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Symposium Issue: "Who's Afraid of Commodification?"

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Introduction

IN THE LAST COUPLE OF DECADES, *commodification* has become almost a buzz-word in bioethics. As we become technically more adept at detaching elements of human bodies and making use of them for others, it seems as if more and more things—from motherhood to gametes to kidneys to our very DNA—can be borrowed, rented, bought, and sold. Other technology allows us unprecedented influence over the characteristics of our offspring (unprecedented, that is, if we ignore the many cultures in which children were and are routinely discarded because they are the wrong sex, disabled, or the product of multiple births). It is common, for example, for writers to worry that the availability of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis will seduce parents into thinking of their children as commodities, to be ordered in much the same way as automobiles, with the inevitable concomitant that they will want to “return” children who do not measure up to their specifications.

Unfortunately, a great deal of the talk about “commodification” has been clumsy and sloppy. The term has been used as a magic bullet, as if saying “But that’s commodification!” is the same as having made an argument. In fact, commodification of human persons, human bodies, human labor, human relationships, is a complex matter. In many human dealings, commodified and noncommodified understandings of the same thing, or the same transaction, exist more or less comfortably together. Most Westerners condemn commercial sex, for example, while at the same time knowing that in most times and places in the world, marriage was and is thought of as primarily an economic relationship. The common use of “cheap” in post-World War II American slang to describe a teenage woman who is more sexually available than her peers perfectly captures the market rhetoric inherent in respectable American sexual mores.

Given this complexity, it is not surprising that many writers in bioethics have gravitated to the work of Margaret Jane Radin. In her two books, *Contested Commodities* (Harvard University Press, 1996) and *Reinterpreting Property* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), and many articles,

Radin has taken on the problem of commodification without falling into either sentimentality or cynicism. She is a careful thinker and a careful (and demanding!) writer. We have long valued her work as we have sought to grapple with the many ways in which the problem of commodification arises in bioethics. In this issue of the *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, entitled "Who's Afraid of Commodification?," we have asked three colleagues to join us in reflecting on aspects of the problem of commodification in bioethics. We are especially delighted that Radin agreed to respond to our efforts in this direction.

Lisa Sowle Cahill takes the discussion of commodification to a new level, as she focuses on global ethics, especially genetic research and the marketing and accessibility of pharmaceuticals. Dena S. Davis explores the debates over refusal of treatment and rational suicide and concludes that to put a value on particular pieces of one's lifespan does not necessarily lead to negative aspects of commodification. Ronald M. Green analyzes Radin's use of Kant. Suzanne Holland addresses commodification of body parts, from gametes to cadaveric tissue, and concludes with some specific recommendations. Thomas A. Shannon takes a fresh look at the problem of whether we should allow the sale of organs; he shares with Holland a special concern for the rhetoric of commodification. Finally, Margaret Jane Radin responds to the preceding essays, asking four "stubbornly difficult" questions, questions that show that the debate about commodification is only just begun.

Dena S. Davis and Suzanne Holland