

Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal

Volume 14

Article 7

2023

Process Note on "The True Culprit"

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Recommended Citation

Nguyen, Khiem (2023) "Process Note on "The True Culprit"," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 14, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol14/iss1/7>

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Process Note
Khiem Nguyen

Written for my Global Commerce 101 class with Dr. McHugh, this paper is a response to Michael Sandel's accusation of the market's invasion into many aspects of life. Through analyzing how people would react to a change of currency from dollars to a credits/points system independently regulated by each entity, I came to the conclusion that the market's involvement in everyday life is not undesirable, it is just the type of money we use that matters. Throughout my writing process, I often write multiple drafts to get my ideas onto the paper and revise them later. I usually consult with my professor and the writing center and/or ARC tutors several times between the drafts to get feedback on where I should go next and what to look for in the next drafts. For this specific paper, I also visited Anna in the Multilingual Learning Center for advice on the use of language, since I was referring a lot to the Church.

The True Culprit
Kheim Nguyen

In his book *What Money Can't Buy*, Sandel references several cases in which some people use money to make their life easier. These include paying extra to avoid having to wait in lines or offering money as an incentive for people to do what the payers want, among other behaviors. A good example is Disney's invention of Disney Genie+, which allows tourists to skip the standby line and use the Lightning Lane entrance. According to Sandel, the problem with these cases is the fact that money is a recent invention to solve these problems and it was not previously a default solution. Therefore, the recent involvement of the market in these cases can cause up to three different problems. The first problem is unfairness, through which Sandel argues that using money for those benefits, namely jumping the queue and incentivizing, is unfair to people who cannot afford to do so. The second is goods-corruption, meaning that doing so is degrading the goods that are being traded by money. The last problem of the market being involved in these cases is that it is equivalent to coercing people into behaving differently than they would.

In this paper, I focus on Sandel's first and second objections on why market involvement in these cases is bad. One of the cases Sandel describes to highlight these kinds of objection involves scalping tickets for papal masses. These tickets were distributed at no cost to the public before being resold by ticket scalpers at high prices. He argues that reselling those tickets degrades the meaning of papal masses and the Church, which supports his argument that markets should not be involved here. However, I disagree with Sandel. In this paper, I argue that the problem does not come from the market, but from what is used to pay for the tickets. To support my arguments, I will first propose a market scheme for distributing the papal masses' tickets, in

which money is replaced by another form of payment. Next, I will show that this scheme will get rid of both unfairness and good corruption problems. Then, I will hypothesize similar schemes in other cases to illustrate that this model works in not only the papal masses case, but also other cases across the board. In the fourth section, I present how Sandel would respond to my case. Lastly, I acknowledged of some limitations of this scheme.

In terms of the dilemma of the ticket scalping for papal masses, what if the church establishes its own 'monetary' system, a unique one used solely for transactions within the church community? In this case, each person has a number of church credits, which increases whenever they attend church meetings or do community service and is deducted whenever they commit sins. These credits will act as a form of payment in cases like getting tickets for the papal masses. With this scheme in place, the situation described by Sandel will progress as follows: demand for tickets to the papal mass is extremely high, and tickets are sold out quickly even when priced very high in church credits. People who were not fast enough to obtain tickets sought to get them from resellers, even at ten times the original amount of church points. Sellers could then use those extra church credits for future church events, or simply as a status symbol (to demonstrate that they are loyal to the church).

This scheme will manage to solve the problem that Sandel claims to happen: degradation of the Church's values. When church officials condemned ticket scalping (Sandel), it is highly likely that they are referencing the use of money to buy tickets. There are two problems with money. First, it is generally thought of as impure and vulgar because money is sometimes obtained through malicious and sinful behaviors, or as a means to lure people into committing morally bad actions. Second, even when used for ordinary behaviors such as buying groceries or purchasing tickets for music concerts, it would still be considered inferior to the holiness of the

Church. Thus, using money in this case makes the church officials unhappy because it means putting the Church at the same level with other inferior things that can be bought easily with money, or even at the same level with sinful acts. If money was to be replaced by church credits, it would be hard to point out reasons for the church officials to condemn ticket scalping. Eventually, the more points needed to get a ticket, the more people will attend church, do community service, and the less people will commit sins. Sandel says that “[h]ow a good is allocated may be part of what makes it the kind of good it is” (33), which means that whatever is used to trade the goods defines the nature of it. This explains why church officials are upset when people use money to get the tickets. However, based on this idea, reselling tickets for papal masses in exchange for church credits is actually a holy action, given that the process of accumulating church credits is based on the rights and wrongs set by the Bible, which hardly anyone can say is unholy. In brief, replacing money by church credits alone altered the nature of ticket scalping, proving that the problem lies within the payment method, not the market itself.

It may be possible that the scheme proposed above, with appropriate adaptations, will also work in other cases described by Sandel. In amusement parks, the fact that some people pay extra to jump the queue is not welcomed by some others. Sandel quoted a commentator, who wrote that “Gone are the days when the theme-park queue was the great equalizer, where every vacationing family waited its turn in democratic fashion” (18). It is worth noting that this objection focuses on the unfairness problem and laments the power of money in cutting the line. The commentator acknowledged the fact that they were waiting in line with people who might have more financial power than they do outside of the amusement park, and thus enjoyed the idea that money is not that powerful. As the affluent get to enjoy shorter lines and unaffluent are left behind, it reminds the latter of their status and the bitter reality of inequality, subsequently

prompting them to criticize the market that stripped them of their satisfaction. However, what if a scheme similar to the one proposed for the papal masses' tickets is implemented here? For example, Disney may distribute a system of loyalty points and those with more points will be able to redeem the perk of cutting lines in Disneyland, instead of having the Disney Genie+ purchased by money. Actions that can lead to an increase in Disney points include cosplaying Disney characters in public or posting on social media about Disney with Disney hashtags. In a close-to-utopian world, Disney can even collaborate with non-profit organizations so that anyone who volunteers there gets Disney points. The idea here is that loyalty points act as an independent system and are impacted by money as little as possible. In this scenario, a mix of poor and rich people can stand in line together, and sometimes poor people will be first before rich people. It would now be hard to imagine those people at the lower end of the queue criticizing the market for lacking fairness. Similarly, in Lexus lanes, public theater, congress lines, or court hearings, if the government/ the operator manages to implement a points/ credits system as a paying method for tickets, it is unlikely that there will be disapproval in terms of unfairness and goods-corruption.

Sandel may reject this scheme, saying that this is still “treating religious rituals [...] as marketable commodities” (Sandel, 37). Admittedly, replacing money with church credits does not prevent the market from entering church events. After all, the tickets can still be exchanged by people for more currency, meaning that a black market can still exist outside the church credit system where people can trade tickets for currency. Therefore, in this case the scheme of church credits still seems morally unacceptable.

I do acknowledge that this scheme may not be perfect. In particular, it is possible that people may engage in a black market where church credits were exchanged for money, or people

may use money to hire other people to perform points-gaining actions, giving them an advantage over those who do not have the financial resources to do so. However, the point that I want to make here is not that my scheme of church credit system is perfect, but to illustrate that the problems Sandel highlights, namely unfairness and corruption, stem from the method of payment rather than the market itself. It is also worth noting that this alternate monetary system appears to work better in cases involving institutions with moral values like the Church, as opposed to commercial and profit-driven entities like amusement parks. This difference may be attributed to the inherent nature of commercial organizations, which prioritize financial gains and therefore are more difficult to be detached from money. Moreover, it should also be noted that black markets are not that popular and widespread in real life, and with proper regulation, this issue can be mitigated.

Sandel presents a problem that the invasion of the market into many aspects of life causes unfairness, goods-corruption, and coercion problems. He describes several examples to support his argument, including ticket scalping for papal masses, and paying extra to cut lines in amusement parks. However, in analyzing and proposing an alternate scheme for those examples, I find that Sandel may have not taken the payment method into consideration when making his claims, particularly for the unfairness and goods-corruption problems. The scheme proposed above, despite some shortcomings, shows that, respectively, when using another payment system, ticket scalping for papal masses and cutting the lines in Disneyland are not likely to trigger church officials and the queuing people to object. This proves that problems of unfairness and goods-corruption are, to a certain extent, non-existent without the involvement of money. Therefore, it is better to direct criticism towards money, rather than the market.

Works Cited

Sandel, Michael J. *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.