some preliminary remarks are in order. First, some critics of commodification object to the market system as-a-whole while others take a more moderate position that markets can be permissible – or even desirable – but that their range should be restricted.⁹ The objections I consider below are specific to the latter tradition.¹⁰ Second, moral arguments about commodification should isolate the salient features of money and markets that affect the moral status of an activity. If something would be ethically impermissible to have or to give away, then presumably a market in that good would also be impermissible, but it is not the market or commodification that is doing the moral work.¹¹ Third, debates about commodification can sometimes be framed exclusively in terms of whether it is permissible for governments to permit a market. However, given the definition I have offered, there is a broad range of ethical questions, for example about what the appropriate attitudes are for individuals to have towards certain goods. Finally, deliberations about commodification often appeal to technical limits of markets rather than their moral limits. For example, an anti-commodificationist might appeal to the inability for a good to be controlled

⁹ Walsh (2013) calls these groups *abolitionists* and *moral boundaries theorists* respectively.

¹⁰ An upshot of this is that the objections raised do not amount to an all-things-considered rejection of commodification; rather they point to morally pernicious aspects of it. It is possible that commodification of a good is permissible, notwithstanding objectionable effects, if there are benefits that outweigh the harms, or if commodification is better than alternative ways of valuing and allocating the good.

¹¹ Notwithstanding this point, Andre (1995) and Brennan & Jaworski (2022) both observe that this distinction is not always observed in the literature. For instance, Walzer's (1983) list of blocked exchanges includes a range of goods for which legal rights are not possible (like divine grace) and things which should not be sold *or given away* (like civil rights). Many examples of objectionable markets or transactions cited by Sandel (2012) are also guilty of this oversight.

by legal arrangements or the inability for markets to allocate non-rival and non-excludable goods. I am primarily concerned with moral arguments rather than technical arguments.

1.2.1 Distributive justice

Understood as an allocative method, commodification involves the production and distribution of goods according to market norms through the price mechanism. This can give rise to distributive injustice where the resulting allocation is unfair. The sense in which it is unfair will depend on the good in question and the distributive criteria that should properly govern it. For example, some basic goods (like healthcare, housing and education) should be universally available to all people or allocated based on need. If such goods are exclusively bought and sold on a market, people of limited means may be unjustly excluded from accessing the good. Moreover, if market distributions leads to the neglect of needs that are unprofitable to service, then commodification can also produce distributive injustices by affecting the types of goods that get made.¹² Conversely, some burdens of social cooperation like military conscription and jury duty should be allocated equally across all citizens. If wealthy people can buy their way out of such obligations, this arguably leads to an unfair distribution of such burdens. These examples show cases where commodification is objectionable because the conditions for a fair distribution of certain goods is not consistent with allocation via markets.

On the other hand, commodification can be consistent with the demands of distributive justice because it involves allocating goods based on how much their private appropriation by one individual imposes an opportunity cost on others. In Dworkin's (2000) theory of

¹² Hermann (2021) argues that in a largely privatised pharmaceutical industry there may not be adequate incentive to undertake research and development for medicines and treatments that affect a small number of people or many people in poorer parts of the world. Commercial interests may also lead to systematic under-investment in preventative healthcare in favour of treatments for sick people because the latter is more profitable.

egalitarianism, market allocation plays a central role in ensuring a just distribution of resources given the diversity of people's preferences, projects and ambitions. For Dworkin, it represents a moral failing to insist on the special importance of one's preferences without considering what preferences this precludes. In this context, monetary valuation of goods – determined through the interplay of supply and demand – provides a morally meaningful quantification of their value, because it is sensitive to opportunity cost: “it fixes the value of any transferable resource one person has as the value others forgo by his having it” (149). For Dworkin, valuing goods in monetary terms through markets is necessary to ensure a just distribution of resources.¹³ Importantly, Dworkin is operating in the realm of ideal theory; his account assumes an equal initial distribution of resources from which a just distribution can be realised through a hypothetical auction. Significant inequalities in the real world do not live up to Dworkin's standard. Nevertheless, even in the presence of some inequality, allocating goods based on willingness to pay can be consistent with ensuring that those that value scarce goods the most are able to obtain them.

1.2.2 Social relations

The expansion of the market sphere also raises broader concerns about inequality and social hierarchies. For instance, commodification may lead to objectionable increases in inequality and enable the concentration of political and other forms of power in the hands of the wealthy. This concern is especially apparent where the commodified good creates opportunities for further material advantage – for example access to quality healthcare, housing or education. This concern underscores Walzer's (1983) account of the limits of markets which is motivated by the tendency for money to ‘intrude’ into spheres of life that in

¹³ Elsewhere he says, “[monetary] measurements make a citizen's own distribution a function of the personal preferences that fixes the true cost to the community of meeting his own preferences for goods and activities. The egalitarian distribution, which requires that the cost of satisfying one person's preferences should as far as possible be equal to the cost of satisfying another's, cannot be enforced unless those measurements are made” (Dworkin 2012: 130-1).

his view should be shielded from commercial norms. It is also central in Satz's (2010) analysis. She argues that "some markets undermine the social context in which people are able to interact on terms of equality" (140). For example, this can occur if some transacting parties have underlying vulnerabilities or when markets exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities.

On the other hand, historically one of the benefits of the market system has been to overcome objectionable social hierarchies. Markets provide avenues for exiting relationships and opportunities for empowerment that liberate people from oppressive and coercive social relationships. This argument was common among early advocates of markets who emphasised their liberatory potential in overcoming oppressive social relationships, particularly those related to feudalism. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith argues that markets liberate people from "servile dependency upon their superiors" (Smith 1976: 412) because by fostering competition and enabling choice they reduce an individual's dependence on any one person or entity.¹⁴ Just as distributive justice considerations can be deployed to argue for or against commodification, so too can concerns about objectionable social hierarchies be countenanced for or against the market system.

1.2.3 Individual character

Just as markets shape social relations, so too can they shape character in morally significant ways. This is an overarching theme of Satz's (2010) account of the moral limits of markets which stresses that markets are not neutral mechanisms to value and allocate scarce goods; rather they shape the kinds of people we become and the kinds of concerns that we have.

Arguments like this cut both ways. It is common among anti-commodificationists to argue

¹⁴ Smith (1976: 420) makes this argument in the following way: "Each tradesman or artificer derives his subsistence from the employment, not of one, but of a hundred or a thousand different customers. Though in some measure obliged to them all, therefore, he is not absolutely dependent on any one of them."

that certain markets have a tendency to make people selfish, develop immoral preferences, threaten civic engagement and crowd-out intrinsic motivation. For example, Michael Sandel and Elizabeth Anderson cite findings from behavioural economics to argue that monetary incentives and market relationships can reduce intrinsic motivation and promote selfish behaviour (Sandel 2012; Anderson 2000). G. A. Cohen argues that market system promotes greed and encourages instrumental modes of regard towards others (Cohen 2009). If commodification tends to make market participants worse people, then this provides grounds to resist the expansion of markets.

On the other hand, some theorists have argued in favour of commodification on the grounds that markets have a tendency to improve people's character. Brennan & Jaworski (2022) draw on empirical research to argue that, because markets tend to improve living standards, they tend to enhance civic virtue (187-190) and intrinsic motivation (145-147). Caplan (2001) makes a similar case for expanding the market sphere on the basis that markets tend to promote more rational beliefs and behaviour, while public choices mediated by voting in elections tend to promote irrational and biased beliefs.¹⁵ Such arguments have a long history. For instance, in Albert Hirschmann's 1977 essay *The Passions and the Interests*, he advances the 'doux commerce thesis' – an argument he attributes to Montesquieu – as an explanation for how money-making pursuits became honourable in the modern world. He posits that money-making is a "calm passion" (63) and that engaging in commerce "softens and polishes the manners of men" (cited at 61). This argument reflects a view that the barbaric excesses of human nature can be tamed by money and markets. The impact of markets on our character – whether they promote virtue or vice; corruption or integrity – is another contested dimension.

¹⁵ Caplan's argument is centred around his theory of *rational irrationality*. This describes situations where it is instrumentally rational to be epistemically irrational. He posits that rational irrationality is likely where the marginal cost of holding erroneous beliefs is low. He argues this is typical of collective decision-making procedures such as voting in an election. By contrast, because people directly bear the costs and benefits of market interactions, rational irrationality is less likely in the economic sphere.

1.2.4 Freedom and exploitation

A fourth ethical dimension of commodification relates to questions about freedom, consent and exploitation. A significant potential benefit of commodifying goods and allocating them through the market is that it supports production and distribution consistent with the free choices of participants to exchange. Markets do not compel people to buy or sell goods, but rather enable people to choose to participate in exchange that, at least in theory, is mutually advantageous. For those that place high weight on freedom of contract and private property rights, blocking market exchanges represents an unjustified infringement of individual liberty. Moreover, by providing the opportunities for profit, markets incentivise multiple producers to make and supply goods and thereby provide people with the opportunity to choose between a set of alternatives. This contrasts with other allocative methods – for instance direct government provision through queues, lotteries and rationing – which do not directly enable allocation on the basis of voluntary transactions and which must be financed by people who are not participants to exchange.

Nozick (2006) provides a powerful defence of markets along these lines through his entitlement theory of justice. This theory is underpinned by the view that the free and uncoerced transfer of holdings can only be supported through a market system which supports, in Nozick's memorable words, "capitalist acts between consenting adults" (163). In this way, markets (and by extension commodification) embody freedom. Markets might also be instruments for promoting freedom. For instance, they can enable people to develop their capacities for individual choice and may be conducive to political freedom by limiting government power and decentralising decision-making (Friedman 1982; Hayek 1944).

While the ideal of freedom provides the basis for potent arguments in favour of commodification, the converse is also an arrow in the anti-commodificationist's quiver.

Many theorists raise concerns that commodification enables exploitation of the poor and disadvantaged by the wealthy and powerful.¹⁶ The concern is that – against a backdrop of unequal resources and bargaining power – allowing people to buy and sell certain goods will enable people to take advantage of others’ vulnerability, undermine consent and lead to exchanges borne of desperation. Walzer’s (1983: 102) list of blocked exchanges includes “desperate exchanges” and “trades of last resort.” Radin (1996: 50) argues that banning certain market exchanges may provide “the best possible coercion-avoidance mechanism under conditions of uncertainty.” In Satz’s (2010) account of the moral limits of markets, *weak agency* and *vulnerability* are two parameters of ‘noxious markets’ that provide strong grounds to block certain exchanges on the basis of “what people bring to a transaction” (9).¹⁷

1.2.5 Efficiency

Another set of concerns in commodification debates relate to efficiency, which can be understood as the extent to which markets and monetary valuations are a cost-effective way to meet needs, satisfy preferences and more generally to achieve their intended outcomes.¹⁸ Markets have a range of features which make them efficient mechanisms to produce and distribute resources. For example, opportunities for profit incentivise productive activities that satisfy consumers’ preferences. Price signals provide a decentralised mechanism to coordinate the activities of buyers and sellers to achieve a market clearing price for a good, thereby reducing wastage and efficiently communicating information across complex

¹⁶ My framing of the exploitative potential of commodification here is narrow – it only applies where a person is vulnerable or if there is a significant power imbalance between participants to exchange. The Marxist tradition provides a broader account of exploitation. On this view, commodifying a good necessarily incorporates it into an exploitative system where people who produce value (workers) are not adequately compensated for their labour (Walsh 2013).

¹⁷ On Satz’s (2010) account, vulnerability arises in several cases: markets in a desperately needed good with limited supply; markets with origins in poverty and destitution; and markets whose participants have unequal needs for goods being exchanged. Weak agency occurs where people have limited information about the goods they are exchanging or are not direct participants in the exchange (98). Both parameters appeal to the capacity for consent and the potential for exploitation.

¹⁸ Efficiency has a range of technical meanings in economics – including maximising consumer and producer surplus (allocative efficiency), maximising innovation capacity (dynamic efficiency) and optimising preference satisfaction (Pareto-optimality) – but in simple terms can be understood in terms of maximising outputs for a given level of inputs.

systems. Moreover, because markets are decentralised institutions – in Smith’s terminology an ‘invisible hand’ guides agents’ action – they do not require burdensome administrative overheads to plan production and distribution. The result of these features is that markets can facilitate global cooperation across complex supply chains without centralised planning and can achieve productive ends without coercion or relying on altruism and goodwill.¹⁹

While efficiency is often a consideration in favour of commodification, the inverse can also be true. Some objections to markets appeal to the fact that they are not cost-effective mechanisms to achieve their intended objectives. This is typically either because assumptions that underpin efficiency arguments like perfect competition and information do not hold in real world cases, or because people do not act in ways that conform to the predictions of standard economic models. For example, Richard Titmuss’ famous inter-jurisdictional study of blood donation found that the UK system (where blood was only collected through donation) obtained a higher quantity and quality of blood than the US system (where some blood was partly purchased by commercial banks). He attributed this, in part, to the fact that creating a market for blood reframed the act of giving blood as a market transaction and thereby crowded out intrinsic motivation and repressed altruism (Titmuss 1971). While this argument appeals to the effects of markets on character as an explanatory mechanism, the conclusion that governments should not permit blood markets is based on the empirical finding that they are not efficient means to achieve their intended outcomes. Likewise, after the global financial crisis, arguments that markets in financial products such as collateralised debt obligations should be prohibited were grounded in claims that they are not, as their proponents claimed, efficient ways of managing financial risk (Lewis 2010). In these ways, efficiency considerations can also be deployed to argue against commodification.

¹⁹ In Smith’s (1976: 356-7) famous words, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we get our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”

1.2.6 The meaning of goods

A final ethical dimension relates to claims about how commodification reflects or changes the meaning of a good. Claims that commodification violates the meaning of a good are common in the anti-commodificationist literature. For instance, Walzer's (1983) theory of complex equality and sphere differentiation places the social meaning of goods at the centre of the analysis. He argues, "the meaning of goods ... determines their movements ... All distributions are just or unjust relative to the social meanings of the goods at stake" (8-9).²⁰ He also raises doubts about the ability for monetary valuation to adequately express a good's value: "it's not cynical to think that price and value will sometimes coincide. But often enough money fails to represent value; the translations are made but as with good poetry, something is lost in the process" (97). Similarly, Sandel's "Corruption Objection" argues that certain goods should not be commodified because "market valuation and exchange diminishes or corrupts the character of [a] good" (Sandel 2012: 104). Anderson (1993) also appeals to the meaning of goods when she contends that goods "differ in kind if they are properly valued in different ways" (10). She argues that the limits of markets can be "partly defined" by considering whether "market norms do a better job of embodying the ways we properly value a particular good than norms of other spheres" (143). In each case, it is the nature or character of a good that is relevant to determining whether – or to what extent – it should be commodified. Though, as we shall see, depending on one's broader metaphysical commitments, the meaning of a good can be understood as inhering in a good because of its essential nature, or because of conventional understandings of a good's meaning that are particular to a certain community at a particular point in time.

²⁰ The reader might notice that, for Walzer, arguments about the social meaning of goods are ultimately arguments about distributive justice, though this is not the case for all theorists. Moreover, just because there can be some overlap in the ethical dimensions of commodification that I have introduced in this section does not mean they are not conceptually independent considerations in philosophical debates about commodification.

Arguments of this kind also often appeal to the expressive character of monetary valuation and market exchange. Sandel argues, “Putting a price on the good things in life can corrupt them. That’s because markets don’t allocate goods; they also *express and promote* certain attitudes towards the goods being exchanged” (Sandel 2012: 9, italics mine). Brennan & Jaworski (2022) call this general class of objections to commodification ‘semiotic objections’ because they are based on the idea that commodification can be a form of wrongful expression; it can communicate disrespect or disregard towards intrinsically valuable goods.²¹

I will have more to say about this dimension in Chapter 2. Before I begin this endeavour, however, I should note that – just like the other ethical dimensions – arguments that appeal to the meaning of a good can also be deployed to make the case for commodification. Creating a market for a good or valuing it in monetary terms may reflect or transform the meaning of a good in positive ways, such as by enhancing a non-commodified understanding of a good or by liberating it from a traditional meaning that is itself objectionable. This type of argument has been made in various forms. For example, Walsh (2001: 9) gives the example of a “middle-aged man named Simpson” who can no longer look after his children’s pony and so advertises it in the local paper. He decided to charge for the pony on the assumption that someone that is willing to pay a reasonable price for it is more likely to look after it. In Walsh’s words, “setting a price is his way of *expressing his own regard* for the welfare of the pony” (italics in original). In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx & Engels (1967: 83-4) describe how capitalist production enabled by money can liberate people and relations from traditional meanings of goods: “all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated

²¹ Though, as I argue in Chapter 2, Brennan & Jaworski’s characterisation of semiotic objections has serious shortcomings. Moreover, their account of semiotic objections has changed over time. When they initially introduced this argument in Brennan & Jaworski (2015) they required that semiotic objections must be *independent* of non-semiotic concerns (1055). This requirement is no longer in place in the second addition of their book *Markets without Limits* (2022: 59).

before they can ossify.” As with the other dimensions, arguments that appeal to the meaning of goods are a double-edged sword in deliberations about commodification.

Conclusion

This chapter has defined commodification and argued that it raises a range of moral issues. I proposed a broad definition of commodification – understood as both an allocative method and a mode of valuation – and characterised commodification as a process that admits of degrees. I distinguished between formal commodification and substantive commodification; the former occurs when a good acquires an exchange value while the latter occurs when exchange value dominates other forms of value that a good has in how it is produced, distributed, consumed or regarded. I developed a taxonomy of ethical dimensions against which the morality of commodification can be assessed. These relate to distributive justice, social relations, individual character, freedom and exploitation, efficiency, and the meaning of goods. Each dimension includes arguments for and against commodification. This reflects a recurring theme of this thesis – that assessing the morality of commodification requires close attention to contextual factors and the specific facts of any given case.

Having provided this overview of the conceptual terrain, the next chapter focuses on the final ethical dimension. My intention is to develop a taxonomy of meaning-based objections by synthesising the existing literature. My goals are both ameliorative and exegetical. Existing accounts of the moral limits of markets that give conceptual primacy to the meaning of goods often conflate distinct claims that bear on the moral status of commodification. Likewise, critiques of anti-commodificationists risk unfairly characterising the arguments of their opponents. To assess meaning-based objections we must therefore wade further into the moral limits of market debate to further explore arguments that commodification violates the meaning of a good.

Chapter 2 Beyond the meaning of money

A taxonomy of meaning-based objections to commodification

Introduction

The previous chapter defined commodification and explored the ethical issues that it raises. I argued that moral deliberations about commodification need to consider six dimensions.

These relate to distributive justice, social relations, individual character, freedom, efficiency, and the meaning of goods. This thesis explores the last ethical dimension.

My aim in this chapter is to understand how claims that commodification violates the meaning of a good should be characterised. The basic thrust of this type of objection is that the value of a good cannot be properly appreciated, or is undermined, when it is commodified because its dimensions of value preclude or resist commodification. This chapter comprises four sections. **Section 2.1** develops a general schema for meaning-based objections. I show that these objections have one of two core features. These are that commodifying a good can either fail to properly appreciate or realise its value (*Misvaluing Cases*), or can diminish or destroy its value (*Devaluing Cases*). **Section 2.2** considers how these cases fit in with different metaphysical views about how value inheres in goods. I argue that Misvaluing Cases and Devaluing Cases are both compatible with conventionalism and essentialism. **Section 2.3** develops a four-part taxonomy of meaning-based objections. The first two objections involve devaluation: the nature of some goods precludes commodification (the *Conceptual Error Objection*); other goods are damaged by commodification because it

transforms them in a way that diminishes their value (the *Transformation Objection*). The latter two objections involve misvaluation: commodification can express an objectionable attitude towards a good (the *Bad Attitude Objection*) or make unavailable desirable ways of valuing a good (the *Crowding Out Objection*). **Section 2.4** defends this taxonomy by comparing it with the taxonomy of semiotic objections developed by Brennan & Jaworski (2015, 2022). I argue that Brennan & Jaworski do not accurately reflect the positions of their opponents, who identify a broader range of ways that commodification can violate the meaning of a good.

2.1 Meaning-based objections in the literature

Arguments that invoke the meaning of a good to object to its commodification are common in debates about the moral limits of markets. This section presents a schema of meaning-based objections. Meaning-based objections can be characterised in the following terms:

P1. X has a meaning that is relevant in determining how it should be valued or allocated.

P2. Commodification violates the meaning of X.

C1. Therefore, commodifying X is morally objectionable.

Let us explore each component in turn.

P1. The moral significance of a good's meaning.

All meaning-based objections to commodification share a common starting point – the meaning of a good – which is taken to be a relevant, or in some cases decisive, consideration in determining how it should be valued or allocated. This is especially evident in Walzer, Anderson and Sandel's accounts which can all be characterised as 'meaning-first theories.' This is because their account of the appropriate scope of markets proceeds from an analysis

of the meaning of goods – that is, the nature or character of that good and the values that are embodied in or realised by that good.

Sandel's Corruption Objection depends on the specific character of each good: "once we characterize the good at stake, it is always a further question whether, or in what respect, market valuation and exchange diminishes or corrupts the character of that good" (Sandel 2012: 104). Walzer argues that there are distinct 'spheres of justice' that should be subject to different distributive criteria, and that distributions of goods are unjust when they violate the social meaning of goods: "It is the meaning of goods that determines their movement ... All distributions are just or unjust relative to the social meanings of the goods at stake" (Walzer 1983: 8-9). For Anderson (1993), different modes of valuation are appropriate to realise the dimensions of value in different kinds of goods. Whether a good should be commodified depends, in part, on whether its dimensions of value are best realised through an economic mode of valuation (143-144).

Other accounts also appeal to the meaning of goods as the basis for objecting to their commodification, even though it is less central to their theories. Satz (2010: 107) objects to buying and selling positions in line to buy movie tickets because "the fact that everyone irrespective of income has to wait his or her own turn on the line for a movie is a convention that has come to symbolize our equality." Similarly, in Sagoff's critique of applying cost benefit analysis to environmental goods, he argues we should not value the environment in economic terms: "By imputing to an endangered species an economic value or a price much greater than it fetches in a market, we 'save the phenomena' for economic theory but do little for the environment" (2007: 135). As I discuss in Section 2.2, the meaning of a good can be understood as conventionally determined and culturally specific (such as in Satz's example of the cinema line) or deriving from a good's essential nature (as in Sagoff's analysis of environmental goods).

P2. The claim that commodification violates the meaning of a good.

Next, meaning-based objections claim that commodifying a good violates this meaning. At this stage, two general forms of violation can be distinguished. On the one hand, commodification can *misvalue* a good by failing to adequately express or realise the value that that good has. Let us call these **Misvaluing Cases**. In such cases, commodification represents a mistake in how to properly value a good. It is a ‘mistake’ because the meaning of a good provides the standard against which a good is properly valued. Consider Sagoff’s analysis of the natural environment. When we value environmental goods in monetary terms – through the use of tools like maximum willingness to pay – we fail to express the dimensions of value that a good has. The environment is intrinsically valuable whether or not our tools for public policy decision making recognise this fact. It is also evident in Anderson’s test for deciding whether or not a good should be commodified: are its dimensions of value appropriately expressed and realised by the market? If not, we are applying the market to goods to which it is inherently inhospitable. Misvaluing Cases can also occur where a monetary price or market exchange fails to accord a good appropriate respect. For example, in discussing adoption markets, Radin (1996: 139) argues that “conceiving of any child in market rhetoric wrongs personhood.” Sandel (2012: 146) objects to information markets that enable people to bet on events like terrorist attacks because of “the dehumanizing attitudes such wagers express.”

Commodification can also *devalue* a good by undermining, corroding, removing or destroying its value. Let us call these **Devaluing Cases**. Arguments of this kind focus on how the character or quality of a good can be diminished when it is commodified. On this view, commodification is not some passive process that fails to conceive of the world as it really is, one that makes us blind to what is truly valuable. Rather, it changes the world by

transforming goods into commodities in a manner that diminishes or destroys dimensions of their value. Again, the *meaning* of the good is relevant because it provides the standard for how it should be valued, such that commodification can be properly said to *devalue* the good. For example, Sandel objects to honorary degrees and college admissions that are exchanged for money because this undermines the values of higher education: merit, honour, integrity and academic achievement. These practices, he warns, undermine institutional integrity and the value of university education: “allowing fund-raising needs to predominate runs the risk of distorting these ends and corrupting the norms that give universities their reason for being” (110). Or consider Anderson’s example of dividing up the commons. A shared space is converted into private allotments and, in so doing, the land ceases to be a site for civic engagement, community connections and political action. Commodification of these goods (university degrees or public land) changes the social and institutional practices associated with them and undermines their value.

C1. The inference that commodification is morally objectionable.

From these premises, meaning-based objections conclude that commodification is morally objectionable. In what sense? On the one hand, a meaning-based objection could be framed as an evaluative conclusion – an argument that it is *all-things-considered wrong* to commodify a good. On the other hand, a meaning-based objection could frame commodification as a *pro tanto wrong* – that is, as a morally bad thing which might yet still be outweighed by other considerations.²² As I show in later chapters, there are also cases where commodification ought morally to be prevented or restricted even where no individual

²² The latter framing of is especially relevant in Radin’s discussion of the ‘double bind’ – a kind of Catch-22 in which commodifying a good is bad (because it undermines personhood and the conditions for flourishing) but not commodifying a good is also bad (because it takes away a potential source of income for people with limited economic opportunities and leads to black markets).

acts morally badly or wrongly because governments have reasons, interests or duties to curtail certain practices in the interests of preserving certain goods.

In addition, there is an important question about the upshot of such objections: *who do they make moral demands of?* Again, this depends. They can either be an argument that the state should not permit a market in some good (or that it should intervene in the market), or that an individual should not buy or sell a good (irrespective of whether a market exists). Anderson's arguments show both conclusions. Her objections to dividing up the commons and commercial surrogacy make demands on the state.²³ Her arguments against commodification in close personal relationships – such as reconceiving marriage as a contract between business partners – are claims that individuals fail to realise the ideals of personal relationships if they adopt a commodified conception of them.

Having sketched a general schema for meaning-based objections, I am almost in a position to develop a taxonomy of these arguments. Before I do this, however, I consider how these arguments depend on broader metaphysical commitments. There are, after all, different views about how to ground claims that goods have a certain meaning or value. If I can show that misvaluation and devaluation cases are metaphysically robust, this helps to show that they are not hostage to, or contingent on, controversial metaphysical assumptions.

2.2 The metaphysical robustness of meaning-based objections

How one seeks to ground meaning-based objections depends on one's metaphysical views about how value inheres in goods, and thus what grounds the meaning of goods. Two general views can be distinguished. According to *conventionalism*, the value of a good is determined by social conventions and varies across time and space. According to *essentialism*, the value

²³ This is reflected in her test for constraining markets, which argues that the state should remove goods from control by markets norms if they “undermine important ideals ... or important interests legitimately protected by the state” (Anderson 1993: 143-144).

of a good is derived from its nature or essence. In this section, I show that both views are compatible with Misvaluing Cases and Devaluing Cases. My intention is not to take sides – it is plausible that each could be true for different goods – but to show that meaning-based objections apply on both views.

On a conventionalist account, the value of a good is based on the understandings of a particular community at a specific point in time. Goods have a certain value because the community takes them to have this value. If the community stops valuing the good in this way, then the good ceases to have this value. In other communities that value the good differently, it has a different value. Walzer's theory of complex equality and sphere differentiation is explicitly conventionalist. He states, "goods have different meanings in different societies. The same "thing" is valued for different reasons, or it is valued here and disvalued there" (Walzer 1983: 7). To understand what goods should or should not be commodified, on a Walzerian picture, involves a kind of sociological enquiry to determine what the social meaning of a good is in a community; that is, in how it is understood by that community and the value that it has for that community.

On an essentialist account the value of a good is derived from its nature or essence, independent of the attitudes of individuals or communities. There is a fact of the matter about the value that a good has independent of whether members of a society agree about it or even know what it is. To understand whether a good should be commodified, on this view, one needs to enquire into the good's nature and whether that nature can be properly appreciated or realised when it is commodified. The good's meaning is determined by its nature; that is, its inherent properties or characteristics. Radin's critique of commodification reflects an essentialist metaphysics, at least in relation to goods associated with personhood. This is evident in her arguments that alienating certain goods to the market is inimical to human flourishing. The nature of persons *requires* limits to markets. Anderson's account is also an

example of essentialism, albeit a nuanced one, because it conceives of valuation as a rationality concept. She contends that goods “differ in kind if they are properly valued in different ways” (10). While she explicitly wants to avoid dogmatic judgments about the nature of the goods – resisting a conception of kinds of goods as “non-interbreeding species” (10) and stipulating that they can be “characterized differently by different cultures” (10-11) – for Anderson there is nonetheless a right and wrong way to value goods, independent of social conventions. This is because valuations are rational only if they are “reflectively endorsable from a common point of view established in dialogue with others” (39).

Misvaluing Cases fit neatly within an essentialist metaphysics. This is because a good has a certain value which may or may not be appropriately realised if it is commodified. The value of the good exists in the world – independent of the views of valuing agents – and it is up to us to realise this value. On this view, the natural environment has spiritual, aesthetic and moral values, independent of whether we express these values in monetary terms for the purposes of policy development. Similarly, whether all human beings have intrinsic dignity does not depend on whether some societies permit slavery. By contrast, Devaluing Cases fit more naturally into a conventionalist metaphysics. This is because commodifying a good might change the social norms and conventions that, at least in part, determine or constitute a good’s meaning. In so doing, the good might be transformed or corrupted by commodification.

While Misvaluing Cases mesh well with essentialism, and Devaluing Cases with conventionalism, is the inverse true? At first glance, perhaps not. If a good has a meaning independent of how people happen to value it, then how could commodification remove or undermine this meaning? Conversely, if a good’s meaning is determined by social conventions, how can society misvalue a good by commodifying it? Would they not have changed its meaning? Notwithstanding the intuitive pull of these points, the conventionalist

can make sense of Misvaluing Cases, and the essentialist can accommodate Devaluing Cases.

Let us consider each.

A conventionalist can make sense of Misvaluing Cases because a particular social meaning of a good seldom monopolises how it is understood in a society. Legalising the purchase and sale of a good (say blood or sex work) will create a market regime alongside a non-market regime (blood donations and unpaid sex). The predominant conventional understanding of the good might still accord with the non-market regime – that is, most people understand blood as a gift of life for a fellow citizen (to use Titmuss' language) and sex as an expression of intimacy and commitment freely given between romantic partners (to use Anderson's language). In such cases, a market for the good will misvalue it insofar as it is inconsistent with the dominant understanding.

Importantly, if a market understanding of the good proliferates, it may eventually transform the meaning of that good. Misvaluing Cases on a conventionalist metaphysics may be a temporary state of affairs – a stepping stone on the path to market domination. This depends on the extent to which market and non-market understandings of goods can peacefully coexist, an issue I consider in Chapter 6. It also depends on whether a conventionalist identifies the shared understanding of a good with views that people happen to have towards a good at a particular point in time, or whether the shared understanding of a good is anchored to deeper commitments, an issue I consider in Chapter 4. Notwithstanding different potential views among conventionalists about how to ground shared understandings, misvaluing a good by commodifying it is possible.²⁴

An essentialist can also make sense of Devaluing Cases because the value of a good can be undermined when it is commodified, even where it exists independently of the attitudes of

²⁴ One may object to the claim that misvaluing is morally problematic. I raise this issue in Chapter 3 and respond to it in Chapter 4.

valuing agents. For example, consider cases where the value of a good is part of a greater whole. Imagine that an ancient relic of great aesthetic and historical significance is treated as a financial asset by a wealthy person who acquires it and locks it up in storage where no one is able to see it. The value of the relic is not, strictly speaking, diminished when it is commodified; it is just the ability for people to appreciate this value that is lost. As such, this is best construed as a Misvaluing Case.²⁵ Now imagine that the relic is one figurine from the Terracotta Army – a collection of thousands of terracotta sculptures dating back to the third century BCE. The historical and aesthetic value of the Terracotta Army lies in these figurines being stored together – the army is greater than the sum of its parts. In this case, the army is *devalued* when part of it is commodified and separated from the rest.²⁶ As such, whether an essentialist can accommodate Devaluing Cases will depend on the relationship between the whole object and its parts. If part of it is commodified, the whole can be devalued.

Consider also cases where the value of a good is constituted by the social practices associated with it. For example, sport is often regarded as a valuable enterprise beyond the formal written rules that define gameplay and the social conventions that give significance to unwritten rules of the game. Broad internalism, which is a common school of thought in the philosophy of sport, argues that there are underlying intrinsic principles that partly constitute sport and define the logic of the practice, such as a commitment to fair play or the mutual pursuit of athletic excellence (Devine & Lopez Frias 2023). One concern about the commodification of sport is that it leads to changes to gameplay that undermine these principles or fail to express them (Walsh & Giullianotti 2007). In this case, commodification

²⁵ Of course, it is another matter if the owner melts the object to sell the minerals from which it is constructed, however this is one potential effect of commodification, rather than a necessary consequence.

²⁶ One might object devaluation is morally problematic; this is an issue I consider in Chapter 3 (where I raise the concern that it is not morally problematic) and Chapter 4 (where I respond to this concern). Here, I do not here intend to argue that splitting up the Terracotta Army is necessarily morally bad – rather than just aesthetically bad. My point is simply that the essentialist can make sense of Devaluation Cases.

of sport can corrupt sport by changing how it is played and understood by communities of practice. It is not simply that sport has been misvalued. Because its non-conventionally derived value is embedded in social practices (how it is played, administered and officiated), it has been devalued through commodification.

Therefore, just as a conventionalist can make sense of Misvaluing Cases, so too can an essentialist accommodate Devaluing Cases, at least in certain circumstances. Both types of cases are consistent with conventionalism and essentialism. I am now ready to develop a more fine-grained account of ways that commodification violates the meaning of goods.

2.3 A taxonomy of meaning-based objections

This section distinguishes four meaning-based objections, drawing on the general argumentative structure outlined above. I consider ways of substantiating P2 by identifying different senses in which the meaning of a good may be *violated* when it is commodified. I argue that four meaning-based objections can be distinguished – the first two are *Devaluing Cases*; the final two are *Misvaluing Cases*.

2.3.1 Conceptual Error Objection

One sense in which commodification can devalue a good is by destroying it completely. This occurs because there are some goods that are beyond the ontological limits of markets; that is, if they were bought and sold they would cease to be the kind of good that they are. If you offered me \$10,000 to be your friend, I might respond that you have misunderstood what it is to be a friend. (I might take the money and offer you company, but it would not be the same thing.) Likewise, if I sought to purchase a Nobel Prize by bribing the committee responsible

for awarding it, what I would have bought would not be the same good, because I could not rightfully lay claim to the honour and prestige associated with the award.²⁷

These examples point to the fact that certain goods have an essential nature that precludes them from being commodified, in that the fact of being purchased for money or distributed on a market would disqualify them from being counted as goods of that kind. Personal goods like love and friendship have to be freely given away based on genuine feelings of personal affection for another person, while honorific goods must be allocated based on desert. It is constitutive of these kinds of goods that they are not treated as commodities. This objection is on the grounds of rationality rather than morality. It is not a claim that a good *should not* be commodified; rather it is a claim that the good *cannot* be commodified. An attempt to sell such a good would make one guilty of false advertising. If you attempt to buy such a good, what you pay for is not what you get. In Dick's (2017) terminology, they are *invariably transformable* goods, because they are necessarily transformed when they are bought and sold. In Taylor's (2018) words, such goods are *monetarily inalienable* because their nature precludes them from being bought and sold.

There are different reasons that goods *preclude* commodification. It may be impossible to secure ownership rights over a good (such as the air we breathe). It may be impossible to alienate a good from one's person (such as dreams or memories). Or the nature of the good may render it impossible to exchange for money (such as friendship or love). We should also distinguish between technological and conceptual impossibility of commodification, as the ability to own, alienate and sell certain goods is subject to technological, legal and economic

²⁷ For example, consider the response of the Nobel Peace Center after Nobel Laureate winner Maria Corina Machado recently presented her medal to US president Donald Trump: "a metal can change owners, but the title of a Nobel peace prize laureate cannot" (cited in Bryant 2026).

developments.²⁸ The Conceptual Error Objection is concerned with universal conceptual impossibilities rather than contingent technical impossibilities.

This objection will not be a focus of this thesis, because it applies to a small range of goods – those whose sale necessarily destroys their nature. One might be tempted to think there is little of interest in goods of this kind. Indeed, in the introduction to a recent Handbook of Commodification, Bertrand & Panitch (2024) suggest that such cases are “easy” and deny that “such goods are contested commodities”, before they set the stage for the “true” focus of commodification studies (2-3). Such a hasty dismissal is a mistake. For while it is common in the moral limits of markets debate to observe that some goods inherently cannot be bought and sold, there has been little work to explore what is common to such goods.²⁹ Nevertheless, these questions are beyond the scope of this thesis.

2.3.2 Transformation Objection

While the Conceptual Error Objection points to cases where a good is completely destroyed when it is commodified, other goods might only be damaged when they are bought and sold or valued in monetary terms. They can survive commodification, but they do not come away unscathed. For example, cultural and sacred artefacts might lose their spiritual, religious or historical significance when they are commodified to sell to tourists. Some goods are valuable because they are available to all on equal terms – like beaches, national parks and museums – such that charging for admission undermines this dimension of value. Civic obligations (like voting, jury duty or national service) might be devalued if people are paid to perform them, or can pay to exempt themselves. These are just a few examples of a more

²⁸ For example, ownership rights over novel ideas were not possible until the advent of intellectual property regimes. Extraterrestrial real estate is not currently possible (in any meaningful sense), but the real estate market in low-Earth orbit is increasingly up for grabs. And science fiction envisages futures where the commodification of dreams and memories are not just possible, but common place.

²⁹ Dick (2017) and Taylor (2018) are two notable exceptions.

general phenomenon in which commodifying a good transforms its character in a way that reduces its value. To flesh out this objection we need to understand how commodification can devalue goods and why it is objectionable.

How does transformation occur?

Commodification can transform the character of a good – and thereby diminish its value – by changing the conditions in which the good is consumed or by changing what is produced in the first place. Let us consider each.

The value of some goods is embedded in and derived from social practices in which they are consumed. Commodification can undermine the meaning or value of such goods by changing how they are consumed. In Hirsch's (2005: 91) words: "The market may supply the same narrow commodity or service, but with different characteristics in its environmental use." Hirsch is primarily concerned with the private appropriation and excludable character of commodities, as demonstrated in his example of a "pub dartboard screened by a turnstile" which would undermine the game of darts as it is "inextricably bound up with socializing" (91). Anderson's concerns about dividing the commons are similar: "since the value of shared goods is realized not in individual, exclusive appropriation and use but in common activities, rights over the physical vehicles of these values cannot be fully distributed in exclusive bundles" (Anderson 1993: 202). One can see this concern in a recent debate over a proposal to create a private beach club on a section of Bondi beach. Many commentators objected to this on the grounds that it was 'un-Australian.' Because the beach is a symbol and expression of Australian egalitarianism, Ferracioli (2020) was right to observe that "roping off Bondi beach will be a symbolic nail in the coffin in terms of our commitment to a fair go." When sites of civic engagement, community connection and fraternal relations are treated as commodities for private consumption, their value may be eroded or lost.

Commodification can also transform production. For example, Hermann (2021) identifies an increase in standardisation as one of the key tendencies of commodification – one brought about by the incentives of profit-seeking firms seeking to exploit economies of scale in the production process, and orienting production towards needs that are profitable to service. For example, when cultural goods are increasingly treated by artists and broader society as vehicles for profit rather than creative acts, this can lead to a decline in cultural innovation (Marx 2025). I discuss this in relation to music in Chapter 11.

Why is transformation objectionable?

The Transformation Objection also depends on a further normative claim that the non-commodified form of a good is something worth protecting; that we lose something of value when it is commodified and that this ought morally to be prevented, restricted or, at the very least, lamented. When I return to this objection in Chapter 7, I consider how the normative premise can be grounded. For now, it should be noted that the Transformation Objection primarily has implications for institutional actors. This is because the mechanisms with which it is concerned – the production process and the environmental context in which goods are consumed – are generally beyond the control of any individual. While individuals participating in such markets might contribute to the collective harm that these markets produce, it is primarily government policy that can prevent or mitigate devaluation.

2.3.3 Bad Attitude Objection

We have seen two examples of meaning-based objections that involve *devaluation*. I now turn to two objections that involve *misvaluation*. The first of these is an expressivist objection because it appeals to the attitudes expressed towards a good when it is commodified. For example, the intuitive aversion that many people feel toward adoption markets is because buying and selling children arguably shows disrespect or disregard towards them, even if they

can permissibly be given away to adoptive parents. Arguments that a live kidney market would, in Sandel's (2012: 110) words, treat the poor as a "collection of spare parts" are motivated by similar concerns. Other examples of this objection focus on monetary exchanges in the context of personal relationships. Purchasing an apology or a wedding toast, selling advertising space on tombstones, paying a close friend for a favour – these are each monetary exchanges that many people feel are objectionable because they express disrespect towards the relationship in question.

This objection appeals to the expressive character of money and markets; it is especially central in Sandel and Anderson's theories. Markets and monetary exchanges, they remind us, do not just allocate goods, they also express and promote attitudes towards goods. For certain goods with non-instrumental value, commodification may be objectionable because it treats them in a disrespectful manner. To make sense of this objection, we need to consider (1) what it means to express an attitude; and (2) the attitudes that commodification might express.

What does it mean to express an attitude?

An attitude is, roughly speaking, a way of thinking or feeling about something, or an affective orientation or disposition towards that thing. Expressing an attitude is a way of conveying these thoughts, feelings or dispositions to other people – typically through gestures, words and conduct. One might express attitudes that one does not personally hold because of the social norms that imbue certain gestures, words and conduct with meaning. When I recently tried to tip at a restaurant in Kyoto, I expressed disrespect towards the waitstaff despite no ill will on my part, given the social etiquette around tipping in Japan. Something similar might be happening when my Polish grandfather uses an offensive word to describe a particular ethnic group that, he insists, was perfectly fine when he was my age.

This distinction suggests two ways that commodification of a good can express an attitude. It can make manifest a thought or feeling that I actually have towards the good in question. Or it can express a thought or feeling towards a good because of the conventional symbolic significance that attaches to buying and selling it, independent of one’s beliefs or desires. Both of these senses of *expressing an attitude* can be seen in the commodification literature. For instance, in Anderson’s (1993) characterisation of the ‘use’ mode of valuation that is appropriate for commodities, she says, “to merely use something is to subordinate it to one’s own ends, without regard for its intrinsic value” (144). This gestures towards the first way of expressing an attitude – making manifest one’s thoughts and feelings that a good is only instrumentally valuable. By contrast, when Anderson (1989) argues that the sale of sexual services “signifies ... a degradation of the prostitute” because “sexuality is equated with the lesser good of money” (188), the expression of disrespect for the prostitute does not depend on the intentions or state of mind of any particular person that pays them for sex.

What attitudes does commodification express?

I have so far only observed that commodification might signal disrespect; it remains to be seen what attitudes may be expressed towards a good when it is bought and sold. In Table 6, I suggest a series of attitudes that might apply in different circumstances. These are substitutability, commensurability, impersonality, instrumentality and objectification. While these attitudes may align in many cases they are conceptually distinct.

Table 6 | Attitudes potentially expressed by commodification

Attitude	Description	Example
Substitutability ³⁰	Commodification may involve treating goods as	Comic book flippers: In vintage comic book online forums, collectors often criticise dealers (or ‘flippers’)

³⁰ One might argue that substitutability does no independent work from other attitudes (i.e., instrumentality and objectification). I concur with Radin (1996) whose ‘*indicia of commodification*’ separates out fungibility from objectification (118). One might objectify a good or treat it as having only instrumental value without necessarily treating it as substitutable for things of equivalent monetary value. Flippers may of course be guilty of all of these pernicious attitudes.

	substitutable for things of equivalent monetary value.	for not being true fans of the art form. When selling parts of their collection, fans often try to avoid selling to flippers. Flippers regard comic books as a fungible good that can be traded for money with no loss of value. This is distinct from fans of the medium who may buy (and occasionally sell) comic books but value them intrinsically.
Commensurability	Commodification may presuppose that things can be measured and ranked along a single scale of monetary value.	Injured worker: A plaintiff is awarded damages by a court for serious suffering caused by a workplace injury that has permanently reduced their mobility. They accept the payment but reject that the grievous injury can be adequately compensated for by any amount of money.
Impersonality	Commodification may signal distance between participants to monetary exchange.	Airport pick up: I recently picked up a friend from the Melbourne airport. He insisted on paying me for the favour, against my objections, and wouldn't take no for an answer. I tried to explain that I wanted to do him a favour as a close friend (a point that was lost on him).
Instrumentality	Commodification may involve treating goods as mere means to acquire money.	Commodified Bar Mitzvah: In the TV show 'The OC', protagonists Seth and Ryan propose holding a Bar Mitzvah for Ryan (who is not Jewish) as an opportunity to raise money for their friend Johnny who urgently needs knee surgery but which he is unable to afford. Seth's father, Sandy, expresses concern about treating a sacred religious tradition as a means to make money but agrees so long as it is an 'honorary Bar Mitzvah.'
Objectification	Commodification may involve regarding or treating goods as mere objects.	Commercial surrogacy: Some governments permit contracts in surrogate parenting, where a woman is paid money to bear a child for other people and agrees to terminate her parental rights after the baby is born. Some object that this practice involves treating the surrogate mother as an object to fulfil one's own desires.

We have thus seen what it means to express an attitude and what attitudes commodification might express. To finesse the objection, we need to consider three things: (1) the relationship between market exchanges and evaluative attitudes; (2) what moral weight to put on the social meanings attached to monetary valuations and market transactions; and (3) the

normative basis for arguing that expressing certain attitudes towards goods is morally objectionable. I return to these points in Chapter 5.

2.3.4 Crowding Out Objection

We have so far seen that commodification can misvalue a good by expressing an objectionable attitude towards it. Another form of misvaluation involves *making unavailable* desirable ways of valuing a good. In this case, it is not the formation and expression of a bad attitude that is objectionable; rather it is the failure to form and express a good attitude.

This type of meaning-based objection typically appears in discussions of how commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods interact. Radin (1996: 95-6) introduces the term ‘*domino theory*’ to formalise the claim that commodification of some things precludes their non-commodified analogues from existing: “once some commodification enters the arena, there is a slippery slope – a domino effect – leading to market domination.” In Titmuss’ (1971: 206) study of blood donation and markets, he expresses this sentiment through the idea of the *freedom to give*: “in the interests of the freedom of all men they should not, however, be free to sell their blood or decide on the specific destination of the gift.” Anderson (1993: 141) also frames her arguments for limits to markets in terms of people’s freedom to express diverse modes of valuation: “the need to limit markets is based on a pluralistic theory of the social conditions for freedom and autonomy ... Individuals require social settings, governed by distinct social norms recognized and endorsed by others, to develop and express their different valuations.” The common thread underlying these ideas is, to borrow Mack’s (1989: 199) phrase, that market valuations are “imperialistic.” They cannot co-exist with non-market understandings.

To understand what this objection claims, we must first understand what is meant by the idea that commodification *makes unavailable* other ways of valuing goods. Consider Mack’s

(1989: 202) characterisation: “Once some individual attaches a price to a given object, relation or activity, they and others tend to lose their capacity to perceive or evaluate that object, relation or activity as anything but a commodity with a specific market price.” The phrase ‘they and others’ suggests two ways of understanding crowding out³¹: an intrapersonal phenomenon or an interpersonal phenomenon..³² Let us consider each.

Crowding out as an intrapersonal phenomenon

Intrapersonally, crowding out is a psychological phenomenon that describes the tendency for a valuing agent to lose sense of a good’s non-market value once it has been incorporated into a market regime, or to subordinate non-market understandings of a good to its commodified form. This is how crowding out is, for the most part, understood by Mack. He characterises the claim as follows: “The process of commodification leads an agent to produce objects, engage in activities, exercise or develop skills, not for the sake of the value that agent directly attaches to those objects, activities, etc., but rather for the sake of what the market offers in return” (Mack 1989: 199). For example, when I find out that my prized comic book collection is worth a lot of money, I cannot help but think about what I could get for the comic books on eBay. While I previously held onto them because of nostalgia for my childhood and admiration for their aesthetic value, now I either lose sight of these non-monetary forms of value or I cannot help but compare them to their market price. Or consider a person that values their salary to the exclusion of other non-monetary aspects of their professional life. While deep down they might know that this is inconsistent with their values,

³¹ One could also formulate a conceptual version of the Crowding Out Objection. For example, commodifying medals (or some other physical representation of a prize) precludes their being an expression of merit. This formulation of the Crowding Out Objection would not depend on an empirical claim about how commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods interact. However, such cases are captured by the Conceptual Error Objection. The main issue in cases like this is that these goods are no longer the same kind of good, not that they make unavailable particular evaluative attitudes towards them.

³² In Chapter 10, I consider a third form of crowding out – what I call institutional crowding out – which bears some resemblance to intrapersonal and interpersonal cases, but is distinct from both.

they cannot help but measure the worth of their professional work in monetary terms. The monetary value they ascribe to their labour crowds out other ways of valuing their work.

Crowding out as an inter-personal phenomenon

Interpersonally, crowding out occurs where commodifying a good affects the valuations of third parties. This type of crowding out is invoked by Titmuss and Anderson in the passages quoted above. Their invocation of the ideal of freedom reflects the view that certain market regimes are, in their view, freedom-restricting. On this view, commodification has spillover effects; it *makes unavailable* certain desirable ways of valuing goods for people that are not participants to exchange.

For both Titmuss and Anderson, this form of crowding out arises because of the social context in which different ways of valuing goods and practice is realised. In Titmuss' case, this is because institutional arrangements generate and sustain, or undermine and curtail, certain motivations. Because of this, the commodification of blood and donor relationships “represses the expression of altruism, erodes the sense of community” (Titmuss 1971: 245). For Anderson, this is because individual meaning making is a social process. She says, “I am capable of valuing something in a particular way only in a social setting that upholds norms for that mode of valuation” (Anderson 1993: 12). The ability to realise modes of valuation depends on social norms that allow them to be expressed. Commodification can make unavailable other ways of valuing goods because markets embody a particular way of valuing goods with particular characteristics, which are poorly suited to non-commodified valuations.

The empirical claim – how, why and when does crowding out occur?

Both forms of the Crowding Out Objection depend on an empirical claim that market valuations and understandings of certain goods can make unavailable their non-commodified counterparts. The intrapersonal version of the objection requires an account of how

commodification is psychologically corrosive. The interpersonal version of this objection requires an account of the spillover effects of commodification; that is, why some people buying and selling a good should affect others' valuations. As Gold (2019: 3) observes, "there has been remarkably little detailed work on [this empirical] mechanism" in philosophical debates about commodification. A satisfactory account of this objection should explain how, why and when commodification leads to either form of crowding out.

The normative claim – why is crowding out objectionable?

In addition to the empirical claim, the Crowding Out Objection also makes a normative claim. The proponent must show why it is important that non-commodified ways of valuing goods are available to people and what is wrong about these being rendered unavailable. In the interpersonal case, we have seen that both Titmuss and Anderson appeal to the ideal of freedom, but this raises a natural question: if my freedom to buy and sell undermines your freedom to value goods in non-commodified ways, why should your freedom take precedence over mine? In the intrapersonal case, it is even less clear that any moral conclusions can be drawn. If commodification has a psychological tendency to monopolise valuations, what is the normative significance of this? I consider these issues further in Chapters 4 and 6.

2.3.5 Concluding remarks

This section has presented a taxonomy of meaning-based objections. Such objections claim that commodification is morally objectionable if it violates the meaning of a good. I argued that commodification can *devalue* a good, either because certain goods have a meaning that necessarily precludes being bought and sold (the Conceptual Error Objection); or when commodification diminishes the value of a good (the Transformation Objection).

Commodification can also *misvalue* a good either by expressing objectionable attitudes

towards a good (the Bad Attitude Objection), or by making unavailable desirable ways of valuing a good (the Crowding Out Objection).

2.4 Comparison with Brennan & Jaworski's taxonomy

My taxonomy of meaning-based objections is not the only option on the table. Brennan & Jaworski (2015, 2022) provide an account of what they call *semiotic objections* that differs from my account, but which similarly appeals to arguments in the literature that proceed from discussions about the meaning of goods.³³ Given that they got to this party first, so to speak, it is incumbent on me to show why my taxonomy is preferable. This section first describes how they conceive of semiotic objections, before critiquing their characterisation.

2.4.1 Brennan & Jaworski's taxonomy explained

Brennan & Jaworski introduce the term 'semiotic objections to commodification' in a 2015 paper which characterises them as "hold[ing] that buying and selling certain goods and services is wrong [1] because of what market exchange communicates or [2] because it violates the meaning of certain goods, services, and relationships" (2015: 1053). They offer the following formal definition³⁴:

Semiotics: Independently of noncommunicative objections, to engage in a market in some good or service X is a form of symbolic expression that communicates the wrong motive, or the wrong attitude toward X, or expresses an attitude that is incompatible with the intrinsic dignity of X, or would show disrespect or irreverence

³³ As noted in a footnote to Chapter 1, Brennan & Jaworski's account of semiotic objections has changed over time, in particular whether they need to be independent of non-semiotic concerns to have moral force.

³⁴ The reader may note that the formal definition of semiotic objections refers exclusively to [1] and not to [2].

for some practice, custom, belief, or relationship with which X is associated
(Brennan & Jaworski 2015: 1055).³⁵

Two preliminary points should be noted. First, semiotic objections do not depend on harmful downstream consequences – the attitude expressed or communicated when a good is bought and sold is taken to be the source of moral concern. Second, such objections need to ‘standalone’ in the sense of being distinct from other concerns about commodification. They explain, “some apparently semiotic objections to markets are parasitic on non-semiotic objections” (Brennan & Jaworski 2022: 61). For instance, slavery communicates disrespect because it violates rights and sweatshop labour communicates disrespect because it is exploitative. In such cases, apparently semiotic objections to commodification are really just concerns about rights and exploitation. The semiotic component piggybacks off the other objection but doesn’t do any of the moral work.

Brennan & Jaworski (2022: 67) identify three semiotic objections:

1. **The Mere Commodity Objection:** Claims that buying and selling certain goods or services shows that one regards them as having merely instrumental value.
2. **The Wrong Signal Objection:** Claims that buying and selling certain goods and services communicates, independently of one’s attitudes, disrespect for the objects in question.
3. **The Wrong Currency Objection:** Claims that inserting markets and money into certain kinds of relationships communicates estrangement and distance, and is objectionably impersonal.

Each semiotic objection is a sub-species of the Bad Attitude Objection. The distinction between the first objection and the latter two reflects the two senses that an attitude can be

³⁵ The precise definition of semiotic objections changes from the 2015 paper to the 2022 edition of their book. In the latter they describe these objections as follows: “To allow a market in some good or service X is a form of communication that expresses the wrong attitude toward X or expresses an attitude that is incompatible with the intrinsic dignity of X, or would show disrespect or irreverence for some person, practice, custom, belief, or relationship with which X is associated” (2022: 59). While the text is slightly different, the underlying thrust of this objection remains unchanged.

expressed – by making manifest a disposition one has towards a good, or communicating an attitude because of the conventional symbolic significance that attaches to certain actions. The distinction between the second and third objections singles out monetary exchange in the context of personal relationships.³⁶

This is a minor point, however. The more considerable difference between the taxonomy I have proposed and Brennan & Jaworski's is that theirs is considerably narrower. There is no analogue in their taxonomy for the Conceptual Error Objection, the Crowding Out Objection or the Transformation Objection. What should we make of this? Is this just a semantic difference – an alternative way of carving up different objections to commodification – or is there a reason to prefer one taxonomy over the other? As I argue below, my account is preferable to Brennan & Jaworski's because it better characterises the major contributions to philosophical debates about commodification.

2.4.2 Brennan & Jaworski's taxonomy critiqued

The main problem with Brennan & Jaworski's categorisation of semiotic objections to commodification is that it does not do justice to the positions of the anti-commodificationists whose views they seek to systematise and systematically refute. There is a disconnect between their literature review and their taxonomy of objections. Given that they seek to argue against anti-commodificationists on their own terms – “we want to play and win in their ballpark” (2022: 22) – it is important to be clear what game their opponents are playing. In essence, their opponents are principally concerned with the *meaning of goods* (that is, their nature or character and the values that they embody or help to realise) while Brennan & Jaworski focus almost exclusively on the *meaning of money and markets* (and the attitudes

³⁶ I am sympathetic to this distinction, as commodification in the context of personal relationships involves different kinds of questions than whether or not to permit a market. Nevertheless, I propose to include *impersonality* (in their terminology, *distance* or *estrangement*) as one of several attitudes that can be expressed when a good is commodified.

expressed towards goods when they are bought and sold or valued in monetary terms). I consider this further in Chapter 5 when I evaluate their criticisms of semiotic objections. For now, we should note that their tripartite taxonomy of semiotic objections is built solely around attitudes that people express through market exchanges, which paves the way for a critique based on the contingent character of semiotic norms attached to money and markets. But, as Rondel (2021: 217) observes, “Semiotic arguments against markets do not depend fundamentally on meanings that prevail about *markets*. Rather, they depend on the meanings that attach to various *goods*, meanings that give us moral bases on which to make judgments about their prospective commodification.” If one attends to the meaning of a good it becomes clear that there are other ways that commodification can violate this meaning beyond expressivist concerns. This is reflected in my taxonomy.

Let us begin with the Conceptual Error Objection. Walzer’s (1983) taxonomy of 14 blocked exchanges includes a range of goods – friendship, love, Nobel Prizes and divine grace, to name a few – that essentially preclude commodification. Sandel (2012: 74) also discusses goods (like friendship and love) that commodification “dissolves” or “turns ... into something else.” These cases are about conceptual impossibilities rather than attitudes expressed when goods are bought and sold.

So too with the Crowding Out Objection. As noted in Section 2.3.4, Anderson raises concerns that markets can undermine the social context for valuing certain goods in non-commodified ways. Brennan & Jaworski (2022: 65) explicitly acknowledge this: “one of her [Anderson’s] main arguments against certain markets is that to preserve Kantian autonomy, we must separate different goods into different spheres so that we can express different modes of valuation.” But Anderson’s arguments on the grounds of freedom and autonomy are not just about the ‘bad’ attitudes expressed when goods are bought and sold; it is about undermining the social context that enables people to form and express good attitudes. While Brennan &

Jaworski consider a separate Crowding Out Objection later in the book, this is narrowly construed as an argument that monetary incentives can crowd out intrinsic motivation. This can be understood as a form of the intrapersonal version of the objection, but it is much narrower than the arguments put forward by Anderson and others.

Brennan & Jaworski's taxonomy also does not reflect the ways that market institutions can transform the character of goods. For instance, when Walzer (1983: 99) objects to the practice of allowing wealthy American to pay to get out of military conscription in the 1860s, he says: "it seemed to abolish the *public thing* and turn military service ... into a private transaction" (italics in original). The concern here is not about attitudes expressed towards goods – the claim is that the meaning of a good is violated because it is transformed through commodification. Brennan & Jaworski do not accommodate this argument in their taxonomy. While they define a separate Low-Quality Objection outside their taxonomy of semiotic objections, this is focussed on the narrow case of where the sale of goods for profit diminishes their quality, which is a subset of ways that the value of a good can be diminished when it is commodified. In these ways, Brennan & Jaworski's taxonomy of semiotic objections does not do justice to the richness of different ways that their opponents argue that commodification can violate the meaning of a good.

Conclusion

This chapter has developed a taxonomy of meaning-based objections to commodification. I began by sketching a general schema for meaning-based objections which distinguished two general ways that meaning can be violated – either commodification can *misvalue* a good or it can *devalue* a good. I showed that both of these general cases are compatible with a conventionalist or essentialist metaphysics. I distinguished four ways that a good's meaning can be violated through commodification. A good can be *devalued* through commodification

either because: (1) its meaning necessarily precludes being bought and sold; or (2) commodification undermines or diminishes the good. A good can be *misvalued* either because commodification (3) expresses an objectionable attitude towards it or (4) makes unavailable desirable attitudes towards that good. I defended this taxonomy against the account of semiotic objections developed by Brennan & Jaworski, arguing that mine is a better reflection of arguments against commodification that appeal to the meaning of goods.

This concludes Part 1 of the thesis. While I have introduced a taxonomy of meaning-based objections, it remains to be seen how strong these objections are. In Part 2, I introduce and evaluate four general criticisms that apply to all moral meaning-based objections.

Part 2.

In this part of the thesis, I develop and evaluate four general criticisms to moral meaning-based objections, which each target a different part of the general schema of these objections. If successful, these objections would refute all meaning-based objections. I argue that this class of objection is not defeated by the general criticisms, though whether the objections successfully demonstrate that commodification of a good is morally objectionable will depend on a context-sensitive analysis that is attentive to specific facts about the good in question.

Chapter 3. The Price is (Not) Right

Developing four general criticisms of moral meaning-based objections

Introduction

Meaning-based objections claim that commodifying certain goods is morally objectionable because it violates their meaning. In the previous chapter, I proposed a general schema for this class of objection: (P1) X has a meaning that is relevant in determining how it should be valued or allocated; (P2) this meaning is violated when X is commodified; (C1) so the commodification of X is morally objectionable. I showed that the violation of meaning can take different forms, which served as the organising logic for my taxonomy.

In this chapter, I introduce four general criticisms that apply to all of the moral meaning-based objections. If successful, such criticisms would refute all of these objections and derail an account of the moral limits of markets that gives conceptual primacy to the meaning of goods. The chapter comprises four sections. **Section 3.1** develops the *Contested Meaning Criticism* which disputes P1 by arguing that the meaning of a good is too contested to give it normative force in deliberations about how it should be valued and allocated. **Section 3.2** develops the *Neutrality Criticism* which disputes P2 by denying that there is a close connection between the meaning of a good and the way that it is valued or distributed. **Section 3.3** develops the *Expressive Potential Criticism* which also casts doubt on P2 by drawing attention to circumstances where commodification reflects or transforms the meaning of goods in positive ways. **Section 3.4** develops the *No Moral Upshot Criticism*. This criticism accepts each premise but denies the conclusion: it does not follow from the fact

that commodification violates the meaning of a good that it is morally objectionable. Each of these criticisms can be found in different forms in the philosophical literature.

Before I present the criticisms, some preliminary remarks are in order. First, this chapter does not evaluate the criticisms; however, where appropriate, I make some observations about what the criticism consists in that are relevant to my appraisal. Second, these criticisms do not exhaust criticisms of meaning-based objections to commodification. Rather, these are criticisms that apply to all moral meaning-based objections. Each of the specific objections is also subject to other criticisms that will be considered in subsequent chapters.³⁷ Finally, the responses in this chapter do not pertain to the Conceptual Error Objection, which makes a claim about the ontological limits of markets rather than their moral limits.

3.1 The Contested Meaning Criticism

One critique of accounts of the moral limits of markets that proceed from an analysis of the meaning of a good is that this meaning is often too contested to give it normative force in deliberations about how the good should be valued or allocated. For example, Satz (2010: 81) draws attention to “rival views of the meaning of many particular goods (and of human flourishing)” to critique the theories developed by Walzer, Anderson, Sandel and Radin. She argues, “As a practical matter we may be unable to reach consensus on the best meaning of many specific goods. (This can be true even if the account given of a good’s best meaning is in fact correct.)” (82). For example, people disagree about whether, and to what extent, goods like healthcare, education and housing should be distributed through market norms, or through some other principle, such as equal provision for all or distribution based on need. Often these disagreements reflect different views about the meaning of goods. If

³⁷ A notable omission from this chapter is thus Brennan & Jaworski’s (2015, 2022) influential critique of semiotic objections on the basis that semiotic norms attached to money and markets are culturally contingent and highly variable. This critique pertains only to the Bad Attitude Objection so I consider it in Chapter 5.

disagreements are based on different views about the meaning of a good, how can we appeal to those meanings to resolve these disputes?

In addition to there being rival views about the meaning of a good *within a community*, there are added complexities about how to evaluate commodified exchanges *between communities* that attach different meanings to a good (Cohen 2003: 693-5). For instance, the peyote cactus is of enormous spiritual significance to certain Native American tribes, where it is lauded as a way to get close to deities. These communities often look down on the purchase and sale of peyote (in part due to concerns about overharvesting). The plant is also increasingly popular among other communities who do not have the same historical and religious connection to the plant, as a way to enjoy an interesting psychedelic experience and (cynically perhaps) to enhance productivity and improve cultural cachet. How should we make sense of commodified exchanges of peyote between these communities? If people in Silicon Valley purchase peyote buttons from reservations in Texas, does this market undermine its spiritual significance for Native Americans?

This line of argument has been an especially common critique of Walzer's theory of complex equality, because his account of the meaning of goods is unapologetically conventionalist. For many critics this means that his theory cannot escape a deep relativism about justice. For instance, Dworkin (1983) argues, "Our political arguments almost never begin in some shared understanding of the pertinent principles of distribution. Every important issue is a contest between competing models." He goes on to say, "What can it mean even to say that people disagree about social meanings? The fact of the disagreement shows that there is no shared social meaning to disagree about." Daniels (1985: 145) echoes the concern that "disputes abound" about the social meaning of goods, before observing that – even where shared meanings do exist – they may "reflect a history of class struggle and domination by a ruling class, or domination by external cultures." Anderson (1993: 143) also makes this point:

“shared understandings, if they exist at all, are often riddled with contradictions and confusions, are established in relations of domination that silence the perspectives of some members of society, and fail to meet the pragmatic demands, such as the preservation of social order, that people ask of them.” Accepting the shared meaning of a good as the basis for determining how it should be distributed might give undue explanatory and justificatory power to a history of conquest and bloodshed from which shared meanings are formed.

Critiques of Walzer on these grounds are objections to his pluralistic theory of justice, not just his views on the scope of the market domain. Nevertheless, such critiques raise questions for the proponent of meaning-based objections, ones that must be answered to show that this enterprise is worth undertaking. How should we make sense of disagreements about the meaning of a good? What is the boundary of the community that determines its meaning? How can we make sense of shared understandings that result from an unjust history?

3.2 The Neutrality Criticism

Another general criticism of meaning-based objections denies that there is a close connection between the meaning of a good and the mechanism used to distribute it. For instance, Satz (2010: 81-2) argues, “[T]here is only a tenuous connection in most cases between the meaning we give to a good and its distribution by a market ... Markets are typically instrumental mechanisms for achieving our ends; a market price is rarely the direct expression of our evaluative attitudes towards a good.” A similar thread runs through Brennan & Jaworski’s (2022) critique. They highlight a range of examples of goods that are routinely bought and sold but which are still regarded as things with intrinsic value by the people buying and selling them. Regarding something as a commodity is not the same as regarding it as a *mere* commodity. The core argument of their book, the Markets without Limits thesis, claims, “If you may do it for free, then there is some way that you may do it for

money” (11). According to this thesis “the market does not *transform* what were permissible acts into impermissible acts. It does not *introduce* wrongness where there was not any already” (11-12, italics in original). Notice the presumed equivalence between the action on both sides of the conditional in the thesis; that is, that the “it” done for free is the same as the “it” done for money. This reflects the underlying assumption that markets do not shape the character of the goods that they distribute; if they do then one cannot take the equivalence for granted. By explicitly denying that markets ‘transform’ acts in a morally relevant sense, or ‘introduce wrongness’, Brennan & Jaworski reflect the view, made explicitly by Satz, that buying and selling a good does not impact, much less violate, its meaning.

To see what the Neutrality Criticism consists in, it is helpful to consider how Satz develops this argument to critique accounts of commodification that appeal to the meaning of goods. She begins by observing that it is perfectly consistent to support markets in many goods, while regarding those goods as intrinsically valuable, or at least as having a value that is not captured by their market price. She cites Bibles, healthcare and food as examples. She then observes that concerns around the acceptability of a market for some good “is often conditioned by empirical factors” (82) – whether a market is judged as permissible is thus likely to depend substantially on contextual factors rather than lofty concerns about the good’s meaning. She then casts doubt on whether people’s intuitive repugnance to certain markets tracks the meaning that goods have for them. She cites Larry Summer’s leaked memo which argued for an international market in toxic waste – and, crucially, for dumping toxic waste in less developed countries – and observes that critics need not be “committed to any particular view about pollution’s *meaning*” (83, italics in original). She finally observes that there are some goods that have a meaning that “resists commodification” – such as friendship, love and Nobel Prizes – but concludes that “the overwhelming majority of goods

do not” (84). For these reasons, she argues, critiques of commodification based on the meaning of goods are not on firm conceptual ground.

While I address these arguments in the next chapter, we should note that the proponent of meaning-based objections need not be committed to the view that the meaning of the good is the only consideration in determining the acceptability of a market for that good. The taxonomy developed in Chapter 1 sought to show that meaning-based considerations are one of six ethical dimensions of commodification. Moreover, Satz’s observation that our considered judgments of the acceptability of a market in a certain good depends on empirical factors – rather than a more general concern about the good’s meaning – also reminds us that the effects of a market on a good’s meaning often has a lot to do with *how* a good is bought and sold, not simply *that* it is bought and sold. An account that defines commodification as a process and a state of affairs which admits of degrees is well suited to this analysis, as it can consider what market architectures are consistent with the meaning of a good.

Notwithstanding these remarks, Satz’s argument does require the proponent of meaning-based objections to provide an account of when and why there can be a close connection between the meaning of a good and its distribution via a market.

3.3 The Expressive Potential Criticism

Another general criticism of meaning-based objections points to cases where valuing a good in monetary terms, or distributing it on a market, reflects or transforms its meaning in positive ways. Unlike the Neutrality Criticism, this criticism acknowledges a close link between commodification and the meaning of a good, but draws attention to circumstances where monetary valuation or market exchange either promotes non-commodified ways of valuing goods or liberates goods from traditional meanings that are themselves objectionable. While the Neutrality Criticism points to the potential for commodified and non-commodified

understandings of goods to *co-exist*; the Expressive Potential Criticism argues that these understandings can be *complementary*. We can distinguish two types of cases: (1) where ascribing an exchange value to a good expresses a positive evaluative attitude towards it; and (2) where commodification transforms the meaning of a good in positive ways.

The first form of the Expressive Potential Criticism points to examples where an exchange value furnishes non-commodified ways of valuing goods. Recall Walsh's (2001: 9) example of a man who attempts to sell a pony rather than giving it away because "setting a price is his way of *expressing his own regard* for the welfare of the pony" (italics in original). In a similar vein, in a short story titled *The Devil is a Busy Man* by David Foster Wallace, the narrator's 'Daddy' periodically tries to get rid of household items he doesn't want by putting a notice in the local paper to give them away. This, however, does not prove to be an effective strategy because people are suspicious of its quality. ("And they'd be skittery about it too and their face all close up like at cards and they'd walk around the thing and poke it with their toe and go Where'd you all get it at what's the matter with it.") His Daddy resolves to sell the good instead ("he puts in some fool price he just makes up there on the phone"). This proves to be a much more successful strategy ("folks ... press on Daddy to take the \$5 or \$10 right away before any other folks could take it"). While this is a more nefarious example than Walsh's case – akin to Tom Sawyer asking friends to pay him to paint his fence to trick them into believing that it is a valuable activity – it is another example where ascribing an exchange value to a good expresses to others that it has a significant use value.

Beyond examples of specific market transactions, commodification of certain goods may express respect towards them. Consider the commodification of domestic labour, in particular care giving. There are debates about whether personal caregiving – the provision of care services for children, elders, the disabled, sick and other dependents – should be treated as a commodity. Should it be compensated as with other forms of labour (whether by the state

through legal instruments, or by family members as a matter of custom)? Should it be linked to economic entitlements like the receipt of welfare payments? Should it be ascribed a monetary value for the purposes of national accounting? While some raise concerns about the commodification of caregiving – chiefly that it reorients care towards a transaction; in Stone’s (2005: 285) words “it has to become contractual, in spirit if not in law” – others emphasise the benefits of care work acquiring an exchange value for the people (mostly women) providing it. For instance, Silbaugh (2005: 302) defends treating women’s household labour as a commodity on feminist grounds: “Understanding the economic aspects of women’s non-market activity is an important part of the transformative vision of a progressive feminism.” She argues, “[T]he objection to commodification ... fails to consider the potential benefits that economic understandings can bring to the social relations surrounding that non-market phenomenon.” I will not express an opinion on this matter here – it is a complex debate – but it should be noted that, on one plausible view, commodifying household labour can assign appropriate value to women’s work. It renders visible what was invisible and expresses that it is a valuable activity.

Commodifying household labour may, of course, not be beneficial simply in virtue of the fact that it *expresses* that this work is valuable. It also has an emancipatory potential for those performing this work – usually women – by reducing their economic reliance on and subordination to men. This idea gestures towards a second way that commodification of a good can have beneficial effects on the non-commodified aspects of its value. Acquiring an exchange value might *transform* the meaning of a good in positive ways. One way that it can do this is by liberating a good from restrictive and cloistering traditional meanings that may themselves be objectionable. Rather than an expectation on women imposed by patriarchal social norms, domestic work could be reconceived of as productive labour with all the associated benefits (from social esteem to pay and related entitlements). Similarly, as I

discuss in Chapter 7, certain exclusive clubs for which membership cannot directly be purchased – like the Qantas Chairman’s Lounge or the Melbourne Cricket Club – might become less objectionable symbols of social hierarchy and stratification were they available on the market.³⁸ More generally, as noted in Chapter 1, because markets appeal to reciprocal self-interest of individuals and foster anonymous exchange, commodification of certain goods might have the potential to liberate previously disenfranchised groups. For instance, Williams & Zelizer (2005: 372) observe that many queer theorists’ support for the commodification of sperm and eggs is because “they trust the impersonality of the market more than the social attitudes of social workers who would otherwise be in charge of allocating opportunities for parenthood.” In such cases, commodification can overcome objectionable social norms by disrupting them with impersonal market forces.

As these examples show, the Expressive Potential Criticism pushes back against meaning-based objections to commodification in one of two ways. Either commodification expresses respect towards the good in question and helps to cultivate or furnish the non-commodified aspects of its value, or it transforms the meaning of a good in positive ways. Of course, the proponent of meaning-based objections to commodification is not committed to the view that commodification only ever reflects or transforms the meaning of a good in negative ways, so they need not be concerned by the Expressive Potential Response so long as they can point to cases where commodification negatively effects a good. Nevertheless, a satisfactory account of meaning-based objections should be able to adjudicate between cases where commodification is objectionable because it violates the meaning of a good from case where it is likely to be benign or even beneficial on these grounds.

³⁸ One might object that such goods would no longer be the same good if they were commodified – for example because some goods are the type of good they are in virtue of their means of distribution. In the cases mentioned above, it would be more accurate to say that such goods would persist but with different properties. The Melbourne Cricket Club and the Qantas Chairman’s Lounge would still presumably have the same name – indeed they would remain exclusive in an important sense – if they auctioned off some membership positions to the highest bidder.

3.4 The No Moral Upshot Criticism

Even if one accepts that the meaning of a good is normatively significant in how it should be valued or distributed and that commodification violates this meaning, one can still resist the conclusion that this demonstrates that commodifying a good is morally objectionable. I call this the No Moral Upshot Criticism because of how it has been stated by Brennan & Jaworski (2022). They criticise Anderson and Gold's arguments about commodification undermining shared valuations and the social contexts required to expressive diverse modes of valuation by saying: "But it's also hard to see why these arguments have any moral upshot. To show that buying and selling sex is wrong, it's not enough to point out, as Anderson does, that prostitution reduces Jane's freedom to have sex have the meaning she wants it to have. We need an additional premise, namely that Jane is *entitled* to have other people create a social environment in which sex has that special meaning" (102, italics in original).³⁹ In a similar vein, they critique arguments that commodification results in lower quality versions of goods by denying that such arguments have moral import: "Even if selling certain items for profit lowers the quality of those things, it does not follow that it's *morally wrong* or *morally bad* to sell those things for profit. After all, there's no general moral duty to produce only the highest quality things" (129, italics in original).⁴⁰ They also raise doubts on the moral conclusions that can be drawn from arguments that certain market exchanges express disrespect by claiming that such arguments raise "issues of mere manners" (82). Each of these points casts doubt on the claim that a violation of meaning through commodification is morally

³⁹ I note that this claim echoes the Contested Meaning Criticism because it refers to competing understandings of the meaning of sex. However, I include it here, because one could grant that Jane's understanding of sex is 'better' in a normatively significant sense than the person who prefers a commodified understanding of sex, while still resisting the conclusions that this shows a market in sexual services is morally wrong.

⁴⁰ This comment is made in relation to what they call the Low-Quality Objection which argues that certain things should not be for sale because selling them leads to lower quality versions of those things. I discuss this further in Chapter 7. It should be noted that the Low-Quality Objection is narrower than the Transformation Objection because it is focussed (1) only on the sale of goods for profit, and (2) only on reductions in quality through commodification, which is a subset of ways that goods can be devalued through commodification.

objectionable. While I consider each of the passages above in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 – as they relate to each of the moral meaning-based objections – the more general point is that the proponent of such objections needs to show why the violation of the meaning of a good is morally objectionable.

This response is especially pertinent for cases where the violation of meaning involves misvaluation rather than devaluation. In the latter case, market exchange or monetary valuation diminishes the value of a good for everyone. Commodification has spillover effects that, at least *prima facie*, provide a basis for concluding that it is morally objectionable. In the former case, however, an individual or group only misvalues a good. They do not remove something valuable from the world, they just fail to appreciate what is valuable about the world. But isn't that their prerogative? A person who cannot help but think about 'how much the view is worth' when they watch a beautiful sunset may be doing themselves a disservice by failing to appreciate natural beauty, but it is hard to argue that they are behaving immorally. By analogy, my friend recently sat on his phone scrolling through social media while we were in a room full of Rembrandt paintings. I alerted him to this fact in an attempt to implore him to look up from his phone and appreciate the artworks. He responded by kindly reminding me that it was none of my business how he chose to spend his time in the art gallery. Misvaluation Cases are subject to a similar kind of rebuke. As long as I don't hurt anyone by treating something as a commodity, why is there any moral upshot to such cases?

While I agree that Devaluation Cases and Misvaluation Cases need to be treated separately, when I revisit this response in the next chapter I resist the claim that such cases do not provide cause for moral concern. I show that meaning-based objections can draw different types of conclusions and that they can have moral force even if no one has acted morally wrongly or badly by commodifying a good.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced four general criticisms of meaning-based objections that either reject one of the premises of this class of objection or the conclusion that commodification is morally objectionable. If successful, these criticisms would refute all meaning-based objections. The Contested Meaning Criticism denies P1 by arguing that the meaning of a good is too contested to give it normative force in deliberations about how it should be valued or allocated. The Neutrality Criticism denies P2 on the grounds that there is usually only a tenuous connection between the meaning of a good and its method of distribution. The Expressive Potential Criticism also targets P2, but argues that commodification can positively reflect or transform the meaning of a good. The No Moral Upshot Criticism resists the conclusion of meaning-based objections by arguing that even if commodification violates the meaning of a good, it does not follow that it is morally objectionable. We thus have four criticisms of meaning-based objections on the table which cast doubt on arguments against commodification that give conceptual primacy to the meaning of a good. In the next chapter, I critically evaluate them and show that, while these responses call for a context-sensitive analysis of commodification, meaning-based objections are not refuted by these criticisms.

Chapter 4. Not Buying It

Responding to the general criticisms

Introduction

Meaning-based objections to commodification, while common in debates about the moral limits of markets, are subject to a range of criticisms. Chapter 3 introduced four general criticisms. One can deny that the meaning of a good is a normatively significant consideration in determining how it should be valued or allocated (the Contested Meaning Criticism). One can deny the link between the meaning of a good and its method of distribution (the Neutrality Criticism). One can accept a link but argue that commodification positively reflects or transforms the meaning of goods (the Expressive Potential Criticism). Or one can accept that commodification violates the meaning of a good but reject the conclusion that this renders it morally objectionable (the No Moral Upshot Criticism).

This chapter evaluates the general criticisms and considers the implications for meaning-based objections and ethical deliberations that appeal to these objections. I conclude that this class of objection is not defeated by the general criticisms, though whether these objections successfully demonstrate that commodification of a good is morally objectionable will depend on a context-sensitive analysis that is attentive to specific facts about the good in question. My intention in this chapter is not to vindicate the meaning-based objections, but to address threshold concerns one might have about this class of objection. In so doing, I develop some of the argumentative resources that will be used in later chapters.

This chapter comprises three parts. **Section 4.1** critically evaluates the Contested Meaning Criticism. Recognising that one can sidestep this critique by endorsing essentialism, I argue

that the conventionalist also has the conceptual resources to overcome this criticism so long as they do not regard social meanings as incommensurable, beyond the scope of normative evaluation, or dependent on a universal consensus to have moral force. **Section 4.2** responds to the Neutrality Criticism and the Expressive Potential Criticism. Neither of these responses defeat meaning-based objections because the proponent of such objections is not committed to the claim that commodification always violates the meaning of a good. But they do call for a nuanced account of how commodification affects the meaning of a good, one that is not guilty of a reflexive hostility and pessimism towards money and markets. **Section 4.3** addresses the No Moral Upshot Criticism. I argue that meaning-based objections are best understood as making pro tanto claims rather than all-things-considered claims about the wrongness of commodification. I distinguish four kinds of moral conclusions that can be drawn from meaning-based objections. I finally observe some implications of this analysis for moral deliberations that appeal to meaning-based objections.

4.1 Responding to the Contested Meaning Criticism

The Contested Meaning Criticism challenges the idea that the meaning of a good can have normative force in deliberations about how it should be valued or distributed, by drawing reference to rival conceptions of the meaning of many goods. One way to sidestep these concerns is to endorse an essentialist view about the meaning of goods. On this account, there is a fact of the matter about the meaning of a good independent of whether members of a society agree about it or even know what it is. Contested views among members of the community are, on this view, not a deep concern because they merely indicate that some members are mistaken about what the meaning of a good is. Because this meaning inheres in the good itself – that is, it is based on the nature of the good itself and not the minds of valuing agents – it should have weight in how we value the good, independent of the views of

any particular community at any particular point in time. And because a good's nature transcends the artificial geographical boundaries of communities, as well as the historical injustices that have given rise to certain conventional meanings, these related concerns around contested social meanings need not concern the essentialist.

While endorsing essentialism represents one way of avoiding the Contested Meaning Criticism, it is not without costs. First, there are epistemic issues. It is difficult to know what the essence of a good is and there is no easy way to resolve disagreements between competing views. Satz (2010: 81) gestures towards this concern: "we may be unable to reach consensus ... even if the account of the good's best meaning is in fact correct." Second, the essentialist might be prone to dogmatic judgments about the meaning of goods which reify a particular perspective rather than identify some universal property of a good. They may also be unable to explain persistent disagreements within communities about the meanings of certain goods. Moreover, given that I have tried to show that meaning-based objections to commodification are metaphysically robust – that is, they are valid whether one is a conventionalist or an essentialist – endorsing essentialism will not suffice for my purposes.⁴¹ In what follows, I outline three approaches that the conventionalist can take to defend the claim that the meaning of a good should have normative force in moral deliberations about how it should be valued or distributed.

First, a conventionalist should not take the social meaning of a good to be normatively significant simply in virtue of the fact that a community happens to value the good in a certain way. Rather, they should enquire into the social relations and power structures that produce social meanings and the degree to which these reflect the authentic views of the whole community. Walsh & Giullianotti's (2007) critique of amateurist objections to the

⁴¹ After all, the meaning of some goods may be interpretative; that is, the dimensions of value that such goods have may not be inherent to their nature.

commodification of sport is a case in point. Amateurism was a philosophy of sport common in Britain in the nineteenth century which argued that athletes should be motivated by goals specific to sport – such as the pursuit of excellence – rather than financial ends. On the amateurist view, the meaning of sport requires that it should take place in a non-commercial sphere; paying athletes represents “a corruption of the ideals and goals that should properly animate athletes” (8). Walsh & Giullianotti (2007: 50) raise several concerns with amateurism, chief among them that it “contains ... various aristocratic prejudices against the lower orders” (48) that served to “deliberately and explicitly” (50) exclude them from competitions.⁴² By exploring the historical origins of amateurism – and finding them to embody objectionable class hierarchies – they set themselves the challenge of developing a moral critique of the commodification of sport “without endorsing a return to amateurism and without making fanciful, ahistorical claims about the intrinsic nature of sport” (10). In this way, the conventional understanding of a good that some community has at some point in time should not be given undue significance in considerations about how it should be produced and distributed; the social meaning can itself be subject to normative evaluation. Building on the idea that social meanings can themselves be subject to scrutiny, the conventionalist should also not regard competing social meanings as incommensurable, but insist that they can be meaningfully compared based on the values and ideals that they express, embody and enable. Again, Walsh & Giullianotti’s (2007) critique of the commodification of sport is instructive. They explicitly steer clear of an essentialist position, in which certain values are constitutive of sport, in favour of the view that certain values “emerge from sport” (10). They argue that such values – such as community pride and the

⁴² Amateurism may be a recent example of a broader phenomenon that cultural anthropologist Igor Kopytoff describes when discussing how societies (in his terminology) ‘commoditise’ different goods to ‘singularise’ or ‘sacralise’ them and in so doing reinforce existing power structures: “Power often asserts itself symbolically precisely by insisting on its right to singularize an object, or a set or class of objects ... What these monopolies clearly do ... is to expand the visible reach of sacred power by project it onto additional sacralized objects” (Kopytoff 1986: 73).

mutual pursuit of excellence – are undermined or compromised when sport is conceived of in excessively commercial terms. On this view, different social meanings of sport can be meaningfully compared based on how well they enable and express values that “are at the heart of what matters about sport” (10). To take another example, in the 2023 film *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*, the eponymous archaeologist butts heads with his sidekick Helena because of ideological differences about the value of historical artefacts. While Indy is a fan of insisting, of some relic, that “it belongs in a museum”, Helena cares only about selling them to the highest bidder; in Indy’s words she is “all about the money” (Scraps from the Loft 2023). The audience is clearly encouraged to side with Indy in these disputes. One could argue that this is because Indy’s view better accords with the ‘true value’ of historical artefacts, but one need not resort to essentialism to adjudicate between the competing views. A conventionalist could deny that there is some inherent cultural or aesthetic value in ancient relics and still support not treating them as a commodity on the basis that doing so would undermine important ideals – respect for different cultures and curiosity about the past – that can only be realised if we conceive of them as objects of reverence not commercial gain. The conventionalist can compare different accounts of the meaning of goods.

Third, the conventionalist need not require a universal consensus about the social meaning of a good for this meaning to have normative weight in deliberations about how it should be distributed. On this point, Walzer’s exchange with Dworkin is instructive. In response to the latter’s objection that social meanings are “endlessly contested” (Dworkin 1983), Walzer (1983b) argues that within a culture at a specific point in time “there is, in principle, a right decision” about the meaning of a good. This is because “there is a history; there are institutions and practices and underlying ideals” which enable us to “mark off better from worse arguments, deep and inclusive accounts of our social life from shallow and partisan accounts” (Walzer 1983b). This suggests that the conventionalist can appeal to cultural

interpretation – what Reiner (2016) has termed *ethical anthropology*⁴³ – as a method for determining what the shared meaning of a good is within a particular community. When Federal politician Bob Carr asserts that people who choose not to get a COVID-19 vaccination should pay for their own hospital bed when they get sick, one can respond that this is inconsistent with how we understand healthcare in Australia (Sainty & McGowan 2021). If the Californian Government institutes a policy allowing prisoners to pay to upgrade their jail cell, it can be objected to on the grounds that this is a violation of the meaning of punishment and the criminal justice system (Sandel 2012). This is not to suggest that meanings cannot change over time that would render Carr and California’s judgements valid interpretations of the meaning of the good in question.⁴⁴ However, it does suggest that, at a particular place and time, there is a fact of the matter about the meaning of a good (notwithstanding disagreements at the margin) which is, in principle, discoverable by examining a culture’s underlying values.

One might accept this point, but still claim that the scope of the community that determines the conventional meaning of a good – that is, the culture that must be examined to determine the ‘right decision’ about the meaning of a good – is itself contested. However, the conventionalist can allow that the scope of the community that determines the meaning of a good can depend on context and may change over time, but nonetheless insist that the relevant community is not arbitrary and can in principle be clearly defined. Often it will be

⁴³ Incidentally, I agree with Reiner’s (2016: 367) defence of Walzer, when he argues that criticisms “exaggerate ... the degree of consensus to which Walzer appeals.”

⁴⁴ For instance, arguably conservative opposition to same sex marriage in Australia on the grounds that it is inconsistent with the meaning of marriage was, at one point in time, a reasonable argument. But the 2017 postal survey that led to the legalisation of same sex marriage rendered these arguments incoherent (even if they were appropriate before the survey), because it led to a change in the meaning of the institution of marriage.

members of a nation state – given that this is the primary organising unit for political communities and laws pertaining to markets – but it can also be a smaller or larger unit.⁴⁵

This relevant community should be determined by the nature of the moral deliberations taking place. For example, debates among family members about whether it would be disrespectful to sell an old family heirloom that has great sentimental value need not involve enquiring about how people outside the family value the good. In debates among vintage comic books fans about whether it is appropriate to morally condemn ‘flippers’ – that is, people who trade in comic books rather than enthusiastic collectors – it is fans of the medium whose opinions are relevant. In debates about whether to permit a market in prison services, the polity whose criminal justice system would be impacted by the establishment of private prisons is the relevant community. None of this is meant to deny that there will be edge cases where defining the scope of the community is difficult, especially for market exchanges between different cultural groups with radically different conceptions of the goods being traded. But even in such cases, there may be separate grounds to privilege a particular culture’s conception of the meaning of a good – for example on the basis of a historical connection to the good or because one group’s understanding of meaning is morally superior. Thus, concerns about defining the boundaries of the community that determines the conventional meaning of a good do not derail meaning-based objections.

So, one can accept conventionalism about the meaning of goods, and acknowledge that this gives rise to competing conceptions of the meaning of a good, while still arguing that appeals to the meaning of a good can have normative weight in considerations about how the good should be valued or distributed. So long as different social meanings are not incommensurable or beyond normative justification, and so long as we do not require that

⁴⁵ For example, the meaning of human rights arguably transcends any nation, while the meaning of punk is the domain of a particular sub-culture, albeit one that spans multiple nation states.

normative significance depends on universal consensus, the conventionalist has the resources to resist the Contested Meaning Criticism. The criticism requires that we do not take for granted that a particular social meaning of a good is normatively significant. Where there are rival views about the meaning of a good that are pertinent to moral deliberations about commodification, it requires that these be subject to normative scrutiny to consider which understandings ought to be promoted and honoured.

4.2 Responding to the Neutrality Criticism and the Expressive Potential Criticism

The Neutrality Criticism and the Expressive Potential Criticism each put pressure on the anti-commodificationist by pointing to cases where commodification has no effect on the meaning of a good (the former) or a positive effect (the latter). These responses do not refute meaning-based objections for the simple reason that the proponent of such objections is not committed to the claim that commodification always violates the meaning of a good. They only argue that *if* violation occurs, *then* it is morally objectionable. In this sense, dealing with these responses is simple. So long as the proponent of this class of objection is attentive to the specific facts of a case, and is alive to the possibility that commodification may be benign or even beneficial with respect to the meaning of a good, then they need not be concerned with either of these responses. The responses serve as a reminder that a reflexively pessimistic view of markets will not provide for a satisfactory ethics of commodification. Considering whether either of these responses applies in any given case will depend on the facts of the matter. The remainder of this section is thus focussed on the more general question of what addressing these responses requires when making a meaning-based objection.

The Neutrality Criticism requires the proponent of meaning-based objections to demonstrate a conflict between commodification and the meaning of a good. Recall that in criticising

meaning-first accounts of the moral limits of markets, Satz (2010) argues that “there is only a tenuous connection in most cases between the meaning we give to a good and distribution via a market” (81), and that “the overwhelming majority of goods” do not have a meaning that “resists commodification” (84). But the examples she gives of goods whose meaning does, in her view, resist commodification – friendship, love and Nobel Prizes – demonstrate that she is working with a very narrow conception of the verb ‘resist’. She considers only goods that are within scope of the Conceptual Error Objection. But the taxonomy of meaning-based objections I introduced in Chapter 2 sought to show that there are three other ways that monetary valuations or market distributions can violate the meaning of a good. They can shape the character of the goods they distribute through effects on production or consumption (the Transformation Objection). They can express an objectionable attitude towards a good either by making manifest attitudes that participants to exchange have or because of the symbolic significance attached to buying and selling a good (the Bad Attitude Objection). Or they can make unavailable desirable ways of valuing goods, either intrapersonally or interpersonally (the Crowding Out Objection). When any of these objections apply, markets are not simply “instrumental mechanisms for achieving our ends” (82). There are more ways available to demonstrate a connection between the meaning of a good and its method of distribution than Satz allows for in her (admittedly brief) discussion on the topic.

The Expressive Potential Criticism requires the proponent of meaning-based objections to acknowledge that there are cases where commodification positively reflects or transforms the character of a good. This is relevant for each moral meaning-based objection introduced in Chapter 2. Commodification might express respect towards a good or something to which it is related; it might complement non-commodified understandings of a good; or it might positively transform a good by liberating it from a traditional meaning that is itself objectionable. Determining whether a Bad Attitude Objection, Crowding Out Objection or

Transformation Objection holds for a particular good thus depends on a context-sensitive analysis that is attentive to specific features of the case in question.

In this endeavour, it is important to recognise that markets are not monolithic entities.

Markets come in all shapes and sizes – formal legal rules and informal cultural norms regulate and constrain the time, place and mode in which participants to exchange meet, and the terms within which exchanges can occur. For example, whether commercial surrogacy expresses disrespect towards surrogates for their gestational labour likely depends on how much they are paid, how they are treated across the process, how payment for their services is structured, the presence of brokers, and a range of other factors.⁴⁶ Whether the growing market for Australian Aboriginal art expresses respect towards First Nations people and cultures depends on a variety of factors, for instance the extent to which First Nations artists and their communities receive proceeds from the market, and whether the place of sale and the manner of the exchange supports the transmission of cultural knowledge. The effect of commodification on the meaning of goods will often be more about *how* something is sold, not simply *that* it is sold.⁴⁷ And it will also depend on what alternative modes of valuation or methods of distribution are realistically available for the good in question.

I return to these points in Chapter 6 when I develop an account of the relationship between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods and identify features that

⁴⁶ Notably, a recent discussion paper by the Australian Law Reform Commission on proposed changes to the country's surrogacy laws argues that reimbursing surrogates is warranted on expressive grounds, given problems with the current system. The paper observes: "The law does not currently allow payment that recognises the full range of costs and losses associated with being a surrogate ... It can also symbolise a lack of respect for the surrogate within a highly monetised system, where many others are paid" (cited in Cook 2026).

⁴⁷ This statement might seem like a concession to proponents of commodification, depending on how one characterises the moral limits of markets debate. For example, Brennan & Jaworski (2022) distinguish concerns about commodification from concerns about (what they call) business ethics: "Other times, critics' real problem is not with the fact that goods and services are sold, but with *how* the goods and services are sold. Their complaints aren't about commodification, but about business ethics, or about background considerations of distributive justice and the structure of the market" (147, italics in original). Let us leave aside exegetical concerns about whether theirs is a fair characterisation of the moral limits of markets debate. I have offered a broad definition of commodification (as a process that admits of degrees), and I am primarily interested in questions of (what I have called) *substantive commodification* rather than *formal commodification*. So, recognising that what is objectionable about commodification is often about *how* something is sold, not *that* it is sold is not a problematic concession given my account.

distinguish cases that are likely to be objectionable from cases where commodification is benign or morally desirable. For now, we should observe that the Expressive Potential Criticism calls for a context-sensitive approach to ethical deliberations about commodification, underpinned by a nuanced understanding of different ways that commodification can reflect or transform the meaning of goods.

4.3 Responding to the No Moral Upshot Criticism

The No Moral Upshot Criticism challenges the conclusion of meaning-based objections by arguing that *even if* commodification violates the meaning of a good it is not necessarily morally objectionable. We saw that this concern is especially pertinent for Misvaluation Cases. Responding to this concern requires the proponent of meaning-based objection to clarify the nature and strength of the conclusion that the objections claim to make, and the different kinds of moral concerns that meaning-based objections to commodification identify. In this section I consider each point in turn. Recognising that I will return to normative implications of meaning-based objections at several points later in this thesis – when I consider specific criticisms of each moral meaning-based objection – my intention here is to provide remarks of a general nature that I will draw on and develop further in later chapters. As noted in Chapter 2, meaning-based objections can either be framed as making *pro tanto* claims or *all-things-considered* claims about the wrongness of commodification. That is, they can suggest arguments against commodifying a good, which may nonetheless be outweighed by other factors, or they can seek to draw evaluative conclusions about the moral permissibility of commodification. These objections are best understood as making *pro tanto* claims (albeit ones that can be more or less weighty in different cases). This is for two reasons. First, meaning-based objections do not exhaust the ethical terrain of philosophical debates about commodification. As I argued in Chapter 1, there are five other ethical

dimensions that bear on our all-things-considered moral judgments. We might decide that the freedom to voluntarily buy and sell a good, say sexual services, outweighs concerns that such a market would objectionably degrade those providing the service or diminish the value of sex. Even so, concerns that such a market would express and promote the wrong attitudes towards sex, prostitutes and perhaps women more generally, is still a relevant consideration in our all-things-considered moral judgments.

Secondly, while commodifying a good may be morally objectionable because of how it represents or transforms the meaning of a good, it may nonetheless be better than the available alternative modes of valuation or methods of allocation. For example, consider the burgeoning global market for dinosaur fossils. Since 2018, there has been a growing trend in auction houses selling dinosaur specimens to private collectors (The Economist 2023a). Many palaeontologists object to this market; for instance, many science journals have protested by refusing to publish studies on privately held fossils (The Economist 2023b). They have raised concerns that museums and other public institutions will be priced out of the market.⁴⁸ However, as The Economist points out, market incentives help to resolve challenges associated with presumed public ownership of dinosaur remains: “Scientists often lack the resources to find, collect and preserve every fossil with scientific value before it is destroyed by nature. The private sector plugs the gap by responding to these price signals.” The alternative to private ownership of fossils is not, at least straightforwardly, public ownership. In lieu of private ownership, erosion and other weather-related damage threaten to destroy some of these specimens. On this basis, The Economist argues that the market should be regulated, not banned, to preserve the value to the public of privately owned fossils. One might still argue that, in an ideal world, dinosaur fossils should be publicly rather than

⁴⁸ While these might be concerns about distributive justice – given they are about the allocation of scarce resources – this is underpinned by a view that the scientific and historical value of these specimens should prevent them from being privately owned and so can also be construed as meaning-based objections.

privately owned, in part because of their scientific and historical value. Nevertheless, these concerns should not lead to an evaluative conclusion about a market in dinosaur fossils. After all, in our non-ideal world, a market prohibition would be worse than a regulated market.

The second point of clarification involves showing that different kinds of moral conclusions can be drawn from meaning-based objections to commodification. The conclusion of these arguments can vary based on two dimensions: (1) the moral status of the act of commodifying X; and (2) the appropriate response to the commodification of X. In relation to (1), commodifying X can either involve acting morally wrongfully or not. In relation to (2), either some form of collective regulation is justified by the objection, or some form of moral criticism. This gives rise to four different kinds of moral conclusion, as shown in Table 7. The important point is that the justification for preventing or restricting certain forms of commodification need not depend on any agent acting morally badly by commodifying a good. Nor is acting morally badly a sufficient condition for state intervention to prevent or restrict commodification. I briefly explain each type of conclusion below.

Table 7 | A schematic of moral conclusions that can be drawn from meaning-based objections

	<i>Dimension 1. Does the agent act morally wrongfully by commodifying X?</i>	
<i>Dimension 2. What is the appropriate response to commodification of X?</i>	Yes	No
Collective regulation	Type 1	Type 2
Moral criticism	Type 3	Type 4

Type 1 cases occur when an agent acts morally wrongfully when they commodify a certain good and the state is entitled to prevent this from occurring through some form of collective regulation, for example prohibiting the market in the good or intervening to regulate the conduct of market participants. This is the most typical type of case in commodification

debates which, as I noted earlier, are often centred on debates about markets in human body parts or goods associated with the body.

Type 2 cases occur where there are reasons to prevent or curtail certain forms of commodification even if no one acts morally wrongfully, because states have independent reasons or interests to preserve non-commodified understandings of goods. For example, a Native American political community might be justified in preventing its members from selling peyote – notwithstanding the economic benefits that a market might have – because they have an interest in preventing a sacred good from being treated as a commodity.

Likewise, the Australian Government might prevent nationally significant buildings like the Sydney Opera House, the Melbourne Cricket Ground, or the Australian War Memorial from selling advertising space to corporate sponsors for similar reasons. Whether these exchanges ought to be prevented is independent of any moral wrongdoing on the part of those that would buy and sell such goods. The moral permission to intervene is not predicated on the moral wrongness of the action.

Type 3 cases arise where morally wrongful acts of commodification do not provide a legitimate basis for collective regulation but do justify moral criticism or condemnation. This is evident in the context of close personal relationships where a person might have moral duties not to commodify certain goods (such as expressions of friendship and love, or precious family heirlooms) as a result of their relationship to the good in question or to transacting parties. A person who pays a third party to write an apology to their friend for some wrongdoing might be criticised for acting morally wrongfully but it is not within the purview of the state to prevent them from doing so.

Type 4 cases occur where some form of moral criticism or condemnation is justified even if a person did not act morally badly by commodifying a good. This type captures the concerns

raised in the previous chapter about Misvaluation Cases. There we saw that misvaluation, unlike devaluation, is susceptible to the response that it is no one else's business if I treat a good as a commodity so long as I am not hurting anyone. If I am not depriving others of something of value, what is the basis for the moral concern? While misvaluation will often have spillover effects – for the simple reason that meaning-making is a social process – even where it doesn't, it may still warrant moral criticism because it involves failing to live up to some ethical ideal. This can be grounded by appealing to the moral significance associated with having certain evaluative attitudes towards objects of value in ways that are incompatible with commodifying them.⁴⁹ The person who experiences a beautiful sunset or waterfall and can only see the opportunity to make money selling access to tourists has not necessarily acted morally wrongfully – for example, they have not wronged another party – but they can nonetheless be criticised for commodifying the good. While this is a weaker sense in which commodification is morally objectionable, it shows that one can still rightfully be the subject of criticism for certain acts of commodification where one fails to act in a meritorious or virtuous way.

I draw on each of these types of cases in Part 4 of this thesis when I turn to a discussion of four case studies. Supply-side and demand-side regulation of the public sector consulting market can be justified as a Type 1 case. Regulation of housing markets and the sports betting industry can be justified primarily with reference to Type 2 cases. The term 'sell-out' can be understood as a meaningful and coherent normative criticism of musicians with reference to Type 3 and Type 4 cases. For now, the important point is that meaning-based objections can be defended against the No Moral Upshot Criticism by being characterised as *pro tanto*

⁴⁹ In Chapter 6, I use this strategy by drawing on Stephen Darwall's rational care theory of welfare to defend the claim that intrapersonal crowding out can be of moral significance.

arguments against commodification and by appealing to a range of different kinds of moral conclusions that these objections can have.

Conclusions and the road ahead

This chapter has evaluated four general criticisms of meaning-based objections. Against the Contested Meaning Criticism, I argued that both essentialist and conventionalists have the conceptual resources to argue that the meaning of a good can be normatively significant in deciding how it should be valued or allocated. I argued that the Neutrality Criticism and the Expressive Potential Criticism need not trouble the proponent of meaning-based objections, so long as they acknowledge cases where there is no close connection between the meaning of a good and its distribution via markets and cases where commodification positively reflects or transforms the meaning of a good. Against the No Moral Upshot Criticism, I argued that meaning-based objections are best characterised as *pro tanto* arguments against commodification and that they can lead to a range of moral conclusions. Given this, meaning-based objections are not defeated by these general criticisms, though whether any of the objections is successful for a particular contested commodity remains to be seen.

While these general criticisms do not defeat meaning-based objections, they do have implications for moral deliberations about commodification that deploy these objections. First, the responses collectively suggest the importance of a context-sensitive analysis that is attentive to specific facts about the good in question and the community that values it, rather than assuming that commodification will always have similar kinds of effects that cut across different types of goods. Second, the proponent of meaning-based objections needs to characterise the nature of the good in question and – where competing conceptions exist – subject these to independent normative scrutiny to determine which conception should be honoured and promoted. Third, the moral wrongs identified by meaning-based objections are

best understood as pro tanto wrongs. The nature of the moral upshot of such arguments will vary across cases. Sometimes they will provide grounds for regulating markets; in other cases, they will provide grounds for moral criticism. Fourth, given the heterogeneous character of markets, any violations identified by meaning-based objections are likely to be sensitive to market design. To determine how to respond to the harms it is important to consider whether they can be addressed through market design. Finally, conclusions from these objections need to be informed by comparative analysis, which considers how the effects of commodification compare with other modes of valuation or methods of distribution. Each of these conclusions is reflected in the procedure I introduce in Chapter 8.

This brings us to the conclusion of Part 2 of this thesis, which has focussed on general criticisms of meaning-based objections. I now turn to Part 3, in which I revisit each of the moral meaning-based objections. Over the next three chapters, I consider more specific criticisms that can be levelled against each objection and which need to be dealt with to show that each objection is credible. I begin with the Bad Attitude Objection before turning to the Crowding Out Objection and the Transformation Objection.

Part 3.

In this part of the thesis, I consider each of the moral meaning-based objections in detail by evaluating specific criticisms that can be made against each. I argue that each objection can be revised to withstand the criticisms. I identify the conditions that need to be met for a successful instance of each objection. I compile the findings from the theoretical component of this thesis into a framework that can be used to assess the morality of commodification on meaning-based grounds.

Chapter 5. Money Talks

Revisiting the Bad Attitude Objection

Introduction

It is often said that *money talks*. This idiom usually refers to the influence that money has on people's actions, decisions and beliefs. But it could equally be used to describe how buying and selling goods can be an expressive act – it can communicate attitudes independent of the beliefs of participants to exchange. This is because while markets are primarily allocative mechanisms that facilitate the purchase and sale of goods, they also represent a way of valuing of goods (the medium of money) and provide a context in which goods are valued (the marketplace), and thereby express attitudes about how goods should be valued.

Objections that appeal to the expressive character of money and markets are examples of what I have called the Bad Attitude Objection. This is the claim that commodification is morally objectionable if it expresses attitudes towards goods that fail to show appropriate respect. These arguments can appeal either to the attitudes that people actually have when they buy and sell a good, or to what buying and selling that good can communicate independently of the attitudes of transacting parties. Let us call these the *attitude-manifesting* and *attitude-communicating* forms of the objection, respectively. While these are common arguments, they have been subject to criticisms that cast doubt on the relationship between commodification and evaluative attitudes and draw attention to the socially constructed and contingent semiotics of money and markets. By reconsidering the Bad Attitude Objection in light of these criticisms, this chapter sheds light on both possible meanings of the idiom 'money talks' – considering both how it talks and what it says.

This chapter comprises four sections. **Section 5.1** summarises what I have said to date about the Bad Attitude Objection. **Section 5.2** develops two specific criticisms, drawing on Brennan & Jaworski's (2015, 2022) critique of semiotic objections. These are: (1) that commodification does not necessarily show that participants to exchange regard a good to be only instrumentally valuable; and (2) that semiotic norms attached to money and markets are culturally contingent, variable and should be revised when they lead to bad consequences. The final two sections consider what these criticisms mean for the objection. **Section 5.3** argues that the attitude-manifesting form can be defended if it is framed in probabilistic terms; that is, if commodification tends to be psychologically corrosive. **Section 5.4** argues that the attitude-communicating form need not depend on an essentialist semiotics towards money and markets. One can acknowledge that the social meanings attached to money and markets are culturally variable while insisting that they still have moral force in deliberations about commodification.

5.1 A brief recap of the Bad Attitude Objection

The Bad Attitude Objection argues that commodification is objectionable if it expresses an attitude towards a good – or a related person, practice, relationship or institution – that fails to show appropriate respect or regard given the nature or character of that good and the values that it embodies or helps to realise. In Chapter 2, I sketched out this objection. I observed that it is a common objection in the literature, especially in Michael Sandel's Corruption Objection, Margaret Radin's account of how commodification harms personhood, and Elizabeth Anderson's expressive theory of rational action and value. I followed Brennan & Jaworski (2022) in distinguishing two senses in which commodification can express an attitude: it can either make manifest feelings and dispositions that valuing agents actually have towards the good in question, or it can communicate an attitude independent of one's

beliefs and desires as a result of the conventional symbolic significance attached to buying and selling a good. These are the attitude-manifesting and attitude-communicating forms of the objection, respectively.

I showed that, in either case, commodification can express a range of attitudes: substitutability, commensurability, instrumentality, objectification and impersonality. I foreshadowed that a complete account of this objection needs to consider: (1) the relationship between market exchanges and evaluative attitudes; (2) what moral weight to put on the social meanings attached to monetary valuations and market exchanges; and (3) the normative basis for arguing that expressing certain attitudes towards goods by commodifying them is morally objectionable.

5.2 Two specific criticisms of the Bad Attitude Objection

These issues can be explored by considering an influential critique of objections to commodification that appeal to the attitudes expressed by monetary valuations and market exchanges that has been developed by Brennan & Jaworski (2022). They advance two criticisms against what they call semiotic objections to commodification. These target the attitude-manifesting form and the attitude-communicating form, respectively.⁵⁰

5.2.1 A criticism of the attitude-manifesting form of the objection

A concern for the attitude-manifesting form of the Bad Attitude Objection is the presence of many examples of goods that are bought and sold while being regarded as intrinsically

⁵⁰ Recall that their taxonomy of semiotic objections, discussed in Chapter 2, comprises three objections: the Mere Commodity Objection; the Wrong Signal Objection; and the Wrong Currency Objection. The first is an example of an attitude-manifesting Bad Attitude Objection, albeit an especially strong one. It claims that when someone buys or sells a good they necessarily regard it as something that has merely instrumental value. The latter two are examples of attitude-communicating Bad Attitude Objections. They appeal to attitudes expressed by market transactions independent of the beliefs and desires of participants to exchange. The latter is narrower, as it argues only that certain forms of commodification are wrong in the context of close personal relationships. The criticisms they develop to each of the semiotic objections pose significant challenges for both forms of the Bad Attitude Objection

valuable by the very people exchanging them. Brennan & Jaworski claim, “In fact, objects routinely are bought and sold without the buyers or sellers considering those objects to be mere commodities” (72). They offer pets, artworks and Catholic devotionals as examples. Moreover, they observe, this objection is actually a complaint about attitudes rather than commodification per se: “it’s at most an objection to the attitudes buyers and sellers might have or lack while buying or selling. So long as buyers and sellers have the right attitudes, then the objection doesn’t hold” (75).

They advance this criticism against (what they call) the Mere Commodity Objection which, as we saw in Chapter 2, involves a very strong claim about the relationship between buying and selling a good and regarding it as having only instrumental value. This is that when someone buys or sells a good they necessarily regard it as something that has merely instrumental value. The proponent of the Bad Attitude Objection need not make this claim.⁵¹ An obvious move for the anti-commodificationist is to accept that commodifying a good does not *necessarily* involve disregarding its intrinsic value; rather, they can make the more moderate argument that there is a *strong tendency* for goods that are incorporated into markets to no longer be valued intrinsically. In fairness to Brennan & Jaworski, they acknowledge this point: “someone might respond to our argument by instead trying to argue that when people buy and sell certain objects, this tends over time to *cause* them to view the objects as mere commodities” (74, italics in original). The main thrust of their criticisms of this objection – which they call a *semiotic corruption objection* – is that it is not supported by empirical evidence and that, even if markets do corrupt attitudes, these effects can be prevented through market design.⁵² When I consider how the attitude-manifesting form of the

⁵¹ Indeed, in the second edition of their book, Brennan & Jaworski explicitly acknowledge this point: “To clarify, we do not believe that any contemporary philosopher or theorist accepts this argument ... But demonstrating how and why this argument goes wrong can help shed light on why non-necessary and non-essentialist arguments go wrong” (2022: 79-80).

⁵² For example, they argue: “to say that money as such or markets as such turn some good of practice into a mere commodity is to ignore the fact that commodification only occurs when money is interpreted in some specific way” (150). They go on to

Bad Attitude Objection should be revised in Section 5.3, I consider this further, and provide some explanatory mechanisms to account for how commodification might have a tendency to corrupt the attitudes of participants to exchange.

5.2.2 A criticism of the attitude-communicating form of the objection

A concern for the attitude-communicating form of the Bad Attitude Objection is the fact that semiotic norms that imbue monetary transactions and market exchanges with meaning are culturally contingent and variable. Thus, what one society regards to be a disrespectful market exchange may be perfectly fine in another society. Brennan & Jaworski's critique of the stronger semiotic objections comprises two claims which bear directly on this form of the Bad Attitude Objection. They argue, (1) the meanings expressed by market exchanges are contingent and socially constructed; and (2) consequentialist considerations should allow us to judge the semiotic norms that a culture attaches to money and markets. Let us call these the *Social Construction Claim* and the *Consequences Judge Semiotics Claim*, respectively.

According to the Social Construction Claim, "If there are no semiotic-independent objections to markets in certain goods or services, then the meaning of market exchanges in those goods and services is probably just a contingent, relative social construct. There is probably no essential or inherent meaning to market exchanges" (83). To advance this claim, they present a range of sociological and anthropological evidence, drawing especially on the work of Viviana Zelizer, to argue that there is no essential meaning to money or market exchanges. They provide an extended list of commercial transactions that were viewed, in certain times and places, as respectful, or at least not as offensive as a contemporary Western reader might find them.⁵³ From this, they conclude that anti-commodificationist arguments that markets

argue, in response to arguments that monetary payments can reduce intrinsic motivation, that one can "alter the manner of payment" to "avoid a commodification attitude" (150).

⁵³ For instance, giving monetary gifts to intimate friends and family expressed affection in the United States between the 1870s and 1930s. Husbands giving their wives money for sex expresses respect among the Merina people in Madagascar. By

essentially signal disrespect towards the goods in question or estrangement from the participants to exchange is overstated. It is merely the cultural biases of Western liberal philosophers masquerading as a priori truth. And while one could insist, in such cases, that people really are expressing disrespect towards the good in question (they just don't know it), that seems culturally insensitive and empirically unsound.

They then turn to the Consequences Judge Semiotics Claim. Given that the social meanings attached to market activities are contingent, they are at least in principle revisable. Moreover, imbuing certain actions, words and objects with symbolic meaning can come at a significant cost – whether it is the practice of eating rotting flesh to express respect for the dead (the Fore tribe of Papua New Guinea until the 1950s) or regarding selling a kidney as degrading (most countries around the world today). The former causes prion infections; the latter reduces the quality and length of life of people on dialysis. In both cases, they argue, the harmful consequences of these practices gives strong grounds for revising a culture's semiotics to change the symbolic meaning that we attach to certain practices. Importantly, this is not just the claim that consequences trump or outweigh semiotic considerations, but rather that “consequential considerations allow us to *judge* the semiotics of market transactions” (83, *italics in original*).⁵⁴ If revising a society's code of meaning is not possible, they argue that individuals are morally justified if they “conscientiously refuse to participate in the semiotics of one's culture” (96). If this criticism is successful, it would refute the attitude-communicating form of the Bad Attitude Objection by showing that semiotic norms towards

contrast, some markets that are generally seen as acceptable today were previously treated with scepticism or contempt. For instance, when the market for life insurance was established in the United States in the late-nineteenth century it was seen as expressing the desire to profit from death (Brennan & Jaworski 2022: 84-91).

⁵⁴ Noting this characterisation of the Consequences Judge Semiotics Claim, it cannot be reconciled with the argument for *pro tanto* wrongness that arises from the Bad Attitude Objection. If Brennan & Jaworski were simply claiming that consequences outweigh semiotic considerations, then it would be perfectly consistent with the conclusion of the Bad Attitude Objection.

money and markets have no moral weight (independent of their consequences) in moral deliberations about commodification.

Having now presented two criticisms to the Bad Attitude Objection, in the following two sections I consider how each form of the objection can be revised to withstand the criticisms.

5.3 Revising the attitude-manifesting Bad Attitude Objection

To revise the attitude-manifesting form of the Bad Attitude Objection, we should make three concessions in light of Brennan & Jaworski's critique. First, we should accept that the source of the moral concern with this objection lies in the attitudes that people may have when buying and selling a good. The wrong-making feature associated with commodification, then, is that it facilitates or encourages objectionable attitudes towards goods. Second, we should acknowledge that a person regarding something as a commodity clearly does not entail that they regard it as a *mere* commodity – a point obvious from many goods that we interact with in daily life. Finally, we should accept that the relationship between commodification and the attitudes of valuing agents is not straightforward, and is ultimately a matter of empirical investigation rather than a priori reasoning. It is likely to differ considerably based on the design and structure of a market for a good. For example, where a market is designed in a way that honours or cultivates non-commodified understandings of the objects of exchange, it is less likely to promote objectionable attitudes towards the good in question.

Notwithstanding these concessions, the attitude-manifesting form of the Bad Attitude Objection can be defended in two ways: first, by characterising the objection in terms of a strong tendency for commodification to cultivate objectionable attitudes; and second by arguing that the empirical claim underpinning this form of the objection is credible. The remainder of this section considers each point in turn.

5.3.1 A tendency to express and promote objectionable attitudes

Even allowing that commodification does not necessarily entail having a particular attitude towards the object of exchange, it might be morally problematic because it creates a risk that an objectionable attitude will be formed, cultivated, encouraged or exacerbated among participants to exchange or third parties. To understand this characterisation of the objection, consider drink driving. Setting questions of legality aside, it is intuitively plausible that it is morally impermissible to drive under the influence of alcohol. This is not because it always causes harm to people or property – clearly it doesn't – but because it creates a morally significant risk of causing these harms; one that is sufficiently weighty that individuals should not do it and governments should not tolerate it. Even though, to use Brennan & Jaworski's language, drink driving is not *essentially* harmful – seeing as it does not always lead to harmful outcomes – this does not excuse the practice. This is just one example where risk of harm factors into the moral assessment of an action – but it is commonplace in philosophical theorising and everyday moral reasoning.⁵⁵

The attitude-manifesting form of the Bad Attitude Objection can be grounded in a similar way; that is, by understanding commodification as a process that can create morally significant risks that objectionable attitudes towards goods will be formed or exacerbated. The state may be justified in preventing certain forms of commodification where there is a legitimate interest in preventing the cultivation of objectionable attitudes towards certain goods.⁵⁶ Of course, the benefits of creating a market for a good may outweigh the risk that objectionable attitudes are formed or exacerbated, the likelihood that such attitudes might be

⁵⁵ For example, understanding the harms associated with negligence and recklessness, and characterising the permissibility of carbon emissions and drone strikes requires considering the likelihood and impact of harms that may not eventuate.

⁵⁶ Moreover, even if carefully calibrating market settings to prevent the cultivation of such attitudes is technically possible, this may be a very risky strategy in the context of limited state capacity and the potential unintended consequences of establishing markets in some good. I raise this point to cast doubt on whether careful 'market design' is a feasible strategy. Regulation in practice may not live up to regulation in theory.

formed or exacerbated may be sufficiently low, or the harms associated with objectionable attitudes might be minimal. This will depend on a case-by-case basis. For example, if creating a market for adopted children would have a tendency to either promote a commodified self-conception among children or an instrumental mode of regard towards children among some biological or adoptive parents, this would provide compelling reasons for governments to prohibit this market, especially if the upsides are not significant. By contrast, given the enormous potential benefits of permitting the purchase and sale of kidneys for those on waiting lists, risks that such a market might cultivate objectionable attitudes towards the human body or towards those selling a kidney are likely to be outweighed in an all-things-considered assessment. A comprehensive moral assessment might find that the likelihood of forming objectionable attitudes is low, or that the impact of such attitudes is not material, at least compared to the potential benefits of commodification. In any event, this form of the Bad Attitude Objection still has a role to play in an all-things-considered assessment of the permissibility of commodification.

5.3.2 Mechanisms to account for the empirical premise

Even if we accept that the objection can be characterised in this way, the opponent can still dispute the claim that commodification tends to cultivate objectionable modes of regards towards goods. This is a core strategy of Brennan & Jaworski's critique of various arguments that markets corrupt character. They write, "Since the Corruption Objection relies upon empirical premises, its proponents owe us proper empirical evidence that such corruption does in fact take place. What proponents really need to do is supply us with the kind of sustained empirical analysis that would merit publication in a social scientific academic journal" (2022: 129). This kind of empirical analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter, though it is important in a case-by-case assessment. Moreover, consistent with my context-sensitive approach, I am happy to concede that the empirical premise will apply in some

cases and not others. We need not resort to overarching claims about the psychological impacts of markets. My more modest goal here is to show that the empirical premise underpinning the objection is credible. Below, I suggest three mechanisms that could explain this effect. This shows the kind of facts that need to be established for a successful Bad Attitude Objection.

One explanation appeals to what Walsh & Lynch (2008: 12) call the *morally salient features of money* which are “features of money that impact on our understanding and conception of what has value and, particularly, what has moral value.” Money functions as a *universal medium of exchange* that can satisfy a wide range of needs and wants. As a result, when something acquires an exchange value – and particularly if this exchange value increases over time – valuing a good as an end-in-itself can impose an increasingly large opportunity cost, as the good can be used instrumentally to acquire other objects of value. Money is also a *store of value* which – unlike goods subject to spoilation – has no upper bound. It is an object of potentially unlimited acquisition. In a society that venerates money and those with a lot of it, the temptation to value goods for the price they can receive on a market is especially great. In addition, as a *universal substitute and commensurating device* that places all commodities in relationship to one another through a common measure of value, money provides a psychologically alluring veneer of simple and quantifiable objectivity. In these ways, monetary valuations are alluring. If people tend to value goods in monetary terms once a market price is attached to them, then this lends credence to the view that commodifying a good tends to promote instrumental modes of regard towards it – that is, valuing goods in terms of their exchange value.

Another explanation appeals to *market norms and frames*. Framing effects refer to circumstances where contextual facts about a situation – such as how information about the situation is presented – shape people’s beliefs, perceptions, judgments, attitudes and

behaviours. The substantial social sciences literature on framing effects is relevant to debates about commodification because markets are social and economic institutions with distinctive norms that structure relationships and modes of interaction between participants to exchange. Framing effects are a common mechanism used to experimental results where monetary incentives reduce intrinsic motivation. For example, Lindenberg & Frey (1993) argue that motivation crowding effects occur when a ‘gain frame’ crowds out a ‘normative frame.’ Similarly, Anderson (2000) appeals to framing effects to explain why residents of a Swiss town that was identified as a site for a nuclear waste facility expressed less support for the proposal after they were offered compensation: “the offer of compensation changed the perceived relationship of the Swiss government to the town residents and thus changed the practical identity they assumed in contemplating the waste facility” (197). When market norms are introduced into a situation it can change how parties understand the situation that they are in. By framing interactions in market terms, commodification can encourage participants to adopt transactional modes of engagement with each other, or to view an item of exchange in instrumental terms.

A final explanatory mechanism to account for how commodification cultivates instrumental modes of regard appeals to the *effects of money and profit on beliefs and behaviours*. Money is often a powerful incentive. If an activity becomes market-driven in some way – for example, through privatisation, deregulation or liberalisation – other non-market values, motives and goals may be disregarded altogether, or at least subordinated to the ultimate end of profit maximisation. For example, Hermann (2021) draws on a range of empirical evidence to argue that the commodification of healthcare, education, agriculture and housing shapes how these goods are produced, distributed and consumed by affecting the incentives and attitudes of market participants.

To conclude, commodification may have a tendency to promote instrumental modes of regard among participants to exchange because of (1) features of money that make monetary valuations alluring, (2) the framing effects of market norms, and (3) the influence of the profit motive. These mechanisms should be investigated to establish whether or not the empirical premise of the attitude-manifesting form of the objection holds in particular cases.

5.4 Revising the attitude-communicating form of the Bad Attitude Objection

Revising the attitude-communicating form of the Bad Attitude Objection requires a more extended consideration of Brennan & Jaworski's critique of the stronger semiotic objections. This section begins by responding to their criticism on its own terms before showing forms of the objection that withstand their criticisms.

5.4.1 Evaluating Brennan & Jaworski's critique

Recall that the Social Construction Claim appeals to the contingent semiotic norms attached to money and markets. However, one can accept cultural variability in the meanings attached to money and markets without conceding that they are *merely* contingent. This is because money and markets have certain features that constrain or influence the social meanings attached to them. Brennan & Jaworski are at pains to emphasise the heterogeneous character of markets because one of their main argumentative strategies is to show that their opponents are objecting to *how* something is sold not *that* it is sold. But in so doing, they arguably do not give sufficient regard to the institutional features, tendencies and dispositions of markets. As Hodgson (2021: 155-156) puts it in a review of the first edition of their book: "Variety or plasticity within a kind, does not imply the kind does not exist. Triangles are highly varied and can change. That does not mean there is no essence to a triangle."

Three examples suffice to make this point. First, as a universal commensurating device, monetary valuation presupposes that goods can be valued in monetary terms without, in Sunstein's (1993: 796) words, "*doing violence to our considered judgments about how these goods are best characterized*" (italics in original). However, this is precisely what is at dispute in some cases; for example, whether the methods of cost benefit analysis should be applied to environmental goods (Sagoff 2007). Second, as a fungible and abstract measure of value, money tends to be impersonal. Likewise with market relations, which tend to be between participants to exchange who have no shared past or future and who do not owe each other anything outside the transaction.⁵⁷ Third, as market participants tend to be individuals or single entities, markets tend to presuppose the divisibility and exclusive appropriation of the goods in question. But some contested cases in commodification debates – such as Anderson's (1993) concerns about dividing up the commons or Hirsch's (2005) concerns about parks becoming country clubs – are about goods whose value depends on being indivisible and available to all. These features suggest some limits on the extent to which attitudes expressed by money exchanges are capable of being revised. There may be significant cultural variation, but these systems of meaning are not completely arbitrary.⁵⁸

This point is acknowledged, and indeed repeatedly emphasised, by Zelizer (1994) in her sociological account of the rise of 'gift money' – money given as a gift to friends and family – in the United States in the early-twentieth century. She argues, "Money as a gift was problematic precisely because the call for display of intimate, affectionate knowledge of the recipient and the relationship contradicted, to some extent, the impersonality of the many

⁵⁷ Of course, this is not always the case – when I buy my morning coffee at the O'Connor shops I tend to have a conversation with the barista; we have what Aristotle might call a friendship of utility – but impersonality is nonetheless a tendency of market exchanges.

⁵⁸ One might object that none of the three cases I raise in this section are inherent to monetary valuation and market exchanges. That is, monetary valuations and market exchanges do not necessarily presuppose commensurability; market relations are not necessarily impersonal; and goods can be purchased by or for a community. However, my point here is about the *tendencies* of money and markets rather than inherent features of all monetary valuations and market exchanges.

other settings and relations in which money transfers took place” (90-91). Elsewhere she talks about the “sensitive task” and the “challenge” of turning an “apparently autonomous, socially indifferent currency into a sentimental personalized gift” (84). Much of her account is devoted to how this counterintuitive process occurs – what she calls ‘earmarking’. For Zelizer, money is not a blank canvas on which any possible social meaning can be painted; it has features that make it particularly unsuited for particular ends. And yet, in invoking her work to make a philosophical argument, Brennan & Jaworski emphasise the cultural variability of meanings attached to money without acknowledging the hard work that goes into attaching meaning to monetary exchanges to which money is not well suited. The social meaning of money is contingent, but not *merely* contingent. By extension, we should expect either that the degree to which meanings attached to market exchanges can be revised is limited by the inherent features of money and markets, or that the costs of revision may be especially significant.⁵⁹

While we have reason to dispute the Social Construction Claim, we can also accept the claim but dispute its implications. On this line of thinking, semiotic concerns about market exchanges do not require that money and markets have an essential meaning that is constant across time and space. A conventionalist version of such an objection, for example, can be attentive to the social meanings of goods within a culture at a specific point in its history.⁶⁰ In

⁵⁹ These features of money and markets might explain why it is common for societies to resist the commodification of sacred goods. For example, in a cultural anthropological analysis of commodities, Kopytoff (1986) contrasts *commoditisation*, which he sees as a process that homogenises value, with *singularisation*, which societies use to resist commoditisation and to “set apart a certain portion of their environment, marking it as “sacred” ... Culture ensures that some things remain unambiguously singular” (73). He goes on to claim, “In every society, there are things that are publicly precluded from being commoditized” (73). This partly occurs to ensure that such goods are sacralised through singularisation. I will not hinge my critique of Brennan & Jaworski’s arguments on competing interpretations of the available anthropological evidence, but it is worth noting that their claim about cultural variability in semiotic norms attached to money and markets is consistent with there being underlying commonalities across cultures. The particular goods that cultures regard as sacred might differ considerably (whether it is whale carcasses, ceramic drinking mugs or albino elephants) but the common thread might be that cultures have strong conventional norms against commodifying sacred goods.

⁶⁰ We have already seen in earlier chapters that Walzer’s account is an explicitly conventionalist one. Likewise, Taylor (2019: 169) has argued, in defending Sandel against objections raised by Brennan & Jaworski, that the former is “participating in a debate over where the moral limits of money-based exchange should lie *within a particular social context*.” (italics in original).

fairness to Brennan & Jaworski, they acknowledge this point – in what they call the Argument from Civic Respect – according to which, “Even if the meaning of markets is contingent, it remains the case that some markets are contingently seen by one’s culture as disrespectful, and this provides at least *prima facie* grounds for refraining from engaging in these markets” (99, italics in original). However, this assumes a false dichotomy that is apparent throughout their argument: either the meaning of money and markets is “part of the moral fabric of the universe” (107) or it is a matter of polite courtesy. In their words, “Semiotic objections have force only in the way manners have force” (108). This does not do justice to what an intuitive sense of repugnance towards money and markets might actually involve. To explore this, I now turn to the second prong of their criticism.

Recall the Consequences Judge Semiotic Claim argues that semiotic norms attached to money and markets should be judged based on their consequences. The thought here is that if cultural hang-ups about certain markets being disrespectful or morally repugnant lead to bad outcomes or impose a high opportunity cost⁶¹, then we should revise our interpretative practices (as a society) or we are justified in rejecting them (as individuals). Again, we can dispute the claim or accept the claim but deny its implications.

One way to critique Brennan & Jaworski’s claim is to argue that semiotic norms can have moral weight independent of consequentialist considerations and are not exhausted by these considerations. Consider cases where people have moral duties not to commodify certain goods in virtue of belonging to a community with particular contingent semiotic norms attached to money and markets. For example, the sin of simony forbids the purchase and sale of ecclesiastical privileges and sacred objects in the Christian church. One need not appeal to

⁶¹ Brennan & Jaworski give the example of a live kidney market and the Pentagon’s proposed Policy Analysis Market (which would enable people to bet on whether certain events would occur, such as terrorist strikes or wars). They argue that if these markets worked to solve the problems they were intended to address, then we should not forbid them on semiotic grounds; rather, we should modify our semiotic norms towards these markets.

bad consequences to morally condemn someone for committing the sin of simony; it is a moral obligation owed by members of the church. While Brennan & Jaworski might respond by characterising cases such as this as mere conventional politeness – rather than anything to do with moral truth – this presupposes a dichotomy between morality and manners that many would resist. To take one example, Owens (2022) argues that conventional rules can have moral force independent of whether they mirror moral principles or are instrumentally conducive to achieving good outcomes. For Owens, conventions can bind us because being bound by them realises ‘deontic value’ – conventions give meaning and order to our lives, and our existences would be impoverished without them. It is, in short, good for us to be bound by socially recognised obligations. On Owens’ view, when we breach such conventions, we are rightly met with sanctions or with normative reactive attitudes such as blame and resentment. While I will not defend Owens’ view here, I raise this point to show a basis for resisting Brennan & Jaworski’s hasty conclusion that abiding by culturally contingent semiotic norms towards money is merely a matter of polite courtesy.

We can also accept the Consequences Judge Semiotics Claim but dispute the implications that Brennan & Jaworski suggest it has. This is for two reasons. First, prevailing attitudes within a society that certain market exchanges signal disrespect might not be mere superstition or polite courtesy – there might be good reasons for them. Socially constructed meanings attached to money might be part of a broader system of interpretative practices and beliefs that are important to realise or safeguard important social ideals and values. For instance, Sandel’s concerns about advertising in baseball stadiums arguably reflect concerns that important ideals in sport (such as the mutual pursuit of excellence and community identification) are undermined when sport is treated as a commodity. It is not as if commercial sponsorships and advertising in baseball stadiums necessarily undermine these ideals. But attaching certain meanings to sports stadiums and money may serve as guardrails

for protecting these ideals. Or consider former US president Harry Truman’s rejection of opportunities for personal enrichment after leaving the office: “I could never lend myself to any transaction, however respectable, that would commercialise the prestige and dignity of the office of the presidency” (cited in *The Economist* 2025). Even *respectable* business offers were off the table for Truman. It is not as if these would constitute or lead to political corruption. Nevertheless, safeguarding the integrity of public office might require a strongly anti-market semiotic norm.

Second, Brennan & Jaworski’s arguments presume and reflect a deflationary account of semiotic objections which does not exhaust concerns that one might have about commodification on expressivist grounds. On their view, semiotic objections must be independent of other deontic and consequentialist concerns to fit the bill. For example, they say such arguments “are often treated as stand-alone arguments independent of non-semiotic worries about exploitation, misallocation, rights violations, self-destructive behavior, harm to others and (sometimes) character corruption” (60). This is unduly narrow. After all, attitudes expressed through commodification can lead to non-semiotic harms.⁶² For example, objections to prostitution markets or commercial surrogacy on the grounds that they perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes invoke the expressive meaning of certain market exchanges but identify an independent source of moral concern about these forms of commodification. Even where surrogacy and prostitution are not exploitative – given appropriate regulation to ensure consent, for example – they still might express and promote a pernicious and objectifying attitude towards women. They might increase the risk that an

⁶² Dick (2018) supports this line of reasoning by distinguishing between pure and impure semiotic objections; the former are the kind that locate the source of the moral wrong in the semiotics themselves; the latter “invoke semiotic concerns not as the source but instead as the cause of moral problems or wrongs” (229). Of note, Brennan & Jaworski argue that impure semiotic objections are “easy to overcome because you can eliminate them by eliminating *other* problems with the exchange” (2022: 62, italics in original). But this assumes that expressive features of market exchanges have no independent moral weight, or are reducible and derived from non-semiotic considerations, a claim I disputed above.

individual harbours these attitudes, or they may contribute to a social environment in which these attitudes flourish.

As the examples demonstrate, one can accept Brennan & Jaworski's claim that semiotic norms should be judged according to their consequences, but reject the implication that this renders semiotic objections unsound. This is because their claim presupposes a false dichotomy between semiotics and consequences that does not acknowledge that the expressive meaning of market exchange can lead to bad consequences; or that contingent norms that certain exchanges express disrespect can help to prevent bad consequences.

Having evaluated Brennan & Jaworski's criticism, the remainder of this section develops two general forms of this objection that withstand their critique: first, a consequentialist objection that appeals to the benefits of anti-market semiotic norms or the costs of establishing pro-market semiotic norms; and second, a deontological objection that argues that expressing attitudes through commodification is wrong because it infringes a duty. The former can be used to justify collective regulation to prevent or restrict commodification, while the latter is principally an argument that an individual acts badly when they commodify a good. Using the terminology introduced in Chapter 4, the consequentialist form of the objection draws Type 1 and Type 2 conclusions (grounds for collective regulation whether or not an agent acts morally wrongfully) whereas the deontological form principally draws Type 3 conclusions (grounds for moral criticism where the agent acts morally wrongfully).

5.4.2 A consequentialist form of the attitude-communicating Bad Attitude Objection

The first viable form of the objection is grounded in the consequences of expressing attitudes towards commodified goods within a particular social context, given the prevailing semiotic norms of that society. This objection invites the consequentialist assessment of semiotic

norms that Brennan & Jaworski argue for, but rejects the conclusion that this will find anti-market semiotic norms wanting. This could be for two reasons. Anti-market semiotic norms might, all things considered, produce better consequences than their pro-market counterparts. Alternatively, the cost of revising anti-market semiotic norms to more ‘market friendly’ norms might be significant, even if such pro-market semiotic norms are on balance better than their anti-market counterparts. Let us consider each in turn.

In the first case, anti-market norms function as more than mere superstition, as Brennan & Jaworski suppose, and instead serve as guardrails for defending things of value that we ought to care about – things which risk being misvalued or devalued when they are commodified.

The examples I cited above from Sandel and Truman are instances where anti-market semiotic norms might plausibly defend things of value. Such norms are by no means costless – they forego a means of generating revenue from advertising or from certain business transactions, respectively. However, they plausibly have important functions – for example, insulating sacred artefacts or offices from market norms that may corrode their value. A detailed case-by-case assessment is required to consider whether these anti-market semiotic norms are ultimately justified based on the consequences. But, if we assume for argument’s sake that they are justified, then the expressive significance that these norms give to market transactions – namely that they express disrespect towards the good in question – provide reasons to prohibit, limit or condemn certain forms of commodification.

The commodification of expressions of intimacy provides a useful example. Consider Spike Jonze’s 2013 science-fiction film *Her* which depicts a society in which such forms of commodification are normalised. The protagonist works for an organisation called *Beautiful Handwritten Letters* in which professional writers compose letters on behalf of clients to send to their lovers, friends or family. The intimate relations that receive the letters are not being deceived about the true author of the letters; rather, it is a world in which one can express

one's affection for another person by paying for a third party to write a letter on one's behalf. The semiotic norms of the world in *Her* are different from our world; its inhabitants express their affection in personal relationships in different ways. They can show how much they care for a family member, a friend or a romantic partner by paying a person to write them a letter. Importantly, there are benefits to this commodified service. For example, those that struggle to express their thoughts can pay for letters of a personal nature, letters that the recipients cherish. Nevertheless, given a theme of the film is technology-fuelled alienation and isolation, the audience is invited to be critical of the semiotic norms of the world depicted in *Her*. And for good reason. A means of expressing affection and intimacy in personal relationships has been outsourced to a third party. Through its commodification, this expression of intimacy has been devalued because it no longer expresses the particular, authentic views of a friend, family member or lover. Rather it expresses the views of a paid professional who is not party to the relationship. Moreover, those that use this service likely deprive themselves of an important way that people make sense of, build and sustain their close relationships.

While such practices appear to make sense in the pro-market semiotic norms of the world depicted, it is not a world we should want to live in. We can thus condemn the normalisation of commodification of expressions of intimacy on the basis that they express objectionable attitudes and normalise practices that devalue intimate personal relationships. This does not mean one needs to be blind to the undeniable cultural contingency of semiotic norms – for example, the fact that it is offensive in our society to purchase a wedding toast but not a wedding cake – but it does involve recognising that these norms are not entirely arbitrary. They help to defend and sustain values and interests which are threatened by commodification. Arguments that such forms of commodification involve expressing an

objectionable attitude towards objects of value may be justified based on consequences, because an alternative world with pro-market semiotic norms would be a less desirable world.

Another way that the attitude-communicating form of the Bad Attitude Objection can be defended on consequentialist grounds is in terms of the costs involved in revising anti-market semiotic norms. These costs may exceed the benefits of pro-market semiotic norms, even if such norms are, on the whole, better than their anti-market counterparts. Earlier, I noted that semiotic norms towards money and markets may admit of cultural variability without being *merely* contingent; that is, they may arise because of inherent features of money and markets. In this context, attempting to revise semiotic norms may be very difficult or costly.

This idea is central to Maguire & Brown's (2019: 3) efforts to develop a "broadly consequentialist semiotic objection" to commodification on the basis that "markets undermine a range of valuable social practices." They identify several social practices – caring, testimony and esteem – that are governed by non-market norms and in which expressive activities play important roles.⁶³ They argue that markets in behaviours associated with caring, testimony and esteem threaten to undermine these practices because market transactions, as a kind of voluntary exchange for consideration, serve as a 'signal distortion'. For example, if selling book acknowledgements became widespread, the practice of acknowledging would become ineffective because the market would reduce the ability for such an action to operate as a signal of genuine regard for the person. If it became commonplace for marketing agencies to pay people to recommend products to their friends, it would be difficult to know whether someone was genuinely recommending a product or whether they were doing so in exchange for a kick back.⁶⁴ There may be benefits to markets

⁶³ For example, doing something for someone at a personal cost is a way to signal that you care for them. Signalling reliability and genuine belief are important for testimonials and demonstrating that one holds something in esteem.

⁶⁴ In their words, "Markets in behaviours associated with signalling care, or esteem, or testimony will disrupt and distort these other signals in the first instance by defeating the evidence needed for uptake, but eventually by defeating the standing

in behaviours associated with care, esteem or testimony. Nevertheless, exchanges in such markets may express attitudes that undermine these valuable social practices or which require costly establishment of alternative higher-order disambiguating signals to maintain them. In either case, the costs of transitioning to pro-market semiotic norms may exceed the benefits even if the pro-market norm has some benefits.

Consider that it is commonplace in Vipassana Buddhist meditation retreats to forbid remuneration of staff or even to give donations directly to the volunteers. While this is partly to ensure that those running the retreats are there for the right reasons, this also functions as a signal to all those involved – participants and staff – that the retreats are not commercial activities. The strict prohibition on remuneration has an expressive significance, signalling that the retreat is an intrinsically valuable activity that promotes spiritual growth rather than a money-making venture. Indeed, this is perhaps what differentiates such retreats most clearly from religious cults. There may be benefits to changing this anti-market semiotic norm. For example, it might allow more people to work at the retreats who cannot afford to do so without remuneration. One can imagine a more market friendly semiotic norm that demonstrates that the retreats are at arms-length from commerce while not requiring a costly strict ban. However, trying to revise this semiotic norm risks sending a mixed signal about retreats or failing to adequately express their sanctity and non-commercial significance. Perhaps efforts to reform the semiotic norm would be deleterious to how the retreats are perceived, deterring prospective participants or tainting the experience for those who take part. In the context of this uncertainty – even recognising the potential for revising semiotic norms to be more money friendly – there are good expressivist reasons to maintain a strict prohibition on money changing hands.

of the semiotic norm as a norm. Unless alternative signals can be quickly established — and ones that are not themselves subject to further parasitic distortion — these practices will be threatened” (Maguire & Brown 2019: 14).

From this discussion we have seen that the attitude-communicating form of the Bad Attitude Objection can be defended against Brennan & Jaworski's criticisms on consequentialist grounds. Semiotic norms that imbue certain market institutions and transactions with expressive significance can be justified because they preserve values that we have reason to protect, or because the costs involved in revising semiotic norms to be more hospitable to markets may be very high.

5.4.3 A deontological form of the attitude-communicating Bad Attitude Objection

The attitude-communicating Bad Attitude Objection can also be defended if expressing an attitude towards a good by commodifying it would infringe a duty that a person owes to treat a good (or related person, practice or custom) with respect.⁶⁵ A person or institution might have an obligation to value a good in a certain way, and this duty might be infringed because commodifying the good misvalues or devalues it. This provides grounds for objecting to forms of commodification on the basis of the attitude expressed through commodification (but not necessarily held by the commodifying person), independent of downstream consequences. Unlike the consequentialist form of the objection, which usually provides grounds for collective regulation, this form of the objection can typically be used to ground claims that an agent acts morally badly when they commodify a good.

A duty of this kind might be more or less general in nature; that is, some people might owe a duty to treat a good in particular way given their specific relation to the good, or it might apply to an entire community. For example, a punk musician choosing to sign a major label record deal could reasonably be said to be infringing a duty owed as a member of this

⁶⁵ Here I draw on Taylor's (2022) discussion of expressivist objections to commodification. He demonstrates the viability of (in his word) 'non-consequentialist prescriptive expressive justifications of law and policy' by drawing on expressivist arguments in legal and moral theory, especially those made by Cass Sunstein, Elizabeth Anderson and Ronald Dworkin.

community to treat their music in a non-commercial way. Aligning with mainstream music institutions amounts to devaluing their music, given the norms of the community in which they are a part.⁶⁶ Likewise in the Commodified Bar Mitzvah case from Chapter 2, where Seth and Ryan propose to hold a Bar Mitzvah to raise money to pay healthcare expenses for their injured friend. The objections raised by Seth's father to this practice have force because the family is Jewish and this would infringe duties they owe as a result of their faith to treat Jewish traditions with appropriate reverence. Hosting such a Bar Mitzvah would devalue the specific instance of the rite, and misvalue the broader category, by treating it as a means to acquire money and wealth. Or consider the decision of Australian-based gambling companies to refrain from creating a market in outcomes of the referendum to create an Indigenous Voice to Parliament (Belot 2023). While very likely this decision was a way to avoid negative media coverage for little benefit, it arguably reflects an obligation on all Australians to treat that referendum with respect that would be infringed by offering betting odds on its outcome. In each of these cases, commodification is objectionable because the attitude expressed towards the good in question involves infringing a duty, independent of both the consequences and the attitudes of those buying and selling it.

Brennan & Jaworski might object to this form of the attitude-communicating Bad Attitude Objection on two grounds. First, they might argue, this is just an incidental limit to markets grounded in special obligations. If I promise my wife I will not sell a family heirloom and I go ahead and do it anyway, what matters is that I have broken a promise; there is nothing wrong with commodifying the heirloom per se.⁶⁷ Second, they might argue that if the

⁶⁶ This is a difficult question; I explore this idea further in Chapter 11 where I defend the claim that criticising an artist for being a sell-out is a meaningful and legitimate criticism, in part because it involves an objectionable commodification of music.

⁶⁷ For example, Brennan & Jaworski (2022: 16-17) observe several cases where commodifying a good is wrong given the specific circumstances: "... in each case, there is some other moral duty – a duty to respect promises, a duty not to cause harm, a duty to respect property, or a duty of care – that incidentally attaches to that particular transaction or that situation ... In each of the cases, the good in question is normally something that it's permissible to sell. The objection is not really to the market in any interesting sense. The wrongness does not originate in the market exchange either."

consequences of upholding a duty to not commodify a good are sufficiently great, then such a duty should be infringed. For example, if the result of refraining from commodifying a Bar Mitzvah is that Seth and Ryan's friend does not have the money to afford an important surgical procedure, then their duty not to commodify the religious rite should be outweighed by the benefits of commodification.

Neither of these concerns is fatal. First, Brennan & Jaworski's examples delineate incidental from inherent limits to markets to clarify the object of their critique: that there are some things that can be owned or possessed, but not generally bought or sold. They cite examples such as breaking a promise not to sell a vintage camera in a yard sale, failing to take one's child to the hospital in order to sell one's car, and selling a baseball bat to a person who intends to use it to murder someone. In such cases, the market is indeed incidental. By contrast, the examples I cited above where there is plausibly a duty not to commodify a good are not incidental features of particular situations; they are central to what it means for particular groups to treat a good with respect, and apply in a wide range of circumstances. Treating music as a non-commercial venture is core to one's duties as a member of the punk community, just as refraining from selling blessed objects and indulgences is central to being a good Catholic official. In such cases, commodification does *introduce the wrongness* because there is a duty for members of the relevant community to refrain from commodifying the goods in question.

Second, one can acknowledge that duties not to commodify goods given conventional semiotic norms may have costs that are relevant to assessing whether a person is morally required, all-things-considered, to uphold the duty, or whether they can permissibly infringe the duty. Perhaps once we have marshalled all the facts, the punk is justified in signing a major label record deal and Seth and Ryan act permissibly by holding a commodified Bar Mitzvah. But this is a separate question as to whether they have infringed a duty by

commodifying the good in question. The proponent of this objection need not be committed to the claim that duties derived from contingent semiotic norms attached to money and markets trump any and all consequences.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the Bad Attitude Objection can be revised to withstand specific criticisms developed by Brennan & Jaworski. The attitude-manifesting form can be characterised in probabilistic terms. Commodification is of moral concern insofar as it has a strong tendency to give rise to objectionable attitudes towards a good. The attitude-communicating form can be grounded either in consequentialist or deontological terms. The former accepts the calculus that Brennan & Jaworski call for to adjudicate semiotic norms, but argues that they will not always be found wanting because they can be guardrails to preserve important values or because the costs associated with trying to revise them may be significant. The latter locates the wrongness of commodification with an independently justified duty to treat a good in a manner that is infringed by commodifying it, given culturally contingent semiotic norms. Thus, both forms of the Bad Attitude Objection remain important considerations in moral deliberations about commodification.

I have now shown that the Bad Attitude Objection can be revised to withstand specific criticisms. The next chapter continues Part 3 of the thesis by turning attention to the Crowding Out Objection.

Chapter 6. Buy Nothing?

Revisiting the Crowding Out Objection

“Give freely, receive freely, and share freely. No selling, buying, renting, trading, bartering, or otherwise engaging in this-for-that interactions. No marketing or advertising. All gifts offered and requested must be freely-given without expectation of any reward or reimbursement. No fundraising or requests for money. Remember that all gifts have the same value in Buy Nothing: Priceless.”

~ Buy Nothing Project Community Commitment (2025).

Introduction

The Buy Nothing Project is a global network of community organisations that aims to build resilient, equitable and sustainable communities by encouraging the giving of goods and services instead of conventional commerce. Founded in 2013, it now boasts over 7.5 million community members worldwide. Buy Nothing groups facilitate the giving and receiving of a wide range of things – gifts of self, talent, time, community, assistance and stuff. A commitment to inclusion is central to the Buy Nothing ethos. But they are inclusive only to a point. As shown in the Community Commitment quoted above, members are strictly prohibited from buying and selling goods, as well as other forms of non-gift exchange. These rules are actively policed by moderators on Buy Nothing Facebook groups. This suggests that the Buy Nothing leadership considers the norms of money, markets and commerce to be inimical to their gift economy network. Why might this be the case? If the spirit of gift giving cultivated by Buy Nothing is so effective in forging connections, fostering gratitude and building healthy communities, why would it be vulnerable to conventional commerce –

which after all might facilitate the exchange of more goods and services that owners are unwilling or unable to give away for free, but which nonetheless could be traded in a manner that benefits both parties? Why can't the community networks created by and facilitated through Buy Nothing support both a gift economy network and a traditional marketplace?

This is a good example of concerns about commodification reflected in what I have called the Crowding Out Objection. This claims that commodification is objectionable because it has a tendency to make unavailable desirable ways of valuing goods. This objection appeals to the relationship between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods – and argues that the former has a tendency to crowd out the latter. In Radin's (1996: 97) words: "once something is monetized for some it is monetized for all." While it is a common argument, it is also subject to a range of criticisms. These cast doubt on both the empirical and normative premises that underpin the Crowding Out Objection – disputing either that crowding out occurs, or that it is cause for moral concern.⁶⁸

This chapter continues Part 3 of this thesis by revisiting the Crowding Out Objection. I consider specific criticisms that have been made against this objection and show that it can be revised to withstand them. **Section 6.1** provides a summary of the Crowding Out Objection. **Section 6.2** introduces three specific criticisms. These are: (1) that the objection is underpinned by a simplistic view of the relationship between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods; (2) that there has been little work to provide an account of how crowding out occurs; and (3) that the argument does not have any moral implications. The remaining sections address each criticism in turn. **Section 6.3** proposes a

⁶⁸ I borrow the terms 'empirical premise' and 'normative premise' from Radin (1996) in her description of the 'domino theory' which claims that commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods cannot co-exist and argues, on this basis, for limits to commodification: "The domino theory implicitly makes two claims: first, as a background normative premise, that it is important for a nonmarket regime to exist; and second, as an empirical premise, that a nonmarket regime cannot coexist with a market regime" 100). As I note later, crowding out could also occur as a matter of conceptual necessity, and thus need not involve an empirical claim.

multifaceted understanding of the interaction between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods. **Section 6.4** suggests several explanatory mechanisms to account for crowding out. **Section 6.5** argues that both forms of the objection raise moral concerns: the interpersonal case provides reasons to prevent certain forms of commodification; the intrapersonal case provides grounds for moral criticism.

6.1 A brief recap of the Crowding Out Objection

The Crowding Out Objection claims that commodification can violate the meaning of a good by making unavailable desirable ways of valuing it. In Chapter 2, I observed that this is a common thread in debates about the moral limits of markets, one that can be found in Walzer's sphere differentiation, Radin's domino theory, Anderson's account of the social contexts required to express diverse modes of valuation, Sandel's claims that monetary incentives crowds out intrinsic motivation, and Titmuss' objections to blood markets on the grounds that they undermine the freedom to give. Each is underpinned by the view that market valuations and understandings of goods cannot co-exist with non-market valuations and understandings.

I distinguished two forms of the Crowding Out Objection: (1) an intrapersonal phenomenon which rests on the psychology of a valuing agent; and (2) an interpersonal phenomenon in which a market regime affects the valuations of third parties. I observed that both forms of the objection depend on an empirical claim (that crowding out occurs) and a normative claim (why it is bad). I briefly alluded to some issues that its proponents face. These are to provide an explanation of how market understandings of goods make unavailable their non-commodified counterparts, and to show why this is morally objectionable. I expand on these points below by introducing three criticisms. The first two put pressure on the empirical claim; the last challenges the normative claim.

6.2 Three specific criticisms of the Crowding Out Objection

One criticism of the Crowding Out Objection is that it is based on a simplistic understanding of the relationship between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods. In a critique of the domino theory, Mack (1989) questions the empirical assumption underlying the objection. He appeals to “internally motivated activities” – those undertaken for their own sake, or at least not for external rewards such as money – and argues that this category shows “how readily people operating out there in the real world can identify and be motivated by the value of various activities and relations and thereby resist the pressure of domino processes” (213-214). He also lists “instances of nonmarket activities and relations [that] persist in a substantially market world” (201) to cast doubt on the ostensibly “imperialistic” (199) character of market valuations.

Similarly, an overarching theme of a 2005 collection of essays on commodification is a rejection of what the authors call the *Hostile Worlds* view. This view – which the authors associate with Walzer, Anderson and Radin – claims that “the world is bifurcated into an economic arena dominated by rational self-interest and self-interest alone (“the market”), and a sharply different arena of intimacy and altruism that must be protected from the kind of instrumental behavior that is appropriate in market contexts” (Ertman & Williams 2005: 4). According to this view, sphere differentiation between market and non-market activities must be promoted and enforced because “when such separate spheres come into contact they contaminate each other” (Zelizer & Williams 2005: 364). Against this view, they argue, “Actual studies of concrete social settings, from auctions to households, do not yield descriptions of spheres neatly separated nor of segregated hostile worlds” (366). Rather, social settings comprise “dense networks of social relations that intertwine the intimate and economic dimensions of life” (366). While this critique is broader than the Crowding Out Objection, it implicates the objection by questioning the extent to which market and non-

market activities are at odds with each other, and whether commodified understandings intrude on their non-market counterparts.

Another concern for the Crowding Out Objection is that there has been little work to account for how, when and why it occurs. In a paper focussed on the interpersonal form of the objection, Gold (2019) observes that such arguments “depend on the truth of the empirical premise, on the existence of a mechanism that would cause market exchange to drive out moral and civic values for third parties” (2), before noting that “there has been remarkably little detailed work on mechanism” (3). What psychological or sociological mechanisms can explain what is, at face value, a counterintuitive process?

It is common to invoke the empirical literature on motivational crowding theory to defend claims about crowding out (e.g., Anderson 2000; Walsh 2001; Sandel 2012). This theory claims, contrary to standard economic theory, that providing external rewards such as monetary incentives can reduce a person’s intrinsic motivation to engage in an activity; that is, that money can crowd out intrinsic motivation. This can occur where there is *impaired self-determination* (when individuals perceive an external intervention to limit their autonomy) and where there is *impaired self-esteem* (when external intervention suggests that an individual’s intrinsic motivation is not acknowledged) (Frey & Jegen 2000).

However, motivational crowding theory falls short as a defence of the empirical premise of the Crowding Out Objection for two reasons. First, applied to the intrapersonal form of the objection, it is only relevant in circumstances where monetary incentives reduce intrinsic motivation. It does not explain a more general tendency for exchange value to monopolise how individuals regard commodified goods. Second, it does nothing to explain the interpersonal form of the objection because it does not show how monetary incentives can

affect the valuations of third parties.⁶⁹ In lieu of a plausible explanatory mechanism, the Crowding Out Objection arguably lacks credibility.

A final concern for the Crowding Out Objection relates to its moral implications. Even if it occurs, why does crowding out have any moral upshot? While I considered this issue generally in Chapter 4 – when I argued that meaning-based objections to commodification can lead to a range of moral conclusions – I am yet to consider more specific arguments that concerns about crowding out do not have moral implications. Brennan & Jaworski (2022) advance this view against the interpersonal form of the objection when criticising Anderson’s arguments that commodification undermines the social contexts required to realise non-commodified understandings of goods:

But it’s also hard to see why these arguments have any moral upshot. To show that buying and selling sex is wrong, it’s not enough to point out, as Anderson does, that prostitution reduces Jane’s freedom to have sex have the meaning she wants it to have. We need an additional premise, namely that Jane is *entitled* to have other people create a social environment in which sex has that special meaning.

Consider, as a parody: Suppose we prefer that Swedish progressive death metal be seen as sacred. Suppose, in our view, Swedish progressive death metal should not be bought and sold on the market, but should only be developed through gift exchanges inside churches. If our culture allows Swedish progressive death metal to be bought and sold it thereby reduces our freedom to have Swedish progressive death metal have the sacred meaning we want it to have. But, even if so, so what? Other people don’t have any moral duty to ensure that Swedish progressive death metal has the meaning we want it to have (102).

While this passage relates to arguments about markets in sexual services and death metal, the point could be generalised to other goods within scope of a Crowding Out Objection.

⁶⁹ This point is noted by Gold (2019: 3) who observes, “There is no empirical literature on motivation crowding in third parties, which is what commodification arguments require.” Note that what Gold refers to as ‘commodification arguments’ are essentially what I have called the interpersonal form of the Crowding Out Objection.

Moreover, while Brennan & Jaworski's criticism is focussed on interpersonal crowding out, the moral implications of the intrapersonal form of the objection are even less clear, because it is not (at least straightforwardly) anyone else's business if commodified understandings monopolise how I value goods. The challenge for the proponent of the Crowding Out Objection is to show why crowding out can provide reasons to prevent, limit or condemn commodification.

The Crowding Out Objection thus faces challenges on multiple fronts: critics of the empirical premise say, 'not true!'; critics of the normative premise say, 'who cares?'. Over the next three sections, I consider how the proponent can respond to these concerns. Section 6.3 considers the relationship between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods. Section 6.4 suggests explanatory mechanisms for both forms of crowding out. Section 6.5 argues that both forms of crowding out have moral implications.

6.3 A multifaceted account of crowding out

The proponent of the Crowding Out Objection is, of course, not committed to the claim that commodified understandings of goods *always* make unavailable their non-commodified counterparts. They simply argue that *when* they do, this provides reasons for preventing, restricting or condemning certain forms of commodification. So, the first criticism is not fatal for the Crowding Out Objection. But it does require the proponent to clarify the different relations between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods and to distinguish objectionable relations from unobjectionable ones. I consider this below.

6.3.1 Four different relations between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods

In an exploration of the relationship between market price and intrinsic value, Walsh (2001) distinguishes two claims about the relationship between market norms and intrinsic value,

and the ability for the former to undermine, or ‘evacuate’, the latter. According to the Entailment Thesis – a view he attributes to Immanuel Kant, Elizabeth Anderson and Hannah Arendt – the former necessarily evacuates the latter: “if one incorporates x into the market, intrinsic valuation of x will, as a matter of necessity, be evacuated” (537). According to a weaker form of evacuation, the Corrosion Thesis, there is a probabilistic, causal connection between price and intrinsic value: “if one incorporates x into the market there will be a strong tendency for x no longer to be valued intrinsically” (537). On this view, which Walsh endorses, markets are predisposing factors for undermining intrinsic valuation.

While a useful starting point, this should be supplemented in two ways. First, we should distinguish further relations between commodified and non-commodified ways of valuing goods that are not as pernicious as those identified by Walsh. Second, rather than endorsing one relation for all goods, as Walsh does, we should allow the relation to vary between cases. After all, in some contexts, markets may have a to undermine the intrinsic valuation of a good, while in others there may be no tendency, or at least not a strong tendency.⁷⁰ In what follows, I adapt Walsh’s terminology to the language of the Crowding Out Objection. We can distinguish four relations between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods, as shown in

⁷⁰ Certainly, Walsh is within his rights to argue that the Corrosion Thesis is true and these present only isolated counterexamples that are not fatal to the weaker form of evacuation that he endorses. But I want to provide more specificity about the potential relationships between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods.

Table 8.

Table 8 | Relations between commodified and non-commodified understandings

1. **Entailment** – Commodification of X necessarily makes unavailable (i.e., crowds out) non-commodified ways of valuing X.
2. **Corrosion** – Commodification of X has a strong tendency to make unavailable (i.e., to crowd out) non-commodified ways of valuing X.
3. **Coexistence** – Commodification of X sustainably co-exists with (i.e., has no effect on) non-commodified ways of valuing X.
4. **Complementarity** – Commodification of X supports, enables, furnishes or promotes non-commodified ways of valuing X.

Each of these relations can apply to the intrapersonal or interpersonal form of the objection. That is, a relation could apply at the level of a person's psychology when they buy or sell a good. Or it could apply at the social level, describing a general tendency for how people value a good when a market for it is permitted, or when it is increasingly governed by market norms. The same relation need not apply in each case for a given good.⁷¹ Coexistence is designed to account for cases like Mack's internally motivated activities, while Complementarity recognises cases where commodification honours or cultivates non-commodified understandings.⁷² My claim is that Entailment and Corrosion can be morally objectionable relations, while Coexistence and Complementarity do not raise moral concerns. In fact, insofar as it is desirable to value goods in certain ways, where Complementarity holds, this provides grounds to support commodification. The pertinent question for my purposes is *when does each relation hold?* Insofar as the Crowding Out Objection provides

⁷¹ For example, to pre-empt the focus of Chapter 9, the proliferation of sports betting may have no effect on how I personally value sports, but it may contribute to a general corrosion in society's interest in the internal goods of sport.

⁷² The reader may notice that Coexistence is closely linked to the Neutrality Criticism and Complementarity to the Expressive Potential Criticism, which I discussed in Chapter 3.

reasons to restrict or prohibit certain forms of commodification but not others, it would be wise to know the general circumstances that will distinguish objectionable cases from benign or benevolent ones.

6.3.2 When does each relation hold?

The Entailment relation holds in rare cases where it is a conceptual necessity that a commodified understanding of a good precludes non-commodified ways of valuing that good; that is, in circumstances that do not depend on empirical investigation. Consider commodification of a good whose value is constituted in being shared – whether in the context of an intimate personal relationship or in a community. Anderson (1989: 201) argues that ‘shared values’ cannot be fully realised in the context of market norms and relations because their goodness lies in the fact that they are not divisible: “Part of their being good consists in the fact that they are understood to be held in common – that everyone in the group both acknowledges the thing to be good and participates in its benefits.” For example, proposals to ‘divide the commons’ preclude realising the goods associated with spontaneous community interaction that come from all members of a community having shared access to land. Similarly, when deliberative political processes and forums are commodified – for example, by introducing a voucher system in education or a market in votes – this prevents realising the shared values of such goods as forums to determine the public good. Certain forms of value that such goods have are precluded when governed by market norms.

In each of the other cases – Corrosion, Coexistence and Complementarity – it is an empirical matter about which relation holds. Consistent with a recurring theme of this thesis, this is likely to be sensitive to market design and structure, rather than be inherent to any kind of market for a good. Below, I suggest several features that likely affect which relation holds. These pertain to the nature of a good and the community that values it (Features 1 and 2),

how market transactions for a good are structured and conceived (Features 3 and 4), and the social context in which goods are exchanged and consumed (Features 5 and 6). These are summarised at Table 9. Determining which relation holds will depend on the specific facts of a case. My intention here is to provide general guidelines to support this analysis.

Table 9 | Features that affect the relation between commodified and non-commodified understandings⁷³

Domain	Nature of good	Nature of exchange	Broader social context
Features	<p>Feature #1. Does commodification make salient an invisible or undervalued good?</p> <p>Feature #2. Is a non-commodified valuation independent of a shared understanding?</p>	<p>Feature #3. Does commodified exchange express value remainder?</p> <p>Feature #4. Does the commodified exchange promote pluralistic understandings?</p>	<p>Feature #5. Is there relative equality in bargaining power of market participants?</p> <p>Feature #6. Are the environmental contexts of exchange and consumption distinct?</p>

Feature #1. Does commodification make salient an invisible or undervalued good?

Putting a dollar value on a good can signify its use value where it is otherwise not valued highly. This is a feature of examples considered in previous chapters. Domestic labour and the various household items in David Foster Wallace’s short story are, arguably, not valued particularly highly in the absence of an exchange value. Assigning these goods an exchange value – by including unpaid household labour in national accounts or putting some arbitrary price tag on goods – can make the non-exchange values of these goods salient. By placing a dollar value on a good, one might be less inclined to regard it as worthless. Paying someone for a service – such as being an anonymous reviewer for prospective papers in a philosophy journal or tipping service staff in a culture where this is commonplace – can communicate

⁷³ Note, in each case, if the question that prefaces the feature is answered in the affirmative, that makes it more likely, all else equal, that Coexistence or Complementarity will obtain.

that the service provided is valuable. This is a tricky matter. Acquiring an exchange value might encourage people to conceive of the good's value as exhausted by its exchange value, rather than gesturing to its use value or intrinsic value. For example, this is central to Sandel's critique of emissions trading schemes. He argues that these policies might reinforce the view that one can pay to absolve oneself of the moral obligation to reduce carbon emissions (Sandel 2012). Nevertheless, in a social context where money is often the marker of value, a dollar price can make salient the value of goods that are otherwise underappreciated.

Feature #2. Is a non-commodified understanding independent of a shared valuation?

Whether commodification crowds out, coexists with or complements non-commodified understandings depends on the extent to which a non-commodified understanding depends on the shared understanding of a community. While many goods can be valued independently of the views of others – whether I enjoy a novel or TV show need not depend on others' opinions about it – some goods depend on a shared understanding within the community to render them meaningful. Gift giving, for example, depends on the gift giver and recipient recognising it as such. Shared understandings are vulnerable to commodification because the introduction of a market can break down the common understanding on which the non-commodified form of the good depends.⁷⁴ Shared goods are vulnerable to market regimes to differing extents, based on the scale of social exchange required to sustain the shared meaning of a good. For example, in a discussion of Titmuss' study, Archard (2002: 87) argues that “societal relationships are vulnerable or permeable to the effects of the market in a way that those constitutive of the personal sphere are not.” To consider how commodification affects the non-commodified form of a good one must consider whether the good depends on a shared valuation and, if so, the nature of the community that sustains it.

⁷⁴ This point is made by Gold (2019); I consider it further in Section 6.4.

Feature #3. Does commodified exchange express value remainder?

Whether commodified exchange crowds out non-commodified understandings of a good also depends on how the exchange is structured and conceived. Money can change hands for goods in many ways: as an entitlement, reimbursement, compensation, contractual condition, remuneration, or tip (Zelizer 1994). The framing of a monetary transaction can embody different values and ideals. Consider that a compensatory model for live kidney donation – in which a person is reimbursed for their time and foregone income – tends to elicit different ethical intuitions than a competitive market. This is partly because of how the exchange is conceived – the money remunerates someone for their time, not directly purchasing a kidney. The Australian Government’s recent proposal to introduce a compensatory model for surrogates reflects this approach – it aims to provide recognition of the range of costs and losses associated with being a surrogate and thereby serve partly as a symbol of respect (Cook 2026). On similar grounds, Radin (1996) argues that compensation for personal injury should acknowledge “incommensurability between injury and dollars” and attach “a plausible meaning to compensation other than punishment of quid pro quo: recognizing the wrong and signifying its weightiness” (195).

Cohen’s (2003) distinction between *value equilibrium* and *value remainder* in market transactions helps to explain such cases. In the former, the goods exchanged are presumed to be of equal value; in the latter there is no such presumption. He argues, “[T]he difference between value-denigrating and non-denigrating exchanges depends on whether the transaction expresses a relationship of value equilibrium ... Even exchanges of higher-valued goods for money might be saved if they express value remainder” (706-707). To consider whether some exchange honours a non-commodified understanding of a good, one should consider whether it is conceived of as a trade of like-for-like, or whether it expresses the non-monetary aspects of the good’s value.

Feature #4. Does the commodified exchange promote pluralistic understandings?

Other features of exchange also emphasise non-commodified understandings of goods and, in Radin's (1996: 107) words, "foster the non-market aspect of ... what we buy and sell ... to honour our internally plural understandings." For instance, it is common for Aboriginal art stores in the Northern Territory to be co-located with cultural centres that provide information about the art and artists, such as the spiritual significance of different symbols and the tribe to which the artist belongs. While the art is commodified, the place of exchange is structured as a way to impart cultural knowledge on buyers of art and to acknowledge and celebrate Aboriginal culture. The site of exchange emphasises the aesthetic and cultural value of the good being exchanged. By contrast, some exchanges emphasise the commodity status of the object being exchanged. Consider health practices that operate on a high-throughput business model and which provide impersonal healthcare to many people to maximise revenue. Or education 'products' that are framed as a way to purchase a qualification without other valuable aspects of the university experience. The effects of commodification on non-commodified understandings depend on how exchanges are framed and structured.

Feature #5. Is there relative equality in bargaining power of market participants?

The effect of commodification on non-commodified understandings also depends on the relative power of participants to exchange and whether a market reinforces power imbalances or promotes equality. Whether or not one is committed to the view that the act of purchasing sex is degrading for the sex worker, the extent to which it is degrading is surely closely linked with policy settings, such as how it is regulated to promote agency and reduce exploitation. Similarly, whether the Aboriginal art market promotes the non-exchange value of Aboriginal artwork depends on the extent to which First Nations peoples control the production and distribution of the artworks. This is reflected in Williams & Zelizer's (2005) conceptualisation of commodification debates, which resists what they call the Hamlet

Question: to commodify or not to commodify: “Indian arts and crafts are going to be sold, native plants made into medicines, and blue corn sold. In each context, the key issue is not whether or not to marketize but who controls the process and the proceeds of marketization” (373). The relative power of exchange participants will likely affect how commodified and non-commodified understandings of a good interact.

Feature #6. Are the environmental contexts of exchange and consumption distinct?

Some goods are enjoyed independently of the market in which they are exchanged. For example, religious texts and pets are routinely bought and sold but which are still often regarded as intrinsically valuable. The goods procured on the market are enjoyed in a separate domain of life (whether in religious ceremonies or in walks-around-the-block), so individual valuing agents and third parties can both know the market price of a Bible or a beagle, while not taking this price to exhaust the ways in which these goods are valuable. By contrast, some goods exhibit little or no spatiotemporal distinction between purchase and consumption. This can make the market price of a good salient in ways that affect non-commodified valuations of the good in question. This might explain why various social contexts create mechanisms to spatially or temporally separate monetary transactions from the consumption or use of a good – such as free-at-point-of-service healthcare systems, or the physical separation of art galleries from adjacent gift shops. This separation might help prevent people from viewing such goods as mere commodities. To understand what relationship between commodified and non-commodified understandings of a good will hold, we need to consider the context in which the good is consumed.

This discussion has shown that the proponent of the Crowding Out Objection need not be guilty of a naïve pessimism about the tendency for market valuations to crowd out non-market counterparts – they can acknowledge that the relationship between the two is complex. It has also identified features that may affect whether the relationship between

commodified and non-commodified understandings is objectionable, benign or beneficial. These can be used to consider whether a Crowding Out Objection is likely to apply in any given case. They can be used to fend off concerns of those who are inclined to view market understandings of goods as inherently inhospitable to non-market understandings. Where commodification makes salient an invisible good, expresses value remainder, embodies pluralistic understandings of goods, or takes place within bargaining conditions of relative equality then crowding out is less likely to be an issue. In the section below, I consider in more detail why and how the Corrosion relation might obtain. I begin with the intrapersonal case before turning to interpersonal crowding out.

6.4 Mechanisms to explain crowding out

To show that there are credible risks that *intrapersonal* crowding out can occur, we should consider what is attractive about monetary valuations which mean they might be psychologically corrosive of other types of valuation. Recall from Chapter 5, I appealed to what Walsh & Lynch (2008) call *morally salient features of money* to explain the tendency of commodification to promote instrumental modes of regard. I noted that three features of money are especially relevant – money is a universal substitute, a commensurating device, and an object of potentially unlimited acquisition. Collectively, these provide the basis for their moral psychology of money in which, they claim, money has a tendency “to drive other modes of evaluation from the Temple of Value, and to do so in a way that fails to even register what it is that has been lost” (207). Such an account demands empirical investigation. Here, my intention is modest – to show that this view is plausible. This is for three reasons. First, people have many needs and wants that money can satisfy because it is a universal medium of exchange. When something acquires an exchange value – and as this exchange value increases – valuing a good as an end-in-itself can impose a large opportunity cost, as

the good can be used to acquire other objects of value. Moreover, in a society that venerates money, and one in which money provides many material benefits and bestows social prestige, the temptation to value goods for the price they can receive on a market is especially great.

Second, people may have psychological dispositions for coming to regard the means to achieve some end as more important than the end itself. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith observes that “the means for attaining any conveniency or pleasure should frequently be more regarded, than that very conveniency or pleasure, in the attainment of which their whole merit would seem to consist” (Smith 2005: 161). The value of money is ultimately in the goods that it can be used to obtain – its use value *is* its exchange value. But money and wealth have a tendency to become their own ends. As Smith notes, while money and wealth are pursued purportedly for the conveniences which they afford, the person that pursues them “submits in the first year, nay in the first month of his application, to more fatigue of body and more uneasiness of mind than he could have suffered through the whole of his life from the want of them” (162). It is not because they think those with more money are necessarily happier, but because they “possess more means of happiness” (163). John Maynard Keynes makes a similar point in the 1930 essay *Economics Possibilities for our Grandchildren*. After decrying “pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us for two hundred years”, he expresses hopes for a future in which “the love of money as a possession – as distinguished from the love of money as a means to the enjoyment and realities of life – will become recognised for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity” (Keynes 2010: 329). A tendency to mistake means for ends – and to regard money as an end in itself – also helps to explain the psychological temptations of monetary valuations.

Third, money provides a psychologically alluring veneer of simple and quantifiable objectivity. When discussing ‘what something is worth’, it is easier to appeal to a market price, rather than to one’s own pluralistic and often conflicted judgments about the various

respects in which it is valuable. To explain the value of a Rembrandt painting, it is simpler to point to the outcomes of an auction than to appeal to the aesthetic quality of the brushstrokes in portraying light and shadow. Moreover, monetary valuations promise a single measure of value that incorporates and aggregates all the aspects in which a good is valuable. The price that a painting sells for reflects its historical importance, relative scarcity, and aesthetic value. None of these other dimensions of its value lay claim to incorporating all the respects in which the painting is valuable.⁷⁵

For these reasons, Walsh & Lynch's claim that money is psychologically corrosive of other forms of valuation is plausible. But while the temptation of monetary valuations suggests why a good can be corrupted for those buying and selling it, this does not explain how commodification affects the valuations of third parties. Why would prospective blood donors be less inclined to donate when a market is introduced to supplement donation? Why should the fact that some people monetise a good affect how others regard it? An account of the psychologically corrosive impacts of monetary valuations does not explain the spillover effects of commodification.

In a paper that addresses this question, Gold (2019) argues that the empirical premise can be explained through the *crowding out of frames*. She argues that the value of some goods – say blood understood as a gift of life – depends on a shared understanding within a community. They depend not just on members of a community having a shared understanding about that good, but also correctly inferring that other members of the community have this understanding. Such goods are vulnerable to commodification because the introduction of a market can reframe a good in monetary terms which can crowd out intrinsic motivation of individuals, and break down the shared understanding on which the non-commodified

⁷⁵ This may be of no concern to the value monist, but to anyone that is sympathetic to value pluralism, monetary valuation can only ever offer a false promise as a tool to aggregate goods' values.

valuation depends. In her words: “Although one may think that blood *should* be a gift, and even decide to treat it as a gift, one cannot decide that it *is* a gift independent of what other people in the community are doing” (24, italics in original). Shared goods are vulnerable to market regimes to different extents, based on the scale of social exchange required to sustain the share meaning. She argues, “[T]he shared understandings underpinning large scale shared goods are likely to be weaker and more easily eroded than those underpinning small scale shared goods” (27). She suggests that romantic sex is unlikely to be corrupted by legalised prostitution, even as blood donation regimes are vulnerable to blood markets.

Gold’s explanation raises some questions. First, if non-market shared valuations are sometimes vulnerable to commodification, why isn’t the inverse true? Why aren’t shared market valuations vulnerable to non-commodified understandings? Second, if there is value in a non-commodified shared understanding of a good –people who have this understanding think it is valuable and want to preserve it – why wouldn’t market exchanges have isolated impacts on a small number of third parties’ valuations while leaving the dominant shared understanding intact? By considering these questions below, I build on Gold’s account.

The first question asks why there is an asymmetry between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods. An explanation for this is that market understandings and norms require less coordination than non-market counterparts so they are relatively easy to introduce in a setting governed by non-market norms. To take one example, my friend described to me a system for cooking dinners in his share house that was, until recently, underpinned by the spirit of a gift relationship. Each of the housemates would take it in turns to purchase ingredients and cook dinner for the house, with no expectation of immediate reciprocity. However, one housemate bucked this trend by purchasing expensive ingredients and asking the housemates to contribute. Being non-confrontational people by nature, they acquiesced. But the equilibrium of gift-giving was broken. Since then, the housemates have

steadfastly kept the receipts from the supermarket and fastidiously split the cost for each dinner between them. While the understanding of share house dinners as a gift shared between housemates required coordination between all housemates to sustain, it only took one defector to replace this equilibrium with transactional norms of the market. The general point is that market understandings – especially in the context of a legal market regime – do not require difficult and costly coordination to sustain. One needs only to pursue one’s pecuniary self-interest to signal to others that these are the rules of engagement.⁷⁶ It is easy for market understandings to emerge for goods previously governed by other norms.

Moreover, once market understandings get off the ground, there can be a tendency for them to proliferate. This can be analysed as a case of the free rider problem. This problem arises where the efficient production of collective goods is threatened by the incentive that each agent has to not pay for them (Hardin & Cullity 2020). The logic of the free rider problem is that everyone benefits from some collective good but can get that benefit without contributing to the costs. It presents a market failure because freeriding leads to collective goods being under-produced, overused or degraded.

Interpersonal crowding out can be understood in these terms. A non-market institution that depends on a shared valuation within a community can be understood as a collective good. It is *collective* because everyone contributes to it by promoting the valuation on which it depends. It is a *good* because it provides benefits to the community, for example by promoting altruistic behaviours and community solidarity. However, individuals can, up to point, attain these benefits without contributing to the cost by adopting a commodified understanding. They can pursue their own self-interest – for example, by charging

⁷⁶ In Anderson’s (1989: 182-183) terminology market relations are *impersonal*: “The impersonality of the market leaves its participants free to pursue their individual interests unrestrained by any consideration of other people’s advantage. Each party to a market transaction is expected to take care of himself and not to depend on the other to look after his own interests.” Because of this characteristic of market relations, it is comparatively easy to establish market norms for a good or practice previously governed by non-market norms.

housemates for dinner or selling their blood – while benefiting from the dominant non-commodified understanding. Depending on the good, the community loss from any individual defecting may be very small but the personal gain can be significant (especially if the good has a significant exchange value). Once some people start freeriding by abandoning the non-commodified understanding, the temptation for others to do the same increases. Partly this is a function of human psychology; if individuals perceive others to be freeriding then cooperation may break down due to resentment. Partly this is a rational response. As some individuals defect, the relative gain that an individual will get from defecting will increase because they otherwise have to bear a larger burden of the costs of sustaining a non-commodified understanding. The shared non-commodified understanding breaks down under the weight of freeriding.

We can now revisit the example of the Buy Nothing Project discussed from the introduction. A strict prohibition on conventional commerce in Buy Nothing groups is necessary to sustain the gift-giving ethos at the heart of the movement. This is because this ethos depends on a shared understanding among many people who are not well coordinated, because they do not generally know each other personally. This makes this ethos vulnerable to conventional commerce. Individual members of a Buy Nothing group each stand to benefit from defecting from the norms of the group, for example by attaining goods with money or offering goods for payment. Moreover, they can do so unilaterally without coordinating with other members of the group. If rule breaking consists of only a few isolated cases – while the dominant gift giving ethos remains in place – they continue to benefit from the community solidarity promoted in these groups. But if some individuals defect from the gift giving ethos, there will be an incentive for others to follow suit. If enough people do, the norms of gift giving will be crowded out by conventional commerce. The Buy Nothing Project would become just another online marketplace. To preserve its ethos, its members have to buy nothing.

This mechanism can help to explain other cases. In a history of the digital age, biographer Walter Isaacson observes that the collaborations that produced the internet, world wide web and other technological innovations were assembled in three primary ways: government funding; private enterprise; and commons-based production by peer networks.⁷⁷ The last form of collaboration involved “peers freely sharing ideas and making contributions as part of a voluntary common endeavor ... driven not by financial incentives but by other forms of reward and satisfaction” (Isaacson 2014: 499). This ethos is reflected in free and open-source software, open access principles, and various activist movements to make information online freely available. While this third form of collaboration still exists today – a prominent example is Wikipedia – the internet has become increasingly dominated by large, powerful, for-profit companies. Early utopian visions for the internet seem like a quaint historical footnote (Levy 1984). Many have raised concerns that open-source software has been co-opted by corporate interests and, especially in the context of the recent Artificial Intelligence (AI) boom, that the digital commons are being eroded by companies that monetise it without contributing to its upkeep or while actively diminishing its value.⁷⁸ Sharma (2023: 1178) analyses the digital commons through the logic of free-riding: “Because open source is non-excludable, companies can profit from it without paying a dime – and many do. This results in a lack of investment in the maintenance required to prevent overuse.” Stone (2025) considers this in the context of Generative AI, arguing that various aspects of this technology contribute to the degradation of the digital commons.⁷⁹ This point can be generalised. A shared understanding of the web as a space for free exchange of information depends on a

⁷⁷ Isaacson attributes this term to Harvard Law School professor, Yochai Benkler.

⁷⁸ For example, the rise of ChatGPT has been linked to declines in public knowledge sharing on online platforms such as Stack Overflow. This creates a risk that there is not enough public data to train future models (del Rio-Chanona, Laurentsyeva & Wachs 2024).

⁷⁹ For example, he argues that “harvesting data for the development of generative AI ... strains the digital communities we use for filtering” (11). This is both because these communities are required to pay costs for increased bandwidth as a result of web scraping bots that used to collect this data, and because they are not compensated by the AI companies who harvest their data.

loosely organised community. It is thus vulnerable to commodified understandings that can quickly proliferate and effectively capture and monetise this value through patent protections and other intellectual property regimes. This ethos survives in some forms, but commodified activities on the web have a tendency to crowd out non-commodified activities.

This section has shown that the empirical premise of the Crowding Out Objection is credible by providing explanatory mechanisms to account for its intrapersonal and interpersonal forms. In the former case, I drew on Walsh & Lynch's (2008) moral psychology of money. In the latter case, I built on Gold's (2019) account of the crowding out of frames to explain why the purchase and sale of a good can have spillover effects for third parties. Commodified valuations are tempting, easy to get off the ground, and contagious once they do.

6.5 Why is crowding out cause for moral concern?

While I have explained the empirical premise of the Crowding Out Objection, it remains to be seen whether the normative premise can be defended. If a market is counterproductive to achieving the ends to which it is directed – for example, because by crowding out intrinsic motivation the price mechanism fails to induce supply – then this provides prudential grounds to prohibit that market. But it does not show that permitting a market, or participating in it, is morally objectionable. Moreover, as we saw in Section 6.2, there are reasons to doubt the moral upshot of such arguments. In this section, I defend the normative claim, beginning with the interpersonal form followed by the intrapersonal form.

Recall that Brennan & Jaworski's criticism of Anderson casts doubt on the moral upshot of interpersonal crowding out by arguing that people are not necessarily entitled to having their non-commodified understanding of a good defended at the expense of others' commodified understandings. My response comprises three parts.

First, as discussed in Chapter 4, we need not regard all social meanings of goods as having equal moral value. Social meanings can be subject to independent normative scrutiny and compared based on the ideals that they express, embody and enable. For example, if allowing prospective students to buy admission to higher education institutions promotes a commodified understanding of a university education – and if this is an inferior understanding compared with conceiving universities as forums for development of academic skill and recognition of merit – then rules that restrict such practices may be justified to preserve a non-commodified understanding.

Second, while Brennan & Jaworski frame their critique by claiming that “other people don’t have a moral duty” to ensure that a good “has the [non-commodified] meaning we want it to have” (102), the state might nonetheless have an interest in preserving this meaning. As I observed in Chapter 4, the grounds for restricting the purchase and sale of certain goods need not rest on any individual acting wrongfully; governments may have separate reasons to curtail certain practices in the interests of preserving certain goods.⁸⁰ The Australian Government might be justified in blocking the purchase and sale of beach space on the grounds that public access to beaches has cultural significance as an expression of the country’s egalitarian ethos. In such cases, the moral permission to restrict certain actions does not depend on the moral wrongness of such actions.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Brennan & Jaworski’s examples assume that the person or group with a non-commodified understanding of a good (Jane and Swedish progressive death metal fans, respectively) are imposing their preferences on those that wish to buy and sell that good. But if the empirical premise of the objection holds, then allowing markets in these goods involves market participants imposing *their* preferences on those that want these goods to

⁸⁰ I referred to this as Type 2 cases; that is, circumstances where collective regulation does not depend on any agent acting morally wrongfully when they commodify a good.

have a non-commodified meaning. If meaning-making is a social process, and if commodified and non-commodified understandings are incompatible, then allowing a market is not a neutral policy; it involves privileging a commodified understanding. This is not to deny that there may be other reasons why permitting a market should be the government's default position. But it does caution against characterising those with non-commodified understandings of a good as the only people imposing their meaning on others. Given the spillover effects of commodification, it is not a one-way street.

In these ways, the normative claim underpinning the interpersonal form of this objection can be defended against the charge that it has no moral upshot. What about the intrapersonal case? Where the issue is not one of government policy, but rather an individual choosing to buy and sell a good or value it in monetary terms, why would this be of moral concern? Even if monetary valuations tend to crowd out other ways that agents value goods, isn't that their business? Below, I resist this conclusion by arguing that intrapersonal crowding out does raise moral concerns, even though it does not involve wronging anyone or infringing a duty. This builds on my discussion in Chapter 4 of what I called 'Type 4 cases' where, the reader will recall, the moral force of meaning-based objections can lie in justifying moral criticism and need not depend on an agent acting morally wrongfully.⁸¹

To defend the moral significance of this form of the objection, we can appeal to the ethical ideals associated with having certain evaluative attitudes towards objects of value. Darwall's (2002) rational care theory of welfare is instructive. In contrast to agent-relative normative accounts of welfare, Darwall argues that someone's good is what one should want for that person insofar as one cares for her (4). He argues that the most important constituents of welfare involve appreciative contact with things that are objectively good: "the most

⁸¹ Type 4 cases are circumstances where meaning-based objections justify moral criticism even where the agent has not acted morally wrongfully by commodifying a good.

beneficial human life consists of activities involving the appreciation of worth and merit” (80). This is because “the best life for a human being involves ‘valuing activities’ in the sense of activities that involve a sense of their own merit” (77). This requires “an *appreciation* of the relevant values that is not simply a correct belief about their value, but a direct experience and evaluative response to what exemplifies them” (88-89, italics in original).

Drawing on this account, where a commodified understanding of a good that is intrinsically valuable crowds out other ways of valuing it, a person deprives themselves of a certain kind of good that comes from attending or responding to things in the appropriate kinds of ways. A person need not wrong anyone, infringe a duty or otherwise act in a way that is impermissible when, for example, they value their creative projects exclusively in commercial terms or view a beautiful sunset as an opportunity to make money selling cliffside property. But commodifying such goods may involve acting in a way that is not meritorious as it fails to live up to the ideals of the virtuous person who has an “orientation to things of worth” (93) that enable the direct appreciation of their value. In such cases, we may criticise the person who has lost sense of the non-commodified aspects of a good’s value on the grounds that they have failed to live up to ethical ideals that require valuing goods in the right ways. We have no moral claim on them to change their behaviour, nor can the state legitimately intervene, but we can nonetheless criticise their actions. In this limited sense there is a moral upshot to intrapersonal crowding out.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the Crowding Out Objection can be refined to withstand specific criticisms. I made three claims. First, notwithstanding the potential for benign or beneficial relations between commodified and non-commodified understandings, the Crowding Out Objection raises concerns where Entailment or Corrosion obtain. Second,

there are plausible explanatory mechanisms to account for Corrosion, both in its intrapersonal and interpersonal forms. Third, there are moral implications for both forms of the objection. The interpersonal case provides reasons to limit or restrict certain forms of commodification. The intrapersonal case provides grounds for moral criticism on the basis that commodified understandings can fail to live up to ethical ideals that involve having non-commodified evaluative attitudes towards objects of value.

Having considered the Crowding Out Objection, I now turn to the Transformation Objection and show that it can also be revised to withstand several specific criticisms.

Chapter 7. Markets and Metamorphosis

Revisiting the Transformation Objection

And Jesus entered the temple of God, and cast out all those who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-lenders and the seats of those who sold the doves. And he said to them, ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer”’; but you have made it a den of thieves.’

~ Matthew 21:12-13 ⁸²

Introduction

In the cleansing of the Temple narrative in The Bible, Jesus expels the merchants and money lenders from the temple after accusing them of turning it into a den of thieves. His choice of language is significant. The merchants and money lenders have *made* the Temple into something else. By introducing market activity into a place of worship and orienting the sacred space around commerce, its ability to be a true house of prayer has been lost – at least until the merchants are expelled and the primacy of prayer reinstated. The temple has been devalued. This is one example of a more general phenomenon where commodification is objectionable because it undermines a good’s value by turning it into an inferior good.

Objections of this kind are what I have called the Transformation Objection. This claims that commodification is morally objectionable where it transforms a good in a way that diminishes its value. While this objection is common in the philosophical literature on the moral limits of markets, it is subject to a range of criticisms. These cast doubt on whether

⁸² Cited in Walsh & Lynch (2008: 151).

commodification actually has a transformational effect in the way that proponents of this objection presume, or that such an effect is morally objectionable.

This chapter continues Part 3 of this thesis by refining the Transformation Objection in light of several criticisms. It comprises three sections. **Section 7.1** provides a brief summary of the objection. **Section 7.2** introduces three specific criticisms of the objection. These are: (1) that the objection is underpinned by a simplistic view of the corruptive effects of markets; (2) that the objection is metaphysically confused because commodification actually creates a new distinct type of good; and (3) that the objection does not have any moral implications.

Section 7.3 shows how the objection can be revised to withstand these criticisms by exploring the claims that a successful instance of the objection needs to demonstrate. I argue that a successful Transformation Objection needs to show: (1) that a good persists when it is commodified though its properties change; (2) that the commodified form of the good is inferior to the non-commodified form; (3) that the two forms are incompatible; and (4) that the transformation is morally objectionable. I explore each of these assumptions in turn.

7.1 A brief recap of the Transformation Objection

The Transformation Objection claims that commodification is morally objectionable where it transforms a good in a way that diminishes its value. In Chapter 2, I observed that this is a common argument against commodification in the philosophical literature, especially in Sandel's Corruption Objection. I characterised this objection as a claim that, by transforming a good, commodification can *devalue* it; that is, it can undermine, erode, damage or remove dimensions of value that the good has. I showed that commodification can transform a good through its effects on consumption or production. The former can devalue a good because the value of some goods is embedded in and derived from the manner in which they are consumed. For example, the fact that a good is available to all free of charge partly

constitutes the value of certain civic institutions. The latter can devalue a good because incentives in a market-driven production process lead to inferior products being brought into existence. For example, relative to their non-commodified forms, commodified forms of care delivery may tend to be more transactional and less personal. I noted that, to have moral force, the objection also depends on a normative claim, which is that this transformation raises moral concerns. Below, I introduce three criticisms of this objection. The first two challenge the empirical claim (that commodification diminishes the value of a good) while the third challenges the normative claim (that this is morally objectionable).⁸³

7.2 Three specific criticisms of the Transformation Objection

One criticism of the Transformation Objection is that it is underpinned by a simplistic view of the transformational effects of markets. We saw this when exploring two of the general responses to meaning-based objections in Chapter 3. Commodifying a good might not have a transformational effect on the good in question (as the Neutrality Criticism claims). Or if it does its effects may be positive (as the Expressive Potential Criticism claims). While we saw in Chapter 4 that these responses do not defeat meaning-based objections generally – as their proponents are not committed to the claim that commodification always violates the meaning of a good – I am yet to explicitly consider the implications of these criticisms for a successful instance of the Transformation Objection. Moreover, commodification might transform a good with ambiguous results – positive with respect to some dimensions of value and negative with respect to other dimensions. For example, Sandel argues against allowing people to pay to jump the queue for certain goods on the grounds that this objectionably expresses and promotes inegalitarian ideals while unfairly changing the composition of the

⁸³ The first and third criticisms are closely related to the general responses to several of the meaning-based objections introduced in Chapter 3 and critically evaluated in Chapter 4, although they are specifically targeted at the Transformation Objection rather than the general class of meaning-based objections to commodification.

people who can access the goods in question. In response, Brennan & Jaworski (2022) observe, “He’s worried that markets might in the short run crowd out the poor, but he understates the worry that queues might crowd out the busy ... Insofar as queues are egalitarian or fair on one dimension, they are inegalitarian and unfair on others” (237-8).

This kind of example is common in commodification debates because markets typically have positive features (efficiency, choice, competition) and negative features (concentration of power, externalities, inequalities). Both will generally have a bearing on the character of goods they are used to distribute. To take one example, Australia’s National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which was established in 2013, created markets in disability services by providing individualised payment packages to people with disability, rather than block funding to service providers. It aimed to provide choice and control for people with disability, while promoting quality services through competition. As one might expect, its results have been mixed. Many participants indeed have greater choice over services they receive in a market-based system, but there have also been many concerning instances of fraudulent providers as well as inappropriate supports and exploitation of scheme participants. Given both the vulnerable nature of the cohort and the significant informational asymmetries, as well as the prevalence of ‘thin markets’ in regional areas, many of the intended benefits of market-based provision have not been realised (Commonwealth of Australia 2023). Commodification can have a range of effects on the character of goods.

A second criticism of the Transformation Objection is that it is metaphysically confused. Even if the commodified form of a good is inferior to its non-commodified form, the proponent of an objection is open to the question: why can’t we have both? If commodifying a good produces an inferior good, isn’t this better described as the creation of a new kind of good, one that exists alongside its superior non-commodified form? This criticism can be

seen in Mack's (1989) critique of the domino theory.⁸⁴ Mack argues that this thesis is false in part because market interactions and non-market interactions are conceptually distinct; the latter is not simply the 'fee free' version of the former: "Why does a market in sexual services not drive out or undercut free-of-charge sex? Because we are talking about two radically different – albeit not absolutely different – forms of human interaction" (211-212). The point can be expressed in the following general terms: if some tokens of a more general type are commodified, then we should expect that non-commodified tokens of that type continue to exist in parallel.

On this line of reasoning, commodification does not devalue a good; it creates a new class of inferior good. But the following are quite distinct: (1) removing the value that a good has, and (2) creating something new that has less value. At face value, (1) is worse than (2) because it involves doing harm to something, rather than creating something new that is sub-optimal. Moreover, having the greatest possible value is not normally the criterion by which things are allowed to exist. For example, governments may permit for-profit education, healthcare, social services and journalism even if these forms of goods tend to be inferior to public provision of these goods. People should surely, at least as a general rule, be free to choose these inferior products if they wish. The proponent of the Transformation Objection needs to clarify why it is appropriate to say that commodification diminishes the value of a good rather than creating a new good of lesser value.

A final criticism of the Transformation Objection is that it does not have clear moral implications. For example, Brennan & Jaworski (2022: 174) raise concerns that arguments that markets reduce the quality of goods have no moral import: "Even if selling certain items for profit lowers the quality of those things, it does not follow that it's *morally wrong* or

⁸⁴ Recall that the domino theory, introduced by Radin (1996), claims that market valuations and understandings tend to crowd out their non-market counterparts.

morally bad to sell those things for profit. After all, there's no general moral duty to produce only the highest quality things" (italics in original). This concern is with what they call the Low-Quality Objection. This is narrower than the Transformation Objection because it claims that commodification is wrong when the sale of goods for profit results in a lower quality version of these goods. This is only a subset of ways that goods can be devalued when they are commodified. But the general point applies to broader concerns about transformation. Who cares if commodification turns goods into inferior versions of themselves? If I see a market opportunity to sell expressions of intimacy – such as by founding the Beautiful Handwritten Letters company discussed in Chapter 5 – and I find willing purchasers of this service, then isn't that the prerogative of me and my customers? What can be said for the Transformation Objection to address concerns that it lacks, in Brennan & Jaworski's words, "*moral sting*" (174, italics in original)? While I explained in Chapter 4 that meaning-based objections can yield different moral conclusions, I am yet to consider the claim that concerns about transformational character of commodification does not have moral implications.

We thus have three criticisms of the Transformation Objection. The empirical claim that commodification diminishes the value of a good can be criticised on the grounds that it is simplistic or metaphysically confused. The normative claim that this is morally objectionable can be disputed on the grounds that the objection has no moral upshot. In response to these concerns, the following section describes the conditions that need to be met for a successful instance of the Transformation Objection.

7.3 Revising the Transformation Objection

To revise the Transformation Objection to withstand these criticisms, we can characterise the objection as comprising three claims about the relationship between a non-commodified

version of a good (call this “ X_N ”) and its commodified counterpart (call this “ X_C ”).⁸⁵ These are that: (1) X_N and X_C are the same good but have different properties; (2) X_C is inferior to X_N ; and (3) X_C and X_N are in some sense incompatible. In addition, to have moral force, the argument has an additional normative implication, namely: (4) the transformation of X_N to X_C is morally objectionable. Let us call these claims, respectively: the Transformation Claim; the Inferiority Claim; the Incompatibility Claim; and the Normative Claim. The following four sub-sections substantiate each of these claims to show that each of these assumptions is plausible in some cases. If they all hold, the objection is not defeated by the criticisms.

7.3.1 The Transformation Claim

The first assumption is that commodification does in fact transform the goods that are subject to it. Unlike goods within the scope of the Conceptual Error Objection, this transformation is not total (thus the claim that X_N and X_C are the same type of good). But it nonetheless involves some change in the properties of that good. The challenge for proponents of this objection is to identify the respects in which X_N and X_C are distinct. Different kinds and degrees of transformation are possible. For example, proposals to divide up the commons – that is, to convert publicly available land open to all into private allotments – involve changing the use to which land is put. It is still the same land but new legal arrangements regulating ownership and access change the ways that people use the space. Insofar as part of the value of the commons was that it was a site for civic engagement and community connections, the new privately owned lots are a distinct good because this dimension of value is lost. Or consider Titmuss’ comparison of blood markets and blood donation. If the value of the blood donation regime was partly constituted by the fact that blood was understood as a ‘gift of life’ rather than a market transaction – and if this shared understanding broke down

⁸⁵ This section owes a debt to Taylor (2022: 122-124). My intention is to expand on his brief discussion of this topic to illustrate where ontological assumptions raise issues for the proponent of the Transformation Objection.

with the introduction of blood markets – then the blood provided under the latter system has distinct properties, even though it is still literally the same substance. This is because one of the properties of blood understood as a ‘gift of life’ is that it is given freely rather than sold.

But other cases are more complex and subtle. Say my local community library introduces a small annual membership fee and a charge to rent each book. Assume that this has no effect on the collection of books that the library stocks and that the fees are sufficiently low such that it does not deter anyone from renting books. Has the good been transformed through its commodification? It is tempting to answer in the negative; the commodified library service seems identical to its non-commodified counterpart. But there is an important respect in which the community library has been transformed. It is no longer available to all members of the community free of charge. Even if no one is deterred from going, it has still been transformed in one sense. If part of the utility I and others derive from going to the library is tied to the fact that it is available to the community free of charge, then it has become a different kind of good. Hirsch (2005) makes a similar point about charging the public to go to museums. He suggests that widespread hostility to the introduction of fees in the UK in the 1970s “may have been directed at the symbol of the turnstile as much as the modest charge. This charge removed not only 10 pence from the pocket but also the pleasure derived by some visitors from the existence of a part of the cultural heritage as common property available freely to all” (92).

These kinds of cases are widespread. For example, outrage at the Australian Government’s 2014 proposal to introduce a \$7 co-payment to visit General Practitioners, as well as among patrons of the Railway Hotel in Fitzroy North after its recent proposal to introduce a small fee to play 8-ball, reflect similar concerns. Part of the value of these goods for those that use them lies in the fact that they are available to all free of charge. While the transformation that these goods undergo when they are commodified is less substantial than other cases, it would

be mistaken to view the commodified goods as *identical* to their non-commodified counterparts. We can thus see that the transformation caused by commodification can occur in different ways and to different degrees. Some aspect of the good (such as what is produced or how it is consumed) which constitutes part of what makes it valuable must be changed by being commodified. As the examples above suggest, the bar for this transformation is low; however, the more minor the difference in properties between X_N and X_C , the harder it will be to claim that the latter is inferior or that the transformation is morally objectionable.

7.3.2 The Inferiority Claim

Once the proponent of the Transformation Objection has established that the good X persists when it is commodified but has different properties, they then need to show that X_C is inferior to X_N . It is helpful to distinguish two different senses of inferiority to avoid concerns – which have been raised against Sandel’s Corruption Objection – that this concept is vague and imprecise.⁸⁶ Let us call these *Quality Inferiority* and *Value Inferiority*, respectively.⁸⁷

The former refers to cases where X_C is inferior to X_N in the sense that it is less effective at achieving the ends to which the good is directed. It is a lower quality good against some objective standard or agreed end. This might be because X_C is more costly to produce and distribute to a given standard than X_N . For example, a common criticism of the privatisation of industries like telecommunications, utilities and transport previously owned and run by governments is that the quality of the good declines when it is run by for-profit companies, or that quality increases are not commensurate with cost increases (Hermann 2021).

⁸⁶ For example, Volberg (2015: 171) criticises Sandel on the grounds that “he does not ever seem to actually explain this idea of corruption ... There just are no characteristics that Sandel could point to show that a thing is being corrupted because we do not know what this corruption amounts to.” Similarly, Wells (2013) argues Sandel works with a “rather crude concept of corruption” which he fails to develop “systematically.”

⁸⁷ This distinction resembles that which Brown (2017) draws between ‘efficiency corruption’ and ‘value corruption’ though her account is specifically about motivation crowding theory and the use of financial incentives to change behaviour.

The latter refers to cases where X_C is inferior to X_N in the sense that its production and distribution become governed by different values and ideals that transform the character of the good by changing the ends to which it is directed. For example, when various aspects of sport are commodified – players are routinely bought and sold, advertising space is sold throughout stadiums, changes to the rules of gameplay are designed to attract more viewers – the concern is often that sport has become mere entertainment. It is no longer animated by an ideal such as the mutual pursuit of athletic excellence.⁸⁸ The value of the good has been diminished because the ends to which it is directed have changed for the worse.

Quality Inferiority and Value Inferiority may often align. Private prisons might be inferior in both senses if they are both more expensive to run and if they orient the criminal justice system towards turning a profit rather than achieving goals like rehabilitation and just punishment. Commercial art galleries may be worse than national galleries both because the art they display is of lower aesthetic quality *and* because the art is curated in a way that is designed to sell paintings rather than promote meaningful aesthetic engagement. But they need not coincide. Private healthcare and private education may be higher quality than their public counterparts, but nonetheless objectionably reorient these systems away from their proper goals – ensuring healthcare is provided to those who need it most, and ensuring that education provides a social good of integrating young people from all walks of life. The rise of the wellness industry has probably improved the quality of many yoga classes and gyms, but may nonetheless have objectionably transformed wellness activities into status goods. Each of these cases is plausibly an example of Value Inferiority but not Quality Inferiority.

Quality Inferiority will generally provide for more clear-cut cases for demonstrating that commodification has transformed a good into an inferior good. In such cases, X_C is an

⁸⁸ The commodification of sport might also lead to lower quality gameplay (and thus be an example of Quality Inferiority) but commodification of sport may well increase the quality of sporting contests by increasing the amount of money that is invested in sporting leagues, teams and players.

objectively lower quality good than X_N in its ability to meet the needs of those that use the good X . For example, assuming the empirical validity of Titmuss' study, the commodified form of blood was inferior both in terms of the quality and quantity procured through the market when compared with the donation regime. Or consider the creation of markets in complex financial instruments such as synthetic collateralised debt obligations that I mentioned in Chapter 1. These played a significant role in the global financial crisis because these markets were not an effective way, as their proponents claimed, to manage financial risk (Lewis 2010). In cases like these, the market fails on its own terms. The inferiority of X_C relative to X_N is due to the inefficiency of the market in X .

Value Inferiority claims will generally be more difficult to establish because there may be disagreements about the appropriate ends to which a good should be directed. In such cases, debates about the relative value of X_C and X_N will hinge on differing conceptions of why the broader category of X is valuable. Consider again the GP co-payment proposed by the Australian Government in 2014. This would have an important communicative effect that proponents of smaller government and fiscal prudence may well be sympathetic to; that is, to demonstrate to citizens that access to basic services should not be regarded as a universal entitlement, and that it does not really come free of charge even if the person receiving the service does not directly pay for it. Depending on one's broader political convictions, one might argue that the charge transforms the good of frontline healthcare delivery in positive ways. So, whether this represents a morally objectionable form of commodification depends on broader questions about the meaning of healthcare and the State's role in providing it.

Consider the debate between Sandel (2012) and Brennan & Jaworski (2022) about legacy admissions to higher education institutions. Sandel claims that this practice is tantamount to allowing wealthy prospective students to pay their way into elite colleges, which corrupts the ideals of meritocracy, academic achievement and scholarly excellence that should be the

animating principles of higher education. Brennan & Jaworski respond by arguing that legacy students subsidise education for capable students that cannot afford to pay, and that they tend to have cultural and social capital that is valuable to have in a student body. They say, “One reason why elite universities might admit such students is that they want their other students to learn these elite manners, modes of speech, and behaviors, or to at least be exposed to them. Harvard grooms its students to become the new elite, and one way it does this is by socializing them with the current elite. It’s a product most students want to buy” (183).

Though I am more sympathetic to Sandel’s view of higher education than Brennan & Jaworski’s, we need not settle their argument here. The point is that their dispute about legacy admissions hinges on a broader debate about the value and purpose of higher education. Similarly, for proponents of the Transformation Objection, arguments about whether X_C is inferior to X_N will often depend on a broader enquiry about the meaning and value of the general category X . Importantly, as I argued in Chapter 4 when considering the Contested Meaning Criticism, this does not mean such debates are fruitless. This is because rival conceptions of the meaning of a good, and the ideals and values that it should properly embody, are themselves subject to normative evaluation.

There will also be reasonable disagreements about both forms of inferiority in cases where X_C is better in some respects than X_N but worse in others. Even if the ends to which X should be oriented are agreed by all, such cases raise problems of aggregation of different dimensions of value and thus require careful judgments about the various respects in which each form of X is valuable. For example, introducing a fee-for-service for public amenities or services might transform a good in negative ways, as discussed above. But it may be used to fund public works improvements that increase the quality of these goods over the long-term, or it might be used to regulate access to goods that are prone to deterioration through over-consumption. Consider that Jackson Pollock’s Blue Poles – which is owned by the National

Gallery of Australia (NGA) – was recently valued at \$500 million but that the NGA currently lacks the funding to waterproof the building that holds the painting (Morris 2023). While it would be a shame to sell the painting to fund rectification works, it may be most valuable to the NGA as a commodity given the current circumstances.

Likewise, commodification might expand access to a good that is otherwise only available to a select few but in so doing reduce the quality of the good in some respects. This is relevant to debates in the academic literature on tourism about the relationship between commodification and authenticity. Is offering tourists in Mumbai the opportunity to pay to appear in a Bollywood film worse (in some sense) than the previous system where a few lucky tourists got headhunted on the street? Is a Balinese ritual performance devalued when it is oriented towards an external public with Western tastes and sensibilities? In an influential paper that discusses the latter, Cohen (1988: 382) suggests that concerns about devaluing goods by commoditising them may be overblown: “what used to be a religiously meaningful ritual for an internal public, may become a culturally significant self-representation before an external public.” While the touristic performance is different from the religious performance, it is not necessarily worse: “commoditization does not necessarily destroy the meaning of cultural products, although it may change it or add new meanings to old ones” (371). In such cases, the transformed good might be inferior in some respects and superior in others. An all-things-considered judgment comparing X_C to X_N will require cautious and context-sensitive aggregation of the different senses in which the good is valuable.

Finally, proponents of the Transformation Objection should be open to circumstances where X_C is (in some or all respects) a superior good to X_N . As we have seen in earlier chapters, commodification can positively transform a good into a morally superior alternative, such as

by liberating goods from meanings that are themselves objectionable.⁸⁹ For example, some exclusive member-only clubs – such as the Qantas Chairman’s Lounge and the Melbourne Cricket Club – could be transformed into less objectionably inegalitarian institutions if one could pay to be a member. Access to these clubs is currently determined by non-market means of distribution – gift giving and queuing, respectively. This means that they serve as means for securing political advantage for a private company (in the former case) and privileging less passionate sports fans whose families happen to put them on a list as children (in the latter case). In short, establishing a market in a previously non-commodified good X can have a positive effect by transforming X in a way that enhances its value. While the proponent of the Transformation Objection is not committed to the view that commodification always and only devalues goods, they should avoid a reflexive hostility towards markets that overstates the harms and undersells the benefits of commodification. They must also, as this section has sought to show, clarify the particular sense in which the commodified form of a good is inferior to its non-commodified counterpart, and engage in the sort of analysis required to support this claim.

7.3.3 The Incompatibility Claim

Even once the proponent of the Transformation Objection has established that commodification transforms the properties of a good (from X_N to X_C), and that the latter is inferior to the former, they have still not provided a complete objection to commodification on these grounds. As we saw earlier, a Transformation Objection that comprises just these two parts is open to the question: why can’t we have both? This claim is evident in the discussion of commoditisation and authenticity in tourism referenced above. When

⁸⁹ Of the anti-commodificationists I have discussed across this thesis, Michael Sandel is especially guilty of this. For example, his argument that carbon trading schemes are a morally problematic form of commodification – because they frame environmental obligations as something that one can pay a fee to avoid – fails to grapple with realities where major polluters currently emit large amounts of carbon without social stigma. A dollar value attached to carbon emissions better expresses the disvalue associated with pollution.

comparing a touristic performance with a religious significant ritual, Cohen (1988: 382) argues: “the two kinds of meaning are not necessarily mutually exclusive but could be additive: new meanings may be added to new ones, which persevere into the new situation.”

In some cases, there may be good reasons to not permit the commodified form of a good from existing at all. Governments might decide that sex and prisons should not be for sale, even if they accept that markets in these goods could peacefully co-exist with non-commodified counterparts. Perhaps the risks of permitting such markets, for example on the grounds of exploitation, would be too great. But this would no longer be a Transformation Objection.

This is because the claim being made is *not* that commodification of the general class of good X would involve an objectionable transformation of X_N into X_C , but *rather* that X_C should not be allowed to exist at all. For these reasons, the Transformation Objection depends on a further claim, namely that X_N and X_C are incompatible. Only then can the claim that commodification devalues a good by diminishing its value be properly grounded.

This might seem to make the Transformation Objection depend on a Crowding Out Objection. However, the Incompatibility Claim assumed by Transformation Objections is not as strong as the empirical claim that underpins the Crowding Out Objection. This can be understood with reference to the distinction between tokens and types. While the Crowding Out Objection needs to make a claim about the *type* of a good – in particular that commodification of some tokens will affect all instantiations – the Incompatibility Claim need only make a claim about specific tokens. To take a simple example, a museum that charges an admission fee is incompatible with a version of that museum that is free for all, simply because a good cannot simultaneously cost money and be free. If the free version was superior to the version that costs money this might provide the basis for a successful Transformation Objection. A Crowding Out Objection to this practice would need to make the further claim that introducing a fee at this museum crowds out non-commodified

understandings of other museums (e.g., because of a slippery slope effect). However, the proponent of the Transformation Objection need not make this claim.

This of course requires clarity about what precisely is being transformed through commodification. For example, the decision of one university to offer legacy admissions may corrupt that institution; but it is unlikely that that will corrupt higher education more generally unless it is adopted as a standard practice across the sector. Similarly, Jesus' concerns that the merchants have turned a House of Prayer into a den of thieves is a plausible complaint about the Temple in Jerusalem; but the fact that commercial activity is permitted in a single temple does not corrupt temples where commerce is prohibited. In these cases, it is a particular instantiation of a good that has been corrupted through commodification, not the more general class of that good. The *token* has been devalued but the *type* remains unscathed.

Sometimes a more general class of good may be corrupted when particular instantiations of the class are commodified. For example, gift giving networks may be vulnerable to market norms, as noted in Chapter 6. This will depend on the relationship between tokens and types for different kinds of goods. For example, consider transgressive goods – those goods that are used by sub-cultures as forms of symbolic resistance to the dominant culture within a society. Such goods may cease to exist as forms of symbolic dissent when they are reproduced as marketable commodities (Hebdige 2002). How many T-shirts does Che Guevara's face need to be printed on before he ceases to be a symbol of resistance to corporate capitalism and American hegemony? How many times can a protest song be used to advertise consumer products before it is no longer a form of resistance? I ask these rhetorical questions only to show that whether commodification of a good diminishes particular tokens or the broader type is a complex one.

Characterising precisely what has been transformed through commodification, and why the commodified and non-commodified forms are incompatible, is important to successfully making a Transformation Objection. Otherwise, such objections are vulnerable to the response that commodification has created a new class of good with lesser value, but it has not devalued anything.

7.3.4 The Normative Claim

Though we have seen the ontological claims that a proponent of the Transformation Objection must defend to make a successful argument against commodification, it remains to be seen in what sense transformation is morally objectionable. Though I stipulated that such arguments claim that X_C is inferior to X_N , the moral import of this claim has not yet been substantiated. As we saw in Section 1, one can criticise the Transformation Objection for not having any ‘moral sting’ on the basis that it is not generally morally required to produce only the highest quality things, nor is it necessarily morally bad or wrong to reduce the quality of a good by commodifying it. A successful Transformation Objection thus depends on a further Normative Claim: that the transformation from X_N to X_C is morally objectionable.

Consistent with my remarks in Chapter 4, this allows for a range of moral conclusions from Transformation Objections.⁹⁰ Contrary to Brennan & Jaworski’s criticisms of the related Low-Quality Objection, the proponent of the Transformation Objection can defend the claim that an individual or state might in some instances act morally wrongfully when they contribute to the corrosion of things of value that they have some interest, obligation or reason to protect (Type 1 cases). Alternatively, one can grant that no agent has acted

⁹⁰ Recall that in Chapter 4, I distinguished four types of moral conclusions that can be drawn from meaning-based objections. Collective regulation might be justified to prevent or limit commodification of a good when an agent acts morally wrongfully by commodifying the good (Type 1), or independent of any moral wrongdoing (Type 2). In other cases, moral criticism might be justified in response to commodification, either when an agent acts morally wrongfully (Type 3) or independent of acting morally wrongfully (Type 4).

wrongfully by commodifying a good while still arguing that the state ought to intervene to prevent a diminution in its value (Type 2 cases). The state might, for example, have a moral permission to intervene in people's conduct in order to preserve culturally valuable goods independent of any wrongdoing on behalf of prospective market participants – such as prohibiting selling advertising space on national monuments or goods that have significant symbolic or expressive significance. Or the state might have a duty, or at least be permitted, to ensure that X_N and X_C can coexist by cultivating spaces for the production and consumption of goods that are insulated or immune from market forces. Public funding of the arts and local content requirements for broadcasters and streaming services are common examples where states either intervene in markets or provide a good through non-market means that would not otherwise be adequately supplied.

In other cases, Transformation Objections might provide the basis for moral condemnation or exhortation even if this does not justify state intervention to regulate markets. This can occur when the agent acts morally wrongfully (Type 3 cases) or when their actions justify some form of moral criticism even if they have not wronged any other party (Type 4 cases). For example, when music review websites or travel guides make recommendations in exchange for money, one need not think this ought morally to be prevented to think that this practice is morally bad – either because it infringes a duty owed to readers of the website or guidebook or because it involves a failure to live up to one's ethical ideals. In these ways, the Normative Claim allows for a range of moral conclusions to be drawn from Transformation Objections.

Moreover, there are other avenues for proponents of the Transformation Objection to argue that commodification can be morally objectionable. I have so far characterised the Normative Claim, consistent with the discussion in Chapter 4, as the claim that some forms of commodification ought morally to be prevented, limited or condemned. This might appear to suggest that such goods would naturally be commodified unless the state proactively

intervenes to prevent it from happening. However, at least in some cases, governments have to actively facilitate commodification of goods. It is not simply a matter of getting out of the way.⁹¹ This changes the moral calculus involved in determining whether a good should be commodified. The question is *not* whether the state is morally justified in preventing commodification, but *rather* whether it is morally required to facilitate commodification. The state might simultaneously not be morally justified in actively preventing the commodification of a good, but nor is it morally required to proactively facilitate its commodification.⁹² In such cases, whether commodification needs to be prevented or actively facilitated will be decisive in determining whether a good should be commodified. This allows for a broader class of good which can be covered by Transformation Objections and creates more room for such objections to have moral force.

This does not mean that all transformations of goods into inferior commodified forms will be of normative concern, nor does it mean that governments might not be morally required to actively facilitate markets for certain goods. However, this discussion shows that the proponent of the Transformation Objection has multiple avenues to argue that this objection has moral significance. Such objections can provide grounds to limit, prohibit or condemn commodification, which need not depend on any moral wrongdoing. And such objections can be used to argue that the state doesn't have a duty to actively facilitate commodification.

Conclusion

The Transformation Objection argues that commodification can be morally objectionable if it transforms a good in a way that diminishes its value. This chapter has shown that this

⁹¹ Taylor (2022) applies this idea to a market in votes. He argues: “an active market in votes requires institutional support. The relevant question for a market in votes is thus not whether it should be allowed (i.e., not prohibited) but whether it should be introduced (i.e., provided with the institutional support that would necessary to facilitate it)” (125).

⁹² In cases where the state has actively facilitated commodification, it might be morally required to change policies. This point is relevant in Chapter 10 when I discuss housing policy.

objection can withstand several specific criticisms by demonstrating what a successful version of this objection looks like. It needs to show (1) that a good persists when it is commodified but that it has different properties from its non-commodified form; (2) that the former is inferior to the latter; (3) that the two are in some sense incompatible; and (4) that the transformation from one to the other is morally objectionable. The latter can occur when commodification ought morally to be prevented, limited or condemned, or when the state does not have a duty to actively facilitate commodification.

I have now revisited and revised the three moral meaning-based objections to commodification and shown they can be revised to withstand a range of criticisms – though whether they are successful for any particular good will depend on an analysis of the facts of the matter. Having done this, the next chapter concludes Part 3 of this thesis by showing how these objections can be compiled into a framework that can be used to assess contested cases of commodification on meaning-based grounds.

Chapter 8. The Bottom Line

A framework for applying meaning-based objections

Introduction

This thesis is concerned with arguments that commodification is morally objectionable because it violates the meaning of a good. So far, I have (1) developed a taxonomy of meaning-based objections, (2) argued this class of objection is not defeated by several general criticisms, and (3) explored three moral meaning-based objections in detail by identifying the conditions for a successful instance of each in light of further specific criticisms. The remaining task in Part 3 is to show how the objections can be assembled into a framework that be used to assess the morality of commodification on meaning-based grounds.

This is the task I turn to in this chapter. It comprises two sections. **Section 8.1** provides a recap of the arguments so far made in this thesis. **Section 8.2** develops a three-step approach to applying these objections to contested cases of commodification. This begins by characterising the meaning of a good. It then applies each of the refined meaning-based objections to consider whether commodification violates the meaning of a good. It finally applies both a *sensitivity analysis* and a *comparative analysis*; that is, asking (1) whether identified violations are sensitive to the design of the market for that good; and (2) whether different allocative methods can better represent, realise or protect the meaning of a good. This step helps to draw conclusions about whether, and in what sense, commodification is morally objectionable, and thus what should be done about it, in a manner that is attentive to the heterogenous character of market institutions. I conclude by foreshadowing how I apply this framework to a series of case studies in Part 4 of this thesis.

8.1 A brief recap

Arguments that commodification violates the meaning of a good involve two general forms of violation – what I have called *Misvaluation Cases* and *Devaluation Cases*. The former involves failing to adequately express or realise the value that a good has. In such cases commodification represents a mistake in how to properly value a good. The latter involves undermining, corroding, removing or destroying the value of a good or some dimension(s) of its value. These cases are closely related but conceptually distinct. The meaning-based objections I developed in Chapter 2 can be understood as sub-species of these more general forms of violation. Commodification can misvalue a good if it expresses an objectionable attitude towards it (Bad Attitude Objection) or if it has a tendency to make unavailable desirable attitudes (Crowding Out Objection). Commodification can devalue a good if buying and selling that good is either impossible (Conceptual Error Objection) or would diminish its value (Transformation Objection). After introducing this taxonomy, I set aside the Conceptual Error Objection to focus on the three *moral* meaning-based objections.

The general class of moral meaning-based objections can be criticised on several grounds, as I showed in Chapters 3 and 4 when I presented and evaluated four general criticisms. I argued that the general criticisms do not refute meaning-based objections though they do call for a cautious and context-sensitive approach to moral deliberations about commodification. The general criticisms, my responses to the criticisms, and the implications of these responses for more deliberations about commodification are summarised at Table 10 below. Each moral meaning-based objection is also subject to further specific criticisms, as I discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. I argued that each objection can be refined to withstand these specific criticisms and identified success conditions for each. These are summarised at

Table 11.

Table 10 | General criticisms of moral meaning-based objections

Premise of objection	General criticism	Description of general criticism	Summary of reply	Implications for analysis
P1. X has a meaning that is relevant to determine how it should be valued or allocated.	Contested Meaning Criticism	The meaning of a good, or the scope of the community that determines its meaning, is too contested to give it normative force in deliberations about how the good should be valued and allocated.	Both essentialists and conventionalists have the resources to argue that the meaning of a good can be normatively significant in deciding how it should be valued or allocated.	The proponent of meaning-based objections needs to characterise the nature of the good in question and subject different conceptions to normative scrutiny, recognising that traditional non-commodified meanings may themselves be objectionable.
P2. Commodification violates the meaning of X.	Neutrality Criticism	There is rarely a direct connection between the meaning of a good and its distribution via a market, as markets are typically instrumental mechanisms for achieving our ends.	The proponent of meaning-based objections is not committed to the claim that commodification always violates the meaning of a good, only that <i>if</i> it does <i>then</i> it is morally objectionable.	Proponent of meaning-based objections must avoid a reflexive pessimism towards money and markets. Violations identified by meaning-based objections are likely to be sensitive to market design which must be considered in determining how to respond to identified harms.
	Expressive Potential Criticism	Commodification can reflect or transform the meaning of a good in positive ways.		
C1. Therefore, commodifying X is morally objectionable.	No Moral Upshot Criticism	Even if commodifying a good violates its meaning, it does not necessarily follow that commodification is morally objectionable.	The moral wrongs identified by meaning-based objections are best understood as pro tanto wrongs. Meaning-based objections can raise different kinds of moral concerns.	Conclusions from meaning-based objections need to be informed by comparative analysis, which considers how commodification compares with other modes of valuation or methods of distribution. Meaning-based objections can be used to make the case for regulation or moral criticism.

Table 11 | *A taxonomy of moral meaning-based objections to commodification*

	<u><i>Bad Attitude Objection</i></u>	<u><i>Crowding Out Objection</i></u>	<u><i>Transformation Objection</i></u>
Initial statement of objection	Commodification is morally objectionable because it expresses an objectionable attitude towards a good. It can either make manifest attitudes that participants to exchange hold (attitude-manifesting form), or express an attitude due to the conventional symbolic significance attached to buying and selling a good (attitude-communicating form).	Commodification is morally objectionable because it has a tendency to make unavailable desirable ways of valuing a good – either intra-personally or interpersonally.	Commodification is morally objectionable because it transforms a good in a way that diminishes its value.
Specific criticisms of objection	Commodification does not necessarily show that participants to exchange regard a good to be only instrumentally valuable. Semiotic norms attached to money and markets are culturally contingent, variable and should be revised where they have bad consequences.	The objection is underpinned by a simplistic understanding of the relationship between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods. There has been little work to account for how, why and when crowding out occurs. The objection does not have moral implications.	The objection is underpinned by a simplistic view of the corruptive effects of markets. The objection is metaphysically confused because commodification actually creates a new distinct type of good. The objection does not have moral implications.
Success conditions for refined version of objection	The attitude-manifesting form of this objection applies where commodification creates a morally significant risk that objectionable attitudes towards a good will be formed or exacerbated. The attitude-communicating form of this objection need not depend on essentialist semiotics. A conventional form of this objection applies where: (1) the consequences of revising anti-market semiotic norms would be worse than preserving them, or (2) expressing an attitude towards a good by commodifying it infringes a moral duty.	Both forms of this objection apply in cases where there is a relation of Entailment or Corrosion between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods, and where this ought to be prevented, limited or condemned. The interpersonal form provides reasons to limit or prevent certain forms of commodification. The intrapersonal form provides the basis for moral criticism.	This objection applies where: (1) a good persists when it is commodified but has different properties from its non-commodified form; (2) the commodified form of a good is inferior to its non-commodified form, (3) the two forms of the good are incompatible, and (4) the transformation from one to the other is morally objectionable (because it ought to be prevented, limited or condemned, or because it ought not to be actively facilitated).

8.2 Building the framework

The objections described above can be operationalised to assess contested cases of commodification through a three-step process, as shown in Table 12 overleaf and explained below. Before describing each step, it is useful to make some general observations.

First, this framework does not exhaust arguments against commodification for a good. It relates only to arguments that appeal to the meaning of a good. As I observed in Chapter 1, there may be compelling reasons that a good should not be commodified that have to do with distributive justice, character, social relations, freedom, or efficiency, even if commodification does not violate the meaning of a good.

Second, each of the three moral meaning-based objections provides considerations that are of moral importance in deliberations about commodification. They do not decisively demonstrate that commodification of a good is morally impermissible or should be prohibited or restricted. They provide considerations that need to be factored into all-things-considered ethical judgments.

Third, this framework reflects my broad understanding of commodification as a process that admits of degrees. While most debates about the moral limits of markets to date have focussed on *formal commodification* – that is, whether a good should be permitted to be bought and sold in any form – my focus is primarily on the extent to which goods should be governed by market norms and understandings. This is reflected in the case studies that I explore in the remaining chapters of my thesis. It is also reflected in the final step of the framework which considers the degree to which social norms or government regulation can mitigate or prevent the misvaluation or devaluation associated with commodification. Given the heterogenous character of markets, the ethical considerations suggested by this framework will more often bear on questions of *substantive commodification* – that is, the

extent to which the exchange value of a good should be permitted to dominate its use value in terms of how the good is produced, distributed, consumed or regarded.

Table 12 | A framework for applying meaning-based objections to commodification

1. Characterising the meaning of a good	→	2. Applying the objections	→	3. Determining the response
<p>What values and ideals should X embody, express or realise?</p> <p>Do individuals, the state or other institutions have reasons, interests or duties to preserve or promote particular meanings of X?</p>		<p>Does commodifying X violate its meaning by either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultivating or communicating objectionable attitudes towards X? • Making unavailable non-commodified understandings of X? • Transforming X in a way that diminishes its value? <p>If so, commodification X is morally objectionable and there are reasons to prohibit, limit or condemn commodification of X.</p>		<p>Are any of the violations identified in Step 2 sensitive to the design of the market for X?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes, then (all else equal) the market should be designed to mitigate or prevent these violations. • If no, then (all else equal) a market for X should not be permitted. <p>Would alternative feasible allocative methods or modes of valuation better represent or realise the meaning of X?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes, then (all else equal) X should not be commodified. • If no, then commodification of X (all else equal) is permissible.

8.2.1 Step 1. Characterising the meaning of a good (‘Characterisation Stage’)

The first step enquires about the meaning of a good. Why is the good valuable and what ideals and norms should it embody, express and realise? To use the term employed by Aristotle and Marx, what is the good’s use value? What is it for? In this respect, the first step of my proposed framework is similar to the ‘meaning-first’ accounts of the moral limits of markets developed by Sandel (2012), Walzer (1983) and Anderson (1993). Importantly, I remain agnostic on whether to endorse conventionalism or essentialism about the meaning of goods – as I argued previously, misvaluing and devaluing through commodification are both consistent with either metaphysical view.

There will, of course, be disagreements at this stage, either because people have rival conceptions of the meaning of a good or because people agree that a good has multiple meanings and dimensions of value but they disagree about their relative importance. While some have taken this to be a fatal blow for meaning-first accounts, as I showed in Chapter 4, this is too hasty. An essentialist can insist that there is a fact of the matter about the meaning and value of a good even if people disagree about it. A conventionalist can insist that rival conceptions of the meaning of a good are not incommensurable and are themselves subject to normative evaluation. Moreover, individuals or states may have duties, interests or reasons to protect and cultivated certain conceptions, even where there are rival conceptions of the meaning of that good. We may thus disagree on specifics about what a good is for and why it is valuable, yet still draw conclusions about what conceptions should be honoured and promoted by individuals or governments.

8.2.2 Step 2. Applying the objections (‘Application Stage’)

Once we have articulated the respects in which a good is valuable, the three meaning-based objections provide a series of tests to assess whether commodification would objectionably violate the meaning of a good. In this sense my approach differs somewhat from Anderson’s – while she is also concerned with whether the market can realise or express the value of goods, her approach is built around a single principle: goods that have dimensions of value that are incompatible with market norms should not be commodified. My approach instead provides a series of logically related considerations to assess whether commodification is morally objectionable.

It can be morally objectionable to commodify a good in the following cases: (1) if it risks cultivating objectionable attitudes towards the good, or communicates such attitudes because of a culture’s semiotic norms in a manner that produces bad consequences or infringes a duty;

(2) if it has a tendency to make unavailable non-commodified understandings of goods either intrapersonally or interpersonally; or (3) if it transforms a good in a way that diminishes the value of a good. If any of these objections successfully applies to a good, it shows that commodification of that good is, in some sense, morally objectionable. This provides reasons to prohibit, limit or condemn commodification.

8.2.3 Step 3. Determining the response ('Response Stage')

At this stage, we have seen whether commodification of a good is morally objectionable on the grounds that it violates the meaning of a good in a manner that ought to be prohibited, limited or condemned. To consider what should be done about pro tanto wrongs identified above, we must ask two further questions. First, to what extent is the violation of a good's meaning contingent on the design of a market? If the violation is sensitive to market design, then this suggests that the appropriate policy response is government regulation to limit the degree to which the good is commodified, for example by designing a market so that such a violation does not occur. In this case the good should not be substantively commodified. If there is a significant risk that the violation applies to all feasible markets for that good, then this suggests the appropriate response, all else equal, is to prohibit commodification of the good. In this case the good should not be formally commodified.

Second, we must ask whether there are other feasible allocative methods or modes of valuation that could better represent or realise the value of the good. It may be that commodification is the lesser of two (or more) evils. If there are alternative feasible methods of allocation or modes of valuation, then all else equal the good should not be commodified. If there are not any such alternatives, then commodification is, all else equal, permissible.

In these ways, this stage allows us to place any sources of moral concern identified in Step 2 in a broader context. They may be able to be mitigated through careful market design, or they

may be regrettable but ultimately less bad than the next best alternative. The appropriate response will depend on the circumstances of the case but may include some form of collective regulation or ascriptions of moral blame.

This does not necessarily provide an evaluative conclusion about the all-things-considered permissibility of commodification. This is because there are other ethical dimensions of commodification – each of which might provide powerful countervailing reasons to commodify a good in spite of the pro tanto wrongs identified through this analysis.

Nevertheless, this framework does provide a tool to comprehensively evaluate a subset of these moral deliberations, namely those arguments that invoke the meaning of the good to argue that it should not be commodified.

Conclusions and the road ahead

I have now developed a framework for assessing contested cases of commodification on meaning-based grounds, one that is attentive to the general and specific criticisms developed and evaluated earlier in this thesis. This completes the theoretical component of this thesis and brings us to the end of Part 3. I now turn to Part 4. This is the task of applying this framework. Over the next four chapters, I apply the framework to a series of case studies: sports betting; housing policy; music and the idea of ‘selling out’, and the public sector consulting market.

My intention in discussing these four particular case studies is four-fold. *First*, they are each interesting in their own right and are underexplored in the literature. While most philosophical debates focus on questions of formal commodification, each case study is principally about the ethics of substantive commodification. *Second*, they vindicate an approach to ethical deliberations about commodification that give put the meaning of the good in question at the centre of the analysis. *Third*, collectively they reflect the breadth of

arguments I have corralled in the theoretical component of this thesis. They cover each moral-meaning based objection, including their different forms (see Table 13). They also reflect the broad definition of commodification I have adopted. The chapters on sports betting and selling out relate primarily to commodification understood as a mode of valuation, while the chapters on housing policy and public sector consulting concern commodification understood as a method of allocation. The case studies also reflect the diverse range of ways to respond to the pro tanto wrongs of commodification. Sports betting and housing policy both call for government regulation. The harms of the public sector consulting market suggest obligations on both the supply and demand sides of the market. Concerns about the commodification of music involved in ‘selling out’ provides a justification for moral criticism, but not government action.

Table 13 | The meaning-based objection(s) used in each applied chapter

Case study	Meaning-based objection(s) applied in corresponding chapter	Form of meaning-based objection(s), if applicable
Sports betting	Bad Attitude Objection	Attitude-manifesting form
	Crowding Out Objection	Interpersonal form
Housing policy	Crowding Out Objection	Interpersonal form & Institutional form
Music and “selling out”	Bad Attitude Objection	Attitude-communicating form
	Crowding Out Objection	Intrapersonal form & Interpersonal form
	Transformation Objection	N/A
Public sector consulting	Transformation Objection	N/A

Fourth, each case study elucidates different arguments I have made about how to develop and apply meaning-based objections in moral deliberations about commodification. The discussion of *sports betting* shows how attitudes expressed and promoted towards a good (in this case sport) when it is commodified can have harmful downstream consequences – in this case because the values of the good in question are causally linked to or constituted by the attitudes of valuing agents. It demonstrates how justification for government regulation need

not depend on any individual acting wrongly when they commodify a good. It also shows how concerns about crowding out can arise from apparently isolated actions of individuals that commodify goods, because of the social context in which a good is valued. The discussion of *housing* shows the different forms that crowding out can take; in this case it occurs at an institutional level as well as interpersonally. Unlike in the sports betting case, where interpersonal crowding out principally occurs due to the social context in which sport is appreciated, for housing crowding out occurs principally due to the incentives to adopt a commodified mode of valuation. Housing also provides a good example where moral deliberations that appeal to the meaning of a good can proceed in spite of disagreements about a good's meaning. The discussion of *music* and *selling out* helps to demonstrate the range of ways that commodification can transform the character of a good in a manner that diminishes its value, in this case principally through effects on production. This contrasts, in important respects, with the final chapter's discussion of the *public sector consulting market*. In this case, commodifying the functions and activities of governments can diminish the value of the public sector, but it can also strengthen its capacity in important ways. This chapter thus highlights the importance of comparative analysis in moral deliberations about commodification. It also provides a vivid example of the heterogeneous character of markets and the various effects of commodification on the character of goods.

Having made these remarks, we are now ready to proceed with Part 4.

Part 4.

In this part of the thesis, I apply the framework introduced above to four case studies to demonstrate that it is illuminating in moral deliberations about commodification. I first analyse sports betting as a form of commodification and argue that the practice can undermine the ideals of sport in a manner that justifies state interventions to regulate the sports betting industry. I then argue that Australia's housing affordability crisis is partly a consequence of the commodification of housing and that government policies should change to limit the extent to which housing is commodified. I then consider the criticism that musicians are 'sell outs' when they value creative pursuits in primarily or solely commercial terms, and argue that it can be a normatively significant criticism. I finally analyse the public sector consulting market as a form of commodification, and argue that the market can be designed in ways that mitigate its harms and ensure it advances the public interest.

Chapter 9. At odds?

Sports betting and commodification

“It introduced money where money really didn’t belong in sports.”

~ Former NBA player and US Senator Bill Bradley, on the legalisation of sports betting in the United States.⁹³

Introduction

Sports betting is a booming business. While gambling and elite sports have long been closely related, a combination of technological, cultural and legal changes have led to a rapid intensification of the relationship between the two practices. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the ‘gambification’ of sport. Many people find the normalisation of sports betting objectionable, as the quote that prefaces this chapter suggests. The limited literature on sports betting raises two ethical concerns about the practice. These relate to problem gambling and the potential for betting-related corruption. In this chapter, I analyse sports betting as a form of commodification to show that a distinct source of ethical concern lies in the ability for sports betting to undermine the ideals of sport, principally through its effects on the engagement and attitudes of spectators and fans. I argue this provides grounds for regulating the sports betting industry.

This chapter comprises seven sections. **Section 9.1** provides background and context on the modern sports betting industry. **Section 9.2** describes traditional critiques of sports betting and argues that these do not exhaust what is objectionable about it. **Section 9.3** explains why sports betting can be understood as a form of commodification, as defined in Chapter 1. The remaining sections deploy the framework introduced above. The *Characterisation Stage* is

⁹³ Lewis (2024).

developed in **Section 9.4**. I explore the values and ideals associated with sport, drawing on Walsh & Giullianotti's (2007) account of *autotelic goods* that supervene on sport and contribute to its ethical justification. The *Application Stage* is developed over the next two sections. **Section 9.5** applies the attitude-manifesting form of the Bad Attitude Objection to argue that (1) some forms of sports betting plausibly affect the attitudes of fans and spectators in negative ways, and (2) if this is the case then this provides grounds for moral concern. **Section 9.6** applies the interpersonal form of the Crowding Out Objection to argue that the modern sports betting industry may change the social context in which sport is valued in ways that make unavailable preferable ways of valuing sport. I turn to the *Response Stage* in **Section 9.7**. I argue that the moral concerns identified should be ameliorated through policies that prohibit or regulate certain forms of sports betting or that seek to change social norms about the practice.

9.1 An overview of the sports betting industry

The practice of wagering on the outcomes of sporting contests is not new. Indeed, there are examples dating back to the Roman Empire of bets on circus events and chariot races (Evans & McNamee 2021). Moreover, for sports like horse racing, betting has always been a central part of the contest. The meteoric rise of the sports betting industry globally, however, is a more recent historical phenomenon. Three features of the modern sports betting industry are noteworthy: its size; the scope of betting markets; and the integration of gambling companies with elite sports. Let us consider each.

Sports betting is a large global industry – annual spending (i.e., bettors' losses) has been estimated at US\$130 billion in 2024 (The Economist 2024a). It is also a rapidly growing industry in many parts around the world. For example, the turnover of sports betting companies licensed in Australia exceeded AU\$50 billion in the 2022 financial year,

representing a tenfold increase from a decade prior (Snape 2023). The sports betting market in Europe was estimated at US\$36.4 billion in 2023 and is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 9.6 per cent over the next 10 years to reach US\$84.3 billion by 2033 (IMARC 2024). The most marked rise, however, is in the United States. After a 2018 decision by the US supreme court struck down a federal law that effectively banned commercial sports betting, most states have legalised the practice. According to the American Gaming Association, gross gaming revenue from legal sports betting increased from US\$0.9 billion in 2019 to \$10.9 billion in 2023 – with US\$119.8 billion wagered in the latter year (Fisher 2024). As *The Economist* (2024b) reports, “To hear the industry tell it, this is only the beginning.” Sports betting is a high proportion of online gambling but is only a small share of ‘land-based’ forms of gambling. As the former displaces the latter, the sports betting industry will continue to grow rapidly.

While growth in the sports betting industry has been enabled by legal changes, technology has also played a significant role. The rise of smartphones provides consumers with portable and instant access to betting markets that has enabled different gambling formats, such as real-time and peer-to-peer betting. These technologies have also enabled a rapid expansion in the types of bets that can be made. In sophisticated online betting platforms, punters can bet on a huge array of ‘micro-events’ – often called proposition bets – which they can combine into ever more convoluted multis, parlays or accumulators.⁹⁴ Members of betting platforms can also watch sporting contests, make bets and interact with their friends all without leaving their preferred app (Gurrieri 2023). In these ways, new technologies are expanding the scope of sports betting markets, while making gambling and sports increasingly indissociable.

⁹⁴ These are the common terms for multiple-selection bets used in Australia, the US and the UK, respectively.

Another notable trend is the deepening of economic ties between professional sport associations and gambling companies. Sporting leagues and bodies that have historically been vocal in their opposition to sports betting – such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Football League (NFL) – have recently embraced legalised gambling as a major source of revenue (Purdum 2018; Chen 2022). Economic relationships between sporting organisations and gambling companies take a range of forms. For example, betting companies sponsor sporting leagues and teams, buy advertising space during broadcasts, enter into profit-sharing arrangements with sporting institutions, purchase data rights to set odds in betting markets, and pay for the use of sports logos and intellectual property in their advertising and on their platforms (Hing, Rockloff & Browne 2023). At a time when revenues from broadcasting rights and advertising space are declining, forming commercial relationships with gambling companies offers sporting leagues and teams a reliable income stream. The fates of sporting leagues and gambling companies are increasingly intertwined. For example, the Australian Football League (AFL) collects ‘product fees’ from bookmakers – which is a percentage of their turnover or revenue – thus giving the league a direct financial interest in increasing the volume of bets on its games (Belot 2025).

One result of increasing ties between sporting institutions and betting companies is a constant stream of gambling-related advertisements during sporting contests. For example, in the 2024-25 season, over half of English Premier League teams’ shirts feature gambling sponsors – more than any other industry (Fletcher 2024). When one opens the official AFL mobile app, one is offered four pieces of information about upcoming games: the teams; the time; the location; and the official Sportsbet odds. There has also been a significant growth in pre- and post- match sports coverage that is exclusively focused on betting opportunities (Manzo 2022). As a result of the symbiotic relationship between sporting institutions and betting companies, many professional sports are increasingly oriented around gambling practices.

9.2 Common objections to sports betting

Many people are critical of sports betting. For example, in a critical review of gambling research studies, Hing, Rockloff & Browne (2023) cite survey evidence from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and Australia which shows that a significant majority of their populations have concerns about gambling sponsorship and advertising of sporting contests. Interestingly, these concerns are especially acute among sports fans. Such concerns are reflected in the decisions of some sporting leagues and teams – for example major English football leagues and the Sydney Swans in the AFL – to reject certain forms of sports betting sponsorship (Chammas, Decent & Rugari 2023). Existing critiques of the sports betting industry – both within and outside the philosophical literature – typically advance two objections. These relate to problem gambling and betting-related corruption.

One objection reflects a more general concern about the addictive and harmful nature of gambling. People who gamble on sports can develop problematic gambling habits that can negatively affect individuals, families and communities. By being bedfellows with betting companies, sporting leagues and teams are complicit in the harms caused by problem gambling. This underpins Jones, Pinder & Robinson's (2020) critique of gambling sponsorship and advertising in British football. They argue that the relationship between the marketing of gambling and the sport is morally problematic because it “contributes to an increase in the overall ‘amount’ of gambling in society [which] in turn ... contributes to an increase in the prevalence of problem gambling (including gambling disorder) and all the associated harms” (165). Hing, Rockloff & Browne (2023) similarly argue against the gambification of sport on the grounds that “Sports organisations play an instrumental role in the gambification of sport and derive revenues from wagering operators that are, in large part, derived from harmful gambling by sports fans.”

This criticism of sports betting often appeals to related concerns – such as the use of predatory marketing techniques by gambling companies, the disproportionate impacts of these advertisements on children and the exploitative nature of the business model which actively promotes problem gambling. These concerns are particularly acute given the rise of mobile betting. Instant access to thousands of betting markets effectively gives gamblers a ‘casino in their pocket.’ Moreover, betting companies have an enormous quantity of data on people’s betting practices which they use to craft strategies to encourage more betting. In the words of author Michael Lewis, speaking about the United States sports betting industry: “the new sports gambling industrial complex ... [is] exquisitely designed to maximize both the number of and the stupidity of sports bets that Americans make” (Lewis 2025). While concerns about exploitation raise ethical issues about consent, at heart these are concerns about gambling being a harmful activity. Advocates of this criticism often draw an analogy between sports betting and tobacco. The latter, they remind us, was once a major sponsor of many sporting contests around the world. Just as popular sentiment and the consensus of public health experts shifted against the tobacco industry, so too should the weight of evidence about problem gambling force greater regulation of the sports betting industry.

A separate critique draws attention to the potential of sports betting to create perverse incentives for match-fixing or spot-fixing among athletes, administrators and teams. For example, McNamee (2013: 174) notes, “the greater the variety of betting practices, the greater the possibility for corruption.” Examples of corruption in sports are widespread, from the 1919 Baseball world series to the South African cricket team under Hansie Cronje. In a review of the relationship between gambling and sport, Forrest & Simmons (2003: 607) cite examples of betting-related corruption to argue that betting “inflicts negative external costs on the sport industry because loss of confidence in the integrity of competition will lessen the attractiveness of the spectacle and, consequently, lower attendance demand and the value of

media rights.” Aside from the financial implications of betting-related corruption, there are also ethical concerns about deceiving fans and undermining the integrity of sport. These concerns are often reflected in sporting leagues’ historical opposition to sports betting. For example, in a 2012 deposition, a lawyer for the NFL justified the league’s staunch opposition to sports gambling on the grounds that it would “negatively impact our long-term relationship with our fans, negatively impact the perception of our sport across the country” (Chen 2022). As recently as 2023, the Commissioner of the NFL said: “it’s one of the reasons we oppose legalized sports betting, because of the risk to the integrity of the game” (Kilgore 2023).

These represent powerful objections, but they do not exhaust the moral concerns that one might have about sports betting. To see this, consider the following criticisms:

- 1) In 2023, Australian politician Zoe Daniel raised concerns about the AFL’s relationship with gambling advertising by saying: “Do we really want to reach a situation where impressionable teenagers know more about the intricacies of ‘multis’ than they do about on field tactics? ... Do we really want a situation where they come to believe that having a punt is an integral part of following footy?” (Niall & Sakkal 2023).
- 2) In 2023, former Canadian Olympian Bruce Kidd expressed concerns that “television advertising is inculcating young Canadians into sports betting, rather than nurturing an appreciation of sports through the beauty of skilled athletes playing at their best, the drama of a closely fought game and the communal joy of being amidst fellow ‘fans’” (Kidd 2023).
- 3) Former NBA Player and US Senator Bill Bradley expressed long-standing concerns about gambling in 2024: “The idea of gambling on sports was always something that was counter to the values of the sport ... I didn’t want players to be Roulette chips. I wanted to protect the purity of the game, the values that were important to me, and gambling polluted that in a fundamental way” (Lewis 2024).

- 4) After Australia banned showing live betting odds during sport in 2013, then chief executive of the National Rugby League (NRL) Dave Smith supported the ban by saying, “The overwhelming sentiment is that we do not want to see betting as the primary focus of the game ... We want young kids to be enjoying the skills of their favourite team, not quoting the odds” (BBC News 2013).

While most of these examples raise concerns about problem gambling and predatory marketing, each also appeals to sport as an independently valuable activity that may be corrupted when it is treated as an opportunity to profit by gambling. Kidd invokes the ‘beauty of sports’ while Bradley speaks of the ‘purity of the game.’ Daniel and Smith both worry that young people’s interest in the skills or tactics displayed in sport will be replaced by interest in gambling. Each comment gestures towards two claims that provide additional grounds for critiquing sports betting: (1) the claim that sport has some meaning, values or ideals that are violated when it is oriented towards gambling; and (2) the claim that ‘proper’ appreciation of sport is incompatible with treating sporting contests as a gambling product. In the following sections, I make sense of these intuitions, drawing on the framework developed in Chapter 8 to advance two related objections to sports betting.

9.3 Conceptualising sports betting as a form of commodification

Before I get to this task, however, it remains to be seen precisely how sports betting is a form of commodification. Recall the definition from Chapter 1: “Commodification is the process (and the resulting state of affairs) by which a good is transformed into or used to create a commodity; that is something that is (a) bought and sold in the social context of a market, or (b) valued in terms of the price that it could (hypothetically or actually) obtain on a market.”

Sports betting involves turning sporting contests into a gambling product. Based on the definition above, sports betting is a form of commodification because sport is used to create a commodity; that is, a betting market in which people essentially purchase a lottery ticket that pays out if particular events transpire during gameplay. In so doing, it turns gameplay into a vehicle for financial speculation rather than an athletic contest. It also introduces a set of economic relationships between sporting institutions and gambling companies in which objects connected with sporting leagues – for instance, official statistics, advertising spaces, logos and other intellectual property – acquire an exchange value.

In addition, as I argue below, sports betting plausibly affects how fans value and appreciate sport. Rather than thinking in terms of pressure, performance and momentum, sports betting encourages people to think of sport in terms of its financial potential – odds, probabilities and expected returns. If it has these effects, then another sense in which sport is commodified through sports betting is that such markets promote instrumental modes of regard towards sporting contests. It is valued for the price one can obtain from it, not for its own sake. I turn to this point in Section 9.5. Before I get to this task, however, we first need to understand the values associated with sport that are threatened when it is treated as a gambling product.

9.4 The autotelic goods of sport (*Characterisation Stage*)

There is a considerable literature in the philosophy of sport about the values associated with sport that either constitute or emerge from the practice and which contribute to its ethical justification (Devine & Frias 2023). In this chapter, I draw on an account developed by Walsh & Giullianotti (2007) as part of a normative critique of the commodification of sport. According to their view, there are ‘autotelic goods’ associated with sport, goods that are threatened by excessively market-oriented understandings of sport. An autotelic good is one that has a purpose in, and not apart from, itself. Such goods are realised when an activity is

enjoyed for its own sake and not for the outcomes consequent on it.⁹⁵ These goods are “fundamental moral values that emerge from or through sporting activity” (10). When these goods are undermined, it provides grounds for moral concern. The account draws inspiration from internalist accounts of sport, in particular Robert Simon’s *broad internalism*. According to this view, sport is partly constituted by underlying intrinsic principles that provide a foundation for the interpretation and ethical justification of sporting practices. In Simon’s view the foundational principle is mutualism: sport is a “mutually acceptable quest for excellence through challenge” (Simon, Torres & Hager 2019: 47). Walsh & Giullianotti do not argue that such goods are constitutive of sport, only that these goods supervene on sport. They list a range of autotelic goods. These include the mutual pursuit of athletic excellence, the cultivation of skills, and ideals of fair play and sportsmanship. While most of the goods they list are associated with and realised through participation in sport, some relate more generally to the broader culture in which sport is appreciated by fans, spectators and communities. For example, they include among the autotelic goods aesthetic values associated with appreciating the ‘beauty of the game.’ They also note that sporting clubs are a locus of community – they can promote community identification and community-mindedness. Their description of autotelic goods thus provides a capacious account of the moral values of sport that is not limited to participation (62).

None of this is to deny that sport is also valuable as an economic activity, one that provides a living for the administrators, officials and players involved (at least at elite levels). Walsh & Giullianotti (2007) readily acknowledge the benefits of markets in sport: “That we accept the necessity and desirability of markets in sport, does not rule out the possibility that the market is often morally pernicious and that we might wish to avoid some elements of it” (30). While

⁹⁵ In their words, “Autotelic goods are realised in sport when the agent pursues sport-for-sport’s sake; that is when the motives of those playing sport are realised by the very performance of it rather than through outcomes consequent upon it ... The pursuit of autotelic goods is one way of regarding sport as intrinsically valuable” (Walsh & Giullianotti 2007: 33).

they do not discuss sports betting in detail, the same point applies. One might acknowledge that sport is partly valuable as a means to make money – not just for those involved in sporting leagues but for bettors too – while also recognising that this might be at odds (no pun intended) with other values of sport.

I will not defend the view that sport is intrinsically valuable for the reasons that Walsh & Giullianotti identify. I will argue *from* this premise rather than *for* this premise. However, I note that many philosophers of sport and sports players and fans alike would be sympathetic to the idea that sport is an intrinsically valuable activity that embodies and produces morally valuable ideals. If one accepts this premise, then it remains to be seen whether and how such goods are compromised by the modern sports betting industry. In the next two sections, I apply the attitude-manifesting form of the Bad Attitude Objection and the interpersonal form of the Crowding Out Objection to critique sports betting.

9.5 Applying the Bad Attitude Objection (*Application Stage*)

Recall that the attitude-manifesting form of the Bad Attitude Objection claims that commodification is pro tanto morally objectionable when it creates a significant risk that an objectionable attitude towards a good will be formed or exacerbated among participants to exchange. In this section, I apply this objection to sports betting to argue that (1) there are credible worries that sports betting negatively affects the way that fans and spectators attend to and experience sporting contests, and (2) if this is the case then this provides grounds for moral concern. Before I substantiate these claims, we should observe two preliminary points.

First, the effects of gambling on spectator and fan attitudes are likely to vary between individuals, based on both personality traits and gambling practices. Betting on the outcomes of sporting contests may very well give spectators ‘skin in the game’, leading to a more intensely enjoyable spectator experience for some. It might provide an avenue into fandom

for people that were not previously interested in sports. Or it might encourage bettors hoping to gain a competitive edge on the market to learn more about the details of gameplay. Such arguments have been made in defences of sports betting in popular media. Stewart (2014) argues, “With \$500 on a game, I am like a kid on Christmas morning. Sports betting is a challenge. It makes sports more exciting. It makes you a part of the contest.” Likewise, Cosh (2023) argues, “It’s closer to the truth to say that gambling is an inherent part of the pleasure of sport than it is to say it’s inimical to those pleasures.”

Second, there is limited empirical evidence of the effects of sports betting on fan and spectator engagement, especially causal studies that examine fan engagement over time. Some studies find a positive correlation between gambling and viewership (Dwyer et al 2024) or between gambling and positive emotions during games (Xu et al 2021). However, others link gambling practices to reduced fan engagement (Blank, Loveland & Houghton 2021). Systematic empirical investigation about how gambling tends to affect the attitudes of different groups – such as committed fans, casual fans and non-fans – would be valuable to provide a more fulsome appraisal of how the sports betting industry affects spectator engagement. Nevertheless, the empirical claim underpinning this objection is credible because gambling mediates the relationship that individuals have to sporting contests. It gives punters a financial interest in sporting contests. Given this, it plausibly changes how they watch games – by affecting both what they are attentive to during gameplay and what events they are interested in. This could have the effects described in Table 14. Again, my intention is to raise some potential effects and argue they are not outlandish. Below, I’ll explain why – if they are correct – they have normative implications.

Table 14 | Potential effects of sports betting on fan engagement

Effect	Description of effect	Example
Distraction or Selective Attention	Instead of focussing on the game ,bettors are either (1) compelled to check betting apps during gameplay, or (2) oriented towards aspects of the game that they have bets on which are tangential to the central drama of the game.	Ruberry (2024) objects to the meteoric rise of sports gambling in the United States on the grounds that: “It may well lead to a thoroughly gamified experience ... where the games unfolding within the game – endlessly recursive in the limitless potential of prop bets, in-game adjustments and byzantine parlays – come to obscure the sport itself.”
Depersonalisation	Gambling leads bettors to regard athletes as mere means to make a profit.	Bill Bradley articulates his objection to sports betting as follows: “I didn’t want players to be Roulette chips” (Lewis 2024). NBA player Tyrese Haliburton has said: “To half the world, I’m just helping them make money on DraftKings or whatever. I’m a prop” (Smith 2024). The New York Times has reported a considerable rise in online harassment of NBA players by disgruntled sports bettors (Edwards 2025).
Reduction in interest over time	A preoccupation with gambling reduces bettors’ interest in sport over time. Without the rush of excitement borne of financial stakes in a game, sport is of little interest to viewers.	In an American study involving 492 participants, Blank, Loveland & Houghton (2021: 366) found that “consumers who bet on the home team and lose report lower positive emotions and subsequent fan engagement than consumers who do not bet.” The study concluded that “we find support for a negative (but not positive) effect of sports betting on fan engagement.”

If we grant that the empirical claim underpinning the Bad Attitude Objection is, at least, plausible in the case of sports betting, it remains to be seen why this is of moral concern. In the remainder of this section, I consider the normative premise of the objection: the claim that there is some moral implication if sports betting negatively affects fan and spectator engagement and appreciation. My argument comprises three parts. The first two points seek to show that attitudes towards sport have ethical significance even where these have no

spillover effects on other people or on sport itself. The last point shows that the attitudes of fans and spectators do indeed have spillover effects that give rise to moral concerns.

First, it is plausible that one's motivations for supporting sports teams can be subject to ethical analysis and that some motivations are morally superior. In an influential paper about the ethics of supporting sports teams, Dixon (2001: 153) argues that there is an ideal sports fan – the “moderate partisan” – who combines some partisan loyalty to their own team with some impartial concern for the sport being played skilfully, fairly and with style. He argues that this orientation is preferable to both the “purely partisan fan” who is overzealous and the “100% purist fan” who lacks a commendable allegiance to a team. For Dixon, moderate partisan support is, like other particular allegiances, a *prima facie* good. If this account of sports fandom is plausible, then the motivations of fans can be subject to ethical evaluation.⁹⁶

Another way to show that fans' attitudes towards sport have moral significance is to appeal to the ethical ideals associated with having certain evaluative attitudes towards objects of value. In Chapter 6, I drew on Darwall's (2002) rational care theory of welfare to make this point. Recall that Darwall argues that the most important constituents of welfare involve appreciative contact with things that are objectively good. In his words, “the most beneficial human life consists of activities involving the appreciation of worth and merit” (80). On this account, treating goods as opportunities to make money may fail to live up to the ideals of the virtuous person who has an “orientation to things of worth” (93) that enables the direct appreciation of their value. If a fan cares deeply about being a discerning viewer of sports, with appropriate admiration and respect for excellence and other virtues displayed in sporting contests, then we might be justifiably concerned that their interests are undermined by viewing sport as an opportunity to gamble. This person has compelling reasons not to bet on

⁹⁶ Of course, sports betting might in some cases temper the loyalties of the pure partisan or promote a commendable amount of allegiance in the purist. Nevertheless, the point is that it is not just the prerogative of the individual fan about how they choose to support a team: there are ethical ideals at stake.

sports if it leads to attitudes that either conflict with their considered judgments about why sport is valuable or that fail to appreciate the aspects of sporting contests that are valuable.

The points above give reasons to lament the attitudes that gamblers cultivate towards sport, and to criticise them for failing to live up to either their own ideals or to appreciate the objectively valuable aspects of sport. Using the terminology from Chapter 4, this is a Type 4 moral conclusion of a meaning-based objection: grounds for moral criticism of those that violate the meaning of a good that commodify it which does not involve acting morally wrongfully. While this provides grounds for moral exhortation, we do not yet have grounds to intervene and regulate the practice and industry of sports betting. More is required to get to a Type 2 conclusion: grounds for collective regulation to prevent or limit commodification that do not depend on acting morally wrongfully. This requires further work to connect the attitudes of fans and spectators to the goods associated with sport.

To make this further claim, we need to show that the attitudes expressed and promoted through sports betting have a spillover effect on others; they are not simply the business of the bettor. We have already seen one sense in which this is the case. If the growth of the sports betting industry leads to greater harassment of athletes, then the losses from sports betting are not contained to gamblers. More generally, there might be spillover effects if there is a connection between the attitudes of fans and the ideals of sport. If these ideals have moral worth, as I have assumed, then a practice and industry that cultivates attitudes among participants that negatively affect them raises moral concerns. Such a connection can be demonstrated in several ways.

First, fans play an important role in motivating athletes to perform well in sporting contests – a point acknowledged countless times in post-game speeches by athletes who thank their supporters and attribute their victory to the crowd’s support. This requires spectators and fans

to be appropriately attentive to the gameplay, which may be undermined if many are instead focussed on betting outcomes. To take one example, Bill Bradley speaks about getting booed by fans after scoring a late basket in an NBA game – the fans’ line bets would have paid out for a 6-point win but not the eventual 8-point win (Lewis 2024).

Second, fans of a sport have an indirect influence over gameplay. Consider what Simon, Torres & Hager (2019: 192) call the “steamroller effect.” This occurs where changes to the rules and design of gameplay that are intended to make sport more entertaining attract new fans who “lack knowledge and respect for its defining internal values, traditions, and ethos.” As this group grows, it is more likely that gameplay is “changed more and more frequently to become ever more entertaining but at the price of important principles ... and traditions.” This point can be applied to sports betting. As the prominence of gambling on sport grows, it will attract new fans without a historical connection to the sport who could come to value the sport for different reasons than traditional fans. This could lead to changes in how the game is played. For example, consider the NRL in Australia, which has committed to five years of hosting opening rounds in Las Vegas as a means to attract American gamblers to the sport, despite there being no historical connection between the NRL and Nevadans (Snape 2024).

Finally, some of the values of sport are in part constituted by the attitudes of fans, most notably community identification. For example, Walsh & Giullianotti (2001: 54) claim, “*ceteris paribus* that the ideals and values embodied in the ethos of a community of sports practitioners are valuable” (italics in original). They explicitly extend this idea to include sports fans. Sporting institutions can be a locus for community and an expression of identity and pride. But the realisation of this value depends on a social context in which members of a community watch and talk about sport together. While sports betting can certainly be a social

activity – and we should not automatically discount communities of sports gamblers⁹⁷ – it necessarily excludes those without the ability or willingness to pay. In this respect, communities of sports gamblers are necessarily less inclusive than fan communities that do not require spending money. If an excessive orientation to gambling changes the social context in which sport is enjoyed, a claim I will return to below, then it is of moral concern because it undermines part of what is valuable about sport.

From this discussion we can conclude that if the modern sports betting industry encourages instrumental modes of regard towards sport, then this provides grounds for moral concern. The normative implications of this argument can either be grounded by appealing to the ethical ideals associated with having particular attitudes towards sport (ones that are often inconsistent with gambling) or by drawing a link between the ideals of sport and the attitudes of fans. In the former case, we have grounds for lamenting the actions of sports bettors and for moral exhortation against the practice and industry of sports betting. In the latter case, the instrumental mode of regard cultivated through sports betting has spillover effects by undermining the ideals of sport. This gestures towards reasons to intervene in the sports betting market to preserve the culturally valuable goods associated with sport. In these ways, the attitude-manifesting form of the Bad Attitude Objection can be applied to sports betting.

9.6 Applying the Crowding Out Objection (*Application Stage*)

Another way that sports betting is objectionable considers the social context within which sport is enjoyed and appreciated by fans and spectators. Recall the interpersonal form of the Crowding Out Objection claims that commodification is pro tanto morally objectionable if it

⁹⁷ For example, in a famous anthropological analysis of cockfighting in Bali, Geertz (1972) observes that gambling practices in the Balinese community are about much more than an economic logic; they reflect and promote the norms of the community and have a deep expressive significance that is about far more than rational economic calculation. He writes: “In the cockfight, then, the Balinese forms and discovers his temperament and his society’s temper at the same time” (28).

makes unavailable desirable ways of valuing goods for third parties. In this section, I apply this objection to sports betting. I first consider empirical mechanisms that could account crowding out, before turning to the normative implications.

To account for *how* interpersonal crowding out might occur, recall from Section 6.3 the features that I suggested might affect the relationship between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods. I argued that, all else equal, a relation of Corrosion might obtain where sustaining a non-commodified valuation depends on a shared understanding of a good within a community and where the environmental context of exchange and consumption of a good are intertwined.⁹⁸ Both are relevant to sports betting. Watching sport is usually a social activity – whether it is at the stadium, at home or at the pub – and gambling on a sporting contest is very often done while watching the game. As such, the social environment in which one appreciates sport could be vulnerable to commodified understandings promoted by the normalisation of gambling. Recall Anderson’s (1993) observation that expressing and realising diverse modes of valuation depends on social context: “I am capable of valuing something in a particular way only in a social setting that upholds norms for that mode of valuation ... To care about something in a distinctive way, one must participate in a social practice of valuation governed by norms for its sensible expression” (12). Below, I explore two mechanisms through which sports betting affects the social context in which sport is appreciated. These relate to expressing fandom and sports coverage, respectively.

The rapid rise in gambling on sport risks leading to a social environment in which placing a bet is one of the primary ways to express one’s love for a sport or a team, or where knowing the odds becomes a more important marker of fandom than understanding and appreciating

⁹⁸ These were Features #2 and #6, respectively, in Section 6.3.2. That is: “Is a non-commodified valuation independent of a shared understanding?” and “Are the environmental contexts of exchange and consumption distinct?”

the game. For example, Hing, Rockloff & Browne (2023) cite survey evidence that shows that sports betting has become normalised. For example, in one Australian survey most respondents (54 per cent) agreed that sports betting is ‘part of Australian culture and you’re never going to change that.’ Likewise, in a survey of Australian adolescents, 31 per cent of respondents reported that betting on sport is normal and 15 per cent reported that knowing the odds is part of following sport and makes watching sport more exciting. They cite a range of studies showing that, particularly among young men, sports betting has become central to people’s lifestyle, identity and friendship groups (790).

This risk is exacerbated by the advertising strategies of sports betting companies which often appeal to people’s love of sports as a way to promote gambling. In a study of online sports betting advertising, Lopez-Gonzalez et al (2018: 720) argue that structural metaphors used by sports betting companies contribute to “blurring the lines between the real sport event and the bet.” They conclude that “such penetration and extent of betting advertising is a likely contributory factor in strengthening the mental association between sports and gambling” (710). These risks are particularly acute in cases where sporting leagues have profit-sharing arrangements with betting companies, as these arrangements give sporting institutions a direct financial interest in continued growth of sports betting.

Such trends are likely to be exacerbated by technological developments. As online betting platforms become more sophisticated, bettors can gamble, watch sports and engage with friends all within their preferred gambling app. So-called ‘social betting options’ are offered by many major betting platforms and represent an integration of the social aspects of sports viewing with gambling practices. For example, Sportsbet Live Streaming enables users to watch and bet on certain sports simultaneously, while its “Bet With Mates” feature allows people to create a group, pool funds and bet as a group (Kruse 2021). Through these features, the entire fan experience becomes mediated through a betting platform and the norms of

gambling. Of course, bettors do not have to consume sports in this way. But aside from the addictive component of sports betting, the social costs of disengaging from this form of sports consumption may be high, especially if a person's whole friendship group stays connected and enjoys sport together through betting platforms.

Another way that sports betting affects the social conditions in which sport is watched is through its effects on coverage. For example, there are cases where commentary of a game has been explicitly centred around gambling practices.⁹⁹ Up until the practice was banned in 2013, it was common in major sporting codes in Australia to show live odds during sporting matches. Commentary teams would often cut to bookmakers, who often appeared to be part of the broadcast teams, to provide updates on the odds. This phenomenon is evident in the growth of pre- and post-match coverage that is explicitly oriented around gambling. Shows like the *Bad Beats* and *Daily Wager* in the United States and *In the Back Pocket* in Australia analyse upcoming or past sporting matchups explicitly and exclusively through the prism of betting (Lucia 2022; Affleck 2023).

This kind of sports coverage is ascendant. In 2022, ESPN announced that it would be expanding its sport betting content with a range of new shows, content and analysis (Manzo 2022). In 2023, a US\$2 billion deal between ESPN and Penn Entertainment led to the launch of ESPN BET – an online sports betting service that licenses the branding from the sports broadcaster. As part of the deal, ESPN cross-promotes the service across its television and digital platforms. The distinction between sports broadcasting and sports betting has been eroded to the point of collapse. In each of these ways, sports coverage – which is an

⁹⁹ Affleck (2023) cites an example of a college football game between the University of Utah and Penn State – where the latter had a commanding lead with less than a minute to go in the game – but where commentators focussed on how much a late touchdown would mean to people. He explains, “the announcers didn’t elaborate, but the implication was obvious: Those who had bet the over – wagering that together the two teams would score more than 54 points – had a lot riding on that touchdown. So, in a sense, did ESPN. In a blowout, fans of both teams are likely to tune out. But when there’s money riding on something like the over, eyes stay glued to the screen.”

important way that people interpret, make sense of and appreciate sporting contests – is becoming oriented around gambling in ways that change the spectator experience.

In summary, through its effects on expressing fandom and sports coverage, the sports betting industry is changing the social context in which people consume sport. Insofar as individuals require social contexts to express and realise diverse modes of valuation towards goods, as Anderson claims, then this will affect how individuals understand, appreciate and engage with sport.¹⁰⁰ This could make certain values of sport harder to access for spectators; for instance, it is more difficult to appreciate athletic excellence when sports coverage is focussed on betting opportunities. If sports and gambling practices become ever more deeply integrated and scarcely distinguishable, the social context necessary for valuing sport intrinsically could be seriously compromised – for bettors and non-bettors alike.

The normative implications of this can be explained in two ways. First, to the extent that it occurs, crowding out undermines a culturally valuable good – that of enjoying sport for its own sake – which is both intrinsically valuable and closely related to other goods that are associated with sports (the ‘autotelic goods’ in Walsh & Giullianotti’s terminology). So, crowding out provides a pro tanto case for intervention in the market for sports betting, and of actions on behalf of market participants, in the interests of preserving the culturally valuable goods associated with sporting competitions.

Second, the moral upshot can also be justified with respect to third party harms that arise from a social context in which gambling becomes indissociable from sport. We have seen that the effects of gambling on sports – particularly in the context of a profitable and

¹⁰⁰ I hasten to add that the claim that the sports betting industry renders people unfree to value sport intrinsically would be an overstatement. Many sports fans do not bet on matches and, for many, the love of sport is not tied to the opportunity to gamble. Nevertheless, the financial allure of sports betting means there are incentives for sporting leagues and teams to continue to promote gambling and for greater structural integration over time between elite sports and gambling practices. In Ruberry’s (2024) words, “it’s not clear that the infiltrating of betting will end short of permeating the entire professional sports landscape.”

powerful sports betting industry – are not necessarily only felt by the bettors themselves, but by all sports fans and spectators. As such, non-bettors are entitled to claim that they are harmed by the practice and industry of sports betting, as their ability to value sport for its own sake is undermined by a social context in which gambling is ubiquitous. One might deny that non-bettors are entitled to a social environment that promotes their non-commodified understanding of sport. But recall my responses in Chapter 6 to Brennan & Jaworski’s claim that there is no moral upshot to the Crowding Out Objection. If meaning making in sport is a social process, and if there is an incompatibility between commodified and non-commodified understandings of sport, then either way bettors or non-bettors will be imposing their understanding of sport on the other party. If we have reason to prefer one meaning of sport, and I have suggested we do, then this provides grounds for non-bettors to claim that they are unjustly harmed by the sports betting industry. This provides a further basis for demonstrating normative implications of the Crowding Out Objection in this case.

9.7 What is to be done? (*Response Stage*)

I have so far applied the Bad Attitude and Crowding Out Objections to sports betting to demonstrate that it raises moral concerns where it either affects the attitudes of fans and spectators in negative ways or where it changes the social context in which sport is appreciated. I have suggested that these provide pro tanto grounds for limiting or preventing the commodification of sport on the grounds of preserving culturally valuable goods and preventing third party harms. The *Response Stage* completes the analysis by considering (1) whether the harms of commodification are sensitive to market design and (2) whether alternative modes of valuation or methods of allocation would better represent or realise the value of a good. I show that both of these can be answered in the affirmative. I then turn to the responses that would mitigate or prevent the harms discussed in the previous sections.

The answer to (1) is a resounding yes. Many of the harms associated with sports betting are not intrinsic to the activity of gambling on sporting contests. In their most pernicious forms, they arise in the context of the modern sports betting industry, and the practices of gambling that this industry enables. Three factors are especially important. First, the growth in the nature and type of bets that can be placed on all manner of events. Second, the ubiquity of real-time betting enabled by smartphones and mobile betting applications. Third, the deepening economies ties between sporting institutions and gambling companies which, among other things, leads to pervasive gambling advertisements during sporting contests. Given that many of the harms discussed relate to contingent facts about betting markets, the challenge for governments and market participants is to design the market to reduce these harms. In short, I do not share Bill Bradley's view that there is no place for betting in sports.

The answer (2) is implicit in Walsh & Giullianotti's discussion of autotelic goods discussed in Section 9.4. Their core claim is that valuing sport for its own sake helps to realise the goods that they argue supervene on sports. By contrast, excessive market understandings of sport threatened to undermine these goods. In this chapter, I have sought to extend their normative critique of the commodification of sport to the practice and industry of sports betting. Because an alternative mode of valuation is feasible, we should seek where possible to promote that among spectators and fans. But how can we do this?

The analysis offered provides a pro tanto case for several policy responses and actions. First, there is a case for moral exhortation from governments, politicians, communities, athletes, teams and leagues to caution against the normalisation of sports betting. For example, as noted above, the Sydney Swans in the AFL have partnered with the New South Wales Government to refuse sports betting advertising within their stadium at men and women's home matches. In the absence of regulation, we should encourage more sporting teams and leagues to take similar actions. Similarly, campaigns like 'Reclaim the Game' and 'Love the

Game Not the Odds’ – both of which explicitly draw attention to the ways that gambling is corrosive of the values and ideals of sport – should be expanded. We need not compare gambling to tobacco to dissuade people from sports betting.

Second, there is a case for restricting the scope of betting markets on sporting contests to prevent or better regulate those forms of betting that are deleterious to appropriate appreciation of sport. For example, micro-bets and exotic bets on events that are entirely irrelevant to the central drama of sporting contests – and the ability to combine such bets through multiple-selection betting – would be targets for regulation or restriction. This could include prohibiting certain betting markets, or regulating the time and manner of betting, such as by restricting the ability to place bets during gameplay. It could also involve regulating the ways that gambling companies target individuals to prevent practices like aggressively advertising algorithmically tailored betting options. Some policies would not necessarily require government action, because sporting institutions often hold proprietary data that they choose to sell to gambling companies. This data is then used by these companies as a source of truth for setting odds, closing markets and paying out positions. Sporting leagues could, and indeed *should*, refuse to sell data or attach conditions to the data they so sell.

Third, in the interests of preserving culturally valuable goods associated with sport and preventing third party harms, there is a case for policies that promote the disintegration of sporting clubs and leagues from gambling companies. This could be achieved by preventing gambling companies from advertising during sporting contests, regulating sponsorship deals between sports broadcasters and sports betting companies, banning showing live odds during game play, or otherwise regulating the frequency and content of gambling advertisements.

Through these responses, the harms associated with sports betting could be mitigated or prevented. Importantly, the arguments I have given provide only a pro tanto case for these

policies. A comprehensive response to the harms of gambling on sports would also need to be responsive to concerns about problem gambling and betting-related corruption. Fortunately, the implications suggested above align with policies that are often suggested to respond to concerns about problem gambling and betting-related corruption.¹⁰¹ Moreover, they provide grounds to justify such policies that apply even where sports betting does not lead to problem gambling or betting-related corruption. As such, the critiques of sports betting developed in this chapter provide further grounds for regulating the practice and industry to defend the values and ideals of sport.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that traditional critiques of sports betting – that it leads to problem gambling and betting-related corruption – do not exhaust the ways in which it is objectionable. I showed this by applying the Bad Attitude Objection and Crowding Out Objection to the industry and practice of sports betting. I argued that it can undermine the values and ideals of sport by changing the experiences and attitudes of spectators and fans. It may lead individuals to cultivate instrumental modes of regard towards sport, and it might change the social context in which sport is enjoyed in ways that make it much harder to appreciate sport for its own sake. In these ways, the growth of the sports betting industry is an appropriate object of ethical concern for those motivated by love of the game. Even though betting can enhance the entertainment value of sport, the odds, as it were, aren't in its favour. Can we preserve non-commodified understandings of sport as its institutions become more culturally, financially and technologically integrated with gambling? Absent meaningful change from sporting institutions and governments, I wouldn't bet on it.

¹⁰¹ For example, micro-bets, exotic bets and multiple-selection bets are also objectionable on the grounds of promoting problem gambling and betting-related corruption.

Chapter 10 The Australian Dream and its Discontents

On the commodification of housing

“It will be impossible to return the price of housing to something less destructive ... without purging the idea that housing is a means to create wealth as opposed to simply a place to live.”

~ Financial journalist Alan Kohler¹⁰²

Introduction

Housing affordability is a major public policy problem in many countries around the world. Rapid rises in the cost of housing relative to wage growth are a significant driver of inequality within and between generations and result in cost-of-living pressures, housing insecurity, rental stress and homelessness. In Australia – where home ownership rates have traditionally been relatively high – the housing affordability crisis is an urgent policy problem that threatens the meritocratic and egalitarian ideals that the country aspires to.

In this chapter, I apply the conceptual lens of commodification to housing affordability in Australia, both to understand the problem and identify solutions. As in the previous chapter, my focus is primarily on cultural attitudes that tend towards treating a good as a commodity – in this case an investment good – but here the principal concern is the flow on effects of these attitudes for how the good is distributed. I argue that the substantive commodification of housing should be curtailed through government policy changes. The chapter comprises six sections. **Section 10.1** provides some background on Australia’s housing affordability crisis. **Section 10.2** outlines how housing has become substantively commodified in Australia and

¹⁰² Kohler (2023: 4).

links this to the crisis. **Section 10.3** defends an analysis of housing affordability that gives conceptual primacy to the meaning of housing. The remaining three sections apply the framework introduced in Chapter 8. **Section 10.4** applies the *Characterisation Stage* by introducing two conceptions of housing based on its use values and exchange value. I argue that the use values of housing have greater normative significance. **Section 10.5** turns to the *Application Stage* by deploying the Crowding Out Objection. While the previous chapter focussed on the interpersonal form of the objection, here I show that crowding out can also occur *institutionally*. I argue that, at the level of government policy, there is a deep structural tension between commodified and non-commodified understandings of housing, and that the former has a strong tendency to crowd out the latter. This is normatively significant because government policies that promote the exchange value of housing have a range of harmful social and economic consequences. **Section 10.6** turns to the *Response Stage*. I suggest several general policy directions that would reprioritise the use values of housing.

10.1 Bricks, mortar and money

Housing plays a central role in the Australian national psyche. While the American Dream is an expression of the idea that in the United States everyone has the freedom and opportunity to succeed, its Australian counterpart has traditionally referred to the potential of home ownership in achieving a better life – the so-called ‘quarter acre block’. While house prices remained fairly consistent as a percentage of median income for much of the twentieth century, since the mid-1990s there has been a divergence between the two, with property increasing at a much faster rate than wages. Kohler (2023) reports that since 2000 there has been on average 6 per cent annual growth in the value of houses compared with 3 per cent annual growth in average incomes. The price of an average home in Australia has increased

from 4.6 times the median household income in 2001 to 6.5 in 2020 to 8.0 in 2024 – with even more marked price-to-income ratios in major cities (Kelly 2025).

This has made home ownership a distant or unattainable goal for many Australians. Although rates of home ownership in Australia have remained broadly stable around 70 per cent since the 1960s (RBA 2015) – with a slight decline to 67 per cent in the last two censuses (AIHW 2024) – they have declined considerably among younger and poorer Australians.¹⁰³ There have also been increases in the proportion of the population living in housing stress, defined as households where more than 30 per cent of income goes towards housing costs. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare estimates that in 2024-25 more than one-quarter (26 per cent) of households were spending over 30 per cent of disposable income on housing-related costs. This figure has been trending upwards over the last forty years for both renters and (especially) mortgage holders (AIHW 2025). Concerns about housing affordability have led some pundits to decry the death of the Australian Dream (Safi 2016; Turnbull 2023).

10.2 The substantive commodification of housing

Housing in Australia has become substantively commodified.¹⁰⁴ This can be seen in patterns of home ownership, government policy settings, and cultural representations of housing.

First, over the last 25 years there has been a significant rise in the share of the residential property market that is owned by investors and the proportion of the value of mortgages lent to investors as opposed to owner occupiers.¹⁰⁵ Second, government policy settings promote

¹⁰³ For example, home ownership rates among young people aged 25-34 years dropped from 61 per cent in 1981 to 43 per cent in 2021 (Daley, Coates & Wiltshire 2018).

¹⁰⁴ Recall from Chapter 1 that commodification is the process by which a good is transformed into a commodity. This occurs where a good acquires an exchange value (formal commodification) and where the exchange value comes to dominate other forms of value in how the good is produced, distributed or regarded (substantive commodification).

¹⁰⁵ For example, the proportion of households that rented from a private landlord increased from 18.4 per cent in 1994-95 to 26.2 per cent in 2019-20 (ABS 2022). Australian Tax Office data suggests that over 30 per cent of the country's private residential dwellings are investor owned (Rachwani & Issa 2023). The share of housing loan approvals made to investors has generally trended up since 2000 (RBA 2015), making up over 37 per cent of the value of new loan commitments in June 2025 (ABS 2025).

commodified understandings of housing. Forms of direct and indirect assistance (such as rent subsidies, homeowner grants and favourable tax arrangements for income from property) contribute to what Ryan-Collins & Murray (2021: 1888) call the ‘rentierization’ of the Australian housing market: “the shift in the treatment of housing away from its use as a consumption good to a financial asset from which economic rent can be extracted.” A commodified conception is further reflected in and exacerbated by increasing privatisation of the housing market. In recent decades, Australia’s social housing stock has remained stagnant at an absolute level and declined considerably as a proportion of the housing stock.¹⁰⁶ Finally, popular culture and media promote the substantive commodification of housing. For example, while Australia tends to import its reality TV shows, ‘The Block’ – in which contestants compete to renovate houses or apartments and sell them at auction for the highest price – is Australian-founded and still going strong after twenty years on the airwaves. Likewise, the real-estate listing website Domain – which was purchased by Fairfax in 2011 and now includes a ‘news arm’ in addition to its listings – regularly has articles in mainstream newspapers with headlines like “The locations where houses make more money than their owners” (Heagney-Bayliss 2025). In these ways, housing in Australia is increasingly treated and understood as a commodity.

The link between the commodification of housing and Australia’s housing affordability crisis is two-fold. First, treating housing as a commodity tends to put upward pressure on prices by increasing demand. Investor-driven growth in housing demand contributes to and reflects a rise in speculation, in which housing is bought and sold more regularly in the hope of realising short-term profits. This leads to greater volatility in house prices, as the market

¹⁰⁶ This has resulted from mass privatisation public housing in the 1960s and 1970s as well as a lack of investment in new social housing. Australia’s social housing stock today makes up just 4 per cent of all households, down from 6 per cent in the mid-1990s (Coates 2021). By contrast, public housing alone made up around 10 per cent of all residential dwellings built during the 1970s and 1980s (Jericho 2022).

reflects the dynamics of speculation and expectations of future growth more than the underlying asset value. Moreover, there is a positive feedback loop – virtuous for some, vicious for others – between investor-driven demand and housing prices. Housing has traditionally been attractive for investors by providing a high yield with low risks. The higher prices rise, the more attractive it is, leading to a rise in investor demand and ever higher prices. This effect is magnified by the relationship between leverage and house prices. Increases in credit drive higher property prices, which in turn increase the value of collateral and the amount that households can borrow (Daley, Coates & Wiltshire 2018).

Second, commodification has effects on supply. In part this is because greater provision of housing through market forces has been accompanied by reductions in public investment in social housing, as observed above. This reduces the availability of housing for people who cannot afford to rent at the prevailing market rate. In addition, restrictive zoning and planning laws that contribute to supply shortfalls are at least partly based on the desire for homeowners to preserve the financial value of their houses; values which would be threatened by increases in supply. Fischel (2017: 19) has called this the ‘homevoter hypothesis’ which claims that homeowners have become an interest group that “use their local votes and other political activities to protect and promote the value of their owner-occupied homes.”¹⁰⁷ Klein & Thompson (2025: 45) describe this dynamic in the United States (though their point could also apply to Australia): “In the ‘70s, rising inflation and slowing home building turned the homes people did own into the center of their wealth. But how do you protect the value of that asset? ... You do that through zoning and organizing. You do it through restricting how many homes and what kinds of homes can be built near you.” Commodification also

¹⁰⁷ Empirical evidence for this hypothesis is mixed. Certainly, many homeowners’ opposition to local developments is motivated by, or at least expressed in terms of, concerns about neighbourhood amenity rather than house prices. The theory predicts, among other things, that homeowners should be more opposed to developments than renters. Some studies have found evidence of this effect (e.g., McGregor & Spicer 2016).

influences housing supply through effects on the type of properties that get constructed. An increasing proportion of apartments are built for investors rather than owner occupiers (Property Australia 2024). This is not necessarily aligned with the interests of occupants, for whom liveability rather than future earnings is the paramount consideration.

Commodification is not the only driver of Australia's housing affordability crisis. Decades of low interest rates and high rates of net migration have also put upward pressure on demand (Kohler 2023). Moreover, zoning restrictions and planning decisions that restrict supply can also be based on non-pecuniary interests, such as a desire to preserve neighbourhood amenity. Nevertheless, commodification has an important causal role to play.

10.3 The value of a meaning-first analysis of housing

Across this thesis I have defended a meaning-first approach to ethical arguments about commodification; that is, giving a good's meaning central importance in assessing whether and how it should be commodified. If one accepts that commodification contributes to Australia's housing affordability crisis, and one believes that this crisis is of moral concern¹⁰⁸, then it seems straightforward to conclude that the commodification of housing is objectionable. A sceptic could reasonably ask: what value do we get from invoking the 'meaning' of housing? Is this not needless conceptual infrastructure?

Certainly, much analysis of housing affordability in the public sphere analyses the problem exclusively in economic terms; that is, the interplay of supply and demand.¹⁰⁹ This is evident in public discourse around housing. For example, in the leadup to the 2025 Federal election, both major political parties supported lowering net migration targets primarily to reduce

¹⁰⁸ I will provide reasons for this in Sections 10.4.2 and 10.4.3. At this stage, I take it to be a non-controversial premise that the housing affordability crisis is, in some sense, objectionable.

¹⁰⁹ In a Marxist-inspired analysis of housing crises around the world, Marcuse & Madden (2016) make this point, arguing that a common approach to conceptualising housing affordability "explains the lack of adequate housing as a function of supply and effective demand" (86).

demand pressures that are driving up housing costs (Commins 2025). The YIMBY (Yes in my Backyard) movement supports changes to zoning and planning laws that would increase housing supply to drive down prices (Rushton 2025). While this is a reasonable way to think about levers available to address rising costs, I share Marcuse & Madden's (2016: 86) concerns that it "reduces housing to economics." It does not give sufficient regard to attitudes towards housing – which in my view are a considerable part of the problem. And it offers only a partial explanation of the problem. This is for several reasons.

First, housing is unlike other goods as many factors reduce the degree to which the interplay of supply and demand can efficiently determine a market clearing price for the good. For one, it is both a consumption good and a financial asset (Yang 2009). Houses are also typically very expensive and time consuming to build and to transfer (both because of policy settings, such as planning laws, and the inherent complexity involved in building infrastructure when compared with other commodities). As such, it can take considerable time for supply to catch up to rapid increases in demand (for example due to high rates of net migration and other demographic changes). In addition, while an economic analysis tends to measure value in terms of willingness to pay, housing involves social and personal values (Igan 2024). Such factors are not easily understood in terms of market price.

Second, understanding housing affordability exclusively through the lens of supply and demand risks giving undue emphasis for deregulatory policy solutions that seek to more efficiently allocate housing capital by reducing government intervention in the operations of the market. Such policy responses can be part of a suite of responses to make housing more accessible and affordable. But this analysis risks being insufficiently attentive to circumstances where the operations of the market exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, the housing affordability crisis. For example, Madden & Marcuse (2016: 47) argue that "when housing becomes a globalized, financialized commodity, the gulf widens between the price

signals to which markets respond and the actual social need for dwelling space.” This dynamic is especially evident in large cities with many foreign investors in real estate. Moreover, standard economic logic risks being inattentive to the relationships of power that structure housing markets – whether between tenants and landlords, or property developers and communities. Reducing housing regulation to increase supply risks exacerbating power imbalances between these groups under the guise of more efficient allocation of capital.

Finally, the standard economic analysis is silent on the broader normative question: *should* housing be primarily viewed as an asset class, or *should* its production and distribution be governed by other sets of norms? In this context, considering the meaning of housing – what it is for and why it is valuable – provides a more fulsome understanding of the housing affordability crisis. It offers several advantages.

To make an argument that the distribution of some good is unfair or unjust when it is commodified, we need to know more about what kind of good it is. To argue that the distribution of housing is unjust when it becomes concentrated in the hands of investors, we must understand what the value or meaning of a house is, and what differentiates it from other assets – yachts, handbags and the like – which are all unequally distributed among wealthy people, but which do not raise the same kinds of moral questions as housing.

Evaluating governments’ housing policies also requires a conception of the purpose of housing. Policies that place upward pressure on house prices – namely those that increase demand and those that restrict supply – cannot be properly scrutinised unless they are evaluated against what housing policies should seek to achieve. For example, in 2003 former Prime Minister John Howard famously said that he had never met anyone who complained about their house going up in value: “I don’t get people stopping me in the street and saying, ‘John you’re outrageous, under your government the value of my house has increased.’” In

fact, most people feel more secure and feel better off because the value of their homes has gone up” (The Age 2003). One could criticise this statement by appealing to the interests of renters. But to argue that this sentiment is problematic in terms that anyone, homeowners included, can accept, we need to first understand what housing is and what housing policy should try to achieve. Without a view of the purpose of housing, one could reasonably argue that a large and sustained appreciation in the market value of housing is a good thing.

Giving conceptual primacy to the meaning of housing also helps to make sense of common ethical intuitions. Consider the activist Jordan van den Lamb (nee Berg) – more commonly known for his X/Twitter handle @Purplepingers. He is infamous in Australia for assisting people to access and live in properties left vacant by their owners (Turnbull 2024). The following he has amassed reflects that many people find it grotesque that so many people are homeless in Australia while properties are vacant. But best estimates are that around 1.3 per cent of all dwellings in Australia show no sign of recent use (Touma & Evershed 2023). This is not insignificant, but neither is it a major driver of Australia’s housing affordability crisis. Thinking about housing affordability strictly in terms of demand and supply does not help to make sense of moral intuitions that many people have about vacant properties.

For these reasons, giving conceptual primacy to the meaning of housing is useful to analyse Australia’s housing affordability crisis. Having established this, I am now in a position to apply the framework introduced in Chapter 8.

10.4 Two conceptions of housing (*Characterisation Stage*)

The distinction between a good’s use value and its exchange value was central to the definition of commodification introduced in Chapter 1. In this section I bring this distinction

to bear on housing. I explain why the use values of housing are more morally significant than its exchange value, and why government has a responsibility to prioritise the former.¹¹⁰

10.4.1 The use values and exchange value of housing

Housing has a range of use values.¹¹¹ On one level, it is a basic need that provides its occupants with shelter and associated benefits such as security, safety, stability and a location for what Waldron (1991: 301) calls “primal human tasks.” Another use value comes from the privacy that can be enjoyed by having a place from which others can be excluded. This idea is suggested in the phrase “an Englishman’s home is his castle” and was invoked by former Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies when he said, “One of the best instincts in us is that which induces us to have one little piece of earth with a house and a garden which is ours; to which we can withdraw, in which we can be among our friends, into which no stranger may come against our will” (cited in Commonwealth of Australia 2008: 16). As well as providing privacy, the right to exclusive control that comes with housing is a powerful safeguard against subordination. For example, Essert (2016: 279) argues that by “giving their holders control over who will be in a given location and what will happen there, property rights eliminate the holders’ subordination to the power of others in respect of where they may be, and make possible rightful participation in the forms of activity and relationships that are partially constituted by such control.” In this way, housing provides a basis for equal participation in society and helps to prevent arbitrary exercises of power.

The latter part of this quote gestures towards a richer understanding of the use value of housing that extends to a sense of place and connection to community. These ideas are

¹¹⁰ Importantly, in making the case for prioritising use values over exchange value, I do not confine myself to meaning-based arguments. Rather, I appeal to a range of the ethical dimensions of commodification introduced in Chapter 1 to make this case. This is in keeping with my arguments in Chapter 4 that the meaning of a good should be subject to normative evaluation, and that competing conceptions of the meaning of a good can be meaningfully compared.

¹¹¹ The account of the use values of housing that follows draws from the ‘ladder of home-related concepts’ that Jenkins & Brownlee (2022) develop in their account of what a home does and what homelessness consists in.

embodied in the richer concept of a *home*, which as Radin (1986: 365) reminds us “is for many people involved with continuity and personal identity.” A home need not coincide with a house, but it often does. King (2018: 82) goes so far as to claim that the idea of *housing as home* has an “existential significance.” Jenkins & Brownlee (2022) emphasise the social aspect of this richer conception of home. In their view, a home does not just consist in shelter or exclusive property rights, but rather is “a place of intimate belonging in which our deepest social needs are met” (443). It is central to connection to community and having “meaningful control over our social environment” (443). In these ways, the use values of housing are intimately connected to wellbeing.

On the other hand, housing is also an economic asset that can be bought and sold on property markets. For most homeowners, it is by far the largest asset they own. Housing wealth has increased as a share of overall wealth in Australia and now makes up over half (55 per cent) of total household wealth (MacLennan, Long & Leishman 2021). In this form, it provides a store of value, one that has historically been very low risk relative to other assets. It can also be a productive asset that produces income for owners – both capital gains (when a property is sold) and rental income (when it is leased out on a temporary basis). In this capacity, it provides the basis for financial security for oneself and one’s family. So, in addition to its value in meeting basic human needs by providing shelter and related goods, housing also has significant exchange value – as a store of wealth and as a source of income.

We thus have two different conceptions of the value of housing – one grounded in its use values and one in its exchange value. But we do not yet have good reasons for preferring one over the other.¹¹² Indeed, one might defend treating housing primarily as an asset for financial

¹¹² While it may seem that my description of the use values of housing has tipped the scales in its favour, I have tried to avoid what Kuletskaya (2023) describes as a pitfall in recent housing research, which is the conflation of use value and exchange value as “implicitly evaluative normative categories” (590). He argues that the “moralization of the concepts of *use-value* and *exchange-value* in academic scholarship ... obscures their original analytical potential” (599). Further justification is required to justify prioritising the use values of housing over its exchange value.

accumulation on the grounds that it is a reliable, low-risk pathway to economic security and upward mobility for millions of Australians. This view is suggested by the comment from John Howard mentioned above. If people disagree about the meaning of housing, on what basis can we argue that one conception should take precedence over another?¹¹³ Below, I defend the view that the use values of housing should be prioritised over its exchange value. This is for two sets of reasons: first, the relative importance of its use values; and second, the harms associated with prioritising its exchange value.

10.4.2 The relative importance of housing's use values

The shelter that housing provides is a basic human need that is necessary for survival. This is reflected in international human rights treaties. For example, the right to adequate housing is recognised both in article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 11.1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Commonwealth of Australia 2008). Moreover, as noted above, shelter enables people to access other goods that are critical to human flourishing, such as access to services, privacy, control over one's environment, connection to community and a sense of belonging. It is therefore unsurprising that there is substantial evidence that access to suitable housing is one of the best things for a person's health across many domains of life and, conversely, that its absence is often very harmful to physical and mental health (Irving-Clarke 2023). Indeed, King (2018: 97) goes so far as to say, "Housing is the right that underpins all others in allowing human flourishing as it provides the freedom to be. Housing ... is the principal right that allows private life and therefore social relations to flourish." Similarly, Martha Nussbaum's list of ten basic human capabilities – which for her are the central components necessary for human flourishing – includes control over one's environment. Among other things, this involves being able to

¹¹³ This challenge is a form of the Contested Meaning Criticism considered earlier. My responses in this section uses some of the argumentative strategies I introduced in Chapter 4.

hold property and have property rights on an equal basis with others (Nussbaum 2011; Kimhur 2020). Each of these views underscores the importance of the use values of housing for people's wellbeing.

This does not mean we should treat appeals to the use values of housing as necessarily having significant moral weight in our deliberations. For example, resistance to infrastructure projects from local residents – often referred to as NIMBYism – often appeals to the use values of housing (for example, effects of the changing character of the neighbourhood for the local community) in ways that exacerbate housing affordability issues. The use values of housing are not an unalloyed good. But given the importance of housing to meeting basic needs, all people within a political community have a strong claim that their governments provide access to suitable housing. And, crucially, if the right to access a good is not accompanied by the means to access it then the formal right does not amount to much. If the only adequate housing available to people is prohibitively expensive – on terms that significantly erode quality of life or compromise the ability to access related goods – then a formal right to housing does not mean much.

By contrast, the profit that can be earned from housing – either capital gains or rental income – is a less fundamental or enduring need. Insofar as the interests of shelter and profit (or of home and real estate) are incompatible, as I argue below, use values should be prioritised.

10.4.3 The harms of prioritising housing's exchange value

There are also significant economic and social harms associated with treating housing as a commodity. First, rising prices preclude those who do not have the ability to pay from the basic need of adequate housing. At the most extreme, rises in rent or mortgage repayments force people out of their homes and into sub-standard housing or some form of homelessness. Second, rising housing costs can be a significant financial burden for Australians, one that

compromises quality of life as ever more income is devoted to housing costs. Third, rising housing costs exacerbate power imbalance between landlords and tenants, especially in the context of a rental market in which demand outstrips supply and a regulatory regime that favours the rights and protections of owners over those of tenants. Fourth, there are considerable economic consequences of having a large and increasing proportion of the country's wealth invested in an unproductive asset. There is a significant opportunity cost associated with an economy where wealth is generated and stored in housing, rather than in more liquid forms that efficiently allocate capital to productive uses that generate wealth and other valuable economic activities (Kohler 2023).¹¹⁴

Finally, rising housing costs exacerbate social and economic inequalities. Because housing is both a store of value and an income-producing asset, as capital gains and rental yields increase, those that own a house increase their relative advantage. The renting class falls further behind, as they face increasing costs of living without the hope of future capital gains. The distributional effects occur both within and between generations. *Intergenerational* inequalities increase because older Australians purchased property when it was relatively affordable while younger Australians have come of age at a time where purchasing property is much more difficult. Moreover, as more private debt is tied up in housing, the costs of structural adjustment to the economy – through changes to the official cash rate – disproportionately fall on borrowers and renters, while those that own a property outright bear very little of the costs. *Intragenerational* inequalities also increase because those from wealthy backgrounds have significant advantages over their less-monied peers either because they inherit property or because they can draw on family money to purchase property. The

¹¹⁴ In Kohler's words, "High-priced houses do not create wealth; they redistribute it" (2023: 2). By contrast, other capital investments (such as investments in stocks) have the benefit of at least creating new activities. Or in the words of Paul Schorde, CEO of AustralianSuper, "We have poured all this money into houses – all very well and terrific, we've painted the front fence and sold it on – which has deprived the economy of heaps and heaps of productive capital. We have all this money in our domestic houses, and we're not backing businesses ... We are not creating new things, and we are not driving productivity" (cited in Piper 2025).

more house prices rise – and the greater the share of private wealth that is stored in property – the starker these inequalities become, and the more the so-called ‘Bank of Mum and Dad’ becomes decisive in people’s ability to purchase property.¹¹⁵ In these ways, property ownership becomes a central cleavage point between society’s haves and have nots.

10.4.4 The responsibility of government

If one accepts that the use values of housing should be prioritised over its exchange value, as I have argued, the next question is who this responsibility applies to. Who should change how they treat housing? This responsibility rests ultimately with government. This is because individuals are not well placed to drive the systemic change needed to reduce the degree to which housing is commodified. If individuals make housing available at below-market rates to support people in need, it is certainly commendable, but can hardly be relied on to improve access to housing at scale. Moreover, when homeowners themselves face rising costs of living, for example because of significant increases in regular mortgage repayments borne of rising interest rates, they will inevitably seek to pass down some of these costs to renters.

More generally, in a social context where housing is widely regarded as a good investment option – and where all elements of our culture and economy encourage and reward that conception – individuals can hardly be blamed for wanting to get their foot in the door of the property market. It would be irrational not to. When everyone acts this way, it drives up prices to increasingly unsustainable levels. Each investor contributes in a small way to this significant collective harm. Because of these dynamics, government action is required to disrupt the cycle and establish a housing system that is not beset by perverse incentives, one which encourages society to view housing as an essential good rather than a financial

¹¹⁵ Parents are the fifth largest lender in Australia (behind the Big 4 banks), and average parental contributions to deposits have increased by over 15 per cent between 2017 and 2015, from \$64,000 to \$74,000 (Mozo 2017; Mozo 2025).

instrument. The final section of this chapter explores general policy directions that would rediscover and reprioritise the use values of housing.

Before I consider policy responses, however, there is more conceptual work to do. In the next section, I turn to the *Application Stage* – deploying the Crowding Out Objection to show that there is a significant tension between the use values of housing and its exchange value.

10.5 Applying the Crowding Out Objection (*Application Stage*)

The quote from Alan Kohler that prefaces this chapter suggests that addressing the nation’s housing affordability crisis requires choosing between the use values and exchange value of housing. Either housing is a means to create wealth *or* a place to live. Likewise, former Greens spokesperson for housing, Max Chandler-Mather, calls for a housing system that “doesn’t treat it [housing] as a financial asset for large profits, but does treat it as a place to call home” (7am Podcast 2024).¹¹⁶ Madden & Marcuse (2016: 4) make this point explicitly: “there is a conflict between housing as lived, social space and housing as an instrument for profit making – a conflict between housing as *home* and as *real estate*” (italics in original). In this section I consider the nature of this conflict by applying the Crowding Out Objection. This objection claims that commodification is pro tanto morally objectionable if it makes unavailable desirable ways of valuing goods.

10.5.1 Some preliminary remarks

In what follows I distinguish between how individuals treat housing and how governments treat housing. The former refers to the psychological attitudes that people have towards houses (their own house or housing more generally). The latter refers to the housing policies

¹¹⁶ These comments may lead the reader to question my earlier claim that most analyses of housing affordability does not invoke the meaning of housing. Rest assured, these are in the minority.

that governments set which seek to achieve certain objectives – objectives that make sense in light of a particular conception of the value of housing. While these are likely to be closely related – because government policy settings affect how individuals regard housing and as people are likely to elect governments that share their conceptions – they are nonetheless distinct senses in which housing is treated as having a certain kind of value.

Relatedly, I apply two forms of the Crowding Out Objection. For individuals, the interpersonal form of the objection is relevant, as some people treating housing as a commodity may have a tendency to affect the psychological attitudes of others. For government policy, I invoke a different *institutional* form of crowding out. In this case, the policies pursued by an institution to realise a commodified understanding of a good can have a tendency to crowd out policies that attempt to realise non-commodified understandings.¹¹⁷ While there is some overlap with both intrapersonal and interpersonal crowding out, because the phenomenon occurs at an institutional level it warrants being treated separately.

10.5.2 A case against *inherent* incompatibility

Before I make a qualified case in favour of the Crowding Out Objection as it pertains to housing, I must first caution against the view that the two conceptions of housing are inherently incompatible. Kuletskaya (2023) argues that this is a common view in recent housing scholarship, which is “often framed around the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value of housing and urban space” (590) and which views the two dimensions of value as being “mutually exclusive” (590). The use values and exchange value of housing are not inherently incompatible for several reasons.

¹¹⁷ The ‘institution’ in this case is the state, or more precisely the different levels of government that are collectively responsible for different aspects of housing policy. This form of Crowding Out could also apply to corporations, judicial systems, international intergovernmental groups or other institutions.

First, the two conceptions of housing can both act in service of affordability and accessibility. This is because opportunities for financial gain can induce increases in supply, by encouraging developers to add to the housing stock and for owners to make more of the existing stock available on the market. As the exchange value of housing goes up, then, the market (at least theoretically) should respond by increasing supply. Indeed, economists' objections to rent caps – which are often justified, at least indirectly, in relation to the use value of housing – are typically on the grounds that they lead to shortages by fixing rent payments below the market clearing price (Kholodilin 2024).

Second, governments have a range of policy levers that can embody and promote different conceptions of housing. A government can simultaneously invest in large-scale provision of social housing while introducing tax breaks for investors to capture a larger share of the capital gains of property sales. Or they can pursue policies that achieve both objectives. The First Home Owner Grant helps people access the use value of housing (by providing financial support to purchase new or substantially renovated homes), while also helping people to access a lucrative market (all the while placing upward pressure on house prices).

Third, individuals often have complex attitudes towards housing, treating it both as a commodity and a good whose value is not exhausted by its exchange value. As Radin (1996: 108) observes, “Although a house has market value and we can express our investment in terms of dollars, there is a nonmonetizable, personal aspect to many people’s relationships with their homes.” Indeed, it is telling that the term *homeowner* is more commonly used than *houseowner*. This reflects that for many people houses are, to use Radin’s language, *incompletely commodified*.¹¹⁸ These attitudes can extend beyond the houses that one lives in,

¹¹⁸ Garber (2000: 97-8) also reflects this sentiment in a series of essays that seek to understand why people love houses. She writes, “The pleasures of “doing,” or “doing over,” a house are often deprecated as self-indulgent, trivial and consumerist, while the notion of “making a home” implies an ethical or moral commitment that transcends mere things, mere “stuff,” from collectibles to plumbing fixtures. But for many people – and I am one of them – the two activities are intimately

as evidenced in an increasing trend of landlords in Australia renting out housing at below market rates (Aubrey 2022). In these ways, commodified and non-commodified understandings of housing are deeply intertwined.

10.5.3 A case for *qualified* incompatibility

Notwithstanding the possibility that commodified and non-commodified understandings of housing co-exist or are even complementary, there is still a considerable tension between the two understandings of housing, such that the former tends to crowd out the latter. This is both at the level of individual valuing agents and government policy.

Interpersonal crowding out

At the individual level, this is simply because as house prices rise the cost of a sentimental or civic minded understanding of housing increases commensurately. While it is common for owners to regard *their own house* as intrinsically valuable, or at least not as a mere commodity, the rise of investment property purchases discussed above – and especially the growing number of short-term investors¹¹⁹ – suggests that many people regard *housing more generally* in commodified terms: that is, as a financial asset. The considerable returns that can be gained from treating housing as an investment reward and encourage a commodified conception. Moreover, landlords seeking to maximise profits are probably less likely to invest in improvements or rectification that would help to realise the use values of housing for tenants. Notice the difference between the explanation for interpersonal crowding out here compared with the previous chapter. In the sports betting case, I appealed to the social

related, the one an imaginative spur to the other.” On her account, the material aspects of a house are “all part of the story of who we are and what we love.”

¹¹⁹ Recent research by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute has found that the median rental-investment period for housing purchased in Australia is two years, and approximately 22 per cent of rental investments are disposed of after the first year (Singh et al 2025).

context in which sport is consumed to make the case that some people gambling on sport can affect the valuations of third parties. In this case, interpersonal crowding out occurs because of the incentives to adopt a commodified understanding of the good given the returns that one can obtain from property investment. Recall the discussion in Section 6.3 of the features that can affect the relation between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods. I suggested one factor that could support Coexistence or Complementarity was if exchange value makes salient an otherwise unappreciated or invisible good. Conversely, if the exchange value of the good is itself salient, this might lead to Corrosion. For housing, the latter holds, as the significant price that housing can receive on the market promotes a commodified mode of valuation.

Institutional crowding out

A structural tension between commodified and non-commodified conceptions of housing can also be seen at the level of government policy. This is particularly evident in the current economic and political climate. This is for three reasons. These relate to policy goals, the tendencies for speculation, and the political economy of housing. Let us consider each.

First, the two conceptions of housing involve diametrically opposed policy goals with respect to price. As Smith (2024) argues, in a discussion of American housing policy: “A house is a place to live, but it’s also something that’s supposed to make you wealthier over time, when its price goes up. These two objectives directly conflict – if owner-occupied housing becomes more affordable, *that makes Americans poorer*” (italics his). Demsas (2022) makes a similar point: “How do we ensure that housing is both appreciating in value for homeowners but cheap enough for all would be homeowners to buy in? We can’t.” In short, policy settings that promote and honour the use values of housing must seek to reduce prices (or at the very least slow the growth of prices) to improve accessibility and affordability as a matter of

urgency. By contrast, policies that honour the exchange value of housing – that is, as an investment that can produce a reliable stream of income and realise capital gains – resist any changes that would dampen or reduce prices.

One might object by arguing that it is possible for government to treat housing principally as a commodity that provides returns to owners over time, while still seeking to ensure that it is broadly accessible for people with lower incomes. But this can only occur through policies that place downward pressure on prices which, in part, requires demand-side policies that make housing a less attractive investment option. Where governments try to honour both goals – for example, by enhancing accessibility through direct and indirect cash transfers to low-income earners – this tends to put upward pressure on house prices, making the problem worse. Moreover, commodified understandings of housing in the broader population make supply-side policies harder to achieve in practice, insofar as local resistance to property developments is driven partly by a desire to preserve and enhance the value of homeowners' assets (as discussed above). Finally, in the context of a housing affordability crisis, the trajectory of property prices needs to change dramatically to make housing more accessible to those on lower incomes, which would threaten the interests of existing property owners.

Second, the substantive commodification of housing encourages investor-driven speculation because many people see an opportunity to make money quickly from investing in property. The positive feedback loop between investor-demand, leverage and house prices exerts continual upward pressure on prices. The tendency for speculative demand to arise where housing is seen as a reliable investment means that, over time, house prices become detached entirely from the use values of housing. The asset price rises independently of any increase in the quality or social utility of housing, reinforcing and exacerbating a structural tension between the use values and exchange value of housing. This makes it increasingly difficult to achieve a balance between the two conceptions of housing.

The tension between the use values and exchange value of housing given real estate market speculation was expressed by President of China, Xi Jinping, in 2016 when he said, in a now famous phrase: “Houses are for living, not for speculation” (Bloomberg News 2017). This principle has been a guiding force behind efforts to stabilise house prices in China in 2020 – which has included a range of policies designed to reduce speculation, such as introducing purchasing restrictions, resale restrictions and borrowing limits on property developers (Zheng et al 2023; Reuters 2023). It is telling that the rhetoric used to introduce these policies has explicitly emphasised what housing is (or should be) for.

Finally, the politics of housing means that it is increasingly difficult for government policy to honour both commodified and non-commodified understandings of housing. Again, Demsas (2022) is instructive in her diagnosis of the “secret hiding in plain sight” at the core of American housing policy: “Homeownership works for some because it cannot work for all ... The system by its nature pits incumbents against newcomers.” This dynamic is readily apparent in the Australian context. Government policies that seek to improve people’s ability to get their foot in the door of the housing market – for example both major parties’ housing policy platforms in the 2025 Federal election¹²⁰ – tend to exert upward pressure on prices by raising demand without a commensurate increase in supply. These policies help some people access housing – especially the first participants in the scheme that can purchase property before price increases take effect – while making it less affordable for all.

More generally, policies that seek to promote investment in housing do not tend to serve as efficient mechanisms to increase supply, even if they were initially intended to. This reflects a context in which homeowners are both a larger constituency than renters, and one that has more money and political influence. Rather, such policies become means to preserve and

¹²⁰ The Labor Party proposed to allow first home buyers to purchase homes with a 5 per cent deposit. The Coalition proposed to make interest payments on mortgages taken out by first-home buyers tax deductible. Housing experts have almost universally criticised both policies for stoking demand without meaningfully increasing supply (Wong 2025).

enhance the wealth of homeowners with little impact on the housing stock. For example, only around 5 per cent of negatively geared properties in Australia are new homes. Current capital gains tax discounts – in which only 50 per cent of nominal capital gains for assets held for more than one year are subject to taxes – primarily increase speculation and volatility without significantly increasing supply (Daley & Coates 2018). Such policies also become very difficult to wind back, despite not having a clear policy rationale. This was a hard learned lesson for the Labor Party after its shock loss in the 2019 Federal election. Its proposals to remove negative gearing and halve the capital gains tax discount (Parliamentary Budget Office 2019) have since been abandoned. They are widely regarded as political non-starters for any party that hopes to form government. The politics of housing thus makes it increasingly difficult for governments to simultaneously honour the use values and exchange value of housing through their policy settings.

In these ways, a commodified understanding of housing has a tendency to crowd out non-commodified understandings of housing. This occurs both interpersonally and institutionally. In the former case, large increases in exchange value over time affect psychological attitudes towards housing and encourage people to see it primarily as an investment good. In the latter case, in the context of a housing affordability crisis, government policy settings cannot simultaneously honour commodified and non-commodified conceptions of housing.

10.5.4 The normative implications of crowding out

The moral significance of crowding out in the case of housing lies in the harmful consequences of a commodified conception of housing. For interpersonal Crowding Out, individuals do not act morally badly when they adopt a commodified mode of valuation – as noted in Section 10.4.4 it is a rational response given the society we live in – but they contribute in a small way to a significant collective harm. As such, using the terminology

from Chapter 4, this form of crowding out is best understood as a Type 2 case: an argument in favour of collective regulation to reduce the degree to which housing is commodified that does not depend on any agent acting morally wrongfully. There is a stronger argument for moral wrongdoing in the institutional case. It can be understood as a Type 1 case: an argument in favour of collective regulation that does derive from morally wrongful acts of commodification. Successive Australian governments have implemented policies that have enabled, and actively facilitated, the substantive commodification of housing and, in so doing, have caused the considerable harms discussed in Section 10.4.3. In a memorable 1972 speech Prime Minister Gough Whitlam said: “It is the people’s land and we will fight for the right of all Australian people to have access to it at fair prices” (cited in Commonwealth of Australia 2008: 16). Governments have failed to fight for this right; some have abandoned the fight altogether. There is thus a moral imperative for government policies to change to reprioritise the use values of housing. In the final section of this paper, I explore general policy directions that would achieve this goal.

10.6 Bringing it all back home (*Response Stage*)

I have so far argued that there is a deep structural tension between the use values and exchange value of housing, that the former should take priority over the latter, and that this responsibility rests with government. I now apply the *Response Stage* of the procedure. Recall that this stage asks two questions: (1) are violations of the meaning of a good sensitive to the design and structure of the market; and (2) would alternative feasible allocative methods or modes of valuation better represent or realise the meaning of the good? Both questions can be answered in the affirmative. The former is apparent from the fact that the substantive commodification of housing in Australia has been actively facilitated by policies, particularly tax settings and supply constraints, that have encouraged this conception of

housing. It is not a natural or inevitable state of affairs; it is a result of policy decisions. The latter can be shown by pointing to general policy directions that would ameliorate this situation and reprioritise the use values of housing. The policy directions proposed below do not go as far as some critics suggest. For example, Madden & Marcuse (2016: 131) argue the housing crisis requires that we should “prevent housing from being treated as a commodity” and that decommodification is “the overarching goal.” In my view, housing should not be *substantively commodified*. Government policy changes should limit the degree to which market forces govern the production and distribution of housing.

10.6.1 A higher justificatory burden for investment policies

Policies that promote investment in housing can, as we saw above, help to improve affordability and accessibility by increasing supply. However, often such policies – in particular negative gearing and capital gains discounts – primarily function to preserve and enhance the wealth of the most well off. They make housing markets more volatile and increase incentives for speculation, with negligible impacts on supply. An implication of the arguments above is that such policies must be justified with respect to their impacts on affordability and accessibility. They would have to be efficient and effective means to increase supply to be justified.

This would mean significant reforms to property tax arrangements that exacerbate housing affordability issues by increasing speculation. Negative gearing should either be abolished entirely, or at the very least limited either to new houses or to offsetting investment income. Current capital gains tax discounts policy settings would also not be justified. Current vacant residential land taxes should be increased substantially to make it prohibitively expensive to own a property whose use values are not realised. Policies that provide subsidies to first homeowners should be tied to measures to increase supply (for example only applying to new

builds) and would need to be sufficiently targeted (for example through means testing) to ensure they do not ultimately make housing less affordable.

A higher justificatory burden for policies that promote investment in housing would serve as a test for whether government policies are justified. This approach would, to use a term popularised by Karl Polanyi, help to ensure that the housing market is *embedded* within and constrained by broader social objectives, rather than following its own logic (Polanyi 2001).

10.6.2 Substantial expansion of the social housing stock

Social housing currently comprises less than 4 per cent of Australia's total dwellings. This is significantly less than other OECD countries, such as the Netherlands (34 per cent), Austria (24 per cent), Denmark (21 per cent), the UK (17 per cent) and France (13 per cent) (OECD 2024). Governments should invest substantially in the social housing stock so that the use values of housing are available to the many Australians for whom the private market is prohibitively expensive. Direct state provision of housing outside the market would help to ensure that a proportion of the housing stock is allocated on the basis of need rather than ability to pay. This should be accompanied by rental assistance, recognising that there is not enough social housing (at least in the short-term) for all in need. Both policies would help people to access housing at below-market rates; the former would also increase supply.

The extent to which government should pursue these policies depends on the proportion of the population that cannot afford housing at prevailing market rates. As a general policy direction, it calls for treating housing more like other basic goods, such as healthcare and education, which are also provided through public and private means, but with a much greater emphasis on public provision. Around 45 per cent of Australians rely entirely on the public health system, while 64 per cent of Australians school students attend public school (ACCC

2023; Cassidy 2023). Perhaps not coincidentally, those using the public forms of these services are less stigmatised than those living in public housing (Sisson & Chatterjee 2020).

10.6.3 Experimenting with different housing models

There are many alternative models for the provision of housing beyond private ownership and market-led supply. A more pluralistic housing system is possible with a broader range of institutional forms through which housing is accessed, financed, owned and governed. These include limited-equity cooperatives, community land trusts, mutual home ownership schemes, co-housing arrangements, and public-private partnership models (Madden & Marcuse 2016). There have been recent calls to expand such models in Australia (Pope 2025; Fitzgerald 2025). Different models vary considerably, but each seeks to enhance access, promote affordability and reduce speculation. Each model reconfigures ownership and control to limit commodification.

By funding and supporting different housing models, government can actively foster institutional innovation in housing markets, rather than simply intervening in the market to address harms. Experimenting with different models could also support long-term policy development by contributing to an evidence-base around what housing solutions can provide owners or occupiers with access to the goods of housing in an efficient and effective way. Exploring different options could also be more cost effective than direct financial assistance, as is currently the focus of government. These alternative arrangements should complement rather than substitute for direct public provision of housing.

10.6.4 Decoupling use values from ownership

Government policies designed to support people to access the use values of housing – such as first homeowners’ grants, shared-equity schemes and stamp duty concessions – have tended

to focus on homeownership as the overarching goal. This has the unfortunate consequence of placing upward pressure on house prices by increasing demand, and further promoting a commodified conception of housing. One implication of the arguments above is to reconsider the relationship between use values and home ownership. The use values of housing do not, after all, depend on ownership.¹²¹ While there are benefits to home ownership over renting – such as stability over time, the ability to personalise a home, and more control over surroundings – this partly results from policy settings that prioritise the interests of homeowners (Daley & Coates 2018: 72-3). Changes to tenancy laws could make renting significantly more attractive, for example by making it more difficult to terminate leases, extending minimum notice periods, increasing tenants’ freedoms to modify homes, and creating regimes for long-term leases which provide more security of tenure. These are more common in other jurisdictions which have tenancy laws that are more favourable to renters (Daley & Coates 2018: 126-127).

Importantly, attempts to decouple the use values of housing from ownership would need to be accompanied by measures that reduce the relative economic benefits that accrue to homeowners and not to renters. If one of the harms of the commodification of housing is that it exacerbates inequalities, then attempts to make the goods of housing more available to all (irrespective of ownership) will be in vain if homeowners continue to benefit economically from significantly rising house prices. Policies that improve housing affordability will help to address these inequalities. In addition, removing the current tax benefits that apply to homeowners – such as exemptions of owner-occupied housing from land taxes and exclusions of family homes in the Age Pension assets test – would also help to make renting relatively more attractive.

¹²¹ King (2018: 97) puts this point as follows: “Use predominates over ownership and physicality, so that the ends to which housing is put are more significant than any sense of ownership and physicality.”

These general policy directions represent four ways that governments could re-orient policy settings towards treating housing primarily as a basic good rather than as an investment asset. Collectively these policies would limit the extent to which housing is substantively commodified and reduce the associated harms.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed Australia's housing affordability crisis as, in part, a consequence of commodification. First, I argued that commodification is a useful and underappreciated conceptual lens to explain Australia's housing affordability crisis, and that a meaning-first analysis is preferable to understanding the crisis exclusively through the lens of economic theory. Second, I argued that the use values of housing should be prioritised over the exchange value of housing and that this responsibility lies with government. Third, I applied the Crowding Out Objection to argue that there is a structural tension between the use values of housing and its exchange value, at the level of individual valuing agents and government policy. This built on the discussion of crowding out in the previous chapter by introducing a different form of the objection (*institutional* crowding out) and a different explanation for interpersonal crowding out (based on incentives to adopt a commodified mode of valuation). Finally, I suggested policy directions that would reprioritise the use values of housing. Collectively, these would re-imagine the Australian Dream so it delivers on its promise.

Chapter 11 What's so bad about selling out?

On the commodification of music

“... the term sellout holds little to no weight anymore ...there's no condemnation of foregoing all possible integrity and authenticity in pursuit of a dollar.”

~ Vic Mensa¹²²

Introduction

The production, distribution and consumption of music is governed by market forces to a considerable degree. Many aspects of music are routinely bought and sold. These include ownership rights over compositions and recordings (licenses, royalties, copyrights); the means to create music (instruments, studio equipment, software packages); the technologies of music distribution (radio, turntables, CD players, streaming services); representations of musical works (vinyl, CDs, digital files, sheet music); and the identities of musicians (branding, product sponsorships, merchandise). As with other art forms, from literature to visual arts, culture and commerce are deeply intertwined in the domain of music.

Notwithstanding that many aspects of music are commodified in the contemporary world, many people are suspicious of the relationship between art and commerce. A common concern – held by many artists, cultural critics and music lovers – is that aesthetic interests can be undermined when music is driven by commercial imperatives. These concerns are perhaps best embodied in the phrase ‘sell-out’. Accusing someone of being a ‘sell-out’ is a pejorative term that impugns that person’s character. It is often applied to musical artists who

¹²² Genius (2017).

are perceived to have compromised their values or their artistic integrity for commercial gain. In certain cultural contexts, the term ‘sell-out’ has been a potent criticism, one that artists have gone to great lengths to avoid being charged with.

The term ‘sell-out’ is also contentious. By supposing that commercial motivations provide legitimate grounds for criticising artists, it might imply that artists must live in poverty or else forego any pretensions to artistic integrity. Relatedly, it is plausibly a naïve term that is underpinned by a simplistic account of motivation and one that arguably assumes, falsely, that aesthetic considerations are necessarily corrupted by commerce. Finally, it is arguably an anachronistic term in a music industry with few opportunities for artists to make money and one where commercialisation is increasingly normalised. These issues have led some commentators and artists to conclude that the term is not a meaningful criticism. In a cultural history of the term, Bethany Klein observes, “Claims that there’s ‘no such thing as selling out’ ... that ‘selling out no longer exists’ ... and similar sentiments have increased in frequency and volume” (Klein 2020: 128). A reasonable conclusion, in light of these objections, is we should abandon the term altogether.

In this chapter, I explore ethical issues related to the commodification of music by considering the term ‘sell-out’ – both what it means and why it matters. I argue that it is a meaningful criticism that can legitimately be applied to artists and their art, one that gives voice to the disquiet that many people feel when music becomes a commodity directed towards commercial ends. I show how the framework introduced in Chapter 8 can help to make sense of why selling out can raise moral concerns. I defend a term that, in my view, has been unfairly maligned and which could be of considerable import in contemporary culture. This builds on the discussions in the previous chapters principally by focusing on the transformative potential of commodified modes of valuation – in this case for music making.

This chapter comprises six sections. **Section 11.1** considers prominent examples in the history of popular music of artists being accused of selling out to provide a rough account of the term. I show that it is a heterogeneous term that is used in cases where commercial imperatives supersede aesthetic considerations. I show that it can be understood as a form of commodification, given the definition provided in Chapter 1. The next five sections apply the framework developed in Chapter 8. **Section 11.2** focuses on the *Characterisation Stage*. Drawing on Hesmondhalgh (2013), I argue that music is valuable because it contributes to human flourishing by enriching the lives of individuals and collectives. The next three sections focus on the *Application Stage*. **Section 11.3** uses the attitude-communicating formulation of the Bad Attitude Objection to show that, within certain sub-cultures, selling out expresses an objectionable attitude towards music. **Section 11.4** uses the intrapersonal and interpersonal formulations of the Crowding Out Objection to show that selling out can raise moral concerns because it has a tendency to make unavailable desirable attitudes toward music. **Section 11.5** applies the Transformation Objection to argue that selling out tends to diminish the aesthetic quality, diversity and political potential of music. **Section 11.6** turns to the *Response Stage*. I argue that the harms involved in selling out give morally serious reasons for different actors in music markets to engage in or refrain from certain conduct to promote, cultivate and sustain non-commercial values and norms.

11.1 Contextualising the term ‘sell-out’

The term ‘sell-out’ has been a persistent and widespread term of derision in popular musical history: its use in popular culture dates back to at least the 1960s and it has been used across a range of musical traditions (Klein 2020). After Bob Dylan ‘went electric’ in 1965 he was, in his own words, called a “Sellout, fink, fascist, red, everything in the book” (Nicolay 2017). Members of the grunge rock band *Nirvana* – which became a major cultural phenomenon

after the release of the 1991 single ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ – were concerned to manage perceptions that they were selling out by embracing the mainstream. This tension was exemplified by the lead singer Kurt Cobain appearing on a *Rolling Stone* magazine cover wearing a homemade T-shirt with the slogan ‘corporate magazines still suck’ (Rolling Stone 2017). Many bands in the heavy rock or metal tradition – *Green Day*, *Metallica* and *KISS* to name a few – have faced charges of selling out for toning down their image and sound to appeal to a broader audience, and for embracing mainstream musical institutions and licensing music for commercial ends (McCoy 2023). Punk band *Sex Pistols* attracted criticism for selling out after they entered into a sponsorship deal with Virgin Money who launched a line of credit cards in 2015 emblazoned with the front cover of their 1977 album *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s The Sex Pistols* (Makortoff 2015). The band’s lead singer, John Lydon (formerly Johnny Rotten) attracted criticism for abandoning the anti-consumerist ethos of punk when he appeared in a 2008 advertisement for Country Life Butter (Sweney 2008). In a 2017 interview with *Genius* about what selling out means in hip-hop today, A\$AP Ferg explained that the term means different things to different people: “Some dudes might define a sell out by changing the sounds of your music or jumping on commercial records or some dudes may define sellout by like, you not hanging out or associating with old friends or not hanging out in your neighborhood anymore” (Genius 2017).

While these are just a few examples of contemporary and historical discussions of selling out, they gesture to the fact that the term is used in a variety of contexts to criticise different types of actions. We can observe three general points about how the term is used in practice that help to make sense of the normative assumptions that underpin accusations of selling out.

First, the term is deployed when an artist’s actions are perceived to be motivated by commercial interests rather than aesthetic considerations. In this sense, it can be understood as a form of commodification, as defined in Chapter 1, because it involving valuing a good –

in this case, one's music – for the price that it can obtain on the market. This can manifest in various ways. An artist might change their sound to appeal to a broader audience. This was the perception among folknik purists of Bob Dylan's decision to go electric – as folk-rock had broader commercial appeal than its acoustic counterpart. Alternatively, artists might leverage their art, or their status as a well-known artist, to make additional forms of revenue through corporate sponsorships or partnerships (e.g., John Lydon and *Sex Pistols*) or by licensing their music to appear in commercials or to promote consumer products (e.g., *KISS*). Artists might also be accused of selling out because they 'embrace the mainstream' by signing a major label record deal or, in *A\$AP Ferg's* words, "jumping on commercial records" (Genius 2017). This was central to criticisms of both *Nirvana* and *Green Day*. Often such criticisms are underpinned by views that signing with a major label necessarily involves an artist sacrificing creative autonomy and compromising their artistic vision. The lead singer of *Black Flag*, Henry Rollins, expresses this sentiment well: "Selling out is when you make the record you're told to make, instead of the one you want to make" (CJMarsicanoPA 2009). The ways that artists orient their creative endeavours toward money-making vary greatly, but using art to pursue pecuniary interests, in a way that conflicts with aesthetic considerations, is central to many claims that an artist is a sell-out.

Importantly, the mere fact that an artist is motivated by money is not (or at least should not be) sufficient to warrant the charge of selling out. Any artist seeking to make a career from their art must invariably consider money (unless they are independently wealthy) if only to have the resources and time required to produce art. Lead singer of *Talking Heads*, David Byrne, describes this challenge as follows: "Though I won't want my creative decisions to be guided by profit and marketing – a motivating criteria that inevitably ends in disaster – I also don't want to be blissfully ignorant of budgets and business" (Byrne 2012: 206). Moreover, artists might have commercial and aesthetic motivations that interact in complex ways to

determine their creative decisions. For example, John Lydon defended his decision to appear in a commercial for butter partly on the grounds that he was using the proceeds to fund a musical venture – his post-punk band Public Image Limited (Wilkinson 2009). In light of this, the term sell-out should be used where commercial interests are the primary or sole motivation in an artist’s all-things-considered judgments, and where they are largely or completely unconstrained by non-commercial aesthetic considerations. I agree with Nguyen (2021: 35) who argues that selling out occurs when an artist “*abandons* their sense of aesthetic value, giving it up entirely in a bid for money or the like” (italics in original). He recognises a “crucial difference between an artist who makes something aesthetically valuable for the sake of money, and an artist who simply makes something directly for the sake of money” (36). Only the latter warrants the charge of being a sell-out.

Second, the claim that an artist is a sell-out is not usually intended as a descriptive term, but rather is a normative criticism of their actions. What is the basis for this criticism? We can distinguish three concerns. Artists might act *hypocritically* by selling out in the sense of acting inconsistently with strongly held values or beliefs they have, or at least profess to have. *Nirvana* and *Sex Pistols* are interesting case studies precisely because they built their reputations on anti-consumerist, anti-capitalist ideals and aesthetics. They decried the ‘mainstream’ and positioned themselves as outsiders before being associated with it, either through record deals or corporate sponsorships. Artists might also act *inauthentically* when pecuniary interests influence their creative decisions and output. Concerns among punk and metal fans that bands like *Green Day* and *Metallica* have sold out by making commercially palatable music are not so much about hypocrisy, but rather a failure to remain true to their artistic visions. Accusations of selling out can also be grounded in *loyalty*. For critics of Bob Dylan, the charge of selling out was not about hypocrisy or inauthenticity so much as failing

to meet fans' expectations of the kinds of music they felt he should make.¹²³ Likewise, when *A\$AP Ferg* notes that rappers are called sell outs if they do not “hang out or associate with their old friends” (Genius 2017), the implication is that those levelling the charge feel abandoned by the artist, irrespective of whether the artist has compromised their values.¹²⁴ Thus, a second strand that underpins claims of selling out is that artists act in a manner that is hypocritical, inauthentic or disloyal.

But what about the effects on art itself? Claims that artists have sold out are often motivated by concerns that commercial motivations have a deleterious impact on art, not simply that an artist compromises their values or abandons their community when they are motivated by commercial interests. For example, in Ultimate Guitar's list of *'Top 10 Bands that were labelled "Sellouts"*, eight-out-of-ten examples relate to changes in musical style that were perceived by fans to be a diminution in artistic quality (Kiryushkin 2019). The idea that selling out is bad because it corrupts music helps to explain why the term has been a potent criticism in sub-cultures like punk, grunge and indie which have each been underpinned by pessimistic attitudes towards mainstream musical institutions. It also helps to understand why artists that have changed their style in ways that have been commercially successful *and* critically acclaimed – such as David Bowie, Blondie and Radiohead – tend to escape accusations of selling out. Finally, it helps to make sense of the fact that accusations of selling out often make a judgment about an artist's output, not just the artist. Concerns about hypocrisy, inauthenticity and disloyalty are principally reasons to judge a person, not a product. But claims that an artist is a sell-out often pass judgment on the music itself.¹²⁵

¹²³ In this sense, it is significant that a crowd member at Dylan's 1966 concert in Manchester famously yelled 'Judas' rather than some other epithet (Fleming 2016). Going electric was perceived as an act of betrayal.

¹²⁴ Klein (2020: 21-22) corroborates this point: “Selling out in hip-hop is often not about commercial success per se, but turning your back on the community while presenting an inauthentic picture of that community.”

¹²⁵ For examples, debates about whether Metallica's 'Black Album' is a sell-out album or a masterpiece (e.g., see Coffman 2025) reflect that it can be the art itself – not just the artist – that is central to debates about selling out.

In summary, there are three common strands that underpin accusations of selling out. First, the term is deployed when an artist's actions are perceived to be motivated by commercial interests rather than aesthetic considerations. Second, often the implication is that the artist can be blamed because they have acted in a way that is hypocritical, inauthentic or disloyal. Third, claims of selling out are often underscored by the view that an artist has acted in a way that compromises or diminishes the quality of their art. In the remainder of this chapter, I draw on the framework introduced in Chapter 8 to understand what's wrong with selling out.

11.2 Why music matters (*Characterisation Stage*)

Let us begin with the values and ideals associated with the commodified good: in this case music. Music has many values – it can be an object of aesthetic beauty, a locus of community, a source of transcendence and spiritual growth, a form of entertainment, the grounds for political organisation, and a basis for therapy (Levinson 2015). In this section, I draw on David Hesmondhalgh's 2013 book *Why Music Matters* to explore what is valuable about music: both as a creative activity and a good that people consume, and both for individuals and collectives. This will provide theoretical foundations to understand why treating music as a commodity can be morally objectionable and, for the purposes of this chapter, why artists can be legitimately criticised for selling out.

Hesmondhalgh (2013) argues that music plays an important role in contributing to human flourishing. On his account, music can enrich the lives of individuals and societies in many ways – for example by helping individuals to understand and communicate affective experiences, enhancing intimate relationships, promoting sociability and community, and building experiences of solidarity and commonality across space and time. I follow his approach by considering its benefits for individuals before turning to collectives.

Music evokes emotional responses in its listeners – indeed it is perhaps more closely tied to affect and emotional engagement than other art forms. It can move, inspire or motivate its listeners and it can encourage a range of emotional responses, from quiet contemplation to ecstatic joy. Some of its effects on our emotional states may be trivial or even negative, but in other senses music can play a valuable role in “cultivating and enriching our inner world” (17). Some of its benefits can be realised through consumption of music. Hesmondhalgh draws on evidence from music sociology and psychology to argue that it can: “heighten people’s awareness of continuity and development in life” (53); promote a “healthy integration of different aspects of our being, combining reflection and self-awareness with kinetic pleasure” (53), and “heighten our understanding of how others might think and feel” (54). While each of these aspects of music can be realised through music appreciation, some values are particular to music creation. Drawing on Aristotelian notions of *practice* – that is, activities for pursuing excellence where internal rewards rather than extrinsic benefits are the measure of success – he argues that “music-making is an activity loaded with ethical significance for many people” (55).

Music also helps collectives to flourish by promoting feelings of sociality, community and collectivity. Music tends to be enjoyed with others in social settings. It is often created by groups of people (marching bands, church choirs, karaoke, trad sessions) and its consumption is often communal (music festivals, sporting events, rave parties, concert halls). It can thus bring people together through its ability to “enhance feelings of shared experience, attachment, and solidarity towards other human beings” (87). Some of these valuable aspects of music can be found in quotidian settings, like in singing or dancing together with friends or enjoying a live concert of one’s favourite band with fellow fans. Another important benefit

of music for collective flourishing relates to its potential to advance political struggles.¹²⁶

Popular music often seeks to achieve political ends, whether in Bob Marley imploring his listeners to *get up, stand up*, John Lennon asking his audience to *imagine a world without religion*, or Woodie Guthrie playing a guitar emblazoned with the slogan *this machine kills fascists*. Music can be a powerful force for solidarity of political movements and an accelerant of social change – whether that is in protest songs or in promoting values and attachments through participation in musical cultures.

Importantly, Hesmondhalgh observes that music does not necessarily contribute to individual or collective flourishing. For one, not all music has the ability to enrich the emotional lives of its listeners and creators. He argues that music which is both innovative and evocative is especially enriching of our emotional lives because it “can valuably add to the diversity of expression in a society” (17). Bland or formulaic music, however, may not have this effect. Moreover, certain music can promote emotional reactions that are nativistic, nationalistic, misogynistic, narcissistic or simply excessively sentimental about the past (8). The collective benefits of music are also contingent – partly because music can be the agent of both emancipatory and oppressive political movements, but also because institutional arrangements affect how music contributes to social life. He notes: “Music’s ability to unite people across space and time, and thereby enable their collective flourishing, I conclude, is real, but specific, and highly vulnerable to systemic changes, such as increasing consumerism, commodification, and competitiveness” (10). This is an important observation for my purposes because, when I consider how selling out affects the ideals associated with music, the relevant question will be how selling out affects musical output and cultural

¹²⁶ While Hesmondhalgh (2013) discusses music’s role in advancing political struggles for greater quality he is sceptical of views that this is one of its primary benefits: “The claim that music’s most important and valuable relationship to collective flourishing is via its contribution to political struggle ... is wrong because *music makes much stronger contributions to collective flourishing through sociable publicness than through deliberative publicness*” (144, italics in original).

practices of music making. If selling out tends towards lower quality, less diverse and more politically anodyne music, as I argue in Section 11.5, then we have grounds to argue that it will be contrary to music that is a source of individual and collective flourishing.

Before we proceed, a final observation is in order. I have so far described the values and ideals associated with music *writ large*. This is consistent with the approach that Hesmondhalgh takes in his book and it is sufficient for my purposes. However, there are considerable differences between musical genres or sub-cultures and the values and ideals they seek to embody and espouse.¹²⁷ These range from political solidarity and expression (punk and folk); heightened social interaction (EDM and disco), self-transcendence (psytrance and techno), demonstrating skill (jazz and heavy metal), transgressing social norms (classic rock and hip hop), valorising the past (classical and roots music), or expressing the experiences of particular social groups (emo and country western). Clearly these are rough categorisations and genres can embody multiple ideals simultaneously. As will become clear, concerns about selling out are particularly widespread and potent within certain genres because of the values and ideals they espouse.

Having sketched a brief account of the values of music, I am now in a position to apply the meaning-based objections to commodification developed earlier in this thesis to understand why selling out raises moral concerns. In the next three sections, I apply the Bad Attitude Objection, the Crowding Out Objection and the Transformation Objection, respectively, to explore the normative significance of accusations of selling out. Before I do this, however, I should provide a word of caution. Consistent with the framework introduced in Chapter 8, the arguments in these sections are only meant to demonstrate that selling out can be pro tanto morally objectionable. These are not designed to draw evaluative conclusions that artists

¹²⁷ This is a point that Hesmondhalgh is clearly aware of. I do not mean to suggest otherwise.

have, all-things-considered, acted morally wrongly by selling out. Indeed, a common thread in debates about selling out concern whether the term asks too much of artists.¹²⁸ I am sympathetic to these concerns and to the plight of artists more generally. My goal is simply to show bad-making features of selling out.

11.3 Applying the Bad Attitude Objection (*Application Stage*)

Recall that the attitude-communicating form of the Bad Attitude Objection argues that commodification can be morally objectionable for expressive reasons – it can communicate an objectionable attitude towards a good because of the contingent meanings attached to money and markets within particular social contexts. I argued that this objection can be grounded in deontological or consequentialist commitments. In this section, I appeal to the former, though I also briefly make reference to the latter to vindicate my arguments in Chapter 5 about the value of anti-market semiotic norms.

The claim that selling out is morally objectionable because it expresses disrespect towards music is, at face value, unintuitive. For one, it does not respect the autonomy of artists to make music for the reasons they see fit – including as a means to make money. More generally, it can be disputed on the grounds that music has many different meanings and sources of value for people. It might also be callous and classist to begrudge people for treating their music as a way to make money, especially where a career as a musician offers an escape from poverty or hardship.

¹²⁸ In the words of jazz critic Doug Ramsey, “show me a solvent jazz band and I’ll show you a band accused of selling out” (Nicolay 2017). Or consider Isaac Brock, the lead singer of Modest Mouse, on his decision to license his songs for beer and shoe commercials: “I thought, ‘Am I compromising my music by doing this?’ And I think not. I like to keep lights on in my house” (Modell 2004). Henry Rollins puts this point in a characteristically forceful way: “Do you have any idea what some of these bands went through to make that music? The fact that there might be some money for them all these years later is great. You think that paycheck is any way a slight to their integrity? Are you fucking kidding me?” (CJMarsicanoPA 2009).

That said, a plausible expressivist critique of selling out applies in cases where the charge of selling out is deployed in particular sub-cultures or aesthetic communities where the value of art is explicitly conceived of in non-commercial or anti-commercial terms. Punk, grunge and indie are good examples of this: each genre prizes authenticity of expression and holds pessimistic attitudes towards mainstream musical institutions. As a member of one of these aesthetic communities, treating music solely as a way to make money might constitute an objectionable attitude that infringes a duty one owes to the community to embody its ideals and authentically produce art in line with its values. This isn't to say that any accusation of selling out on these grounds is a justified criticism. For example, accusations that Bob Dylan sold out by going electric are unreasonable because he did not owe a duty to the folk community to only ever make music with acoustic instrumentation.

In other cases, however, it is plausible to criticise artists on these grounds. Where an artist depended on the support of a community to build their initial profile, they might have a duty to remain loyal to or present in that community, or to give back to that community in some way. As punk band *Crass* said of *Sex Pistols* member Steve Jones in their 1978 song 'Punk is Dead': "And he sucked from the system that had given him his name" (Crass 1978). Another plausible case is where the leaders of an artistic community have an implicit obligation to its members that requires some form of self-sacrifice. The same *Crass* song expresses this sentiment succinctly: "Punk became a movement 'cos we all felt lost, but the leaders sold out and now we all pay the cost."

More generally, an artist might have a duty where they have made a promise – either explicitly or implicitly – to their fans, community or scene to act in a certain way to make a certain kind of music. For example, rapper Denzel Curry describes selling out in these terms: "The rapper ... gives fans promises like a president, telling them, 'I'm not gonna change.' But as soon as money, family, and more issues get involved, they start to reconsider their

values. When they start to actually change and go against everything they said, that's the definition of selling out" (Genius 2017). Of course, artists might justifiably break a promise that they have made to their fans, just as there can be good reasons for people in all domains of life to break promises in certain circumstances. But even if it is not all-things-considered wrong to break a promise, an artist nonetheless acts morally badly by doing so because the act of promise-making creates a duty to fans that is infringed by selling out.

While the wrongness of selling out on expressive grounds can be justified in deontological terms, anti-market semiotic norms towards selling out in particular sub-cultures might ultimately be based on concerns about bad outcomes that result from commodified modes of valuation and the commercialisation of culture. Recall in Chapter 5 that I argued that semiotic norms might not be mere superstition or polite courtesy, as Brennan & Jaworski (2022) argue, but that there might be good reasons for them. They can serve as guardrails for interests and values that we have reason to protect. Selling out provides a case in point. In a cultural history of the twenty-first century, Marx (2025: 276) expresses support for what he calls "the highly productive twentieth-century taboo against selling out" which in his view was a valuable social norm for promoting experimentation and cultural invention and steering emerging artists away from internalising market goals. In Section 11.5, I explain why selling out might lead to worse quality music and cultural stagnation. For now, it is important to note that concerns that selling out expresses disrespect towards music could be justified with respect to consequences not just duties.

These examples suggest that selling out can raise moral concerns where it involves expressing an attitude towards music that is disrespectful within a particular social context. The wrongness of expressing such an attitude can be derived from one's duties to one's fans or an aesthetic community, or because of the bad consequences of selling out that anti-market

semiotic norms help to mitigate or prevent. Thus, the attitude-communicating form of the Bad Attitude Objection can shed light on why selling out can be morally objectionable.

11.4 Applying the Crowding Out Objection (Application Stage)

Recall that the Crowding Out Objection argues that commodification is objectionable where it makes unavailable desirable ways of valuing goods. In the previous applied chapters, I applied forms of this objection to sports betting and housing. In the case of music, crowding out can occur for individual artists, or for aesthetic communities. This builds on the discussions in previous chapters in two ways: by showing an example of *intrapersonal* crowding out, and by providing a different explanation for *interpersonal* crowding out.

11.4.1 Intrapersonal crowding out

Let us begin with intrapersonal crowding out. In this case, the concern is that treating music as a vehicle for money making can be psychologically corrosive to non-pecuniary ways of valuing music. This is a common concern raised by artists. Consider the warning that anti-folk musician Jeffrey Lewis gives in a 2003 song titled ‘*Don’t Let the Record Label Take You Out to Lunch*’: “You’re the one that got to pay at the end of the day. And try not to want people to like you too much. You’ll just need more and more flattery to recharge your batteries. And don’t let showmanship become more important than honesty” (Lewis 2003). Conversely, consider Guy Clark’s observation in the chorus of his 1999 song *Cold Dog Soup*: “Ain’t no money in poetry. That’s what sets the poet free” (Clark 1999).¹²⁹ Nick Cave expressed a similar sentiment, albeit in a different context, when he declined MTV’s request to participate in an awards ceremony: “I feel that it is my duty protect her [my muse] from

¹²⁹ Full disclosure, the next line of the chorus is “I’ve had all the freedom I can stand.” Perhaps selling out is, all things considered, the right thing to do to put “cold dog soup and rainbow pie” on the table, even if it is freedom-restricting.

influences that may offend her fragile nature” (Taysom 2020). In short, selling out might harm an artist because it undermines their ability to value music *qua* music – because a creative pursuit becomes oriented around extrinsic rewards. In such cases, selling out involves giving in to temptation and acting inconsistently with one’s better judgments. It may be particularly likely because of the many benefits of commercial success (fame, fortune, social prestige), especially in a culture that venerates commercial success.

Selling out, in this formulation, involves a form of self-harm. An onlooker could criticise the artist as a sell-out and imply that they should have acted differently. This might be a prudential normative judgment – that is, a claim that they have acted in a way that is contrary to their interests. But consistent with my earlier arguments, selling out in this way can also attract a more limited form of moral criticism on the grounds that the artist failed to have meritorious attitudes towards an object of value – their creative pursuits. To use the language from Chapter 4, this case invites a Type 4 conclusion: moral criticism of an artist that does not depend on them acting morally wrongfully.

11.4.2 Interpersonal crowding out

Let us now turn to interpersonal crowding out. In this case, an artist’s decision to sell out has spillover effects that affect third parties’ valuations of music. Here, there is a stronger case for artists acting morally wrongfully by selling out because of potential effects for aesthetic communities. Selling out can make unavailable desirable attitudes towards music by promoting a norm of treating music as a commercial activity, one that makes it harder for artists to value music chiefly in non-commercial terms. This can occur for two reasons.

First, like the housing case, there can be a strong incentive for artists to adopt a commodified mode of valuation towards music, especially if the potential economic returns are significant. In a music industry where selling out is standard practice – or where it is not an established

norm to criticise artists for being sell-outs – it can become more difficult for artists to sustain non-commercial attitudes towards art. After all, if everyone else who is given the opportunity signs a major label record deal, licenses their music for commercials or endorses products, then it would be foolish not to. To take one example, *The Black Keys* defended their decision to play a 2024 show at ‘America Loves Crypto’ – a concert series hosted by a crypto advocacy group – partly on the basis that they needed the income, but also because another band was doing the same. In the words of drummer Patrick Carney: “We got offered a lot of money to play a show, and we saw that the Black Pumas had done the same event and we were like, ‘Book it.’ It’s that simple, bro” (Pillely 2025). As I showed in Chapter 6, sustaining a non-commodified understanding of a good can become irrational if enough people ‘defect’ and adopt a commodified conception.

Second, similar to the sports betting case, crowding out can occur because music is produced and consumed in a social context. Non-commercial values of music can depend on a shared understanding that music is valuable in these ways. Recall Gold’s (2019) account of crowding out in terms of shared valuations: “Although one may think that blood *should* be a gift, and even decide to treat it as a gift, one cannot decide that it *is* a gift independent of what other people in the community are doing” (24, italics in original). Likewise, artists might individually want music to be valued as more than just a commodity, but they cannot unilaterally decide that music is valued as such. When *Crass* laments that “punk is dead”, it is not because no one is making punk music anymore – they released the song in 1978 – it is that the ethos of punk depends on a shared commitment to its values among the punk community which is compromised when people in the community use the label to pursue commercial ends. More generally, in a society that celebrates commercial culture – in Marx’s (2025:6) words one that treats “popularity as the ultimate democratic arbiter of quality” and “business savvy as equivalent to artistic genius” – selling out becomes the natural way to

obtain cultural cachet.¹³⁰ If the dominant understanding of the value of music – among artists, the music industry and society – is expressed in market terms, then artists might have no choice but to sell out because there is little to be gained from refusing to do so.¹³¹

11.5 Applying the Transformation Objection (*Application Stage*)

Selling out also affects the kinds of music that an individual artist or a culture makes and, in so doing, can diminish the value of music. To understand how, I apply the Transformation Objection. This claims that commodification is morally objectionable where it diminishes the value of a good in a manner that ought to be prevented, limited, condemned or at least not actively facilitated. Recall that I argued in Chapter 7 that a successful Transformation Objection depends on four claims – that a good is transformed when it is commodified, that its commodified form is inferior to its non-commodified form, that the two forms are incompatible, and that the transformation is morally objectionable.

I briefly observed concerns about transformational effects of commodification in the previous applied chapters; for example, if rule changes are made to sports to placate betting companies, or if property developers make lower quality housing for investors. In both cases, however, these were secondary, potential effects of commodification. In the case of music, it is the primary concern. In this section, I argue that when individuals make music primarily or solely for commercial considerations – or where a culture rewards and encourages such

¹³⁰ Recall the discussion in Section 6.3 about the features that affect the relationship between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods. One of these (Feature #3) related to the expressive feature of market transactions. I argued that Corrosion was more likely to obtain where market exchanges expressed value equilibrium rather than value remainder. This is characteristic of a society that celebrates commercial culture: the money one receives for a music video or a record or an advertisement is, after all, a good measure of its artistic worth.

¹³¹ This is not to suggest there is nothing to gain by refusing to sell out. An artist might retain autonomy over their aesthetic vision and a more authentic relationship to their music and fans. My point, consistent with my analysis in Chapter 6, is that non-commodified understandings of music are a collective good that depend on a shared valuation. Once some artists defect by selling out and thus erode the collective good, it may be rational for others to follow suit. In the resulting equilibrium, the shared non-commodified understanding has broken down.

attitudes towards music making – this will tend to diminish the value of music. More precisely, the cross-temporally continuing cultural practice of music making is diminished when artists sell out.¹³² I do not argue that selling out necessarily diminishes the quality of music, nor do I wish to evince a reflexive pessimism and hostility towards commercially successful music.¹³³ My more modest goal is to suggest reasons that pecuniary motivations and interests can compromise the quality, diversity and political potential of art for a range of reasons. To use the language from Chapter 7, this is because selling out involves a form of Value Inferiority: changing the ends to which music making is directed for the worse.

First, attempting to achieve commercial success can be a distraction from making great art for the simple reason that profits are not necessarily a good proxy for aesthetic quality. In the words of producer Rick Rubin (2023a: 220), “Popular success is a poor barometer of work and worth.” Worse, an emphasis on commercial success can distract attention away from valuable creative activities. For example, Marx (2025: 185) attributes cultural stagnation in the twenty-first century partly to the rise of ‘hyperoptimism’ and its emphasis above all on commercial success: “Creative invention was not just an afterthought, but a potential hindrance in the new path towards fame and fortune.” If individual artists or aesthetic communities measure success primarily or solely with reference to commercial outcomes, this can be a poor guide to the production of good art.

Second, when music and norms in the music industry are oriented primarily towards commercial ends – whether it is maximising record sales or downloads, or using music to

¹³² I add this point of clarification to specify the good that is being devalued by selling out. It is the cultural practice rather than the specific outputs. One might argue that this is not an appropriate use of the Transformation Objection because selling out is not transforming a good into something less valuable, but rather diverting efforts of artists away from making great art.

¹³³ As Hesmondhalgh (1999: 45) observes, “the term ‘sell-out’ masks not only a potential range of motivations behind collaboration with other sources of capital, but also the achievements which such collaboration sometimes allows.” Such ‘achievements’ might be aesthetic or political in nature. For example, a major label record deal might give an artist access to higher quality session musicians or production equipment. Or commercial success might provide a band with the platform to pursue their political goals.

promote other products – this can blur the lines between music as a creative act and as a means to promote consumerism. For example, in David Byrne’s (2012) analysis of what he calls the 360-degree deal – in which “every aspect of an artist’s career is handled by producers, promoters, marketing people, lawyer, accounts, and managers” (220) – he cautions that such deals promote sponsorships and endorsements that are harmful to music: “As more artists sign these deals, we will have a hard time knowing whether or not we are listening to a song or a commercial – or whether there is any difference between the two” (223).

Third, the tension between commercial and aesthetic considerations can be understood in terms of aesthetic disinterest – a key concept in aesthetics since Immanuel Kant.¹³⁴ This is the idea that pleasure in the beautiful is disinterested, in the sense that aesthetic judgments are made without any personal stake, desire or practical concern (Shelley 2022). If disinterestedness is also an ideal in aesthetic creation not just in aesthetic appreciation, as some have argued¹³⁵, then producing art for commercial reasons will in general be inconsistent with the goal of producing good art.

Fourth, an overriding focus on money-making can constrain what is produced to that which is commercially viable, thereby leading to music that is less diverse and, on average, of lower quality. This idea is core to many accusations of selling out from recent popular music history – from *Korn* to *Coldplay* and *Maroon 5* to *Metallica* – which are motivated by fans’ concerns that the bands have self-consciously moderated their sounds to gain greater popular appeal, but in doing so have compromised the aesthetic quality of their music. Indeed, this point is

¹³⁴ In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant (1914) describes the judgment of taste as “merely contemplative” (53). He argues, “*Taste* is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an *entirely disinterested* satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful*” (55).

¹³⁵ For example, in *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer extends Kantian disinterestedness to the artist’s mindset, describing art as arising from will-less contemplation. He claims, “Only through the pure contemplation ... which becomes absorbed entirely in the object, are the Ideas comprehended; and the nature of genius consists precisely in the preeminent ability for such contemplation” (Schopenhauer 1957: 185).

central to Klein's (2020) critique of the ascendancy in promotional culture in music and the arts, in particular the rise of partnerships between artists and brands: "If brand-artist partnerships privilege certain sounds and messages, we can also think of promotional culture as privileging music that makes money, with no particular aesthetic preference" (148). If monetisation is the primary concern for the institutions that control music production, then there will be less incentive to make unconventional and experimental music that has aesthetic merit and pushes boundaries but which is less likely to generate significant revenue.¹³⁶

Fifth, the political potential of music can be undermined when it is oriented around commercial norms. Where music production is driven by pecuniary interests, and in particular when it is co-opted by the forces of corporate capitalism, what was transgressive can be rendered anodyne. In a famous cultural analysis of the punk movement, sociologist Dick Hebdige observes the tendency for subcultural signs to lose their meaning as forms of symbolic resistance when they are transformed into mass produced objects.¹³⁷ For example, the revolutionary fervour invoked by the punk slogan *Never Mind the Bollocks* is undermined when the symbol is being used to sell credit cards. Similarly, Lynskey (2010) observes how the radical potential of protest songs was undermined in the 1990s and 2000s through what he calls the commodification of dissent: "Across the musical spectrum, underground movements became declawed by success ... Musical rebels suffered the same fate as Che Guevara, reduced to a face on a T-shirt, an *n*th-generation reproduction of radicalism" (627). Insofar as the value of music is partly political, I share critics' concerns that, if its production is

¹³⁶ This is not unique to music. For instance, in a recent article on the end of golden age of TV, *The Economist* (2023b) attributes the declining quality of TV – so-called "resolutely brand-safe output" – in large part to the entrance of large tech companies into the streaming business: "Amazon and Apple see streaming as a way to bolster audiences' interest in their other businesses."

¹³⁷ He makes this point as follows: "Thus, as soon as the original innovations which signify 'subculture' are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become 'frozen'. Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise" (Hebdige 2002: 94).

governed by commercial interests, punk music – or any subversive musical subculture – can become “just another cheap product for the consumer’s head” (Crass 1978).

Finally, a preoccupation with commercial interests at the expense of aesthetic considerations can undermine the production of great art because it involves a lack of aesthetic sincerity, which is a valuable ideal for aesthetic communities. For example, Nguyen (2021: 50-1) argues: “The forces which pull away from sincerity – to pander, to do market research, to sell-out – are so strong and the compensations so vivid. But giving in to such motivations would undermine the shared leap of aesthetic life ... A commitment to sincerity helps underwrite the genuineness of our aesthetic convergences.” If a commitment to sincerity helps to form and sustain aesthetic communities, and if these are generally conducive to producing great art, then an excessive focus on pecuniary interests within a culture threatens to undermine the aesthetic interests of that culture.

These arguments suggest several mechanisms to explain why desirable features of music can be undermined when its production is primarily or solely motivated by pecuniary interests. These collectively justify the Transformation Claim and Inferiority Claim on which this objection depends; that is, that commodification has a tendency to transform the character of a good in a way that diminishes its value. Moreover, because the transformed good is the cross-temporally continuing cultural practice of music making – rather than any specific musical output – the commodified form of the cultural practice is incompatible with the non-commodified form, in the limited sense required by the Transformation Objection. Finally, we have good reason to be morally concerned about this. This is because the features of music that have a tendency to be compromised when artists sell out are important to realise the moral goods associated with music that were discussed in Section 11.2. So, the Normative Claim also holds. I consider the normative implications in the final section. In summary, to use the language of the Transformation Objection, the commodification of music (understood

as a mode of valuation that artists take towards creative pursuits) transforms the cultural practice of music making in a way that diminishes its value and which raises moral concerns.

11.6 Addressing the harms of selling out (*Response Stage*)

In the preceding sections, I applied each moral meaning-based objection to commodification developed earlier in this thesis to understand why selling out can be morally objectionable.

The final stage of the procedure (the *Response Stage*) asks whether the violations identified above: (1) are contingent on the design and structure of the market, and (2) could be addressed through alternative methods of allocation or modes of valuation. This provides the basis for considering appropriate responses to address the harms of commodification.

As in each of the applied chapters, both questions can be answered in the affirmative. Music markets are extraordinarily diverse with a wide range of institutional arrangements potentially governing production, distribution and consumption. Recall Hesmondhalgh's (2013: 10) point about how institutional arrangements deeply affect how and whether music contributes to people's flourishing because music is "highly vulnerable to systemic changes." To take a concrete example, Byrne (2012: 230) distinguishes six distribution models that involve different levels of artistic control, ranging from the 360-degree deal (mentioned above) to self-distribution. In addition, the harms of selling out can be limited or prevented by modes of valuation that give greater weight to non-commercial aesthetic and political motivations. This does not require that artists give zero weight to commercial considerations. Given that the harms of selling out are sensitive to market design and can be mitigated through different motivational profiles and ways of valuing music, there are grounds for participants in music markets to promote non-commodified understandings of music.

As I noted in the introduction, this chapter has a narrow focus: it seeks to understand what selling out is and why it matters. Unlike the other applied chapters, it is not concerned with

how governments should respond to these harms. Partly, this is because I have had my hands full with trying to make sense of a commonly used but much maligned cultural criticism, not with the much broader task of considering how the music industry should be regulated and governed. But it also reflects my own reservations that governments are well placed to regulate artistic expression or judge the quality of cultural output, in part due to its transgressive character, the deeply subjective nature of art, and the fact that culture is inherently diffuse and decentralised.¹³⁸ Finally, selling out involves having a certain attitude towards one's art. Using the language from Chapter 1, it involves a commodified *mode of valuation* not a commodified *method of allocation*. Internal subjective states are not usually good candidates for government regulation for a range of reasons, not least unenforceability and concerns about state overreach.¹³⁹

That said, I have sought to show in this chapter that selling out can raise moral concerns. Using the language from Chapter 4, it raises Type 3 and Type 4 moral concerns; that is, concerns that justify moral criticism but not collective regulation. To this end, it gives morally serious reasons for market participants to engage in or refrain from certain conduct (independent of whether this conduct should be regulated by the state). In the remainder of this section, I briefly consider some of the implications for different groups. I begin with cultural consumers before turning to artists and record labels.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ I am not suggesting that governments have no role in cultural matters. For example, governments can directly fund the arts and can create the legal frameworks (e.g., intellectual property, collective bargaining, employment protections) that support the rights of artists and ensure fair bargaining conditions.

¹³⁹ While the sports betting and housing case studies also involve an objectionable mode of valuation, the target for state action in each case was the goods exchanged: contingent financial claims that underpin betting markets and physical property, respectively. The government intervention in these markets that I advocated for sought to affect attitudes of participants to exchange by ensuring that goods are not substantively commodified, but did not seek to directly regulate their attitudes towards the goods in question.

¹⁴⁰ I recognise this is a very simplistic taxonomy of music market participants – which after all include a range of other actors, including intermediaries, distributors, platforms and rights holder. It will suffice for my purposes.

One implication of my arguments is that cultural critics and consumers alike should put the term sell-out back to work. We have seen that the term provides a powerful way of giving voice to concerns about the deleterious impacts of market norms on music. It can helpfully be deployed as a criticism of profit-driven practices and attitudes in music industries that direct artistic resources and creative efforts to commercial ends. In Klein's words (2020: 162), the term can have an important role in "policing boundaries between culture and commerce." Given this, it should be part of the vocabulary of contemporary cultural criticism, rather than a quaint piece of cultural history. This requires that consumers and critics alike are judicious in accusing artists of selling out. They should avoid the pitfalls that have beleaguered many historical uses of the term – for example, presupposing a simplistic account of artists' motivations, assuming that aesthetic and commercial interests are always in conflict, or placing too much responsibility on individual artists and too little on structural inequalities in the music industry and in society more broadly. They should also avoid using the word in a manner that is classist or self-serving.¹⁴¹ Putting the term to work without evincing a naïve understanding of the decisions that artists have to make would help to make the term a potent criticism, one that is taken seriously by artists and by the culture at large.

For their part, artists have morally serious reasons not to sell out where this would lead to the kinds of harms discussed in this chapter. This does not mean that artists have no autonomy to make the kind of music they want to for the reasons they see fit (though it does mean they should be wary of the ways that their autonomy might be compromised by commercial forces). And it certainly does not mean that artists should retain artistic independence and integrity at all costs, even if this means their impoverishment. But it does mean that artists should recognise that they are often parts of aesthetic communities with shared values, and that their actions can contribute meaningfully to sustaining or corroding these values. This

¹⁴¹ For example, as a way to signal to others that they (the accuser) are the true fans because they 'prefer the old stuff.'

can give rise to duties which are infringed when they sell-out. This is especially clear for artists that self-consciously identify with transgressive musical sub-cultures, where music has a context-specific meaning that is violated when it is treated principally as a commercial venture. Such duties are especially apparent for the leaders of such sub-cultures, who have a disproportionate role in sustaining non-commercial norms and on whose leadership other artists depend. It can also apply to artists who have relied on the support of their local community to build a following – abandoning one’s community justifiably attracts morally-loaded charges of being a sell-out. More generally, while acting in a manner that is inauthentic or hypocritical does not, at least directly, infringe a duty owed to others, remaining true to oneself (as an authentic and honourable artist who maintains their integrity in the face of pressures to compromise) is nonetheless a valuable ethical ideal to aspire to.

Given the sheer number of artists making music at any given point in time, no one artist likely has a significant influence over an entire culture’s musical output. But record labels – the companies responsible for production, manufacturing and distribution of music recordings – do have a meaningful influence over the culture at large. So insofar as there are moral goods associated with music, and the ability to realise these goods is linked to the quality, diversity and political potential of music, the harms discussed earlier in this chapter also provide morally serious reasons for record labels to act in ways that mitigate or prevent these harms. This is a complex matter, given the many functions that record labels can perform, so here I will suggest a few general strategies.

First, labels should be animated by what David Byrne calls “love of the form” (211) rather than exclusively by financial interests. Where labels integrate with or are acquired by non-music businesses, it is important to make sure that there are still staff with “good ears” (211) that can spot and nurture talent. Music should not be treated as generic, undifferentiated, profit-generating ‘content’ by large media companies. Second, record labels should have

institutional mechanisms to respect and honour artistic independence. This can include through entering into fair and transparent contracts with artists, including creative control clauses that give artists final say over recordings; fostering long-term artistic development through partnerships that give creative latitude; and maintaining diverse portfolios of artists so that financial performance of labels does not depend on immediate (or ultimate) commercial success of every artist on the roster. Finally, record labels should offer diverse distribution models to give artists choice about how best to pursue their creative projects. This includes enabling self-distribution, where an artist is responsible for all aspects of recording, producing and marketing. But it should also include models where labels take on responsibility for more of the business side of the process so that artists can focus on the creative process of making art. Ironically, distribution models with less artistic control may be better suited to realising artistic independence and integrity in certain circumstances.

The responses advocated in this section for audiences, artists and record labels are, of course, not exhaustive. They simply point to various ways that participants in music markets can limit the extent to which music is commodified and mitigate, prevent or respond to the harms associated with selling out.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the commodification of music by analysing the term ‘sell-out’: both what it means and why it matters. I have argued that it can be a meaningful and useful terminological tool that can be critically applied to artists and their art. My argumentative strategy has comprised four parts. First, I set the scene by considering how the term has been used across the history of popular music. Second, I considered why music is a valuable good and activity, one whose commodification through selling out might be of moral concern. Third, I applied several meaning-based objections developed earlier in this thesis to clarify

the nature of the normative concerns involved in selling out. I argued that selling out might express an objectionable attitude towards music in certain sub-cultures, make unavailable desirable ways of valuing music, or undermine the aesthetic quality, diversity and political potential of music. This built on the discussions in the previous applied chapters both by applying different objections and by providing a different explanation for interpersonal crowding out. Finally, I suggested ways that different market participants – consumers, artists and record labels – could mitigate or prevent harms associated with selling out. Unlike in previous applied chapters, I argued that the appropriate response to moral concerns raised by commodification is not government regulation, but rather actions from market participants.

Ultimately, I have provided a cautious defence of a much-maligned form of cultural criticism. To circle back to the quote that prefaced this chapter, *Vic Mensa* might be right that the term “holds little to no weight anymore.” This would be a shame because selling out raises serious moral concerns. And in our increasingly commercialised culture, it has important work to do.

Chapter 12. Honest Brokers or Guns for Hire?

*An ethical appraisal of the public sector consulting market*¹⁴²

“For the last decade or so, in the name of modernisation, rationalisation and efficiency, we have been living under a regime of government by management consultant and policy by PowerPoint.”

~ David Cameron, former British Prime Minister, 2008¹⁴³

Introduction

Many governments around the world outsource a wide and increasing range of work to management consulting firms (van den Berg et al 2019). Growing demands on the public sector, as well as broader trends in public sector administration, have contributed to what Halligan (1995: 146) calls “a tendency to bring in more outsiders” to support the work of government. The result has been substantial growth in government expenditure on consulting firms in many jurisdictions. For many, this trend raises significant concerns. An increasingly common perspective – in popular media, government and some parts of academia – is that the public sector consulting market is wasteful and inefficient, riven by conflicts of interest and perverse incentives, and corrosive of democratic ideals and a robust public sector.¹⁴⁴ This sentiment has been buoyed by recent scandals across many jurisdictions that have highlighted unethical and illegal conduct of consulting firms working for government.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Disclosure: I am employed by a management consulting firm that specialises in public sector consulting.

¹⁴³ Cited in Weiss (2019).

¹⁴⁴ The Economist (2023a); Ferguson (2017); Bourgoin & Harvey (2018); Crowe (2023); Ziffer (2023); and Wright (2023).

¹⁴⁵ For example, each of the ‘MBB’ consulting firms – McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group and Bain & Company – has come under fire in recent years for working for autocratic governments (The Economist 2022). In Australia in 2023, it came to light that senior partners at PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) who advised the Federal Government on tax policy were using this confidential information to help multinational firms avoid paying more tax (Ainsworth 2023).

These critiques build from and draw on a political science literature that is sceptical of the value of consulting – what Graham (2011) describes as “the critical view”. This view “questions both the legitimacy and effectiveness of consulting. According to the critical view, consulting is an activity that provokes a degree of suspicion for its opaque pervasiveness and implied unaccountable power” (213). Even defences of public sector consulting often frame consulting as a necessary evil, an external marketplace that public sector agencies may, regrettably, need to draw on from time-to-time to provide additional capacity or niche expertise. In response to concerns about this market, some governments have banned the use of consultants and contractors for core work such as policy development – the Federal Government in Australia implemented a ban in 2023, and the New South Wales Government followed suit in 2025 (Burton 2023; Tadros 2025).

In this chapter, I evaluate the critical view by providing an ethical appraisal of the public sector consulting market. I analyse this market as a form of commodification and apply the Transformation Objection to understand its tendency to diminish the value of the public sector. My goals are fivefold. First, I clarify what common objections to the public sector consulting market consist in. Second, I show that these are objections to specific practices and not inherent features of the market. Third, I show that harms are often a product of consulting firms and the public sector officials that engage them. Fourth, I argue that the market can also help to enhance policy development and public sector administration. Fifth, I propose strategies that would prevent or mitigate these harms.

In presenting these arguments, the chapter builds on the analysis from the previous applied chapters in several ways. First, while the previous chapters sought to problematise forms of commodification that do not, I believe, receive sufficient attention, this chapter provides a cautious defence of a market that is, in my view, unfairly maligned. This is in keeping with the spirit of a thesis that has stressed that commodification can be benign or beneficial with

respect to the meaning of a good. Second, while the previous chapter on music and selling out showed how a Transformation Objection can be applied to commodification understood as a mode of valuation, this chapter extends this objection to commodification understood as a method of allocation. Third, this chapter brings into sharp relief the importance of sensitivity analysis and comparative analysis in deliberations about commodification on meaning-based grounds. This is because the markets harms are contingent on the form of commodification and, in some cases, commodifying the functions of government is better than the alternative.

The chapter comprises five sections. **Section 12.1** clarifies the scope of analysis and explains why the public sector consulting market is a form of commodification. **Section 12.2** turns to the *Characterisation Stage*. I suggest several ideals to which public sector bodies should aspire. **Section 12.3** focuses on the *Application Stage*. Using the Transformation Objection, I argue that there are three distinct ways that the public sector consulting market might diminish the value of the public sector. The market might (1) reduce its capability, (2) undermine democratic ideals, and (3) lead to worse policy outcomes. I argue that each objection raises significant moral concerns. The final two sections apply the *Response Stage*. **Section 12.4** argues that the harms invoked by each Transformation Objection are not inherent to the market and that they are often the fault of both parties to a consulting contract. **Section 12.5** suggests strategies to address these harms that are available to ministers, public sector leaders, the officials that engage consultants, and consultancies themselves.

12.1 Background, context and conceptual clarifications

This chapter is focused on the public sector consulting market by which I mean the *market for services provided by management consulting firms to public sector agencies*. While

management consultancies provide the bulk of their services to non-government entities¹⁴⁶, this narrower focus reflects specific ethical issues that arise where governments are the purchasers of consulting services. While the contours of this market are difficult to precisely define – given the broad range of work undertaken by consulting firms on behalf of government – some general remarks help to clarify the scope of analysis.

12.1.1 Supply side (consultancies)

The primary providers of consulting services to the public sector are international management consulting firms, notably the Big 3 (McKinsey, Bain and Boston Consulting Group), the Big 4 (PwC, Deloitte, EY and KPMG) and Accenture. There are also many other firms, large and boutique, that offer general and more specialist consulting services to government. These firms provide a range of services to government – including policy advice, strategic guidance and operational and implementation support – which are difficult to neatly categorise.¹⁴⁷ I follow Althaus, Carson & Smith (2021) in distinguishing consulting services provided to the public sector by management consultancies from the broader categories of more specialised *consultants* (which involve specific technical expertise, for example on legal and engineering matters) and *contractors* (which include a wide range of not-for-profit and private sector firms that are engaged to perform routine tasks for government, such as service delivery). These forms of outsourcing can raise ethical concerns. Nevertheless, my narrower focus on management consultancies reflects distinct concerns that many regard this industry as having for policy outcomes and public sector capability.

¹⁴⁶ The Economist (2005) estimates that government consulting makes up around 30 per cent of the global management consulting market.

¹⁴⁷ This is reflected in the varied taxonomies of consultants work in the political science literature. For example, see Howlett & Migone (2013), Seabrooke & Sending (2022) and Marciano (2023).

12.1.2 Demand side (public sector agencies)

The structure of the public sector differs across jurisdictions and there is significant diversity in the organisation, structure, management and legal arrangements that oversee public sector agencies. We can distinguish two parts of the public sector. First, the core *public or civil service* which comprises departments that, in the Westminster System, assist Ministers to perform their portfolio responsibilities and implement Ministerial decisions. Second, a range of other *public entities* which exercise public functions but are outside the core public service, at arm's length from government. These include advisory committees, regulators, commissioners, integrity bodies and many other entities. Public entities have varying degrees of independence from Ministerial direction (VPSC 2013). By the *public sector consulting market*, I mean the procurement of consulting services by any public sector body.

12.1.3 Public sector consulting as a form of commodification

Before I analyse the market, I must first explain why it is a form of commodification. Recall the definition provided in Chapter 1: “Commodification is the process (and the resulting state of affairs) by which a good is transformed into or used to create a commodity; that is something that is (a) bought and sold in the social context of a market, or (b) valued in terms of the price that it could (hypothetically or actually) obtain on a market.”

The public sector consulting market has created a market in functions and activities that were traditionally undertaken within government. Of course, these activities already had an exchange value – one equivalent to the salaries of the public sector officials paid to perform them. However, previously the public sector had a monopoly on such activities; the exchange value of these activities was not determined by market forces through a competitive tendering process. The public sector consulting market thus displaced a government monopoly with a market-based regime. Based on the definition above, the consulting market is a form of

commodification of the functions and activities of government because these functions and activities are *used to create a commodity*; that is, contracts with consultancies to perform defined scopes of work. The market has also introduced economic relationships between public sector agencies and consultancies that did not previously exist.

12.2 Public sector values and ideals (*Characterisation Stage*)

Given that the activities of government are commodified by the public sector consulting market, we must consider the values and ideals of the public sector to assess whether and how commodification is morally objectionable. The account I sketch below is drawn from the Australian context – in particular a 2019 Independent Review of the Australian Public Service (APS), the APS Values,¹⁴⁸ and a 2019 decision by the High Court of Australia, *Comcare vs. Banerji*. While these are particular to one country, the characterisation of the public sector they offer is not parochial.

The foreword of the 2019 Independent Review offers a concise articulation of the values that should underpin the public service and public administration:

“The Australian Public Service is a foundational institution of Australia’s democracy. It performs a critical role within the executive arm of Government. Its proper functioning is essential to the future prosperity and security of all Australians and successive governments requires the APS to perform efficiently and effectively in order to fulfil their responsibilities ... The modern Westminster principles of government remain essential: an apolitical, merit-based, and open public service, underpinned by integrity, serving the Government, Parliament and the people of Australia” (Thodey et al. 2019: 9).

From this we can delineate several values that the public sector should embody.

First, the public sector should *serve the public interest*, as determined by the government through democratic processes and as constrained by the law. Public sector officials should be apolitical and act with integrity. They should provide impartial advice to government that is

¹⁴⁸ These are set out in the *Public Service Act 1999 (Cth)*.

frank, honest and evidence-based to assist it to decide its policy priorities and how to achieve them. They should administer the laws made by Parliament and implement the government's decisions. This ideal was recognised by the Australian High Court in a 2019 judgment:

“Regardless of the political complexion of the government of the day, it is highly desirable if not essential to the proper functioning of the system of representative and responsible government that the government have confidence in the ability of the APS to provide high quality, impartial, professional advice, and that the APS will faithfully and professionally implement accepted government policy, irrespective of APS employees' individual personal political beliefs and predilections.”¹⁴⁹ A public sector that is partisan, captured by special interests, or compromised by conflicts of interests is anathema to this ideal.

To serve the public interest effectively, the public sector must also be *accountable* to the community that it serves under the law. In the Westminster context, this is determined by the framework of Ministerial responsibility, in which ministers are individually and collectively responsible to parliament and to electors, and in which public sector agencies support this by providing advice to ministers and assisting them in implementing policies. This requires that public sector officials are transparent, open and honest in their dealings and are committed to keeping government and ministers informed. According to Justice Gageler (quoting nineteenth century legal academic William Edward Hearn): “It is their duty and their point of honour to give to their official superior true information, faithful advice, and loyal cooperation. It matters not to them who that superior may be, or how frequently he may be change. Their position is the same.”¹⁵⁰ A public sector in which chains of accountability and responsibility are obfuscated or disregarded fails to live up to the ideal of accountability.

¹⁴⁹ *Comcare v Banerji* (2019) at [34] (Kiefel CJ, Bell, Keane and Nettle JJ).

¹⁵⁰ *Comcare v Banerji* (2019) at [72] (Gageler J).

Finally, the public sector should serve the government, the parliament and the community *efficiently and effectively*. To do this, it needs to have the competencies required to discharge its responsibilities. This requires enduring capabilities and institutional knowledge that can serve successive governments. This point was summarised by Justice Gageler, again quoting Professor Hearn: “The commander may be often changed and the direction of the good ship may be altered; but the crew remains the same, equally prompt to obey every varying order, and equally skilful to carry it into execution.”¹⁵¹ This also requires a commitment to excellence, professionalism and meritocracy. Competency rather than cronyism should determine appointments and career trajectories. This also requires a public sector that is responsive to governments’ changing priorities, can provide timely advice and efficiently uses the resources at its disposal.

Much more can be said about the ideals that a public sector should embody and aspire to. For my purposes, however, it is sufficient that the public sector should advance the public interest, be accountable, and operate efficiently and effectively. Having provided this characterisation, I am in a position to turn to the *Application Stage* to see whether these values are compromised by the public sector consulting market. Three Transformation Objections can be formulated that each pertain to one of these dimensions.

12.3 Three Transformation Objections (*Application Stage*)

Recall that the Transformation Objection argues that commodification is morally objectionable where it diminishes the value of a good in a manner that ought to be prevented, limited, condemned or at least not actively facilitated. In the previous chapter, I showed how this objection could be brought to bear on music. While that related to commodification as a mode of valuation (musicians’ decisions to sell out), the discussion here focuses on

¹⁵¹ *Comcare v Banerji* (2019) at [72] (Gageler J).

commodification as a method of allocation (outsourcing the work of government). My intention, however, is similar: to show that commodification plausibly diminishes the value of a good in morally objectionable ways.

In this section, I distinguish three objections to the public sector consulting market that each point to ways that it might corrupt the public sector. It might diminish the value of the public sector by: making it less competent (the Hollowing Out Objection), reducing accountability and transparency (the Consultocracy Objection) or by aligning its work to private interests rather than the public good (the Bad Actor Objection).¹⁵² Each of these is a Transformation Objection because each points to a dimension of value that is diminished through the public sector consulting market. The first can be understood as a form of Quality Inferiority as it links the public sector consulting market to a less effective public sector. The latter two can be understood as forms of Value Inferiority as the ends to which government activities are directed are altered when work is routinely outsourced to management consultancies. Each raises moral concerns insofar as citizens have a vested interest in an efficient and effective public sector that is democratically accountable and acts in the public interest.¹⁵³ Conduct that undermines these ideals may be a target for government regulation of the public sector consulting market, or changes in government policy about how and when consultants are engaged. That is, they can lead to Type 1 or Type 2 conclusions from meaning-based objections.¹⁵⁴ My aims in this section are twofold: (1) to systematise interrelated but distinct

¹⁵² This does not exhaust ethical concerns one might have about the public sector consulting market. For example, many raise concerns that it is inefficient and wasteful because consultants are expensive and/or have little expertise. To use the taxonomy of ethical dimensions introduced in Chapter 1, this concern can be understood as an Efficiency Objection rather than a Meaning-based Objection.

¹⁵³ Thus, the four claims of a successful Transformation Objection – the Transformation Claim, Inferiority Claim, Incompatibility Claim and Normative Claim – would each be met by the objections developed in this section.

¹⁵⁴ While each objection explored in this section provides grounds for regulation of the public sector consulting market (i.e., they are either a Type 1 or Type 2 case), I do not consider which of them involve acting morally wrongfully (i.e., which is a Type 1 case as opposed to a Type 2 case). My view is that it depends on the conduct in question. Where consultants fail to disclose conflicts of interest or respect client confidentiality there is a strong case that they have acted morally wrongfully. Where outsourcing work contributes to gradual declines in institutional knowledge over time, it is less likely that this involves acting morally wrongfully even though the harm is significant.

negative intuitions that people have about the public sector management consulting industry; and (2) to demonstrate that each objection, appropriately construed, is a plausible and morally significant critique of the market.

12.3.1 The Hollowing Out Objection

One concern about the public sector consulting market is that it diminishes the value of the public sector by making it less competent. This is a common theme in the political science literature which observes various ways that the public sector consulting market is linked with declining public sector capability. For example, Seabrooke & Sending (2022: 459) note a common view that “the increased use of consultants diminishes public agencies’ planning capacity.” Jossierand (2023) argues “One of the dangers of relying heavily on management consultants is that it results in a “hollowing out”, a process by which the public service progressively loses skills.” Mazzucato & Collington (2023: 18) put this point succinctly: “the more governments and businesses outsource ... the less they know how to do.” The Hollowing Out Objection is a Transformation Objection because one dimension of the public sector’s value – its effectiveness – is diminished by a tendency to outsource work to consultancies. This objection depends on both an empirical premise (that the public sector consulting market leads to hollowing out) and a normative premise (that this is a bad thing). Let us consider each.

For the empirical premise of the objection to be successful, it needs to defend the claim that engaging consultants *contributes to* hollowing out rather than the weaker claim that it is a *symptom of* hollowing out. Some arguments specifically invoke the latter concern. For instance, Momani (2013: 396) argues that in the United States, “the increased use of management consultants is further evidence of the hollowing of the state.” Brown (2021: 17), writing about Australia, notes that “over-reliance on consultancy contracts ... [is] a symptom

of the hollowing out of the public service.” According to such an argument, the public sector consulting market is a reflection of declining public sector capability rather than a cause. But just as it would be a mistake to attribute the cause of cancer to an unusual lump rather than a smoking habit, so too would it be wrong to blame a market that has emerged in response to declining public sector capability for that very problem.

Nevertheless, many criticisms of public sector consulting do make the claim that consultants are a cause, and not merely a symptom, of declining public sector capability. A range of mechanisms could account for this. The public sector consulting market might lead to an erosion in institutional or tacit knowledge held within public sector organisations over time because this knowledge becomes privatised and monopolised by consultancies (Ylönen & Kuusela 2019). It might change the skillset required of public servants, increasingly positioning them as contract managers rather than policy advisors, and thus unable to critically analyse advice provided by consultancies. The consulting market might reduce the ability for the public sector to attract and retain talented staff; if important policy work is increasingly outsourced to consultants then the public sector might be a less attractive career option (Dickinson 2023). A tendency to lean on consultants might also deter investments in public sector capability that are costly in the short-term but which provide a long-term return on investment, because these are more difficult than periodically engaging consultants (Mazzucato & Collington 2023).

For the normative premise of the Hollowing Out Objection to be successful, it needs to demonstrate why hollowing out is a bad thing. One could imagine a hollowed out public sector that has little policy expertise but is nonetheless extremely adept at mobilising external capabilities to achieve policy outcomes. What would be wrong with this? One reason is that it would be prohibitively expensive to get anything done, but this would collapse into concerns about wastefulness. A better explanation is that there are unique functions and roles that only

governments should perform – its “core business” so to speak – that a hollowed out public service could not adequately perform. In addition, a public sector that lacks certain capabilities would be unable to critically evaluate, refine or implement the advice it receives from consultants and other external parties.¹⁵⁵ On both counts, hollowing out is bad because it renders the public service unable to serve the public. As such, concerns about hollowing out have greatest normative weight when applied to the core business of government (however that term is defined).¹⁵⁶ Insofar as consultancies contribute to hollowing out, this provides reasons to prevent or limit the commodification of the activities and functions of government.

12.3.2 The Consultocracy Objection

A second objection to the public sector consulting market raises concerns that this market affords consultants undue influence over policy development and public sector administration. This objection is often invoked by the terms ‘shadow government’ (Guttman & Willner 1976) and ‘consultocracy’ (Hood & Jackson 1991). According to this objection, public sector consulting is corrosive of democracy. It is a Transformation Objection because it claims that the public sector consulting market diminishes the value of the public sector by reducing accountability and transparency.

Many critics argue that the public sector consulting market weakens accountability by displacing work traditionally undertaken within government. For instance, Craig & Brooks (2006) raise concerns that “non-elected consultants are replacing political debate conducted

¹⁵⁵ This point is reflected in Mazzucato & Collington’s (2023: 219) response to views that governments should *steer more, row less*. They argue that a government incapable of rowing cannot steer either.

¹⁵⁶ This is a complex matter, because people have different views about the role of government and the public sector. The APS Strategic Commissioning Framework, published in October 2023, defines core work (somewhat circularly) as “work essential to delivering the enduring functions of an agency, required on a regular and ongoing basis” (APSC 2023). It seems uncontroversial that policy analysis must be retained in-house (even if it is not the unique purview of the public sector), as well as the ability to implement policy reform, draft legislation, administer government programs and, perhaps, act as a system steward. However, some functions that were once ‘core business’ of government (such as front-line service delivery) are now routinely outsourced to external providers. For example, the ACT Legislative Assembly is located near where I am writing this chapter. ACT Government employees used to mow the lawns there. The fact that private contractors now do this does not, to the best of my knowledge, raise any concerns about hollowing out.

by publicly accountable politicians.” Saint-Martin (2000) raises concerns that consultocracy has led to a diminishment of democratic practices. Saint-Martin & Hurl (2023: 48) note common worries that “consultants have effectively colonised the public sector, raising concerns about policymaking at large being privatised – potentially granting private interests more dominion over government than the public.” Ylönen & Kuusela (2019: 251) argue that the weakening of accountability is “one of the most fundamental consequences of consultocracy for public administration.” This is because outsourcing work to consultants disrupts traditional chains of accountability between public servants, governments, parliaments and the people. In addition, engaging consultants may effectively outsource responsibility for decision making to consultants who are not subject to the same legal and professional obligations as public servants or politicians. Democratic safeguards afforded by an independent and accountable public sector may be curtailed when its work is outsourced to the private sector.

The Consultocracy Objections is a serious critique, but one in need of clarification. It is important not to conflate advice with decision-making. This objection is most concerning where consultants are engaged to make decisions on behalf of public sector agencies, especially where those decisions have traditionally been made by government.¹⁵⁷ But consultants are primarily engaged to provide advice to decision makers within government, not to make these decisions. In this context, consultants (just like any advisor) should be held accountable for the quality of their advice, but it is the decision maker that acts on that advice who is responsible for the decision.

In fairness to proponents of this objection, however, there is not always a sharp dividing line between advice and decision making. A person assisting a driver to park their car cannot

¹⁵⁷ For example, this is the focus of Guttman & Willner’s (1976), study which argues that the US government has given away its decision-making powers to private management consultants and other non-state actors.

claim they were just providing advice when the ensuing reverse parallel leads to an accident. Consider Mazzucato & Collington's (2023: 36) description of the spread of consulting to the developing world: "From South-East Asia to West Africa, consultants have been brought in not simply as advisers; they *are* the management and deliver core functions; their proposals to decision-makers are adopted as the final word" (italics in original). Clearly the decision-maker deserves some blame for becoming a rubberstamp for consulting advice. Nevertheless, if consultants are hired to manage programs and deliver core functions, they may effectively control the policy development process. The only ideas that the decision-maker sees are those of the consultants. Even if consultants do not formally make the decisions, if they monopolise or dominate the policy development process – rather than provide an input to that process – concerns raised by the Consultocracy Objection are serious.

12.3.3 The Bad Actor Objection

A third objection draws attention to the motivations and incentives of consultancies and the implications of these for public administration and policy outcomes. This objection appeals to the fact that consultancies are generally for-profit firms motivated by commercial imperatives. As such, consultants may provide advice, or engage in business practices, that serve their own commercial interests at the expense of the interests of their clients and the public. This is a Transformation Objection because consultancies diminish the value of the public sector by directing its activities and efforts away from the public interest.

Proponents of this objection appeal to many dishonest and harmful practices of consulting. Chief among these is violating client confidentiality or failing to disclose conflicts of interest for commercial gain. This is especially likely where consultants work for both public sector agencies that develop policies and the businesses that are subject to them. For example, in the UK in 2013, an inquiry by the Public Accounts Committee found that the Big 4 consulting

firms “appear to use their insider knowledge of legislation to sell clients advice on how to use those rules to pay less tax” (cited in Mazzucato & Collington 2023: 180). In addition, consultants might also provide advice that prioritises the consultancy’s commercial interests over the public good. For example, Mazzucato & Collington (2023) argue that consulting advice in the wake of the financial crisis was “anything but neutral” (92) and express dismay about the industry “shaping reforms as it benefited from them” (60). In a similar vein, Ivison (2023: 78) claims, “Consultants have little incentive to offer genuinely impartial and frank advice, given the commercial incentive to maintain their client relationships.” Consultants might also have an incentive to on-sell more work or to deliberately create cycles of dependence to extract more money from public sector agencies over time.¹⁵⁸

This objection cannot be grounded on the basis of bad motives alone; it needs to link these motives to bad outcomes. To see this point, consider Wright (2023) and Mazzucato & Collington (2023), both of whom criticise management consultancies for focussing organisational resources on addressing climate change. The former writes, “The global climate emergency is proving very lucrative for consulting firms ... designing policies and shaping the regulation of climate responses is a new and very profitable line of business” (Wright 2023: 70). He cites the fact that many consulting firms were, until recently, “remarkably quiet on an issue which scientists and policy analysis had long recognised posed an existential threat” (71). Many established sustainability practices only once climate change “suddenly arrived in the halls of finance” (72). It is strange to impugn firms for allocating resources to an existential threat just because they are motivated by money; surely it is still a net positive. (By comparison, would it be reasonable to criticise a person who takes a highly paid job at a renewable energy company on the basis that they are primarily motivated by the

¹⁵⁸ For example, Saint-Martin & Hurl (2023: 50) argue, “They [consultants] themselves influence the decisions to hire outside experts by creating uncertainty while also offering a readily available solution. They make clients addicted to, or over-reliant on, their expertise.”

salary?) In fairness, both Wright and Mazzucato & Collington eventually link their critiques to the kind of policy advice that consultants give (for instance, an over emphasis on carbon offsets and an underemphasis on fossil fuel reduction). The key point, however, is that this objection needs to appeal to harmful outcomes. Simply impugning one's motives for doing otherwise commendable things, or criticising a consultancy for benefiting from a crisis, is a form of reflexive hostility that verges on an ad hominem attack.

That said, by appealing to perverse incentives of the profit motive, the Bad Actor Objection identifies serious concerns with the public sector consulting market, one that has been brought to the public's attention by high profile instances of unethical and illegal conduct. It is glib to reject this objection by trying to pin it on *a few bad apples* that engage in unethical and illegal behaviour. It may also be naïve to assume that pecuniary incentives – namely those relating to reputational risk – will be sufficient to prevent poor business practices. To the extent that the public sector consulting market provides incentives for otherwise well-meaning consultants to participate in poor business practices, this underscores the importance of structural solutions to deter such practices. This is especially relevant for large firms that have conflicts of interest, such as those that routinely work for both government and businesses subject to government laws, and those that provide audit and advisory functions.

12.3.4 Concluding this section

This section has developed three Transformation Objections by drawing on academic literature that is critical of the public sector consulting market. We have seen that each appeals to plausible and normatively significant ways that the market may be corrosive of public sector ideals. Insofar as each applies in practice, this shows harms of the market that provide grounds for limiting or restricting it. But I have yet to consider whether these market

harms are contingent and who is responsible for them. Each of these steps is necessary to providing a comprehensive ethical appraisal of the market.

To this end, in the following two sections I turn to the *Response Stage*. Recall that this involves asking two questions: (1) are violations of the meaning of a good sensitive to the design and structure of the market?; and (2) would alternative feasible allocative methods or modes of valuation better represent or realise the meaning of the good? As in the previous applied chapters, the first question can be answered in the affirmative because the harms are contingent features of the market. The second question can also be answered in the affirmative, though my answer here is qualified. I am sceptical of the comparison implicit in critiques of the market between amoral consultants and altruistic bureaucrats.

12.4 The contingent character of harms (*Response Stage*)

In this section, I argue that the harms of each Transformation Objection are contingent rather than necessary features of the public sector consulting market. Moreover, in some cases, that the relevant public sector ideal can best be realised by outsourcing work to management consultancies. Finally, where these harms do arise they are often the fault of both parties to a consulting contract.

A common theme in this discussion is that we should be cognisant of what Walsh & Lynch (2000) call the *supply-side mode of moralising*. In a paper about the ethics of mercenaries, they observe that “discussions of mercenarism typically focus upon the moral status of those who sell their skills in the art of warfare rather than with their customer” (149). Drawing an analogy with critiques of the morality of prostitution, they observe the strange fact that “it is not the nation-states buying those services who attract the moral barbs of social commentators” (149). We can observe a similar tendency in debates about management consultants – a vilification of the suppliers of a service and a comparative lack of attention on

those purchasing it. However, both suppliers and purchasers of consulting services are complicit in harms of the public sector consulting market. It takes two to tango. Moreover, because governments have the ability to shape the market for consulting services, more attention needs to be given to their role as purchasers of consulting services. With this observation in mind, I turn to each of the objections introduced above.

12.4.1 The Hollowing Out Objection

While hollowing out is a plausible effect of outsourcing work to management consultants, evidence that it occurs is mixed. For example, Kirkpatrick et al. (2023: 1) observe that “there is little systematic evidence for this view [the ‘hollowing out thesis’] which also ignores how public sector managers may, themselves, drive consulting use.” They argue that the hollowing out thesis would be supported by a ‘substitution effect’ in which consultants substitute for internal management capacity. In an analysis of consulting spends of 125 English public hospitals over a six-year period, they find little evidence of this effect and instead find evidence of a complementary relationship in which hospitals with larger management functions spend more on consultants. They argue their findings – in which “managers are the primary drivers of the hiring of consultants” (22) – are contrary to claims that “assume that the use of consulting services results ... from prior under-investment in managers” (22). While this is just one study, it suggests, at the very least, that hollowing out is not a foregone conclusion.

Moreover, contrary to the claims of the Hollowing Out Objection, there is some evidence that the public sector consulting market can help to enhance public sector capability. Althaus, Carson & Smith (2021: 867) draw on experimental research in Queensland, Australia to argue that some forms of commissioning consultants and ways of working together can “harness and balance the strengths of the contributions of consultants and consultancy firms

to improve government policy capacity.” They argue that where certain conditions are met – such as a clear purpose for engaging consultants and a conscious approach to skills transfer – government policy capability can be enhanced. From their study, they conclude, “high-quality external consultants properly commissioned can potentially offer significant assets which can be better leveraged by public sectors to aid policy improvement and capability in certain circumstances” (886). Their conclusions suggest that if certain approaches to working with consultants are adopted, then hollowing out need not occur. Moreover, their findings suggest that by providing access to specialist expertise that cannot readily be developed or retained in-house, the public sector consulting market can in fact enhance policy capability.¹⁵⁹

So, while it is an empirical matter how often and to what extent hollowing out does in fact occur, the fact that it is a contingent feature of the market suggests that the objection calls for consultants and governments to work together in ways that enhance public sector capability, or at least do not contribute to its diminution.

12.4.2 The Consultocracy Objection

The harms to democratic ideals invoked by the Consultocracy Objection are also contingent. Addressing these harms requires preserving a clear distinction between advice and decision making. Politicians and bureaucrats should retain responsibility for policy decisions and should avoid engaging consultants as a way to outsource risk or responsibility or to prevent internal deliberations about how best to solve a problem. This objection shows that consultants should be engaged to add depth to policy development and public administration, not be its sole architect.

¹⁵⁹ This finding may be supported by Simon & Kumar’s (2001) study of Australian business executives, which found that “insufficient in-house expertise” was the most important reason cited for engaging consultants. This is corroborated by a 2023 study by the NSW Audit Office which found that the “need for specialised or professional skills” was the most cited reasons for consultancy-related contracts.

Moreover, while an excessive reliance on consultants can undermine democratic ideals – particularly if consultants are engaged in ways that obfuscate responsibility or undermine chains of accountability – the public sector consulting market can also act in service of accountability, transparency and institutional integrity. One of the reasons that all organisations (not just those within government) engage consultants is for their independence and impartiality. This can be valuable where a second opinion is required before making a significant and costly decision, particularly where decision makers are concerned that personal, organisational or institutional biases may cloud their judgment about the best course of action. For example, in Simon & Kumar’s (2001) study for Australian business executives, *independent/objective advice* was the second most important reason for engaging consultants cited by executives (behind *insufficient in-house expertise*).

Within the public sector, the independence that consultants bring can be especially valuable. For example, a 2025 report by the UK’s National Audit Office on governments’ use of consultants found that the ability for consultants to “provide an external perspective” is one of the main values they provide to government (National Audit Office 2025). A 2023 New South Wales Government Inquiry also reported that “an external perspective can sometimes be required, for example, when an internal view should be tested” (Parliament of NSW 2024). This can be valuable in many contexts. For example, evaluating the effectiveness of a government program should not generally be done by the agency responsible for developing and implementing the program, as it has a vested interest in its success (Schwartz & Rist 2017). In addition, public sector bodies often need to engage stakeholders to test or develop policy ideas. Such stakeholders may be reluctant to speak honestly to a body that funds or regulates them, but may be more likely to state their true views to an external entity.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ I do not mean to suggest that consulting firms are uniquely placed to do these kinds of work, only that the independence they can bring is valuable.

Consultants can also enable public sector agencies to preserve institutional independence, particularly for public sector agencies that need to be at arm's length from government. This includes independent regulators and integrity bodies that monitor and enforce compliance of government entities with legal obligations. Such entities are unlikely to supplement in-house expertise by seeking advice from within government, as this could create conflicts of interest. The availability of a private market for advice can maintain and enhance independence.¹⁶¹

12.4.3 The Bad Actor Objection

Like each of the previous objections, the Bad Actor Objection is, at heart, a critique of poor practices of consulting firms, not the public sector consulting market as a whole. It occurs where consultants fail to act in the best interests of their client, especially where they breach legal and ethical obligations to avoid or manage conflicts of interest. We should condemn consulting practices that do not live up to these ideals, but not assume that the entire market should be tarred with this brush. Addressing this objection requires that the public sector consulting market is governed and regulated in a manner that best ensures that consultancies act in their clients' best interests, including through adequate mechanisms to enforce non-compliance. As with the Consultocracy Objection, maintaining a clear division between advice and decision-making would help to prevent harms of this objection by ensuring that consultancy advice is only one input to policy development.

Moreover, as I noted above, we should avoid a reflexive hostility towards for-profit entities.

It is important to be clear about the relevant comparison between the motivations and incentives of consultants and public sector officials. It is naïve to assume that greedy, money-

¹⁶¹ The independence that consultants can bring is, of course, not guaranteed. In addition to their impartiality being compromised by financial incentives, independence may be eroded for the simple fact that clients define the scope of work that consultants undertake. For instance, Bortz (2018) observes that consultants are often hired to identify the precise steps that a client needs to take to reach a pre-determined end: "This means the consultants may not be at liberty, or may not want, to explore whether this end is the appropriate thing to pursue, or whether the problem has been defined correctly." This underscores the importance of 'designing in' mechanisms for impartiality and independence in consulting contracts.

loving and amoral consultants should be compared with altruistic bureaucrats motivated by the public good. Aside from the fact that individual bureaucrats may be motivated by their own career aspirations – and may be reluctant to provide frank advice for fear that it will be ‘career limiting’ – bureaucracies can also develop their own logic, norms and ends that become divorced from the public interest. In contexts where governments have actively undermined the independence and impartiality of the public sector, engaging external consultants may be the best way to get frank advice that aligns with the public good. To the extent that Ivison’s (2023) concerns are correct – that consultants do not have the incentive to provide such advice because they wish to maintain client relationships – this is also an indictment on their clients for their apparent lack of interest in being provided with accurate information and honest advice. We should not downplay the risks that consultants’ motivations may lead to harmful outcomes, but nor should we presume that consultants have a monopoly on bad incentives.

12.4.4 Concluding this section

This section has argued that the harms invoked by each Transformation Objection are contingent features of the public sector consulting market. They result from the actions of both parties to a consulting contract. Moreover, in some cases, the related public sector ideal is best realised through the availability of a competitive market. The challenge, then, is to ensure that this market is designed so that it advances, rather than compromises, the public interest and the ideals that should animate the public sector. I turn to this task below.

12.5 Implications for the market (*Response Stage*)

Because harms of the public sector consulting market results from the actions of consultants and the public sector officials that engage them, both have a role in remedying the potential harms of the market to ensure that it serves the public interest. In this section, I first consider

what purchases of consulting services should do to address these harms, before considering what consultants should do.¹⁶²

12.5.1 Demand-side implications

Notwithstanding some views of public sector consulting that downplay the agency of the purchaser of consulting services (Ernst & Kieser 2002), governments have many levers available to shape both the general market for public sector consulting and specific consulting projects. As I argued in Chapter 7, in some cases governments actively facilitate the commodification of goods which would not otherwise be commodified. In this case, governments have facilitated the commodification of government functions and activities by providing the demand necessary to create the public sector consulting market. Indeed, government is the sole purchaser of these services. Its ability to shape market outcomes, coupled with obligations owed by government officials to parliament and the public, provides a case that buyers of consulting services should take action to prevent or mitigate the harms discussed in this chapter.

As the *ultimate purchasers* of consulting services, Ministers and senior leaders in public sector bodies are uniquely placed to shape the market to ensure that it is channelled towards productive ends. *First*, a strategic commissioning framework that provides guidance about when and how to outsource work (such as that recently developed by the APS)¹⁶³ could help to better harness internal capabilities, clarify the value sought from consultants, improve government clients' ability to get value from consultants, and prevent engaging consultants for frivolous reasons (such as to rubberstamp decisions already made, or as a means to circumvent bureaucratic infighting). This could be coupled with a clear vision for the core

¹⁶² The strategies discussed are not intended to be exhaustive.

¹⁶³ APSC (2023).

roles and capabilities of the public sector which would provide clear guardrails for public sector officials that directly engage consultants, and limit the potential for incremental creep in consulting spends and declines in long-term capability. *Second*, evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of public sector consulting would also help to build an evidence base around when and how consulting provides value for money and its institutional impacts over time. *Third*, tightening eligibility restrictions to bid for particular work could deter poor practice arising from conflicts of interest. This might include preventing firms from providing both consulting and auditing services. *Fourth*, committing to public transparency around consulting – including money spent and services procured – would help to ensure that consulting contracts do not become a black box free from public scrutiny.

As the *immediate procurers* of consulting services, public sector officials that work closely with consultants are uniquely positioned to shape specific consulting projects to ensure they mitigate the risks discussed earlier. They can be more discerning procurers and managers of consulting services in several ways. *First*, they can ensure that decision-making responsibility is not obfuscated through consulting contracts by maintaining clear chains of accountability. *Second*, where appropriate they can seek to build into consulting contracts requirements for capability uplift and skills transfer. *Third*, requiring consultancies to demonstrate values alignment may promote higher standards of professional conduct among consultants and reduce the chance of unethical business practices.¹⁶⁴ *Fourth*, ensuring a clear purpose for engaging consultants and aligning ways of working to the value sought could help to get better value for money. For instance, where a client seeks additional capacity or complementary expertise collaborative working arrangements may be justified, whereas if

¹⁶⁴ For instance, the Queensland and the Northern Territory governments have a local benefits test – to evaluate the benefits that a supplier would bring to the local area (Queensland Government 2019; Northern Territory Government 2018).

they are engaging consultants for an independent opinion then an arm's length arrangement may be more appropriate.

12.5.2 Supply-side implications

One might object that I have placed a lot of responsibility on the demand-side of the market to mitigate practices that emerge from, or are associated with, the supply-side. In this section I sketch out two obligations that consultants should adhere to when working with public sector clients. Each obligation suggests that the public sector consulting market should not merely serve private interests. Rather than being governed only by the norms of the market, consultants that work with public sector clients should be governed by a higher purpose, akin to the norms of a profession. Consider Anderson's (1989: 189) discussion of the norms and ideals of a profession: "Professional services, such as legal, medical and educational services, provide a classic case of "mixed" goods whose production and distribution is determined partly by market norms and partly by nonmarket professional norms." In my view, public sector consulting should also not be governed exclusively by market norms. In Graham's (2011: 222) words, consultants should "support their clients' objectives and public values, and not just try to commercialise them." This could be achieved through government-imposed regulations (such as licensing and registration regimes) or through consultancies themselves committing to internal cultural change. I remain agnostic about the best mechanisms to ensure consultancies meet the obligations set out below.

First, consultants should always act in the client's best interests when providing consulting services. This obligation can be understood in terms of a fiduciary duty. This is a duty owed by a party (the fiduciary) when acting for and on behalf of another party (the principal). It typically applies where there is a relationship of trust between the parties and where the principal depends on the fiduciary (such as in lawyer/client and doctor/patient relationships).

I agree with Simon & Kumar's (2001: 371) analysis that – to the extent that clients engage consultants when “they are looking for something that they have not the capacity to do or undertake in their own firm [and can thus be] ... in a position of dependence and vulnerability” – this creates a duty on consultants to work on behalf of their client and place their client's interests ahead of their own. This duty is, of course, not specific to public sector consulting; it applies to any consulting relationship. However, given the particular risks associated with public sector consulting, the stakes are higher in this market. Moreover, to the extent that one is concerned about declines in public sector capability, the relationship of dependence is likely to be greater, and the duty especially important.

This is not a revelatory insight – acting in clients' best interests is a catch-cry across the consulting industry.¹⁶⁵ By arguing that some concerns with the public sector consulting market are structural in nature, however, this chapter suggests that consultants must have a broad conception of their public sector clients' interests. This would involve focussing beyond a specific consulting engagement and considering the long-term capability of the client. Delivering high quality work on a consulting project – but doing so by making oneself indispensable to continue to win more business, or contributing to a decline in the client's institutional knowledge and capability – would infringe this duty. Similarly, consultants should not bid for work that they do not believe they have the capability to do to a high standard, even if they are able to convince the client of their capability in a proposal.

This obligation has significant ramifications for consultancies that *serve both sides of the street*. We have seen that the interests of consultants and their clients can come apart – especially because consultancies have a diverse client base and are usually for-profit entities

¹⁶⁵ For instance, the Guidelines for Professional Conduct published by the European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations stipulates that “the consultancy shall at all times maintain the highest ethical standards in the professional work undertaken and, *in matters relating to a client's affairs, act solely in the interests of the client*” (European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations 1999, italics mine).

– which can lead to harmful outcomes for clients and, in the case of public sector consulting, for the broader community. An obligation to act in the interests of clients implies that consultants must uphold client confidentiality and integrity – and declare and manage conflicts of interest – not just because of the reputational and legal risks of failing to do so, but because it is an ethical obligation. This would help to mitigate many of the harms discussed in Section 12.3, which result from misalignment between the interests of government clients and consultancies.

Second, when working with government clients, consultants should have an additional overarching obligation – beyond serving their client – to act in the public interest.¹⁶⁶ The basis for this obligation can be justified as follows. Public sector officials have an obligation to act in the public interest (this can be formally encoded in various ways, such as through legislation or codes of conduct). When engaged by a public sector client, a consultant is, in effect, doing the work of government on behalf of their client. This will especially be the case where they are given latitude in how they conduct their work and where they operate autonomously. In acting on behalf of the client, the consultant should inherit – not just an obligation to advance the client’s interests – but also to discharge the obligations of their client. These duties should constrain how the consultant undertakes their work to achieve their client’s interests. By analogy, in the law of agency, agents acting on behalf of a principal have a duty of good conduct, or to act in a way that does not injure the principal’s endeavour. This is in addition to a duty of loyalty owed to the principal (Wright 2020). If we interpret a public sector official’s “endeavour” to include acting in the public interest, then this suggests that a consultant should, at least, not act against the public interest.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ As noted in Section 12.2, the public interest should be determined by the government through democratic processes and constrained by the law.

¹⁶⁷ Recent reforms in Australia echo this sentiment. The 2019 Independent Review recommended incorporating APS values and integrity requirements into contracts, including with consultants, to ensure high standards of ethical conduct (Thodey et

A client's interests and the public interest should generally coincide – as public sector bodies are tasked with achieving the public interest – however these interests can come apart. For instance, if a client seeks to suppress the findings of a consulting report, or unduly influence these findings, because they are politically unpalatable or create reputational risks, a consultant might be morally justified, or even required, to insist that these findings are made available to the decision-maker, contrary to the client's wishes.¹⁶⁸ Or a consultant may have whistleblowing obligations where it comes to their attention that a client is engaging in corrupt conduct. Formally codifying a public interest obligation for management consultants would reorient the industry more towards the norms of a profession, akin to lawyers who have a paramount obligation to the court and to the administration of justice that overrules obligations to act in the best interests of their clients. If we take the public interest – not just the client's interest – as the basis for ethical practice in the public sector consulting market, then management consultants can lay claim to being honest brokers, not merely guns for hire.

Conclusion

This chapter has critically evaluated claims that the public sector consulting market corrupts the public sector and diminishes its value. I showed that this market can be understood as a form of commodification. I developed an account of the ideals that should animate and govern the public sector – namely that it serves the public interest, is accountable, and operates efficiently and effectively. I then introduced three Transformation Objections, drawing on the critical literature on management consulting, each of which is both

al 2019: 113). This has become a common practice in Federal Government consulting contracts. In addition, under the *National Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2022*, consultants working on Australian Government projects are considered a 'public official' or 'staff member', which gives them specific obligations and protections (NACC 2023).

¹⁶⁸ In an analogous case, in November 2021, it came to light that senior Treasury officials in the NSW Government sought to influence and cover up a critical report written by KPMG which warned of safety and budget risks in a state-owned rail corporation (Ferguson & O'Sullivan 2021). In this case, it would be justified for the consultant to refuse to acquiesce to the demands of Treasury officials, given the public interest in identifying these risks.

empirically plausible and normatively significant because it undermines one of these ideals. The public sector consulting market raises moral concerns where it: (1) reduces public sector capability; (2) undermines accountability and transparency; or (3) leads to policy outcomes that are not aligned with the public interest.

I argued that each objection raises important challenges for the public sector consulting market and should collectively provide guardrails for when and how public sector bodies outsource work to consultants. But they are sensitive to the design of the market. Moreover, they are the product of both consultancies and the public sector officials and leaders that purchase their services. Finally, consistent with earlier observations about the positive effects of commodification on the meaning of a good, in some cases a competitive market can help to realise the relevant public sector ideal. I finally suggested a series of strategies that would address the potential harms and better realise the benefits of the public sector consulting market. This combined elements of the other applied chapters. Like the previous chapter on music, I focussed on obligations of market participants to mitigate or prevent market harms. As in the sports betting and housing chapters, I also considered policy changes that would prevent or reduce the harms of commodification. Collectively these would help to ensure that the public sector consulting market serves and advances the public interest.

Concluding remarks

This thesis has sought to contribute to philosophical debates about the moral limits of markets by considering claims that certain goods should not be commodified because to do so would violate their meaning. What do these claims amount to? What force should they have in moral deliberations about commodification? Throughout the thesis, I have argued for a context-sensitive approach to ethical deliberations about commodification, one that is attentive to the heterogeneous character of markets, the particular facts of different cases, and the strengths and limitations of other, non-market, methods of distribution and modes of valuation. I have had three main objectives: to systematise; to defend; and to apply. Part 1 focussed on the first objective. Parts 2 and 3 addressed the second objective. Part 4 turned to the final objective. I conclude by summarising how I have delivered on each objective.

I systematised meaning-based objections to commodification by developing a taxonomy of these objections. Commodification can violate the meaning of a good either by misvaluing it or devaluing it. Misvaluation can involve expressing an objectionable attitude towards a good (the Bad Attitude Objection) or making unavailable morally desirable ways of valuing goods (the Crowding Out Objection). Devaluation can involve destroying goods whose nature precludes being commodified (the Conceptual Error Objection) or transforming the character of goods in ways that diminish their value (the Transformation Objection).

Setting aside the Conceptual Error Objection, I defended the moral meaning-based objections against a series of general criticisms (that targeted all meaning-based objections) and specific criticisms (that targeted one meaning-based objection). My defence against general criticisms showed that the meaning of a good can be a relevant consideration in determining how it should be valued or allocated, that the proponent of meaning-based objections need not be

committed to the claim that commodification always violates the meaning of a good, and that such objections can lead to a range of different moral conclusions. My defence against the specific criticisms involved identifying conditions for a successful instance of each meaning-based objection. Of particular note, I defended the Bad Attitude Objection against concerns that expressivist objections mistakenly presume and require an essentialist semiotics towards money and markets. I defended the Crowding Out Objection against concerns that it presumes a simplistic and empirically implausible account of the relationship between commodified and non-commodified understandings of goods. I defended the Transformation Objection against claims that reducing the quality of a good by commodifying it lacks any moral upshot. I showed how these objections can be compiled into a framework for assessing the morality of commodification on meaning-based grounds.

I then applied this framework to four diverse case studies that collectively provided coverage of the breadth of objections and argumentative threads developed in the theoretical component of this thesis. These case studies reflected my focus on questions of substantive commodification, rather than formal commodification, and vindicated an approach to moral deliberations about commodification that give conceptual primacy to the meaning of goods. I showed how the meaning-based objections could be used to develop a novel critique of the practice and industry of sports betting; understand and develop policy responses to Australia's housing affordability crisis; make sense of and defend the criticism that artists are 'sell outs'; and understand the diverse effects of the public sector consulting market for policy development and public sector administration.

While the framework helped to illuminate the case studies, the converse is also true. The case studies enabled us to see a range of ways that commodified understandings of goods can crowd out their non-commodified counterparts; different respects in which the attitudes expressed by commodification can be morally significant; and the multifaceted and complex

ways that commodification can transform a good in ways that diminish – or, in some cases, enhance – dimensions of its value. The case studies also show how a range of different moral conclusions can be drawn from deploying meaning-based objections from government regulation to moral criticism.

In contemporary capitalist economies, many factors enable and encourage the expansion of markets to an ever-increasing range of goods. As the goods that lie beyond the ‘technical limits’ of markets decline with technological progress and legal innovations, understanding the moral limits of markets will be increasingly important for ethical deliberations and public policy decisions. This requires an appreciation of both the strengths and shortcomings of markets as methods of allocation and modes of valuation. We must avoid a reflexive pessimism and hostility towards money and markets without being naïve to the ways that they shape our attitudes and the character of the goods that they are used to value and distribute. Remaining vigilant against the expansion of the market domain, while recognising the considerable benefits of markets, requires a sophisticated moral vocabulary. I hope this thesis assists, in some small way, to supporting more mature and considered ethical deliberations about commodification by philosophers, policymakers and laypeople alike.

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